

# Life Writing and American Studies

## Forum

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## Abstract

This forum seeks to outline a variety of research prospects at the intersection of American studies and life writing studies. The common thread that interrelates the individual contributions is spun and twisted out of various filaments of life writing theory which productively dialogue with current trajectories in American studies. The contributors to this forum highlight what they consider particularly significant developments of the interdisciplinary field of life writing studies. Taken together, they raise issues about representations of the self in film, literature, and popular culture from the vantage points of transnational American studies, feminist studies, intermediality studies, oceanic studies, affect theory, critical race theory, and queer theory. The result is a rich, multi-layered conversation about the future of American studies within the interdisciplinary and decidedly transnational context of life writing studies.

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The field of life writing studies periodically entertains speculations about its future development.<sup>1</sup> In this context, many themes central to American studies concerns have received attention in the two leading journals of life writing studies in the past five years: *Biography* has published special issues on indigenous lives and online life writing,<sup>2</sup> while *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies* gave special attention to the Americas with two special issues in 2015 and 2016, respectively.<sup>3</sup> Interestingly, lesser curated efforts to address life writing concerns have appeared in flagship American studies journals, including *American Quarterly*, *American Literature*, and *American Literary History*. Contributing to these critical efforts, this forum identifies three research prospects which illustrate the productive intersections between American studies and life writing studies. In this light, the phenomena discussed in the contributions to this forum expand the field imaginary of American studies through the inclusion of transoceanic, digital, and intermedial life writing in the widest sense. The forum as a whole also attends to questions of genre and form and thereby raises issues about the relationship between aesthetics and politics in various cultural phenomena.

An expansion of the field imaginary of American studies demands constant redefinitions of life writing practices. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson's attempt to map specific forms of life writing and the sixty life narrative genres they list in their classic handbook *Reading Autobiography* (2001) are particularly relevant in this context.<sup>4</sup> The intersections between basic long-standing terms, such as "Auto/biography, or a/b" and "Autofiction,"<sup>5</sup> convey the context-oriented variability of concepts which has inspired numerous neologisms for hitherto unrecognized or recently developed forms and foci. The inclusion of the "Diary," of "Letters," and of

“Digital life stories” indicates the gamut from life writing formats of yore to the age of new media,<sup>6</sup> which simultaneously suggests numerous scenarios of shifting conceptualizations of the private and the public. Smith and Watson’s typology also distinguishes, among other things, between genres that either focus on individual selfhood or on context-centered self-definitions. In the latter category, “Relational life writing” depicts the autobiographer not as possessing an autonomous and stable self but rather as being a person with an interdependent and fluid sense of selfhood.<sup>7</sup> Interdependent selfhood may provide the basis for “collectivized and situated life writing in which the bios of autobiography is replaced by the ethnos or social group,” to draw on Smith and Watson’s description of autoethnography.<sup>8</sup> Taking up the tension between facticity and fictionality, such a social formation is an ideal rather than a reality, and a relational approach may serve to combat “cultural invisibility” through foregrounding membership in a “mythic community” that serves disadvantaged or marginalized social groups.<sup>9</sup> The frequently collaborative genesis of autoethnographic writing, which was to move away from “the investigator–informant model of ethnography as a practice that sustains asymmetrical relations of colonialism,”<sup>10</sup> nevertheless often comes in the form of “as-told-to” texts that threaten to muffle the voice of the person depicted.<sup>11</sup> Further subgenres use a location or a type of life-changing experience as a point of departure (“Prison narratives”; “Survivor narrative”; “Conversion narrative”; “Spiritual life narrative”), or they hinge upon the desired impact of writing or reading the account (“Scriptotherapy” and “Self-help narrative”). As this overview indicates, genre considerations in the realm of life writing studies go far beyond form, style, and content. Instead, they branch out into contextual issues like genesis, publication, distribution, and reading practices of life narratives.

As the five thematic sections will demonstrate, life writing studies converses effectively with many twenty-first-century American studies concerns. For instance, the movement away from life writing in conventional book format and toward multimedial or online forms of representation raises new questions about authorship, audience, medium, genre, and the shifting power relations between the autobiographical subject and the teller of the tale. The production, dissemination, and reception of autobiographical self-expression in liminal genres which waver between private and public consumption—such as diaries and letters—furthermore require contextual analyses of individual texts and a reconsideration of reading practices. From a transnational American studies context, this diversity of formats and contexts calls attention to the trans- and intercultural features based on practices defined by language, cultural expectations, and aesthetic concepts. In particular, our collaborative essay attends to American studies concerns such as citizenship and nationhood versus individuality, mobility versus rootedness, and

progressive historiography versus nostalgic attachment to tradition. The sequence of short essays is based on the following rationale: with reference to the recurring question regarding authenticity in life writing, the individual contributors move in their discussions from personal diaries and letters as historical life writing documents (Depkat) via first-person documentary films (Rieser), the co-presence of producers and consumers in quick media life writing (Schultermandl), intermedial and transnational representations of hip-hop artists (Balestrini) to unsettling practices of reading and of constituting an archive of transoceanic mobility and settler colonialism (Fackler).

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## Notes

- 1 Emily Hipchen and Ricia Anne Chansky, “Looking Forward: The Futures of Auto|Biography Studies,” in “What’s Next? The Futures of Auto|Biography Studies,” ed. Emily Hipchen and Ricia Anne Chansky, special issue, *alb: Auto|Biography Studies* 32, no. 2 (2017): 139–57, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08989575.2017.1301759>; Ricia Anne Chansky and Emily Hipchen, eds., *The Routledge Auto|Biography Studies Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2016).
- 2 Alice Te Punga Somerville, Daniel Heath Justice, and Noelani Arista, eds., “Indigenous Conversations about Biography,” special issue, *Biography* 39, no. 3 (2016); Laurie McNeill and John David Zuern, eds., “Online Lives 2.0,” special issue, *Biography* 28, no. 2 (2015).
- 3 Ricia Anne Chansky, ed., “Auto|Biography across the Americas,” special issue, *alb: Auto|Biography Studies* 30, no. 1 (2015); Laura J. Beard, ed., “Indigenous Autobiographical Writings in the Americas,” special issue, *alb: Auto|Biography Studies* 31, no. 3 (2016).
- 4 Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives* (2001; Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 253–86.
- 5 *Ibid.*, 256, 259.
- 6 *Ibid.*, 266, 273, 268.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 278–9; see also Leigh Gilmore, “The Mark of Autobiography: Postmodernism, Autobiography, and Genre,” in *Autobiography and Postmodernism*, ed. Kathleen M. Ashley, Leigh Gilmore, and Gerald Peters (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1994), 6; Anne Rügge-meier, *Die relationale Autobiographie: Ein Beitrag zur Theorie, Poetik und Gattungsgeschichte eines neuen Genres in der englischsprachigen Erzählliteratur* (Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2014).
- 8 Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography*, 258.
- 9 *Ibid.* 263.
- 10 *Ibid.*, 258.
- 11 See Smith and Watson’s entries on collaborative life writing (264), ethnic life narratives (269), and heterobiography (272).