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Autobiography and Other Life Narratives

by Marijke Huisman

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FULL ARTICLE

Introduction

The Oxford English Dictionary defines “autobiography” as “an account of a person’s life given by himself or herself, esp. one published in book form” (OED Online 2020). But not all accounts of lives in book form are labeled as such. Former slave Olaudah Equiano, for example, published the book of his life as *The Interesting Narrative of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African. Written by Himself* (1789). In the late eighteenth century, the new word “autobiography” was not common. An anonymous critic of the *Monthly Review* hesitated to use it in 1797: “The next dissertation concerns Diaries, and Self-biography. We are doubtful whether the latter word be legitimate: it is not very usual in English to employ hybrid words partly Saxon and partly Greek: yet autobiography would have seemed pedantic” (W. Taylor quoted in OED Online 2020).

Pompous or not, terms such as “self-biography” and “autobiography” entered European languages from the late eighteenth century onward (Folkenflik 1993: 1–20). Since then, older “lives” or “memoirs” have been reframed as “autobiography” and a remarkably broad range of people have written their own life stories—men and women, Black and white, from all ranks of society. For this reason, autobiographical writing is considered as one of the most democratic forms of writing (Couser 2012: 26). In the first half of the twentieth century, however, early autobiography scholarship defined the genre in rather exclusive terms. Based on criteria such as the quality of writing, the level of subjective introspection, and of individualism, “autobiography” was elevated into a literary genre and separated from other, lesser-valued types of writing for instance “biography,” “memoir,” “diary,” and “letter.” Toward the end of the century, and for different reasons, alternative, more inclusive concepts were introduced—for instance “ego documents” or “Selbstzeugnisse” in Dutch and German or, in English, “auto/biography” and “life writing.”

In the *Encyclopedia of Life Writing: Autobiographical and Biographical Forms* (2001), editor Margaretta Jolly explained that “life writing” was chosen as an umbrella term “because of its openness and inclusiveness across genres, and because it encompasses the writing of one’s own or another’s life,” even “originating outside of the written form, including testimony, artefacts, reminiscence, personal narrative, visual arts, photograph, film, oral history, and so forth” (2001: ix). In a similar effort for openness and inclusion, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, in their leading textbook *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives* (2001: 3), understand “life writing” as a “general term for writing of diverse kinds that take a

life as its subject." Leaving biographical forms aside, this contribution will focus on the ways in which historians have dealt with "life narratives," that is: the broad range of autobiographical narratives expressed in multiple media.

Background/Context

Autobiography and history are intimately connected. Recounting the story of their lives, autobiographers practice history by definition and it is not uncommon for autobiographers to use sources such as diaries and calendars—even though their narratives are ultimately based in the subjects' memories. Traces of autobiographical writing can be observed in historical writing too, albeit often hidden in prefaces and acknowledgements at present. Early historians such as Herodotus and Thucydides, however, integrated firsthand experiences into their historical accounts, just like many chroniclers did later. This lack of distance between subject and object was not considered a problem for centuries, on the contrary. Cardinal de Retz's *Memoirs* (1717), for instance, were appreciated as one of the best histories of France under Louis XIV for ages (Popkin 2005: 14–15). In the mid-nineteenth century a Dutch critic even welcomed *The Wonderful Adventures of Mrs Seacole in Many Lands* (1857), the life narrative of a Jamaican-Scottish woman who tended to British soldiers during the Crimean War, into the ranks of great historians' works (Huisman 2011: 387).

The intimate relation between history and autobiography was complicated in the process of historians' professionalization in the course of the nineteenth century. For one, the transformation of history-writing into an academic discipline went hand in hand with a conception of historians as detached outsiders who, as trained professionals, methodically studied and evaluated archival sources to establish an objective truth about the past. In other words, first-person narratives by engaged and unskilled authors no longer counted as proper historiography. Although, such documents could serve as primary sources. Following the new ethos of "bloss zeigen, wie es eigentlich gewesen," leading historians such as Leopold von Ranke and his contemporaries used a wide range of sources, including personal documents, for instance autobiographies or memoirs, diaries, and letters.

But over time, autobiographical sources were increasingly criticized as subjective, partial, mendacious, or downright fictional and deemed incompatible to the professional historian's quest for truth. British historian G.P. Gooch, for example, disqualified all political memoirs for its propagandic, truth-distorting nature in the 1930s (quoted in Mascuch et al. 2016: 16). In the 1940s, Dutch historian Jan Romein advised even biographers to leave their subjects' autobiographies aside, because "those most dangerous of all sources" were "misleading to an extent that amazes one who is not aware" (1946: 204). The historical value of life narratives further declined in the postwar era, when these dangerous sources became pointless too. Influenced by Marxist interests in the material base and/or Annales-historian Fernand Braudel's call to move beyond man-made surface events and dig into deeper temporal layers, academic fashions such as cliometrics drove historians into research on long-term structural developments in the socio-economic sphere—often using quantitative approaches and methods from the social sciences. In this a conception of "history," the single human agent and his—let alone: her—life narrative was simply redundant.

Life narratives were of some interest in the field of cultural history, at the margins of the historical discipline. The outstanding figure here is Georg Misch, a German philosopher and historian of ideas who, in 1907, published the first volume of a massive but unfinished *Die Geschichte der Autobiographie*. Inspired by the hermeneutic philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey, his teacher and father-in-law, Misch set out to study the culture of individuality in Europe. He understood autobiography, a self-written account of a life, as a sign of individualism and contended that such narratives did not develop until the late Middle Ages or Renaissance. Formulating his thesis, Misch built on the work of cultural historian Jacob Burckhardt who, in 1860, had argued that only Renaissance culture in Italy had lifted a medieval “veil” that was “woven of faith, illusion and childish prepossession” and awakened man as “a spiritual individual” who “recognized himself as such” (1958: 143; emphasis in the original) and produced autobiographies such as *Vita* by the Florentine sculptor Benvenuto Cellini (1500–1571).

