

## Life writing as an ecological research method

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### Author biography

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### Abstract

This paper examines life writing as a research method to uncover new insights about the interrelationships between beings and place including with fashion and clothing. In it, the practice of using oneself as a site of enquiry is presented as a route to ecological understanding where finite, direct experience builds towards rooted, embodied, plural and relational knowing about how we live and how we respond to the ecological crisis. Throughout, the paper is supplemented with reflections from the practice of nature-clothing life writing.

### Introduction

As the ecological crisis intensifies, so does the urgency of uncovering new knowledge that enables awareness and action. In a world of finite ecological limits, questions of what and how we know and act become about survival. They also provide a long-overdue acknowledgement of the plurality of 'truth' and the hubris and destructive bias of the dominant Euro-American, anthropocentric, mechanistic view of what it means to know about the world. In literary circles, writers have turned to their own life as a source of knowledge about relationships among nature, place, culture and action and demonstrate the role of autobiography as a research method to uncover the world's depth and richness (e.g. Angelou, 1984). Likewise in feminist traditions (Ahmed, 2017) and radical political activism (DeRocher, 2018), researching and writing from life experience has been used as a way to bear witness, to enact multi-voiced ways of knowing and to find agency. Similarly in the field of nature writing, autobiographical narrative gives voice to webs of life and relatedness between humans and non-humans, animating the world from many centres (e.g. Shepherd, 1977; Dillard, 1974; Jamie, 2005).

Continuing this tradition, in this short position paper I set out to gain territorial status for life writing as an ecological research method, i.e. as a process by which to uncover the interrelationships between beings and place, with examples drawn from fashion and clothing. I have come to prefer the term 'life writing' to describe this practice, because of its literary heritage and close connections to feminist conceptualisations. I use it also for the emphasis the term gives to *life* and the ecological awareness and flourishing that this suggests. This said, the terms life writing and autobiography are often used interchangeably depending on context, including in this article, as there are many affinities between these practices.

Life writing is a method in which we use ourselves, our lives, as sites of enquiry in order to study or interpret phenomena. It involves writing in first person and uses finite, direct, embodied experience of life and place as the basis from which to develop understanding. As such it brings forth a multitude of different content, experiences and possibilities that in turn become the basis for different decisions tied to the contexts in which they occur, building a web of complex, real world insight and action. The importance of such insight is underscored by Ehrenfeld and Hoffman: 'What's needed in complex systems isn't positive knowledge, it's understanding. Understanding comes from a keen sense of observation and continuous learning about the system in which one lives' (2013: 94). In this paper, I outline life writing practices as aides to continuous learning about the Earth systems in which we live. I describe what these practices involve and their intended purpose, pulling out some features that hold especial resonance for ecological understanding. I also reflect on the role of life writing in processes of sustainability change, such as those facing the fashion sector today. The paper closes with a short passage of autobiographical nature-clothing writing.

I wish to declare my interest at the outset: I have been using life writing as a research method – and also as a pedagogical tool which I turn on myself to teach myself about the world and my place within it – for about seven years. I write autobiographically about the relationships between clothing, people and nature, including in the book *Wild Dress* (Fletcher, 2019). I use garments as a conduit to a bigger ecological context in which (after Plumwood, 1998) an embodied, embedded, contextualised, connected and engaged set of human and non-human nature relationships unfold. I employ life writing to teach myself about ways of knowing other than scientist or reductionist ones that typify industry insights about fashion and sustainability. I write autobiographically not because my life is interesting (it is not) but as a necessary pretext for getting closer to the places in which I live and the many others that are also there. Often this is a goal that cannot be approached directly. I also write autobiographically because when I do I see that I must take action. This paper, and I myself, am heavily influenced by the book *Life Writing and Literary Métissage as an Ethos for Our Times* by Erika Hasebe-Ludt, Cynthia Chambers and Carl Leggo (2009) and my correspondence with them.

### **Life writing as a research method**

Life writing primarily requires researchers, like me - and you - to craft pieces of autobiographical work, often, though not exclusively, through writing, in order to unveil and situate ourselves, to better understand the interdependencies that are part of our lives and work, and also to seed ideas of change. The form that life writing practices can take is open in terms of content and genre (e.g. visual essay, historical narrative, diary entry, poem etc). Yet their starting point is more targeted: privileging direct engagement with the world. Thus life writing transgresses traditional academic conventions and asks us to consider what academic work looks like when it is reliant on direct experience; when it is written in first person; when it takes us not to the library but outside into the streets and fields, repeatedly; and when it puts forward no grand universal ideas or theories of how to act.

