

Introduction: Situating Subjectivity in Women's Autobiographical Practices

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The subject . . .—female autobiographies, memoirs, letters and diaries—represents one of those cases of maddening neglect that have motivated feminist scholarship since 1970. This body of writing about the self has remained invisible, systematically ignored in the studies on autobiography that have proliferated in the past fifteen years.

—Domna C. Stanton, *The Female Autograph* (vii)

There are four ways to write a woman's life: the woman herself may tell it, in what she chooses to call an autobiography; she may tell it in what she chooses to call fiction; a biographer, woman or man, may write the woman's life in what is called a biography; or the woman may write her own life in advance of living it, unconsciously and without recognizing or naming the process. . . . Women of accomplishment, in unconsciously writing their future lived lives, or, more recently, in trying honestly to deal in written form with lived past lives, have had to confront power and control. Because this has been declared unwomanly, and because many women would prefer (or think they would prefer) a world without evident power or control, women have been deprived of the narratives, or the texts, plots, or examples, by which they might assume power over—take control of—their own lives.

—Carolyn G. Heilbrun, *Writing a Woman's Life* (11, 16–17)

After two decades of a ferment of activity in theorizing women's autobiography, it seems important to attempt, not an overview of, but a guide to, the field as it has evolved. This collection proposes a set of categories, however provisional, overlapping, and contingent, to focus

key issues in scholarship. Some categories are formalist, such as genre and history; others indicate terrains of debate, such as experience, subjectivities, and sexualities. The essays we have selected for inclusion were not necessarily the most influential ones at the time of their publi-

cation; but they *now* foreground concepts and pose questions helpful for *practicing* the critical activity of theorizing women's autobiography. This collection does not claim to be a history. Rather, it aims to capture the complex interplay of multiple theoretical critiques as they have motivated a discussion of women's autobiography. The history of women's autobiography studies is yet to be written—and the dust has nowhere near settled.

As a guide for mapping the field of women's autobiography, this introduction has several goals:

- to *locate parameters* in the theory of women's autobiography by identifying how critics have read it in relation to dominant autobiographical theory;
- to *order the field* by surveying the "stages" of critical activity in women's autobiography, from theories of gendered experience, to theories of difference, to the proliferation of differences that inform postmodern and postcolonial theorizing;
- to *identify significant theoretical interventions* that have helped reframe critical perspectives on women's autobiography;
- to *reflect on the contributions* of the essays included in this volume; and
- to *propose prospects for future inquiry* in feminist critical investigation.

But before launching into this study, we want to emphasize that this is a book necessarily without a conclusion. Think of it as a set of tools—or building blocks, guides, recipes—for enabling your own entry into the activity (and the self-reflexivity) of theorizing women's autobiography. As a map for the perplexed, the skeptical, the uninitiated, the jaded, we hope it will aid readers in discovering and valuing the rich ferment of feminist critical activity that has excited and sustained scholars and contributed to the ever-increasing production, "rediscovery," and analysis of women's life writings.

Our Introduction is in five interrelated parts: Part 1 discusses the emergence of theories of women's autobiography as a series of critical moments; part 2 considers theoretical perspectives on subjectivity that have led to the reformulation of women's autobiography; part 3 discusses prospects for theorizing; part 4 considers the future of women's autobiography as a field; and part 5 offers summary remarks on the project and the contributors.

Part I: The Emergence of Theories of Women's Autobiography

The problem for the female autobiographer is, on the one hand, to resist the pressure of masculine autobiography as the only literary genre available for her enterprise, and, on the other, to describe a difficulty in conforming to a female ideal which is largely a fantasy of the masculine, not the feminine, imagination.

—Barbara Johnson, *A World of Difference* (154)

Prehistory—Laying the Groundwork of a Women's Tradition

As we approach the millennium it is remarkable that, although women have written autobiographically for many centuries and published autobiographies throughout the twentieth century that are widely read, advertised by book clubs, and taught in university courses, the criticism of women's autobiography as a genre is barely two decades old. Women's autobiographical writing, seldom taken seriously as a focus of study before the seventies, was not deemed appropriately "complex" for academic dissertations, criticism, or the literary canon. The phrase "Read this only to yourself," used by one of the diarists discussed by Elizabeth Hampsten, named the "bind" that readers confronted in discovering their "bond" to women's autobiography. Academic and popular historians alike regarded it as at best a mine of biographical information and salty citations and deemed it

too windy and unreliable—since life stories “stretch” the truth—to be worthy of critical investigation. Those who took autobiography seriously, critics such as Georg Misch, Georges Gusdorf, and William Spengemann, restricted their focus to the lives of great men—Augustine, Rousseau, Franklin, Goethe, Carlyle, Henry Adams—whose accomplished lives and literary tomes assured their value as cultural capital.

The status of autobiography has changed dramatically in the intervening decades, both within and outside the academy. Women’s autobiography is now a privileged site for thinking about issues of writing at the intersection of feminist, postcolonial, and postmodern critical theories. Processes of subject formation and agency occupy theorists of narrative and, indeed, of culture as never before. If feminism has revolutionized literary and social theory, the texts and theory of women’s autobiography have been pivotal for revising our concepts of women’s life issues—growing up female, coming to voice, affiliation, sexuality and textuality, the life cycle. Crucially, the writing and theorizing of women’s lives has often occurred in texts that place an emphasis on collective processes while questioning the sovereignty and universality of the solitary self. Autobiography has been employed by many women writers to write themselves into history. Not only feminism but also literary and cultural theory have felt the impact of women’s autobiography as a previously unacknowledged mode of making visible formerly invisible subjects.

The growing academic interest in women’s autobiography may be the result of an interplay of political, economic, and aesthetic factors. The growth of gender, ethnic, and area studies programs to address the interests of new educational constituencies has created a demand for texts that speak to diverse experiences and issues. Too, publishers have discovered that recovering and publishing women’s life stories is a profitable enterprise. Autobiographies by

women and people of color introduce stirring narratives of self-discovery that authorize new subjects who claim kinship in a literature of possibility. Most centrally, women reading other women’s autobiographical writings have experienced them as “mirrors” of their own unvoiced aspirations. Critic Barbara Christian, for example, wrote of her excitement when, as a graduate student in 1967, she first read the autobiographical novel *Brown Girl, Brownstones* by Paule Marshall: “[it] was not just a text; it was an accurate and dynamic embodiment both of the possibilities and improbabilities of my own life. In it I as subject encountered myself as object. . . . It was crucial to a deeper understanding of my own life” (197).

This interest in women’s autobiographical practices as both an articulation of women’s life experience and a source for articulating feminist theory has grown over several decades and was acknowledged as a field around 1980. Activity was evident on three interrelated fronts that we will explore: building the archive of women’s writing, claiming models of heroic identity, and revising dominant theories of autobiography.

Building the Archive of Women’s Writing

In the fifties and sixties, several women’s memoirs became best-sellers; some were by prominent or “notorious” women, others by unknown writers who created compelling life stories. Critic Carolyn Heilbrun, author of the best-selling *Writing a Woman’s Life*, noted, “Only in the last third of the twentieth century have women broken through to a realization of the narratives that have been controlling their lives. Women poets of one generation—those born between 1923 and 1932—can now be seen to have transformed the autobiographies of women’s lives, to have expressed, and suffered for expressing, what women had not earlier been allowed to say” (60). By incorporating hitherto unspoken female experience in telling their own stories, women revised the content and purposes

of autobiography and insisted on alternative stories.

The translation of Simone de Beauvoir's multivolume autobiography—*Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter*, *The Prime of Life*, and others—was important for its interrogation of the category of “woman” in the making of self-consciousness. Anais Nin's multivolume *Diaries* combined self-exposure and literary experimentation. A generation of girls grew up reading *The Diary of Anne Frank* and *I Never Promised You a Rose Garden* (Joanne Greenberg). Mary McCarthy's *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood*, first serialized in magazines in the fifties, was acclaimed as life writing of high seriousness by the eastern establishment. Lillian Hellman's three memoirs, *An Unfinished Woman*, *Pentimento*, and *Scoundrel Time*, were lionized as best-sellers and incorporated in films. And the McCarthy-Hellman feud, aired on the Dick Cavett talk show in January 1980, in which McCarthy remarked of Hellman's autobiographical texts that “Every word she writes is a lie, including ‘and’ and ‘the,’” not only nurtured popular interest in famous lives but also exposed knotty issues of truth and lying in self-representation. An emerging generation of African American women, coming of age during the years of the civil rights movement and the later Black Power movement, published autobiographical narratives through which they staked out a place within political or artistic movements and explored the complex legacies of racial and sexual exploitation. Anne Moody's *Coming of Age in Mississippi* and Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* were among many writings that introduced African American women autobiographers to a broader American audience.

By the seventies the bravado self-assertions of some feminist critics were widely heard. Germaine Greer in *The Female Eunuch* and Shulamith Firestone in *The Dialectic of Sex* interwove autobiographical and theoretical writing to

demonstrate that the personal is political; Kate Millett, in *Sexual Politics* and in her later autobiographical works *Flying* and *Sita*, took this posture to a limit in claiming experience as the foundation of theory. And Angela Davis used her life story, *An Autobiography*, not only to expose the reach of racism in the United States, but to make her case for the necessity of a radical politics that included a critique of misogyny within the writings of Black Power activists.

Influential early feminist literary critics focused on the intersection of women's lives and their writing in studies that sought to map a women's tradition and to legitimate feminist scholarship. Widely available books such as Mary Ellmann's *Thinking about Women*, Ellen Moers' *Literary Women*, and Elaine Showalter's *A Literature of Their Own* interrogated the history of patriarchy and the invisibility of women's texts and voices in dominant literary and academic culture. These early feminist critics pointed out that an extensive women's literary tradition had existed for centuries, especially if one turned to supposedly “marginal” genres—memoir, journal, diary, the many modes of private autobiographical writing. Moers' fifty-page list of women writers and their works mapped a female tradition that generated innumerable studies. In recovering the long-out-of-print writings of women over centuries and framing them as a tradition rather than as “marginal” or “failed” efforts to write master narratives for male audiences, these pioneering critics cracked literary history wide open.

The archive of women's writing was also built through the recovery of earlier women's texts, above all by historians and bibliographers. In numerous ways women historians redirected the attention of their discipline from large-scale political events to the social history of everyday subjects and practices. Historians such as Mary Beth Norton, Rayna Rapp, Ann Douglas, Nancy Cott, and Carroll Smith-Rosenberg used ar-

chival materials such as diaries, journals, and unpublished autobiographical narratives to rethink a rich record of women's histories. Bibliographies of women's writing were genuinely a work of cultural excavation. In addition to Ellen Moers' annotated list of women's published writings, women could turn to Louis Kaplan's *A Bibliography of American Autobiographies*, listing over six thousand works before 1945 and, in the eighties, to its extension to contemporary times that included many writings by women, *American Autobiography, 1945-1980*, edited by Mary Louise Briscoe, Lynn Z. Bloom, and Barbara Tobias. Though a bibliography of American women's autobiography would not appear until 1983, in Patricia K. Addis' *Through a Woman's "I,"* the groundwork was laid for exploring the vast and neglected storehouse of women's personal writing and revaluing women's "place."

Claiming Models of Heroic Identity

As early feminist literary critics developed courses on "Women in Literature" and "Images of Women," autobiographical texts often supplemented fictionalized accounts of women's lives. Critic Patricia Meyer Spacks in *The Female Imagination* read life writing analytically rather than as simply a mirror of women writers' lives. Exploring what she called the "characteristic patterns of self-perception" that "shape the creative expression of women," Spacks used autobiographies to probe what shapes the "female imagination" (1). Spacks's influential book historicized a tradition encompassing four centuries and many genres, including diaries, journals, and autobiographies. Her rubrics suggested a history of gradual artistic and personal liberation for "selves in hiding": "Finger Posts," "The Artist as Woman," and "Free Women" discovering creative spaces for female self-expression. Spacks emphasized women's struggle to assert a "positive" identity and focused on self-mastery and the dangers of "relational" female self-

definition, although she largely omitted texts by women of color, which now limits the usefulness of her study (267).

Germaine Brée was also an influential critic of women's autobiography. Her 1976 essay "George Sand: The Fictions of Autobiography" made an early call for reading a woman's personal narrative as a separate genre and a means for a writer to autobiographically "think back through her mothers" (441). In women's autobiographies students found models of heroic womanhood absent from their own education, as suggested by the title of Lynn Z. Bloom's 1978 essay "Promises Fulfilled: Positive Images of Women." To develop a feminist pedagogy teachers sought these positive models of women who had creatively talked back to patriarchy, defied, resisted, in short, been empowered through writing their lives. In a literary canon and a Western tradition that had "othered" women, whether as goddesses or demons, on pedestals or in back rooms, this effort to reclaim women's lives and discover how women would speak "in their own words" was an essential initiatory gesture. Without excavating and revaluing the buried texts of women's autobiography, the critical ferment of the last twenty years could not have occurred.

Revising Theories of Autobiography

With the loosening of formalist New Criticism's hold on literary scholarship, several critics began reading autobiographies as literary texts, rather than documentary histories. But the typologies, accounts, and theories of autobiography continued to dismiss, erase, and misidentify women's autobiographical texts. For example, Georges Gusdorf's "seminal" essay "Conditions and Limits of Autobiography," published in French in 1956 (and widely known through its publication in English in the Olney collection, 1980), defended autobiography as an "art" and "representative" of the best minds of its time because it "recomposes and interprets a life in its to-

Barthes

tality" (38).¹ But, like Georg Misch in his earlier three-volume *History of Autobiography*, Gusdorf configured autobiography as unquestionably white, male, and Western: "the artist and the model coincide, the historian tackles himself as object . . . he considers himself a great person" (31).² Wayne Shumaker in 1954 discussed some women's autobiographical texts in his history of autobiography in England, but ascribed to them "feminine" qualities that marginalized their contributions to the development of the genre. By the end of the seventies the growing critical interest in autobiography studies was evidenced by several texts that would remain influential throughout the decade for theorizing autobiography, notably the dissemination of French critic Philippe Lejeune's theory of the autobiographical pact, James Olney's collection of essays, *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*, and studies of American autobiography by William Spengemann and Albert Stone. In the Olney anthology one essay, by Mary G. Mason, focused on women's autobiography and another, by Louis Renza, discussed the significance of a woman's autobiographical text (*The Life of Saint Teresa of Avila*) without foregrounding gender issues. In Spengemann women were absent from the tradition of autobiography mapped. Only Stone made a sustained attempt to address the intersection of race, class, and gender in the American tradition by focusing on many women's and ethnic, notably African American, autobiographies.

Around 1980: First Forays—Theories Based on Women's Experience

Around 1980 the criticism of women's autobiography necessarily came of age. It was clear that new theories and generic definitions were required to describe the women's writing that had been recovered and was being produced. Why? Gradually, it became clear to many feminist critics that academic scholars were complicit in

broader cultural practices that valued women's writing only in terms of, and as the "other" of, men's writing. In publication, at conferences, in scholarly overviews, references to women's writing were often uninformed or condescending. Throughout the 1980s feminist critics intervened in what they saw as traditional reading practices that assumed the autobiographer to be male and reproduced cultural stereotypes of differences between men and women.

