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Ethnic Life Writing and Historical Mediation: Approaches and Interventions

Rocío G. Davis, Jaume Aurell, and Ana Beatriz Delgado

Critical discussions on the intersection between life writing and history inspired the dialogue that led to this collection. In the context of the fraught ethnic politics in our increasingly globalized world, negotiating with historical memory has become both a cultural obsession and a powerful political weapon. Though we now generally agree about the use of memory (and the writing thereof) as a legitimate source of historical truth, we need to continue to examine the *ways* in which these historical mediations occur. Importantly, as Jacqueline Dowd Hall suggests, we need to explore “the phenomena that travel under the sign of ‘memory and history.’ First, personal memories (the chains of association that seem to come unbidden to the mind, rely on concrete images, and split and telescope time); second, social memories (the shared, informal, contested stories that simultaneously describe and act on our social world); third, history (the accounts we reconstruct from the documentary traces of an absent past); and, finally, political imagination (the hope for a different future that inspires and is inspired by the study of the past)” (442-443). These different phenomena function simultaneously in the ethnic life writing exercises examined in this volume, giving the texts a Janus-faced perspective, and complicating our notions of how previously discrete methodologies function in changing situations.

This volume presents some of the results of the Fifth Conference of the Society for Multi-ethnic Studies: Europe and the Americas (MESEA), held at the University of Navarra in May 2006, entitled “Ethnic Life Writing and Histories.” The essays collected here are highly interdis-

ciplinary and focus on how processes of literary creativity and historical inscription blend to produce texts that require nuanced readings on many levels. This strategy is multiply enhancing as a discursive tool because the autobiographical perspective presented in the texts may be analyzed not merely as a way to negotiate historical contexts in order to inform the reader, but as a tool that illuminates the creative activity of writers or filmmakers. Half the essays focus on Asian American texts, inviting crucial connections and insights on the ways ethnic concerns are reflected methodologically. Publishing a comparative analysis in a series on Asian American literary studies favors the strategic intersections between the work of writers of diverse ethnic groups or national affiliations who consciously negotiate issues of ethnic self-representation and history.

From a theoretical perspective, the work of Karl Weintraub, Philippe Lejeune, Hayden White, Paul John Eakin, Jerome Bruner, and Jeremy Popkin, among others, have expanded our views on the ways in which life writing enriches our readings of public experiences, on the one hand, and how these creative performances become historically valid documents, on the other. Weintraub posits that autobiography achieved its prominence when we acquired a historical understanding of our existence; the life writing text then became an important cultural artifact, part of “that great intellectual revolution marked by the emergence of the particular modern form of historical mindedness we call historicism or historicism” (821). From a more literary point of view, Eakin, in *Touching the World*, describes autobiography as more than “an imaginative coming-to-terms with history” because “it functions itself as the instrument of this negotiation” (144, 139). These reflections authorize the use of autobiographical writing as interpretative frames for historical information, validating the methodology of life writing for historical discourse.

Conscious of the complexity of the interaction between the subjective and objective in the telling of stories, historians and literary critics have increasingly granted authority to singular voices, considering them “unconventional” yet reliable perspectives. Autobiography has gained important scientific and academic ground as a valid source for negotiating with the past—viewing a public story through stories of the self. The increasing fascination of the critics with life writing is based on

the possibilities of the triple dimension of the word “auto-bio-graphy”: *autos*, the portrait of the author’s self that emerges from the text; *bios*, the narrative of the life that it contains; and *graphie*, the writing of the text itself (Olney 236-267). The history of a particular context, the story of a singular life, and the act of narration of that story are integrated in one text. For this reason, historians, even those who have written their autobiographies, often reveal their reluctance and suspicion regarding a genre that appears to privilege the subjective. Jeremy Popkin, for example, in the introduction to his *History, Historians, and Autobiography*, presents an illuminating caveat to the ways in which we read historians’ life writing: “My training as a historian makes me acutely aware of the risks one would run by accepting as gospel truth everything these autobiographers have written about themselves, but evaluating their completeness and factual accuracy has not been my main concern” (9). Understanding this position, we nonetheless argue that life writing can be not only a potentially productive source for a nuanced reconstruction the past, but also an invaluable document for discerning processes of identity. We do not conceive autobiographies as a “dangerous double agent,” moving between literature and history, fact and fiction, subject and object (Marcus 7) but rather as a privileged way to access personal and collective forms of subjectivity in changing contexts.

