

# Garden Stories: Auto/biography, Gender and Gardening

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## Abstract

Life writing in the form of a single garden story is used in this paper to examine the garden as a powerful theme in gendered leisure. I explore the ways in which garden narratives in the form of auto/biography can represent new identities in everyday life. One women's life story is (re)told; about her childhood, her home and family, and her work in the garden. I conclude that life stories contained in the Mass Observation Archive (big and small) are useful ways of studying gendered lives to gain deeper understandings of the uses and meanings of leisure spaces in and around the home.

**Keywords:** *Garden, Gender, Auto/biography, Leisure, Narrative, Home*

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## Introduction

- 1.1 The ordinary space around the house, the private garden, is a growing field of academic study. I want to argue that the humble domestic garden is an important part of everyday life and gendered leisure. The main purpose of this paper is to use life writing in the form of a single story or narrative contained in Mass Observation (MO), to examine the ways in which leisure in and around the home can be a source of identity reformulation, especially for women. The paper is an illustration of MO as method in the field of life writing that explores the interrelations between self, identity and autobiographical forms (Sheridan et al 2000, Jolly 2001). Auto/biography is used in this context, to reveal the negotiated nature of leisure in the domestic sphere, and the meanings and emotions imbued in the garden are specifically examined from one women's perspective (see also Baisborough and Bhatti 2007). Joy's garden story (not her real name) used in this paper is not in any way representative of social relations at a broader structural level in the positivistic sense, but it has the force to enable deeper understandings about gender identities in domestic leisure settings. The paper is in three sections; the first section defines 'auto/biography, narrative analyses in the form of 'big and small stories', and argues for the usefulness of MO for gathering these stories. The second section presents Joy's garden story, as written by herself, but with my interpretations. In the final section I return to MO as method suggesting that 'big (and little) stories' in the Archive start to identify some of the complex emotions, resistances, and ambiguities of gendered leisure lives in contemporary society.

## I Telling stories

- 2.1 The term 'auto/biography' is used throughout this paper (following Liz Stanley 1992) to denote the idea that life writing (in our case the MO form) can be used by the sociologist '...who is concerned with constructing, rather than 'discovering' social reality...' (Stanley 1993:49). Indeed the researcher and the researched cannot be so easily separated as the construction of this sociological knowledge is specific, contextual and situational, and dependant on the social locations (gendered, raced classed) of the narrator/writer and the sociologist. This idea has emerged out of feminism in the 1990's which has sought to link the researcher and the subject under study, thereby uncovering the lives of 'ordinary' women and making them overtly political. MO contains forms of life writing which at one level narrate the routines and activities of everyday life, but respondents frequently resort to

broader themes and concerns of their lives in a longer time frame and context. These 'tellings' can help us (academics) to gain deeper understandings of the practices of everyday life. Such stories written by 'ordinary people' are presented as auto/biography, and I want to suggest they are one important part of MO as method.

**2.2** Recent developments in narrative analysis have focused on how self identity is accomplished through narration (Freeman 2006, Georgakopoulou 2006, 2007). There is continuing debate about the usefulness of 'big' stories and 'small' stories in this process. Looking specifically at ageing Phoenix and Sparkes (2006), and Phoenix (2009) have suggested that age identities can only be fully understood if reflective/retrospective life-shaping episodes that narrate a life story (that is, their own 'big' story within cultural contexts) are studied alongside the telling of events in the course of daily interactions and experiences. These 'small' stories are often overlooked and not usually deemed to be important; nor can they be heard in the course of using traditional research methods. Yet as Georgakopoulou (2006:123) suggests, these stories of everyday events are, *'fleeting moments of narrative orientation to the world'*. As such they also express identities, as they reveal the daily trials, tribulations, enjoyment and pleasures of daily life. MO allows us to put the big stories and small stories together, told by the same people, over a period of time; this enables us to explore how the individual 'performs' gender in the course of their daily activities as they go about negotiating their work/leisure/family lives. MO helps us to research how particular forms of life writing help to sustain a sense of self as a creative being and social actor (Freeman 2006) combine this with a sociological approach advocated by Plummer (1995) which seeks to emphasise the social and political significance of 'telling' big and small stories in the private/public context of MO; these can provide alternative 'narrative maps' of gendered lives. Thus MO is good example of this personal, yet public life writing as a means of creative expression and daily engagement. These areas are often not captured by other methods, and even though in-depth interviews or retrospective life histories, for example, provide a view backwards over the past; they do not locate these big stories in the context of daily lives. Using MO data gathered specifically on gardens and gardening practices, I want explore how life changes are interpreted and written about focussing on the 'big' stories that people tell about their own leisure activities within in the broader cultural context. At the same time MO data allows us to investigate how leisure is experienced, managed, and negotiated in and through daily routines; these are the 'small' stories of daily life.

