



Levke Harders:

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LEGITIMIZING BIOGRAPHY: CRITICAL APPROACHES TO BIOGRAPHICAL RESEARCH

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In the summer of 2008, I received several photographs from Great Britain from Renate Easton, a great-niece of Helene and Max Herrmann. Helene Herrmann, née Schlesinger, born in Berlin in 1877, received her university degree by auditing courses in German studies, philosophy and art history at Berlin's Friedrich Wilhelm University. She began her studies in 1898, ten years before women were allowed to matriculate at Prussian universities.¹ In the same year, she married theater scholar Max Herrmann. After finishing her doctorate, Helene Herrmann worked as a teacher and freelanced as a literary critic, while her husband taught at the university, today Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin. After National Socialist policies forced Max Herrmann into retirement in 1933, the couple, like all Jewish Germans, experienced increasing discrimination but rejected the idea of going into exile. In early September 1942, their assets were seized by the state and they were deported to Theresienstadt, where Max Herrmann died in November. Two years later, Helene Herrmann and her sister were deported from Theresienstadt to Auschwitz, where they were murdered.

There are various biographical perspectives from which we might tell Helene Herrmann's life story. The focus could be on gender as a category of social difference, or on the history of German studies, on Nazi persecution or collective biography. Fourteen years ago, Professor of literature David Ellis was still able to claim that the genre of biography offered only "lives without theory."² Such a definitive (if exaggerated) claim can no longer be made. Many works well worth reading have been published in both German and English in recent years that now provide us with a literary and historical overview of the genre of biography and its development.³ In this article, I will summarize the debates in progress in German and English-language biographical research. After a short look at the current state of research, I would like to explore three aspects of the discussion that are changing the genre for the better: inclusions and exclusions, gender and genre, and de/legitimizing biography.

- 1 For more information on Helene Herrmann, see: Levke Harders and Nadin Seltsam, "Spurensuche: Helene (1877–1944) und Max Herrmann (1865–1942)," *Zeitschrift für Germanistik* 20 (2010): 307–323; Alexandra Tischel, "Wissenschaft jenseits des Berufs — Teilhabe und Ausschluss am Beispiel der Germanistin Helene Herrmann," in *Das Geschlecht der Wissenschaften. Zur Geschichte von Akademikerinnen im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert*, ed. Ulrike Auga et al. (Frankfurt/M., 2010), 127–140. For more information on her husband, see Martin Hollender, *Der Berliner Germanist und Theaterwissenschaftler Max Herrmann (1865–1942). Leben und Werk* (Berlin, 2013).
- 2 The title of the first chapter of David Ellis, *Literary Lives: Biography and the Search for Understanding* (New York, 2000).
- 3 For example Thomas Etzemüller, *Biographien. Lesen — erforschen — erzählen* (Frankfurt/Main, 2012); Bernhard Fetz, ed., *Die Biographie — Zur Grundlegung ihrer Theorie* (Berlin, New York, 2009); Nigel Hamilton, *Biography: A Brief History* (Cambridge, 2007); Michael Holroyd, *Works on Paper: The Craft of Biography and Autobiography* (Washington, 2002); Hermione Lee, *Biography: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford, 2009); Hans Renders and Binne de Haan, eds., *Theoretical Discussions of Biography: Approaches from History, Microhistory, and Life Writing* (Lewiston, N.Y., 2013).

I. The State of the Field

“Can biography offer historical research a distinctive contribution that is truly up to date in subject, method, and theory? What would a biography informed by the approaches and categories of modern historiography look like?” Simone Lässig asked ten years ago in the *Bulletin of the German Historical Institute*.⁴ There have been many discussions on theory and method, especially in the social sciences (including life course research) as well as in literature studies (for example, narratology) and increasingly also in history (oral history, history of science, etc.) as Susie Pak’s network analysis and Clifton Hood’s statistical study in this volume show. At the same time, feminist, post-modern and post-colonial critiques of the genre have led to more pluralistic approaches and broadened the spectrum of methods. Biography is no longer understood solely as a linear narrative of one person’s life from birth to death. Often the biographical approach itself is reflected upon within the biography. The role of the biographer is now sometimes discussed within the text, or a radically subjective approach is chosen. Collective biographies have also been written, such as Natalie Zemon Davis’s study on Glikl Hamel, Marie de l’Incarnation and Maria Sibylla Merian.⁵

Certainly the splintering of the unified subject contributed to this shift in the genre of biography. If the individual can no longer be seen as the “doer behind the deed” (Friedrich Nietzsche) and biography must be seen as a complete construction, then the classical retelling of a life history no longer works.⁶ This tendency has been strengthened by the establishment of race, class and gender as analytical categories, which has changed the way biographers work and think over the past two decades. The biographical genre has become more critical and more self-reflective and, particularly as a result of German academic discussions, more scientific, as Volker Depkat points out in this volume.