Misch’s interest in autobiography was not shared by other historians, but his thesis was continued by Georges Gusdorf in the 1950s. The French philosopher, too, saw autobiography emerge in Renaissance culture but history was not his primary fascination. Gusdorf, in fact, lifted autobiography out of the historical domain and argued for its literary and anthropological relevance. In his view, the genre’s significance rested on the idea that autobiography expressed an existential search for meaning:

Every autobiography is a work of art and at the same time a work of enlightenment; it does not show us the individual seen from outside in his visible actions but the person in his inner privacy, not as he was, not as he is, but as he believes and wishes himself to be and to have been. What is in question is a sort of reevaluation of individual destiny; the author, who is at the same time the hero of the tale, wants to elucidate his past in order to draw out the structure of his being in time.

(2016: 27–8)

Gusdorf therefore urged critics to move “beyond truth and falsity” and “give up thinking about autobiography in the same way as we do an objective biography, regulated only by the requirements of the genre of history” (2016: 27–8).

Like historians, twentieth-century literary scholars used to have little to no interest for autobiographies. Influenced by New Criticism, they had shifted their focus from context to text until the point that authors were proclaimed redundant and dead. In the mid-century, however, some critics set out to define autobiography as a literary genre—partly by separating it from memoirs, which were supposed to be a historical or documentary genre on the context of a life lived. Scholars such as Wayne Shumaker (1954) and Roy Pascal (1960) framed autobiography, in contrast, as a creative act that had to result in a self-reflexive narrative on the development of an individual’s personality, or *Bildung*. By emphasizing the developmental or historical aspect, the genre’s origins gradually shifted from the Renaissance to the late eighteenth or early nineteenth century. German-American historian Karl Weintraub (1978),

especially, argued that autobiography could not really exist before the rise of historicism, the idea that true knowledge of the world and man can only be obtained through historical studies into origins and developments.

Combining individualism and historicism as necessary preconditions, autobiography critics located their object of studies in modernity. In an attempt to elevate the new-defined literary genre into a legitimate object of studies too, some autobiographies were canonized as capturing both the human condition and the best or greatest in the genre. This canon ranged from “precursors” such as Saint Augustine’s spiritual autobiography *Confessions* (c. 400) and the *Vita* by Italian Renaissance men Benvenuto Cellini and Girolamo Cardano (1501–76) to protestant conversion narratives, for instance English puritan John Bunyan’s *Grace abounding to the chief of sinners* (1666) and “real” autobiographies such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Les Confessions* (1782–9), Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s *Dichtung und Wahrheit* (1811–30) and twentieth-century examples including *Les Mots* (1964) by Jean-Paul Sartre.

It did not take long before this canon and its underlying conceptions were problematized. Working from a literary historical perspective, French scholar Philippe Lejeune criticized the tendency to essentialize the autobiographical genre in a canon that was based on preconceived notions of what it should be. In the mid-1970s, he introduced a new, reader-based definition of autobiography. More important here is that Lejeune incessantly called for historicization of the genre’s definition. He pleaded for serious studies into what the practice of autobiographical writing looked like in different eras and contexts. To make a start, Lejeune himself searched the Bibliothèque nationale de France in Paris to make an inventory of all titles that were labeled as “individual biography” and connected these to nineteenth-century social history (Lejeune [1975] 1989, [1982] 1989).

Criticizing the autobiographical canon from a more political angle, feminist, postcolonial, and other scholars pointed to the absence of women and people of color and called into question the autonomous, individualist self-conception that was foundational to the genre’s definition. Feminist scholars, especially, claimed that women’s self-conceptions were better understood in terms of relationality because they (were socialized to) see themselves as related to other people, in their families or communities (Jelinek 1980; Smith and Watson 1998, 2016). This could also explain why life narratives written by women often looked less like “autobiographies” and more like “memoirs” or even “biographies.” To include texts by women and other marginalized human subjects (including most white men), it became increasingly apparent that hierarchical genre classifications had to be abandoned and new concepts were introduced—for instance “auto/biography” and “life writing.”

Regardless of the debates about definitions and words, “autobiography” gained academic momentum. In 1968, for example, *Comparative Literature Studies* featured an article by Stephen A. Shapiro who called for studies into “the dark continent of literature: autobiography” and claimed that “now”—an era of mass media and institutionalization—was “the time to examine the meaning and value of individual life” (1968: 454). In 1980 the “cultural moment” was once more proclaimed by James Olney, in his introduction to a volume that set the stage for “autobiography studies” and is still recycled in overviews of the field. Explaining the “moment,” Olney first pointed to the identity politics of academic programs that accompanied contemporary emancipation movements, such as Black studies and women’s studies. Striving for counter histories and literatures, scholars found autobiographical

texts to provide “access to an experience ... that no other variety of writing can offer” (Olney 2016: 8). Second, and most important to Olney, was the contemporary “fascination with the self, an anxiety about the dimness and vulnerability of that entity that no one has ever seen or touched or tasted” (12).