Hasebe-Ludt et al trace the theoretical underpinnings of life writing practices to both phenomenology (the study of direct experience) and hermeneutic inquiry (concerned with the art of understanding and of making oneself understood). To that they add a vector of dynamic movement: praxis. Life writing is active: 'an enactment, an embodiment, a

realisation of research' (2009: 37). Its focus is to put *understanding in motion*, to bring insights from the real world, from diverse human and non-human relations, into the research process itself by repeatedly applying, reflecting and revising ideas and practice. Life writing is a process of bringing into being different understanding and even different futures through paying attention to - and imaginatively joining - the world. Such a process seems especially critical given the imminent, existential threat of biodiversity loss (GBO, 2020) and climate change and the uncompromising deadline of less than a decade to transform our activities to prevent climate breakdown (IPCC, 2018). This suggests that with urgency we ought to ask questions about survival: how do we want to live? Who and how are we in relation with others? How ought we constitute our fields of study in these times of emergency with and alongside these others? To ask these questions requires that we turn inwards; that we first examine and research ourselves.

That life writing is self-reflexive is a truism and frequently a challenge. It necessitates self-awareness and that the researcher opens up and in the course of doing so, makes themselves vulnerable. Louise St. Pierre describes the process this way: 'I expose myself and my vulnerabilities to myself through writing, re-reading it later, and sharing that writing with others who might reflect my views back to me through their own lens.' (2020: 9). For my part, I have felt exposed, uncomfortable, raw and unconfident in the course of writing autobiographically. I have sometimes felt ashamed of my choices and motives. I have worried that I will be judged and dismissed. I have also worried that I might offend my family. Yet in writing like this I have also felt clear-sighted, connected and personally powerful. I am a white woman raised in a working class family in a disregarded city in the north of England who was warned as a child, "don't get ideas above your station". It is only as I have grown into middle age that I have found legitimacy and relevance in my lived experience; that I see that I, too, have a right to speak from places other than academic learning. To write from life requires both courage and self-compassion. In my experience we rarely have both at the same time. That I have persisted with it as a method despite the challenges is not down to me being confident in what I create, but more perhaps because when I work in this way, it sometimes grants me glimpses of something larger and intensely real, of an inner depth to our world that I can only partly perceive – and this is electrifying.

### **Direct voice, life-centred**

Using life writing practices as a research method necessitates writing in first person. For some of us this might feel a natural choice and even a liberating one. For others however, this can feel uncomfortable. After being schooled in educational traditions which favour objective analytical writing and the use of passive voice over intimate, personal reflection and narration; writing with the narrative 'I' can feel antithetical. Likewise the placing of ourselves at the centre of the research process within the life writing process can seem self-obsessive, almost narcissistic. Yet alongside the self-evident fact that such texts are plainly 'all about me'; the details and particularities conveyed by autobiographical research processes can be – and are often – about all of us, navigating universal themes and revealing relationships and experiences. Nestled within the autobiographical writings of others, we can also find our stories. Life writing texts can be a route to seeing how multiple experiences and understandings combine to show how we are both diverse and interrelated, how there is no one individual centre of striving or knowledge. They can provide an alternative to the single totalising 'one world' normative framework and its

claims to universality favoured within Euro-American modernist ontological and epistemological orthodoxies and urgently critiqued within decolonial (Escobar, 2018; Jansson, 2020), feminist (Haraway, 2016) and ecological practice (Boenhart, 2018). Hannah Arendt puts it this way, 'It is not generality but the multiplicity of particularity that accounts for the possibility of critical understanding' (in Hasebe-Ludt et al, 2009: 12). We know better when we know through the diverse, cumulative and the particular stories of our lives.