The 1979 collection of excerpts from British and American women's autobiographies *Journeys: Autobiographical Writings by Women*, edited by Mary G. Mason and Carol Hurd Green, mapped a skeletal canon. Mason's introduction proposed a women's autobiographical tradition rooted in four texts, the late-medieval life writings of Margery Kempe and Julian of Norwich and the self-effacing histories of others penned by Margaret Cavendish and Anne Bradstreet. Mason's essay, expanded as "The Other Voice" in Olney's collection, became the basis for much later theorizing of women's autobiography. It argued that women's alterity informs their establishment of identity as a relational, rather than individuating, process: "[T]he self-discovery of female identity seems to acknowledge the real presence and recognition of another consciousness, and the disclosure of female self is linked to the identification of some 'other'" (Olney, 210). Mason used an essentialized "woman" as an internally coherent gender distinction. And she contrasted the flamboyant self-staging of "the drama of the self" (210) in a male text, Rousseau's *Confessions*, with the relational self-presentations of these four women writing "radically the story of a woman" (235). Later critics, notably Susan Stanford Friedman, would productively expand Mason's argument for relationality by appeal to psychoanalytic theory and multicultural texts.

Even more influential in 1980 was the first anthology of essays in the field, *Women's Autobiog-*

raphy: Essays in Criticism, edited by Estelle C. Jelinek. The fourteen essays, most on white twentieth-century literary autobiographers in the British and American traditions, inaugurated sustained critical inquiry into women's experience as the basis of their autobiographical practice. Several essays called for either expanding the literary canon of autobiography or establishing an alternative canon of women's writing (Suzanne Juhasz, Annette Kolodny, Sidonie Smith and Marcus Billson). Jelinek's introduction called for diverse kinds of analysis to be brought to reading women's autobiography: "the historical, the social, the psychological, and the ethnic," as well as "rhetorical, poststructuralist, and Jungian" analyses (x). Jelinek primarily used gender, uninflected by class, ethnicity, genres, or life cycle, to define women's autobiography, and paid little attention to geographic or political locations. She argued that differences between the sexes are manifest in both the content and the style of autobiography (xi) and may be ascribed to the long-term restriction of women to the private, personal world and the prevailing view that women's lives are too "insignificant" to be of literary interest (4).

Jelinek contrasted the autobiographies of women and men on several points: At the level of content, she argued, men distance themselves in autobiographies that are "success stories and histories of their eras" focused on their professional lives (10), while women's life writings emphasize personal and domestic details and describe connections to other people (10). At the level of life scripts, men aggrandize themselves in autobiographies that "idealize their lives or cast them into heroic molds to project their universal import" (14–15). Women, by contrast, seek to authenticate themselves in stories that reveal "a self-consciousness and a need to sift through their lives for explanation and understanding," employing understatement to mask their feelings and play down public aspects of

their lives (15). At the level of temporality, men shape the events of their lives into coherent wholes characterized by linearity, harmony, and orderliness (16). Irregularity, however, characterizes the lives of women and their texts, which have a "disconnected, fragmentary . . . pattern of diffusion and diversity" in discontinuous forms because "the multidimensionality of women's socially conditioned roles seems to have established a pattern of diffusion and diversity when they write" (17). For Jelinek, women's narratives mime the everyday quality of their lives—their life writings are "analogous to the fragmentary, interrupted, and formless nature of their lives" (19). That is, a pattern of discontinuity consistently characterizes women's autobiography just as it marks their lives.

Jelinek's argument about women's discontinuous narrative textuality asserted a model of coherence for men's autobiographies that, from the perspective of the late nineties, seems difficult to maintain for the autobiographical writings of, say, Richard Wright and James Baldwin, as well as Augustine, Rousseau, and Franklin. Not only was this model of women's autobiography mimetic in form and expressive in content for women's lives; it also assumed that "experience" is unproblematically "real" and "readable," and can be captured transparently in language expressing the truth of experience. Jelinek's "Introduction" had a manifesto quality in its essentializing of gendered experience to the exclusion of other differences in women's autobiographies and its sweeping analogy between lives and texts.

Several critics in the Jelinek collection, however, gestured toward a more temperately theorized view of writing and analyzed texts such as *The Woman Warrior* that became crucial for exploring women's autobiography. The most significant impact of the Jelinek collection was that a vigorous group of feminist critics claimed women's autobiography as a field of cultural

study and went on to extended studies of the field or of particular autobiographers.

A focus on women's experience as the true feminist "content" of women's autobiography and the transparent "expression" of their lives enabled critics' intervention in autobiography, but it essentialized woman. The approaches to women's autobiography that we have discussed tend to be based on experiential models that are vertical and foreground certain moments in the life cycle—childhood, adolescence, marriage/career, aging (for example, Spacks's analysis of "the female imagination" in the life cycle). Such models oppose all women to all men and set up a structure of resistance and self-authorization through collective critique and political action based on assumed universal subordination.

Clearly, the analysis of Second Wave feminism, which read women's lives as inextricably embedded in patriarchy—understood as a general, ahistorical, transcultural system of social organization through which men maintained domination over women—informed the experiential model of women's autobiography. Another foundational tenet of Second Wave feminism, the egalitarian sisterhood of all women as a collectivity undifferentiated in its subordination, is also evident in early analyses of women's autobiography, where the "we" of women was asserted unproblematically.³ That assumption would later be severely critiqued in autobiographical writings by women of color who had been rendered invisible in these accounts and who would write autobiographically to announce their differences in an irreducible plurality of voices.

Nonetheless, certain provocative questions were posed by first-stage theorists of women's autobiography: To what extent is women's autobiography characterized by the frequency of nonlinear or "oral" narrative strategies, unlike the master narratives of autobiography that seem to pose stable, coherent self-narratives? To

what extent is it characterized by frequent digression, giving readers the impression of a fragmentary, shifting narrative voice, or indeed a plurality of voices in dialogue? Is the subject in women's autobiography less firmly bounded, more "fluid"? If in women's autobiography writers often authorize their texts by appeal to the authority of experience rather than by public achievement or historical significance, should this privileging of the personal and domestic be gendered female? To what extent can it be ascribed to class and cultural moment or to an alternative rhetoric of the familiar style within the essay tradition?

Second Stage—Theorizing Beyond the Experiential in Women's Autobiography

In the wake of Jelinek's 1980 collection, several influential books appeared throughout the eighties that, in offering readings of particular texts and laying the groundwork for a women's counter-canon, gradually revised and expanded the conceptual terms she had laid out. By the end of the decade none of Jelinek's definitional parameters remained uncontested.⁴

Two American critics well versed in French feminism and the French literary tradition, Nancy K. Miller and Domna C. Stanton, drawing on the early work of Germaine Brée, laid important groundwork for revising gender essentialism in the light of Second Wave theories of difference. They argued, in different ways, that theorizing in women's autobiography should not simply invert the exclusionary logic of the dominant tradition, but, instead, map women's dialectical negotiations with a history of their own representation as idealized or invisible. In "Toward a Dialectics of Difference" Miller critiqued the universalization of maleness as humankind in the literary canon and called for a gendered reading of genre. Refusing the "fiction" of a de-gendered reading, she urged critics to "read for difference," in a "diacritical gesture," and ar-

Second wave
feminism
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gued for reading as “a movement of oscillation which locates difference in the negotiation between writer and reader” (56).

Domna C. Stanton’s collection *The Female Autograph* (1984), which announced itself as “a ‘conversation’ between writers and critics across cultural and temporal boundaries,” cast a wide net for women’s autobiography, with essays on women autobiographers from tenth-century Heian Japan to twentieth-century Palestine. Its spirit of inclusionary breadth indicated the expansion of boundaries, historically, generically, and in media, that critics of women’s autobiography were pursuing in the decade. Stanton’s lead essay, “Autogynography: Is the Subject Different?” critiqued the essentialism of first-stage criticism and theorized in terms of multiple differences of the subject. Stanton rehearsed with droll rapidity dozens of denunciatory comments by male critics about women’s autobiographical texts and female textuality, positioning herself like Woolf’s narrator in *A Room of One’s Own*, at the margin of the literary world. Stanton’s “I” asked why women’s lives are suppressed in literary history and proposed a new nomenclature of “autogynography” for the separate genre of women’s autobiography. In mapping a textual tradition of women’s life writing, Stanton tried both to circumvent gender essentialism and to resist appropriation by the dominant tradition of autobiographical theory.

One of the emerging and enduring debates in theorizing women’s autobiography, as Marjanne E. Goozé pointed out, is how narrowly or broadly to construct the field of autobiographical texts. Some early essays and collections argued strongly for an inclusionary scope of “women’s personal literature of the self,” in Margo Culley’s phrase (“Women’s,” 13). The Hoffmann and Culley collection, *Women’s Personal Narratives* (1985), included women’s letters, diaries, journals, and oral histories to expand the canon of women’s writing. Culley’s

title, “Women’s Vernacular Literature: Teaching the Mother Tongue,” announced the essay’s agenda. Likewise, Hoffmann called for reading the writings of non-professional women to discover “the modes of verbal art practiced by most women who use language to give shape and meaning to their experiences” (1). These essayists asserted that the interrelational and conversational purposes of women’s writing distinguish it from men’s “rhetorical” purposes (Elouise Bell, 168).

An inclusionary view of women’s personal writing was also emphasized in *Interpreting Women’s Lives: Feminist Theory and Personal Narratives* by the Personal Narratives Group (1989). The group, including ten scholars in the literary and social sciences, gathered together essays that offered multidisciplinary perspectives—from anthropology, sociology, history, political science, as well as literary disciplines—on a wide range of women’s personal narratives drawn from everyday life venues such as abortion activism and from developing as well as developed countries. Electing to speak of “narrative forms” rather than the genre of autobiography, the Group called for exploring women’s narratives as sources for our understanding of gendered identity: “Women’s personal narratives embody and reflect the reality of difference and complexity and stress the centrality of gender to human life . . . [they] provide immediate, diverse, and rich sources for feminist revisions of knowledge” (263). While it is beyond the scope of this Introduction to survey the ever-growing literature on women’s personal narratives in the social sciences, clearly work on personal writing has become increasingly interdisciplinary. For example, the collection *Investigating Subjectivity: Research on Lived Experience*, edited by Carolyn Ellis and Michael G. Flaherty (1992), explored personal stories as a mode of incorporating the investigator’s reflexivity.

Other theorists of women’s autobiography

called for a primary focus on the genre of autobiography, in order to read women's writing within, and against, the master narratives of the West. In 1986, in *The Tradition of Women's Autobiography*, Estelle C. Jelinek proposed to set forth a two-thousand-year-old tradition. But unfortunately this book, in its sparse documentation and focus on the white Euro-American tradition, demonstrated the limits of first-stage theorizing as surely as her 1980 collection had shown its strengths.

The late eighties saw a breakthrough in numerous studies of women's autobiography. Two books in particular proposed theories centered in women's textuality and the history of women's cultural production rather than simply a gendered identity. In 1987 Sidonie Smith's *A Poetics of Women's Autobiography* argued that, in an androcentric tradition, autobiographical authorization was unavailable to most women. Historically absent from both the public sphere and modes of written narrative, women were compelled to tell their stories differently, and had done so, at least since medieval autobiographer Margery Kempe (*Poetics*, 50). Smith asserted that any theory of female textuality must recognize how patriarchal culture has fictionalized "woman" and how, in response, women autobiographers had challenged the gender ideologies surrounding them in order to script their life narratives. Smith posed key questions for reading a woman's autobiography: How does she authorize her claim to writing? how does she negotiate the gendered fictions of self-representation? how is her literary authority marked by the presence or absence of her sexuality as subject of her story? Smith was particularly interested in the historical specificity of the double-voiced structure of women's narratives as it reveals the tensions between their desire for narrative authority and their concern about excessive self-exposure.

In *Autobiographical Voices: Race, Gender, Self-*

Portraiture (1989), Françoise Lionnet staked out an intercultural territory of writing by women of color and proposed a theory of *métissage* to articulate how marginalized subjects voice their lives. Lionnet argued that as historically silenced subjects, women and colonized peoples create "braided" texts of many voices that speak their cultural locations dialogically. *Métissage*, viewing autobiography as a multi-voiced act, emphasized orality and the irreducible hybridity of identity. In privileging difference, plurality, and voices, Lionnet asserted that not only new subjects but new kinds of subjects were emerging, and that "traditional" autobiographies could be read differently as well.

In many ways Smith's and Lionnet's theories shared an interest in the rhetoric of women's self-presentation. Centering their investigations on histories of women's subjectivities in dialogue with one another, rather than as adjunct to a tradition of "high" literature, their books set forth frameworks to assert women's autobiography as a legitimate field of analysis and practice.

The year 1988 saw the publication of two collections that were also influential for women's autobiography. In *Life/Lines: Theorizing Women's Autobiography* Bella Brodzki and Celeste Schenck gathered essays that read First World traditions of autobiography against postcolonial forms such as the *testimonio* (Doris Sommer), and diverse sexualities in the coming out story (Biddy Martin), as well as expanding the concept of autobiographical textuality to women's films, painted self-portraits, and poetry. Insisting on a more globalized concept of women's writing that ranged from Native American to Egyptian to Québécois texts, Brodzki and Schenck theorized explicitly as well as editorially. They reasserted the *bios* that Domna Stanton had excised in her notion of "autogynography," and called for a revision of post-structuralist theory, to assert "the imperative situating of the female subject in spite of the

postmodernist campaign against the sovereign self" (14). Urging attention to female specificity against both feminist essentialism and "pure textuality," Brodzki and Schenck argued for a kind of theorizing that allows the female reader the "emotional satisfaction" of a referential world of women's lives (14).

Another 1988 collection, *The Private Self*, edited by Shari Benstock, with essays examining a wide range of women's narrative forms, includes two influential essays that contextualized female subjectivity in very different ways. Susan Stanford Friedman, in "Women's Autobiographical Selves: Theory and Practice," focused on "relationality" in women's autobiography as an expression of the "fluid boundaries" they experience psychologically. Shari Benstock, in "Authorizing the Autobiographical," offered a Lacanian reading of women's textuality as "fissures of female discontinuity" exemplified in the writing of Virginia Woolf. (These theorizings of subjectivity are explored in part 2 of this Introduction.)

