



Two Sisters Family Histories: Self-In-Transit

Elaine Pedreira Rabinovich¹

Accepted: 19 April 2021 / Published online: 26 April 2021

© The Author(s), under exclusive licence to Springer Science+Business Media, LLC, part of Springer Nature 2021

Abstract

Departing from meanings of experiences and experiencing, of memory and poetics, the aim of this article was to describe and analysis the experience of the encounter of two sisters by means of a common ground represented by family narratives. It was based on collaborative auto ethnography. The study involved two sisters that lost their parents and home. The older sister – I—conserved memories of her parents and house; the little one, did not. The main conclusion was that my sister and I constructed narratives that signal something common to both: pointing to the origin in family history.

Keywords Sisters · Auto ethnography · Narratives · Memory · Family · Poetics

Introduction

“My very best guess, however, is that he has had to exercise his imagination, strenuously, and to construct for himself a new version of who and what he is, one that is more truthful, more adequate to his existence. (...) Put simply, he had undoubtedly realized something about himself through this series of events; something important had been disclosed about his own personal existence and, perhaps, about certain aspects of human existence more generally”. (Freeman, 1999, p. 109)

Departing from meanings of experiences and experiencing, of memory and poetics, the aim of this article was to describe and analysis the experience of the encounter of two sisters by means of a common ground represented by family narratives. It was based on collaborative auto ethnography. The study involved two sisters that

✉ Elaine Pedreira Rabinovich
elainepedreira@gmail.com

¹ Universidade Católica Do Salvador, Brasil (Catholic University of Salvador, Brazil), Salvador, Brazil

lost their parents and home. The older sister – I—conserved memories of her parents and house; the little one, did not.

This is an article based on collaborative auto ethnography. Auto ethnography corresponds to a story belonging both to the individual and to the world as he/she moves a lens to inside and outside and refers to the process as well as what is produced from this process. An auto ethnographic report overlaps art and science: it is part *auto* or *self*, part *ethno* or culture, exposing the multiple and polyphonic layers of conscience. (Ellis, 2004).

The collaborative auto ethnographic method comes from the fact that members of a group, elaborating each one similar and own stories, we could realize the exercise of bringing the lens to inside and outside, and to close and to put far away time and space talking all stories together. This group, Family, (Auto) Biography and Poetics is trying to reach some socio-historical-ethnic Brazilian roots through the family stories of its members.

Context

Ramirez (2011), studying Benjamin and Proust works, develops the presuppose that involuntary memory – a past that takes involuntarily possession of the present – annuls the temporal and supposal cognitive distances between past and present, contrary to what is usually conceived in social sciences. He shows how, to these authors, “childhood, far away from succumbing to the past, emerges alive and potent in the present”. Memory directed to infancy, in Proust and Benjamin, does not depart from a purposed and conscious remembering conducted by reason, but as sensations that suddenly take over the individual, as a choc or a rupture, and events of infancy are revived with the same or even superior intensity in adult life (p. 121).

These descriptions of how these authors saw the relation between infancy and present shows the method we have followed to construct our texts. This method was based on living an experience of the past as an experience of the present, so past and present would be synchronic and maybe even the future. It was not a purposely remembering, but, as I have pointed out talking about myself, sensations that catch the individual as a choc or a rupture and that open the world to him/her.

Graciliano Ramos (2012), a well-known Brazilian writer, wrote, at the end of his life, an autobiographical book, *Infancy* (2012), in which his infancy is presented as a decisive time where his ethical convictions were formed and imprinted his life as a writer, provoked his resistance face any form of authority and founded his atheism (Nitschack, 2009, p. 287).

To Graciliano Ramos (2012), to narrate is always an experience, and this individual experience is what legitimates the narratives. He emphasizes the experiences of suffering/pain because they show the contradictions, imperfections and fissures of the repressor and totalizing system where the individual child is settled (Martins, 2007).

He, as in a sense also Agamben (2000), proposes that individual exists in-between language and world and that only an act of rebelling, or against language

as in poetry, or against world as in political action, the person may find subjective freedom.

