

Writing the Self and the English-Speaking Worlds

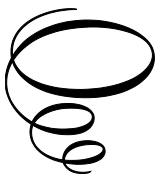
Writing the Self and the English-Speaking Worlds:

*Life Writing and Politics Since
the 20th Century*

Edited by

Cédric Courtois and Claire Dubois

**Cambridge
Scholars
Publishing**



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INTRODUCTION

CÉDRIC COURTOIS AND CLAIRE DUBOIS

This volume grew out of an international conference organised in 2022 at the University of Lille, France, focusing on the interconnections between the personal and the political through the study of autobiography and, more broadly, life writing, in the English-speaking worlds in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Although our respective areas of expertise differ, we have been drawn to a common object of study—life writing and the politics of self-narration—, which we have approached from distinct disciplinary perspectives (postcolonial literature for one, Irish history for the other). Sharing the same objects of inquiry has proven fruitful, as they lend themselves particularly well to a multidisciplinary approach, already established in the field of postcolonial studies, for example. The object we then wished to foreground was polymorphous: autobiography, autofiction, autoethnography, autobiographical comic, blog, documentary, epistolary exchanges, essay, diary, memoir, (Insta)poetry, among others—, some of which were unexplored by the participants. At the core of our initial approach lied the (allegorical?) relation between life narratives and social and/or political change—what Paul John Eakin has described as “relational lives”¹—where the poetic and the political intersect, collide, and/or interrogate each other. We aimed to ponder over the ways in which these works foster the emergence of what Jacques Rancière calls “dissensus”² and the power of narration, which can also be understood as a power of action. Their ultimate goal is intrinsically political and consists in broadening the “distribution of the sensible,” which, for Rancière, is that which “reveals who can have a share in what is common to the community based on what they do and on the time and space in which this activity is performed” while “politics revolves around what is seen and what can be said about it, around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak,

¹ Paul John Eakin, *How Our Lives Become Stories: Making Selves* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), 43.

² Jacques Rancière, “Ten Theses on Politics,” in *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, ed. and trans. Steven Corcoran (London: Bloomsbury, 2010), 27-44.

around the properties of spaces and the possibilities of time”.³ Such a conception necessarily implies a relationship between ethics, poetics, and politics—a “reciprocal and necessary implication,” in the words of Henri Meschonnic.⁴ In this context, poetics functions as *poiēsis*—a practice that necessarily entails *poiein*, an act, a making.

Philippe Lejeune famously defines autobiography as “retrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own existence, focusing on his individual life, in particular on the story of his personality”.⁵ For a long time, this literary genre celebrated the existence of a sovereign self, traditionally the prerogative of white, heterosexual, upper- or middle-class men—thus an androcentric, and arguably ethnocentric, genre promoting a universality based on highly exclusive criteria. Accordingly, it has been characterised by linearity, narrative coherence, and the idea of a stable self, possibly unaffected by trauma, for example. In this context, Linda Anderson observes that “insofar as autobiography has been seen as promoting a view of the subject as universal, it has also underpinned the centrality of masculine—and we may add, Western and middle class—modes of subjectivity”.⁶ In their autobiographies or memoirs, political figures—like Winston Churchill in *Memoirs of the Second World War* (1959)—often present themselves as embodiments of collective aspirations and the destiny of the nation,⁷ while simultaneously foregrounding a normative individuality. These accounts have also often taken on highly problematic dimensions, as in the less well-known autobiography of the colonial settler Percy M. Clark, *The Autobiography of an Old Drifter*,⁸ a text explicitly reworked and subverted by Zambian author Namwali Serpell in her novel *The Old Drift* (2019).⁹ The white, male, heterosexual paradigm has been challenged by postcolonial writers for whom self-narration constitutes a form of what

³ Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (London: Continuum, 2004), 12-13.

⁴ Henri Meschonnic, *Poétique du traduire* (Paris : Verdier, 1999), 198.