The rise of autobiography studies in the late twentieth century was accompanied by the emergence of a scholarly infrastructure. Leading journals such as *Biography: An Interdisciplinary Quarterly* and *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies* were established in 1978 and 1985, respectively, while the International Auto/Biography Association (IABA) was founded in 1999. By then, terminology quickly changed and “life writing” emerged in titles of new journals, such as *Life Writing* (2004), *Lifewriting Annual: Biographical and Autobiographical Studies* (2011), and the *European Journal of Life Writing* (2012). This field is multidisciplinary and encompasses even life sciences, but the scene is dominated by the humanities—more specifically by scholars housed at departments for language, literature and creative writing, gender, race, queer and disability studies, cultural and media studies, and memory studies. Historians are not overrepresented, which testifies to a long and strong tradition of suspicions against autobiography as the “most dangerous of sources.”

Importance Today

Still, the individual actor returned to history too. Countering the postwar obsession with socio-economic structures and quantifiable data, new social and cultural historians brought human subjects back into their research projects from the 1970s onward. Somewhere around the millennium shift, scholars even observed a “biographical turn” in history, the humanities, and social sciences—“a new preoccupation with individual lives and stories as a way of understanding both contemporary societies and the whole process of social and historical change” (Caine 2010: 1).

Life writing certainly abounds in contemporary culture: from printed books to audiovisual testimonies in museums and (online) archives, Facebook posts, Instagram selfies, and so on. In the aftermath of the Cold War, especially, scholars saw such an autobiographical outpour that they labeled the late twentieth century as “the age of testimony” (Gilmore 2001: 16–17) or the “era of the witness” (Wieviorka 2006) and qualified “memoir” as the “central form of culture” (Yagoda 2009: 7). “We speak so much of memory, because there is so little of it left,” French historian Pierre Nora stated in his 1980s work on *lieux de mémoire*—that (in)tangible places that, like “shells on the shore,” help remember a (national) past that is no longer part of lived memory and is in danger of becoming the mere object of history and historians (Nora 1989: 12). Reflecting Nora’s sense of loss, other historians, too, explained the contemporary “memory craze” as signal of a deep crisis in making sense of life, identity, and history (Megill 1998; Winter 2001).

In *Stranded in the Present: Modern Time and the Melancholy of History* (2004), the American historian Peter Fritzsche identified a similar crisis in another memoir boom—in Europe, around 1800. The idea that autobiographical writing emerged in this place and era was not especially new, but Fritzsche introduced another explanatory framework. Leaving processes of individualization aside, he drew on the work of the German historian of concepts Reinhart Koselleck. In his studies on the semantics of historical time, Koselleck identified a growing gap

between the so-called “space of experience” (past) and the “horizon of expectations” (future) in the era between 1750 and 1850. During this *Sattelzeit* structural developments, such as the Industrial and French Revolutions, changed traditional societies to such an extent that the future became perceived as open-ended, the past lost its use as a means to make sense of life in the present and the modern conception of history as a linear, instead of cyclical, process emerged. Fritzsche argued that Europe’s experiences with the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars led to feelings of estrangement and rupture, which left people “stranded in the present.” Simultaneously, the shared experience of rupture created a common historical field in which people came to recognize themselves and others as contemporaries and participants in the same historical process. This mutual recognition, according to Fritzsche, stimulated such an interest in vernacular historical writing that history became a mass medium—most importantly in the form of memoirs and other instances of autobiographical writing.

The idea that fundamental changes in the perception of time and history help explain the rise of autobiographical writing in the modern era was also foundational to a large research project undertaken at Erasmus University Rotterdam (Baggerman 2011). Based on a large inventory of “ego documents” by Dutch people since 1500, the project *Controlling Time and Shaping the Self* started from the observation that ever more documents were written from 1800 on, but that most of these narratives could not be characterized by their introspective nature. Instead, many nineteenth-century authors focused on the introduction of railways and other aspects of a rapidly changing context in which they had to make sense of their life. Furthermore, the inventory showed that an increasing number of life narratives were published and sold through the book market, which suggested commercialization of the autobiographical practice. Huisman (2008, 2011) studied how mechanisms of the nineteenth-century book market shaped ideas of what a printed life should look like. Using sources such as the national Dutch bibliography, publishers’ advertisements and reviews in cultural magazines, she found that contemporaries expected autobiographers to deliver a kind of historical source, a “building block” for the future writing of contemporary history in its broadest sense. In 1900, for example, a critic applauded the life narrative of an actor because his book contained the “building stones” for a future history of Dutch theatre in the nineteenth century. Understanding autobiography as a historical genre first and foremost, contemporary critics welcomed life narratives by all sorts of people—regardless of rank in society or quality of writing. Each life could be valuable, if only the authors abstained from digging into their personal particulars and focused on the public or “historical” parts of their life.

Other scholars found that nineteenth-century British critics valued autobiographies as sources for the history of ideas (Marcus 1994), an approach pursued by Georg Misch in the early twentieth century. By that time, however, not many professional historians were inclined to build their histories on autobiographical documents. Outside academia, on the other hand, self-written lives continued to function as sources and even history—especially for groups of people who were neglected in the political history that was produced by academics. The labor movement, for example, generated large numbers of autobiographical texts, from leading men’s memoirs such as August Bebel’s *Aus meinem Leben* (1910–14) to many life stories by workers themselves. The women’s movement, too, is famous for its autobiographical output.

Pioneering feminists such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Jane Addams, Emmeline Pankhurst, and the Dutch Aletta Jacobs all published their autobiographies to record (and frame) the movement's history.

Another case in point are so-called slave narratives, life histories of former or fugitive slaves that were produced by the abolitionist movements in Great Britain and North America. Some were ghost written by white activists, but many were not—as indicated by titles such as *The Interesting Narrative of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African*. Written by himself (1789), *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American slave*. Written by himself (1845), and Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the life of a slave girl*. Written by herself (1861). After emancipation these narratives lost their original function as anti-slavery propaganda and were largely forgotten, but they resurfaced as primary sources for Black history in the early twentieth century in the United States (Dagbovie 2010). Leading (white) scholars did not intend to use these sources, however. Ulrich B. Phillips, in 1929, argued in *Life and Labor of the Old South* against the use of slave narratives because "as a class their authenticity is doubtful" (2007: 219).

