The two editions of Ken Plummer’s incredibly influential text, The Documents of Life (1983) and The Documents of Life 2 (2001), have helped re-make the intellectual landscape and importantly contributed to the huge growth of biographical methods, auto/biographical approaches and narrative inquiry of the last 30 years.

A NABS conference is being held on Friday 20 May at the University of Edinburgh, on the theme of ‘The Documents of Life – Revisited!’, which will return to Plummer’s work with the insights and developments of the period since the 2001 publication of the second edition in mind. You will find the Programme, the Registration Form (the conference is FREE), and the Abstracts in the rest of this document. As is usual at NABS events, papers will be a mixture of 30 minute presentations and shorter more focused ones of 15 minutes, with discussion slots attached to both.

In this document, you will find

- Programme
- Registration Form
- Abstracts

Registration is essential as places are limited! Thank you.
## PROGRAMME

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<td>9.30 – 10.00</td>
<td>Refreshments, chatter</td>
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<tr>
<td>10.00 – 10.15</td>
<td>Welcome, Housekeeping, Introduction</td>
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<td>10.15 – 10.45</td>
<td>Paper 1: Claire Lynch ‘The literary invasion of the Burnett Archive of Working Class Autobiography - A response to the claim that “Nobody wages war with Dostoevsky or Dickens”’</td>
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<td>10.45 – 12.00</td>
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<td>Paper 2: Niamh Moore “Humanist’ methods in a ‘more-than-human’ world?</td>
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<td>2.i Helen Dampier ‘Identifying the quotidian in the heterotopic universe of Olive Schreiner’s letters’</td>
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<td>2.iii Clair Morrow ‘Exploring the lie as a document of life’</td>
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<td>2.iv Paul Walters ‘Spiderwebs and jigsaw puzzles: working with letters on the margin’</td>
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<td>2.45 – 3.00</td>
<td><strong>TEA &amp; COFFEE</strong></td>
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<td>3.i Christine Bell ‘Visible Women: Stories of Age, Gender and In/Visibility’</td>
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<td>3.iii Wen-Shan Shieh “”“Hiding behind a Foreign Language”: A Strategy to Avoid Self-Censorship in Life Writing’</td>
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<td>3.iv Shivaun Woolfson ‘Everything Speaks: A Multidimensional Approach to Research’</td>
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<tr>
<td>4.45 – 5.00</td>
<td><strong>Closing remarks: Publication and all that</strong></td>
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The form to register for the conference is on the next page. Please note that places are limited to 42 (a resonant number for us Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy fans) so early booking is recommended. Please register asap and by Monday 18 April at the latest – thank you!

Abstracts of the papers follow the registration form.
If you would like to attend this NABS conference on ‘The Documents of life – Revisited!’ can you please register by completing the information below and sending it by email to andrea.salter@ed.ac.uk as soon as possible and by Monday 18 April at the latest? The conference is free, places are limited to a maximum of 42, and you are advised to register as soon as possible to be sure of a place. Thank you!

The seminar will be held in a fully wheelchair-accessible building; however, parking is likely to be a bit more problematic. For information on disabled access, please email the above address.

On 19 April, a final timetable and set of abstracts, and also information on the room/building where the seminar is being held, will be sent by email to everyone who has registered. Juice and a biscuit will be provided at registration, and coffee and herb tea in the afternoon break. Anything else, please bring with you. There are sandwich shops, a wonderful Swedish cafe, a small but nice Sainsbury’s and a Starbuck’s are all within easy walking distance.

YOUR NAME:

INSTITUTIONAL AFFILIATION:

YOUR EMAIL ADDRESS:

PHD STUDENT, ACADEMIC OR WHAT?