However, from the in-between where one constitutes himself, the person has the opportunity of creative intervention, as in a poetic act or as in a concrete act.

Therefore, some writers affirm that, during their childhood, some experiences, mainly of suffering, may become guides to their adult activity.

However, the survival of experience itself has been questioned nowadays. Agamben (2000), for instance, describes as the modern science juxtaposed two subjects that had, until then, been separated: an intellectual agent, “*nous*”, “*divine*”, separated from experience, and “*psychê*”, where the agent would realize the experience. The modern science substitutes these two subjects for one only one: the Descartes *ego cogito*.

In this way, experience and knowledge were mixed, forming the psychic conscience, that is, the subjectivity. In this sense, experience, that is always not predictable and uncontrolled, was substituted by experiment (Agamben, 2000).

Contrary to this amalgam, experience may be also seen as a kind of birth (Romano, 2012), when one has not yet the meanings of the world and this can be reached as for the first time, emerging as the revelation of one’s world and of oneself. Romano calls this experience an Event (*événement*).

This meaning of experience as Event brings it close to poetics as defined by Paz (1973)—as an *instant con/sacred*, that is, a moment that transcends itself and allows the person to transcend oneself, joining the community of humanity.

Perceiving oneself and the world in this flux of time, at same time temporal and a-temporal, vertical and horizontal, experiencing the one and the multiple, one has the experience of an overlapping of temporalities that corresponds to poetics. This experience is at the same time inside and outside, because of its open boundaries.

Therefore, putting things together when you have an experience of the world and yourself as for the first time corresponds to an overlapping of times and to poetics.

This notion of experience is intrinsically tied to the poetics, because they form, as to say, a unity where from the possibility to have an experience – not to make one as Agamben (2000) insists—this is the possibility of poetics instant. For instance, in a sexual encounter – if sexuality is what emerges from this encounter – this is poetics. And at each encounter, sexual or not, the world may start, be born. And this initiates the possibility of poetics that, as Graciliano Ramos (2012) points out, opens the world to subjective freedom and/or liberating action.

Therefore, in our autobiographical experience emerges as the methodological issue (Romano, 2012 p. 8). Romano is a philosopher that says that, when we are born, the world already exists, we don’t construct it; at the opposite, it constructs us when we have its experience.

To Agamben (2000), if we were born talking, no novelty would be possible, everything would be ready. *In-fans* is someone who still does not talk. This means that experience precedes *logos*, the verbal world. It is not separated from it, just is not after it. We need words to narrate our experience, but we don’t need them to have it.

Lehmann (2013), in an inspired text, describes the experience of a depressed woman after seeing a man with difficulties to walk in a bus station: he was smiling.

After this encounter, arriving home, she saw her niece smiling too. Those smiles stayed with her as a resonance. She referred that in these moments she did not think about the meaning of life, “she just got the feeling something happened, as she was completely immersed in their smiling act, fused in them” (p. 13). So, the woman describes she had an event, something happened to her she had no idea that it would happen, no prediction, no control, something new.

Lehmann continues: “Indeed, during these poetic instants she experienced, the perception of inner and outer boundaries was lost – yet existing” (2013, p. 13).

Finishing her article, says Lehmann (2013, p. 14): “The influence that these lived-experiences have on identity has a crucial role in the decision-making, at the point that could give sense to life in an existential way, becoming a motto”.

If we compare this sentence with what Graciliano Ramos (2012) says about the experiences of pain during childhood, for instance, we may presume that, by becoming a motto, they mobilize experiences during the person’s whole life, even or mainly in a silent way. When this silence/shadow finds a way out, an expression, this could be said what Abbey and de Sousa Bastos (2012) called “poetic motion” or a poetic instant.

Departing from these meanings of experiences and experiencing, of memory and poetics, the aim of this article is to describe and analysis the experience of the encounter of a two sisters by means of a common ground represented by family narratives. It has a broader objective that is to better understand Brazilian families.