Autobiographers themselves often describe their ambivalence regarding the use of their texts in historical contexts. Robert Rosenstone subtitles his family memoir: “*The (Mostly) True Story of My Jewish Family*.” He conceives this memoir as a mosaic of memories that re-created certain experiences, transforming *lived* experience into *narrated* experience. Telling the story shifted the experiences’ epistemological status, complicating notions of “reality” or “fiction,” or “literature” and “history.” Rosenstone argues that through this process of transformation of the past into written memories via words (or images, or sounds), “we attempt to simulate a lost word, but the life we bestow upon the dead is not one they would recognize as their own” (xi). A professional historian himself, Rosenstone illustrated how, after decades of the hegemony of the great narratives and the long-term historical structures, historians are becoming more and more convinced of the privileged function of the singular “stories” in the making of “history.” The reality of the past does not lie in a collection of data but in an accumulation of stories. These

stories are always told by those who have experienced them. It is now considered naïve to maintain a blind trust in official records, because these too are subject to limited or partial perspectives. Personal and collective memory creates a space where fact, truth, fiction, invention, forgetting, and myth are so entangled as to constitute a renewed form of access to the past. This theoretical assertion also provides a deep experiential reflection, because, as Rosenstone concludes, “ultimately, it is not the facts that make us what we are, but the stories we have been told and the stories we believe” (xv).

Taking our lead from Rosenstone’s affirmation, the editors of this book posit that ethnic identity is not only shaped by the “stories we have been told and the stories we believe,” but also, and more importantly, by the stories we tell. The act of telling and writing one’s story affirms as it performs identity. This idea links the articles in this collection: the intersection between the discourse, practice, and social function of life writing, history, and ethnic identity. Our approach is based on a transversal methodology that links genre studies and historiography, using the strategies of each in order to arrive at new conclusions about the writing of the history of globalization, immigration, racial and ethnic negotiation, privileging non-official histories in the process.

The first two essays in the volume, reflections on the writing of autobiography, describe the processes that direct self-inscription in specific contexts. Shirley Geok-lin Lim positions her autobiography, *Among the White Moon Faces*, in dialogue with academic writing, embodied memory, and the historical and social material that contextualizes all Asian American writing, thus illuminating the making of a private and historical self out of individual memories. Seeking for the story of her life a form that would accommodate “the interiority of poetry and a different external scaffolding: drama and narrative drive,” Lim explains how she deploys images of her embodied self to locate herself in a family story and also in the shifting political practices in Malaysia and the United States. Carmen Pearson’s essay, the introduction to her family memoir about her grandmother, the first Carmen, describes her sense of responsibility as the heir of her grandmother’s diary and her struggles to uncover a history of multiple dislocations, seeking the balance between private stories and public contexts. As she says of her family: “We are not the people who have written history; instead, we

have always remained in that silent fringe of the middle class, living our lives largely within the domestic, somewhat isolated from extended family, from politics and from a culture we were born into." Transcribing, interpreting, and also trying to publish Carmen's diary, Pearson also negotiates the politics that govern ethnic self-representation. Both these essays, reflections on the self located in history and politics by persons who have engaged the genre of autobiography, invite us to consider how the act of life writing may be directed or controlled and how the texts function discursively in society.

Jerome Bruner's reflections on the nature of autobiographical writing as historical mediation are useful for this discussion. Noting the development of the ideas that have validated autobiography as history, he explains a series of discourses involved in the autobiographical act: first, he posits autobiography as "a discourse of witness: accounts of happenings in which one participated if only as an observer. These accounts are most often marked by the past tense, by verbs of direct experience such as *see* and *hear*, and by declarative speech acts. Witness creates existential immediacy for both the writer and the reader" (Bruner 45). When the "witness," as is often the case in ethnic life writing, is not necessarily the writer but a relative or a member of the community, the genre's conventions allow the reader to receive the information as coming from a witness. In a sense, the writer bears witness to the witness. The autobiographer's position as receiver and preserver of personal or community stories authorizes her voice, granting a similar immediacy to the narrative.

Historical mediation, thus, requires two previous phases: first, a recognition of the power of personal narratives inserted in the public forum to engage historical and cultural issues, in order to challenge dominant mainstream versions which have often hidden, misrepresented, or invalidated these stories. It also suggests how, to an important extent, individual identity is constituted in relation to family and national history. Second, historical mediation requires a commitment to preserve these stories from disappearing and provide the ethnic communities with potentially empowering narratives. In a sense, these motivations function simultaneously on the personal and collective level. So, though the autobiographical act is primarily a personal one, autobiographical writing exists for public interpretive uses, "as part of a

general and perpetual conversation about life possibilities... In any case, the 'publicness' of autobiography constitutes something like an opportunity for an ever-renewable 'conversation' about conceivable lives" (Bruner 41).