PLEASE EMAIL US TO JOIN THE NABS MAILING LIST, IF YOU WOULD LIKE TO RECEIVE INFORMATION ABOUT FUTURE EVENTS - contact andrea.salter@ed.ac.uk

Prof Liz Stanley, Centre for Narrative & Auto/Biographical Studies, University of Edinburgh,
Edinburgh EH8 9LL, UK.
www.sps.ed.ac.uk/NABS/
Claire Lynch, Brunel University

‘The literary invasion of the Burnett Archive of Working Class Autobiography - A response to the claim that “Nobody wages war with Dostoevsky or Dickens”’

Compiled by John Burnett, David Vincent and David Mayall, the *Burnett Archive of Working Class Autobiography* contains over 230 unpublished autobiographies of authors who lived in England, Scotland or Wales between 1790 and 1945. The autobiographies were taken as evidence “that in different ways and in different contexts the common people had always been historians of their own lives” (Burnett, Vincent and Mayall xiii).

The archive has remained at Brunel University with “documents of life” in the form of letters, diaries, photographs, sketches and auto/biographies kept in bulging acid-free folders in over-filled filing cabinets. This paper is concerned with what happened next. As Steedman points out, once an archive is formed, “nothing happens”, it is “indexed, and catalogued, and some of it is not indexed and catalogued, and some of it is lost. But as stuff, it just sits there until it is read, and used, and narrativised” (Steedman 68). Whereas much of the previous work based on the archive has been concerned with boiling down the written text to its essence of dates and facts, a new approach using literary scholars and creative writing workshops hopes to narrate the archive through methods more commonly found in the humanities, in short, to reintroduce the literary modes of “experiencing, feeling, interpreting” (Plummer 6).

Through the application of literary techniques this approach sought to question the assumptions that illiteracy prevented self-reflection, or that an unpublished narrative necessarily meant an unpublishable one. The paper will engage with Plummer’s ideas and present the findings of a project which has in several ways sought to implement them.


Sally Fincher, University of Kent

The diarists’ audience

Inspired by the methods of Mass Observation, the Share Project (http://www.sharingpractice.ac.uk) is collecting diaries from academics in Higher Education over the course of the academic year 2010-11. The project asks respondents to keep a diary for one day of each month—the 15th—so that, taken together, the
diaries form a series of “day surveys”. To date there are 375 diarists registered, although not all write every month.

Share Project diaries are unusual (qua diaries) in two important respects. One is that there is a known, knowable and external audience, they are written for the project; the other is that (from the outset) they have a defined and limited span, they start in September 2010 and finish in August 2011. As a genre, whilst diaries always have a defined start date, they finish in various and odd ways, infrequently by intent, more commonly by desuetude (Lejeune, 2009): these have stricter boundaries.

The diaries will eventually be analysed in detail, but at this point they have effectively a single reader. Every month, I read all the entries and prepare a summary “newsletter”—The Day Survey Reporter—for participants, composed of extracts from their texts that reflect common themes. In this paper, I will explore this associative relationship between diarist, audience and “newsletter” as a partial but responsive text, and how this relationship impacts the voice (and behaviour) of some contributors.

This relationship reflects two concerns raised by Plummer’s notion of the “continuum of construction” when reporting work of this nature (Plummer, 2001). One is the question of audience: for whom are these diaries written, who is the implied reader, and how does this impact the diarists’ text? Another is the problematic issue of “author intrusion”, of how far I, as researcher, may interpret and edit the contributors’ raw diary entries into another work, and what the different possible degrees of intervention imply.

Lejeune, P. On Diary, University of Hawaii Press, 2009
Plummer, K. Documents of Life 2, SAGE publications, 2001

Helen Pleasance, Open University (h.pleasance@open.ac.uk and helen.pleasance@btopenworld.com)
‘The very documented life of Myra Hindley’

The words ‘documents’ and ‘life’ both pertain to the figure of Myra Hindley in peculiar ways. Since her conviction in May 1966, with her partner, Ian Brady, for the Moors murders, she has had a very public presence in British culture via a range of documents, while her material body remained shut away in what Claire Grant has termed ‘the dead time’ (Claire Grant, Crime and Punishment in Contemporary Culture (London; Routledge, 2007), p. 127) of life imprisonment. Indeed, until her death in 2002 a chief function of popular renditions of her ‘life’, organized around the central document of her arrest photograph, was as evidence that she should remain imprisoned. Through such documentation a particular subjectivity emerged; in the tabloid shorthand for her, she became ‘evil Myra’.