⁵ Philippe Lejeune, *Le Pacte autobiographique* (Paris : Seuil, 1975), 14.

⁶ Linda Anderson, *Autobiography* (London: Routledge, 2001), 3.

⁷ Liam Harte, “Introduction: Autobiography and the Irish Cultural Moment,” in *Modern Irish Autobiography: Self, Nation and Society*, ed. Liam Harte (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 3.

⁸ Percy M. Clark. *The Autobiography of an Old Drifter* (London: G. G. Harrop, 1936).

⁹ Namwali Serpell, *The Old Drift* (London: Vintage, 2019). For more about Serpell’s subversion of Clark’s autobiography, see Cédric Courtois, “Politics and Poetics of (De)colonization in Namwali Serpell’s *The Old Drift* (2019),” *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 59, no. 4 (2023).

Barbara Harlow refers to as “resistance literature”.¹⁰ In her book’s fourth chapter, Harlow examines the memoirs of political prisoners, noting that they

are to be distinguished [...] from the conventional autobiography inasmuch as the narratives are actively engaged in a re-definition of the self and the individual in terms of a collective enterprise and struggle. The prison memoirs of political detainees are not written for the sake of a ‘book of one’s own,’ rather they are collective documents, testimonies written by individuals to their common struggle.¹¹

Life narratives are therefore intrinsically political, particularly for the “wretched of the Earth,” to use Frantz Fanon’s phrase.¹² Autobiography and memoir—the latter being a genre poised between the story of a singular life and the symbolic weight of history—provide a means of recognising denied existences—“minuscule lives,”¹³ “precarious lives”¹⁴—and marginalised subjectivities, those “who have no part”.¹⁵ In *Le Parlement des invisibles : Déchiffrer la France*, Pierre Rosanvallon summarises the stakes behind representation, democracy, and the “demand for recognition:”

The most humble and discreet lives are indeed the ones most obviously affected [by the lack of representation]. But the problem is broader and applies to all components of society. Democracy is undermined by the inaudibility of all faint voices, by the neglect of ordinary lives, by the disdain for lives judged to be without distinction, by the absence of recognition for initiatives left in the shadows. The situation is alarming, for it concerns both the dignity of individuals and the vitality of democracy. To live in society is, above all, to see one’s existence acknowledged in its everyday truth. Lives that are not told are, in fact, diminished lives—denied, implicitly scorned. This absence only intensifies the harshness of living conditions. To be invisible—since that is what it comes down to—first of all carries a cost for the individuals themselves. For a life left in the shadows is a life that does not exist, a life that does not count. To be

¹⁰ Barbara Harlow, *Resistance Literature* (New York: Methuen, 1987).

¹¹ Harlow, *Resistance Literature*, 120.

¹² Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1991).

¹³ Guillaume Le Blanc, *L’Insurrection des vies minuscules* (Montrouge : Bayard, 2020).

¹⁴ Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2004).

¹⁵ Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, trans. Julie rose (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 30.

represented, on the contrary, is to be made present to others, in the very literal sense of the term. It is to be taken into account, to be recognized in the truth and specificity of one's condition. [...] The aspiration for a more just society is therefore inseparable today from a demand for recognition.¹⁶

For formerly colonised peoples, the writing of the self is a means to construct an identity of one's own and, in so doing, of asserting a form of "willfulness"¹⁷ in refusing the oppressive "universality" of the traditional autobiographical genre. This "universality" has been described as "violent," notably by Theodor W. Adorno, whom Judith Butler cites in *Giving an Account of Oneself*:

there are conditions under which [universality] can exercise violence. Adorno helps us to understand that its violence consists in part in its indifference to the social conditions under which a living appropriation might become possible. If no living appropriation is possible, then it would seem to follow that the precept can be undergone only as a deathly thing, a suffering imposed from an indifferent outside at the expense of freedom and particularity.¹⁸

