

Transculturating Auto/Biography

Rosalía Baena's theoretically challenging, analytical volume of essays, explores the diversity of shapes that transcultural life writing takes, demonstrating how it has become one of the most dynamic and productive literary forms of self-inscription and self-representation.

Expanding much of the contemporary criticism on life writing, which tends to centre on content, the essays highlight that reading contemporary forms of life writing from a literary perspective is a rich field of critical intervention that has been overlooked because of recent cultural studies' concerns with material issues. To read life writing as primarily cultural texts undercuts much of its value as a complex dynamic of cultural production, where aesthetic concerns and the choice and manipulation of form serve as signifying aspects to experiences and subjectivities.

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Transculturating Auto/Biography

Forms of Life Writing

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INTRODUCTION

Rosalía Baena

TRANSCULTURING AUTO/BIOGRAPHY

Forms of life writing

To read life writing as primarily cultural texts undercuts much of its value as a complex dynamic of cultural production, where aesthetic concerns and the choice and manipulation of form serve as signifying aspects to experiences and subjectivities. Though life writing must be located within specific historical and social contexts, its engagement with and revision of traditional critical paradigms, forms, and canonical prescriptions strategically rearticulates their subject positionalities and challenges dominant ideologies. It is precisely through our understanding of autobiographical practices as conscious artistic and literary exercises that we fully grasp the extent to which autobiographical narrative is, as Jens Brockmeir argues, such a powerful symbolic form and a genre of identity construction (277).

In general, the contributions in this volume deal with different ways of negotiating "transculturality." The term "transculturation" has been lately expanded from the earlier uses of Fernando Ortiz and Mary Louis Pratt, in a number of different disciplines, to refer loosely to transnational or cross-cultural encounters; however, in this later context it has not been properly defined. Specifically, I privilege the term "transcultural," which I use as Janice Kulyk Keefer does, to refer to the manner in which the dominant culture "becomes part of a larger, looser structure within which literary texts which foreground the experience of 'minority' as opposed to 'dominant' groups both present themselves and are received as representative, even paradigmatic forms for an entire social formation, and not just for the ethnic or racial group with which the text's author is associated" (Keefer, 1993: 265). Keefer prefers "transcultural" to "multicultural" since the latter can refer to the nature of

a social formation, but not to that of a literary work because "what is important in transcultural writing is the circulation and exchange of ideas, energies, vision between different ethnocultural groups as well as between 'center' and 'margin,' 'dominant' and 'minority' groups" (265). Consequently, I do not take transcultural as a fixed principle or static perspective, or as referring to a closed group of texts but rather as a term that accommodates a series of multiple interrelated dynamics of the formal negotiation of cultural perspectives. The term thus applies itself to the renewed manner of engagement that arises from new forms of perceiving experience, and to the dynamic nature of the resulting narratives stemming from the contact zones produced in the cross-cultural encounters.

In this book, the term resonates on two levels: the level of ethnic/multicultural/post colonial writing, where there is an intersection between cultural affiliations and processes of self-perception and self-representation; and the level of form, such that these examples of life writing "transculturally" challenge traditional (normative) ways of inscribing autobiography. All the essays have a dialogue with this issue, and offer theories of versions of "transculturality" as it is negotiated in life writing. This process of "transculturating" may be understood within the context of how contemporary autobiography is moving away from traditional patterns. If, as Janet Gunn has noted, autobiography is not conceived as "the private act of self-writing" but as "the cultural act of the self reading" (Gunn, 1982: 8), then what is at stake in autobiographical discourse is not a question of the subject's authentic "I," but a question of the subject's location in the world through an active interpretation of experiences that one calls one's own in particular "worldly" contexts (Gunn, 1982: 23), that is to say, a willful positioning of oneself in history and culture. In this regard, ethnic and immigrant autobiographies contribute to the recognition of the self not as a unified or stable entity, but rather as fragmented, provisional, multiple, in process. As Betty Bergland argues, "if we acknowledge that human beings are positioned in multiple and contradictory discourses, then the effect of that multiplicity shapes the subject" (Bergland, 1984: 134–35). As both authors and protagonists of these visual and written texts, they inhabit different cultures, influencing and being influenced by a process of transculturation. The manner in which transcultural writers appropriate and subvert traditional literary genres in order to attend to particular subjectivities makes a detailed study of the strategies being employed by these writers exigent. Transcultural engagements with and revision of traditional literary genres strategically rearticulate subject positionalities and challenge dominant ideologies. Susanna Egan has pointed out that we need to critically address the following question: "How do autobiographers co-opt and adapt the genres that express this fraught moment of in-between?" (Egan, 1999: 13).