The essays by Terry DeHay and Lavina Shankar analyze texts produced in similar circumstances. DeHay's reading of Mahmoud Darwish's autobiography, *Memory for Forgetfulness*, situated in a single day during the Israeli siege of Beirut in August 1982, elucidates how violence compels the articulation of memory. Positing that all of Darwish's work can be read "as an intervention in the narrative of his people and demonstrates the creation of a national narrative as an ongoing process," DeHay validates reading this personal account in the context of a national story, partly as a form of recovering and preserving memory and partly providing Palestinians with a necessary narrative of selfhood. Shankar analyzes Meena Alexander's 2003 revision of her 1993 memoir, *Fault Lines*, a task the Manhattan author felt was imperative after having lived through the 9/11 bombings in New York. Again, a violent event becomes the trigger for memory. Alexander finds herself revisiting what she had previously written, in order to work through its validity, its completeness, and its function in her present life. Importantly, she revisits the notion of nationhood and belonging, which were crucial points in her first memoir but which she felt compelled to re-address in the new context of a city shattered by violence. Both these pieces, which foreground historical events as catalysts for the articulation of memory, bring private recollection into the public—even "national"—sphere.

Bruner also stresses the role of autobiography as a "discourse of interpretation," *diegesis* in the classical sense, which organizes the elements of the story and "places them in evaluational frames (instances of 'struggle,' of 'devotion,' or whatever). Diegesis has a way of being more subjunctive than mimesis: it considers paths not taken; it is crouched retrospectively and counterfactually; it is more apt to ride on epistemic verbs like *know* and *believe* rather than see and hear; and it is usually crouched in the present or timeless tense" (Bruner 45). The interpretative element Bruner refers to is illustrated in several of the essays in this collection, notably a series of articles that examine the ways in which autobiographers negotiate generic possibilities.

Three essays explain the advantages to the use of graphic art, photography or film to represent or interrogate specific events in twentieth-century history. Pin-chia Feng's essay on the text and film versions of Abraham Verghese's *My Own Country*, discusses the politics of representation in complex situations, describing the ways ethnic subjectivities are enacted vis-à-vis questionable group identities and how these may be represented in writing and film. By focusing on the ways communities are formed—ethnic as well as, in this case, the community that grows out of the experience of AIDS in a small town—she unveils the interaction that determines ways of representing belonging. Min Song's comparative study of Miné Okubo's *Citizen 13660* and Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*, focuses on the advantages of the graphic novel as a form of life writing that illuminates "the trope of looking back during times of transition in state power." Discussing childhoods experienced in internment camps and during the Muslim Revolution in Iran, he posits that both graphic artists use their multilayered form of representation to call attention to the "discursive poverty" surrounding the historical experiences they represent. Finally, Eleanor Ty's analysis of Denise Chong's *The Girl in the Picture*, the biographical account of Phan Ti Kim Phuc, the South Vietnamese girl in the emblematic 1972 picture of the napalm bomb, negotiates "the tightly woven intersection of biography, politics, and history, the fluidity of global subjects in an age of transnational crossings at the same time as it raises questions about competing discursive forms of image and text in contemporary society." As she analyzes these issues, Ty also explores the ways Chong's texts transcends biography to become a form of immigrant personal and collective history for a generation of Vietnamese people caught in perpetual warfare.

This interpretational process leads to Bruner's third point, "stance," referring to the "autobiographer's posture toward the world, toward self, toward fate and the possible, and also toward interpretation itself" (45). For ethnic autobiographers, these crucial points define the ways in which the author conceives of the text as entering the critical dialogues established in ethnic historiographical writing. Bruner notes that the task of the autobiographer consists in uniting the discourses of witness, interpretation, and stance to create a story that has both verisimilitude and negotiability (46). By negotiability, he refers to "whatever makes it

possible for an autobiography to enter into 'the conversation of lives'. In other words: "Are we prepared to accept this life as part of the community of lives that makes up our world?" (Bruner 47). Quoting Hayden White, Bruner affirms the final result of autobiography's historical quality: "one cannot reflect upon the self (radically or otherwise) without an accompanying reflection on the nature of the world in which one exists. And one's reflections on both one's self and one's world cannot be one's own alone: you and your version of the world must be public, recognizable enough to be negotiable in the 'conversation of lives'" (43).