Such "violence" is for instance recounted by Bernardine Evaristo in her memoir *Manifesto: On Never Giving Up*.¹⁹ The British author reflects on her early experiences of alienation and invisibility within British society, noting that reading works on Black British history "made [her] feel that [she] was part of a continuum in Britain and Europe".²⁰ She further observes: "I guess this book is a massive act of self-interrogation".²¹ These passages demonstrate how memoir can intertwine a personal narrative with broader historical and social concerns. Some postcolonial authors engage in such "living appropriations" of the normative autobiographical model by reworking its forms and genres (journals, letters, hybrid writings...), producing what Irene Kacandes calls "experimental life writing," where the experimental dimension serves "the purposes of

¹⁶ Pierre Rosanvallon, *Le Parlement des invisibles : Déchiffrer la France* (Paris : Seuil, 2020), 17-18 (our translation).

¹⁷ Sara Ahmed, *Willful Subjects* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 4.

¹⁸ Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 7.

¹⁹ Bernardine Evaristo, *Manifesto: On Never Giving Up* (New York: Grove Press, 2022).

²⁰ Evaristo, *Manifesto: On Never Giving Up*, 156.

²¹ Evaristo, *Manifesto: On Never Giving Up*, 26.

enhancing, reinforcing or drawing attention to the referential level”.²² Such acts of writing the self may allow these writers to negotiate the boundaries between invisibility and recognition, making their presence and perspectives legible within literary and social spheres.

Attempts at decentring this androcentric genre through literary experimentations—Estelle Jelinek refers to “disjuncted narratives,”²³ for instance—are also central to numerous autobiographies and memoirs by women writers. Gender interacts with genre, as Mary Mason and Shirley Neuman remind us, the latter quoting the former:

The most generally accepted thesis of gender difference in autobiography has been Mary Mason’s that, where men stress their individualism in their autobiographies, women define their identity in terms of their relationship with others. Other ‘gendering differences’ frequently put forward hypothesize the discontinuity and fragmentation of women’s autobiographies as opposed to chronological, linear and coherent narratives by men; the personal, intimate subject matter of women’s autobiographies as opposed to the public, professional matter of men’s; and the ‘split subject’ of women’s autobiographies written against a cultural ‘injunction against [women’s] writing’.²⁴

The intersection between gender and genre is also a central dimension of autobiographical writing by transgender authors, though such texts remain relatively marginal(ised). In *The Secrets of My Life*,²⁵ U.S. reality television celebrity Caitlyn Jenner recounts her earlier life as William Bruce Jenner, the Olympic champion. She foregrounds the fact that

[f]or a long time [she] did not understand what was happening. There was no context or point of reference. The term *gender dysphoria*, increasingly and mercifully a growing part of the vernacular today, had as much application in the world in which [she] grew up as Facebook or Twitter or Instagram. Its first usage was not until 1974.²⁶

²² Irene Kacandes, “Experimental Life Writing,” in *The Routledge Companion to Experimental Literature*, ed. Joe Bray, Alison Gibbons, and Brian McHale (London: Routledge, 2012), 380.

²³ Estelle Jelinek, *The Tradition of Women’s Autobiography: From Antiquity to the Present* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1986), 33.

²⁴ Shirley Neuman, “Autobiography and Questions of Gender: An Introduction,” in *Autobiography and Questions of Gender*, ed. Shirley Neuman (London: Routledge, 2016), 2.

²⁵ Caitlyn Jenner, and Buzz Bissinger, *The Secrets of My Life* (New York: Grand Central Publishing, 2017).

²⁶ Jenner, *The Secrets of My Life*, 19 (original emphasis).