This paper will examine this construction of Hindley, against challenges to it made possible through other forms of documentation. It will examine three challenges in particular; accounts of her as a redeemable criminal, engagements with the construction of ‘evil Myra’ as an icon, and Hindley’s own autobiographical accounts, in which she inserts herself into a poetics of working class experience. Hindley moves, through these challenges, from a singular figure of individual iniquity to a complex socially and culturally placed human subject. The National Archives in Kew justified the release of her prison documents in 2008 because
of her ‘historical importance’. If Hindley is to be viewed as such a figure we need to ask what kind of history of the human subject we want her life and documents to tell. The dehumanization of Hindley as a figure of individual monstrosity depends upon uncritical assumptions of essential humanism. Plummer’s concept of a critical humanism allows an ethical examination of the discourses, textual forms and the relations of power through which Hindley is made knowable, which emphasises their relationship to the lived experience of real people. Plummer’s critical humanism maintains ‘an embodied, emotional self, striving for meaning in wider historically specific social worlds’ (Ken Plummer, Documents of Life 2 (London: Sage, 2001), p. 255).

Andrea Salter, University of Edinburgh
‘Stories, or “someone telling something to someone about something”: two stories in Olive Schreiner’s letters & one in Nella Last’s Mass-Observation diary’

Stories are a common feature of everyday life, told in different situations for various purposes. Stories are also an essential part of ‘documents of life’, occurring in both letters and diaries among other forms of life-writing. My presentation focuses mainly on stories in letters, specifically those written by Olive Schreiner (1855-1920), feminist, socialist writer and social theorist, and which have emerged from Olive Schreiner Letters Project research. What a story ‘is’ is subject to various interpretations, making the task of identifying them across c5000 extant Schreiner letters not altogether straightforward. In addition, often the terms ‘narrative’ and ‘story’ are used interchangeably, while Michel de Certeau’s (1984) approach to understanding stories is helpful in providing a simple and practical framework for distinguishing stories.

Firstly, my presentation will overview the broad structure of stories identified using de Certeau’s framework across Schreiner’s letters. Secondly, I will take two examples of rather different kinds of stories in Schreiner’s letters to point up some features of her ‘epistolary story-telling’ more generally. Thirdly, thinking about stories in terms of form suggests there are some important differences between telling stories in letters as compared to telling them in diaries, an idea based on my earlier research on the Mass Observation women’s diaries, in particular on Nella Last’s Mass-Observation diary, from which I draw an example. While some diarists are story-tellers and others are not, the stories that do appear in diaries are generally markedly less ‘to the person’ than those written in letters, and this raises the interesting possibility that a story should be examined as form-specific.


Cate Watson, University of Stirling (cate.watson@stir.ac.uk)
‘Between diary and memoir: documenting a life in wartime Britain’

Ken Plummer talks about the bricolages and fragments from which a person assembles their stories and the ‘props’ ‘deposited in a trail behind a life as it is lived’ (Plummer, K. (2007) ‘The call of life stories in ethnographic research’. In, P. Atkinson et al (eds) Handbook of Ethnography, London: Sage, pp.395-406). This paper concerns the assembly and reassembly of these fragments in the telling of a life. In generating another
telling I draw on two first person narratives of civilian evacuation at the outset of WWII. The first is a diary of a 13-year old boy evacuated from Edinburgh to Fife. The second is a chapter in his unpublished memoir of these same events written over 50 years later.

Treating these sources as topic and resource my main aims for the paper are: To explore the two narratives as evocations of wartime Britain. What does each contribute to our understanding of the personal experiences of a young person caught up in this aspect of war, and what light is shed on the wider social systems and structures in place at this time? Secondly, although diary and memoir are both autobiographical forms, they represent separate discourses. The second aim of this paper is therefore to examine the gap between diary and memoir. In particular, how do diary and memoir respectively work to produce subjectivity/identity? What shifts are apparent in these two versions of self and what does this say about how we learn to narrate ourselves and our lives?

SESSION 2 ABSTRACTS

Niamh Moore, Centre for Research on Socio-Cultural Change (CRESC), University of Manchester

‘Humanist’ Methods in a ‘More-than-Human’ World?