**2.3** The story I want to (re)tell is written by a married women from the North East of England; I have named her Joy. She is 35 at the time of writing (1998), has a number of health problems, and describes herself as 'housewife, unpublished writer' (she is number M1201 in the Archive). Her story is approximately 15 pages long and my re-telling of it leaves out quite a lot, emphasizes some things and underplay others. There are two narratives here: one in which the person writing the story is in conversation with herself, creating meaning, and making sense of her experiences and the world around her (Joy's garden story); the other (my story) is struggling to pull out pieces of her narrative which will help me to make sense of concepts and theories (i.e. 'leisure as empowering'). Thus I am re-writing her story in a specific academic discourse to explore the themes that interest me as a male (non-gardener) sociologist. My 'story' of her life story is therefore a construction designed for a specific purpose and audience. Indeed Joy's garden story is very much about her changing identity; it is reflexive and knowingly designed to show the remaking her 'self' in which the gardens plays a significant part. My telling is about reworking her story to suit my academic purposes; it in this sense that the paper is in the form of an 'auto/biography'. Thus, in making a space for leisure in a particular place, Joy is involved with me in telling the story of how the garden provides an 'opportunity for empowerment'. Leisure is particularly problematic for women (Green et al 1990, Aitchison 2003); finding spare time separated from obligations to others and domestic duties is a constant struggle. As Casey (2004:179) points out 'women frequently participate in leisure activities which are thoroughly blended into their everyday, domestic routines'; and so women tend to integrate leisure into daily routines and rituals. In this context then, the garden can be a domestic chore (keeping it tidy), as well as gardening becoming a creative activity with potential for self expression. Foucault (1984) describes the garden as that 'other place', a *heterotopia*; a contradictory space that is open to many possibilities for the self. Seeing the home garden in this way allows us to focus on these leisure locales and activities of everyday life that challenge dominating ideologies; forms of leisure that have the potential to reshape identities. As we will see below, the garden gives Joy a sense of individual agency and self expression, and her garden story becomes a source of alternative discourses, leading to a remaking of herself.

## II Joy's garden story

**3.1** In 1998 Mass Observation issued a Directive entitled "THE GARDEN AND GARDENING" to 354 respondents (252 women and 102 men) which received 244 responses (181 women and 63 men). The Directive asked respondents to write about key personal themes which related to their gardens including childhood memories; the personal significance of certain plants; and differences in terms of gardening tasks and how these

may be changing. Here is sample of questions: *As a child did you plant things in the garden? How do you use your garden? In your family who does particular tasks such as mowing the lawn digging, planting weeding? What do you grow in your garden? What do you like/dislike about your garden? Do you consider yourself to be an 'expert' gardener? Who do you trust to give you the best advice about gardening? Some people are passionate about their gardens, other see it as a burden - what does your garden mean to you?* The flexible nature of the MO format gave some respondents the chance to write at length about how the garden represented a key theme in their lives. Replies ranged from a single page to some over 30 pages with photographs and drawings. Not everyone wrote a life story as such, indeed little snippets of information about the garden were the norm But several respondents linked their biography and life course very closely with homes and gardens they had lived, played and worked in. Typically over half of MO respondents were aged over 50, and three-quarters were women. This is not a significant concern since it is precisely older women that are underrepresented in public discourses, so using their garden stories highlights the 'democratic' nature of MO (Sheridan et al 2000). Indeed MO does not aim to recruit representative samples from which to generalize, and the writing project is set up in such a way that the writers remain anonymous. Often the writers are referred to as 'ordinary' and there is much proud self identification with this notion from the respondents themselves; that is, they do not see themselves as experts. These qualities allow unknown people to write personal, individual narratives of private lives for public record.