Only a few years later, a new mass of slaves' autobiographies was produced through one of the largest public history projects ever undertaken: the American Slave Narrative Project (1935–8). Initiated by African American historian-activist Lawrence D. Reddick and funded through the New Deal program, the US Federal Government sent unemployed journalists, researchers, and other writing professionals to the former slave states in the South to interview over two thousand former slaves and document their memories of slavery as sources for a more inclusive version of national history (Hirsch 2003; Yetman 1967).

Based on the transcripts of these oral life narratives American folklorist Benjamin Botkin wrote the popular-historical study *Lay My Burden Down: A Folk History of Slavery* (1945). Understanding the interviews as a mixture of fact and fiction, he used them as entries into "a kind of collective saga of slavery" (Botkin [1945] 1989: xxxix), as sources that provided a window to the mental world of the ex-slave community. But the narratives also transcended the history and memory of slavery, according to the son of Jewish-Lithuanian immigrants in 1945. In his view, the testimonies of former slaves called for democratic renewal and "folk history":

As the last of the ex-slaves speak, with the urgency of the "historic few", their words take on new meaning and relevance in the light of the present, with its new freedoms and new forms of slavery. For what they have to say of race, caste, and class, of cultural conflict and change as well as slavery, the narratives have prime importance for the sociologist and the social anthropologist. As folk history—history from the bottom up, in which the people become their own historians, they directly concern the cultural historian, fully aware that history must study the inarticulate many as well as the articulate few.

(Botkin [1945] 1989: xxxix)

Notwithstanding Botkin's plea, the slave narrative transcripts laid unstudied for years in the Rare Books division in the Library of Congress in Washington, DC.

This changed with the rise of the civil rights movement. In the early 1960s, when Martin Luther King Jr. led the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom (1963), Malcolm X called for a cultural revolution to “unbrainwash an entire people” through recapturing “our heritage and our identity” ([1964] 2009: 417). In this climate, antebellum slave narratives were once more rediscovered as sources for Black history and made available through reprints published by both popular and academic presses—often in series and anthologies such as *Five Slave Narratives: A Compendium* (1968) or *Great Slave Narratives* (1969). The New Deal slave narratives were published too, in forty-one volumes entitled *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography* (1972–9). Referring to the aims of the original project, white socialist historian George P. Rawick introduced the volumes by expressing his hope that these would stimulate an inclusive social history of the American people. Lack of sources could, in any case, no longer serve as an excuse for historians to write history from a white elite’s perspective only.

In a similar vein, second-wave feminists combed archives and libraries to find sources for what came to be known as “herstory” or women’s history. The International Archive for the Women’s Movement in Amsterdam, for example, launched a search project for unpublished women’s “ego documents”—diaries, letters, autobiographies, memoirs—to add to its collection (Bosch 1987). In the United Kingdom, labor historians David Vincent, John Burnett, and David Mayall searched local archives and family attics to unearth working-class memoirs from the period 1790–1945, all of which were listed in the annotated bibliography *The Autobiography of the Working Class* (1984–9). Continuing an earlier project from the 1930s in 1981, the Mass Observation Project at the University of Sussex solicited life writing from citizens to document everyday life in contemporary Britain and continues to do so. In the Netherlands, historians Rudolf Dekker and Arianne Baggerman initiated searches in national, regional, and local archives and libraries to list all published and unpublished “ego documents” written by Dutch people since 1500 (Baggerman n.d.; De Valk n.d.; Lindeman et al. 1983).

The massive search for life narratives partly stems from new social movements’ need for historical role models, but developments in the historical discipline played a role too. In the first place, the prewar tradition of labor history evolved and expanded during the 1960s into “history from below.” Less focused on labor institutions such as unions, this “new social history” was interested in the history of everyday life and tried to understand that life from the bottom up, through the eyes of ordinary people—both male and female, Black and white. Micro-historians, in the second place, developed an approach to write “total history” from the perspective of one place, or even one person.

In this historiography, the human agent returned—albeit as part of collectives with group-specific life experiences, identities, and worldviews or mentalities. Social historian Linda Pollock (1983), for instance, studied over five hundred diaries to find patterns in parent-child relations in early modern England and America. Based on the materials listed in *The Autobiography of the Working Class*, book historian Jonathan Rose (2001) reconstructed the intellectual life of the British working classes from the late eighteenth to the mid-twentieth century. In a famous example of micro-history, *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller* (1976/80), Carlo Ginzburg studied the heretic Menocchio as a lens through which he reconstructed both the socio-economic base of the miller’s life as well as the cultural superstructure, namely, the belief system or collective mentality he exemplified. Other

historians continued this line of research, often using additional methods from anthropology—such as Clifford Geertz’s “thick description.” Dutch historians Arianne Baggerman and Rudolf Dekker (2009), for instance, used one boy’s diary to paint a picture of the revolutionary era in late eighteenth-century Europe.