This work responds to that critical challenge. The eight original essays offer innovative readings of life writing texts that stress the constructedness and variety of the autobiographical text as well as the conscious strategies different transcultural writers employ. Each essay views autobiography as a self-representational practice complexly situated within cultures and thus located between the constructed references of artistic, literary, and critical contexts. Thus, the range of texts – "text" understood in its widest sense to mean a cultural product, from a book to film to painting – analyzed in this work offer an interesting picture of the techniques, practices and cultures of autobiography. One of the strengths of the book lies

precisely in the variety of both generic and cultural approaches discussed from the critical perspective of autobiographical self-representations – films, paintings, travel writings, essays, short stories, literary biographies, immigrant writing – which attest to the significant amount of genre crossing in postmodern literary life. In their diversity and complexity, such autobiographical acts call for a nuanced theorizing of the autobiographical.

The title of the work – “Forms of Life Writing” – tries to point to the expansion of the possibilities of how we understand the inscription of autobiography. We are at a point in the development of the autobiography where the hybrid possibilities of life writing can and should be explored. Therefore, for readers of *Prose Studies* who expect to find traditional non-fictional prose, we offer a glimpse into the new ways and innovative approaches offered by “non-fictionality.” Today, non-fictional prose is a fertile ground that blends fruitfully with new ways and forms, and, in this regard, the purpose of some of the contributions is to investigate the place where non-fictional prose merges with visual prose.

The blurring of the traditional frontiers of genre can best be understood within the wider context of reflexivity that characterizes the contemporary use of autobiographical modes, thus resulting in a kind of meta-criticism of autobiographical practices. Marlene Kadar posits that life writing “may represent both a genre and a critical practice” (Kadar, 1992: 3); it is no longer a fixed term, but rather a term in flux as it moves from considerations of genre to considerations of critical practice. Kadar elaborates on the cultural possibilities enacted when we consider life writing a critical practice that encourages the reader to develop and foster his/her own self-consciousness to humanize and make the self-in-the-writing less abstract (Kadar, 1992: 12). We are thus required to think of the autobiographical not as a rigid critical category, but rather as a mode, a critical perspective, a way of reading that actually emphasizes the agency of the reader as someone who, as Gillian Whitlock argues, can make “a connected reading across autobiographies possible, thus pulling at the loose threads of autobiography, and use them to make sutures between, across and among links [...] to ultimately use criticism and reading as a means of suggesting new ways of thinking” (Whitlock, 2000: 203–204).

The work opens with William Boelhower’s essay, “Shifting Forms of Sovereignty: Immigrant Parents and Ethnic Autobiographers.” Boelhower analyzes the cultural work enacted by immigrant autobiographies, signaling how “the defining mark of immigrant autobiographical practice lies in its attempt to hold the juxtaposed cultures and countries together not only as part of a sequence but also as the natural source of comparison, contrast, and memory.” Narratives like *Kaffir Boy in America*, *Lost in Translation*, *Hunger for Memory*, Li-Young Lee’s *The Winged Seed*, and Edward Rivera’s *Family Installments* are structured around a wager, and it is this sovereign moment, often but not always exhibited in narrative form, that occasions the split in these texts. Boelhower develops concepts such as narrative sovereignty, the notion of sacrifice, the gift economy, ethnopathy, and so forth, in order to understand further ethnic autobiographical semiosis. The immigrant experience in the United States is also analyzed in “The Hungry Self: The Politics of Food in Italian American Women’s Autobiographies,” where Alison Goeller examines the various ways Italian American women have used images of food – including descriptions of its preparation and consumption – in autobiographical discourse: “As an ethnic