Carolyn Heilbrun's *Writing a Woman's Life* (1988) was an important milestone in women's autobiographical criticism because it called the attention of a larger public to the field. Advertised by book clubs, taught in many women's studies courses, and used as a reference by readers uneasy with more "academic" feminist theory, Heilbrun's study was both inclusionary and deliberately nontheoretical. On the other hand, in analyzing women's coming to voice for a wide female readership, she focused on women's *lives* rather than their texts; for "we are in danger of refining the theory and scholarship at the expense of the lives of women who need to experience the fruits of research" (Heilbrun, 20). Heilbrun explored the recent past when women had begun to assert power and control—"only in the last third of the twentieth century have women broken through to a realization of the narratives that have been control-

ling their lives" (Heilbrun, 60)—rather than previous centuries of silencing in a patriarchal literary tradition, when this realization was encoded, often obliquely, in the long and rich history of women's self-representations. *Writing a Woman's Life* is a valuable resource for examining the lives of women in the West who have written autobiography in this century, and its focus has been complimented by many theorists in this decade writing on the lives and autobiographies of women writers throughout the world.

If Heilbrun sought to find an autobiographical thread in many kinds of women's writing, Rita Felski's *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics* (1989) provided an alternative model for exploring women's personal narratives broadly in a European, notably Germanic, frame. Critiquing the gender essentialism of much feminist writing, Felski foregrounded the social contexts of a wide range of women's confessional narratives that enforce gender-based identifications and examined their discursive practices. Revisionist in intent and focused on the intersection of politics and personal narrative, Felski's book helpfully extended the text-based focus of such work in German women's autobiography as Katherine Goodman's *Dis/Closures: Women's Autobiography in Germany between 1790 and 1914* (1986) and anticipated the ambitious reading of women's autobiographical practices sketched by Barbara Kosta in *Recasting Autobiography: Women's Counterfictions in Contemporary German Literature and Film* (1994). Similarly, for French and francophone women's autobiography Leah D. Hewitt, in *Autobiographical Tightropes* (1990), mapped concerns that yoke writers of personal narrative such as Nathalie Sarraute, Monique Wittig, and Maryse Condé, who had not previously been linked as generic practitioners, and argued that "they all openly adopt dialogic patterns to sustain the figure of an interactive subject" (194).

Specifying Location—Materialist and Difference Theorists

While many theorists of women's autobiography worked primarily in generic terms, important explorations of women's writing were also grounded in analyses of specific historical periods. Notably Felicity Nussbaum's *The Autobiographical Subject* (1989) on eighteenth-century women's writing and Regenia Gagnier's *Subjectivities* (1991) on nineteenth-century British working-class writing performed close readings of neglected texts of women's writing and provided materialist analyses of culture to situate forgotten women's traditions within established periods of literary history, thereby revising the terms of subjectivity. In-depth analysis of Victorian women's autobiography by critics such as Mary Jean Corbett, in *Representing Femininity: Middle-Class Subjectivity and Victorian and Edwardian Women's Autobiography*, and Linda H. Peterson, in "Institutionalizing Women's Autobiography: Nineteenth-Century Editors and the Shaping of an Autobiographical Tradition," called attention to the multiplicity and variety of women's autobiographical writings during a period when most were supposed to be outside public life.

The important work of reclaiming African American autobiography also contributed to amplifying the canon and honing the critical lens of women's autobiography theory. Jean Fagan Yellin's revival of Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, long ascribed to Lydia Maria Child, and the restoration of Zora Neale Hurston's *Dust Tracks on a Road* and her other writings under the aegis of Alice Walker⁵ are two cases in point; the current range and status of the field are unthinkable without these texts. Searching analyses by, among others, William L. Andrews, Joanne M. Braxton, Hazel V. Carby, Frances Smith Foster, and Nellie Y. McKay, of Jacobs', Hurston's, and other African Ameri-

can women's autobiographical writings, have re-framed the foundations of American women's autobiography. Braxton's *Black Women Writing Autobiography: A Tradition within a Tradition* mapped interrelationships among texts that, ten years earlier, had been out of print and known to few scholars.

Similarly, for Asian American writing, the proliferating critical scholarship on Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* inspired examination of narratives of immigration and theorizing of specific national identities, hybridity, and generationally distinct histories. Studies of Asian American women's writing by Shirley Geok-lin Lim, Amy Ling, and Sau-ling Cynthia Wong, among others, have insightfully explored both the reception of Hong Kingston and the renegotiation of immigrant autobiography in second-generation Asian American women's writing.

The anthologizing, dissemination, and theorizing of ethnic identity in women's autobiography continue in a productive ferment, led by such critics as Tey Diana Rebolledo and Lourdes Torres on U.S. Latina women's autobiographies, Hertha D. Sweet Wong on Native American oral narratives and autobiographies, and Anne E. Goldman on working-class writing. Many other critics have contributed as well to the study of ethnic women's autobiographies. This critical explosion has rewritten the terms of American autobiography and arguably dislodged the novel as the master narrative of American literature. We call readers' attention to the pivotal role of such critics as William L. Andrews, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Houston Baker, Ramon Saldivar, Genaro Padilla, John Beverley, Greg Sarris, and Arnold Krupat, whose theoretical interventions in autobiographies of women of color have made major contributions to revising the canon and the methods of literary history in the Americas.

Both American literature and autobiography studies have long existed in a state of willed ig-

norance about Canadian writing, but in women's autobiography valuable resources now exist for textual and comparative study. *Essays on Life Writing*, the collection of essays edited by Marlene Kadar (1992), Helen Buss's *Mapping Our Selves: Canadian Women's Autobiography in English* (1993), and the special issue on Canadian autobiography edited by Shirley Neuman for *Essays on Canadian Writing* (1997) have addressed this need in recent years. Julia V. Emberley's *Thresholds of Difference* (1993) foregrounded ethnographic issues in oral histories and written narratives of indigenous Canadian women writers. These studies of Canadian women's autobiographical writing helpfully complicate notions of "American" autobiography.

While most American critics lack the linguistic skill to engage the wealth of women's autobiographical writing being produced or revived in Mexico and the countries of Latin America and the Caribbean, feminist critics of autobiography including Doris Sommer, Debra Castillo, Amy Katz Kaminsky, Cynthia Steele, and Sylvia Molloy for writing in Spanish and Portuguese, and Françoise Lionnet, Elisabeth Mudimbe Boyi, VêVê Clark for French Caribbean, as well as many other critics, attest to a vigorous and nuanced tradition that includes collective histories and testimonios, as well as other genres of self-reflexivity.

The number and variety of collections on women's autobiography have increased during the nineties. *American Women's Autobiography: Fea(s)ts of Memory*, edited by Margo Culley (1992), assessed four centuries of women's personal narratives and, in her extensive bibliographical essay, proposed an eclectic view of women's self-reflexive writing. The University of Wisconsin Press series on American autobiography, notably in *American Autobiography: Retrospect and Prospect*, edited by Paul John Eakin (1992), has provided overviews in wide-ranging critical essays with extensive bibliographies. In

that volume, critics Blanche H. Gelfant, on autobiographies of twentieth-century public women, and Carol Holly, on women's nineteenth-century autobiographies of affiliation, identified important subgenres of women's life writing. The essays in Susan Groag Bell and Marilyn Yalom's collection, *Revealing Lives* (1990), claimed that autobiographical texts are historical lenses through which readers may seek "evocations" of human beings and the mythologizing they do as they shape their life stories. Several of the essays selected by the editors deliberately blurred the distinction between biography and autobiography in employing gender as a lens for investigating life writing as a strategic response. An extreme and suggestive case is that of Charlotte Salomon, German painter-autobiographer and Holocaust victim, discussed by Mary Lowenthal Felstiner, who subsequently published a gripping biography of the artist in 1994.

Theorizing Women's Autobiography in the Wake of Postcolonialism and Postmodernism

For many new scholarly explorations, however, postcolonialism and postmodernism have become the dual focus, as the intellectual turn toward postcolonial studies in the eighties provoked serious engagement with women's status as multiply colonized in many parts of the world. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson in *De/Colonizing the Subject: The Politics of Gender in Women's Autobiography* (1992) and Françoise Lionnet and Ronnie Scharfman in *Post/Colonial Conditions: Exiles, Migrations, and Nomadisms* (1993, two volumes) gathered essays that mapped emergent literatures and reframed women's issues and subjectivities at diasporic sites on the Asian, African, Australian, and American continents. Along with Lionnet's *Postcolonial Representations* (1995) and Barbara Harlow's earlier *Resistance Literature* (1987), these studies proposed issues and examined practices that relate

subjectivity to the material and economic conditions of women's lives, recasting the terms of theories rooted in Anglo-American autobiography. Similarly, the publication and translation of women's autobiographies on a global scale have given new impetus to international and indigenous feminist movements.

Postmodernist theorizing has also stimulated new analytical tools and generated collections, such as Kathleen Ashley, Leigh Gilmore, and Gerald Peters' *Autobiography and Postmodernism* (1994), that dedicate considerable attention to women's autobiography. Some postmodernist critics have proposed new rubrics—for example, Leigh Gilmore's "autobiographics" or Jeanne Perreault's "autography"—to subvert the hold of the term "autobiography" and renegotiate the definition of "woman" as a writing subject. Similarly, Sidonie Smith, in *Subjectivity, Identity, and the Body* (1993), explored the relationship between subjectivity and autobiographical practice by posing questions about how women, excluded from official discourse, use autobiography to "talk back," to embody subjectivity, and to inhabit and inflect a range of subjective "I's." Such critiques of women's autobiography, informed by the theoretical discourses of feminism and postmodernism, have strategically opened new doors for the articulation and analysis of women's autobiographical practices in a global framework.

Before 1980 James Olney could sum up the activity in women's autobiography thus: "As several recent bibliographical publications attest, Women's Studies courses have a sizeable autobiographical literature to draw on, but theoretical and critical writing is for the most part yet to come" ("Autobiography," 16). And come it did, with an extensive body of critical writing that would lead Paul John Eakin to state in 1995: "[T]he serious and sustained study of women's autobiography . . . is the single most important achievement of autobiography studies in the last decade" ("Relational," 7).

Part 2: Theorizing Subjectivity

The gender balance of autobiographical history cannot be corrected simply by adding more women to the list; basic suppositions about subjectivity and identity underlying autobiographical theories have to be shifted.

—Laura Marcus, *Auto/Biographical Discourses* (220)

In this section we map various theoretical approaches to women's autobiography in order to establish a context for the essays that follow. To do so, we recast the history we have just sketched and, in this part, present a set of responses by theorists of women's autobiography to major theoretical currents of the eighties that changed the terms of the field. We want to emphasize here that feminist critics do not slavishly adhere to a particular theoretical line. They actively engage, critique, and modify theoretical models even as they import certain ideas and vocabularies into their reading practices. They also change their theoretical minds, so to speak. As they reflect upon responses to their analyses or as they read the work of other theorists and critics working in the field or in related—or even unrelated—fields, they formulate new ways of approaching the texts they take up.

Theories of Difference: Ego Psychology

By the early eighties the ferment of feminist and poststructuralist critical theory had brought a range of influences to bear upon women's autobiography. Above all, the psychological or psychoanalytical category of "sexual difference" elicited reformulations of what it meant to be "woman." In the United States the work of Nancy Chodorow was influential in rethinking the early dynamics of the mother-daughter relationship and their implications for creatively reframing the discussion of women interdisciplinarily. Chodorow, a psychologist specializing in ego psychology, took existing analyses of the "basic sex differences in personality" between

girls and boys and postulated that "feminine personality comes to define itself in relation and connection to other people more than masculine personality does. That is, in psychoanalytic terms, women are less individuated than men and have more flexible ego boundaries" (44). This notion of "relationality" would have long-term implications for theorizing female subjectivity in autobiography.

Chodorow pursued the differentiating process of ego development before the oedipal stage that Sigmund Freud had described as formative of the (male) autonomous individual. She argued that the mother identifies differently with her boy and girl children. Because she is "a person who is a woman and not simply the performer of a formally defined role" (47) the mother "identif[ies] anticipatorily" with her daughter and therefore confounds for the daughter the process of separation and individuation. By contrast, the boy child turns away from the mother to the father in an identification that is positional rather than personal. In that process a boy learns to define himself as "that which is not feminine or involved with women . . . by repressing whatever he takes to be feminine inside himself, and importantly, by denigrating and devaluing whatever he considers to be feminine in the outside world" (50). As the boy turns away from the mother to identify with his father, he must enforce an emotional break, a rupture in identification, and impose a scheme of difference. A girl, by contrast, comes to develop more fluid ego boundaries than a boy because she does not have to resist her early identification with the mother or undergo a rupture. Therefore she develops less of a desire to sense her difference from the mother. "Feminine identification is based not on fantasied or externally defined characteristics and negative identification," wrote Chodorow, "but on the gradual learning of a way of being familiar in everyday life, and exemplified by the person . . . with whom she has been more involved. It is

continuous with her early childhood identifications and attachments" (51). That is, rather than a firm, differentiated boundary the girl child develops a fluid interface between self and others.

For literary critics reading avidly in the burgeoning interdisciplinary field of women's studies, Chodorow's theory of difference was attractive. Eventually a critique of her theory would emerge: that she hypostasized the difference between a universal boy and a universal girl, ignoring differences within communities; that she universalized the developmental process by giving only superficial attention to cultural practices not located in the twentieth-century West; that, consequently, her call for a political solution was naive. But in the early eighties Chodorow's psychoanalytic framing of difference was persuasive for scholars trying to define perceived differences in men's and women's narratives because it offered a foundational category informed by depth psychology and language acquisition theories. Her discussion of women's developmental difference also accounted for the formation of women's social roles within patriarchy. Linking vertical (psychological) and horizontal (social) axes, Chodorow's hypothesis moved beyond observed particulars of adult experience and "roles."

Chodorow's emphasis on women's relationality informed thinking about women's difference among many early theorists. Although her argument was not specifically linked to Chodorow's work, Mary G. Mason, in "The Other Voice: Autobiographies by Women Writers," stressed that female identity is grounded in relationship and produces textual self-presentations that contrast with masculine self-representations. Mason's "set of paradigms" for women's life writing involved the postulation of an "other" toward, through, and by whom women come to write themselves, whether that other is "God," for instance, or a "husband." The work of Chodorow was also important in encouraging literary critics to shift their focus

from how daughters relate to “patriarchal” fathers to how they are connected to their mothers and the larger community of women.

Susan Stanford Friedman, in “Women’s Autobiographical Selves: Theory and Practice,” incorporated Chodorow’s hypothesis to postulate that women have more “flexible or permeable ego boundaries” (72–82, in this volume). Friedman fused her emphasis on the interconnectedness of women’s interpersonal relationships with an analysis drawn from Sheila Rowbotham’s politically grounded focus on the importance of female community for women’s self-definition. Friedman compellingly summarized the significance of her argument for a “difference” theory of women’s autobiography: “[a woman’s] autobiographical self often does not oppose herself to all others, does not feel herself to exist outside of others, and still less against others, but very much with others in an interdependent existence that asserts its rhythms everywhere in the community” (79, in this volume). By invoking examples from African American and lesbian women autobiographers, Friedman expanded not only the theoretical framework of the field but also its repertoire of exemplary texts. Her essay’s emphasis on women’s “relationality” and community has remained pivotal for a decade.