Thus life writing processes are not necessarily self-centred or solitary acts. The self, after all, is not separate and alone, severed from and floating in orbit somewhere above the world – it is rooted in the soil of our bodies, our streets, our communities, our clothes. Indeed the practice of autobiographical writing can make explicit a shift from *apart from*- to *part of*- the world and from the *autos* (self) to the *bios* (life) (Hasebe-Ludt et al, 2008: 18). This concern with *bios*, that is with life and life processes, brings autobiography close to an ecological investigation. Ecology: the study of the relations of organisms to each other and their surroundings. Autobiography: concerned with lived experience and the visible and invisible relationships which unfold in a particular context. And life writing: in which when we reflect upon the power of life, of ecological health, of interrelatedness, of our bodies and the giving of voice to ourselves, rather than waiting to be invited to speak.

As an example, life writing research approaches have shown themselves to fit well with work around design and nature. In a recent edited book on the topic (Fletcher, St. Pierre and Tham, 2019), 10 papers out of a total of 24 used elements of autobiographical writing. This was an emergent feature within the contributions and was never suggested to authors. In the book, the ways in which life writing is used include: as a route to examining a loosening of control in design, to a changed sense of responsibility and to establishing new foci of activity that were not just human-centred.

Of the many facets of life writing practice, I now explore four with particular resonance for investigating ecological understanding: rooted in place; embodied understanding; relationality; and multi-centredness.

### **Rooted in place, embodied understanding**

Central to using life writing as a way to build ecological understanding is its emphasis on a setting or context and the knowledge that the place in which something happens, impacts what goes on there. Seeking to uncover the interdependencies between animate and inanimate beings and place; those of us who working autobiographically use subjective narration to document a web of relationships. We present our own embeddedness within the earth as the starting point for research enquiry. Etymologically, *ecology* is derived from the Greek *oikos*, meaning house. We begin in perhaps the place we know best – home – including our earth home.

The most obvious equivalent to an existing ecological-autobiographical research practice is nature writing, and within it home contexts are a usual point of departure. Certainly it is so within the variant of nature writing that I practice, where place is an integral theme. In real terms this means I describe, often quite literally, the physical places and landscapes where I am. This physical description spills over into details of the body, emotions and the senses and shows autobiography as a research practice that is embodied, situated and rooted in

real conditions. In my narrative texts I describe how my body moves in, and experiences, different settings. I write about the physicality of garments as well as their restrictions and associations with place and the many others who live there, layering interconnections. I also write about what clothing reveals and enables in the world, and vice versa. By describing clothes on a moving body in a landscape, social norms and fashion culture are rendered visible in new ways, revealing pleasure, possibility and anachronisms aplenty.

For my own part, life writing has helped me know places better. It has called me to listen, to look, to feel both more and more openly than before and to relish the world's absurdity and wonder. I can attest to the fact that there is a lot going on alongside and between species; crazy things, things to laugh about, things to get drawn into and things over which small and large fears are stoked. It is also the case that I have found the act of grounding my work in place to be liberating. Place affords a feeling of both being connected and free; free to roam in the realm of where I am. It is even the case that I have found that rooting an investigation in a particular place can feel a bit like love. It draws out an acute regard for the world, including for fashion. Wagner-Lawlor (2017: 121) describes regard as, 'a particular form of attention: intensive, evaluative, care-ful'. Such qualities are not without a critical edge. If it is love that life writing elicits, it is a cognisant love, aware and real, sometimes heady, at others, hard won, difficult.

### **Relational**

Ecological processes are nonlinear and not prototypically hierarchical. They are made up of webs and nests of actors (animate and inanimate), relationships, occurrences and ideas, unfolding in place and in a constant state of flux. Investigating these processes is complicated. As is doing so in such a way that maintains a sense of the whole, while still allowing aspects of it to be examined closely but not apart from others. The capacity for narrative to handle and convey nonlinear 'stories' is well known and used to great effect in literature. Life writing as an ecological research method also trades on this potential, keeping alive multiple lines of enquiry, representing different centres of knowledge, describing what is between things, and how they relate to and affect each other. It also brings us into relationship with ourselves and our neighbours through the process of reflection, record making and revisiting, including with others. Working in this way builds experience of relationship, holding the whole and its multiple, layered connections. Critically it has the potential to do this by placing humans within nature without a presumption of special power, describing human lives as a dynamic part of 'the wild' (Snyder, 1990).