marker and a means of cultural preservation, as a site of creativity and a source of power as well as a source of shame and frustration, food and the activities connected to it – including the refusal to cook as well as to eat – ultimately serve as sites of longing and desire, of self-identity, as symbols for the hungry self longing to feed and nourish its soul.”

In addition to textual modes of autobiography, visual modes are increasingly being recognized as complex autobiographical acts. In investigating the intersection of regimes of visibility and textuality, three of the contributions in this book show how linguistic and visual media are entities with “semiotically comparable narrative functions [...]. Both are texts that can tell a story [...], both kinds of text not just depict, express, or reflect reality, but evoke reality” (Brockmeier, 2001: 277). These essays, which negotiate the manner in which artists privilege the visual in their acts of self-inscription, thus highlight the performative potential of the autobiographical act itself. Critics Davis, Rajan and Fischer-Hornung contemplate the possibilities of visual elements in the autobiographical process as they focus on painting, comics as autobiographical exercises, as well as on reading film as autobiography, stressing the ways writers appropriate and expand aesthetic modes to limn complex creatively transcultural concerns. Gita Rajan analyzes the self-portrait series of Siona Benjamin, Annu Palakunnathu Matthew, and Ambreen Butt, showing how these artists blend aspects of American art with several other traditions, such as the Indian miniature, in their representation of their artistic and transcultural selves. Moreover, it is the strong narrative quality of the paintings what makes them a valid and engaging experiment with life writing. By applying the term *autography* to their works, Rajan shows how each artist confidently inserts her racialized and transcultured body into a contemporary, American art scene, emphasizing fluidity and community to represent the multiplicity of cultures and meanings without evacuating presence. Furthermore, the material presence of photographs and pictures in the essay will make the “connected reading” mentioned above possible for the reader.

The ubiquity of the autobiographical, as Smith and Watson put it (2002, 5), is highlighted in Rocío G. Davis’s essay on comics as autobiography. Davis’s analysis of Marjane Satrapi’s *Persepolis* shows how the juxtaposition of image and words constitutive of graphic narratives yields a new artistic, literary, and creative experience – a revised aesthetic. As a result, Davis proves how a significant challenge to the prescriptive paradigms of autobiographical writing comes precisely through genre. In a sense, reading Satrapi’s memoir of her childhood in Iran involves asking pressing questions about the act of construction (or reconstruction) of the self-in-narrative. Her multilayered strategy serves as a highly effective vehicle for two fundamental concerns of transcultural self-inscription: the performance of selfhood and how meaning itself evolves. Davis reads Satrapi’s transcultural graphic autobiography as a literary and cultural site for the negotiation and management of the memory of childhood perceptions of and positioning in family, history, politics, and religion.

Interestingly, innovation in experimental film has often been closely related to autobiographical modes. Russian American Maya Deren’s performance of subjectivity is the stuff her art is made of. Dorothea Fischer-Hornung explores how Deren’s use of experimental film technique assures that her films are simultaneously depersonalized and archetypal in filmic effect: “Her particular emphasis on ritualized form and archetypal content as well as her manipulation of filmic time and space, move her films away from

