

# Humanities Research Centre

HRC Biographical Turns across the Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences  
Wednesday 17<sup>th</sup> May 2023 – Scarman House  
Provisional Programme

9.00 Registration and Coffee

9.30 Welcome & Introduction – Alison Cooley (HRC Director, Classics, Professor)

Session 1 -Chair: Alison Cooley

9.40-10.20 **Emma Campbell** (SMLC, French, Reader)

*Thinking Biographical Turns Through Medieval Saintly Biography*

10.20-11.00 **Li Liu** (English; PGR)

*'To Be or Not to Be': Reading Dickens with Narrative Theories and Biographical Studies*

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11.00-11.20 Coffee

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Session 2 - Chair: Louise Bourdua

11.20-12.00 **Sarah Richardson** (History, Professor)

*The Cobden Sisterhood: Culture and Politics in the Age of Women's Suffrage*

12.00-12.40 **Paul Smith** (History of Art, Professor)

*'The meaning of his work cannot be determined from his life': Cezanne, Biography, Autism*

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12.40-13.30 Lunch

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Session 3 – Chair: David Lambert

13.30-14.10 **Benjamin Smith** (History, Professor of Latin American History)

*Queenpin: How to write the biography of a female drug trafficker*

14.10-14.50 **Gioia Panzarella** (GSD, Assistant Professor)

*Linguistic autobiographies in the classroom: a self-reflective and creative assessment*

14.50-15.20 **Douglas Morrey** (SMLC/French Studies, Reader)

*Biography, promiscuity and autofiction in France: On the eighteenth-century lives recounted by Philippe Sollers*

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15.20-15.40 Tea

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Session 4 – Chair: Phil McCash

15.40-16.20 **Hande Cayir** (Film Studies, PGR)

*Research as film: Searching Self in the Ethno and Re-thinking Ethno in the Self*

16.20-17.00 **Daniel Vanello** (Philosophy, Leverhulme ECF)

*Moral Understanding, Thick Ethical Concepts, and Biography*

17.00-17.30 Closing Roundtable Discussion – Chair: Silvija Jestrovic (Theatre Studies, Professor)

## ABSTRACTS (A-Z by speaker)

**Emma Campbell**

### **Thinking Biographical Turns Through Medieval Sainly Biography**

This presentation considers the colloquium's methodological questions in the context of medieval hagiography—a form of Christian sacred biography that circulated widely in medieval Europe, in Latin and vernacular languages. While ostensibly based on the lives of individual holy figures, the biographies of medieval saints are, first and foremost, typological portraits. Such portraits are often deeply interested in how social marginality and exemplarity go hand-in-hand. This paper focuses on this dynamic in French versions of the Life of Mary of Egypt, which describe the conversion of a repentant sex worker who becomes a saint following years spent in the desert, doing penance for past sins. My presentation will explore what this text has to say about the gesture of turning itself—in its physical as well as its spiritual senses—and how this provides a way of thinking about sacred biography's representation of individuals at the margins of secular society.

**Hande Cayir**

### **Research as film: Searching Self in the Ethno and Re-thinking Ethno in the Self**

In this paper, I will present two case studies. I am the subject in the first case. I got married and divorced in Turkey, and my surname changed without my wish. When the support around me was insufficient, I decided to make a documentary about changing my last name to demonstrate the invisible wounds and challenge the legal system. To what extent could an ordinary Turkish woman influence the culture and society in which she lives? What makes my story/film worth sharing? Who watches it? I used the autoethnography method (Ellis 2004; Adams & Ellis & Holman Jones 2017) to study this subject. I was putting a woman at the centre of the research, allowing future research to benefit from women's knowledge. The film was screened at festivals, featured in the newspapers, and created debates, with some men at the conferences sharing that they had decided not to pressure the women after watching the film. This formed the content of my first PhD (Çayır 2020).

The second case study belongs to Alex, 57 years old, diagnosed with schizophrenia, and living with benefits in the UK. She says, 'I hurt myself by cutting myself or burning myself or overdosing. However, I don't want to dwell too much on the self-harm. I want to offer an understanding of what goes on which makes self harm a welcome distraction, and easier to fix than my mind' (Alex 2022). How would you film this narrative without distorting or manipulating it? (Nichols 2016) Who would talk on the screen? Is it a voice-over? Who frames the cadrage if it is a collaboration? Do we see images? What is the angle? How does the camera move? What is the location look like? We have worked on filmmaking techniques to get her to film herself rather than me filming her so as not to misrepresent her; the process has been a 'shared anthropology' (Rouch 2003). She wants to contribute to improving mental health services by telling her story through film. It has been a good opportunity to reflect on my family's mental health journey. This will form the content of my second PhD.

