

INTRODUCTION

Three decades have passed now since the vast contribution of theories on women's autobiography began to penetrate the, until then, traditionally male-oriented field of autobiographical criticism. Looking over the debates generated by feminist scholars in that relatively short span of time, the overall impression is that a long and fruitful journey has been accomplished: from the early days, when the emphasis was on discovering the differences between male and female texts, we have arrived at the present day, when the male/female dichotomy has been dismantled and gender is understood from different perspectives in the analysis of life writing. Certainly, all the disciplines which deal with life writing and gender have one point in common: the never ending discussion of the concepts developed in the analyses. The effort behind those discussions seems to be directed towards constructing a more inclusive common ground in which all subjects, all categories, all the ways of reflecting selves/subjects/identities can find expression. The field of life writing could be seen, then, as a receptively open one, which does not restrict itself to the claustrophobic definition of genre in the singular. Both in the practice and in the theory of life writing it seems that more often than not, words become insufficient; they are not precise enough to mean all that we want to say when referring to ourselves or to others' selves. This explains not only the constant revision of concepts, but also the reason why the written word is not the only medium used to portray lives, and the recourse to oral and visual forms has come to enrich the genre(s) with photography, painting, film, video, quilts, music, web sites and blogs, to mention but a few.

In the 1990's, the emphasis that postmodern and postcolonial theories gave to the many differences among subjects was reflected in women's autobiographical criticism, resulting in the revision of the very concept of "autobiography"; for, as Laura Marcus explained in 1994, "'autobiography' as conventionally defined is often judged to be a limited and inappropriate means of representing (...) non-hegemonic subjectivities and identities" (223). In the search for more appropriate and inclusive concepts Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, in *Reading Autobiography:*



A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives (2001), have finally distinguished between life writing, life narrative, and autobiography, agreeing that *autobiography* is a Western, canonical term “that has been vigorously challenged in the wake of postmodern and postcolonial critiques of the Enlightenment subject” (3). For them, *life writing* can be understood as a general term “for writing of diverse kinds that takes a life as its subject,” be it biographical, novelistic, historical, or an explicit self-reference to the writer, whereas *life narrative* would be a narrower term “that includes many kinds of self-referential writing, including autobiography” (3).

Furthermore, in her article “Resisting Autobiography: Out-Law Genres and Transnational Feminist Subjects” (1992), Caren Kaplan, evoking Derrida’s essay “The Law of Genre,” made reference to the “critical anxiety” (117) provoked by the “conditions and limits” of being enclosed in a genre. She suggested, therefore, thinking in terms of “*out-law*” genres, which “often break most obvious rules of genre” (119), and which, in her opinion, were at that moment mixing two conventionally “unmixable” elements: “autobiography criticism and autobiography as thing itself” (119). Her analysis of these alternative genres included “prison memoir, testimonial literature, ethnographic writing, ‘biomythography,’ ‘cultural autobiography,’ and ‘regulative psychobiography’” (119), in an attempt to challenge the restrictive conventions of autobiography and to propose that Western feminist criticism move into “transnational coalition work” (135). Some examples illustrate the plurality of genres specifically concerned with feminism which have been offered throughout these decades: Domna C. Stanton proposed as early as 1984 the use of “autogynography”, Leigh Gilmore would later put forward the more genre-transgressor word “autobiographics” (1994), and Jeanne Perreault suggested the term “autography” in 1995. These, amongst many other terms, were included in the list of fifty-two genres—not exclusively gender-oriented—of life narrative proposed by Smith and Watson in 2001 (*Reading* 183-207). And the list is continually growing.

In recent decades, concepts such as “woman,” “experience,” “agency,” or “truth” have been revised by feminist theories of autobiography, which have also focused on the body “as a site of cultural inscription and practices of embodiment” (Smith and Watson, *Reading* 134). It was also in the 1990’s that “the trouble” with gender and the importance of bodies and sexualities were put forward by the philosopher Judith Butler, and since then not only life writing, but many theoretical disciplines in the Humanities, have come to a broader understanding of sex, gender and sexuality. Butler’s concept of “performativity,” that “reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names” (120) has proved to be a helpful tool which has enabled feminism to get rid of the burden of essentialism; and in the particular case of life narrative it has provided “a vocabulary for describing the complexities of the relationship of regulatory discourses of identity and material bodies, as well as autobiographical agency” (Smith and Watson, *Reading* 143).

