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ORCID# 0000-0002-7730-6601

An Introduction to the Life Writing Issue

S. Bilge Mutluay Çetintaş

How vain it is to sit down to write
when you have not stood up to live.
Methinks that the moment my legs begin to move,
my thoughts begin to flow…
Henry David Thoreau
Journal, August 19, 1851

Since the beginning of the first settlements in America, life narratives have been created in various forms and have become part of American letters although the academic study of such narratives was scarce until the second half of the twentieth century. American life narratives have benefitted from this long tradition starting with the diaries and journals kept by Pilgrims and Puritans, and captivity narratives, such as Mary Rowlandson's *The Sovereignty and Goodness of God: Being a Narrative of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson* (1682), to more canonized life writings such as Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography* (1791). After the 1960s there was an explosion in the production and reception of life narratives, and clusters of multitude genres appeared, partially due to the conceptions of broadening civil liberties and other related public concerns. African American, Native American, Asian American, Latino and Chicano life writing, and LGBTQIA+ memoirs were the result of marginalized groups claiming agency in defining their life experiences and identities outside dominant discourses. Meanwhile other concerns and platforms of expression gave rise to disability narratives, celebrity narratives, food memoirs, ecological narratives, survivor narratives, graphic memoirs, and online lives, to name a few.

In their seminal book *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for*

Interpreting Life Narratives (2010), Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson point out that "autobiography" refers to the traditional western mode of life writing that emerged during the Enlightenment in the late eighteenth century. Unfairly discrediting other life narrating forms, autobiography refers to the traditional representative self-writing of sovereign individuals. Thus, Smith and Watson prefer "life writing" or "life narratives" as an all-inclusive umbrella term instead of "autobiography," or the more flexible term "memoir" to include neglected as well as emerging forms.

The second half of the twentieth century brought new tools to the criticism of life narratives. The emphasis on the inadequacies and limitations of language as well as its constant deferral in determining meanings shook the foundations of a logocentric worldview with poststructuralist approaches, leading to questioning speech acts of all kinds. Thus, the idea of who is speaking in life narratives and with what kind of agency became crucial in understanding the position of the narrative voice. Autobiographical acts necessitate situating the narrator's and the reader's positions in what Philippe Lejune terms the "autobiographical pact," as he suggests that "autobiography is characterized: it is as much a way of reading as a kind of writing, it is an historically variable: *contractual product*" (220; emphasis in original). While defining the distinctions between autobiography, biography, and fiction, Lejune includes the intended and actual readers in the meaning-making process of autobiographical writings by positioning the linguistic "I" to clarify his points. The reader, the narrator, and the publisher all have a role in determining the autobiographical contract.

Besides determining who is speaking and reading—and without mentioning the distinctions between the narrating, the narrated and ideological "I"s—the narrator's historical presence in a certain time frame and their social conditions are also among the subjects of concern in life narratives. Self-referential narratives can be used to make statements on a number of social and cultural issues. Judith Butler has situated agency as "performativity" of subjectivity, but, in her later works, she recognizes the self as being embedded in social conditions. In *Giving An Account of Oneself*, she says, "The norms by which I recognize another or, indeed, myself are not mine alone. They function to the extent that they are social, exceeding every dyadic exchange they condition" (24). The readiness to understand oneself in the situation of the other, in other words, to be able to walk in another

person's shoes, while realizing one's own vulnerability, opens up the question of human rights, among other social and political concerns.

Gillian Whitlock is also interested in how texts are implicated in relationships. Texts can become conduits for activism or help to change conventions of civil and political rights. Whitlock maintains that "Autobiography circulates as 'soft weapon.' It can personalize and humanize categories of people whose experiences are frequently unseen and unheard . . . it is a 'soft' weapon because it is easily co-opted into propaganda" (3). She points to the fact that life narratives can be used as manipulative tools in the public sphere but they certainly play a role in creating a space for discussions on challenging subjects, and they can trigger conversations and interactions on a multitude of topics. Thus, life narratives can work towards social action or become sites of agency together with paratextual apparatuses and other agents who play a role in commodifying the narrative.

The selections in this issue represent the different genre examples of life narratives. Although it is not possible to pinpoint all autobiographical forms in this selection, five genres are covered. The characteristics of these genres are delineated in the space where the autobiographical subject is located and, in some instances, particular genres are used in conjunction with other genres. Arranged by alphabetical order of last names of the contributors, autohagiography, bibliomemoir, illness narrative, autofiction and gastography genres are exemplified through the five articles in this issue.

Mert Deniz's article covers life writings that are historically the earliest ones in this issue. By concentrating on the endeavors of two American Protestant missionaries, Levi Parsons and Pliny Fisk, Deniz traces their mission to the Middle East, to the land ruled by Ottomans in the early nineteenth century. The letters and papers of these missionaries were edited and published posthumously. Their autohagiographies, the biographical writings that "[praise] the life as exemplary, making the person a 'saint'" (Smith and Watson 260), become testaments to American religious and cultural ideals of the time and how life writers viewed themselves and the rest of the world, often coupled with a keen sense of us versus them. The life writings also demonstrate the ulterior motives and prejudices of their narrators and editors who compiled their texts. Deniz also presents certain historical and cultural facts from the era and its geographical spaces, which

clarify the information gaps and absences in these accounts. These chronicles, nevertheless, testify to the dominant discourses of the time.