Bruner's analysis ends with a vital proposal: the conversation of lives that is, ultimately, the aim of these life writing exercises. In this context, questions that historian Carolyn Steedman asks about the making and writing of the modern self resound: "Who uses these stories? *How* are they used, and to what ends?" ("Enforced Narratives" 28). One way in which these texts renegotiate our perspective on the past is by obliging us to revisit our notions of memory. Specifically, two tropes—"countermemory" and "postmemory"—may be usefully deployed in this context. The trope of "countermemory"—interrogating "the gaps that always exist between what is told and the telling of it" (Holquist xxviii)—functions in multilayered ways here, to resist the prejudices, erasures, limited perspectives, or inventions typical of official versions of the past. The narrators of these autobiographies function almost as builders who, according to Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, take up "bits and pieces of the identities and narrative forms available and, by disjoining and joining them in excessive ways, create a history of the subject at a precise point in time and space" ("Introduction" 14). Smith and Watson note that this kind of narrator can evaluate as well as interpret the past, creating a "countermemory" that "reframe[s] the present by bringing it into a new alignment of meaning with the past" ("Introduction" 14). Indeed, Edward Said notes the collective nature of a knowledge production oriented toward "presenting alternative narratives" that "forestall the disappearance of the past" and constitute a kind of "countermemory" with its own counterdiscourse that will not allow conscience to look away or fall asleep" (31).

Ultimately, these authors seek to represent a truth that lies beyond documentary evidence, although they might need the documentary

evidence to verify particular experiences. The kind of memory work involved in these autobiographical exercises illustrates what Marianne Hirsch calls “postmemory,” “distinguished from memory by generational distance and from history by deep personal connection” (22). Significantly, her term also signals the nature of this kind of memory, which is constitutive of the process of ethnic life writing: postmemory becomes “a powerful and very particular form of memory precisely because its connection to its object or source is mediated not through recollection but through an imaginative investment and creation” (Hirsch 22). Indeed, this form of invention of memory is characteristic in cultures where issues of heritage operate in the present to develop ethnic communities. We can also discern the process by which various groups use these forms of memory to adapt personal and national origins to changing political and transnational paradigms.

Two essays on Chicano autobiography illustrate these points. A. Gabriel Meléndez’s survey of Chicana auto/biographical strategies—from La Malinche and Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz to Denise Chávez—marks the continuity, presence, and agency of an autobiographical impulse for Chicanas, who, in diverse ways, negotiate the vexed issue of gender, psychological, class, and racial borders. Philip Bracher’s essay on Oscar Zeta Acosta’s *Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo*, traces the form of self-representation that one of the most emblematic figures of the Civil Rights era. Bracher suggests that this autobiography is deceptively simple: by a sophisticated use of narrative perspective, Acosta undermines the reader’s assumptions and revisits possibilities for Chicano identity formation.

But, more specifically, how do these autobiographical texts mediate history? The first manner of historical mediation might simply be the recovery and safeguarding of particular stories from historical erasure. Manuela Constantino and Susanna Egan posit that the autobiographical text functions like “a museum in which the past can be preserved and explained to present generations” (108). The curator of the museum, so to speak, is the author herself, who selects the forms in which memory is resurrected, presented, and preserved. Importantly, the writer contextualizes these stories, which blur the boundaries between historical accounts and personal memories. In the act of writing, the writers bring these hidden or disenfranchised stories back to life, firstly as access to a

valid identity for themselves and then as a usable past for a community. Indeed, "auto/biographers 'here and now' stake their claim on collective identity 'then and there'. As they do so, they transform the relevance of their new belonging precisely because of the cargo that they carry" (Constantino and Egan 110). For this reason, the history re-presented in autobiographies is always a re-enactment of the past, performance rather than spectatorship. The element of performativity in these texts gives accounts of the past specific personality, nuancing negotiations with the present.