Overall, I started with self (auto) and then found others' stories (ethno) in my first research (graphy). In the second one, I started with others (ethnography) and found pieces of myself (Etherington 2004) in their stories. Many ethical issues came to the fore in both methods. The most compelling finding is the transformation of those who tell their stories through film.

### **Bibliographic entries:**

Alex. *Alex's Zine*, Self publishing, 2022.

- Adams, Tony E., Carolyn Ellis, and Stacy Holman Jones. 'Autoethnography.' *The international encyclopedia of communication research methods* (2017): 1-11.
- Çayır, Hande. *Documentary as autoethnography: a case study based on the changing surnames of women*. Vernon Press, 2020.
- Ellis, Carolyn. *The ethnographic I: A methodological novel about autoethnography*. Vol. 13. Rowman Altamira, 2004.
- Etherington, Kim. *Becoming a reflexive researcher: Using our selves in research*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2004.
- Nichols, Bill. *Speaking truths with film: evidence, ethics, politics in documentary*. Univ of California Press, 2016.
- Rouch, Jean. *Cine ethnography*. Vol. 13. University of Minnesota Press, 2003.

Li Liu

### 'To Be or Not to Be': Reading Dickens with Narrative Theories and Biographical Studies

On the 'biographical turn', this paper re-addresses Roland Barthes's bold declaration about the 'Death of the Author', proposing two questions: Is the author 'dead', or more precisely, should we read the text as if the author were dead? And is the text or the author prone to drive the reader to wrest control of the text from the author? To be or not to be, that is, the author to die or not to die, this is a question. To resolve this Hamletian dilemma, I draw upon biographical studies and narrative theories and compare Charles Dickens's *Our Mutual Friend* (1864–65) with *Great Expectations* (1860–61). Here I do not simply deal with biography as a historical source nor a narrative, but conversely, I read fiction as a biography, or to borrow Joanny Moulin's term, I examine the 'biographisation' of Dickens's works.<sup>1</sup>

In so doing, I present a bipartite argument. First, I find that the conventional heterodiegetic (third-person) novel, *Our Mutual Friend*, employs biographical techniques and contains autobiographical materials, as the homodiegetic (first-person) semi-autobiographical novel, *Great Expectations*, does. This obfuscation between fiction and non-fiction biography, I claim, reinforces and at once undermines the authority of the heterodiegetic narrator, who is traditionally viewed as the spokesperson of the author. On the one hand, characters in *Our Mutual Friend* act as if they were a puppet of the narrator, whose lives are framed by the latter; yet, on the other hand, the novel suggests the authorial narrator as the pawn of the chessboard, leaving it to wrestle with characters, whose (auto)biographical voice even overwhelms narrative voice.

Second, in analysis of Dickens's biographies and letters, I argue that the fusion of biographical elements into fiction and, caused by which, the narrative instability do not only support Barthes's claim that '[t]he text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture' but also show Dickens's conscious involvement in freeing characters from the control of the omniscient narrator and perhaps freeing texts from the control of the author.<sup>2</sup> In other words, a daring statement is that the author is attempting to 'kill' himself in the text so as to leave the text open to the reader's interpretation. In this case, the ultimate question is further complicated: to what extent does the author influence the text, or to put it in a Barthesian way, to what extent is the author dead?

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<sup>1</sup> Joanny Moulin, 'The Life Effect: Literature studies and the biographical perspective', in *The Biographical Turn: Lives in History*, ed. by Binne de Haan, Jonne Harmsma and Hans Renders (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2017), pp. 68–78 (p. 68).

<sup>2</sup> Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author', in *Image – Music – Text*, ed. by and trans. by Stephen Heath (London: Fontana Press, 1977), pp. 142–48 (p. 146).

**Douglas Morrey**

**Biography, promiscuity and autofiction in France:**

**On the eighteenth-century lives recounted by Philippe Sollers**

Beginning in the mid-1990s, the high-profile French novelist Philippe Sollers published a succession of biographies of eighteenth-century cultural figures: *Le Cavalier du Louvre (Vivant Denon)* (1995), *Casanova l'admirable* (1998) and *Mystérieux Mozart* (2001). These books might, at first glance, appear an unusual departure for a writer best known for his prolific (and sometimes experimental) novelistic output, for his literary criticism, and for his regular chronicles in *Le Monde*, collected in several large compendia. These biographies bring together a household name (Mozart) with a notorious but little-read figure (Casanova) and a lesser known historical personage (Vivant Denon, diplomat and author of the libertine novella *Point de lendemain* [1777]) to create a unified portrait of a fantasised eighteenth-century Europe as high point of creative and erotic freedom. In doing so, Sollers helps to create a literary justification for his own infamous sexual promiscuity by insisting repeatedly on the inextricable and vital connection between writing and sex. By exploring these biographies in relation to Sollers's wider output, this paper will identify a literary terrain in which biography collapses into autofiction and will point towards the significance of toxic masculinity in the genesis of the autofictional genre that has become so dominant in contemporary French publishing.

