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Auto/Biography Study Group

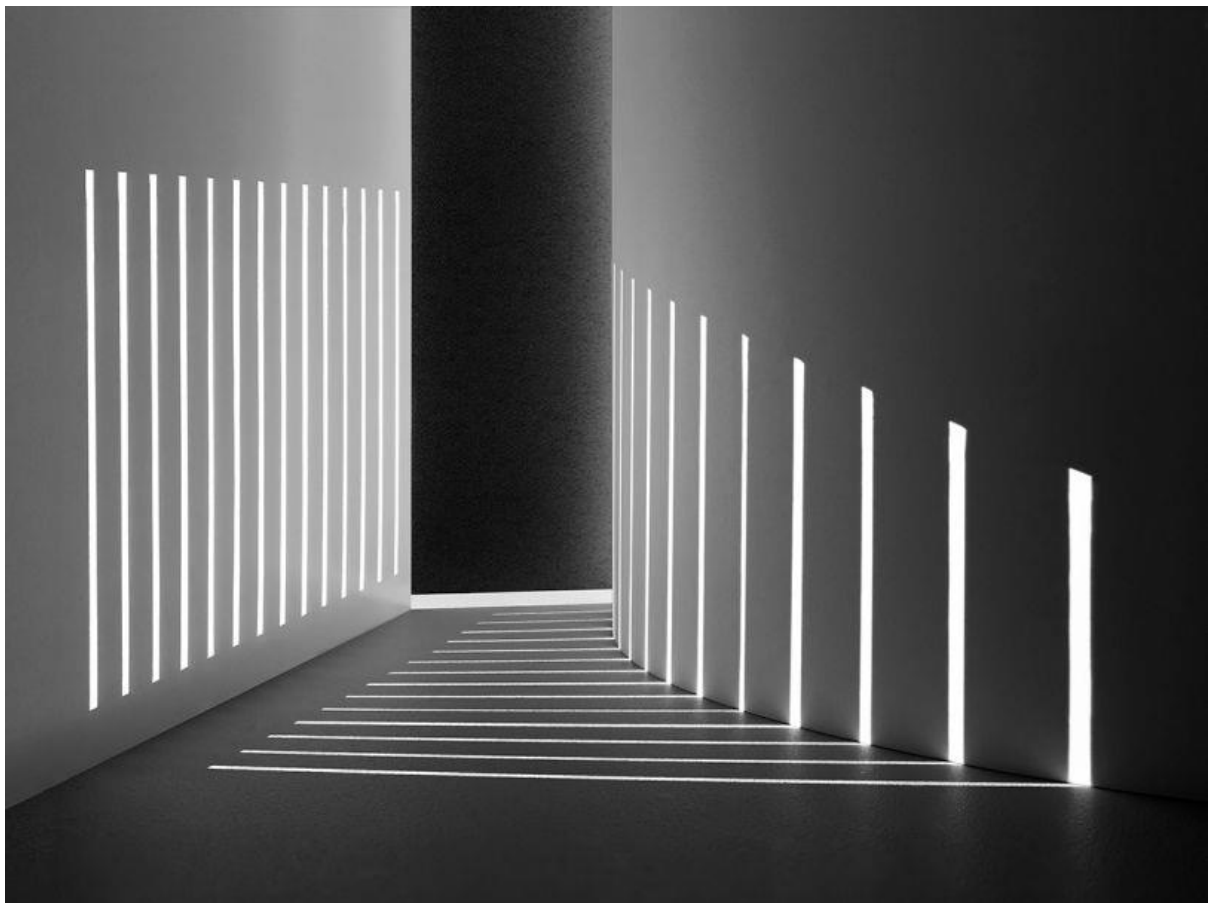
**BSA Auto/Biography Study Group  
Christmas Conference**

**Space and Spaces**

**8<sup>th</sup> December 2023**

**Friends House, Euston, NW1 2BJ**

<https://www.friendshouse.co.uk/>



## Programme

0845-0900 Arrival and Registration with refreshments

0900-0915 Welcome

0915-1005 Keynote

**Contested memories in liminal spaces: An auto/bio-geographical journey in Salonika**  
Ellen McHugh (Brunel University London)