The Case Study

The group of research Family, (Auto)Biography and Poetics – FABEP/UCSal—to which I belong, decided to study families asking siblings two questions: tell me about the home of your childhood; and tell me the moment you realize you were part of your family. The first sibling to answer these questions should be the member of the group – an autobiography—and after this, one or more of his/her brother or/and sister.

We based ourselves on autobiographic reports of writers, as Hesse (2010), Amos Os (2005) and Graciliano Ramos (2012), that had associated their infancy to their future choices as writers and persons, as also authors as Chawla, (1985, 1995) who studied the relation between the childhood of two poets – Wordsworth e Williams – and their poems, and also in authors who focused autobiography as Massimi (2011), de Souza (2006) and Freeman (2007).

Hesse’s report (2010), untitled *The infancy of a magician*, tells about his childhood by means of elements of experience—smells, touches, objects and, most of all, relationships – as he saw at that time. He connects these experiences to his future life as a writer and as an activist.

By his side, the writer Oz (2005, p. 35), in his autobiography, writes:

The truth is that the strange desire I had when I was a child – to give a second chance to what would not have one – is one of the things that move my hand also now – each time I sit to write a story.

These reports emphasize the possibility that something during childhood could drive aspects of adult life and also to be able to be recorded afterward.

As to myself, writing an episode of my own childhood, and connecting it to the theme of my doctorate thesis resulted something new to myself – an experience of novelty, of astonishing, of mystery—and a sense of trespassing many different times: the time as a child, the time I have written the thesis, the time now as a professor and the time as a auto ethnographic researcher (Rabinovich, 2013).

This poetic instant is what many persons of the group “Family, (auto)biography and poetics” have encountered and reported in the book *Family and childhood poetics: autobiographic reports* (Rabinovich et al., 2013).

As to this specific research about siblings, as everybody of the group, I wrote the answers to the queries, then I read the narratives to the group, and after these two moments, I asked my sister the same two questions. I had told before, in another time and research (Rabinovich, 2013) many details about my first house where I have lived with my parents, about how we used to live there and some remembering including my parents, myself and my sister. As about the moment when I realized I was part of my family, I had no doubt that it has been when an aunty told me my parents were dead in an airplane crash. I was five years old and my sister, three. Loosing my parents, I had experienced the feeling of having a family but also because, at the same time, I was charged as responsible for my sister.

However, I became very astonished when I received, by email, my sister answers: she wrote she had never had a home, her only home was our mother’s uterus; and that she never belonged to a family. She meant by this that her mother body was the unique home she knew, and, by doing so, she refused the many others she had as homes. Her voice may symbolically represent an intergenerational transition in a direction not usually seen: one way back to the origin. It is not the same as embodiment where the person body may become one’s home; it is an outside body becoming her home.

Future May Be on the Back

My first reaction to her answers was sadness, a great sadness; the second reaction, a kind of explosion: I could not deny *her* “family” because it was “*my* family”. But her experience denied mine. To cope with this experience, I engaged myself in a process of depositioning (Hermanns-Knopka, 2012) myself not identifying myself with any position: I was like outside my own Self. Taking her experience as mine, I had an experience of myself not me.

How to Incorporate My Sisters’ Self to My Own Self?

Hermanns-Konopka (2012) propose the concept of abject, where “another” is perceived not as a subject or as an object.

Whereas initially the unwanted position was clearly outside the internal domain of the self, at some later point in time this position stood somewhere in a transitional field where it was at the same time experience as ‘belonging to myself’ and ‘not belonging to myself’ (pp. 43/44).

After this transitional field moment, a third moment happened: I started trying to understand how my sister experience and mine could be understood together: I needed to be in transit, a transitional transit.

I asked myself how two years of difference in age could have produced such an enormous difference related to have or not a place for oneself. This may indicate that time is subjective, as for Bergson – apud Dany Boulanger (this symposium, 2018)—but also that I had more time, more experiences together with my parents to keep them and the house in my memory (Rabinovich, 2013, 2016).

However, I could not deny her experience and her experience was also mine because we belonged to the same family and had a similar history. I needed to expand my conception of family to include hers.

