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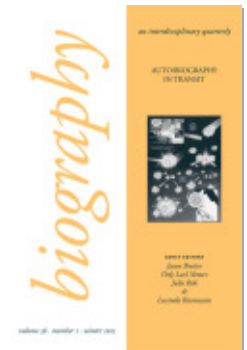
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INTRODUCTION: AUTO/BIOGRAPHY IN TRANSIT

JASON BREITER, ORLY LAEL NETZER, JULIE RAK, AND LUCINDA RASMUSSEN

transit, n.

a. The action or fact of passing across or through; passage or journey from one place or point to another.

fig. (in various senses.) A passing across; a transition or change

—OED Online

Transit. As the *Oxford English Dictionary* indicates, the noun in English came via the French language, containing the Latin root *trans*, meaning “to go across.” Transit literally means a passage, or it names a system (public transit) which allows anyone to travel. Transit is also about figurative movements across identities, historical movements, or other kinds of social and personal changes, as well as movement through spaces, ideas, histories, and subjectivities. It suggests instability in its own meaning, a holding place: as in a transit camp, or a transition from one thing to another. When identities, lives, bodies are in transit, are they outside the systems which put them in motion? Are they constituted by those same systems? What does it mean to be unmoored, or temporary, or in a changing process? Like the critical term “auto/biography” itself, transit is an expression of movement. When something is in transit it is in between places, or it is neither “this” nor “that” thing or idea but perhaps contains both of them, or it is between elements as it links them. To be in transit is to move between movements and languages. We are “in” transit, but not of it, moving across but not always inside a wide variety of cultural and aesthetic formations.

This term seemed fitting as a theme for the International Auto/Biography Association (IABA) 2014 conference in Banff, Canada, because the town of Banff began as a train station, a stop on the way to the coast or the interior, a meeting-place for groups of Indigenous people coming through the region to

hunt and conduct ceremonies, and later a meeting place between Indigenous people and non-Native settlers, who eventually displaced those who had been coming to Banff for centuries and took their lands for a public park (Binnema and Niemi). Later, Banff became a vacation destination, but it was not a place where vacationers could settle: in fact, early members of the Alpine Club of Canada valued the transient nature of their experiences there, because camping in teepees represented an escape from the constraints of urban life (Reichwein). Much of Banff and the infrastructure for the surrounding park was built mainly by interned Ukrainian-Canadian prisoners of war during World War I (and Mennonite conscientious objectors during World War II) who themselves were housed in transit camps—people forced to work, but forbidden to move until the Canadian state gave the order (Govier 40–41).

The term transit was fitting too, because of what the organizing committee for IABA 2014 saw as important areas of research for life writing scholars, including the study of translation, migration, borders, displacement, documentation, and most recently, of online ways to construct and represent identities. The field of life writing is in transit itself as the forces of globalization make themselves felt around the world, giving rise to stories about lives on the move, causing us to rethink what we know about life, writing, and representation. Life writing studies now focuses on social media identities, autobiographical comics, the connection of biography with location, oral history, and the selves created through interviewing and data collection, the existence of “big data” and corporate forms of constructing selves, minority identities of many kinds, and the responses of writers, visual artists, hackers, scholars, and activists to the problems of identity and its technologies. And, as Philippe Lejeune has recently observed, newer technologies (alongside older ones) are changing what we thought we knew about what it means to be a person in the twenty-first century, for “there is no set ‘I’ that remains identical through the history of humankind and simply expresses itself differently depending on the tools at hand. In this case, it is the tool that shapes the craftsman” (248).

The field of life writing studies has always recognized the importance of narrative forms, and that cultural producers make the lives they create, rather than simply represent them. But as Lejeune believes, the materiality of expression, the genre and mode of creating, and even the role our bodies play in creative acts affects what we might think that life is, or what stories are. And so, as scholars in the field of life writing begin to work through the meaning of the digital turn, create new methodologies for examining material, and develop new ways to theorize classic issues such as the unsteady line between fiction and nonfiction, the rise of relatively unknown and marginalized authors

and the discourse of celebrity, public selves and private lives, and even between human stories and the lives of others, auto/biography and life writing studies is clearly in transit. Although we do not know where it is headed ultimately as an area of study, we do know that it is on the move.

The essays in this special issue have been divided into two areas of enquiry—Documents and Displacements. Those in the first section all address the status of the document as a technology of the self, or think about how cultural producers document their lives. The second section, Displacements, is about critical approaches and objects of study which signify how the study of life writing, and its objects of enquiry, are themselves in transit and have the potential to change our ideas about the field itself.