**3.2** Joy has responded to the Directive in the form of conventional autobiography, that is, she starts with her earliest memories of the houses and gardens she has lived in, and works towards the 'now', that is her 'big story'. Towards the end though she writes in the form of a diary of 'now', as key events were unfolding during April/May/June/July 1998, the 'small' stories of everyday life. This gives the life story an ongoing feel; that is, a futurity- that there are still many things unresolved in Joy's life. However, I want to start towards the end of her story to emphasise the importance of the garden in her adult life. Joy says, 'I may have been a trifle over ambitious when I announced to my family that I intended throwing a party, a garden party for my wedding anniversary. It will show off the new garden, and the new terrace, and the new conservatory'. Joy's garden therefore represents something special; it is inextricably linked to herself identity, it symbolizes her life history up to now, and shows us how strongly the garden is embedded in her family life. We will come back to the garden party at the end of the story.

### *'I had no interest in gardening'*

**3.3** To go back to the beginning, the garden did not figure strongly in Joy's childhood, 'In the first house I remember, we had no garden', then 'when I was five years old we moved to a New Town, to a brand new house... with a brand new garden'. But Joy was only there for three months and moved to another new house on the same estate. Her memories of this garden are sketchy, and after two years the family moved again to a new house on the same estate. Here they settled and Joy writes of her childhood memories, '... in the alcove we planted lilacs, a purple one in the left hand corner for the my sister, and a white one in the right hand corner for me. We were told they were ours and we must look after them'. Joy doesn't remember doing gardening very much, but she says 'Years later I met the women who moved into the house after we moved out, the white lilac was still doing very well, and was visible above the wall. In many ways her childhood was still 'alive'. Indeed several other respondents also mentioned the ways in which certain plants had helped them to connect back to their childhood.

**3.4** During this time Joy's mother was the gardener, but 'she was full of can'ts and don'ts, and that won't work... we never got to do any of the fun stuff like planting or putting seeds or deadheading or whatever. I don't think she was at all adventurous about the garden'. As we shall see later, Joy turned out to be incredibly adventurous in her garden in adult life. In contrast to other stories where interest in the garden was often sparked at a young age by grandparents or parents, Joy concludes, 'I had not interest in gardening'. At the Age of twelve a traumatic event (where she stuck a fork through her toe) further reduced her interest in the garden. The near absence of the garden in Joy's childhood is in sharp contrast to other stories I have examined elsewhere; for some respondents childhood memories are strongly linked to first house and garden they can remember.

**3.5** Joy then moves quickly onto her adult life and after getting married moves into a bungalow with large gardens front and rear. Joy says 'I still had no interest in gardening, but I tended what was there... and (my husband) dug over the vegetable patch and planted all sorts of things'. It seems often that often in traditional households the man took over the garden, and it becomes his space. Nevertheless they moved to their current house in 1984 just before the birth of a daughter and neglected the garden somewhat. The change in Joy's life, herself identity and the central role of the garden in her creation and recreation of home came in 1990:

**3.6** 'Then at the turn of the decade I had a change of heart. I decided I wanted to do something about the garden, but I didn't want to be continually compromising. I said to my husband, I'll do the work, you don't have to do anything; but that means I get to decide everything. It'll be my garden. And he agreed. I set to'. Joy invokes her agency at this point (not compromising) and she is prepared to labour (I'll do the work); by 'mixing with the earth' Joy invests her-self in the garden, and in doing so claims it as her own (I get to decide).