She claims she had suffered from “*gender dysphoria*”—the sense of disjunction between assigned gender and gender identity—since she was a child. While Jenner insists that her autobiography is not political, it inevitably functions within a political framework, insofar as sexual and gendered margins appropriate a genre long dominated by white, heterosexual men. Similarly, in *Dear Senthuran: A Black Spirit Memoir*,²⁷ Nigerian writer Akwaeke Emezi—non-binary and self-identifying as “Ogbanje”²⁸—also deconstruct the conventions of “traditional” autobiography and memoir, thereby reimagining life writing as a site of identity negotiation, political resistance, and poetic experimentation. They quote Misty Bastian’s article “Irregular Visitors: Narratives about ogbanje (Spirit Children) in Southern Popular Writing.”²⁹

To be ogbanje is to be categorized [as] other—and to bring alterity home in a way that transcends the more ordinary, bifurcated ‘otherness’ of gender. This other gender is marked from birth—as male and female statuses are marked—by special behaviors towards and physical adornment of the child. The sexual appearance of the ogbanje is likely to break in its refusal to act according to human norms.³⁰

By identifying to an ogbanje, they signal an intention to decolonise the longstanding Western constructions of gender.

Some of the aspects mentioned above invite us to consider the question of vulnerability. In examining these life narratives, several issues may be raised: that of the subject in a situation of vulnerability; that of the forms and factors of vulnerability; and, conversely, that of forms of resistance and resilience. In *The Terrible: A Storyteller’s Memoir* (2018),³¹ British writer Yrsa Daley-Ward writes the story of her self, and, in an interview, provides elements to make her readers understand where she writes from:

²⁷ Akwaeke Emezi, *Dear Senthuran: A Black Spirit’s Memoir* (London: Faber & Faber, 2021).

²⁸ Emezi writes that they are “ogbanje,” “an Igbo spirit that’s born to a human mother, a kind of trickster that dies unexpectedly only to return in the next child and do it all over again” (Emezi, *Dear Senthuran*, 11).

²⁹ Misty Bastian, “Irregular Visitors: Narratives about ogbanje (Spirit Children) in Southern Popular Writing,” in *Readings in African Popular Fiction*, ed. Stephanie Newell (Oxford: James Currey, 2002).

³⁰ Emezi, *Dear Senthuran*, 11.

³¹ Yrsa Daley-Ward, *The Terrible: A Storyteller’s Memoir* (New York: Penguin Books, 2018).

‘I was a black girl living in a market town, alien to everything. There were so many things I wanted to be other than what I was. I wanted to be white, have different hair, have parents who were home, know my father, not be religious. When I watched TV, everything from Disney to *Coronation Street*, there was never a representation of me’.³²

Daley-Ward highlights the underrepresentation of Black women in mainstream British television and global cultural productions, arenas largely dominated by white characters and actors. This dominance was especially evident in the 1990s, a period when whiteness functioned—and to a considerable degree still functions—as the assumed universal norm. As G. Thomas Couser notes,

the democracy [...] of life writing—its accessibility to ‘nobodies’ (even, in Philippe Lejeune’s phrase, ‘those who do not write’) relative to other literary genres—engages subjects who may be especially vulnerable to misrepresentation and exploitation. Today, people with disadvantaging or stigmatizing conditions are increasingly visible in life writing.³³

For example, certain life narratives foreground experiences of disability. According to Susannah B. Mintz, this

kind of life story [...] has commanded scant literary attention or popular readership [...] because those bodies diverge too dramatically from both the idealized human form of Western culture and the disembodied narrative self of conventional autobiography.³⁴

From this perspective, Indian writer Abhishek Anicca’s *The Grammar of My Body: A Memoir* (2023)³⁵ is particularly illuminating. What, then, is at stake in the self-narration of a person living with a disability within ableist societies? What poetics and what politics of disability are enacted in such narratives? Mintz suggests useful starting point:

³² Yrsa Daley-Ward, “Yrsa Daley-Ward: ‘People are afraid to tell the truth. But I don’t care. It’s otherwise’,” interview by Eve Barlow, *The Guardian*, September 24, 2017.

³³ G. Thomas Couser, *Vulnerable Subjects: Ethics and Life Writing* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004), 14.