The paper takes as a departure point for revisiting the critical humanism of Ken Plummer’s *Documents of Life*, Sarah Whatmore’s careful articulation of ‘the urgent need to supplement humanist methods that rely on generating talk and text, with experimental practices that amplify other sensory, bodily and affective registers and extend the company and modality of what constitutes a research subject’ (Whatmore 2006: 606-607). Though Whatmore is not entirely dismissive of ‘humanist methods’, in the paper I explore the possibilities of reconceiving such apparently ‘humanist’ methods as life stories in the context of what have variously been termed, posthumanism, the posthumanities, a more-than-human world, and turns to affect, materiality and practice. However, rather than take up the technologically enhanced world of some posthumanisms, I turn to the stories of environmental activists in Clayoquot Sound on the west coast of Vancouver Island. In the summer of 1993, protestors set up a peace camp based on ecofeminist principles to support non-violent civil disobedience and the blockading of a logging road into temperate rainforest slated for clear-cut logging, leading to the arrest of over 800 people. In approaching these oral histories I also draw on Plummer’s work in *Telling Sexual Stories*, though here I have in mind not so much sexual stories, as stories of nature, of women’s nature, of ‘becoming worldly’ (Haraway 2008) through activism and stories of activism, stories which have been hard to tell in the context of feminist controversies over essentialism, but which I understand as stories whose time might finally have come.

Helen Dampier, Leeds Metropolitan University

Identifying the quotidian in the heterotopic universe of Olive Schreiner’s letters: “I am writing it in between, while I run into the kitchen every now & then to stir the ?lean ?back & the sheep tail I am melting out on the stove; & now it is time to set the table for dinner”

In *Documents of Life 2* (2001: 52), Plummer contends that letters are a “relatively rare document of life in the social sciences”, and suggests that this results from social scientists’ suspicions concerning their lack of direct referentiality. Letters’ reflection of the world of both writer and recipient, the complexities of time in and of letters, and what Plummer refers to as the ‘dross rate’ are all seen to compromise the referentiality of letters as documents of life.

Recognising that no written sources are unmediated or provide transparent access to the past, this paper argues in line with Plummer’s comments, that there is still a tendency to treat letters as directly referential and coterminous with ‘life itself’. It does so by examining the difficulties associated with gaining analytical purchase on the ‘quotidian’ in the letters of feminist writer and social theorist Olive Schreiner (1855-1920). It suggests that some of the ‘defining characteristics’ of letters – their ‘immediacy’, and what Stanley (2004: 208) refers to as their “flies in amber quality” – make it tempting to conflate the ‘quotidian of life’ and the ‘quotidian of letters’, with the latter having a by no means direct, one-on-one relationship with the former. Instead letters can more usefully be understood by making use of Foucault’s (1967) notion of heterotopias, which he identities as times and spaces ‘outside’ of time and space. Deploying the concept of heterotopias helps to point up letters as textual constructions, and perceives letters as a universe of their own making, in which what is quotidian in the textual universe of the letters is the quotidian. Rather than conflating the quotidian with ‘the everyday’, this approach forces the researcher to confront the structural characteristics of Schreiner’s everyday letter-writing practices, and to revisit Plummer’s apposite insights about the mediated, artful nature of letters, as well as of documents of life more widely.

Heather Blenkinsop, University of Edinburgh

Forgotten Memories? Silence, Reason, Truth & the Carnival

It was to be the best carnival ever. However, after much build-up and local publicity, the town’s annual summer carnival stopped abruptly in 1954, and seemingly no one can remember why. It was restarted thirty five years later. Although many townspeople can tell the story of the restarted carnival in 1989, the reasons for the demise of the old carnival seem almost universally forgotten. Or as the account of one townsperon suggests, deliberately silenced. This paper forms part of a much larger ethnographic project concerned with stories in relation to belonging and community in rural Northumberland. Drawing on Plumber’s ideas in *Documents of Life 2* around memory and evaluating the truthfulness of stories, this paper probes accounts about the demise of the old carnival and its restart. By analysing fieldnotes concerning my conversations with townspeople as well as news reports gathered about both events, this paper explores how stories become ‘true memories’, frozen by being written down or constantly retold within certain social frameworks. It also considers what happens when they are not written down, retold or apparently remembered. Stories are all told from differing points of view and as such all represent a ‘truth’ and what
may be factually false can seem 'true' to the listener. These ideas are particularly useful in understanding the reasons given by townspeople for their stories, and my own willingness to believe the one account exposing ‘the truth’ about the failure of the old carnival.