To write (micro-)history from below and/or study collective mentalities all sorts of autobiographical documents came to the fore as relevant sources, albeit not the ones that were canonized as “autobiography” proper. Slave narratives were far from canonized when John W. Blassingame based *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* (1972) on a large number of slave narratives and other forms of “black testimony”—for instance, letters, speeches, and interviews. Confronted with fierce criticism from fellow historians who doubted the authenticity and worth of these sources, Blassingame published an essay (1975) that was republished as the introduction to a source book of Black testimony (1977). He explained the provenance of his sources and showed that slave narratives were perfectly useful, if one applied normal methods of source criticism and compared them to other sources. Good history could never be founded on either Black or white sources only, Blassingame stated. Questions related to the subjective experience of slavery, however, could never be answered without Black testimony:

If scholars want to know the hearts and secret thought of slaves, they must study the testimony of blacks. ... The individual and collective mentality of the slaves, the ways they sought to fulfil their needs, the experiential context of life in quarters and in the fields, and the black man’s personal perspective of bondage emerge only after an intensive examination of the testimony of slaves and former slaves.

(Blassingame 1977: lxv)

In their attempts to write histories from below, historians such as Blassingame worked from the presumption that they could filter out of a mass of subjective sources a truthful picture of the life, experiences, and mentalities of past communities. But the relation between text and reality was complicated in the 1980s, when a “linguistic turn” swept through the humanities. Influenced by postmodern philosophies of language, historians and other scholars now argued that lives, experiences, identities, and selves do not precede text but are, instead, created through the discursive act or practice of writing. Inspired by Michel Foucault’s work, moreover, autobiographical writing came to be seen as a “technology of self”—a practice of power and discipline. Gender scholar Felicity A. Nussbaum (1989), for instance, studied eighteenth-century autobiography as a genre that, through generic expectations, instilled class and gender relations in selves. But Nussbaum also showed how English women, as creative writing subjects, used the same “technology of self” to negotiate or undermine hegemonic idea(l)s of middle-class female subjectivity.

The linguistic turn made “new cultural history” fashionable and historians of all stripes started to understand virtually everything as discursive representations and practices—from collectives such as the nation to experiential notions of the body, self, and subjectivity. In this context, New Historicist Stephen Greenblatt (1980) launched the concept of “self-fashioning”

to describe and study the process of constructing one's identity, or persona, according to a set of socially acceptable standards that include narrative models or plots that are available in a given time and place. In the early 1990s, however, gender historian Joan W. Scott saw still too many emancipatory histories for her taste. In the article "The Evidence of Experience" (1991) Scott launched a fierce critique against the use of first-person narratives to document the lives and experiences of marginalized subjects. In her view, such histories reproduced categories of difference as natural or given. Scott argued, instead, for studies that would historicize these categories by asking which experiences are (not) recognized as relevant or telling and how social identities are (re)constructed in (historical) narratives.

The linguistic or cultural turn affected the approach of slave narratives too. In the mid-1980s, Henry Louis Gates Jr. argued against their use as historical or documentary texts only and called for more attention to language and rhetoric. Pointing to the many passages about learning to read and write in published slave narratives since the late eighteenth century, Gates observed a structural discursive connection between freedom and literacy. This suggested to him that slave narratives were not mere reflections of the narrators' experiences but anti-racist acts or interventions in a European discourse that denied Black people their humanity:

Reading and writing was no mean thing in the life of the slave. Learning to read and write meant that this person of African descent took one giant step up in the Great Chain of Being; the "thing" became a human being. ...

Accused of lacking a formal and collective history, blacks published individual histories which, taken together, were intended to narrate, in segments, the larger yet fragmented history of blacks in Africa, then dispersed throughout a cold New World. The narrated, descriptive "eye" was put into service as a literary form to posit both the individual "I" of the black author, as well as the collective "I" of the race. Text created author, and black authors hoped they would create, or re-create, the image of race in European discourse.

(Gates 1985: xxxix, xxvi)

Further building on the idea of (autobiographical) writing as a performative speech act, William L. Andrews, in *To Tell a Free Story: The First Century of Afro-American Autobiography, 1760–1865* (1986), showed through close reading the rhetoric strategies and repertoires slave authors used to construct and present their selves as able, equal, and free persons.

Public historian Catherine A. Stewart recently studied the New Deal slave narratives once more, but from a different perspective. In *Long Past Slavery: Representing Race in the Federal Writers' Project* (2016), she focused on the institutional framework that created the narratives. She established that interviewers and project staff members were often related to the United Daughters of the Confederacy, an organization that promoted a specific, confederate, perspective in histories and commemorations of the Civil War. Her analysis of the instruction forms for interviewers provides baffling insights on how interviewees were coerced to conform their memories and narratives to the image of the "happy slave" that dominated the

confederate perspective as well as popular culture in the 1930s. Stewart's research, on the one hand, adds more fuel to old debates about the authenticity and use of slave narratives as historical sources. On the other hand, her study suggests a solution that is reminiscent of Botkin's approach in 1945. Moving away from the question what these narratives reveal about (the experience of) slavery in the past, Stewart shows that the slave narratives' content and context are ideal entries for studies into ways of dealing with the history and legacy in the present of the 1930s.

If new historiographical branches such as "history from below" and "new cultural history" stimulated the return of the human agent and the use of life narratives as sources, at least as important is the rise of "memory studies" in the late twentieth century. Reflecting on their own linguistic practice and inspired by Nora's work on "lieux de mémoire," historians came to see their academic approach as but one way of dealing with the past and developed an interest for other, popular or public forms. Under the general denominator of "collective memory," historians and other scholars started to study all sorts of representations and uses of the past in the (historical) present. Much of this work links collective memory to collective identity. Historians studied, for instance, how nation-states use(d) commemorations of the past to construct collective identities and socialize(d) disparate people, through history lessons at school or remembrance rituals, into national citizens who "remember" events and persons they never experienced themselves.