If terms such as female relationality and fluidity promised theorists of women’s autobiography a more enlightened model for exploring and revaluing women’s experiential histories, some have since cautioned against privileging these characteristics as innate to women’s experience rather than as culturally conditioned responses. Considering theories of maternal identification, Jessica Benjamin warns of the dangers of a “one-sided revaluing of women’s position; freedom and desire might remain an unchallenged male domain, leaving us to be righteous and deroiticized, intimate, caring, and self-sacrificing” (Benjamin, 85; quoted in Marcus, 220).

Theories of Difference: Lacan and French Feminisms

Theoretical models based on the authority of experience assume the transparency of language. But this assumption of transparency has long been challenged by groups of theorists who, influenced by structural linguistics, problematize the relationship of the signifier to the signified and the relationship of the subject to language. In the early eighties feminist theorists began to draw upon the work of the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan in order to sort through the particular dynamics of the young girl’s entry into language and thus of woman’s relationship to the symbolic order of words. Rethinking the Freudian psychoanalytic paradigm, Lacan redirected attention to what he described as the “mirror stage,” critical to the subject’s entry into language.

In the mirror stage the child comes to recognize its image in the looking glass; but as it looks in the glass it sees its image as an other. On the one hand, this image as other gives back to the child the semblance of a coherent identity. On the other hand, through acknowledgment of its image, the child mis/recognizes itself as a unified subject. This moment of mis/recognition is precisely the moment when the divided subject comes into being. As Elizabeth Grosz notes in discussing Lacan, “the subject recognizes itself at the moment it loses itself in/as the other. The other is the foundation and support of its identity, as well as what destabilizes or annihilates it” (“Contemporary,” 44). This “loss” is the mark of “lack”—the incomplete identification of subject and other. “That,” the child says to itself, is “me”! And thus the “I” becomes split. The split in the subject inaugurated by the entrance into language generates the sense of an ever elusive grasping toward self-presence that is forever unachievable. For the split in the subject can never be sutured. Thus, Lacan proposes, the coherent,

autonomous self is indeed a fictive construct, a fantasy of the fully present subject in language.

The Lacanian "subject," established under and through the entry into the symbolic realm of language (what Lacan called the Law of the Father), is a masculine subject. Claiming the phallus as the transcendental signifier, Lacan rewrote the Freudian drama of castration by assigning to the phallus the compensatory promise of dominance in the symbolic realm. For the phallus is signifier for the intervention of the father and his "laws" in the desire of the child. With the entry into language—the realm of the law, what Susan Sellers described as "the pre-established order within which the child must take up its appointed place" (46)—the subject takes up a sexed position as either male or female. In this process "woman" becomes a reified cultural Other to the phallic masculine Subject—"the fantasised object (Other) that makes it possible for man to exchange and function" (Sellers, 47). Sexual difference is foundational, implicated in the entry into language.

Lacan's theorizing of the split subject, the privileged phallus, sexual difference, the function of the capital-O Other, and the Law of the Father has had a profound impact on feminist theories of the subject. For instance, the old notion of "self" has been redefined as an illusory ego construct (a fiction, a phantasm) and displaced by the new concept of "the subject," always split, always in the process of constituting itself through its others. As a result the fundamental terms invoked in discussions of autobiography have shifted as attention has been directed to the etiology of sexual difference, the relationship of the subject to its constitutive others, and the rhetorics of the self.

Lacanian theory has been refracted by a host of subsequent theorists who in turn have influenced the reading of women's autobiographies. From France came the work of the French feminists, among them Luce Irigaray, Hélène Cixous,

and Julia Kristeva, three theorists who have responded in markedly different ways to Lacan. In her militant manifesto "Laugh of the Medusa," Hélène Cixous urged women to resist their silencing within the Law of the Father and to "steal" the language in order to write toward their difference, difference that has been misidentified in the Law of the Father. This new language would be, according to Cixous, a writing of and from the body.

For Luce Irigaray, representation is always representation within the "logic of the same" precisely because the subject is constitutively masculine. If the history of metaphysics and of representation in the West has been a history of the violent misrepresentation of woman in "phallogocentrism," or what she labeled metaphorically a logic of solids, then what is required is a sustained critique of the "logic of the same"—the specular logic through which "man" projects onto the surface of "woman" her "lack" and his fullness in alterity. What is also required is the creation of a language alternative to specularity through which women can articulate their difference, their desire. This nonphallogocentric language she metaphorizes as the logic of fluids, a logic emergent from women's different sexuality. It is a sexuality transgressive of stable boundaries, unity, sameness.

Julia Kristeva, rethinking Lacan's notion of the "symbolic" realm, proposed a presymbolic realm she calls "the semiotic." For Kristeva the realm of the semiotic is the space of *jouissance*, the nonverbal effluence of subjectivity that lies outside the Law of the Father, outside logocentric thinking and practices of representation. The eruptions of the semiotic signal the eruption of the irrational, that which must be suppressed in order for the subject to imagine itself as coherent, unified, autonomous. Because the self is a fiction sustained by the very practices of representation, its fictiveness can be glimpsed in the shadows of the semiotic, in the gaps, in non-

sense, in puns, in pleasurable rhythms, all of which erupt from the unconscious (or preconscious) to disrupt meaning. As a strategy for resisting the Law of the Father, Kristeva thus proposes a politics of negativity. In response to the force of identifications, the subject can resist by insisting "I am not this and I am not this." Critically, Kristeva locates the figure of the preoedipal mother in the domain of the semiotic. Hers is the powerful mother not yet diminished and denigrated by association with castration.

There have been significant critiques of psychoanalytically-based approaches to sexual difference. An unnuanced psychoanalytic logic is a universalizing, indeed essentializing logic, despite claims to the contrary, since it assumes the sexual difference of two oppositional sexes as foundational, implicated in the entry into language. For some as well, psychoanalytic logic has the effect of hypostasizing temporality because it proposes a "tragic" narrative paradigm of human psychosexual development that reinforces the impossibility of change and of communication, thus begging the question of the subject's agency.

The rereadings of Lacan (and Freud) enacted by Cixous, Irigaray, and Kristeva have had tremendous importance for the reading of women's autobiography. They provide a way to confront the entrenched hold of patriarchal structures by locating them deep within the unconscious and the subject's foundational relationship to language. They provide a way of understanding the complexity of female positioning as a split subject within the symbolic order and its logic of representation. They provide terms for understanding how the female subject mis/recognizes herself as a coherent subject. They encourage readers to look for gaps and silences in texts, to read away from coherence—in fact, to become skeptical about such previously accepted notions in autobiography theory as the linearity of narrative and a unified concept of selfhood.

They provide a vocabulary for exploring the relationship of women to language, to systems of representation, to the mother, to the body. Since the intervention of the French feminists in psychoanalytic theories, critics have discovered in women's autobiographical texts strategies for writing the subject "other"-wise. Finally, all three theorists explored, in poetic and playful engagements with theory, possibilities for alternative languages. Their appeal to writing the body and to exploring diverse writing practices has prompted others to develop alternative critical styles. In fact, we might trace the current interest in personal criticism in part to the experimental texts of Irigaray, Cixous, and Kristeva.

Thus in the eighties, several theorists of autobiography adapted the work of Lacan and the French feminist theorists even as they remained skeptical of the extremist pronouncements issuing from France regarding the erasure of the author-function in the text. In "Writing Fictions: Women's Autobiography in France," Nancy K. Miller approached the issue of women's self-writing by asking: "Who is speaking? And in whose name?" (46). In "Autogynography: Is the Subject Different?" Domna C. Stanton asked a series of sophisticated questions about the writing woman and her autobiographical practices, proposing that the splitting of woman's subjectivity must be understood in the context of her "different status in the symbolic order": "Autogynography," concluded Stanton, "dramatized the fundamental alterity and non-presence of the subject, even as it asserts itself discursively and strives toward an always impossible self-possession. This gendered narrative involved a different plotting and configuration of the split subject" (140, in this volume). In "Authorizing the Autobiographical," Shari Benstock looked to Lacan's "mirror stage" as a figure through which to trace how the definition of writing is loosened from self-consciousness toward the unconscious. Even as the autobiographical act gestures

→ Shusterman's practice →
 → Arlene → N
 want to make
 coherence 20

Loss in A+N's text... Politics of Mourning... Loss...
 toward a desire for the "self" and "self-image" to "coincide," the act, especially for women who "question" the authority of the Law of the Father, leads not to the inscription of a unitary self but to the self decentered or elided by "the fissures of female discontinuity" (152, in this volume). And in "Mothers, Displacement, and Language in the Autobiographies of Nathalie Sarraute and Christa Wolf," Bella Brodzki worked to reframe a Chodorovian focus on the mother/daughter dyad through the psychoanalytic notion of displacement. For Brodzki the compelling figure haunting the texts of women autobiographers is the figure of the lost mother. The daughter's representation (already a displacement) of the past loss involves her in a complex struggle with this loss that "initiates the metonymic chain of substitute objects of desire, some more productive than others" (158, in this volume).

Subject Matters: Althusser and Foucault

For many critics, psychoanalytic claims about female subjectivity, whether made in the wake of the ego psychology of Chodorow or the split subject of Lacan, too quickly and thoroughly erased the very real imprint of history itself. For materialist historians, subjectivist psychoanalysis universalized sexual difference and ignored the very different material circumstances of people's lives over time.

Concurrently, then, throughout the eighties important work was done by scholars concerned about situating the autobiographical subject in her historical specificity. Some critics turned to the work of French political theorist Louis Althusser, whose concept of ideology attempted to infuse Marxist economic determinism with the dynamic imprint of cultural formations. Althusser understood the social subject as a subject of ideology—not ideology in the narrow sense of propaganda but ideology in a broad sense of the pervasive and inescapable cultural formations of

the dominant class (what he termed "state apparatus"). As a way of understanding how ideology works to conform the subject, Althusser differentiated "Repressive State Apparatuses" (RSAs) from "Ideological State Apparatuses" (ISAs). RSAs are more coercive state institutions such as the military, the police, the judicial system. ISAs are less overtly coercive institutions—social services, educational institutions, the family, and cultural formations, such as the institution of "literature" and modes of popular culture. Both RSAs and ISAs "hail" the subject who enters them, calling her to a certain subject position. In this sense she is "interpellated" as a certain kind of subject through the ideology that informs and reproduces the institution. Critically, the "individual" understands herself as "naturally" self-produced precisely because the processes of interpellation are hidden, obscured by the practices of institutions. The subject, then, is invested in and fundamentally mystified by her own production. An ideological critique of her engagement in the state apparatus is required to understand her own social formation, though such a critique will not undo it.

Althusser's analysis of ideology and interpellation contributed to feminist critiques of the West's romance with the free, autonomous "individual." For the Althusserian critique understood that "individual" to be a function of ideology. Students of Althusser directed attention to the ways in which historically specific cultural institutions provide ready-made identities to subjects. "Autobiography" becomes one such literary institution in the West. It has its traditions (or history); it participates in the economics of production and circulation; and it has its effects—that is, it functions as a powerful cultural site through which the "individual" materializes. Althusser's theory of ideology and subject formation sets the stage for political readings and for the politicization of subjectivity; that is, for readings that attend to the ways in which lit-

erary genres are complicit in reproducing dominant ideologies.

Michel Foucault was also influential for feminist theorists concerned with developing a materialist praxis. Unlike Althusser, Foucault came to understand power not as monolithic or centripetally concentrated in official and unofficial institutions; rather power (with a small *p*) is culturally pervasive, centrifugally dispersed, localized. For Foucault there is no "outside" of power; power is everywhere and inescapable. And it is "discursive," that is, it is embedded in all the languages of everyday life and the knowledges produced at everyday sites. Discourses function as so many "technologies of self" through which the subject materializes. To understand the technologies of self the theorist must attend to several aspects of historical practice: the historical specificity of discourses, historically situated ways of knowing and figuring the world, historically specific regimes of truth. And "history" itself must be redefined as a "genealogical" investigation into the historical emergence of concepts about persons through which knowledge claims are produced. Genealogical inquiry thus becomes what Lee Quinby termed "desacralization," the exposure of local disruptions, contradictions, inconsistencies in the production of regimes of truth (xii–xiii).

Foucault's emphases on the discursivity of texts, on historically specific regimes of truth/knowledge, and on genealogy have had a profound impact on scholars studying women's autobiographical practices. They have used Foucauldian analyses to critique the notion of women's experience, the romance of the "authentic" woman's voice, and the recourse to transparent notions of the "truth" of autobiographical experience and the "truth teller" status of the autobiographer. In her essay "Experience," for example, Joan W. Scott challenged the foundational status of experience as a ground of analysis. She called for the historicizing of "experi-

ence" and for reading experiential categories of identity as "contextual, contested, and contingent" if we are to analyze productively how individuals think of, come to know, and represent themselves in its terms (68, in this volume). "Experience," she writes, "is at once always already an interpretation and is in need of interpretation" (69, in this volume).

As neither Althusser nor Foucault addressed issues of gender, however, scholars of women's autobiography have had to critique their theories even as they use them to ground their analyses. To read women's autobiographical texts is to attend to the historically and culturally specific discourses of identity through which women become speaking subjects. Scholars have explored which discursive practices determine the kind of subject who speaks, the forms of self-representation available to women at particular historical moments, the meaning they make of their experiential histories. Such readings encourage us to think about women's texts—as we do about any texts—as sites for the re/production of knowledge.

Leigh Gilmore, in *Autobiographics*, examined autobiography as a Foucauldian "technology of the self" engaged with the discourses of truth telling and lying as it has authorized some "individual" identities and reproduced gendered identity. Focusing on noncanonical women's texts of self-representation, Gilmore argued for a counter practice of "autobiographics" that would emphasize the writing of multiple, contradictory experimental identities as a means to locate the autobiographical as a "point of resistance" (184, in this volume). And Felicity A. Nussbaum's reading of eighteenth-century British autobiographical writing in the two essays excerpted in this volume ("The Ideology of Genre" and "The Politics of Subjectivity") emphasized, à la Althusser and Foucault, "the materiality of ideology" and explored "the way in which conflictual discourses are yoked together

within ideology to encourage bourgeois subjects to (mis)recognize themselves" (*Autobiographical*, 10). At the scene of autobiographical writing, Nussbaum argued, conflicting concepts of identity are played out as writing subjects, among them variously marginalized women of the eighteenth century, negotiate the politics of subjectivity through generic expectations and contradictions.

In a quite different manner but one also informed by Foucault's interrogation of the confession as a technology of self, Rita Felski's "On Confession" interrogated the "sincerity" and transparency of confessional discourse, particularly recent feminist confessional discourses, to think about how autobiographies accommodate "new" or counterknowledges. For Felski, a feminist recourse to confessional narrative signals a conscious mix of the personal and the political, which are held in tension out of a "concern with the representative and intersubjective elements of women's experience" (84, in this volume). Confession thus becomes a means of creating a new feminist audience to perform the impossible—a validation of the female experience narrated in the text.