³⁴ Susannah B. Mintz, *Unruly Bodies: Life Writing by Women with Disabilities* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 1.

³⁵ Abhishek Anicca, *The Grammar of My Body: A Memoir* (Gurugram: Vintage, 2023).

Life writing by women with disabilities takes part in this larger pattern of storytelling that directly eschews the presumption of a fully accessible, distinct but also representative subject. But it also complicates standard ways of conceiving of the body that appear in women's as much as men's autobiography.³⁶

One might consider writers such as Lucy Grealy (*Autobiography of a Face*),³⁷ Rebekah Taussig (*Sitting Pretty*),³⁸ or Christa Couture (*How To Lose Everything*).³⁹ Unfortunately, this aspect remains unexplored in this volume.

Leigh Gilmore, for her part, examines the “limit cases” of self-narratives that emerge in the aftermath of traumatic experiences. These are “limit cases” insofar as they often occupy a space at the boundary between fact and fiction. Trauma, to cite Leigh Gilmore,

refers to the self-altering, even self-shattering, experience of violence, injury, and harm. Crucial to the experience of trauma are the multiple difficulties that arise in trying to articulate it. [...] Trauma mocks language and confronts it with its insufficiency. Yet at the same time as language about trauma is theorized as an impossibility, language is pressed forward as that which can heal the survivor of trauma.⁴⁰

Indeed, what Gillian Whitlock and Kate Douglas term “trauma texts”⁴¹ provide a rich field for analysis: for example, the self-narratives of members of First Nations communities in Canada who suffered sexual abuse at the hands of representatives of the Catholic Church; of Indigenous peoples in Australia, notably the Stolen Generations, whose members were forcibly removed from their families; or of survivors of the Irish “Mother and Baby Homes”.

Self-narratives may also be considered as a form of self-care or “self-preservation,” in the words of Audre Lorde: “Caring for myself is not self-

³⁶ Mintz, *Unruly Bodies*, 7.

³⁷ Lucy Grealy, *Autobiography of a Face* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1994).

³⁸ Rebekah Taussig, *Sitting Pretty: The View from My Ordinary Resilient Disabled Body* (New York: HarperCollins, 2021).

³⁹ Christa Couture, *How to Lose Everything: A Memoir* (Madeira Park: Douglas and McIntyre, 2021).

⁴⁰ Leigh Gilmore, *The Limits of Autobiography: Trauma and Testimony* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), 6.

⁴¹ Gillian Whitlock and Kate Douglas, *Trauma Texts* (London: Routledge, 2009).

indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare".⁴² Lorde also advocates for speaking out (in written form in our context) as a means of caring for oneself:

I have come to believe over and over again that what is most important to me must be spoken, made verbal and shared, even at the risk of having it bruised or misunderstood. That the speaking profits me, beyond any other effect.⁴³

Here, the political dimension of such acts of self-expression (whether oral or written) is unmistakably central.

Today, the Internet opens up new spaces for discussion and offers alternative possibilities for self-construction, which have now become an integral part of our lives. Previously marginalised voices can now be accessed from all over the world thanks to the digitisation of collections such as that of the Bureau of Military History in Ireland. Collected in the 1950s, digitised and made public in 2003, these sources—mainly witness statements, pension applications and self-narratives—provide a fresh perspective on the revolutionary period in Ireland (1912-1923) and challenge the linear, official narrative of the foundational period⁴⁴. These sources—more personal and previously unexploited—provide a fresh perspective on major events in the island's history and challenge the linear, official narrative of this foundational period. At the same time, the digital age has also given rise to new, specific forms of self-representation and self-writing. As Anna Poletti and Julie Rak note in *Identity Technologies: Constructing the Self Online*,

[n]owhere is the power and diversity of the autobiographical more visible than online, where it is the *raison d'être* for many of the activities and practices associated with Web 2.0, and where acquiring and maintaining online identities make up the core activities of many users.⁴⁵

This raises questions about the impact of the new digital forms of life writing on the identities of authors, given the constant pressure of novelty,

⁴² Audre Lorde, *A Burst of Light and Other Essays* (Ithaca: Firebrand Books, 1988), 125.