Written by Mariya Doğan, the second article in this issue is about Karla Holloway's bibliomemoir, *BookMarks: Reading in Black and White*. Defined by Joyce Carol Oates in 2014, a bibliomemoir is "a subspecies of literature combining criticism and biography with the intimate tone of an autobiography" (qtd. in Shuttleworth). Holloway covers a large range of reading practices from the African American libraries of the early twentieth century to the selections of the Oprah Winfrey Book Club. Thus, *Bookmarks* portrays the African American communities' dynamic interaction with books and a personal reflection on whether or not reading is a redemptive act. According to Holloway, "the matter of books and reading marks the experience of Black folk in a way that is deeply political and resonantly personal" (7). Holloway narrates the reading habits of her subjects mixed with memories related to the members of her family, particularly her son whom she strives to save through offering him books during his incarceration. Thus, *Bookmarks* becomes "a life told in terms of books read" (Lerer 337), and readers' self-construction is also addressed through the booklists given in the narrative.

Aylin Pekanık focuses on Lauren Slater's *Lying: A Metaphorical Memoir* as a postmodern illness memoir and compares the life writing to traditional illness narratives. For postmodern and postcolonial critics, the "I" in self-representation is far from the coherent and unified essentialist individual of autobiographies. The self is a fragmented entity, created through the limitations of language and positioned in multiple discourses. Leigh Gilmore observes the relationship between truth-telling and agency as the core of all autobiographical narrations, complicated further by ideology, gender, identity, and authority. She views autobiographical acts as rooted in conventions and power relations by evoking Foucault's conception of power, stating that self-referential narratives create "a cultural and discursive site of truth production in relation to the disciplinary boundary of punishment" (59). Thus, the unreliable narrator of *Lying* becomes the very definition of the postmodern subject who constantly deconstructs her identity through lies and metaphors, making it impossible for the reader to pin established conventions to the narrative.

Ana Kocić Stanković's article is on Jimmy Santiago Baca's *American Orphan*. *American Orphan* is classified under a novel but

since the narrator's journey follows and traces Jimmy Santiago Baca's life story, the work could also be classified under life writing. The experiences and difficulties an immigrant faces in the adopted land is more or less shared by the other members of the immigrant community, and this characteristic has been the defining feature of ethnic life narratives, in this case the Chicanos'. Such works also carry qualities of a *Bildungsroman*, since the story line follows the development of an individual in discovering her/his social role in public life. Baca is very much aware of his narrator's representative stance, and Stanković finds connections with other American literary personas or characters to remark on the collectivity of the American immigrant experience. The connections between Baca's text and other well-known American literary writers and their works range from Henry David Thoreau's *Walden*, to Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, and F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*.

These canonized American classics also carry connections to life writings, which are similar to Baca's text. Smith and Watson classify such texts as "autofiction" since in these narratives, it is impossible to fully distinguish life writing and fiction from each other. After all, all writings are constructed, and the boundary between the "actual" and "created" characters is blurred even without questioning the nature of "reality." Since establishing a pure definitive truth is not possible, and referential "real" cannot be written, autofiction employs autobiographical and fictional tropes interchangeably and often playfully (Smith and Watson 259-60). This aspect is reminiscent of the beginning of Lynda Barry's graphic novel, *One! Hundred! Demons!* when the drawing/narrating avatar ponders upon a metafictional question before drawing and writing her experiences. While trying to gather her thoughts on organization, her speech balloons in two frames read: "Is it autobiography if parts of it are not true? Is it fiction if parts of it are?" (7), which points to the difficulty of genre classifications among questions of authenticity related to the construction of life narratives. As Paul Eakin observes "The presence of fiction in autobiography . . . tends to makes us uneasy, for we instinctively feel that autobiography is—or ought to be—precisely not fiction" (9).

In the final article of this issue, Gül Varlı Karaarslan writes about Kwame Onwuachi's food memoir, *Notes of a Young Black Chef*. Karaaslan prefers to use the umbrella term "memoir," partially because it is used as the subtitle although the narration can be classified under

"gastography," or "foodoir" where the "story of the self is closely linked to the production, preparation, and/or consumption of food," and the focus of life writing is on food culture (Smith and Watson 271). Food is a life-giving force and can be used as a symbol connecting individuals and cultures. Food memoirs seem to follow a certain linear pattern, such as observing cooking and learning from a family member/ guru figure, experimenting, creating and reaching a certain level of success. In this respect, similar to Baca's *American Orphan*, Kwame Onwuachi's memoir carries the qualities of a *Bildungsroman* since it also traces Onwuachi's journey of becoming a respectable chef and being able to create a space for himself in the area of fine-dining that was previously denied to chefs of color in the white, hegemonic world.

In whatever form they may appear, life narratives continue to be part of the cultural scene an increasing and overwhelming scale. The recent global (semi)forced pandemic lockdowns have augmented the sharing and observing of daily life. Trying out recipes, body training, playing instruments, singing, or demonstrating various hobbies on web-based platforms have become statements of existence or acts of self-assertion. In response to destabilized and unsafe public spheres, domestic enclosures have transformed into permanent sites of renewed interest in various autobiographical acts.

The selections in this *JAST* issue could have been numerous considering the renewed "autobiographical turn" in the global arena where most people have online lives. Future *JAST* issues will certainly showcase analyses of different American life narrative genres. After all, despite the awareness on the retrospective gaze and construction involved in the process of creating life narratives, these stories, with their claim to authenticity, have been captivating and fascinating readers for centuries and functioning as "soft weapons."

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