

Outline: Chap. 2, *Reading Autobiography*

In this chapter Smith & Watson explore the ways that the persona or identity of the autobiographer is established in the text, what they call the “autobiographical subjectivity”.

MEMORY

- Memory as meaning-making: memory reconstructs the past to make it meaningful to us
- Ways of using memory to reconstruct the past change over time
- Memory can be politically charged—note debates over the Vietnam war or the civil rights movement
- Some memory can be personal or collective/cultural: reminiscences vs. documentation
- Memory is very material-based
- Autobiographical memory may be of traumatic events; the severity of the event may “distort” memory (but from another perspective it is even truer than a documentary account)

EXPERIENCE

- Experiences comprise our personal memory, and make us who we are
- We can reconstruct experiences and share them only through memory, through discourse
- Experiences can be interpreted differently by life narrators at different points in their lives
- Experience gives “authority” to an autobiographer
- Experience is used to persuade readers of the truth and authenticity of autobiographies; this is how we “relate” to autobiographical texts

IDENTITY

- Writers both try to get readers to identify with them—what they have in common—and to show readers how they are unique and different
- Identities can shift over time and with different social contexts
- Identities, like memory and experience, are constructed in language
- Life writers incorporate different identities in their texts
- Identities can conflict and complement: e.g., representing yourself as a jock but also a closeted gay or as both black and a woman

SPACE

- All identities, experience, and memory are located in space, a specific space or a broader cultural space
- Space can be “felt” or “humanized,” imbued with very human feelings

- Space can be where social connections are made, social borders crossed—e.g., in an airport you may be mixed with people from many different nationalities or ethnicities
- Space, as described in life writing, may be political or polemic. An autobiographer might talk about “the Jim Crow South,” and that has political reverberations
- Space may be used as a metaphor for the identity of the life writer
- Space can also stand for powerful memories—e.g., the place of the Berlin Wall, or a bedroom in your familial house

EMBODIMENT

- Memory and space are linked to the writer’s body. An American-Chinese woman might tell the story of her family through scars on her back; the reaction of others (including exclusion) might depend on the color of the autobiographer’s skin
- Stories may be based on the body. Sexual memoirs, narratives of disability, texts about addiction or disease, are examples

AGENCY

- Life writers talk about what they have done and can do—their agency. The texts themselves are acts of agency—they have the freedom to tell their own stories
- But agency is always limited by “cultural scripts”—we are limited by the beliefs and institutions around us. How we write about our actions is partly our own power, partly the constraints of culture and ideology
- Agency in life narratives may be politically driven. If a life writer highlights some significant action (protest, leaving), there may be a political agenda behind it

CONCLUSION: “Readers often conceive of autobiographical narrators as telling unified stories of their lives, as creating or discovering coherent selves. But both the unified story and the coherent self are myths of identity. ...Nor is there a unified, stable, immutable self that can remember everything that has happened in the past. We are always fragmented in time, taking a particular or provisional perspective on the moving target of our pasts, addressing multiple and disparate audiences. ... it is more helpful to approach autobiographical telling as [performance].”