Individual subjects and memories are not the primary focus of memory studies, but leading scholars such as Wulf Kansteiner (2002) and Aleida Assmann (2008) did theorize how "episodic memory" relates to "semantic memory": how lived, embodied memories of people do or do not enter the long-term or cultural memory of a collective. Media are considered as of crucial importance in this process of transfer. Embodied memories must be mediated to reach other people in general and future people in particular. In this context, auto/biographical narratives have gained special interest as memory media. Working on *Maus: A Survivor's Tale* (1985–91), a graphic novel in which Art Spiegelman relates his father's memories of the Second World War and the Holocaust, Marianne Hirsch developed the notion of "post-memory." This concept is used to describe and study the transmission of traumatic experiences between generations, and highlights the role of media in general in this process—and of auto/biographical narratives or visuals such as family photographs in particular (Hirsch 1992–3, 1997).

In the late twentieth century, the question of transfer was especially relevant in relation to the historical remembrance of the Second World War and the Holocaust. With the fading of the generations that lived through the events that were so foundational to the identities of many countries in the West, the status of the witness rose rapidly. In 1977, Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel even declared the birth of a new literary genre: "If the Greeks invented tragedy, the Romans the epistle and the Renaissance the sonnet, our generation invented a new literature—that of testimony" (quoted in Felman and Laub 1992: 6). Examples of this particular type of autobiographical texts include Primo Levi's *Se questo è un uomo* (1947) and the famous diary of Anne Frank. Testimonies such as these, and many others, laid the foundations for histories of the Holocaust from the perspective of Jews, such as the Israeli-French historian Saul Friedländer's *Nazi Germany and the Jews: The Years of Persecution, 1933–39* (1997) and *The Years of Extermination: Nazi Germany and the Jew, 1939–1945* (2007).

Friedlander's two massive volumes describe not only a specific past event. His work is also a commemorative act in itself and illustrates the huge moral weight that first-person accounts of the Holocaust—and other atrocities—have acquired. Reflecting on the rise of the “moral witness” in the late twentieth century, Israeli philosopher Avishai Margalit, in *The Ethics of Memory* (2002), explains that a moral witness testifies of experiences under an “evil regime” and that historians can use these as sources. But that moral witness' testimony is ultimately not valued for its factual accuracy, according to Margalit. Instead, moral witnesses—for instance victims of the Holocaust—derive their authority from “having a special kind of experience which is elevated to some sort of high spirituality that makes the witness a moral force” (Margalit 2002: 178). Modern, secular societies, especially, have come to associate this kind of “experience” with the sacred, as intellectual historian and Holocaust specialist Dominick LaCapra (2004) advanced in the same period.

The sacralization of firsthand experiences and testimonies has clearly affected slave narratives, because (some of) these texts were canonized in the United States in the 1990s. At the time, budget cuts threatened African American study programs and institutes. In addition, a fierce public debate or “culture war” was fought over questions of American identity and what kind of history and literature should be taught at schools and universities. To prevent the loss of African American history and heritage once more, Henry Louis Gates Jr. called for canonization:

Our generation must record, codify, and disseminate the assembled data about African and African-American culture, thereby institutionalizing the received knowledge about African-Americans that has been gathered for the past century, and that we continue to gather, as we chart heretofore unexplored continents of ignorance. For our generation of scholars in African-American studies, to map the splendid diversity of human life in culture is the charge of the scholar of African-American studies.

(Gates 1992: 123)

In the course of the 1990s, numerous slave narratives were (re)published in canonical editions to be used in (academic) education. No longer framed as historical sources that provided an entry into “the experience” of slavery, slave narratives were now presented as “classics” of American literature and history; some even entered the prestigious Library of America, a series of books that capture “our nation's cultural heritage” (Library of America n.d.).

The same drive for canonization and sacralization is visible in the phenomenon of the “diary archive” in Europe—like the archive of the Association pour l'autobiographie et le patrimoine autobiographique (founded 1992) in Lyon, the Deutsches Tagebucharchiv (founded 1998) in Emmendingen, and the Nederlands Dagboekarchief (Dutch Diary Archive, founded 2009) in Amsterdam. These archives collect and preserve diaries and other forms of life writing by “common people,” the kind of people whose narratives do not find a home in official national or regional archives easily. The first of this kind was the Archivio Diaristico Nazionale (1984) in Italy, initiated by writer and journalist Saverio Tutino. He meant the diary archive to become a “house of memory” in which people could store their contributions to the “literature of life”

and “today’s human conscience.” Historical relevance, however defined, was no criterium for inclusion though. Having been alive was enough. Consequently, this type of archive seems to serve as a monumental means to empower and immortalize common people (Huisman 2016). Or, as Tutino wrote: “All the people, who give their own diaries to the Archives, obtain a new power they had not before. For the first time, they have a new social liberty and the satisfaction of a real and primary need, that is to preserve their identity after their death” (Tutino n.d.).

Existential and moral meanings of life writing have been recurrent themes in its studies, but the field has taken a more explicit “ethical turn” in the twenty-first century. Literary scholar Paul John Eakin even claimed that “ethics is the deep subject of autobiographical discourse” and connected the rise of autobiographical writing to the emergence of a human rights discourse in the late eighteenth century. Referring to the Declaration of Independence (1776), he suggested that the “right to write our life stories” became a “natural extension of the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness” (Eakin 2001: 113). Literary scholars Kay Schaffer and Sidonie Smith further explored this connection for the very recent past in *Human Rights and Narrated Lives: The Ethics of Recognition* (2004). Based on case studies such as postapartheid South Africa; the Stolen Children debates in Australia; and the strive for recognition, reparation, and apologies of so-called “comfort women,” who experienced sexual slavery in Asia during the Second World War, Schaffer and Smith argue that “over the last twenty years, life narratives have become one of the most potent vehicles for advancing human rights claims” (2004: 1).