**3.7** This also shows us the limits of MO as opposed to interviews; as Joy does not write about what happened 'at the turn of the decade', exactly what made her focus on the garden in this way? How and why did she challenge her husband over the garden space? I cannot ask her what happened around this time that made her want to put all her energies into her garden. Joy then describes the incredible amount of work she did to sort out her garden:

'I looked at the rectangle of lawn and decided I wanted less formality, fewer corners, not so much straight edge. I looked at all the ground cover plants that were useless against the couch grass, and I pulled them up. I took a spade and fork and I dug and turned and riddled it... I ended up with enough stones for my friends to take away in carloads to use as hard core for their new driveway. And still there were more stones, and more'.

My brother in law - started a gardening business - he gave me a greenhouse on the cheap, and I planted my own seeds and raised my own plants and had a ball.

**3.9** Joy makes the garden her own by working in it and putting her emotion and labour into the soil and plants. By doing this work she clearly feels she now has control over what goes in the garden, the design and what to plant. One of the problems that most people encounter when they start gardening is developing their knowledge of 'how to garden' and what to plant. Some of this knowledge is passed down amongst families, and around in local neighbourhoods. But mostly it now comes from the media, as Joy says,

'I watched programs on tv, not one or two, but all of them, on every side and listened to what they said. I learned a lot. Then one day I realised that I had my own opinions about what ever subject was occupying their time that week. I began to argue with the TV or radio. I don't see why I should plant pastel-coloured flowers because the man from the BBC doesn't like gaudiness. I like gaudy colours. I like bright orange lilies...'

**3.10** Joy now begins to challenge the accepted gardening canon and upsets the gendered male expert- lay person (housewife) relationship. By challenging 'the man from the BBC' Joy is claiming her territory both physically, in that she can grow what she wants, and socially as refusal to be judged on taste. This self confidence emerges out of Joy's own labour in the garden, her practical creative knowledge, and her independence begins to grow. Moreover, she begins to appreciate 'being' in the garden,

'I had a drift of peach violas catching the sun and twisting and turning their delicate petals in the wind. I spend a whole afternoon spellbound by them sitting on the backstop, gazing at them, perfectly content'.

But crucially this re-creation of herself is within a social context, for she says, 'I had a glorious cranesbill of which I gave cuttings to all my friends and now I can see my plants in almost every garden I visit'.

**3.11** The social aspects underpinning gardening is important to emphasise, as quite often gardening is presented as a individualised activity. In contrast, I want to suggest that the domestic garden and gardening is embedded in (gendered) social relations, which often comes out in the way people talk about their gardens; it is usually in relation to family members, neighbours and the wider community.

**3.12** So Joy is well aware that the garden becomes (through her own labour) a focal point for domestic life; the important role of the garden in Joy's family life is best summed up by her story of Tree,

'In the lawn, to the left and near the back, a small tress grew, or rather it didn't grow. For the first 6 years we lived there the tree was less than my own height (and I am a very short person), but when I began to look after the garden, I started to look after the tree. I cleared the choking grass for around it refreshed the soil, I poured in bucket after bucket of water, I fed it fed it and it began to grow. It shot away after its own strange nature. It is a willow tree called Tortousa 'tortured willow. Somehow its meandering bole and freely growing branches suit our family perfectly. We've had to trim it, to constrain it a little, and we may have to lose it eventually, but we are holding onto it as long as we can. Its family and is never referred to as the tree but simply as Tree'.

**3.13** The emotionality in the passage above is immense; the hard work in the garden (through the body) and rescuing the tree, symbolizes the 'making' of home, but crucially it is on her terms. In some senses Joy starts with negotiating her garden space literally and metaphorically, but she then also reaches reconciliation with her partner,

'My husband is more interested in the garden these days, and more willing to do the work, which is good thing because I can do much less, now the garden isn't mine but ours in a way it hasn't been before, and it doesn't have the air of compromise that so often accompanies the interior decoration of the house' (my emphasis).

Joy is now confident enough to (re) present the garden back to her husband and family as a gift, a generous gesture which emerges because Joy is now in a different place.