This special issue of the *Revista Canaria de Estudios Ingleses* offers some examples of the different concepts and perspectives which can be applied to texts dealing with written lives. The first essay discusses the state of contemporary criticism as regards life narratives and feminism; it presents three of the most important



theoretical concepts to be used in the analysis of autobiographical acts and practices —amongst them “performativity,” shows how they intersect with gendered positionalities and relations, and applies them to six domains of women’s life narrative. The second essay focuses on one of the genres of life narrative, that of the personal essay, offering an analysis of four recent books by two women and two men from different nationalities: Spaniard Rosa Montero (*La loca de la casa*), Canadian Margaret Atwood (*Negotiating with the Dead: A Writer on Writing*), Mexican-American Richard Rodriguez (*Brown: The Last Discovery of America*) and European-born, Jewish-American George Steiner (*Errata: An Examined Life*); both gender and genre issues are discussed in this transnational comparative analysis. The following two essays deal with contemporary texts whose subjects do not belong to the Western mainstream. One is the analysis of *Meatless Days*, the book published in 1989 by Pakistani writer Sara Suleri; the reflections on the private and public lives of the author and the food imagery she uses are discussed, together with the different classifications of the text as autobiography, memoir or fiction. The other essay concentrates on Chicano writer Oscar Zeta Acosta’s novel, *The Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo*, first published in 1972; the main focus of analysis is on the construction of masculinity in the text, but issues having to do with ethnicity are also discussed, whilst the text is described as “fictionalized autobiography.” The two remaining essays focus on the lives of women born in the 18th and 19th centuries. The biographies of three British actresses of the early years of the eighteenth century are analyzed in the first essay —the only one in the present issue which discusses that mode of life writing; the author reflects on the evaluation and judgement of the sexuality and virtue of these actresses, contending that the authors of those biographies made an effort to explain and to forgive their subjects’ public and private behaviours. The final essay offers an analysis of the autobiographies of two women at the turn of the nineteenth century connected to the world of art in the wake of the modernist period: Margaret Anderson and Isadora Duncan; the focus of the analysis is on their relationship to the spaces they inhabited, a reflection of the distancing themselves from domesticity which some women of their time were able to achieve.

With the first decade of the 21st century coming to an end, and the general feeling that, for better or for worse, the world is entering a “New Era,” different subjects and subjectivities will undoubtedly come to the fore. The dismantled global economic order, together with the latest political changes in the United States, will necessarily be reflected in the texts produced in the various disciplines around the globe —such is still the influence of the Western world. The arrival of Barack H. Obama to office awakens hopes and expectations regarding, amongst other things, the reorganization of what now appears to be an obsolete Capitalist system with its shattered economy and its destructive consequences such as global warming. Indeed, the recently elected president of the most powerful nation in the world is an indisputable example of a new kind of subject. Unfortunately, the story of the not-so-long-ago disenfranchised subject who has become such a powerful figure may not turn out to be the pattern for the writing of lives in the near future. We will probably have to witness multiple aspects of violence, both in the public and pri-



vate sphere, due to the personal sense of failure provoked by, among many other circumstances, this economic crisis and the intricacies of political systems which do not take into consideration the individual. Nevertheless, it is reassuring to think that the story of the lives of those new—and in most cases disempowered—emerging subjects might reflect an upcoming new order in which gender, race, class, experience, performativity, positionality, relationality, and contradiction, among other concepts, will break new ground and uncover possible new genres.

Finally, we would like to take the opportunity to say how honoured we feel to have among our contributors scholars of international renown who have been willing to participate in this special issue, and we would like to thank them for the cordiality, generosity, and patience they have shown throughout the process of edition. Additionally, we would also like to express our gratitude to Dr. Ann MacLaren, who has generously helped us in the process of correction and edition of the present issue.

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