Chair: Anne Chappell

1005-1015 Comfort Break

1015-1045 Paper Session

**Creating space for auto/biography, within and beyond academic spaces**  
Julie Parsons (University of Plymouth) and Daniela Chivers (LandWorks)

Chair: Mark Price

1045-1115 Paper Session

**'Touchy feely or hard as nails'? Challenging normative medical practice in the spaces of Medical Education**

Tracey Collett (Plymouth University)

Chair: Ellen McHugh

1115-1145 Refreshment Break

1145-1215 Paper Session

**Wellington boots and a Hoover Constellation: was Sylvia Plath 'Plathian'?**  
Helen Bain (King's College London)

Chair: Julie Parsons

1215-1245 Paper Session

**Lost in Space**  
Jan Bradford (Word-by-Word Limited)

Chair: Richard Vytņiorgu

1245-1315 Paper Session

**Lifescapes: unpublished diaries and the lived experience of landscape**  
Jeremy Burchardt (University of Reading)

Chair: Gayle Letherby

1315-1400 Lunch

1400-1430 Paper Session

**From the academic encounter to a curated space: developing relational pedagogy**

Laura Minogue and Mark Price (St Mary's University)

Chair: Jan Bradford

1430-1500 Paper Session

**IncludeAge: Using mixed-autobiographical methods to understand experiences of physical and online spaces of inclusion and exclusion among diverse older people**

Richard Vytņiorgu (University of Hertfordshire)

Chair: Mel Hall

1500-1530 Paper Session

**The diary as a private space**

Jackie Goode (Loughborough University)

Chair: Helen Bain

1530-1550 Refreshment Break

1550-1620 Paper Session

**Class Room**

Chris Saunders (Independent Academic)

Chair: Tracey Collett

1620-1650 Paper Session

**Home is where the heart is: reflections on love, legacy, space and place**

Gayle Letherby (University of Greenwich and University of Plymouth)

Chair: Jackie Goode

1650 Close

## Abstracts

### **Wellington boots and a Hoover Constellation: was Sylvia Plath ‘Plathian’?**

Helen Bain (King's College London)

My research question centres around whether it is possible to re-present a subject whose mythology has calcified in popular culture. This paper will examine one method of addressing this: first, how the domestic sphere (or ‘space’) is broadly used to locate and identify a subject; and second, in the way that a new bareness of selection – that is, the ‘spaces’ left between alternative identifying tropes – might uncover a fresh view. When a subject (in this instance, Sylvia Plath) is elevated to the status of cultural icon their identity is compressed and simplified. One purpose of this is that the figure may be de-personalised to reflect back whatever that culture requires. De-identification is paradoxically achieved through familiarity. The subject becomes two-dimensional; the viewer’s eye slides easily over it. One example of the subsequent complacency are the ‘Plathian’ mis-quotes attributed online. Cultural icons are commonly identified with certain tropes, frequently extracted from the domestic or personal sphere. Possessions are transformed into religious relics; a profusion of repetition threatens to overwhelm. But it is in the unexpected object (the item or word that might feel ‘un-Plathian’) and the spaces inserted or enabled between those objects (a specificity of selection) that we find the potential to crack open the two-dimensional self to instead reveal the multifarious, contradictory and mutable subject beneath. I will examine this theory through Plath’s ‘In Plaster’ (1961), with its self and other self – ‘much whiter and unbreakable and with no complaints’; the interdependence between the two; and the eventual exodus.

### **Lost in Space**

Jan Bradford (Word-by-Word Limited)

Methodologically-informed by a deconstructive move away from linear narratives which freeze events and lived-experience (Denzin, 2014) and which tell-and-inform rather than actively interrogating what might be the limits of knowing or being known (Lather, 2007), I practiced *écriture féminine* (Cixous, 1976) and embraced writing as a method of inquiry (Richardson and St Pierre, 2018) throughout my doctoral research. Setting store by assertions that thought happens in writing (Richardson and St Pierre, 2018) and writing is a faithful tool allowing the sparks of the not yet thought to surface from the depths of our bodies to become ‘a thinking’ that can be formulated, repeated and grasped to put a border around something mysterious (Cixous & Heathfield, 2010), I wrote - actively seeking to explore the fragility and abundance within the not-so-glaring gaps in oft-well-told family stories I grew up alongside. Intellectually embarking on a nomadic writing journey to explore mental, textual and theoretical spaces (St Pierre, 1997), I also found myself – behind the privileged space of the academy – lost in familial spaces - sitting – physically-and-emotionally-rooted in three reflexive liminal spaces (Speedy, 2008) - in my hometown. This research will return to these spaces where writing called me to bear witness to sensuous knowledge (Gordon, 2008) - to reflect on primitive unspeakable unwritable haunted sounds that could no longer be unthought or unheard because it had risen to the surface of my writing and left its indelible mark on me as it demanded to be acknowledged and sought airspace to be spoken.