I feel strongly, as I have written elsewhere (Fletcher, 2016), that products like garments ought to be understood within the context of lives and surroundings; that separating them out risks setting in train a process of disassociation, where an action, a thing, like say a way of dressing or a garment, is imagined independent from its surroundings. Such a process tends to overlook relationships, causing us to establish a world full of disconnections that distance us from the consequences of an action, a choice. In turn this detachment governs whether we are more or less willing to inflict harm. From afar, damage is more willingly wreaked; up close, less so. Practices like life writing, that make the world more immediate and salient, are thus a form of environmental direct action. Working autobiographically, *I associate*; I recognise the consequences of my choices, I take responsibility, I act. I write an article like this one to encourage you to do the same.

The relational focus within life writing is a ready ally with feminist perspectives and the lived realities of power inequalities and marginalisation of women and women's experience. In examining human relationships within nature, not conquests over it, life writing enquiry can foreground everyday life, natural wonder, domestic work, landscape, family, climate, care, non-human species as legitimate sources of knowing. Not all autobiographical work takes this stance. Much contemporary nature writing for instance is written in the tenor of public school gentleman-adventurer; sharing his refined knowledge with those at his feet.

### **Multiple centres**

The promise of greater plurality brought by life writing comes courtesy of the space it grants to a multiplicity of specific, direct experiences and ways of knowing including from the more than human world. Just as decolonial critiques challenge the conventions in Western orthodoxy; autobiographical-ecological narratives challenge the overt and tacit positioning of nature as dead resources and separate from humans within anthropocentrism. These narratives seek instead to decentre the human from a position of sole focus and to amplify other voices. Framed in Ursula Le Guin's terms, this changes the story; claiming action and heroics in new places (2020: 28).

Finding action and heroics in new places opens up the prospect of listening across difference and of establishing new connections between and within lived experience, communities, cosmologies, species, landscape, and even systems of garments. It brings the promise of diverse ways of fashioning the body and alternative futures for fashion based on lived experience including of ecological limits. It also suggests we might begin to establish narratives that readily slide back and forth between, say, care and maintenance of clothes and care and maintenance of ecological systems; building awareness and connection. This points to the many sorts of everyday practices that take place in the course of participating in unfolding lives; shedding light on interrelationships placing humans within ecological understanding.

### **Conclusion**

How do we know and how do we learn about ecology? Life writing provides a route to close scrutiny of the interrelationships between beings and place and more relational and plural understanding about how to live in a resource-constrained, climate changing world. This paper has examined features of life writing to seed alternative ways of knowing about fashion and sustainability that work beyond commercial agendas, traditional academic frameworks or generic calls for change. Predictably perhaps, given the nature of the subject, in this paper I also draw from my experience of writing autobiographically about nature and clothing to connect, contextualise and embody human and non-human relationships. I close with a short excerpt of nature-clothing life writing offered as an open invitation to others to research and examine themselves as we fashion ecological lives together, with all our relations.

### **Excerpt from *The Wind* (Fletcher, 2019)**

Three weeks later I went back to the same area with my oldest boy. We walked together, sometimes side-by-side, but mostly I was behind, he was at the age where he ran everywhere. On the far hills, the rough land of the moor was purple, the bare stems of

heather in winter, and blue, the underside of pine needles. The cloud was still low – it hadn't lifted for weeks – but in the wind everything pulsed.

As we skirted another high ridge, the wind blew across and through us, piling in just behind the left shoulder seam and forcing its way out at the collarbone, centre right. As we reached the highest part of the ridge, exposed fully, we skittered, scudded along, our bodies moving compulsorily in the charge of air. Out of control legs, we laugh and stumble, my coat's sleeves bow in the gusts, making the bones in my arms into shapes never before seen in a limb. I look at them, these crazy, soft, alien distortions. I like the new me. We throw ourselves down on the bilberry shrub floor, flattening ourselves into the ground, raucous, giddy. We lift our heads, our arms, again my mittens fill with air; the wind is holding my hand. My coat's wide sleeves grip onto the lip of a gust, my trousers, wide-legged act as a kite. These are the key pieces of the season. And if you have a top layer that opens up the front, so much the better. To hold and be held, undo the fastening, grasp the bottom corners, one in each hand, and then gripping your coat tight, raise your arms high above your head.

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