As part of the method of autobiography and collaborative autoethnography (Ellis, 2004; Chang et al., 2013), after reading to my group partners these reports, I started travelling through time and space trying to approach my feelings and thoughts about this issue: I had a family, she did not.

For Freeman (2017, p. 140),

(...) indeed, in the (these) moments, we can bear witness to the extraordinary manner in which the world comes into view, the way it is released, emerging out of its dormancy and obscurity (...). And perhaps it is the act of seeing the seeing that destabilizes, resulting in a sort of displacement.

So, I displaced myself. The first reaction to understand her point of view came through a dis/location of myself from my center, from a center I used to occupy. I had to do so because I could not deny her experience as part of my own. As to say, “my-self” went to periphery, and another self stood at “my” place: an unclear self, a moving vague unstable one: I had to construct subjectivity continuity out of objective discontinuity.

Valsiner (oral communication, 10th International Conference on the Dialogical Self, Braga, 2018) said there are two levels of coping and integrating disjunctive experiences related to two kinds of hierarchies related to dialogical self: one is transitive and the other is intransitive. So, this first continuity I had to construct to cope with the intense feelings I had is of a transitive order: I deposed myself.

Hermans concept of de/positioning corresponds to this description: her positioning dis/locates mine. The discussion proposed by Dialogical Self Theory about positioning and de/positioning was so reaffirmed by what I have experienced.

However I do also interpret this as a felling of alterity (Lévinas, 2004): she and her truth were as true as mine. I experienced how hard it is to give your place to another different, and to keep yourself alive. I had to be in transit.

To keep me assertive about myself, I needed another move. This second moving was recovering another time of my life that once more was not mine but belonged

to me. This moving Valsiner called a non-hierarchical intransitive relation in an irreversible time.

The term “locate”, that I had used to describe my experiencing after her positioning, took me to a kind of pilgrimage. I had just finished a post-doctorate about the immigration of my family from Russia to Brazil (Rabinovich, 2015). By that time, I was reading Nadine Gordiner “The pickup” (2004), a great book about love and immigration. Gordiner says that, nowadays, people do not migrate, they “locate”. This gave me a clue about how our parents’ death did affect me and my sister in equivalent ways, although taking different forms: the clue for this understanding was time. The death of our parents in/by itself gave a meaning of time that changed everything: she located herself at space and I located myself in time. She feels as having no place, and I transformed this no root in no-origin, looking for my grand-parents venue from Russia to Brazil in 1905. Retracing their stories, I could approach my experience to my sisters’ through travelling in time, being in their place as they moved from Russia to Brazil.

She located herself in our mother-s uterus; I located myself moving from one place to another in time perspective. To find a new location for myself, I needed to re-write the self: in transit.

Analysis

We may resume the case study in a very simply way: Both children lost their parents and home. There was a rupture and emptiness as to intergenerational relation. Both, when asked to tell about their child house and their belongingness referred to their parents and not to the family that cared for them from then on. The older sister conserved memories of her parents and house; the little one, did not.

So, both reaffirms the importance of the family of origin. But how ambiguity emerges in vivo?

Barresi (in Hermans-Konopka, 2012, p. 49) offers a good explanation for this difference: around four, five years old, “self-reflection enters more fully into the temporal domain and the child becomes capable of moving imaginatively among *I*-positions not only across space but also across time”, and “the time when a temporally extended mental self is formed”.

Both sisters had only subjective time to register these events. They had no access to any other kind of time. Younger sister used to say that, for her, her parents were the objects they left to them. So, she “spacialized” her parents locating them in objects that could have kept some “memory” from/of them. These could be seen as transitional objects (Winnicott, 1958/1978), that is, objects at the same time belonging to inside and outside space.

Transition

Something that did help the older sister – me—was that she/I was told at the same time she knew about her parents’ death that, from that day on, she was her sister’s

family and should take care of her. So, she/I received a time ahead/beyond and a sense of belongingness, besides her parents, related to her sister. This helped her to deal with the ambiguity she experienced towards her parents death during this transition and helped her to construct a place in the world. This is not a usual inter-generation transition, but it was so because she was in the place of their parents. We may suppose this is the origin for her to carry the studies she did about immigration.