⁴³ Audre Lorde, *The Cancer Journals* (New York: Penguin Books, 2020), Kindle.

⁴⁴ <https://bmh.militaryarchives.ie>.

⁴⁵ Anna Poletti and Julie Rak, "Introduction: Digital Dialogues," in *Identity Technologies: Constructing the Self Online*, ed. Anna Poletti and Julie Rak (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2014), 3.

the expectations of readers' responses and reactions, and the overlap of virtual and real selves. As Laurie McNeill reminds us:

The modes of auto/biography become part of millions of people's daily routines: they now experience the social motive—the exigence—to log on and represent themselves and others. Surely this habit must shape offline lives, with users on the alert for 'the reportable'.⁴⁶

It would therefore be necessary to foreground the expectations of audiences for these auto/tweetographies, which necessarily differ from those associated with the genre of life writing prior to the digital revolution. This is a space where the field of the digital humanities can make a valuable contribution.

This volume gathers early career researchers as well as more established scholars, and aims at bringing to the fore original contributions with cultural, geographical, and theoretical variety. The first chapter stands out as it was written by the Nigerian writer Unoma Azuah, who delivered the keynote speech at the conference.

In "A Nigerian Lesbian Writer's Intention," Unoma Azuah reflects on how writing became her means of resisting the "colonization" of her queer body by a violently heteronormative and patriarchal Nigerian society. Drawing inspiration from Chinua Achebe's anti-colonial literary vision, she positions her memoir *Embracing My Shadow: Growing Up Lesbian in Nigeria* (2020) as both protest and self-liberation, reclaiming her right to narrate her own life. Azuah situates her sexuality within broader histories of silencing, from her mother's unspoken trauma during the Nigerian civil war (1967-1970) to the shame systematically imposed on queer people in Nigeria and beyond. By linking colonial oppression with contemporary homophobia, she underscores how literature can dismantle structures of domination and archive marginalised lives. She also draws strength from Igbo spirituality, feminist writers like Flora Nwapa and Ama Ata Aidoo, and her community of queer African authors, who collectively challenge silence with storytelling. Ultimately, Azuah asserts that naming oneself through literature is a radical act of survival, resistance, and reclamation of humanity for queer Africans.

In "Making a Case for Autofiction: Updating Dreams of Motherhood in Rachel Cusk and Sheila Heti," Massimiliano Manni examines how

⁴⁶ Laurie McNeill, "Life Bytes: Six-Word Memoir and the Exigencies of Auto-tweetographies," in *Identity Technologies: Constructing the Self Online*, ed. Anna Poletti and Julie Rak (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2014), 151.

motherhood endures as a defining marker of womanhood, even as other traditional aspects of femininity have been redefined or displaced. While parenting roles and family structures have diversified, the biological capacity to bear children continues to sustain gendered inequality, as underscored by Rachel Cusk in *A Life's Work* (2001). At the same time, the physical and emotional labour of mothering remains strikingly undervalued in both cultural and literary discourse. Contemporary authors such as Kate Briggs and Olga Ravn insist on recognizing motherhood as “work,” exposing the ways in which literature and tradition have long minimised or erased maternal experience. Against this backdrop, the chapter analyses Cusk’s memoir alongside Sheila Heti’s autofictional *Motherhood* (2010), exploring how their distinct literary forms challenge patriarchal scripts and interrogate the place of maternal narratives within the canon. In so doing, it highlights the political and aesthetic stakes of life writing when addressing one of the most enduring—and contested—dimensions of women’s lives.