As they have invoked Foucault and Althusser with a difference, scholars of autobiography have had to tackle head-on the issue of human agency. Althusser made a space for the agency of the subject through "science," the development of an objective analysis of the effects of ideological interpellation. The earlier work of Foucault seemed to make no space for the agency of the subject; discursive subjection was total; power was all. Dissatisfied with a problematic scientific objectivity, on the one hand, or total subjection on the other, critics began to pose questions aimed at probing the agency of the subject. How can the subject come to know itself differently? Under what conditions can the subject exercise any kind of freedom, find the means to change? Scott, in a sense speaking for many feminist

historians theorizing women's everyday and social history, offered a way of making space for agency by insisting that subjects, simultaneously implicated in contradictory and conflicting discursive calls, discover or glimpse spaces through which to maneuver, spaces through which to resist, spaces for change. ✖ ✖ ✖ ✖

Questions of agency became central to discussions of women's autobiography. How does the woman autobiographer negotiate a discursive terrain—autobiography—that has been until recently a primarily masculine domain? How do discourses of identity differentiate the narrative scripts of normative masculinity and femininity? How does the narrator take up and put off contradictory discourses of identity? How does she understand herself as a subject of discursive practices? How does she come to any new knowledge about herself? What has been "repressed" in the narrative, which dis/identifications erased? By locating autobiographical subjects in a historically embedded context and probing the conditions for gaining agency, critics have reframed the discussion of women's "experience" as nonessentialized.

A thick materialist analysis offers yet another line of inquiry. In "A Feminist Revision of New Historicism to Give Fuller Readings of Women's Private Writing," Helen M. Buss turned to the reading strategies of New Historicist theory and practice, specifically "thick description," to render more complex her approach to the personal diaries of a nineteenth-century British Canadian woman, Isabel West. Revising New Historicism for a feminist project, Buss locates her diarist among conflicting ideologies and the silence at the limits of patriarchal language in a way that renovates West for new readers.

Feminist theorists attentive to the material circumstances of real women's lives also look at the production and circulation of texts, that is, at the commodification of narrative genres and the ways in which women's literary production

is part of economic systems of exchange. British scholars have been especially concerned with the class status of the autobiographer. For these scholars the following questions are motivating: Who is writing? Where is she positioned within the socioeconomic field? How does her class status affect the way she negotiates autobiographical discourses? Who are her readers? How do autobiographical narratives function in the context of class politics and consciousness?

Regenia Gagnier, in "The Literary Standard, Working-Class Autobiography, and Gender," discussed the importance of socioeconomic status and mobility in her analysis of gender in nineteenth-century working-class autobiographies. Many women's working-class autobiographies, Gagnier argues, employ middle-class narratives of self, with their norms of familial, romantic, and financial success, at great psychic cost to the writer. The clash of enfranchised middle-class norms and disenfranchised working-class circumstances produces "narratives of disintegrated personality" that tell a counternarrative of the cost of individualistic ideology for those positioned at its margin. Employing a class analysis to read Victorian women's autobiography, Mary Jean Corbett, in "Literary Domesticity and Women Writers' Subjectivities," explored how women autobiographers "master their anxiety about being circulated, read, and interpreted only by carefully shaping the personae they present, and more especially, by subordinating their histories of themselves to others' histories" (255, in this volume). As they do so these women writers, who achieved public celebrity through work, forge "new concepts of history and subjectivity" as emergent "in and through all individuals" rather than in the "great man." The popular idiom of memoir enabled them to position themselves as astute "observers" of the familial and social scenes even if they sometimes chafed under the contradictions of publicity.

In "Stories," by contrast, Carolyn Kay Steedman positions subjects as "classed" in a complex way that informs her materialist reading of her own and her mother's lives. The personal interpretations of the past that autobiographical stories tell are often in conflict with a culture's ideology because "class and gender, and their articulations, are the bits and pieces from which psychological selfhood is made" (244, in this volume). Locating herself and her mother in a problematic relationship to the particulars of mid-twentieth century London, she reads their lives *against* the norms of British working-class autobiography and refuses any straightforward act of historical interpretation.

We have traced separate trajectories for psychoanalytic and materialist theories of the female subject, but ever more frequently theorists have sought to bridge the gap between them. Teresa de Lauretis, for example, has made a productive intervention for theorists of women's writing practices by reading materialist and psychoanalytic critiques through one another. De Lauretis claimed that the psychoanalytic concept of the unconscious (the repressed) can be reconceptualized as a site of cultural dis/identifications (the repository of culturally unsanctioned identifications). As a result, she radically revised psychoanalytic theory, without jettisoning it, through attention to cultural and historical specificity.

Interrogating "Woman," Multiplying Differences

To historicize experience is to erode the holding power of the concept of the universal "woman" of psychoanalytic modes of analysis. But the most urgent and invested critique of universal woman came from those women of color who focused attention on the cultural productions of subjects marginalized by virtue of their race and/or ethnicity. As they established a communal tradition and proposed countertexts to the

canon, women of color argued the instrumental role of autobiographical writing in giving voice to formerly silenced subjects. Thus another set of motivating questions generated new ways of approaching autobiographical texts: What alternative traditions of women's autobiographical writing are there? How is the canon of (predominantly white) women's writing disrupted and revised by a focus on texts by women of color?

Numerous scholars of women's autobiography, in the United States and throughout the world, have been engaged in exploring a range of texts and theorizing the difference of their differences. Some of those critics are included in this volume, and their work gestures toward the work of other critics as well. In "The Narrative Self: Race, Politics, and Culture in Black American Women's Autobiography," Nellie Y. McKay suggested that African American women's writing needs to be read within a historically inflected paradigm attentive to the imbrication of gender and race. In the nineteenth-century slave and spiritual narratives, McKay argued, African American women asserted models of selfhood distinct from those of both middle-class white women and African American men. In the twentieth century, however, their autobiographical practice has valued variously the experience of growing up black in a racist world, as writers both chart and resist victimization while moving beyond protest narrative to autobiographically bear witness to the costs of their psychic and political survival.

Reading Asian women's autobiographical texts in "Semiotics, Experience, and the Material Self: An Inquiry into the Subject of the Contemporary Asian Woman Writer," Shirley Geok-lin Lim pointed to the importance of multiple marginalities, of gender, ethnicity, nationality, and linguistic community, that continue to characterize the Asian woman writer's cultural status. But she mined this positionality through her engagement with her own experiential history and

the cultural expectations of passivity—which she approached through Julia Kristeva's notion of the "semiotic," secured as it is in the materiality of the body.

In "Immigrant Autobiography: Some Questions of Definition and Approach," Sau-ling Cynthia Wong called for a more historicized and ethnically specific approach to reading the genre, pointing out that the norms of autobiographies of Americanization are Eurocentric. In contrast, the narratives of many Chinese immigrants emphasize pre-American experience and assign nonutopian meanings to an America in which the autobiographer is "more a guide than an adventurer." Hertha D. Sweet Wong argues, in "First-Person Plural: Identity and Community in Native American Women's Autobiography," that "relationality" and "community" signify different practices and values in Native American and feminist contexts. Wong maps an inquiry into the possible "double relationality" of Native women and proposes terms for reading their autobiographical writing as something other than a foreclosed narrative of tragic loss.

Scholars writing on Chicana and Latina women's writing address a rich autobiographical tradition that encompasses nineteenth-century histories as well as a proliferation of contemporary voices. In "The Construction of the Self in U.S. Latina Autobiographies," Lourdes Torres read Latina autobiographical writing as both revolutionary and subversive. Latina autobiographers, appropriating a new literary space in which they can assert mestiza identity and theorize a politics of language and experience, write the contradictions of their multiple identities in ways that enable other women of color to reshape the paradigms and politics of identity in narrative.

In rethinking autobiographical narratives in terms of the politics of difference, scholars have necessarily developed a critique of Western individualism and the expectation that narrative

lives conform to dominant cultural models of identity. They have also challenged theories that posit a universal woman—implicitly white, bourgeois, and Western—and that presume to speak on her behalf. This challenge has been aggressively directed at white feminists who complacently assume the “white” woman as normative; but it gestures as well to the need for collective affiliation with women of many and diverse differences. In *This Bridge Called My Back*, for instance, editors Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa brought over fifty voices together to insist on the inextricability of multiple differences. In doing so, the writers in *Bridge* challenged the white academic feminist establishment’s allegiance to a privileged sexual difference and a white Western “woman.” They exposed as well the untheorized access to power of white academic feminists.

In proposing accounts and counter-canons of women’s autobiography, theorists of difference have explored alternative notions of subjectivity based not on the unique individual but rather on complex collective identifications. That collective identity may be an indigenous one or the kind of diasporic, “pan”-collectivity posited by such critics as Gayatri Spivak and Chandra Talpade Mohanty. Theorists of difference foreground such questions as the following: Who is speaking? How are they already spoken for through dominant cultural representations? What must they do to be heard? By focusing on such questions, theorists of difference provide the terms to articulate how dominant cultural values have been internalized by oppressed subjects. Major explorations of “difference” occur in autobiographies by North American women of color, such as *Borderlands/La Frontera* by Gloria Anzaldúa, *Loving in the War Years* by Cherríe Moraga, *Bloodlines* by Janet Campbell Hale, *Among the White Moon Faces* by Shirley Geok-lin Lim, and *The Sweeter the Juice* by Shirlee Taylor Haizlip.

These challenges by women of color to a white feminist theory of autobiography were launched as identity claims and from collective practices located outside the academy—in urban centers, among collectives and movements. Because critique is inseparable from resistance to dominant modes, new modes of writing were necessary to ground theory in experience, including reading experience. The language of *Loving in the War Years*, for instance, or of *Borderlands/La Frontera*, is language engaged with the meanings, mythologies, conflicts, and contradictions of experiential history. At work to give voice and words to personal history and to map the intersection of personal and public spheres of meaning, writers such as Moraga and Anzaldúa revise the meaning of “theorizing” about subjectivity. They make explorations of what Sidonie Smith has termed the “Autobiographical Manifesto” in her piece of the same name. Their theorizing does not announce itself as “theory,” high, dry, and hermetically sealed. It is theory at the bone and in the flesh. Autobiographical manifestos issue hopeful calls for new subjects even as they look back through critical lenses at the sources of oppression and conflictual identifications.

Women writing about multicultural practices repeatedly caution against reifying any simple model of difference as adequate to explore the complexity of lived or narrative “lives.” As Marianne Hirsch suggested, “Subjects are constituted and differentiated in relation to a variety of screens—class, race, gender, sexuality, age, nationality, and familiarity—and they can attempt to manipulate and modify the functions of the image/screen” (120). This call to complexity in theorizing of difference multiplies these differences and raises a new issue of priority among heterogeneous differences. If differences are multiple and asymmetrical, who bears the difference? “It was a while before we came to realize that our place was the very

house of difference rather than the security of any one particular difference," wrote Audre Lorde in her autobiographical "biomythography" *Zami*.

But how are all these differences held in some kind of dynamic tension? How does one understand the multiplication of identity vectors? Sexual difference is one of several differences mobilized at different moments—differences with histories, and with social and cultural effects. Responding to this thorny question, theorists continue to rethink the relationship between various positions of marginality, between those of gender and those of race, or those of sexuality, or those of class. If there has been a proliferation of categories of difference, there has also been an insistence upon their inextricable linkage to one another. Yet the question remains: How do we specify productively, rather than reductively, the triad of race/ethnicity, class, and sexuality?

For some theorists of women's autobiography, postmodern critiques of the subject have encouraged a rethinking of the terms of identity politics itself. They argue that "race" and "ethnicity" are not things in themselves but historically specific social constructs, materially realized in the discursive practices of everyday life. So too is "woman." Judith Butler argued that identity, be it sexual or other, is always produced and sustained by cultural norms, and she pointed to the limits of identity politics by noting "tacit cruelties that sustain coherent identity" (*Bodies*, 115). If subjects are irreducibly multiple, as Butler observed, prioritizing one identification, such as gender, at the expense of others is not only reductive but paralyzing. Butler stated: "What appear within such an enumerative framework as separable categories are, rather, the conditions of articulation for each other" (117). Identities, imbricated in and constituted by one another, need to contribute to a politics rather than a policing. This politics would be aimed not only at empowering sub-

jects but at overcoming cultural imperatives that sustain fictions of coherence.

Post/Colonial Moves

In the late eighties the influence of postcolonial theory also began to be felt in studies of women's writing, especially women's writing from global locations outside the United States. Through their critiques of Western imperialism and the asymmetries of power emergent in diverse contexts of colonization and decolonization, theorists of postcoloniality registered and assessed the continuing legacies of colonial histories and the contemporary, or neocolonial, reorganization of global capitalism. More precisely, in the wake of Frantz Fanon, Aimé Césaire, and Edouard Glissant, they pondered how the subjectivity of colonized peoples has been constituted through the processes of colonial conquest and the consequent bureaucratization of imperial power. Attention to "the colonized subject" and to what has been termed marginal or minoritized discourse has spurred rethinking of the paradigms of subjectivity. And a central site in that revisionary struggle has been autobiographical discourse, the coming to voice of previously silenced subjects.

Since "autobiography" in the West has a particular history, what we have understood as the autobiographical "I" has been an "I" with a historical attitude—a sign of the Enlightenment subject, unified, rational, coherent, autonomous, free, but also white, male, Western. This subject has been variously called "the individual" or "the universal human subject" or "the transcendent subject" or "man." Cultural attachment to this sovereign "I" signals an investment in the subject of "history" and "progress," for this "man" is the subject who traveled across the globe, surveyed what he saw, claimed it, organized it, and thereby asserted his superiority over the less civilized "other" whom he denigrated, exploited, and "civilized" at once.

Theorists of postcoloniality have thus recognized autobiography as one of the cultural formations in the West implicated in and complicit with processes of colonization.

This critique has had a profound effect on our approach to women's autobiographical practices. If this autobiographical "I" is a Western "I," an "I" of the colonizer, then what happens when the colonized subject takes up a generic practice forged in the West and complicit in the West's romance with individualism? Gayatri Spivak asked whether the "subaltern" can speak at all, given her assignment to a marginal status in colonial and patriarchal discourses. Can a colonized subject speak in or through cultural formations other than those of the colonial master? Is she always already spoken for? This becomes a particularly vexed question in engaging collaborative texts, those narratives that emerge from the joint project of an informant lacking literacy and an interlocutor or editor interested in bringing the informant's story to a broad audience. In such texts issues of power, trust, and narrative authority become critical to the politics of collaboration. Such texts also require that we acknowledge the importance of oral cultural forms and attend to the speakerly text, rather than remain preoccupied with the writerly effects of narrative.

Spivak's provocative question about the un-speakability of the subaltern has elicited countertheories that intend to account for possibilities of resistance and agency. Theorists of postcolonial agency ask the following kinds of questions: How might processes of decolonization take place through, against, and in spite of the cultural dominance of this "I"? How might subjects come to voice outside, or despite, the constraints of Western models of identity? What alternative possibilities of identity have been overwritten by Western models?