Both stories mixed time and space in a non homogenous way. There are no discreet points to follow. Meaning emerges from many levels of multitemporality and indeterminacy.

Hermans-Konopka (2012) helps us to understand better how to describe what happened. For her, emotions are influential ways to positioning and awareness is a factor of de-positioning. Emotions can be a promoter position which “stimulates the development of a variety of positions and integrate older and new positions in the self” (p. 434). Awareness is a de-positioning presence that generates a receptive attitude to everything and can have a promoter function (p. 435). And: “the space of awareness will allow contradictive tendencies in the self to exist and helps to deal with strong decentralizing movements” (p. 425).

Besides this, as Valsiner pointed out (oral com., 2018), there was a change in an upper intransitive hierarchy where A contained non-A. I interpret this as her point of view becoming mine, even not being me. I suppose this is the basis to understand prejudice and hostility against diversity: it is very hard to give your place, your I and your me, to a-other.

My sister and I constructed narratives that signal something common to both: pointing to the origin in family history. For Pierron (2009), several kinds of stories are told by families trying to understand the family. There is the family history of peaceful return home, like that of Ulysses. But there are other stories where the family discovers its unity in time, like that of the biblical Abraham: family exoduses tell the temporal exploitation of unprecedented, unforeseen, unexpected family places in which the family recognizes itself in a lineage. These two stories interpret different answers to the same problem: how to understand what it means to be from the same family? For Pierron (2009), whether for the sailor Ulysses or for the nomad Abraham, the family can not dispense a history, a trajectory, a journey through and in which to learn to recognize oneself as of this family. In this way, a possible analysis of my and my sister’s stories would be re-membering of these two immemorial stories in which the common trace is the understanding of being and having a family history. Although my narrative and my sister’s seem so far away one from the other, they are very close: at the encounter of oneself with the otherness of oneself, both sisters point to eternity and origin as time and place, that is, to *oroborus* as the myth of the eternal (re)beginning.

References

- Abbey, E., & de Sousa Bastos, A. C. (Orgs.) (2012). Quando a vidaconstrange a poética: Uma análise de narrativas de pais sobre projetos de vida de seus filhos adolescentes. In E. P., Rabinovich, & A. C. S., Bastos (Eds.), *Poética da família e da comunidade* (pp. 37-68). Annablume.
- Agamben, G. (2000). *Enfance et histoire*. Trad. Yves Hersault. Eds Payot et Rivages.. (Original 1978).
- Chang, H., Ngujiri, F. W., & Hernandez, A. C. (2013). *Collaborative autoethnography*. Altamira Press.
- Chawla, L. (1985). The place of poetry. *Children’s Environments Quarterly*, 2(2), 01–13.

