

Life Writing – Writing Lives. Engaging Knowledge, Time and Self

Veranstalter: Zentrum Moderner Orient (ZMO)

Datum, Ort: 30.09.2015–02.10.2015, Berlin

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From September 30 to October 2, 2015, the *Trajectories of Lives and Knowledge* research group at the Zentrum Moderner Orient (ZMO) hosted its conference, „Life Writing-Writing Lives: Engaging Knowledge, Time and Self“. The research group is one of four groups working within the main ZMO research program, „Muslim Worlds - World of Islam: Conceptions, Practices and Crisis of the Global“, which is financed by the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF). Over the three days of the conference, members of the *Trajectories* group and visiting international scholars addressed the conference theme from the perspective of their research in the fields of history, anthropology, and literary and cultural studies.

The conference situated the notion of *life-writing* as a nexus between knowledge, temporality, and self. As the research group ask in their concept paper: How do differentially gendered, racialized, ethnicized, and nationalized subjects situate their life stories within various narratives, temporal and epistemological inventories? And: How do people articulate their self-understanding as departures from and critical responses to predominant modes of incorporation? Or to put it in the categories of social history: How are life and self embedded in particular historical moments, circles, and milieus; and how do people write their lives at particular moments?

In contrast to a convention that equates life-writing with auto/biography, in addition to conventional textual sources, papers engaged other graphic practices, such as oral histories, diaries, epistolary records, photography, film, and sculpture.

LAILA PARSONS (McGill University), the author of a new biography of Fawzi al-Qawuqji, a Palestinian military leader during the 1948 Arab-Israeli War, demonstrated how the archive can „dictate“ the work of the histo-

rian. She argued that Arab sources have rarely been used to study the life of Qawuqji. By including these sources, such as Arab memoirs, she asks different questions to those raised by other historians. Furthermore, al-Qawuqji had arranged and extensively annotated the archive about his life himself and thus pre-structured later research, a process which has to be taken into consideration by the historian. Parsons also highlighted the role and power of visual sources such as photographs. She emphasized the participation of the photographed in the process of photographing and the changing role of the photograph as an archival source and an object of analysis.

How one can deal with the notion of life when one talks of an object or of a collection? And how can an interpretation of inanimate objects inform the discussion on life-writing?

As REGINA SARREITER (Berlin) showed, objects can become a screen of what people want to do, or did; they mirror life; they can be seen as embodied lives. Her paper centered on the complexities of unearthing traces of lives from the ethnological collection of the German missionary Pater Meinulf Küsters, who lived in South Africa and Tanzania in the 1920s. The collection includes objects, texts, photographs and sound recordings collected and produced by Küsters. Sarreiter contextualized the exploration of Küsters' collection within the development of anthropology as a discipline and investigated the way in which objects become „authenticated“ within a collection. The life of the collector forms the brackets which hold the collection together, both with regard to temporality and space.

NILANJAN SARKAR (London) discussed the life of a sculpture, a 16th century artefact from the medieval fort of Bijapur (South India). He argued that, similar to the approach to visual sources, an important methodological approach is informed by raising the question about the way in which viewers encounter their objects. Reflecting on historical writings about this artefact's life over a period of 300 years, and with regard to changing political interests and claims of authenticity, Sarkar explored how various historical narratives could create trajectories and how these trajectories could be transferred into know-

ledge.

A film can become a medium of *life-writing*. The Berlin-based filmmaker ANGE-LIKA LEVI (Berlin) presented her film „Mein Leben Teil II“ (My Life, Part II) as part of the conference. The film deals with the Shoah and the experience of a second generation of Holocaust survivors. Showing a dialogue between Levi and her mother, the film blends her own life with that of the film's subject, her mother. Levi grew up in Germany in the 1960s as a daughter of a Jewish mother and a Protestant father. For the film she uses the archive of her mother, which contains diaries, photos and objects, and integrates film sequences where her mother narrates her life. How does one interpret a film as a form of life writing? In the discussion, the relational aspect of this way of *life-writing* was emphasized. The life of the protagonist is told through the relationship with the observer, in this case, the daughter as filmmaker.