Postcolonial theorists also consider how processes of decolonization might be affected

through alternative cultural practices. Some call for narrative modes that are neither linear nor developmental but that attend to specificities of indigenous cultural practices and how those are reformed within histories of colonization. Barbara Harlow attended to collective voicings of resistance by imprisoned women in "From the Women's Prison: Third World Women's Narratives of Prison." The autobiographical writings of imprisoned women at many sites—Palestinian, Egyptian, South African, Latin American, and other—are transforming narrative paradigms as they assert the textual authority of subjects repressed by authoritarian structures. Their narratives of detainment not only propose resistance but call for global social reorganization.

Caren Kaplan, in "Resisting Autobiography: Out-law Genres and Transnational Feminist Subjects," extended Harlow's analysis to sketch several alternative or "out-law" narrative practices through which women negotiate and reform such generic modes as ethnography, biomythography, and psychobiography. Similarly, both Doris Sommer and John Beverley have argued that the *Testimonios* challenges the norms of autobiography as the narrative of an irreducibly collective subject whose acts of witnessing address the hegemony of Western individualism. In "Sacred Secrets: A Strategy for Survival," Sommer extended Harlow's and Kaplan's readings of women's autobiographies of resistance to the writer-reader relationship as complicated by the ethnographer-informant situation. Sommer explores what she calls a rhetoric of particularism in writers such as Rigoberta Menchú, whose narrative refuses intimacy to privileged readers and warns "against easy appropriations of Otherness into manageable universal categories" (199, in this volume). That is, an autobiographical testimony such as Rigoberta's artfully manipulates its audience to perform a cautious reading and resists the autobiographical genre's illusions of narrator-reader intimacy. In tracking

multiple sites of identity and emphasizing the collectivity of subjects who talk back to Western concepts of the autonomous individual, these and many other theorists of postcolonial writing make clear how postcolonial texts have intervened to reframe the terms of subjectivity.

New terms have emerged to capture the complex vectors of de/colonization and of multicultural subjectivity. A variety of adjectives designate subjects of the "in-between," such as hybrid, marginal, migratory, diasporic, multicultural, border, minoritized, mestiza, nomadic, "third space." Each term carries its own historical and theoretical valences. All name aspects of the complex conditions of subjectivity in the late-twentieth-century world. As they ponder this complexity, postcolonial critics of autobiography draw attention to narrative practices in diverse global locations, from the writing practices of indigenous Australians to the narratives of African American women identifying themselves with the black diaspora; from the stories of the First Peoples of Canada to the narrative testimony of Bessie Head in South Africa; from the intellectual autobiographies and memoirs of postcolonial intellectuals living in the West to the resistance literature of the imprisoned, the institutionalized; from the narratives of the immigrants to the New Europe to the narratives of diasporic Chinese. Each of these instances of narrative voicing calls for a careful focus upon the site of de/colonization in its historical, material, and national specificity.

Developing reading practices attentive to these migratory subjects in all their diversity has led theorists to develop new models of transnationalism and transculturation. It has also spurred incisive critiques of readings framed by Western interpretive approaches. And it has led to a shift from the term "women's autobiography" to terms such as "women's autobiographical practices," "women's personal narratives," "women's lifewriting." This shift away from the word *au-*

tobiography marks a shift away from an uncritical Western understanding of the subject of autobiography. 9

Postcolonial theory remains contentious and fractured; it is not monolithic. There are critiques coming from within of the problematic basis upon which postcolonial theorists found their analyses. There are critiques of the very term "postcolonial." For the idea of time as separated into precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial periods is itself caught in a teleological framing of history that always privileges the moment of Western encounter. The critique of Western values as purely Western takes away the transformative agency of cultures as well as their active transformation of inherited Western values as those values are incorporated through indigenous traditions.

And the reification of the voice of the "authentic" indigenous subject can promote a new form of nativism, as Sara Suleri cautioned in "Woman Skin Deep: Feminism and the Postcolonial Condition." Concerned to "dismantle the iconic status of postcolonial feminism" with its recourse to identity politics, Suleri cautioned that the invocation of the "postcolonial Woman" has the effect of erasing the specific historical contexts in which subjects are forced to understand their experience. She distrusted such identity politics because of its embrace of an unproblematic experience and the "local voice" of the autobiographical "as a substitute for any theoretical agenda that can make more than a cursory connection between the condition of postcolonialism and the question of gendered race" (122, in this volume).

Françoise Lionnet argued, however, that it remains crucial for critics to analyze and represent "the subjective experience of muted groups within social structures that rarely allow them to speak as subjects and agents of knowledge," and to retain an "awareness of the multicultural, multiracial dimensions of various strands of

feminism inside and outside the academy" (*Post-colonial*, 188). We include here an excerpt from Assia Djebar's *Women of Algiers in Their Apartment*, with her caution in mind. The noted Algerian novelist wrote her identity as a subject under erasure, colonized by the politics of imperialism, the practices of the harem, and the métissage of languages, in "Forbidden Gaze, Severed Sound." Speaking the silences of Algerian women's lives, she gave voice to collective "fragments of ancient murmuring" (342, in this volume) to "embody" future conversations among women.

Theories of Heteroglossia and Heterogeneity

Theorists in the late seventies and early eighties argued the difference of women's voices. Notably, Carol Gilligan's influential *In a Different Voice* distinguished a "woman's" voice from a "man's" voice in an effort to better understand the differential ethical development of girls and boys. Boys' values she describes as rule-oriented, agonistic, goal directed; girls' values as communal, contextual, relational. The effect of Gilligan's theory of different "voices" was to assign to women an ethical high ground by appeal to a standard drawn from their own experience, not derived from the "universal" experience of men. Subsequent feminist theorists, suspicious of feminist "metanarratives," pointed to the essentializing and universalizing effects of this way of understanding difference in voice (Fraser and Nicholson, 33). Gilligan's notion of a different voice for women was thus fraught with problems for theorizing women's autobiographical practices; but theorizing women's voices—without recourse to a universalizing metanarrative—continued to be an issue.

Throughout the eighties critics employing the familiar metaphors "coming to voice" and "voicing female subjectivity" looked to the resonant theoretical framework provided by Mikhail Bakhtin, who elaborated the concepts of dialog-

ism and heteroglossia. Arguing that "every word is directed towards an answer," Bakhtin claimed "the internal dialogism of the word." Words, that is, are argumentative. They are also always full of play, "plung[ing]," as he says, "into the inexhaustible wealth and contradictory multiplicity" of meanings. For Bakhtin language is the medium for consciousness; thus he understands subjectivity as dialogical in that it is always implicated in "the process of social interaction." Since social groups have their languages, each member of the group becomes conscious in and through that language. But because of what he calls heteroglossia, the proliferation of languages, words, meanings that "mutually supplement one another, contradict one another and [are] interrelated dialogically" (quoted in Henderson, 344, in this volume), the subject speaks through multiple voices. The utterance of the subject is irreducibly dialogic, contestatory, heteroglossic.

According to Mae Gwendolyn Henderson, Bakhtin's theory links "psyche, language, and social interaction" (345, in this volume). The concept of heteroglossia provides a means to join theories of consciousness to theories of culture and to refocus questions of textuality. The individual's language is always language permeated by the voices of others, voices out of the sociocultural field. Dialogism supports the claim that there are always other voices in the text, that even the most monologic of texts can be read for heteroglossia and that the autobiographical subject is a subject of the play of voices.

Dialogism has been particularly illuminating for discussions of women's autobiographical voices. Thinking about heteroglossia and about the social constitution of consciousness enables theorists to get away from the naive notion of the primary text and its hidden or "latent" subtext. Heteroglossia assumes a pervasive and fundamental heterogeneity to human subjectivity. The text is multivocal because it is a site for the contestation of meaning. Numerous critics have

argued for the multivoicedness of women's autobiographical texts as a crucial way to reframe issues of agency and ideological interpellation. By this tactic they avoid the paralyzing polarization of the total determination of the subject, on the one hand, or the total freedom of the subject to make meaning, on the other.

The heteroglossia of language and consciousness is not specific to women's texts as opposed to men's texts, nor is it specific to a particular genre. Thus the notion of the dialogism of the word precludes theorizing any essential or universal difference. It becomes problematic to speak of an "authentic" voice of some universal "woman." The voice of the narrator is a dialogical voice through which heterogeneous discourses of identity cross the tongue. To paraphrase Bakhtin, the word in one's mouth is always somebody else's word. Therefore the reader must be careful not to discredit certain texts as somehow "inauthentic," or in a different (read "not right") voice.

The theorizing of Lionnet and Mae Gwendolyn Henderson, in different ways, demonstrates the enabling potential of theories of heteroglossia in discussions of women's autobiography. Lionnet's concept of *métissage*, put forth in "The Politics and Aesthetics of *Métissage*," has been influential for reading a wide variety of women's personal narratives. This "braiding" of voices addresses such issues as the agency of postcolonial francophone and anglophone women writers mixing indigenous and colonial languages. Lionnet reframed writing as voice, privileging orality and the incorporation of extra-(Euro)literary forms in women's texts as she reflected on the "muted" cultural status of women in many traditional cultures. Similarly, Henderson, in "Speaking in Tongues: Dialogics, Dialectics, and the Black Woman Writer's Literary Tradition," emphasized "glossalalia" and the multiple voices in which black women writers enunciate a complex subjectivity that employs the discourse of the other(s) and as Other contests

dominant discourses (347, in this volume). For these critics women's "coming to voice" has taken on new theoretical potential that need not be essentializing.

Theorizing the Everyday and Cultural Studies

Everyday kinds of writing in personal venues such as the diary and the journal have long fascinated literary critics interested in women's autobiographical writing and in the relationship of texts to women's material lives. In their inclusionary and democratizing projects, these theorists of dailiness focus on differentiating the kinds of subjects who speak in letters, diaries, journals, memoirs. And they rethink issues of temporality, noting the apparent discontinuity in diurnal forms.

In her "Introduction" to *A Day at a Time*, Margo Culley attended to the critical importance of the audience, either real or implied, addressed by the diary writer. For Culley the pages of the diary become "a kind of mirror before which the diarist stands assuming this posture or that" (219, in this volume). Moreover, the ongoing effect of time in the diary means that the outcome of time is unknown by both diarist and reader, so that self-positioning is always in flux. Similarly, using the letters of eighteenth-century women to explore "Female Rhetorics," Patricia Meyer Spacks emphasized the ways in which self-revelation, assumed in the writing of personal forms, conflicts with the ideology of normative femininity as self-effacing. Thus, women letter writers develop strategies of deflection, preoccupation with others, protestations of insignificance, or identification with women as a collectivity, that enable them to engage in the self-assertion of epistolary correspondence.

Up until the 1990s, feminist critics who focused on forms of dailiness confronted criticism that these modes had a secondary or marginal

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status as literature. But since the end of the eighties, the methods and models of cultural studies have been brought to bear on forms of dailiness and generated theories of the everyday constructions of experience. The variety of approaches to women's inscriptions of dailiness is evident in the recent collection *Inscribing the Daily: Critical Essays on Women's Diaries*, coedited by Suzanne L. Bunkers and Cynthia A. Huff. Contributors to this collection considered the different audiences for diaries; the diary as fragments; the broadened textual boundaries of diaries into which women insert various materials; and the intertextualities of diaries by family members.

As Jerome Bruner has argued persuasively, everyday life can be understood as an ongoing narrative negotiation. Life narratives are articulated in collaborative everyday projects, such as family stories and interactions. Or, as the contributors to our collection *Getting a Life: Everyday Uses of Autobiography* suggested, people "get a life" that conforms them to particular institutions (medical, social services, the academy, etc.) and practices (such as narrating the self-help or intimate presexual or "Personals" version of one's life) in diverse social contexts. Michel de Certeau has theorized the significance of "everyday" negotiations as tactics of social groups and noted how self-signification proliferates in an era of advanced capitalism.

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Diaries
The projects of cultural studies are diverse; but in general they signal a move away from privileging "high" literary forms and toward the reading of all kinds of cultural production as textual. Culture is, in its broadest sense, understood as an ever-negotiated site of conflict. And so popular forms become endlessly productive venues for the social constitution of subjects and for their everyday resistances. Thus cultural studies, opening flexible spaces for the serious explorations of alternative modes of self-writing, has revitalized discussions of many kinds of women's textual practices.

The implications of cultural studies approaches for women's autobiography are only beginning to be realized. Linda Martín Alcoff and Laura Gray-Rosendale have explored the conservative and the liberatory effects of what they call "survivor discourse," a discourse emergent in popular culture venues such as television talk shows and self-help groups. Bidy Martin has pointed to the social uses and the everyday politics of coming-out narratives. Other cultural critics have become fascinated with contemporary visual practices, performance art, talk show confessions. Asking us to read all kinds of texts as autobiographical, cultural critics require us to refine our mode of reading.

Concerned with the rush to privilege women's collective "we" as an alternative to the reification of the singular individual, Anne E. Goldman, in "Autobiography, Ethnography, and History: A Model for Reading," attended to "those impulses toward self-presencing which I believe remain an essential characteristic of life writings" (288, in this volume). She looked particularly at the autobiographical writings of working-class white women and women of color in order to understand how autobiographical narrators negotiate the pressures of the "I" and the "we," how they "maneuver between autobiographical and political-cultural texts," how they pursue self-presence as they "represent" a collectivity (290, in this volume).

The autobiographical thus becomes an aspect of textuality rather than a narrowly defined generic practice about lives lived chronologically.

Personal Criticism

In 1988 Jane Tompkins issued a manifesto of sorts to literary critics and theorists in her essay entitled "Me and My Shadow"—get real and get personal. Nancy K. Miller has theorized the need for and the significance of "Getting Personal." "Personal criticism," she explained on her opening page, "entails an explicitly autobio-

graphical performance within the act of criticism. Indeed, getting personal in criticism typically involves a deliberate move toward self-figuration, although the degree and form of self-disclosure of course vary widely” (1). Miller, who distinguished personal from autobiographical criticism, acknowledged its “internal signature” as self-authorizing while criticizing Tompkins’ essay as finally turning its back on theory (2–4).

Personal criticism is widely practiced by women, in homage to the textual practices they work on but also as integral to their efforts to reframe the critical act through feminist pedagogy and praxis. It is in part a response to the sterile evacuation of the personal voice in what has by now become institutionalized as theoretical discourse. The critic who gets personal may critique the claim to universal judgment and the objectivity of any universal critical “I.” Getting personal also becomes an occasion for the critic/theorist to examine her relationship to the object of study, for a white critic to examine her vexed relationship to issues of unequal power as they affect her reading of texts by women of color, for the psychoanalytic critic to turn the lens of psychoanalytic praxis upon her own critical enterprise. For some it becomes a means to theorize personal experience, or, in the words of Joan Scott, to see experience not only as an interpretation but as in need of interpretation. Thus personal criticism facilitates the reading of personal experience and theory through each other.