It was feminist research, in the United States and Great Britain in particular, which first noted that biography is always subjective and has an autobiographical element; the observer is always also part of what she observes.⁷ Any discussion of biography is therefore always also a discussion about autobiography. My own interest in biographical research, and on the development of its theory and methods, began with a research project on the history of German studies. I planned to use the biography of a female scholar to discuss topics, structures, and epistemologies of this academic field only to find that until the

4 Simone Lässig, “Toward a Biographical Turn? Biography in Modern Historiography — Modern Historiography in Biography,” *Bulletin of the German Historical Institute* 35 (2004): 147–155, 147.

5 Natalie Zemon Davis, *Women on the Margins. Three Seventeenth-Century Lives* (Cambridge, 1995). See as well Louis Menand, *The Metaphysical Club: A Story of Ideas in America* (New York, 2002), and Angelika Schaser, *Helene Lange und Gertrud Bäumer: Eine politische Lebensgemeinschaft* (Köln, 2000).

6 Pierre Bourdieu, “Die biographische Illusion,” *BIOS* 3 (1990): 75–81. For an English version, see Pierre Bourdieu, “The Biographical Illusion,” in *Identity: A Reader*, ed. Paul Du Gay, Jessica Evans, and Peter Redman (London, 2004), 297–303.

7 For example Catherine Neal Parke, *Biography: Writing Lives* (New York, London, 1996).

1960s there had been very few female scholars of German studies, and there was hardly any data to be found on those few. For example Helene Herrmann, as a woman and a Jew, was unable to begin an academic career although her publications received critical acclaim.⁸ Furthermore, aside from a few files in the university archives and some letters, no other writings by Helene Herrmann remain.

I then did my research on a group of female German studies scholars. This empirical approach eventually awakened my interest in the theoretical and methodological underpinnings of biographical research. Biography — in this case as a historical tool — comprises many elements that mirror my research interests. For one, biographical research is always interdisciplinary and can easily be linked to far-reaching theoretical and methodological questions. Second, the genre is well-suited to doing gender research. Finally, as a historian, biography makes it easy to explain and recount history.

Like the German historian Thomas Etzemüller, I understand biography as a reconstruction of an act of construction. This means that as a biographer, I am examining the process of an individual becoming a subject. Etzemüller suggests linking Foucault's concept of discourse with Bourdieu's analysis of structural rules and the influence of *habitus*.⁹ As a biographer I ask — and explain — which behaviors can be ascribed to individual idiosyncrasies, which to dispositions and which to the influences of society and the reigning discourse. Similarly, in *Handbuch Biographie*, published in 2009, most authors concur that newer biographies underscore the constructed nature of biographical identity and almost no one assumes a coherent life course.¹⁰ In his 1920 lectures on "The Art of Biography" William Roscoe Thayer made the same stress: "Remember that one-half — I might almost say four-fifths — of a biography depends on the biographer."¹¹ As historians who write biographies, broadly defined, we should therefore know how to structure biographical accounts so that the "identity" constructed by the subject can be perceived. This can incorporate acknowledgment of both the subjectivity that underlies every life story as well as the narrative forms and structures that mark biographies as such. The elements of these narratives are connected to our social, academic and literary traditions. Only when these substructures are kept in mind do biographies "work."

In the case of Helene Herrmann, there were only a few biographical sketches available that strictly followed and emphasized a "victim"

8 Her articles are published in: Helene Herrmann, *Einführung und Verstehen: Schriften über Dichtung* (Leipzig, 1988) as well as in Helene Herrmann, *Feinheit der Sprache: Aufsätze zur Literatur aus den Jahren 1903–1937* (Flensburg, 1999).

9 For the history of science, Etzemüller also includes Fleck's thought styles. See Thomas Etzemüller, "Die Form 'Biographie' als Modus der Geschichtsschreibung. Einige einführende Überlegungen zum Thema Biographie und Nationalsozialismus," in *Regionen im Nationalsozialismus*, ed. Michael Ruck and Karl Heinrich Pohl (Bielefeld, 2003), 71–90.

10 Christian Klein, ed., *Handbuch Biographie. Methoden, Traditionen, Theorien* (Stuttgart, Weimar, 2009); Christian Klein, ed., *Grundlagen der Biographik. Theorie und Praxis des biographischen Schreibens* (Stuttgart, 2002).