Historians, in the meantime, developed a new kind of historical writing that is explicitly autobiographical. An early example is *Landscape for a Good Woman* (1986), by the British social and gender historian Carolyn Steedman. In this hybrid book, she mixed an account of her mother’s life with memoirs of her own childhood in the 1950s, social history and a theoretical critique against the interpretative, Marxist and Freudian, frameworks that were fashionable at the time of Steedman’s writing:

Personal interpretations of past time—the stories that people tell themselves in order to explain how they got to the place they currently inhabit—are often in deep and ambiguous conflict with the official interpretative devices of a culture. This book is organized around a conflict like this, taking as a starting point the structures of class analysis and schools of cultural criticism that cannot deal with everything there is to say about my mother’s life.

(Steedman 1986: 6)

In the twenty-first century, especially, more historians turned into life-writers (Aurell 2015; Popkin 2005). In full-blown autobiographies or shorter essays, an ever increasing number of historians described their own intellectual trajectories in the context of paradigmatic shifts in the history of their discipline to reflect on the very process or practice of historical writing itself. Spanish historian Jaume Aurell labeled this specific kind of life narratives as “interventionist,” because the historians-autobiographers often forward strong ideas about the future of the discipline. For instance, Geoff Eley, in *A Crooked Line* (2005), proposed to

move beyond cultural history back to the large-scale themes of social history—a proposal that was further explored in a 2008 forum discussion in the *American Historical Review*. Cases such as these made Aurell conclude that life writing has emerged as a liberating genre for historians “to say things they feel they cannot say within the framework of academia. In fact, academia may become for some historians a kind of straitjacket that precludes their saying what they want to about the world, past and present.” From that perspective, he ultimately understands “interventional autobiography” of historians as a new kind of theory of history: “their [historians’] experiments with history outside themselves have drawn them to explore the history inside themselves, turning this process from objectivity to subjectivity into an operation of both historical and historiographical (that is, theoretical) writing” (Aurell 2015: 264; emphases in the original).

In the Future

In their much-discussed *The History Manifesto* (2014), David Armitage and Jo Guldi argued that the historical discipline lost its public relevance because historians forgot the *longue durée* and spent decades on writing specialized micro-studies on small topics or even individual persons. In an attempt to turn the tide, the two called their fellow historians to help solve great, societal challenges, for instance climate change and social inequality, through long-term historical research geared toward the finding of patterns or trends and based on “big data” and digital research methods. In this perspective on the future of history, individuals and their life narratives might be in danger once more.

Decades of studies have, however, sufficiently proven that life narrative-based histories are not necessarily small or inconsequential. Historians and other scholars used life narratives as sources or means to explore a broad range of large topics—from war, genocide, and slavery to ideas of self, time, and history itself. Focusing on the subjective experience or memory of such issues, life narratives proved to be interesting instead of flawed sources. Whatever the topics that will fascinate historians in the future, life narratives will probably continue to serve as sources to study those topics from a subjective perspective.

Life narratives seem, in fact, to facilitate major paradigmatic shifts in the discipline. The “biographical turn,” for one, coincides chronologically with the “global turn” in history: the current attempt to move beyond the “methodological nationalism” that has governed historians’ work since the nineteenth century. But the connection runs deeper than mere chronology. Historian Lois W. Banner (2009), for instance, argued in favor of “biography as history” because the biographical genre enables historians to transcend the national framework through historical studies of individuals who crossed national boundaries. Coming from a world-historical perspective, Glenda Sluga and Julia Horne (2010) suggested that biographical research into the lives of transnational individuals is particularly apt to study cosmopolitanism not only as a normative concept or idea but as an historical practice, a cultural form, or “a way of being in the world.”

In their efforts to foreground human subjects and subjectivities, moreover, historians and other scholars have continuously discussed the issue of social inequality—both in society or culture and in their own academic discipline(s). In the process, every element of the concept “autobiography” has been criticized for its bias in terms of “self”-conceptions used, the

contents that make a “life,” and the medium of “writing” through which such a narrative should be communicated. In a recent volume of the journal *a/b* (2017), on the future of auto/biography studies, literary critic Cynthia Huff went still a step further. She criticized the anthropocentric bias and argued for post-humanist perspectives that foreground “the material, whether that materiality involves human-animal, human-machine interaction, or most likely both, given our increasingly interactive and interdependent world” (Huff 2017: 279).

Over thirty years ago, anthropologist Igor Kopytoff (1986) already noted that the difference between “persons” and “things” is far from clear. Building on his earlier work on slavery, he pointed out that human subjects were traded and treated as “things” but that these “things” could change (back) into “humans” through manumission or emancipation. Understanding enslavement as a biographical process instead of a fixed status, Kopytoff pointed out that other “things” have a life too. From food products to cultural goods such as paintings, things are grown or made, hence “born,” and continue their “lives” being used, exchanged, traded, and reused until they are no longer valued as useful or otherwise important and “die.” Emphasizing the point that things acquire new meanings or statuses in different stages of their “life,” Kopytoff argued for a “cultural biography of things” to study processes of redefinition—especially in situations of cultural contact.

Stephen Greenblatt made a similar point more recently, calling for “the patient charting of specific instances of cultural mobility” and “microhistories” of “displaced things and persons” to show cultural connections between unexpected times and places (2010: 16–17). Under the label of the “material turn,” and in collaboration with scholars from disciplines such as archaeology, anthropology, and museum studies, historians have indeed broadened their horizon “beyond words” (Auslander 2005; Auslander et al. 2009) in the twenty-first century. Highlighting the facts that people live their life using all five senses and that most people, for most of human history, did not use written language as their means of expression, scholars have advanced the use of objects as historical sources. Taking a biographical approach to one hundred objects from the British Museum, former director Neil MacGregor (2010) wrote a famous world history in which he related the “lives” of these objects from their “birth” to their travels around the globe and their ending in the London museum.