- Chawla, L. (1995). In the first country of places: Nature, poetry and childhood memory. *Children's Environments*, v. 12, n. 4, dec.. (CYE Book Review). Acesso em 21/03/2012. mhtml:file://C:/Users/Elaine/Desktop/Documents/CYE Book Review.mht.
- de Souza, E. C. (2006). *O conhecimento de si: Estágio e narrativas de formação de professores*. D&A/UNEB.
- Ellis, C. (2004). *The ethnographic I. A methodological novel about autoethnography*. Lanham: Altamira Press.
- Freeman, M. (2007). Narrative inquiry and autobiographical understanding. In J., Clandinin (Ed.), *Handbook of narrative inquiry: Mapping a methodology* (pp. 120–145). Sage Publish.
- Freeman, M. (1999). Culture, narrative, and the poetic construction of selfhood. *Journal of Constructivist Psychology*, 12, 99–116.
- Freeman, M. (2017). Living in verse: Sites of the poetic imagination. In O. Lehmann, N. Chaudhary, A. C. Bastos, & E. Abbey (Eds). *Poetry and imagined world* (pp. 139–154). Palgrave/Macmillan.
- Gordiner, N. (2004). *O engate*. (Trad. Beth Vieira). Cia das Letras. (Original The pickup, 2001).
- Hermans-Konopka, A. (2012). The depositioning of the I: Emotional coaching in the context of transcendental awareness. In H. J. M. Hermans, & T. Gieser (Eds.). *Handbook of Dialogical Self Theory* (pp. 423–437). Cambridge University Press.
- Hesse, H. (2010). *A infância do mago*. (Trad. Samuel Titan Junior). Companhia das Letras. (Original 1973).
- Lehmann, O. (2013). *The poetics resonance of an instant: Making sense of experience and existence through the emotional value of encounters*. Kitchen seminar: Encounters with life and emotional intuition of values. Retrieved from: <kitchenseminar.files.wordpress.com/.../lehmann-2013. Access 22 June 2014.
- Lévinas, E. (2004). *Entre nós. Ensaios de Alteridade*. Editora Vozes: 2004. (Ed. original 1991) Retirado de: s139e.storage.yandex.net. Acesso em 17 set 2017.
- Martins, J. G. (2007). Experiência e subjetividade em Claude Romano. Em Maria José Cantista (Org.), *Desenvolvimentos da fenomenologia na contemporaneidade* (pp.167–213). Campo das Letras.
- Massimi, M. (2011). A fonte autobiográfica como recurso para a apreensão do processo de elaboração da experiência na história dos saberes psicológicos. *Memorandum*, 20, 11–30. Retirado em 20/04/2011 da <http://w.w.w.fafich.ufmg.br/memorandum/a20/massimi05>.
- Nitschack, H. (2009). A escrita autobiográfica de Graciliano Ramos: Buscando o espaço da subjetividade. In: H., Galle, A. C., Olmos, A., Kanzevolsky, L. Z., Izarra (Orgs.). *Em primeira pessoa: Abordagens de uma teoria autobiográfica* (pp. 287–247). AnnaBlume; FFLCH; USP; FAPESP.
- Oz, A. (2005). *De amor e trevas*. Companhia das Letras. (trad. Milton Lando). (1ª Ed. Original. 2002).
- Paz, O. (1973). La consagración del instante. In T. W., Adorno et alii (Eds.). *El arte en la sociedad industrial* (pp. 127–138). Rodolfo Alonso.
- Pierron, J.-P. (2009). *Le climat familial. Une poétique de la famille*. Cerf.
- Rabinovich, E. P. (2013). A poética da casa da minha infância ou como o ser criança escreveu minha vida. In E. P., Rabinovich, Reis, P. C., Lilian, T. C. M., Leal, & V. S., Reina (Orgs.). *Famílias e poéticas da infância. Relatos autobiográficos* (pp. 53–60). Juruá.
- Rabinovich, E. P. (2015). *Os herdeiros da Colônia Philippson: Trajetória de uma família de judeus imigrantes no Rio Grande do Sul*. AllPrint.
- Rabinovich, E. P. (2016). Canto e cantos. In E. P. Rabinovich, A. C. S., Bastos, M. A. V. Silva, & T. C. M. Leal (Eds.). *Autoetnografia colaborativa e investigação autobiográfica. A casa, os silêncios e os pertencimentos familiares* (pp. 191–198). Juruá.
- Rabinovich, E. P., Reis, L. P. C., Leal, T. C. M., & Reina, V. S. (Orgs.). (2013) *Família e poéticas da infância: Relatos autobiográficos*. Juruá Editora.
- Ramirez, P. N. (2011). A memória e a infância em Marcel Proust e em Walter Benjamin. *Revista Aurora*, n. 10, p. 119–134. Disponível em www.pucsp.br/revistaaurora. Acesso em 04/02/2014.
- Ramos, G. (2012). *Infância*. (1ª Ed. 1946). Record, 1995.
- Romano, C. (2012). *L'événement et le temps*. PUF.
- Winnicott, D. W. (1958/1978). Objetos transicionais e fenômenos transicionais (1951). In D. W. Winnicott, D. W. (Ed.), *Textos selecionados: Da pediatria à psicanálise* (pp. 389–408). (Trad. Jane Russo). Francisco Alves. (Collected Papers: Through paediatrics to psycho-analysis).