11 William Roscoe Thayer, *The Art of Biography* (Folcroft, 1977), 139. Thayer made this comment on George Palmer's biography of his wife Alice.

story in both narrative form and style (which is surely also a result of their place of publication, the GDR). And since they were almost all written by acquaintances or students, these accounts are marked by gaps, myth-making and the repetition of certain episodes.¹² As the author of a biography of Helene Herrmann, I therefore had to read the existing literature and the family stories against the grain, as it were. I had to question them and then decide which focus to take and how I would tell the story of her life, while also making visible my act of reconstruction from the very incomplete details of her life that I could find.

II. Inclusions and Exclusions

For as long as biography has existed as a genre, biographers have discussed their choice of subjects, usually framing this discussion as a question of ethical merit: who is “worthy,” in other words, of having their biography written? Helene Herrmann obviously did not merit a place among the biographies of well-known German studies scholars. One fairly recent collection of portraits of twenty-eight German studies scholars includes women only twice: one is a portrait of Käte Hamburger and the other is in the final contribution “Outsiders,” in which women are treated as “the rest” and gives, moreover, only a “sketch.”¹³

In the United States, critical feminist biographers and post-structuralist, post-colonial and queer theory have given rise to biographical methods which take the subject’s “outsider” status as their vantage point. These accounts of marginalized lives are meant to broaden the dominant Euro- and ethnocentric historical perspectives.¹⁴ In these understandings, biography can be a way of discussing the problem of representation on a thematic and theoretical level. Instead of portraying Western, white male subjects, the presentation of “new” subjects or a post-modern plural approach that does not valorize a single life can, as Mary Rhiel and David Suchoff argue, call into question the hegemonic culture.¹⁵ This should not be understood as recreating a dichotomy between marginal and hegemonical which only reproduces marginalization. Rather the aim is decentering history, as Natalie Zemon Davis has explained: “Decentering involves the stance and the subject matter of the historian. The decentering historian does not tell the story of the past only from the vantage point of a single part of the world or of powerful elites, but rather widens his or her scope, socially and geographically, and introduces

12 See, for example, Joachim Biener, “‘Sprache, regsam in den Gelenken,’” 148–157 and Ruth Mövius, “Helene Herrmann (Ein Lebensbild),” 158–163, both in Herrmann, *Einführung und Verstehen*.

13 Barbara Hahn, “Außenseiter. Eine Skizze,” in *Germanistik in Porträts*, ed. Christoph König, Hans-Harald Müller, and Werner Röcke (Berlin and New York, 2000), 273–279.

14 Shirley A. Leckie, “Biography Matters: Why Historians Need Well-Crafted Biographies More than Ever,” in *Writing Biography: Historians and Their Craft*, ed. Lloyd E. Ambrosius (Lincoln, Neb., 2004), 1–26.

15 Mary Rhiel and David Suchoff, “Introduction. The Seductions of Biography,” in *The Seductions of Biography*, ed. Mary Rhiel and David Suchoff (New York, 1996), 1–5. See also: Angela Woollacott, Desley Deacon, and Penny Russell, “Introduction,” in *Transnational Lives. Biographies of Global Modernity, 1700–Present*, ed. Angela Woollacott, Desley Deacon, and Penny Russell (New York, 2010), 1–11.

plural voices into the account.”¹⁶ This pluralization — a quest for both new (and *more*) knowledge and content — has led to a change in the genre of biography, as I shall discuss in more depth.

Collective biography lends itself well to the study or representation of non-hegemonic subjects or groups, both because the dearth of sources makes an individual biography impossible and because group biographies promise to deliver more insights. This form of biography looks at both what is typical of and what is specific to a group of people. In contrast to both individual biography and purely prosopographical studies, collective biography can deliver a broader view of the history of mentalities, encompassing, for example, political views, influences of a certain milieu, of historical events, or career patterns.¹⁷ Collective biographies can also be linked to other approaches with encouraging results. It can be combined with methods of discourse analysis, intellectual history, historical and empirical social research, analyses of generations and cohorts, histories of migration, and network analysis.