### **Lifescapes: unpublished diaries and the lived experience of landscape**

Jeremy Burchardt (University of Reading)

Much of the literature on landscape experience relies on cross-sectional quantitative methods such as surveys using photographs of ‘representative’ landscapes. These may yield generalisable results but researchers across a range of disciplines are increasingly recognising that landscape experiences are complex, cumulative and highly personal. Hence there are growing calls for more nuanced, process-oriented research. Memory-based studies can be rewarding but the narratives and constructions of landscape experience they retrieve are necessarily retrospective. What has hitherto been lacking are fine-grained studies that trace landscape experience over long time spans using non-retrospective source material. This paper reports on a project that used eight long-run unpublished diaries to explore popular experience of rural landscapes in modern Britain. Unpublished diaries can be extraordinarily rich, varied and expansive, but

except in the context of well-known collections like Mass Observation, historians have hitherto made limited use of them. This paper aims to show that comparative study of such diaries allows us to understand the experiential relationship between lives and landscapes, even of 'ordinary' people, in exceptional depth and detail. For each of the eight diarists, it proved possible to contextualize changing responses to rural landscapes over the lifecourse in relation to a wide range of events, situations and circumstances, including family and social relationships, residence, work, leisure, politics and religion. Unexpected similarities and contrasts between the diarists emerged, yielding new insights into the relationship between hitherto obscure lives and the landscapes in which they were played out.

### **'Touchy feely or hard as nails'? Challenging normative medical practice in the spaces of Medical Education**

Tracey Collett (Plymouth University)

In this piece I build on reflections of my 'Teaching Coat' previously presented (i.e. Auto/Biography Summer Conference 2023 and <https://www.besst.info/blog>). Thus, I continue contemplating on my day-to-day experience as a Sociologist working in Medical Education, in a University Medical School. Focusing on the first term of the academic year 2023-2024 I examine some of the spaces that I occupy, my emotional, political, embodied and academic response to these spaces and how all this impacts on my attempts to challenge normative medical explanations and embed the social into medical education. The spaces considered include the International Conference of the Association of Medical Education in Europe 2023, my specific and particular work environment (i.e. my office and the surrounding work and social spaces, and the spaces of teaching and learning I share with students) and the spaces (both physical and emotional) where I connect with lay members of the public who have concerns around medicine and medical care. Through my analysis of these different, yet inter-connected spaces I consider my influence and impact as Sociologist and detail some of the daily (at least) struggles I face in attempting to challenge long-held dominant discourses surrounding what medical students 'need to know', rather than what is considered (by some, but not me of course) as merely 'nice-to-know'.

### **The diary as a private space**

Jackie Goode (Loughborough University)

Sally Bayley wrote her first diary when she was seven, instructed by her mother, who packed her off alone to Switzerland with the instructions to write down everything she saw. Her diary was already public, she says, already owned. It was never her friend. She could tell it nothing awkward, embarrassing, shameful or pathetic; she could not be homesick or lonely, afraid or bored. Her diary forced her to be brave and heroic, to muster more of the 'grown-up' than she could manage. It asked her to be extraordinary. Consequently, she "saved up lots of big words and big sights", tried to "make everything sound like an Asterix adventure". But where did the real experience go, she wonders, those moments when her 'diary self' was shut off. "Where was the lonely and scared seven-year-old girl?" This paper is about the diary as a private space. Or more accurately, it raises the question of how far the diary IS a private space. It asks, what are practitioners 'doing' when they are keeping a diary? What kind of material goes into them? What kind of 'evidence' - or evidence of what - do diary entries constitute? Is there an intended readership/audience and if so, who? While drawing on memoirists and diarists as diverse as Lorna Sage, Susan Sontag, St Augustine, Anne Frank, Adrian Mole, and Oscar Wilde's Cecily Cardew and Gwendolen Fairfax to help answer these questions, at the heart of this presentation are extracts from my own 16-year old's diary.