Clair Morrow, Goldsmiths University, London
‘Exploring the lie as a document of life’

What does it mean to tell a lie about one’s self? As academics, we tread critically and carefully when speaking of truth and true selves, and notions of autobiographical truth have been widely deconstructed. In this context, then, it might logically follow that the lies we tell are found to be as empirically valuable as our ‘truths’. Yet sociological investigation into the social significance of lying has rarely (Goffman (1959); Simmel (1908) and van Dongen and Fainzang (2005) are some notable exceptions) moved beyond the view that lying is morally reprehensible. In wider society too, lying is framed as a deviant act and is disciplined accordingly. However, in this paper I would like to invite you to re-think the lie. In keeping with Ken Plummer’s longing for the “creative, interpretative story telling of lives” I would like to present the lies we tell as profound ‘documents of life’ that offer the researcher one possible way of exploring the “interminable tension between the subjectively creative individual human being acting upon the world and the objectively given social structure constraining him or her” (Plummer 1983:3).

The discussion will be framed by my own current doctoral research which considers the lie as a “meaningful autobiographical act” (see Dow Adams (1990); Smith and Watson (1996); Rich (1979), with particular reference to my interview with Lisa. Through excerpts from Lisa’s autobiographical telling of her own lies and deceit, I will show how we might reconceptualise the act of lying as an example of human creativity that works to negotiate how one embodies and narrates their selves and their worlds in the face of historical and structural constraints.

Paul Walters, Rhodes University, and Jeremy Fogg, National English Literary Museum (NELM)
Spiderwebs and jigsaw puzzles: working with letters on the margin

Olive Schreiner (1855 – 1920) was the first South African novelist to achieve international recognition with The Story of an African Farm (1883). Inter alia, the book struck a blow for the emancipation of women, a theme which Schreiner was to develop with intelligence and passion for the rest of her life, culminating in Women and Labour (1911). In the 1890’s she vehemently opposed the tightening grip of British Imperialism on South Africa’s mineral wealth, and was an outspoken supporter of the Boer cause throughout the South African (Anglo-Boer) War. In 1894, she married a young farmer, Samuel Cron Cronwright, who was managing a farm which adjoined one where, as a young governess, she apparently began her famous novel. The marriage was fraught with difficulties – including the death of their only child only hours after her birth, Schreiner’s asthma and a congenital heart problem, and a literal-minded stubbornness on Cronwright’s part. There was a lengthy final separation from December 1913 to July 1920 (Schreiner mainly in England, Cronwright in De Aar, Cape Province), when they were briefly reunited in London before Schreiner returned alone to Cape Town, dying there on the night of 10 December 1920.
The presentation will look at the problems posed by trying to form an independent picture of Cronwright in the years immediately following Olive Schreiner’s death, not the least of which is his proprietorial attitude as self-appointed guardian of the Schreiner legacy, and the way in which, having made his selection from Schreiner’s papers, he destroyed anything that might have served as counter-evidence. Detailed analyses of Cronwright’s representation of Schreiner (both published and unpublished) reveal extensive problems of distortion and deliberate misrepresentation with seemingly one aim: to represent himself in the best possible light. It is therefore important to examine contemporary glimpses of Cronwright from sources other than himself, because these may help to explain the distorted portrait which he left of his wife.

In an attempt to answer such questions as ‘How did Cronwright represent his task to others outside what he published?’; ‘How did others see Cronwright’s intentions and abilities?’, we propose to bring together - spider-like - documents from the USA, South Africa, and the UK, drawing on three principal archived sources: 1) a collection of letters from Cronwright to Havelock Ellis from 3 May 1921 to 10 September 1934 (Harry Ransom Humanities Research Centre, Univ of Texas at Austin); 2) a collection of letters from Havelock Ellis to Muriel Horrabin from 19 February 1935 to 12 August 1937 (the Brenthurst Library, Johannesburg, South Africa); and two letters from John L Hodgson to Muriel Horrabin, the first a lengthy fragment copied by Horrabin to Ellis between 24 November 1935 and 3 December 1935, and the second dated 31 July 1936 (Hull History Centre, UK).