- 3.14 As the story above shows the everyday world of the garden impacts on changing gender roles. Even though the challenges to traditional roles appear quite marginal and could be seen as small stories, they take on highly significant events that mark out key periods of home making in life histories. We can clearly see interplay between the garden, gender, leisure and home making. Joy seems to sum up the importance of her garden to her family life,

'The garden has been used, The children have played on it, sunbathed in it. We've had parties and barbecues and they've had the paddling pool on it. The girls have had their own plants, or their own patches to throw seed into to see what came up'.

Just as Joy's memories are materialized in her garden and plants, her own children will come in time to remember this garden, they too will have childhood memories of this house, the garden, Tree, and their mothers accomplishment in creating a garden for them to play in.

- 3.15 During the period that Joy is writing in response to the Directive (April-July), a conservatory and terrace is being built, 'oh my poor garden' she remarks. The building works almost destroy her garden, but she does not give up, 'But I have plans. I have troughs to fill with lilies and trailing flowers... I have friends taking cuttings and splitting plants and putting them aside for me to bring home... despite the bareness, the emptiness and all the hard work to come, 1998 is going to be an exciting time in the garden'.

- 3.16 Joy's garden is a triumph for her personally as it represents her struggle, not just against the elements (the stones, the weather), but her position as a 'housewife'. I started with Joy announcing to her family that she was going to have a party for her wedding anniversary. So what of Joy's garden party? Well, there is no happy ending! 'The garden party didn't happen, not because the garden wasn't presentable- it was green and tidy-but because there hasn't been any summer at all'. It seems the weather won, but Joy is happy in her garden, 'I've found a place to sit, hidden from those in the house, able to look at my garden from a **new perspective**... It's a lovely place, a lovely feeling' (my emphasis).

- 3.17 From a sociological perspective, to what extent does Joy's '*new perspective*' emerge from her creative work in the garden which begins to challenge her domestic role? We can begin to link these ideas about home. Home-making involves a socio-cultural order which includes the notion of a shared existence with other members of the family and/or neighbours. The nature of this sharing varies across cultures, but crucially it involves routines, rituals and traditions. Thus Joy's garden contributes towards home-making through daily routines that are shared through leisure. The garden is shared with others through joint physical 'work', pictures, cuttings, advice, and dialogically with neighbours across the garden fence. 'Garden talk' can often reveal hidden issues of identity, lay versus expert knowledge, status and difference. Moreover, Joy's narrative is continually directed outwards rather inwards; for example, she challenges the masculinist media (*'the man from the BBC'*) in terms of what to plant in her garden. Tree is very much a socialised object referred to through family encounters. There is little doubt that the garden for Joy is a 'social' place she shares with plants, family and with friends, from which she can engage with the outside world.

### III the uses of auto/biography

- 4.1 In order to explore the potential of leisure, in this case gardening, I have used an interpretative approach in the form auto/biography; that is, my retelling of Joy's story of her garden and how it relates to other aspects of her life. But why use auto/biography? As Morgan and Stanley (1993) point out this focus on auto/biography has emerged in context of 'the turn to textuality'; that is, analyzing written text (and/or other narratives) by ordinary people as social products and therefore worthy of sociological study. Stanley (1988) over three decades ago argued for leisure studies research that looked at women's lives 'in the round'; that is, studying the interplay between 'work and leisure' through the life histories of 'ordinary' women (if possible as told by themselves). Indeed as Sheridan points out, auto/biography... is a retrospective story in prose that a real person tells of their own existence, emphasizing the individual life at a given moment, and a movement towards integration or closure' (1993:29-30). The usefulness of MO life writing for researchers is that these narratives validate '...the lived experience of ordinary people and creates conditions for the expression of that experience'. Interestingly, whilst biographies of famous people and celebrities are common in the world of leisure and sport; the leisure lives of ordinary people told in the 'life history' mode is not usually seen to be worthy of comment or presentation

however. In this final section I want to pick out a number of key themes from this literature that impact directly on my telling of Joy's story above. Stanley (1993:47) has neatly summed these up as 'self/other; public/private, and immediacy/memory'.