What happens to this conceptual approach if the individuals we look at are writers, when life becomes writing? ALI RAZA's (Lahore) paper delved into the lives of a group of Pakistani liberal and progressive writers and their involvement in public debates during the period following the foundation of Pakistan. In his research, Raza realized how crucial the interpretation of the past was for the authors. He argued that the historian needs to take the life experiences and networks of these individuals into account, while at the same time neither ignoring nor overemphasizing the role of ideologies or religion as normative frames. Raza reads their writings (historical fiction on Pakistan) as autobiographical texts which bring personal lives together with Pakistan's history.

This concept of the grand scheme in relation to personal life was also central in two papers on contemporary Egypt. In their joint presentation, SAMULI SCHIELKE (Berlin) and MUKHTAR SHEHATA (Alexandria) looked at the life worlds and milieus of a circle of contemporary writers in Alexandria. Following the revolutionary events in Egypt, the writers expressed their hopes and expectations with regard to them and, in doing so, positioned themselves as agents of history. Life here comes together with fiction through the dialectical

relationship between text and author. It became obvious that the writers understood the revolution in their country as a personal act, a moment of biography, and at the same time a moment of history, and they, subsequently, sought to act in accordance with this understanding.

A similar perspective was adopted by PAOLA ABENANTE (Milan) who concentrated on the work of a theatre director in Cairo who brought the revolution to the stage. As a public intellectual who confronted real life, he conceived of the revolution as a moment of improvisation and staged the unfinished revolution as a fragmentation of life. Abenante emphasized the role of hope and visions of utopia for the protagonist with regard to the Egyptian revolution in 2011 and, thus, introduced another aspect of temporality to the conversation – the future; when hope is active it produces utopia, as Abenante argued, which drives people to action or inaction.

The participants of the conference agreed that using the conceptual construction *life writing – writing lives* can provide a fresh look at the concept of agency. By emphasizing the relational and situational character of subjectivity, and by challenging the established division between agency and structure, they refused a clear division between the individual and his/her environment. Instead, they reconstructed dynamics of changing senses of belonging, relationality and affiliation.

The combination of personal history and grand narratives offers possibilities to write history outside the bounds of national boundaries, categories of colonialism, and established ways of periodization. YASMIN SAIKIA (Tempe, Arizona) argued that in doing history one can follow the thinking and self-positioning of the protagonists of histories. What does, for instance, the concept of *freedom* (azadi) mean to Indian Muslims? To develop her argument, Saikia did not look at the „big men“, but at „middle actors“. Given that *azadi* is often used as a secular concept, what is the role that religion comes to play in non-secular conceptions of it? The sense that abstract ideas are actualized and brought to bear on real life is palpable through the manner in which individuals engage with such ideas, and their own life trajectories through them.

NILS RIECKEN (Berlin) connected history and subjectivity through the work of the Moroccan historian, intellectual and novelist Abdallah Laroui (*1933). Excavating a relational approach to subjectivity in Laroui's work, Riecken makes a case for (auto)biography as a temporal practice. He argues that subjectivity is better understood as a processual activity in time and space. Laroui developed his concept of the 'historian' in his writing with relation to the figure of the 'guardian' of Islamic traditions (*ḥāfiẓ*, literally preserver). Both the historian as well as the guardian use concepts of time in order to find their place in history and to present their perspectives on the world. In Riecken's paper, notions of the secular and the religious were connected with concepts of history, time, and the subject as narrating life-in-time.

A similar approach – that of connecting history and subjectivity through individuals' written texts – was relevant for HEIKE LIEBAU (Berlin) in her paper on the brothers Sattar and Jabbar Kheiri. Living in the first half of the 20th century, the Kheiris were political activists, and positioned themselves with regards to, and engaged with, ideas of anti-colonialism, Indian nationalism, pan-Islamism and National Socialism. Liebau centered her paper on the journals published by the brothers in various periods of their lives and in various places. She asked to what extent they can be regarded as autobiographical papers – in that they reflect on certain stages of life, and certain developments of thoughts. Behind these journals are changing networks and audiences, varying expectations and approaches.

