

“A Continuous Present”: Examining the “Autobiographical Acts” of Nineteenth-Century Diarist Emily Hawley Gillespie

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*Autobiography... reflects and produces not self-understanding per se,
but rather a particular kind of self-understanding, the kind we achieve
in dialogue with texts.*

– Geoffrey Galt Harpham

Characterized as “writing that has no audience” (Gannett 2), women’s diaries, journals and letters were dismissed for centuries as “private” and non-literary simply because they did not follow the same patterns as traditional autobiography. French theorist Philippe Lejeune defines autobiography as a “retrospective narrative in prose that someone makes of his own existence when he puts the principle accent on his life, especially on his own personality” (qtd. in Smith & Watson 1). Susan Stanford Friedman proposes that these ideas of what constitutes autobiography are inherently Western, individualistic, and male-centered—invariably caused the writing of women, minorities, or any non-Western author to be ignored (35-36). A traditional image of “achievement and quest” controlled the form and study of autobiography for centuries (Braham

56). Yet for many outside the identity construct of the individualistic white male, the locus of identity formation is established within relationship. Using the nineteenth-century diary of Iowan, Emily Hawley Gillespie, I will argue that diary writings of women can be as much an autobiographical act as traditionally understood autobiographies.

Diaries—and other “private” writings—like Gillespie’s allow a glimpse of the everyday practices of nineteenth-century womanhood, as well as the effects of sexual or racial discrimination and other aspects of a patriarchal system that were part of women’s mutual experience. In this sharing of the commonplace, diaries offered not only an audience within an “intermediate space [of] private and public” (Schiwy 235), but allowed the writer a way to explore the edges of social boundaries and lived experience. Aimée Morrison calls this intermediate space an “intimate public,” offering a sense of familiarity between the writer and her unseen audience (38).

Less than a half a century ago, some feminist literary scholars began to argue for a re-examination of these texts, claiming that discounting them because of their differences from the white male-centric “individualistic paradigms of self” overlooked the types of identity that “signal” women and minorities—the “collective and relational identities” that define them (Friedman 35). Relationships play a prominent role in women’s culture, with female autobiography understood as a “‘grounding of identity’ through ‘linking with another consciousness’” (Braham 57). This relationship of one consciousness

with another, where the reader takes an “active role” along with the writer, is a central feature of women’s writings, “provid[ing] a script the reader enters, resignifies and in some collaborative sense makes her own” (57). The writer’s audience plays a part in her identity formation—and *both* are identified in the process.

Margo Culley argues that most historical diaries were written as “semi-public documents intended to be read by an audience” (3), proposing that whether or not the writer’s intent was to share her diary, she still had an audience in mind as she wrote. The very act of writing created a conversation with an audience which helped to shape the author’s identity in the writing. Charlotte Linde agrees, stating that the “coherence” of a narrative results from a “cooperative achievement of the speaker and the addressee;” it does not belong solely to a “disembodied, unsituated text” (11-12). Monica Pasupathi explains that in writing a narrative, a sense of self is built that is “fundamentally collaborative,” with meaning created between the storyteller and the audience (138). Mikhail Bakhtin proposes that texts exist “on the boundary” (284) between two subjects, and are always directed toward an “anticipated answer” (279). All would seem to concur that a written narrative is essentially a conversation.

Many writers named their diaries—or at least addressed them—so that the act of recording their lives became a conversant act. Anne Frank, in hiding from the Nazis, names her diary “Kitty,” thereby shaping her narrative in the form of a conversation with a friend (Frank 7). Gail Godwin addresses her diary to her

future self, to “encourage, to scold, to correct, or to set things in perspective” (13), thus fashioning herself as her audience. Linde proposes that diary conversations are not “soliloqu[ies]; [they] are told to someone, and...must solicit some response from [the] addressee” (102). Lynn Bloom adds that keeping a diary is an expression of the desire to be discovered, as a perceived audience “hover[s] at the edge of the page... [and] facilitates the work’s ultimate focus” (23)—the sharing of one self with another.

Amy Wink notes that a diarist creates an image of herself as a character within the language of her own life story (xv). Felicity Nussbaum indicates that “language constructs subjectivity *and* in turn writes language” (161), presenting the idea that in narrative, the “I” of the author becomes the “I” of a narrated character who is now distinct from the narrator, simply because of the choices made through language. She adds that diaries—and by extension, autobiography—merely *represent* reality; the diarist “pretends to simply transcribe the details of experience” (165), but instead chooses what to include based on events important to her narrated “I”—just as does a traditional autobiographer.