**Gioia Panzarella**

**Linguistic autobiographies in the classroom: a self-reflective and creative assessment**

In this paper, I discuss the use of linguistic autobiographies as a teaching tool to introduce the link between multilingualism and sustainable development. When building a narrative to outline the presence of languages in their own lives, students are asked to actively reuse some key concepts in the area of multilingualism. I argue that the (auto)biographical element of this assessment is key for students to engage on a more personal and self-reflective level with what they learn, and can be transferred to other disciplinary areas.

First, I will provide some context on how I approach the study of linguistic autobiography as a teaching tool. This paper stems from the research that I conducted to design a creative assignment component in my module on 'Multilingualism and Sustainable Development'. After noticing that the word 'language' does not appear at all in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), I considered which teaching tools I could use to introduce languages and multilingualism in a sustainable development curriculum.

The central part of my paper examines some advantages and challenges of incorporating creative assessments into the curriculum. I ground my research in autobiographical writing as a creative assessment at the junction between various disciplines, including not only literary studies and language learning, but also interdisciplinary perspectives like narrative research. Such an assessment promotes higher-order thinking skills and enables students to synthesize their learning as they manipulate information to present it in a new format. Offering an alternative to more traditional 'knowledge-checking' types of assessments is a key reason behind implementing the linguistic autobiography as part of the assessments for this module. I will argue that, by comparing the linguistic autobiography with other traditional assignments, students can then transfer back newly acquired academic writing skills to more traditional submissions.

I will conclude by presenting some accompanying activities aimed at preparing students for writing their linguistic autobiography. I will show that utilizing ad hoc resources (plus existing ones such as the stories available on the *Accentism Project* website) is crucial for guiding students' reflections on the advantages of drawing upon personal experiences to examine their own personal connection with language.

**Sarah Richardson**

**The Cobden Sisterhood: Culture and Politics in the Age of Women's Suffrage**

On the death of their father, Richard Cobden, his surviving five daughters set up home together in London, calling themselves the Cobden Sisterhood. As individuals, they each led fascinating lives incorporating aspects as diverse as Irish Land Reform, hand-crafted fonts for printing, the Camden Town murder, vegetarianism and Renaissance art. But by exploring their lives as a collective – their interactions, networks and diverse interests – a rich and nuanced picture emerges of politics and culture in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Britain. This was a transformational period in many women's lives framed by the struggle to obtain the parliamentary vote. It also witnessed a flourishing of literary and artistic movements. By recreating the formidable feminist networks of Jane, Nellie, Annie, Kate and Lucy the pivotal role that women played in the political and cultural life of the nation (and beyond) is uncovered. Women's kinship and friendship networks laid a foundation for their political activism providing an alternative female-dominated environment in contrast to the more formalised political arenas of male politicians. This collective biography demonstrates that their networks were not haphazard but focused and purposeful and also exposes the significant interconnections between cultural and political worlds. We may analyse their individual aims and actions but by considering them as a group the broader structures of the world they inhabited are revealed.

**Benjamin Smith**

**Queenpin: How to write the biography of a female drug trafficker**

This paper examines the process of attempting to write the biography of Ignacia Jasso de González "La Nacha". From her base on the US-Mexican frontier in Ciudad Juárez, La Nacha ran the border drug trade in heroin and morphine from the late 1920s to the mid-1970s. During these five decades, she built a formidable reputation as a killer, a heroin peddler, one half of a border Bonnie and Clyde, and the scourge of U.S. drug agents. She became known as the city's "Dope Queen." She was a fable, a folk hero, and a bogie woman used to scare small kids. Yet despite the plethora of newspaper exposés, court documents, and street rumors, she remains a strangely elusive character. How did a poor, female border immigrant manage to become chief of the border's bloody and conflictive drug trade? Perhaps more importantly, how did she stay there for so long? In this paper, I attempt to offer some suggestions on how to get at the history of guarded underworlds; read between the lines of official documents on both drug dealers and border women; and how to write the biography of such an iconic but also misunderstood character.