SAADI NORMAN NIKRO (Berlin) shifted the perspective by asking how we can deal with memoirs as texts: do we adopt methods of textual and discourse analysis or should we take them as reliable sources of information? In his larger project, Nikro is exploring the role of biography in the work of Edward Said. How do individuals like Said reflect on the relationship between their own lives and their intellectual work? What inventories did Said draw upon in producing his literary-critical and philosophical writings? By looking at the biographical impulses in the work of Said, and the nexus between life experience and in-

tellectual activity, Nikro showed how Said developed a sense of self by responding both to others and his own understanding of his life trajectory.

On the whole, the conference used the concept of *life-writing* to link intellectual history with social history. The reason life-writing was seen as a useful frame for such a linkage is because it draws attention to the bridge between biography, agency and the production of knowledge. In ego-documents and autobiographies, people look 'back' and reflect on their own lives, and often relate their own life trajectories to grand narratives that are circulating in their geographical and historical contexts.

Protagonists of the various papers presented were mostly from the Islamic world, often Muslims. The scholars agreed that it is important to break stereotypes and clichés surrounding the representation of Muslims in the Western academic and public discourse. The overcoming of orientalism is a process that has yet to be completed. One way to depart from orientalist patterns of representations is through a focus on *actors*. Individuals are driven by history: they are involved in history, and see themselves as part of history. Seeing the world through individuals' eyes is one way to disarm essentializing grand narratives that homogenize entire cultures, continents and religions.

Methodologically, the conference encouraged a more embodied and relational approach to the subject of life-writing, giving equal importance to temporal, spatial, political and social circumstances by which people adapt, develop and initiate means to engage and represent their life contexts. Rather than being a purely objective and neutral affair, the historian is always „manipulating“ sources – discovering, selecting, analyzing, and interpreting. The conference presentations all pointed towards the intentionality and fragility of sources. A film or photograph tells a particular story at a certain point in time. At another point in time, the same photo or film would tell another story. Circumstances are decisive as are the viewers' and authors' biographies.

Conference Overview:

Welcome & Introduction - Heike Liebau &

Saadi Norman Nikro

Laila Parsons (McGill University): Self-representation, sources, and the biographer's craft

Discussant: Egodi Uchendu (University of Nigeria, Nsukka)

Nils Riecken (Zentrum Moderner Orient): Re-reading (auto)biography as a temporal practice: subjectivity, critique, and power
Discussant: Smaran Dayal (Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin)

Ali Raza (Lahore University of Management Sciences): Musa Say Marx Tak: Sibte Hasan and the life worlds of Pakistani progressives
Discussant: Yasmin Saikia (Arizona State University)

Nilanjan Sarkar (London School of Economics & Political Science): Writing artefactual lives: Producing history in colonial India
Discussant: Regina Sarreiter (Zentrum Moderner Orient)

Saadi Norman Nikro (Zentrum Moderner Orient): Edward Said: Life writing and critical practice
Discussant: Paola Abenante (University of Milano-Bicocca)

Heike Liebau (Zentrum Moderner Orient): Re-configuring world views / re-positioning oneself: discourses and networks in the lives of Sattar and Jabbar Kheiri
Discussant: Ali Raza (Lahore University of Management Sciences)

Film screening: My Life Part 2
Angelika Levi (Berlin)

Yasmin Saikia (Arizona State University): Becoming free from colonialism: 'Middle-actors' and a different imagination of 'The Republic of God'
Discussant: Nils Riecken (Zentrum Moderner Orient)

Paola Abenante (University of Milano-Bicocca): 'Narration is not something we say but something that we live...we live theatrically.' Staging life from the perspective of an Egyptian theatre director
Discussant: Samuli Schielke (Zentrum Moderner Orient)

Samuli Schielke (Zentrum Moderner Orient) and Mukhtar Shehata (Alexandria): The milieu and the writer in Alexandria's literary circles

Discussant: Saadi Norman Nikro (Zentrum Moderner Orient)

Regina Sarreiter (Zentrum Moderner Orient): First thoughts towards writing the lives of an ethnological collection
Discussant: Silke Strickrodt (German Historical Institute, London)

Tagungsbericht *Life Writing – Writing Lives. Engaging Knowledge, Time and Self*. 30.09.2015–02.10.2015, Berlin, in: H-Soz-Kult 09.03.2016.