As a critical gesture personal criticism aims to bridge the troubling gap between academic feminists and feminist activists. It is a search for a wider audience, a broader conversation, ideally on more honest and equal terms. Thus, as Gayle Greene noted, such writing works toward “a clearer sense of responsibility to a social movement . . . to revitalize some important connections—between ourselves and our audience, our writing and its effects” (20). For some, asserting the importance of engaged writing be-

comes a way of assuming certain characteristics of what Antonio Gramsci called the “organic intellectual” within the academy (normally a site of critical disengagement).

One of the most productive and widely circulated practitioners of personal criticism has, of course, been bell hooks. In several volumes of autobiographical essays and in the essay in this volume, “writing autobiography,” hooks made essay writing a way of both “talking back” and “talking to myself.” Moving between a personal “I” and a collective “we,” hooks infused cultural critique with her own responses and politics. The directness of her writing has won her a wide and enthusiastic following, but also sharp criticism, from, for example, Sara Suleri in this volume.

In redirecting attention from the object of inquiry to the critic’s responses to the object, personal criticism can overwrite the subject of inquiry as the theorist’s textual preoccupation becomes herself. At its worst it can resort to willful abandoning of theory for a simplistic identity politics. In a—personally narrated—dissent from personal criticism as critical practice, Linda S. Kauffman asserted: “Writing about yourself does not liberate you, it just shows how engrained the ideology of freedom through self-expression is in our thinking” (“Long,” 133). But for the autobiographer, contextualizing her life narrative as personal criticism attentive to the norms of narrative self-disclosure may enable a more nuanced space for writing the self. Nancy Mairs, in *Remembering the Bone House*, insisted on an integration and eroticization of body and mind precisely in inscribing her experience of disability in the “house” of her past, of memory, to address the commonality of experience. “Our stories utter one another” (473, in this volume).

Queering the Scene, Undoing “Woman”

In 1980 Adrienne Rich’s influential essay “On Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Exis-

tence" appeared, challenging the norm of heterosexuality as natural or chosen. Throughout the seventies Monique Wittig articulated her reading of the lesbian as the third sex, neither the one nor the other, in essays such as "The Straight Mind" and "The Mark of Gender" and novels including *Les Guérillères* and *The Lesbian Body*. Women in particular were called by these authors to reexamine their unreflective assumption of heterosexuality as a norm and homosexuality as perverse or diminished sexuality. Coming-out narratives proliferated, and autobiographies of sexual experimentation became more explicit, as autobiographers investigated the relationship of personal and social experience. In "Lesbian Identity and Autobiographical Difference(s)," Biddy Martin argued that lesbianism must no longer be theorized as "an identity with predictable contents." Rather it should be understood as "a position from which to speak" that "works to unsettle rather than to consolidate the boundaries around identity" (390, in this volume).

While many postcolonial autobiographers, according to Julia Watson in "Unspeakable Differences: The Politics of Gender in Lesbian and Heterosexual Women's Autobiographies," would resist placing sexuality at the center of women's affiliations, contestations around sexuality have emerged as a crucial ground for theory. Watson interrogated the unspeakable as a category "used to designate sexual differences that remain unspoken, and therefore invisible" (393, in this volume). While lesbian desire has until recently been one potent cultural unspoken, so too, suggested Watson, has heterosexual desire remained unspoken. Assumed as normative, that unspeakable desire has functioned to block intercultural affiliations among women.

If difference theorists reinterpreted sexual orientation as relational positionality rather than fixed identity marker, the nineties have brought a retheorizing of debates on sexuality. Queer

studies erupted on the academic scene to shift the terms of debate from sexual difference to issues of "performativity." Theorists such as Judith Butler argued against any simplistic recourse to the essentialized differences of identity politics. In an attempt to "retain" the "explanatory force" of psychoanalysis, Butler, in the "Introduction" to *Bodies That Matter*, used the term "performativity" to capture the provisional and political nature, the "gender trouble," of identity formation. She defined performativity as the "power of discourse to produce effects through reiteration" (368, in this volume). For Butler, an "I" does not precede the social construction of gender identity; the "I" comes into being through that social construction: "The subject is produced in and as a gendered matrix of relations" (371, in this volume). Social construction is always a process of "reiterated acting" (9). Thus bodies "materialize," but the body is not "site or surface"; rather the body is "*a process of materialization that stabilizes over time to produce the effect of boundary, fixity, and surface we call matter*" (372, in this volume). Identity is always coming into being through reiteration and being unfixed through the "gaps and fissures" that emerge "as the constitutive instabilities in such constructions, as that which escapes or exceeds the norm" (373, in this volume).

If gender identity, and identity more generally, is a reiterative process of coming into being and simultaneously failing to cohere, then masculinity and femininity are not fixed attributes of the "self." "Woman" is effectively a style of the flesh, a materialization, that can also be dematerialized, in unconscious and conscious iterations. For queer theorists challenging the notion that there are any differences that are "natural," man, woman—the most "natural" of human categories—are styles of the body. Nor are femininity and masculinity monolithic differences, coherent and unified. There are many

Lesb. → Queen Ident.

Lesb. → Queen Texts

SMITH & WATSON/Introduction

essential sexual difference

↳ performativity of diff

styles of masculinity and femininity, specific to different times, places, and sociocultural locations.

In queer theory the very materiality of the body becomes a site of social construction and conflict. Thus queer theorists challenge any recourse to the body or to the direction of desire as the ground of essential difference. Once again, we find the critique of identity politics—signified by the shift from “lesbian” identity to “queer” identity, the former rooted in a theory of essential sexual difference, the latter in a theory of the performativity of difference. Queer theory proposes a thoroughgoing rhetorical sense of self, a notion of self that has influenced theorists of subjectivity more generally. Sidonie Smith, for example, drew upon theories of performativity in her essay on “Performativity, Autobiographical Practice, Resistance” (108–15, in this volume). Thus queer theory unfixes the relationship of gender identity to sexed body, and gender performance to gender identity. Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano has, however, cautioned that queer theory’s emphasis on performative gender “does not actively factor in how racial formations shape the ‘performance’ of gender and sexual identity” (129), thus pointing to an ongoing debate.

How does “American” change the “performance” of gender?

Deconstructing concepts of gendered voices, gendered bodies, and gendered texts, queer theory has influenced the ways in which women’s autobiographical texts are currently being read. The terms of analysis now focus on autobiographical identity as performative. Such an approach undercuts earlier theoretical investments in certain kinds of autobiographical fixities. For instance, claims based on the binary opposition of man/woman are put into question as multiple gender positions are made available. Kate Bornstein’s 1995 book *Gender Outlaw: On Men, Women, and the Rest of Us* captured this resistance to any fixed style of the body. A transgendered performance artist, Bornstein intertwined a personal narrative with a journey

through theories of sexual identity in order to challenge the reader to resist the notion of any essential concept of masculinity and femininity. In Bornstein’s narrative the usual meanings of identity are evacuated: “My identity becomes my body which becomes my fashion which becomes my writing style. Then I perform what I’ve written in an effort to integrate my life, and that becomes my identity, after a fashion” (1).

Bodies and Desire

Any theorizing of the body in the West takes up the history of the polarization of thought and feeling that assigned the “natural” and “feeling” body to women and the higher capacities of reason to man, a polarization especially pronounced in Enlightenment thinking and its philosophical legacies. The materiality of bodies was erased by the Cartesian identification of being with consciousness, rationality with a disembodied self-consciousness. Man thus projects onto what Irigaray called the “flat mirror” of woman a material groundedness from which he can launch into dematerialized speculation, the transcendental space of pure thought. Thoroughly saturated with her materiality, which is a sign of her diminished humanity, woman struggles to become bodiless as well, but for different reasons.

I think is Nam

Theorists interested in the body seek to retrieve the body from its disembodied, denatured status and to relocate it in the subject. Some, influenced by psychoanalysis, do so by tracking the play of desire across the female body. Others seek to theorize female desire outside the model of psychoanalysis. Still others analyze how the materiality of the female body has been overwritten by—but also necessarily embedded in—social practices. In doing so they look to the histories of specific women’s bodies. Still others challenge the notion of any unified body by exploring the multiplicity of embodiments. Indeed, Kauffman suggested that the late twentieth

century is witnessing a paradigm shift from the specular body to the body staged as spectacle, its insides and outsides exhibited for consumption ("Bad").

Thus theorists interested in women's autobiography have begun to read for the ways in which the body emerges in, disrupts, redirects narrative practices. For if economic and political realities are played out quite literally on the bodies of women, the signature of the political is erased when the reader does not attend to the body in the text. Readers can resist being complicit in the denial of desire to women or the denigration of the body of women by attending to the ways in which narrative is about desire, embodiment, and the material conditions of women's lives and "lives." But in theorizing the body, readers must discover strategies for taking back the (narrative) body in such a way as not to participate in the consignment of women to their bodies.

In this volume, Shirley Neuman's exploration of the phantasmatic male body, "Autobiography, Bodies, Manhood," insists that all, and not just women's, texts be read as sites of bodily inscription and desire. Fascinated by the erasure of the material body that characterizes so much of Western autobiography, Neuman considers "one anomalous moment in which a masculine body ruptures and exceeds the discursive effacement of the corporeal which is characteristic of autobiography" (416, in this volume). Reading the body as simultaneously a material and cultural site on which the nonalignment of biological sex and gender is played out, Neuman looks at the autobiographical writings of Herculine Barbin, the nineteenth-century hermaphrodite about which so much has been written. She does so to tease out in that "rare autobiography which represents the body" the degree to which the narrating subject reproduces normative cultural meanings of sexed bodies and the degree to which s/he resists such cultural inscriptions

(416, in this volume). And in "Mystical Bodies and the Dialogics of Vision," Laurie Finke historicizes medieval mystical bodies to provide a framework for reading how women writers negotiate their constrained and devalued bodily status as they rewrite mystical experience to give themselves agency as visionaries.

Practical Theorizing

In this section we have been tracing the interplay between major theoretical interventions of the last two decades and theories of women's autobiography. But in fact women writing the autobiographical have always engaged in theorizing identity. This interplay between theory and autobiographical writing has intensified in recent years as women offer versions of theory in practice.

Feminist writers have used autobiographical forms, for example, to show how the personal is political. Adrienne Rich has mined the possibilities of poetry, the personal essay, and analysis in her explorations of lesbian identity and women's culture. Audre Lorde extended the mix of autobiography and critique toward the new form of "biomythography" to carve out a writing space expansive enough for her house of difference. Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa combined poetry and essay, Spanish and English, to probe and reimagine the cultural meanings of collective mythologies and the personal politics of border subjects. Related anthologies of women's writing, such as Anzaldúa and Moraga's *Making Face, Making Soul/Haciendo Caras*, reasserted the interweaving of personal narrative and the theorizing of difference. Other subjects of American multiculturalism, such as Maxine Hong Kingston, Janet Campbell Hale, and Meena Alexander, have written in quest of their voices within the vexed legacies of multiple cultural traditions. Shuttling the "black Atlantic," Michelle Cliff turned her experiential history as a subject of post/colonial education into the au-

tobiographical novels *No Telephone to Heaven* and *Abeng*. Carolyn Kay Steedman, in her "genealogical" *Landscape for a Good Woman*, combined autobiographical remembering, biographical case study, and theoretical essay in order to retheorize the working-class subjectivity of her good-enough mother. In Portugal the three Marias engaged in a collaborative narrative of coming of age in a society that represses feminine assertion and denies women's voices. In Germany Christa Wolf repeatedly investigated her childhood as a site for exploring the collective German history of National Socialism and resisting arbitrary assignments of guilt based on political identification. Monique Wittig and Nathalie Sarraute in France, Oriana Falacci in Italy, Elena Poniatowska in Mexico, Bessie Head in Botswana, Nigerian-born Buchi Emecheta in London, Algerian-born Assia Djebar in France have all employed a blend of analytical critique and personal disclosure in shaping feminist voices that resist any easy ideological position. Authorizing their political critiques of women's subjection by appeal to personal experience, they show the resilience and persuasiveness of autobiographical writing as cultural critique.

Women's autobiography has also become a collection of generic possibilities. A wide and growing range of narrative projects have generated new or hybrid forms for addressing diverse audiences—forms such as pathography, collective histories, collaborative life writing projects, testimonial and witnessing, manifesto, bilingual projects, survival narratives, performance art, ethnography, scriptotherapy, and legal testimony. In "Autography/Transformation/Asymmetry," for instance, Jeanne Perreault, mining the possibilities of hybrid writing practices, coined the term "autography" to call attention to the writing of the feminist self as an ongoing negotiation of the shifting boundaries of the "I" and the "we" of feminist collectivity. Through the negotiation of "I" and "we," the autogra-

pher resists "monadic" subjectivity to engage "in a (community of) discourse of which she is both product and producer" (194, in this volume). These autobiographical occasions generate new reading practices, practices that refuse any simplistic notion of autobiography as a master narrative of the bourgeois subject. It is not surprising, then, that much of the energy devoted to theorizing subjectivity has come out of the practitioners and the readers who engage women's autobiographical texts.

In summary, we suggest that the real legacy of the last twenty years in women's autobiographical theorizing has been the emergence of a heterogeneous welter of conflicting positions about subjectivity and the autobiographical. To the degree that autobiography studies is a contested field, it offers an enabling history through which students can gain confidence and flexibility as readers and can honor the richness of women's autobiographical practices.

Part 3: Prospects for Theorizing Women's Autobiography

Theorists of women's autobiography have occupied a special place in calling for new autobiographical practices and critiques adequate to the texts of women's lives while exposing the blind spots, aporias, complicities, and exclusions in dominant theorizing of the subject. This collection examines the alternatives proposed by theorists of women's autobiography. But the range of possibilities has by no means been exhausted. We foresee many options for scholars interested in autobiographical studies and in theories of women's autobiography to pursue—and our list is only partial.

Relationality, across genders and genres, deserves further exploration. The notion of "fluid boundaries" claimed in early theorizing by Friedman and Mason as characteristic of wom-

en's autobiography, in distinction to all others, and typical of all women's autobiography—across ethnicity, class, sexuality, age, historical periods—has been challenged by Hertha Wong, Nancy K. Miller, and Paul John Eakin, among others, in their inquiries about how *all* autobiography may be relational. What links exist between self-narrating and representation of an autobiography's others? How, and in what terms, should relationality be redirected and reappropriated for feminist theory? How else might gendered aspects of women's subjectivity be described?