Since subaltern subjects usually do not leave many written traces behind, their biographers tend to make greater use of photographs, oral histories and other materials. The American historian Nell Irvin Painter calls for using images and photographs in marginalized biographies and working more in an interdisciplinary context. Using Sojourner Truth, Frederick Douglass and Duke Ellington as examples, Painter shows that many photographs contain racist stereotypes and “controlling images” while others illustrate the subjects’ conception of themselves and strategies for distancing themselves from clichés. Portrait photography was one method open to African-Americans for controlling their public image.¹⁸

In the case of Helene Herrmann, the photographs I received from her great-niece posed new questions. One photo was a sepia image of a woman with grey hair whose friendly gaze is focused on something far away. The only photo that had previously been made public, and that had been used in every publication to date, was not only of inferior quality, it also showed Helene Hermann dressed in dark clothing with a white collar, looking straight into the camera with a sad expression on her face. Both portraits were probably taken in the 1930s; one found its way into a public archive, the other remained in the family. The black and white photo was the perfect illustration of the “victim” narrative; the “happier” picture called this narrative into question.

16 Natalie Zemon Davis, “Decentering History: Local Stories and Cultural Crossing in a Global World,” *History and Theory* 50 (May 2011): 188–202, 190.

17 Levke Harders and Veronika Lipphardt, “Kollektivbiografie in der Wissenschaftsgeschichte als qualitative und problemorientierte Methode,” *Traverse — Zeitschrift für Geschichte* 13 (2006), 81–91; Levke Harders and Hannes Schweiger, “Kollektivbiographik,” in *Handbuch Biographie. Methoden, Traditionen, Theorien*, ed. Christian Klein (Stuttgart, Weimar, 2009), 194–198.

18 Nell Irvin Painter, “*Ut Pictura Poesis*; or, The Sisterhood of the Verbal and Visual Arts,” in *Writing Biography*, ed. Ambrosius, 103–131.

III. Gender and Genre

Most certainly in German-speaking countries, but also in the United States, the celebrated historical biographies of recent years have all continued to be about “great men of history,” as a glance at the subjects of the 2011 to 2013 Pulitzer Prizes in the biography or autobiography category shows.¹⁹ When a biography of a woman does meet with critical acclaim, it is often, as with the 2014 Pulitzer Prize-winning biography of Margaret Fuller, about a woman who lived in proximity to “great” men or about a “great” woman with an established status in a nation’s memory.²⁰

Linked to these inclusions and exclusions are the structure and norms of these representations, the reproduction of the mechanisms of the genre and its conventions. This is true of the choice of biographical subject. But this also influences the thematic focus or research question. Biographies in Germany, for example, are often linked to political history which means, among other things, that a gender-specific separation of private and public is reproduced, so that women do not appear as historical actors, and gender relations are not discussed. It is only recently that biographers have begun to analyze the construction of masculinity or the meaning of the body and its (gendered, racialized) embodiment. As far as I am aware, intersectionality has not yet entered the theory and practice of biographical research.

Another factor contributing to the tenacity of the genre is the availability of sources and their analysis, since historians have just begun to consider how to incorporate previously ignored categories of data (such as photographs, mentioned earlier). What is more, the problem of gaps in the sources is rarely discussed. However, as a biographer I should not make those gaps disappear, but instead talk about them and find ways to integrate them into the biographical narrative (by counterfactual methods, for example).

Last but not least, questions of representation are closely related to inclusions and exclusions. Usually, the chronological unfolding of a life history (*Entwicklungsgeschichte*) is offered. Despite continuous debates about biographical narratives, in this area little seems to have changed since Samuel Johnson and Johann Gustav Droysen. The genre of biography still basically always means the biography of an individual, thus constructing and stabilizing identity. Other forms, such as transnational and collective biography, by their nature weaken this dominant pattern. The same is true for transnational life stories since they allow “for national borders to be transgressed” and contest the “tenacious concept of the nation state.”²¹

19 Winner 2013: Tom Reiss, *The Black Count: Glory, Revolution, Betrayal, and the Real Count of Monte Cristo* (New York, 2012); winner 2012: John Lewis Gaddis, *George F. Kennan: An American Life* (New York, 2011); winner 2011: Ron Chernow, *Washington: A Life* (New York, 2010). For a full — and in many respects revealing — list see: www.pulitzer.org/bycat/Biography-or-Autobiography (accessed June 24, 2014).