The wife of an Iowa farmer, Emily Hawley Gillespie began writing her diary in 1858 at age 20, and kept it faithfully until her death 30 years later (*A Secret to be Buried*). During those years, as later discovered by Judy Nolte Temple (formerly Judy Nolte Lensink), Gillespie’s text underwent a series of revisions as the author recopied it, attempting—at least in part—to recast her past self

according to her current concerns. Some twenty years after the original writing, she adds details not previously included and “editorialized” many of her past experiences, occasionally including dialogue as she spun her tales. Gillespie’s diary alludes several times to secrets she refuses to tell—even within the pages of her own diary— a “secret to be buried [sic]” with her at her death (*A Secret to be Buried* 336). In a time when women had little control over their lives, Gillespie’s words demonstrate that simply writing in a diary may have helped many women to “empower” themselves, by giving voice to thoughts that might be considered socially unacceptable (*A Secret to be Buried* xvi). Indeed, if “our sense of self is reflected in and constructed by the kinds of stories we tell” (Pasupathi, et al. 90), then what Gillespie told—and *refused* to tell—helped to create her sense of self within those culturally-constructed boundaries. In light of this discovery, Culley’s suggestion of a “text... reconstruct[ing] its past” seems quite appropriate (20).

In *Reading Autobiography*, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson suggest that autobiographical writings present the experiences of a self “felt from the inside,” as well as alluding to the self that others see (which the writer is also aware of), noting that within an autobiography there is a sense of “not one life but two” (6), with one speaking of the other. The authors also speak of what they call “autobiographical acts,” or rhetorical moves which are always “addressed to an audience [and] engaged in an argument about identity” (63). This argument over the writer’s identity involves the presence of “multiple ‘I’s”—most

specifically, the “I” who speaks, and the “I” who is spoken of (71), however Smith and Watson discuss the existence of more than just these two versions of the self.¹

Taking Smith and Watson’s understanding of these multiple narrative “I”s, I applied them to Gillespie’s diary text, and discovered that in many passages, she performed all four of these possible “I”s. Below is a single entry from her diary, transcribed in its entirety:

March 27, 1883- I finish my nightgown & c. go to town with James. he feels better natured—I am thankful he does. I *sometimes think it is a real disease that some people have to have a time every so often.* they seem to get so full of some undefinable thing they *must explode.* Henry & Sarah at home. they work and study as usual.
Snow.

Quite happy to night
Every thing is all right.
My prayer has been answered
For it I am so thankful.
May it ever be thus, tis well.
My children. Light of my life.
Through all pleasure and strife,
Mat their pathway ever be
Free from sin and sorrow
May they be guided
By virtue. My best wishes for all.
(“Emily Hawley Gillespie Diaries”)

In this entry, dated nearly five years before her death on March 24, 1888, we can see Gillespie’s historical “I” in her notation of the weather (“Snow”),

remarking on her daily activity of finishing the sewing on her nightgown, and in describing her children's actions ("Henry & Sarah at home. they study as usual."), as well. Gillespie vacillates between Narrator ("I finish...go to town with James.") and Narrated ("I sometimes think...") as she records her day. She introduces the ideological "I" in discussing her views on James "disease" from a more detached perspective, speaking of "they" and "some people," rather than expressing her opinions of his conduct directly. She lapses into the ideological once again as she writes a poem sharing her hopes and prayers for her children, which follows the reporting part of the entry.

Several times over the thirty years she kept the diary, Gillespie reports "copying over" her text, remarking on her wish to "live [her] life over again" through the writing ("Emily Hawley Gillespie Diaries" May 6, 1873). In her 1873 version of the diary (there were at least three earlier revisions), the long-married Gillespie reinvents her story, now playing a starring role as the single young heroine of her story—in an opening banner to the text which declares that it "may compose the reminiscences of the life, from day to day, of Miss Emmie E. Hawley. A.D. 1858" (Temple 155).

Clearly, in her daily writings, Gillespie is not telling her life story from its end. There is no retrospective view, no awareness of any significance to any one day over another—nor, in this entry, any inkling that in less than five years her life will end. Yet, this lack of retrospective insight from "the end of the story" does not change the autobiographical character of her diary. While she may have

recorded her life story in the “continuous present” (Culley 20) of a diary format rather than the retrospective narrative traditionally understood as autobiography, Gillespie's revision process, narrative stance, and rhetorical sense of audience, clearly demonstrate the “autobiographical acts” she performed in its writing.

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Endnotes

¹ Defining autobiography as "a retrospective narrative about a ...past that is fully past—a life story that is told from the end" (71), Smith and Watson claim that there are not merely two "I"s (the "I" of the present telling a tale of the "I" of the past, but four. The authors make note of four possible "I"s in autobiographical writing: the "Real" or Historical "I"; the Narrating "I"; the Narrated "I"; the Ideological "I."