individualized narrative. Her aesthetics, therefore, hover liminally between individualized autobiographical performance and universalized myth." Deren's denial of the autobiographical in her work reveals interesting issues of the nature of the autobiographical act. In *Anagram of Ideas on Art, Form and Film* (1946), her manifesto on film theory, Deren elaborates her theories of filmic horizontal motion (time) and vertical elements (space). In this text she clearly positions herself as a visual poet and an artist. However, being simultaneously producer, actor, editor and director, Maya Deren is both the image and the image-maker, the viewer and the viewed subject. Her multiple positions in her art demonstrate the potential of the autobiographical genre as a profoundly aesthetic choice, as well as the paradoxical nature of the autobiographical act. In this context, Fischer-Hornung argues that Deren's use of her own body as materialized image, her filmic structuring of memory, her interest in altered states of consciousness such as trance and possession, as well as her utilization of dance-like movement and camera work position her work at the interstices of the individual and the community in a ritualized performance of her life as archetype. So, the specific autobiographical and auto-ethnographic traces in her films as well as her film theory make it possible to locate her work as a form of deep-structured life writing transposed into a visual medium.

The next three essays demonstrate the flexibility of the idea of "life writing" and show how other literary genres may be harnessed as autobiographical exercises. The essays read specific narrative genres – travel writing, short story, literary biography – as ways of both structuring narrative and formulating renewed manners of expressing processes of self-formation. Danielle Schaub deals with a collection of autobiographical stories which record Fredelle Brusser Maynard's alienation as a Jew in small Canadian prairie towns during the Depression. Schaub shows how Maynard's interconnected stories helped her reach self knowledge as a transcultural subject. Set in a social and historical context, her fanciful fictional embroideries on the stern tissue of her life story offer different versions of the truth; their tentativeness comes to the fore as *The Tree of Life*, the sequel to *Kaisins and Almonds*, questions, or rather enriches it by presenting yet another version. Both versions lead Maynard "to confront the mystery that haunts us all: Who am I?", the focus of her quest narrowing down to a more specific question: "What is it, to be a Jew?" This essay analyzes how Maynard's autobiographical stories reveal a need to write her life and read it for understanding.

Travel writing, though often presented as a genre distinct from life writing, can in fact be perceived under the lens of the autobiographical critical perspective, providing a renewed appreciation of the journey enacted. Rita Monticelli explores travel literature as a genre constructed through a process of translations and intertextual movements. Within this theoretical framework, she analyzes Anna Jameson's writings as emblematic of a process directed towards women's education and emancipation in an international, trans-European dimension. Here, the multiply located subject dwells in different cultural spaces and the author, narrator and protagonist, establishes herself as cultural interpreter of the places visited, even as she develops the account of her life in shifting contexts. Another attempt to show the variety and the scope of auto/biographical practices and forms is Ana Beatriz Delgado's "Paradigms of Canadian Literary Biography: Who Will Write Our History?" Delgado posits the Canadian literary biography as a unique combination of

history, individual experience, and literary criticism, that supports the enactment of a literary history that – consciously or not – seeks to define the markers of Canadian identity. She proposes the need to engage in a more inclusive and comprehensive reading of literary biographies, of writers from early and recent literary traditions, as a strategy for examining the forces that made a particular national literature possible, with all its peculiarities and specificities. More than just a story of a writer's life and analysis of his or her work, a literary biography necessarily reformulates the time and critical context of the writer's production, and reveals the dialogue with culture, nation, and history that writers are involved in, highlighting the manner in which tradition is itself formed and revised.

In conclusion, these essays make us aware of the proliferating sites of the autobiographical (Smith and Watson, 2002: 5). The specific critical studies focus on the diversity of forms that transcultural life writing is taking and suggests new ways of reading these increasingly complex texts. Ultimately, to analyze how authors engage differently with the autobiographical mode is to ask questions about the very nature and textures of narratives and the ways that these function in processes of self-formation and self-representation.

Note

1. We use the term "life writing" as an overarching term which refers to a variety of non-fictional modes of writing that claim to engage the shaping of someone's life (Smith and Watson, 2001: 197). For a longer discussion of the term, see Kadar (1992).

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