To supplement these principal sources we will draw on Cronwright’s Diaries from 7 June 1921 to 13 May 1926 (housed at the National English Literary Museum, Grahamstown, South Africa), as well as a few letters of dubious provenance copied to Cronwright’s brother Morthland (also inNELM’s keeping). We will attempt to piece these very different sources into a “triangulated” sketch of some of the more important aspects of Cronwright’s life in the years leading up to and immediately following Schreiner’s death.

SESSION 3 ABSTRACTS

Mona Livholts, Mid Sweden University
Writing Water: An untimely academic novella

“Once, when she thought she had written, she found her body surrounded by grayish blue, the bluest grey of all colors there were at all times. She is standing on the soft grass in the morning light, looking at the brownish landscape of stones. Making a decision; turning her back on grief.”
Writing Water is the third untimely academic novella in a trilogy of personal narratives based on a woman’s life, writing and desire to reach the Professor’s Chair in the beginning of the twentieth century, Sweden. The novella is set in the university, the writing happens both in the process of writing by the author, and for the main character in the novella in other places. The diversity of forms used in creating a set of interwoven stories is inspired by poststructuralist and postcolonial feminist theory and literary fiction and by methodological approaches, such as theorising of letters, memory work, narrative and autobiography, and photography. In particular, it draws on interpretation of Hélène Cixous’ essay ‘Enter the Theatre’ and Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s story ‘The Yellow Wallpaper’. The paper engages in “revisiting” some of the key aspects of Plummer’s ideas about a ‘critical humanism’ by focussing on the complex relationship between personal history and scholarly identity and injustices created by class, gender and ‘whiteness’. The use of a variety of writing methodologies and photography allows documentation of emotional and sensory perceptions of contradictions, messiness and ambiguities and makes possible for personal, family and society to interact in the creating of life stories.

Previous untimely novellas:
“Commentaries on the Professor’s Chair: Erla Hulda Haldorsdottir, Matti Hyvärinen, Kali Israel, Stevi Jackson, Barbara A. Mitzaal, Andrea Salter, Liz Stanley, Maria Tamboukou.

Christine Bell, University of Bristol (christine@bellcj.demon.co.uk)
‘Visible women: stories of age, gender and in/visibility’

Personal indignation motivated the exploration for my doctoral dissertation into the anecdotal ‘invisibility’ of us older women. Nobody sees us any more – or so we are told. My own experience, and that of other older women I know, does not support this hypothesis – certainly not as a general rule or the only tale to tell. Over a period of around 18 months I corresponded by email with seven other older women (aged between 50-70). In these exchanges we explored our lives, thoughts, beliefs, experiences, sense of visibility or invisibility. Questions posed – and not necessarily answered – included: What is behind the stories of older women becoming invisible and disregarded? Where do they come from? What do they mean – to women and ‘society’? How might they be challenged? What other stories can be told? This is a political and philosophical, as well as a personal, issue and raises many questions, drawing on feminist and
poststructuralist ideas, around women’s perceptions (and experience) of power and positioning. The work presents a reflective, questioning, subjective, self-indulgent and often moving narrative exploration through the stories of women growing older and not disappearing. The major part is the poetic representation of the thoughts and lives of eight older women, told in their own words; what Laurel Richardson calls “a poem masquerading as a transcript and a transcript masquerading as a poem” (Fields of Play (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press) 1997: 139). With Plummer’s ideas in mind, this work demonstrates the depth and diversity of life stories, using narrative and poetry as ‘data’.