4.2 Even though what has been presented is a 'single life', Joy's gardening story is permeated with significant others; for example, her family, particularly her husband who has an 'absent presence' throughout the story, and broader social forces ( e.g. the media). Thus in auto/biography the individual and collective/social need to be considered simultaneously if we are to go beyond the over-socialised self, or notion of the unique person (Roberts 2002:88). Moreover, whilst there is ample description in Joy's story (her 'small' stories of daily struggles with her garden), there is also considerable interpretation; for example, the notion of resistance to her situation as 'housewife' that comes through in her narrating.; this is her 'big' story, knowingly told. Clearly I have overlaid this with conceptual/theoretical discourses borrowed from the academic literature, that is, I have gone 'beyond the text', and in doing so, going beyond the individual to the social person in context.

4.3 The 'self who writes' assumes an audience, and MO facilitates the process whereby 'private lives' can be revealed in a safe, anonymous, and ethical form (Sheridan et al 2000). Thus, Joy's garden story is now told in a public arena (one of the key aspects of Mass Observation), and therefore can act as a catalyst for other similar stories to be told, or for other women to use the garden in this way. The privacy of emotions and meanings surrounding Joy's garden provides us with some useful public insights into increasing tensions in home-making in late modernity, particularly in the context of changing gender relations and identities. In the context of these 'hidden lives' Joy has a 'voice' and a mode of discourse that is authorial and structured and thanks to MO is open to analysis. Moreover in choosing to pick out Joy's story, and in particular emphasizing certain aspects of it, we can better understand the meanings, tensions and conflicts arising out of leisure activities within the domestic sphere. The other key point to make is that in telling her own story memory plays an important part; it is essential to the (re)making of herself. As Roberts observes, ' a key feature of autobiographical memory is the attempt to link memory with the formation of the self - a phenomenological connection- as well as place the process of remembering as part of a social context' (Roberts 2002:138).

4.4 But how useful is a 'single life' for sociological analysis? This raises the methodological issue of individual stories contained within MO; do they help us in progressing social theory? In this context I wish to make use of the anthropological idea of the 'telling case'. As Sheridan et al (2000:14) point out, '... the search for a 'typical' case for analytical exposition is likely to be less fruitful than the search for a 'telling case' in which the particular circumstances surrounding a case serve to make previously obscure theoretical relationships suddenly apparent'. Telling cases can reveal the underlying principles of social change, emphasizing the dialectical relationship between the analytical framework and the case studies, allowing empirical data to be sensitized to highlight certain processes, which then allow conceptual advancement. This is where the MO material on gardens is very useful, not just as an 'apt illustration' of gardening styles, but as a 'telling case' of contemporary processes in gendered leisure. In the process of reading a number of garden stories I have been struck not by their typicality or similarities, but their uniqueness and the different ways in which they were told. So Joy's garden story is a "telling case" because the way it is told (in the form of an reflexive biography with the garden as its central organising theme) and offers an analysis of gendered social lives. Thus we were better able to grasp the complex theoretical/conceptual connections between class, gender and home in her garden story. Mass Observation contains many of these stories and is therefore a very useful Archive for sociological analysis.

## Conclusion

5.1 When I read Joy's story for the very first time I was reminded of Annette Kuhn's observation, 'Telling stories about the past, our past, is a key moment in the making of ourselves' (1995:2). This is where MO as method for investigating auto/biography offers new insights from the writers themselves, which flows through to the researcher. In some senses Joy's daily battles with the stones and plants appear as small stories, but they figure as a 'big' story in the context of her life and her own rethinking of gendered roles as mother and housewife. As Joy's garden story begins to show, the garden can be a more artful and creative place, than is often assumed to be the case, especially in relation to the interior of the house. In Foucauldian terms the garden is an ambiguous, liminal space; a very special place alive to possibilities for the self that have may have been cut off elsewhere (Foucault 1984). But crucially Joy's garden stories both small and big show that she relates to the garden in significantly different ways, often related to the domestic routines of home-making, the availability of 'spare' time, and the pressures from other caring duties. As a private/public archive Mass Observation is unique in revealing Joy's garden as an emotional space, sometimes filled with daily chores, but at other times filled with creative pleasures through which she recreates her own life; her garden story is an essential part of the formation

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