In “From ‘Bookish Introvert’ to ‘Fierce BDSM Gladiator’: Madison Young Memoir’s *Daddy* (2014),” Margaret Gillespie explores how feminist pornography has the potential to re-shape the porn genre as well as gender politics more generally. Young—a contemporary U.S. pro-sex, feminist porn performer and award-winning adult film director—takes pornography out of the purview of men and the commercial, capitalist entertainment industry, its historical site of production and consumption, to constitute a powerful, if provocative, form of resistance. In her memoir, Young turns the lens on herself and tells her own journey towards sexual awakening. The chapter asks to what degree Young’s account may be said to be compatible with her professed feminist politics, and whether this particular mode of writing of the self can be considered a form of resistance to sexist gender norms and the expression of an alternative form of sexual politics.

In “A Wine Writer’s Memoir: The Voice of Alice Feiring,” Éléonore Obis examines wine-writing, a complex genre mixing travel literature, journalism, fiction and non-fiction. Usually drawn to write memoirs or narrative non-fiction in the first person, wine writers address the specific readership of a newspaper or magazine, in order to promote a wine or wine region. Writing about wine implies tasting, personal impressions on people and travels, and in this small circle, the white male hegemony can still strongly be felt – mirroring that of the wine business world. The voice of Alice Feiring—journalist, natural wine expert, and author of eight books on wine—stands out. The chapter focuses on Feiring’s singular voice and shows how her unique style and vision of wine combine in her books,

most especially her last one *To Fall in Love Drink This: A Wine Writer's Memoir* (2022). Drawing on the concept of “autogynography,” Obis demonstrates how the memoir draws a parallel between the wine described and the author’s self, bearing witness to the birth of a writer.

In “‘She decided [...] my name should be Tina:’ Memoirs to Redress the Self in *The Girl Who Smiled Beads*,” Hannah Coombs explores how autobiographical writing provides a crucial platform for child refugees to retrospectively voice their experiences, countering the silencing and misrepresentation that often marks their childhoods. Child refugees, doubly marginalised by age and displacement, are rarely afforded opportunities to articulate their perspectives, leaving them represented either as anonymous masses or as passive victims of tragedy. Focusing on Clemantine Wamariya’s memoir *The Girl Who Smiled Beads* (2018), the chapter examines how her narrative foregrounds the intimate, domestic, and everyday dimensions of displacement, often overlooked by existing scholarship that emphasises gender or humanitarian frameworks. It argues that Clemantine’s account of trauma and identity reveals the challenges of reclaiming selfhood while alternating between her childhood and teenage perspectives. Her lack of a stable home is shown to heighten the role of autobiography itself as an alternative space for self-expression, identity work, and resistance against externally imposed narratives. In this way, Wamariya’s memoir exemplifies how life writing by former child refugees can destabilise reductive portrayals and assert agency within literary and political discourses.

In “Tomson Highway’s *Kiss of the Fur Queen* and the Dissolution of the Autobiographical Pact,” Franck Miroux reconsiders Tomson Highway’s *Kiss of the Fur Queen* (1998) as an autobiographical novel, despite its fictional guise and third-person narration. The story of two Nehiyawak brothers, torn from their family and culture by the Canadian residential school system, mirrors Highway’s own lived experience of displacement, trauma, and artistic survival. While the text appears to violate the “autobiographical pact” as defined by Philippe Lejeune, the chapter argues that Indigenous modes of storytelling generate alternative forms of self-narration that resist Eurocentric definitions of autobiography. Drawing on concepts of “tribalography” and “mythography,” it shows how Highway weaves memory, myth, and trauma into a narrative that asserts Indigenous identity and collective history. In doing so, the novel both reclaims autobiography from the constraints of Western epistemologies and exposes the colonial legacies that sought to silence First Nations voices. Ultimately, Highway’s work exemplifies how life writing can operate

across cultural traditions, unsettling inherited literary categories and the politics that sustain them.