Ulla-Maija Salo, University of Helsinki (ulla-maija.salo@helsinki.fi)

“Dear Mrs. President, The forests are in peril” auto/biographical elements of children's letters to the President of Finland

Over the past nine years, children and young people have written nearly nine thousand letters to the president of Finland, Tarja Halonen. Almost without exception the letters are handwritten and decorated on a carefully chosen paper. The most precious stickers, glossy pictures and glitter decorate the notepaper. The writing styles are varied, and at the most extreme a letter written to the president is presented as sacred and secret, as a devout plea, almost like a prayer. These writings grasp the historical moment and in this sense the letter provides a durable medium for moving words. In these letters, nature is repeatedly brought up, worried about and respected; and not only on the level of speech, but on the level of action as well. Along with this, the young letter-writers tell about their lives, the environments they live in, and the matters which are the most meaningful to them. This paper derives from children's life-writing with a special reference to nature, and they are the ‘Forest Talks’, as I call them. In my data, Mother Nature seems to speak particularly to daughter-citizens, and them to the female ruler. I am asking how the children create, write and inhabit these spaces. In context of ‘documents of life’, I explore my letter-data as an ‘interactive product’, and in terms of ‘the narratives of life-patterns’ I explore how (much) a life may be open to ‘will and agency’ in the early years while the letter-writers are children and young people.

Wen-Shan Shieh (Hannah), University of Sussex (ws35@sussex.ac.uk)

“Hiding behind a foreign language”: A strategy to avoid self-censorship in life writing

The Reader: While reading your epistolary story, ‘Preludes to Love’, a hackneyed question did pop up in my mind: Is it based on real life? Did you choose to write in English to avoid censorship imposed by the government in China?

The Author: I am Chinese from Taiwan, but this does not mean that my writing is exempt from all forms of censorship. What concerns me most, however, is self-imposed rather than political censorship. As Ken Plummer aptly points out in his Documents of Life, an author may face a dilemma of being honest about his or her life or leaving out some sensitive details out of fear of being attacked if the characters or events in his or her story are identified (142-3).
The Reader: Still, it seems odd for two native Chinese speakers to correspond in English, doesn’t it?

The Author: The addresser and the addressee in my story communicate in English because intimacies can sometimes be more easily expressed in foreign languages. The best evidence can be found in Qian Zhongshu’s academic satire, *Fortress Besieged* (1947), in which the heroine ‘only dared order him to kiss her while hiding behind a foreign language’ (108). In addition, some reservations or ambiguities in the Chinese expressions have been removed following their translation into English in my story, as the I-narrator says in Maurice Blanchot’s *Death Sentence*, ‘For quite some time I had been talking to her in her mother tongue, which I found all the more moving since I knew very few words of it’ (173).

Shivaun Woolfson, University of Sussex (shivaunwoolfson@aol.com)
‘Everything speaks: a multidimensional approach to research’

Building on Ken Plummer’s invocation to foster research practices that encourage the creative, expressive and interpretive story tellings of live, the proposed session will present a multidimensional approach to historical research by exploring the lives and memories of a group of elderly Holocaust survivors in modern day Vilnius through the lens of their ‘special’ places and objects. Incorporating Dilthey’s premise that testimony can be viewed as a series of multi-layered expressions which “gather together” and “fix” lived experience such as gestures, facial expressions and words but which can also include more permanent forms such as works of art, architecture, land and written texts, it will illustrate that testimony is not restricted to speech alone but rather that everything – a stone, a clock, an amber pendant, a pair of spectacles, a flower – speaks. Drawing on such diverse influences as Hasidic master, Rabbi Nachum of Bratslav, Canadian environmental artist, Marlene Creates, cultural anthropologists, Barbara Myerhoff, Michael Jackson and Ruth Behar and the writings of Jung, Berlin, Solnit, Micahels and Auslander, the session will explore how by moving beyond words, verbal or written, we can extend the range of our canonical sources. Things are never just things; our memories are inscribed on and through the objects we hold close. Place too is a site of meaning, carrying within deep and long-term historical understandings. In a city like Vilnius where so few survived, where words falter, it is the earth, the trees, the doorways and the pavements that now bear silent witness to the past. A vast massacre pit, a dilapidated synagogue, a gold powder compact, an amber pendant and an old prayer-book, these are the documents of life in a city like Vilnius.

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