**Paul Smith**

**'The meaning of his work cannot be determined from his life': Cezanne, Biography, Autism**

In 1865 Cezanne's closest friend, Emile Zola, declared 'I have to find a man in every work of art', or a 'temperament'. Cezanne's biographers have consistently observed this principle in his wake, both those who knew him and those who did not, notably the art-historian, John Rewald. They have done this largely by intercalating observations about the originality of the painter's work with anecdotes about his eccentricity. Implicit in all such accounts is the Romantic conception of the artist as genius, which regards the work of art as the symptom of this (mysterious) condition, and often of only secondary importance to it. Alex Danchev's 2012 biography lies squarely within this tradition.

In 2007, I published an essay in the volume, *The Life and the Work: Art and Biography*, which tried to get some purchase on this retrograde conception by looking at how Cezanne used the word 'I'. Drawing on Wittgenstein's idea of 'grammar', this argued that Cezanne's 'I' sometimes referred to a series of objectified but imaginary personalities – a 'primitive', a 'child', a seer – which the artist assumed in order to facilitate his activity as a painter. But another 'I', it claimed, was designed to establish that Cezanne was a creative 'temperament' of the kind prized not only by Zola, but by the contemporary art market as well. It was no

coincidence, then, that when Cezanne found himself parodied in several works of fiction as an eccentric, he played up to the image. Cezanne, in short, posed as a 'temperament' for the money.

While this approach did at least make it possible to distinguish between Cezanne the person, his artistic personality, and his public persona, it was – with hindsight – too extreme in treating the artist's atypical behaviour as a myth with no causal connection to his work. Today's paper will therefore pursue an alternative conception of this relationship. This is the possibility, first raised by Merleau-Ponty, that Cezanne was autistic, and that his 'schizoidia' manifested itself both in his untypical behaviour, and in the 'inhuman' character of his portraits and the 'the suspension of expressive values' evident in his work more generally. To this end, it will detail the evidence that Cezanne's behaviours indicated autism, and suggest that it affected his work by predisposing him to look at his 'motifs' for unusually long periods, and attend to them in unconventional ways, or see them as fragmentary.

This is not to suggest that autism was anything more than a substrate to Cezanne's way of seeing. Autistic people (as we prefer to be called,) have ways of modulating their perception and – as artists – of making it pleasurable for others. By this account, Cezanne's work does not express what Merleau-Ponty called his 'illness' as such (even if it were one), but the 'metaphysical' meaning or aesthetic value his autism had

**Daniel Vanello**

### **Moral Understanding, Thick Ethical Concepts, and Biography**

A dominant view in moral philosophy has it that moral understanding is exercised in the ability to explain the truth of moral propositions. For example, one possesses moral understanding in regards to colonialism if one is able to explain the truth of the proposition 'that colonialism is morally wrong'. But what underpins our ability for such explanation? The aim of this talk is to explore the role of biographical narratives in the acquisition of moral understanding. I do so in two steps.

First, I appeal to the distinction between thin and thick ethical concepts. Broadly, the main difference between thin and thick ethical concepts is that thick ethical concepts, in addition to their evaluative content, contain a descriptive content that thin ethical concepts do not. Classical examples of thick ethical concepts are 'cowardice', 'admirable', 'kind', 'courageous', 'betrayal', 'cruel' and 'brutal'. More contemporary examples include 'sexual harassment', 'sexism', 'structural racism', 'police brutality', 'animal brutality', 'homophobia' and 'transphobia'. For example, in judging someone to be cruel, one not only evaluates negatively the given person but one also describes the way in which the person is negatively evaluated. Or in judging an institution to be structurally racist, one not only evaluates negatively the given institution but one also describes the way in which the institution is negatively evaluated. By contrast, thin ethical concepts, like 'morally right' and 'morally wrong', 'morally good' and 'morally bad', contain only an evaluative content and not a descriptive one. Although moral philosophers normally have thin ethical concepts in mind when talking about moral understanding, I will have in mind primarily thick ethical concepts.

Second, I argue that there is a special relationship between our understanding of thick ethical concepts and our understanding what it means to experience a situation or event that falls under the description of the relevant thick ethical concept. It is at this juncture that I introduce the role of biography. By biography, I will understand the construction in narrative form of a person's life. I will argue that, in narrating a person's life, or portion of it, we can articulate the content of a thick ethical concept because we articulate the way in which a situation or event was experienced by the person whose biography we narrate. Biography, then, occupies a special place in the acquisition of moral understanding. I will also argue that, for an important range of thick ethical concepts, biographies should be of members of marginalised and oppressed groups. I will use the example of the thick ethical concept 'colonial brutality'. The case study I will use is the works of Abdulrazak Gurnah, specifically his

*By the Sea*. Although it is fictional, his literary style involves constructing a biographical narrative of a man who needs to emigrate from central-east Africa and enter the UK. I want to argue that, in constructing this man's biography, Gurnah deepens the reader's understanding of the concept 'colonial brutality'.