Candida Rifkind's "The Seeing Eye of Scientific Graphic Biography" examines two graphic biographies of nuclear scientist Robert Oppenheimer: *Fallout: J. Robert Oppenheimer, Leo Szilard and the Political Science of the Atom Bomb* (2001) by Jim Ottaviani, and *Trinity: A Graphic History of the First Atomic Bomb* (2012) by Jonathan Fetter-Vorm. Expanding on Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson's observations that the field of life writing has seen an influx of "new biography" (5–6), Rifkind's essay illustrates a new direction of inquiry for a field in transit. She proposes that scientific graphic biography is a specific and emerging genre of life writing, one that depicts the figure of the scientist as a subject who is both seen and seeing. Through a reading of Bruno Latour's "graphism thesis," Rifkind proposes that the scientific diagrams present throughout the works, framed as thoughts from Oppenheimer himself, allow the audience insight into the science not traditionally offered by prose biography. Convincingly, Rifkind describes the unique ability of this genre to traverse the tension between the life story of the subjects and the importance of the scientific discoveries that are so central to their lives.

Next, Terri Tomsy's "The Guantánamo Lawyers and Life Writing for the 'Courts of Public Opinion'" serves as a compelling addition to scholarship that explores how life narrators can use autobiographical genres to advocate for human rights. Tomsy's essay deals with two life writing publications and their status as documents—civil rights lawyer Clive Stafford Smith's memoir *Bad Men: Guantánamo and the Secret Prisons* (2007), as well as an anthology entitled *The Guantánamo Lawyers: Inside a Prison Outside the Law* (2009), the latter of which is authored by more than one hundred lawyers and edited by legal scholars Mark Denbeaux and Jonathan Hafetz. Tomsy's essay also draws from commentary and life writing by legal expert Marc D. Falkoff, who has written about the prison. Tomsy shows how the lawyers, most of whom do pro bono work on behalf of those who are incarcerated, make use of the autobiographical pact to advocate for them.

Ella Ophir's "The Diary and the Commonplace Book: Self-Inscription in *The Note Books of a Woman Alone*" reminds us that much productive work also remains to be done on life writing originating from a more distant past. Evelyn Wilson—a woman working and living in London in the early twentieth century—spent many years creating what Ophir describes as "a fusion of diary and 'commonplace book.'" Commonplacing, or the "practice of copying notable passages into a personal notebook," is a way for Wilson to claim personal autonomy in what are difficult life circumstances. When Wilson died, she entrusted her work to the care of an acquaintance, Geraldine Waife. Waife, in turn, forwarded it to Mary Geraldine Ostle, a contemporary of Virginia Woolf. Ostle would ultimately edit and publish Wilson's work. It is here that we see that *The Note Books of a Woman Alone* are indeed an autobiography in transit, and we can witness the power of autobiography in motion. Ophir concludes her essay by showing how *The Note Books* serve not only as an outlet for Wilson's voice, but for Ostle's voice as well.

In the next article, Elizabeth Rodrigues suggests a provocative new model for reading life narratives constructed through the accumulation of data. In her essay "'Contiguous But Widely Separated' Selves: Im/migrant Life Narrative as Data-driven Form," Rodrigues proposes that an epistemological commitment to data collection creates a distinct aesthetic in life narratives. She examines texts that favor data collection over selection in their composition, and argues that the abundance of data creates the sense of multiple and co-present identities within a given subject. The identities that these subjects iterate are in flux, and thus the subjects are constantly in transit among their identities. To illustrate her theory of this data episteme, Rodrigues analyzes *The Life Stories of Undistinguished Americans*, a collection of "lifelets" edited by Hamilton Holt (1906), Gertrude Stein's *Three Lives* (1909), and *The Soul of an Immigrant* (1921), the autobiography of Constantine Panunzio. Rodrigues argues that the co-presence of identities in the "data-driven self" goes beyond theories of performativity and relationality, and in fact requires a new vocabulary altogether. Rodrigues's essay encourages a new approach to immigrant life narratives, and has significant implications for scholarship on surveillance, mobility, and privacy as they relate to data collection. As much as the essay is concerned with transit between spaces and selves, it also draws our attention to new reading methods in the field of life writing.