Autobiographical ethics includes a host of issues about how and what subjects and audiences know of each other, and how they comport themselves. The ethics of self- and family revelation within the autobiography, the positioning of audiences during and after the subject's lifetime, the subject's relation to biographical accounts and extratextual evidence are areas that deserve further scrutiny. What would a feminist ethics of autobiography look like? As Doris Sommer suggested in a recent essay on Elena Poniatowska and the testimonial novel, the relationship between (woman) informant and (woman) narrator, like that between writer and reader, may be neither symmetrical nor unmanipulated. Indeed an informant may resist being "consumed" by an interlocutor's mediation. A writer attentive to issues of difference can acknowledge ethical problems in conversations of social unequals, can write so as to resist the "complicity between narrator and reader," acknowledging the social inequities of lives and the privilege of her own authority as author ("Taking," 914).

Narratology, or the telling of a life as a semi-otic encoding and a transaction between writer and readers, has as yet been insufficiently theorized in women's autobiography. Perhaps this is due in part to the current interest in voice and the body, or the cachet of psychoanalytic and

Foucauldian readings. Moreover, issues of performativity now obscure issues of narratology. But we might think more carefully about the textual features that distinguish autobiography from the novel or other forms of nonfiction, especially in light of the tendency of people to use "novel" and "autobiography" interchangeably when they discuss personal narratives. What does it mean for readers to blur the distinction, to read novelistically? The work of Philippe Lejeune on the autobiographical pact can be helpful here; but we would have to consider how Lejeune's concept of the pact might need to be modified in feminist practices.

The relationship of national identity formation and autobiographical narrative deserves sustained examination. As Benedict Anderson aptly noted, nations are "imagined communities." Communities of people create and sustain narratives about the bases for their existence as distinct collectivities, and autobiography, at least in the West, has functioned as a potent vehicle for such narratives. For theorists of multicultural and of postcoloniality, including several in this volume, "national" identity is a deeply problematic category of meaning because national myths are founded upon the discourses of the "other," the "alien." This logic of alterity becomes the means through which national borders are established, policed, and breached. The gendered aspects of this logic are everywhere in evidence in debates about the nation and national identity. Readings of women's autobiographical texts need to attend to the complex ways in which narrators engage myths of national identity and represent themselves as national and/or unnatural subjects.

The building of archives and documentary collections needs to continue. The archive of women's autobiographical history already recovered in the last few decades has transformed the field, establishing a rich legacy. Expanding the archive by incorporating works formerly re-

garded as “merely personal” and extraliterary will make available to scholars and students a broader range of texts—including diaries, letters, journals, memoirs, travel narratives, meditations, cookbooks, family histories, spiritual records, collages, art books, and others.

Memory, the project for the millennium, has now come to preoccupy scholars from all areas of the academy—from philosophers to neuroscientists, from cultural critics to psychologists, from quantum theorists to poets. Increasingly, scholars are studying the making and unmaking of memory—personal, collective, biochemical. Since autobiography unfolds in the folds of memory, there are projects to be found in probing the limits of remembering, the politics of remembering, the communal effects of remembering, and the ways in which remembering confuses our expectations of linearity and spatiality, of poetics and thematics in narrative. Moreover, commitment to the imperatives of testimony, as Shoshana Felman argued in her work on testimony, requires us, as teachers and scholars, to develop radical pedagogies that can facilitate encounters between readers and the texts of unspeakable horror.

In the nineties the project of recovering and validating memories of sexual abuse and psychic trauma through writing, which has authorized much women’s autobiographical narrative, is being vigorously debated on several fronts. Feminist therapist and theorist Janice Haaken, in “The Recovery of Memory, Fantasy, and Desire: Feminist Approaches to Sexual Abuse and Psychic Trauma,” offered a critique of the stakes involved in debates on recovered memory and considered the implications of theories of memory for reading women’s narratives of victimization and survival (352–61, in this volume). Her project is directed at the “recovery” of conflictual discourses and fantasies in women’s stories.

Theorizing travel turns our attention to issues of mobility, location, and zones of transit.

We might argue that all theory is in transit, or that all subjects are in transit, shifting from one identity to another. This is to say that mobility is the condition for the stabilities of identification. To approach autobiographical texts with this focus on travel and mobility stimulates a provocative set of questions. What is subjectivity in transit? How do different kinds of mobility affect self-representational practices—the mobility of forced displacement, for example, or of emigration, immigration, exile? What are the personal and political costs to the autobiographer of homesteading and of homelessness? How do autobiographical subjects negotiate strangeness—whether the strangeness of language, behaviors, cultures, histories, gender differentiation, sexualities? And how does interest in mobility stimulate attention to borders—between places, spaces, identities, destinies—and to the crossings and recrossings of those borders?

Spatiality, rather than temporality, as a focus of critical reading practices has been proposed by Susan Stanford Friedman as particularly appropriate to women’s texts. “Spatialization emphasizes the psychodynamic, interactive, and situational nature of narrative processes; it also provides a fluid, relational approach that connects text and context, writer and reader” (“Spatialization,” 82). For Friedman, drawing on Kristeva’s notion of a text as an “intersection of textual surfaces,” spatialized readings allow readers to construct a “story” of the interactive play between narrative surface and a text’s palimpsestic depths (83). Bringing a spatialized reading strategy to analyses of women’s autobiography, which have usually emphasized temporal succession, may bring new attention to their texture and new interpretations of apparent incoherences.

Interdisciplinary studies of personal narratives that draw analytical frameworks from sociology, history, psychology, anthropology, religion, medicine, and many other disciplines will

produce more nuanced readings of autobiographical texts. The separate studies of first-person narratives that have gone on within fields such as ethnography, oral history, communications, and performance studies offer revolutionary possibilities for recontextualizing autobiographical writing in specific contexts.

Theorizing a new episteme implicated in the technological revolution will reform concepts of the subject and of narrative practices, as Donna Haraway's "A Manifesto for Cyborgs" has suggested. Cyborg identity, embodying both nature and "other," belongs neither wholly to nature nor to culture and subverts all certainties (Balsamo, 33). The mode of production of modernity elicited "identities as autonomous and (instrumentally) rational"; but new communications technologies form subjects as "unstable, multiple, and diffuse," with a revolutionary fluidity of identity (Poster, 87). What has been called the "explosion of narrativity" in cyberspace calls for new theories of the relationship between human and machines. As we are drawn further into technology, we may find ourselves revising our notions of the autobiographical subject and of narrativity itself (Poster, 91, 93–94).

The therapeutics of writing autobiography has engaged feminist critics and calls for further theorizing. Writing and reading autobiography have long been regarded by psychoanalytic practitioners as instruments of healing, in the ongoing search to find and recognize one's story. Similarly, pathography, the writing of illness narratives as both "cure" and consolation, has created a body of literature that is only beginning to be read by such critics as Anne Hunsaker Hawkins, Mary Elene Wood, Suzette Henke, and Marilyn Chandler.

New modes of women's self-representation invite revision of models of women's subjectivity. For example, to read Generation X writer Elizabeth Wurtzel's *Prozac Nation*, we need to attend to the modulation of consciousness by

psychotropic drugs. In the case of the oral collaborative narratives of *taasu* among nonliterate Wolof West African village women discussed by Lisa McNee, the autobiographical involves neither the solitary individual, writing, nor a "life" in the usual Western sense. This proliferation of autobiographical genres is not simply additive, for forms such as these confuse how we have understood the terms "woman" and "autobiography."

Part 4: The Future of Women's Autobiography

At this historical moment little can be asserted about women's autobiography without qualification. Whether to read the "women" in women's autobiography as referring to writers, subjects, readers, communities, performances, or other entities and processes is under debate. Indeed, as Jeanne Perreault suggested, an alternate concept such as "autography" may be desirable to designate a kind of life writing practiced by women that continually calls its own boundaries and activity into question. Virtually every critic of women's autobiography has challenged or modified its perceived definitional parameters to fit an evolving feminist sense of subjects in process.

Given the directions that much recent feminist and postfeminist theorizing has taken, the subject of study here, women's autobiography, may itself have become suspect. All of the features once claimed as hallmarks of women's autobiography—nonlinear narrative, fragmented textuality, relationality, the authority of experience—have been challenged as gender essentialism, from within feminist theory, as the essays in this volume suggest, and from outside it. For example, Nancy K. Miller suggested that the model of identity through alterity associated with women's autobiography by some early theorists

operates in the autobiographical performances of some recent male authors as well. She asked if “we might not more usefully *expand* the vision of the autobiographical self as connected to a significant other and bound to a community rather than restrict it through mutually exclusive models”. . . . “When we return to male-authored texts in the light of patterns found in female-authored texts—reading *for* connection, for the relation to the other—we may want to revise the canonical views of male autobiographical identity altogether” (“Representing,” 4, 5). That is, to what extent and in what ways does the category of women’s autobiography continue to be a useful generic descriptor for women’s autobiographical texts and for the *experience* of reading them? Reading other autobiographical texts? As certain postfeminists also argue, isn’t it time to move beyond this preoccupation with woman, women, and women’s “this” or “that”? And hasn’t the continuing proliferation of theoretical accounts of “difference” undermined any solid ground for focusing separately on women’s texts?

While we recognize the need to continually critique cultural constructions of “woman” and of “difference,” we also recognize the utility and the importance of continuing to focus on the cultural production of women. As Denise Riley advised, we have to act as if “women” exist even as we continue to resist the fixedness of particular forms of “woman” and “femininity” (Riley, 112). Or, as Friedman pointed out in a recent essay, the new geography of identity insists that we think about women writers in relation to a fluid matrix instead of a fixed binary of male/female or masculine/feminine (“Beyond,” 13). A more flexible critical practice will not regard gender difference as a priori and immutable. It will “guard against using male writers or masculinity as fixed foils, as categorical Others whose static nature allows for the identification of female diversity and difference” (“Beyond,” 22).

Rather, feminist criticism needs to consider how gender intersects with other components that comprise identity. Such a focus permits us to locate ourselves even as the theoretical grounds underneath us continue to shift. There is much to be gained by opening up the questions raised in these essays to all texts. As we pursue a feminist theory of women’s autobiographical practices, we might simultaneously pursue a critique of autobiographical practice generally. We hope that this collection offers a set of ideas for engaging in such projects.

Part 5: The Contributors and the Project

We are two feminist critics who have worked in autobiography studies for over twenty years and have ourselves moved through successive inquiries and reassessments of several positions that we trace here. We came to the subject at about the same time that the subject came to the academy. Sidonie’s early work, coming out of the social movements of the late sixties, focused on African American autobiography, its traditions, its politics, and its narrative poetics. It had gone unremarked by her dissertation advisor and by herself that her dissertation on African American autobiography included no discussion of women’s texts. That would come later. In the mid-seventies growing political and intellectual preoccupations motivated her shift to concerted engagement with women’s autobiographical narratives, as part of the process of revisioning literary studies and theorizing women’s practices. Julia’s early work was in exploring and theorizing Renaissance self-writing (Montaigne’s *Essays*) at a time when her mentors focused on neither women’s writing nor autobiography. In the early eighties she realized that there was a common thread among her interests in the self, feminist theory, and women’s writing, and that

it focused on the emerging field of women's autobiography. She began to teach, lecture, and write on autobiography in both women's writing and the Western tradition generally. As the field has grown and changed in the nineties each of us has redefined her interests more globally and interdisciplinarily.

Clearly we were formed by and in the world of the academy in the United States, and much of the work cited here has come out of that world. This collection, however, aims to draw upon disparate sources and include essays theorizing self-representational texts from diverse global locations, from the *testimonio* of Rigoberta Menchú to Shirley Geok-lin Lim's experience of growing up in colonial Malaysia. The essays are organized as conversations on shared topics from diverse perspectives. For example, the essays of Mason, Suleri, Lionnet, and Henderson probe different aspects and registers of voice. The relationship between the unconscious and language is framed variously in essays by Stanton, Brodzki, and Benstock. The material specificity of the autobiographical subject emerges in quite different contexts in essays by Gagnier, Steedman, and Nussbaum. Readers may want to use a different organizational rubric for grouping the essays, for instance, their dates of publication or their topic areas or the kinds of autobiographical texts they foreground.

All but one of the essays in this volume (Herta D. Wong's) have been previously published. We were reluctant to use excerpted rather than full versions of most essays and chapters, but pragmatic considerations dictated this choice. Had we printed essays in their entirety, we would have been more restricted in the number of essays we could include. Our dilemma was, how to compile a collection that demonstrates the lucidity and complexity of critical analysis of women's autobiography and includes a sufficient number of essays to indicate the range and scope of those critiques? We opted for a wide

variety of approaches and a relatively large number of theorists in a book that would be attractive—and affordable—for classroom use. Essays have been edited to preserve the integrity of their theoretical arguments. We hope that readers will pursue other work by those theorists they find particularly helpful in their development of reading strategies. And we hope that our bibliography will stimulate teachers and readers to acquire, read, and learn from the prodigious and productive scholarship in theorizing women's autobiography.

Like paintings in a museum exhibit or patches on a quilt, putting together diverse perspectives on the same topic brings all of them into sharper focus. If new understandings are achieved by this mixture of essays and categories and new discussion provoked, our goal will have been accomplished.

Notes

1. See "Autobiography and the Cultural Moment" by James Olney for a more complete history of autobiography studies prior to 1980.
2. It is worth noting that early literary critic Anna Robeson Burr, unlike her male compatriots, took women's autobiography seriously and listed numerous works by women in her bibliography; but she did not attend to issues of gender.
3. Although the first efforts to theorize women's autobiography occurred in the seventies and early eighties, they should not be confused with First Wave feminism, which usually refers to movements for women's suffrage between 1890 and 1920. Second Wave feminism dates from the early 1970s. In *The Dictionary of Feminist Theory* Maggie Humm notes such hallmarks of the Second Wave as the slogan "The personal is political," the celebration of a women-centered perspective, and declarations of a feminist movement aimed at radical transformation of patriarchy and the creation of a feminized world (198). For an introduction to and readings in Second Wave feminist analyses, see Linda Nicholson, ed., *The Second Wave: A Reader in Feminist Theories*.

4. For a helpful discussion of ten major books on theorizing women's autobiography between 1980 and 1990, see Marjanne E. Goozé, "The Definitions of Self and Form in Feminist Autobiography Theory." The texts Goozé explores are discussed here, along with some she overlooks (Felski, Nussbaum, Hewitt). Goozé argues that these eighties critiques share a concern with the interrelation of self and form in women's writing (414). She reads women's autobiography theory as theorizing the female subject between French and American feminisms and between two male traditions, the humanist view of autonomous unified selves, and the postmodern view of de-centered, split selves. Goozé's reservation about theorizing of women's autobiography in the eighties, namely that much of it equates "the de-centered self of postmodernism" with "a woman's self which defines itself in terms of interconnectedness to others and mutual interdependence," is a provocative one for theorists (425). Our discussion is indebted to Goozé's careful readings and helpful distinctions among theorists as we incorporate her observations and carry them forward to critiques in the nineties.

5. Novelist and critic Alice Walker was also an important force in the recognition of multiple women's textualities. In *In Our Mothers' Gardens* she distinguished herself from white feminists as a "womanist" who, in autobiographical essays such as "When the Other Dancer Is the Self," asserted the inextricability of her experience of political marginalization and personhood.

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