### **Home is where the heart is: reflections on love, legacy, space and place**

Gayle Letherby (University of Greenwich and University of Plymouth)

I live in Falmouth, Cornwall, just a few minutes walk away from where I lived with my parents in the 1970s. Our family life was often materially bleak as we experienced food and other poverty a number of times. Before moving to Falmouth, we were homeless for a while, relying for many months on the kindness of friends, after spending one night sleeping in a railway carriage. What we lacked in 'stuff' we made up for in affection and

my dominant childhood memories are of love, laughter and fun; my parents always insisting that we shared 'a treat' when 'in the money'. Walking through the town or down to the beach front I see and feel them everywhere, their influence on my life as significant as ever. My flat is a busy one, full of stuff, my garage too. Many of my 'things' once belonged to someone else, my mum (Dorothy 1931-2012), my dad (Ron 1923-1979), my husband (John 1948-2010), or were given to me by one of them. So, like the town, my home is haunted by the memories of my life with my parents (and in this case John too). I have of course given away/thrown away much but I still have books, pictures, jewellery and more, lots more. Here, with reference to my home and my home town, I tell a story of the connections between love, legacy, space and place, and reflect on how my relationships and experience has shaped my personal, social and political self.

### **Contested memories in liminal spaces: An auto/bio-geographical journey in Salonika**

Ellen McHugh (Brunel University London)

In this paper, I will explore the contested memories found in the liminal spaces of Salonika, Greece. By exploring the theoretical geographical concepts of space and place, I will examine how memories can be contested and (re)told, (re)imagined and (re)purposed. Using auto-photography, I will explore the everyday geographies of a bustling, historical and modern city. I will take you through a guided walking tour where I will (re)tell the multiple stories of migration, belonging and identity that started with the destruction of Smyrna and the arrival of my grandfather in this city, taking in World War 2 and the Holocaust, the dictatorship from 1967-1974, the 1978 earthquake, through to reckoning and reconciliation in the present day. My family history is inextricably interwoven with the history of Northern Greece and both are stalked by ambiguities. To the extent to which any of my grandfather's story can be defined, it is through the traces left in the buildings, streets, ruins and spaces of this city.

### **From the academic encounter to a curated space: developing relational pedagogy**

Laura Minogue and Mark Price (St Mary's University)

This paper explores the relationality of the 'academic encounter' between 'student' and 'tutor' within doctoral pedagogy, and a journeying towards the development of a 'curated space' between the two. We present elements from our individual and collaborative narratives, drawing on our respective biographical experiences of the student/tutor dynamic. In navigating the development of such a relational pedagogy, issues of trust, vulnerability, authenticity, and intentionality, are explored along the way. The resulting text is presented as a 'duoethnography' and conceptualises a re-positioning of a creative and emotionally intersubjective, learning (and teaching) process. This storying is presented in the hope that it perhaps resonates and acts as a stimulus for others. Our intention is to explore and map, trouble and frame the nature of relational pedagogic processes and spaces: to open possibilities for learning and transformational shift. We focus explicitly on the pedagogic relationship, process and space that has developed between us: Laura as a student/candidate on the professional education doctorate (EdD) programme and Mark as a tutor and Laura's supervisor on this programme. But we also seek to locate this storying and exploration in relation to others' work, where appropriate, theorising through and from our experience. At times we present our specific, individual voices, but we also have crafted collaboratively, a shared voice. Through this duoethnographic approach, we aim to juxtapose our respective life/work biographical storying as a site of research and dialogic enquiry.