Emma Maguire's essay, "Self-Branding, Hotness, and Girlhood in the Video Blogs of Jenna Marbles," is an analysis of contemporary online celebrity. Jenna Marbles, whose real name is Jenna Mourey, is a former go-go dancer who has become one of the most subscribed personalities on YouTube. By studying Mourey's viral YouTube video "How to Trick People into Thinking

You're Good Looking," Maguire shows us what Mourey must do to achieve notoriety. Consequently, Maguire's essay speaks to the conference theme of auto/biography in transit in at least two ways. First, Maguire's essay helps to fill a gap that scholars in auto/biography studies have begun to address in recent years: the study of automedia. Second, Maguire shows how Mourey's high profile success as an online celebrity requires her to fashion a self that is kept in constant motion so that she can navigate what she calls a "weighted system" that unfairly objectifies young women. This essay calls into question assumptions that the Internet is a democratic space, while also asking us to consider the complexities that young women face as they locate places for themselves in this sphere.

The essays found in the Displacements section address critical approaches in transit within the field of life writing studies, and also turn their attention to the idea of displacements—corporeal, textual, and material. In "Fictional Transits and Ruth Ozeki's *A Tale for the Time Being*," Rocío G. Davis identifies a current shift in the critique of slippages between reality and fiction to what she calls a "more fluid understanding of the nature of the novel." Her theorization explores writer-reader relationships, introduces a nuanced discussion of implied authorship, and departs from current conversations about the limits of auto/biography as a genre to suggest that readers trace the boundary lines in the ways that authors navigate the slippage between the fictive (as defined by Robert McGill) and the autobiographical. To ground the shift she identifies, Davis explores Ruth Ozeki's *A Tale for the Time Being*—a text marketed as a novel that interlaces "a recognizable version" of the author's life—not merely to indicate how "Ozeki complicates our relationship with the story . . . [as] acts of reading reconfigure acts of storytelling," but rather to articulate how, as scholars, the text challenges our assumptions about the nature of stories.

Leigh Gilmore's "Covering Pain: Pain Memoirs and Sequential Reading as an Ethical Practice" draws on the visual and verbal distinction foundational to comics scholarship to suggest that the concepts of pacing and closure may serve as an ethical and critical practice of reading memoirs about pain. To demonstrate this way to read, Gilmore places textual narratives of pain memoirs alongside face and hand images found on the book covers of these memoirs and in their other peritextual elements. She sees this strategy as co-creating meaning, a reading of pain as an unnarrated representation through what cannot be addressed via text alone. This critical practice then allows Gilmore to address questions of authorship and readership through the prism of Hillary Chute's idiom of witness, ending with a call for life writing scholars to expand our understandings of pain by engaging in methodological

displacement as a means of ethically exploring matters of discomfort, for writers and readers alike.

Lucinda Rasmussen's study of postfeminist breast cancer narratives, "The (De)Evolution of a Genre: Postfeminism's (Dis)Empowered Narrator of the Breast Cancer Narrative," takes as its subject narratives written by women with breast cancer that, unlike earlier narratives by activists such as Audre Lorde or Jo Spence, do not participate in second-wave or even third-wave feminist discourses. Rather, narratives by authors including Geralyn Lucas, Cathy Buetti, and Tania Katan are often marketed as "chick lit," relatively light-hearted accounts of surviving the rigors of cancer treatment more in the style of the television series *Sex in the City* or the *Shopaholic* series than feminist documents of illness and the struggle with treatment. Rasmussen discusses the latter narratives as part of what Angela McRobbie has called "the postfeminist decade," when government, corporate, and media institutions worked in concert to discredit the worth of feminist gains and arguments from previous decades. Postfeminist ideas about individual women's empowerment and the connection between corporatization and treatment appear in these memoirs and in the marketing schemes for them, Rasmussen argues, even when the authors themselves try to work against more conservative ideas about women and illness and seek to be more radical than the form currently allows. Here we see how women's individual difficulties with cancer treatments and their accounts of suffering are displaced by a corporate discourse emphasizing the need for a medicalized cure, the purchase of products to offset feelings of worthlessness, and the fundraising industry as "big business," which deploys a triumphalist survival discourse, sometimes at breast cancer patients' expense.

In "Between Selves: An Intertextual Approach to Jamaica Kincaid's *Among Flowers*," Ricia Chansky proposes using an intertextual methodology as a means of understanding diasporic subjectivities. The choice to read Kincaid's travel narratives in dialogue, while focusing on the positionalities of tourist and native (invoked by Kincaid herself in *A Small Place*) through the themes of movement and waste, challenges any notion of stable subjectivity seemingly set by the individual texts. Given the nature of diasporic lives as ones marked by transition, Chansky suggests that we "shape our understanding of the autobiographical pact" as set in perpetual motion, "locating the diasporic self" throughout the progression of multiple texts.

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