20 Megan Marshall, *Margaret Fuller: A New American Life* (Boston, 2013).

21 Hannes Schweiger, “Global Subjects: The Transnationalization of Biography,” *Life Writing* 9 (2012): 249–258, 249.

On the narrative level, collective authorship projects — taking a single individual or group and inviting multiple contributors to contribute their analytical perspectives — are one example of how multiple voices can contribute to the aforementioned act of decentering.²²

I would like to therefore plead for a broader conceptualization of the genre that includes “marginalized” subjects and transnational approaches, as well as new narrative forms. As a biographer, the choice of narrative composition is mine. I can try, for example, to create multiple perspectives, a polyphonic narrative. Furthermore, historians especially should take opportunities to integrate photographs, audio recordings, film and music into our body of sources and into our presentations. Alongside the classical book, exhibitions, audio plays, graphic novels and online formats make other forms of biography possible, which of course must be produced and told differently, and which are also read or rather received differently.²³

IV. De/Legitimizing Biography

Gender and genre, inclusions and exclusions are closely connected to at least three different legitimizing and delegitimizing processes concerning biography. Presenting a particular knowledge as valid and unchallengeable is to legitimize it; language in itself has a legitimizing function.²⁴ First, then, production and reception of biography affect legitimation. Ruth Dawson has recently asked: “Who is authorized to write about particular persons? Which persons are legitimized as subjects of biography?”²⁵ The biographer, her subject and the published work exist within specific discursive fields that include legitimizing and delegitimizing processes which can be described as authorization. The rules of academia, of contemporary discourse and of the publishing market can make biographies possible or difficult. On the one hand there are, as Foucault has said, the unthinkable, the unspeakable and the unsayable: that is, questions about who is “allowed” to write about whom. These norms explain why biographical research has to date barely examined certain questions. For example, German biographers tend to write about famous Germans because there is no strong tradition of writing biographies of individuals who lived in other countries.²⁶ Inclusions and exclusions of the author and/or the subject of a biography are therefore connected to questions of the power of definition and of discourses in a specific academic discipline.

22 For example Rolf Kohring and Gerald Kreft, eds., *Tilly Edinger. Leben und Werk einer jüdischen Wissenschaftlerin* (Stuttgart, 2003).

23 The exhibition shown in 2010 and 2011 in Vienna and elsewhere, the “Ernst Jandl Show”, linked audio and video recordings, photos, documents and texts to make visible Ernst Jandl’s artistic work across many media. The DVD released about the exhibition rejects a chronological or otherwise structured hierarchy in favor of a network structure. In my eyes, this is an example of a successful attempt to reinterpret the genre. See Hannes Schweiger, ed., *Ernst Jandl vernetzt: Multimediale Wege durch ein Schreibleben*, DVD (Wien, 2011).

24 Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (New York, 1990). Authorization, moral evaluation, rationalization, mythopoesis and legitimizing by delegitimizing counter-arguments are five ways of legitimation, as Hanna Acke argues by means of Theo van Leeuwen’s and Anna Gustafsson’s categories; Hanna Acke, “‘Bis ans Ende der Erde’ — Die diskursive Legitimierung christlicher Mission in den Publikationen von Svenska Missionsförbundet um 1900” (Ph.D. thesis, Westfälische Wilhelms-Universität Münster, 2014).

25 Ruth Dawson in her conference review “Legitimationsmechanismen des Biographischen,” Wuppertal, 2012, www.zentrum-fuer-biographik.de/DOWNLOADS/Bericht_Dawson.pdf.

26 Woollacott, Deacon, and Russell, “Introduction.”

27 Falko Schnicke, *Prinzipien der Entindividualisierung. Theorie und Praxis biographischer Studien bei Johann Gustav Droysen* (Köln et al., 2010), 160.

28 Michel Foucault, ed., *Herculine Barbin: Being the Recently Discovered Memoirs of a Nineteenth-Century French Hermaphrodite* (New York, 1980).

The relationship between the author and her biographical subject is, secondly, linked to questions of legitimacy, inasmuch as the symbolic capital of the person whose biography has been researched can be transferred to the author and vice versa. As Falko Schnicke shows, the German historian Johann Gustav Droysen gained immensely from his three-volume biography of the Prussian field marshal Ludwig Yorck von Wartenburg. After its publication in 1851–52, Droysen attained a full professorship in Berlin as well as being appointed official historian of the House of Brandenburg.²⁷ Conversely, the nineteenth-century teacher Herculine Barbin would hardly be so well-known had not Michel Foucault published the memoirs of this transgender person and discussed how and why societies construct ideas of “true,” immutable gender identities.²⁸

A third aspect of legitimizing and delegitimizing processes is maybe specific to biography: Compared to other genres in history or literature studies, biography is even more expected to present a complete picture. But, as I argued, biography can not and will never be fully comprehensive. As biographers, we should not see incompleteness as a curse but as a blessing, and welcome it as a means to create plurality and multiple perspectives instead of claiming that we are conveying ultimate biographical truth.

Levke Harders is currently teaching Gender History at Bielefeld University and is working on a project on European migration in the nineteenth century. She has published a book on the history of American Studies (2013) and several articles on the theory of biography as well as on the relation of gender and higher education.