Steffi de Jong, in *The Witness as Object* (2018), complicated the very distinction between humans and objects in her studies on video testimony in Holocaust memorial museums. Combining the informational function of the historic museum with the memorial’s aim to commemorate, these museums have “musealized” firsthand testimonies of the generation that lived through the Second World War and the Holocaust to foster a long-term, cultural memory of the events. De Jong, however, exposes the careful selection, framing, and otherwise manipulation of seemingly pluriform testimonies into a homogenic narrative that has no place for testimonies of bystanders or perpetrators, strips Jewish witnesses from their specificities, and leaves the audience no room to critically engage with the moral and objectified force that (some) witnesses’ testimony has become.

In an era of media revolution, it is to be expected that the book- or text-bias in autobiography studies will lose further terrain to audio/visual, digital, and other mediums. The current mass of emails, text and Whatsapp messages, Facebook posts, Instagram selfies, blogs, vlogs, and other forms of digital life writing might even serve as “big data” for contemporary and future historians of life in the twenty-first century—if harvested and collected properly. The collection

and preservation of digital-born materials is still a major challenge for archivists, but the Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media used electronic media to document history as it happened. In the September 11 Digital Archive thousands of emails, pictures, and other firsthand narratives are preserved (Rivard 2014; September 11 Digital Archive n.d.).

In the meantime, analogue-born life narratives, and other historical texts, are digitized at a rapid pace. The New Deal slave narratives, for instance, have been made available through the website *Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936–1938*, hosted by the Library of Congress in Washington, DC, since 2001. Printed slave narratives can be accessed online through *Documenting the American South*, a website hosted by the University of North Carolina. Since 2004, the subsite *North American Slave Narratives* contains digitized editions of all autobiographical, biographical, and fictional slave narratives in the English language that were published as books or pamphlets before 1920 (Andrews n.d.).

Whilst the digital sphere is virtually unlimited in terms of space, digital archives, libraries, or museums are like their analogue counterparts in other respects. Both serve as tools or technologies in the production of historical knowledge. By deciding what sort of texts and other materials can or cannot enter their (digital) storage rooms, curators like archivists reflect as well as reproduce social and historical power dynamics. It is, therefore, not without meaning that a lot of historians and other scholars started their work on life narratives with projects to find, list, and (re)publish such documents. Their efforts suggest not only an engagement with the “human agent” in history but also, equally, a critique of the medium that has been foundational to the historical discipline since the nineteenth century: the archive. In their attempts to give voice, agency, and history to subjects who were not necessarily part of the cultural archive, historians and other scholars thereby stretched the limits of what was considered worthy to preserve and of what could count as “history.” It seems that this project is not finished yet, and will continue in future studies of (post)human subjects.

Conclusion

Life writing is not the opposite of writing history; the two have been closely related since the dawn of age. It was only in the nineteenth century that history and autobiography went their separate ways. Historians, in their attempts to transform history-writing into an academic discipline and profession, distanced themselves from other, lesser-valued historical practices—such as memoirs and other forms of autobiographical writing. Discarding the first-person genres even as sources too partial or subjective to use, autobiographies and other life narratives gradually appeared as the antitheses of “history” in the first half of the twentieth century.

The opposition was never complete, though. Professional historians such as Georg Misch discovered autobiography as a source for cultural history in the early twentieth century, when this historiographical branch was not in fashion yet. Political historians were perhaps suspicious of autobiographical sources but did not necessarily quit writing biographies of “great men.” Outside academia, moreover, autobiographical and biographical genres of history writing never fell from grace. Groups of people who did not find themselves represented in academic historiography, for instance, women, workers, and Blacks, wrote or told their history in auto/biographical genres. In the era of historians’ professionalization and scientization,

furthermore, many nations launched multivolume biographical dictionaries to commemorate and honor men (and a few women) of national consequence. The British Dictionary of National Biography, for instance, appeared, with supplements, between 1885 and 1927, and the original series of the Dictionary of American Biography (1928–36) was continued from 1944 to 1995.

Looking back, the opposition between “history” and “autobiography” seems but a short interval in the historical discipline. Even if it is true that materialist and structuralist beliefs led historians to bypass human agents, this changed already with the rise of new social history or history from below, micro-history, new cultural history, and memory studies. From at least the 1970s onward, human subjects have returned to history—albeit as representative of a collective. Over the course of half a century, moreover, historians have found creative and imaginative ways to deal with personal testimony. Emphasizing the subjective experience or remembrance of all sorts of historical themes, life narratives thus transformed from unreliable into suitable sources. Some historians take a quantitative approach and work with large numbers, others work in a more qualitative manner with just one or a few autobiographical sources. In terms of contents, however, there is no limit since history and autobiography are both projects to make sense of the full range of life in the past—from the perspective of the present.

Related Articles

See also: Big History, Autobiography, Experience, Gender, Genocide, Joan Wallach Scott, Ranke, History of the Latin and Teutonic Nations, Marxism and Its Influences, Mass-Observation, Reinhart Koselleck, Slave Narratives, Identity/Collective Identities, Early Modern Diaries, Folklore, Social Movements, Heritage, History of Ideas and Its Surroundings, Professionalization of History, Oral History, Micro-History, Museum Objects As Historical Sources, Narrative Template, History of Historiography, Historical Culture, Posthuman History, Public History, Equality, Gender, The Material Turn in Historical Writing, Lynn Hunt

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