### **Creating space for auto/biography, within and beyond academic spaces**

Julie Parsons (University of Plymouth) and Daniela Chivers (LandWorks)

Following the use of auto/biography in my doctoral thesis, I have sought to promote auto/biography in my teaching and post graduate supervision. Since 2016 I have incorporated the use of auto/biography in assessments for undergraduate sociology modules across all stages of the curriculum. I advocate for the use of auto/biography in research and work as a Director of Studies for several post-graduate research students who incorporate this approach. I consider auto/biography vital for understanding Mills' (1959) 'sociological imagination' and see it as a useful means of exploring the links between biography and history. Moreover, I support Letherby's (2012) concept of 'theorised subjectivity' which emphasises the importance of the

positionality of the researcher, to enhance and enrich the epistemological process. How might we understand others if we don't understand ourselves? How might we judge the rigour of our research if we are not clear about our own standpoint? In this paper I work with a BSc (Hons) Sociology graduate, Daniela Chivers, who graduated in 2021. Daniela has direct experience of the use of auto/biography within the sociology curriculum, and we make use of her academic work across the three years to discuss and reflect upon the importance of making space for auto/biography. Furthermore, Daniela worked as a volunteer for LandWorks throughout her degree and is now the project coordinator for the charity. We therefore discuss the significance of auto/biography and self-reflection beyond the curriculum. How it is particularly relevant in this workplace and demonstrate its applicability beyond academic spaces.

### **Class Room**

Chris Saunders (Independent Academic)

Class Room is an evocative auto-ethnography centred on my embodied teenage experiences of being a 'special' guest at my dad's parties in his new London opulent town-house. As an 'enlightened witness' I revisit the desolate emotional space between my dad and I that appeared to shrink and become instantly remodelled primarily for me to witness his sudden and spectacular class migration from bitter unavailable suburban dad to new old money man of wealth and taste with a better class of 'friends' and 'feelings'. Class Room focuses on the class distinctions represented at these dazzling grown-up parties and how these fashionable elite strangers gave the impression of a supposed 'arrival' in a new exclusive (and troubling) space at another level of material success I had not experienced before. And how that distorted, for a while, my belief in the illusory ease of social mobility. I had to reconcile my sense of s/lower middle-class shame and displacement into the faster living of meritocratic social circles I was given temporary access to. Class Room acts as the centre of a wheel in which the spokes of our class routes lead back to our designated social and emotional spaces where we are encultured from day one to know our place. Class Room is a psychological and social mapping of my relational past through the prisms of social class and trauma- as a semi-conscious drive to follow a destination to 'better' social and psychological spaces without necessarily ever arriving.

### **IncludeAge: Using mixed-autobiographical methods to understand experiences of physical and online spaces of inclusion and exclusion among diverse older people**

Richard Vytniorgu (University of Hertfordshire)

This work in progress paper will explore how our team of university researchers and co-researchers on the ESRC-funded IncludeAge project are combining different autobiographical approaches to understand how older LGBT+ people and those with learning disabilities experience inclusion/exclusion, community, and sense of belonging in physical and online spaces. Recent scholarship on these communities' experiences of space and spaces has often neglected the psychological, phenomenological, and experiential components that can constitute sense of belonging and feeling included. Our study is combining digital and non-digital autobiographical data generation methods to create composite pictures of participants' lived experiences of inclusive and exclusionary spaces over their life course. This paper will discuss (1) the rationale of the study; (2) why we are interested in autobiographical approaches; and (3) how we are combining different approaches through different phases of data generation. We hope that our paper will demonstrate innovative ways in which the study of diverse older people's experience of space and spaces can be enhanced by combining digital and non-digital autobiographical data generation methods. Our paper will also include insights from our community co-researchers on combining different autobiographical methods when studying diverse older people's experiences of space and spaces, and how our co-researchers have experienced these methods when conducting fieldwork themselves.

## Conference Delegates

Helen Bain	King's College London
Jan Bradford	Word-by-Word Limited, Borrowstounness, Scotland
Jeremy Burchardt	University of Reading
Anne Chappell	Brunel University London
Daniela Chivers	LandWorks, Dartington, Devon
Tracey Collett	Plymouth University
Jackie Goode	Loughborough University
Mel Hall	Manchester Metropolitan University
Gayle Letherby	University of Greenwich and University of Plymouth
Ellen McHugh	Brunel University London
Laura Minogue	St Mary's University, Twickenham
Julie Parsons	University of Plymouth
Mark Price	St Mary's University, Twickenham
Chris Saunders	Independent Academic
Aidan Seery	Trinity College Dublin
Richard Vytniorgu	University of Hertfordshire