The second form of historical mediation involves a more direct dialogue with public histories. By inserting personal stories into official discourse, they contribute to the process and progress of historical revisioning. Because of the valuable emancipatory work done by life writing texts, autobiographies have become authoritative as historical narratives of ethnic communities, multiplying sources of knowledge and memory, altering perspectives on the past and present, opening up possibilities for the future. Importantly, these personal texts prevent historical erasure as they help attain a sense of group identity, which may serve as a basis for political mobilization. As Angelika Köhler posits in her essay, family memoirs by Victor Villaseñor and Sheila and Sandra Ortiz Taylor evoke "an awareness of their cultural roots that can function as a referential framework for their own processes of self-positioning within the contexts of their family histories in particular, but also within those of American cultural history in general." By examining issues of border identity, class divisions, and possibilities for self-representation, Köhler proposes a reading of these texts as important documents that engage the history of an ethnic community.

In Asian American studies, a related paradigm involves autobiographical (as well as fictional) texts about the Japanese internment in the United States and relocation in Canada, an event that finally received recognition and redress from both Governments. Though we cannot contend that the autobiographical writing on the internment was indispensable in achieving this end, we do argue that the texts invalidated many official accounts of the time, disproving the Government's position. Moreover, these texts interpellate history in a more epistemological sense. Ajay Heble, discussing the forms of writing Canadian history, asks telling questions in this context: "who has the institutional

power to determine who speaks (and who doesn't speak) and to determine whose histories count as knowledge and whose get disqualified as unpleasant and inharmonious noise. What's the relation, these texts compel us to ask, between those who teach, produce, or authorize history and those who live it?" (27). Patricia Chu's analysis of Japanese American narratives of "return" invites us to rethink the ways in which these public histories have been narrated. Her comparative reading of Lydia Minatoya's *The Strangeness of Beauty* and the published letters of Mary K. Tomita, a *nisei* stranded in Japan throughout and after the war, raises provocative questions about Japanese American historical positions and the duties of citizens who disagree with their governments in wartime. Her essay discusses Japanese American identity and political agency, highlighting a politically questioning sensibility in this crucial period in Japanese and Japanese American history.

Finally, these texts mediate history by proposing a textual and cultural model for present and future communities. Using Leigh Gilmore's ideas on autobiography, we argue that "autobiographical performances draw on and produce an assembly of theories of the self and self-representation; of personal identity and one's relation to a family, a region, a nation; and of citizenship and a politics of representativeness (and exclusion). How to situate the self within these theories is the task of autobiography, and entails the larger organizational question of the ways selves and milieus ought to be understood in relation to each other" (135). As noted earlier, we must call attention to the ways in which "the cultural work performed in the name of autobiography profoundly concerns representations of citizenship and the nation" because "autobiography's investment in the representative person allies it to the project of lending substance to the national fantasy of belonging" (Gilmore 135). Ihab Hassan's and Edward Said's memoirs are thoughtfully read by Ioana Luca in this context. The titles of their autobiographies—*Out of Egypt* and *Out of Place*, respectively—already signal the national dislocation that these literary critics experience personally and which, in sophisticated ways, will mark, as their autobiographies attest, their intellectual endeavors. In particular, Luca notes how their specific fields of research—postmodernism and theories of orientalism—are closely connected not only with these scholars' personal histories but also with the ways they engage their past.

These ideas critically complicate notion of life writing's historical mediation *in* and *for* the present. Though most of the material in autobiographies is set in the past, we acknowledge the autobiographer's task of selection, ordering, emphasis, and formal choices. We have to discern, in our analysis of the texts, how particular events are selected because of particular meanings they have for the writing present, more perhaps than for the remembered past. Pirjo Ahokas's reading of the challenges to the neoliberal paradigm of postethnicity in recent texts by Alice Walker and Maxine Hong Kingston reminds us of the discursive possibilities of life writing. By demonstrating how *The Way Forward Is with a Broken Heart* and *The Fifth Book of Peace* perform an ongoing process of identification and disidentification with culturally pervasive public discourses, she shows how they generate forms that promote revisions of imposed systems of ethnic identification.

As we highlight the ways in which life writing mediates history, we could ultimately ask ourselves whether because these autobiographies so effectively engage history and oblige us to rethink our forms of access to history, are the boundaries between autobiography and history still valid? Caroline Steedman's preoccupation with this issue provides a usable answer. She asks: "What function does the historical past serve me in *Landscape for a Good Woman*? I am very eager to tell readers, close to the beginning of the book, that what they are about to read is not history. At the end, I want those readers to say that what I have produced is history" (*Past Tenses* 45). The essays in this volume, in diverse ways, support notions of the fusion of forms, discourses, and conversations. Ethnic writers who engage autobiography are increasingly conscious of the discursive possibilities of the form, inspiring them to participate more actively in the dialogues on history and culture that mark our changing world.

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