In “Rewriting the Self, Revising History: From Ignatius Sancho’s *Letters to Paterson Joseph’s The Secret Diaries of Charles Ignatius Sancho* (2022),” Vanessa Alayrac-Fielding examines Ignatius Sancho’s correspondence and Paterson Joseph’s debut novel jointly to discuss the writing and rewriting of Sancho’s self. The memory and legacy of Ignatius Sancho, one of the most famous Afro-Britons of the 18th century, fell into oblivion before being reactivated in the last twenty years, especially in the cultural context of the UK’s bicentenary of the abolition of slavery in 2007. In this fictional autobiography presented as Sancho’s observations, emotions and personal experience in a complex diary offered to his son William, Paterson Joseph adds his voice to the real Sancho’s voice and impressions heard in the latter’s published correspondence. The impersonation of Sancho is taken to a further level with Joseph’s audio performance of his novel, in which the historical figure is vividly brought to life. This chapter explores the rewriting of Sancho’s life in Joseph’s contemporary fiction as the writing of British identity and of the author’s own identity. Writing a re-imagined autobiography based on archival fragments, Joseph weaves together the writing of the self and the historiography of the Afro-Caribbean diaspora and contributes to “redressing” history—reclaiming the voice of a “vulnerable historical subject”.

In “Writing the Self in More-than-Human Worlds: Niall Williams and Christine Breen’s Memoir *In Kiltumper, A Year in an Irish Garden*,” Marie Mianowski focuses on Williams and Breen’s memoir of their lives in Kiltumper, in the house and on the land where Christine’s grandfather was born in Co. Clare. In the memoir, which tells of the life and work they have been sharing on the farm since 1985, their personal experiences as human beings, as a family, as writers and farmers/gardeners mingle. The chapter questions the ways in which the writing of the self is intertwined with the material experience of the more-than-human world around the two writers. The mode of writing the self, which may seem to be a very intimate affair, actually raises essential questions regarding the politics of ecology and the politics of place—in particular domestic place. Delving into the pioneering theories of Donna Haraway and Baptiste Morizot, Mianowski questions the interlacing of the two authors’ voices as they draw their readers’ attention to their lives on the land they have been staying on for more than three decades, interweaving their narratives with that of the various species they share the land, the water and the air with. The question of creative non-fiction in a context of climate change is also

broached upon, as life writing can raise issues about relationships between human beings and more-than-human worlds.

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CHAPTER ONE

A NIGERIAN LESBIAN WRITER'S INTENTION

UNOMA AZUAH

I took to writing because it offered me the agency and voice to reject the colonization of my body by a homophobic world that forces heteronormativity on queer people. I use colonialization in the manner that the scholar Ogochukwu Ukwueze conceives it, as “a metaphor for every interpellation of an individual by external forces,” which manifest in “the cultural frameworks of normalcy instituted through religion, sociocultural codes and other superstructures [...] antithetical to the project of self-sovereignty”.¹ Homophobia and my mother’s experience of the Nigerian civil war inspired my literary activism, and Chinua Achebe’s example of colonial resistance provided a model for me in confronting homophobia in my memoir *Embracing my Shadow: Growing Up Lesbian in Nigeria*: my sexuality, gender and racial experiences remain pivotal in showing the forces of colonization, both in Nigeria and in America.

Growing up in a conservative, homophobic country like Nigeria, I spent much of my teenage years hiding from myself, trying to deceive myself into believing that I was not who I was, who I still am. My sexual desires terrified me more than the tragedies of the Nigerian civil war, which I experienced vicariously from the stories my mother told me. One night my mother’s eyes lit with terror as she narrated to me how she met my father. During the war, my father, a Nigerian soldier of the Tiv ethnic group had rescued my mother, an Igbo woman of southeastern Nigeria, from the clutches of his colleagues who wanted to rape her. I believe my father must have eventually paid a difficult price for his daring, since his colleagues felt betrayed by his action. This story, unlike any other war narrative that my mother told me, choked her. But why would a woman who freely, even if painfully, talked about the massacre of her Igbo

¹ Ogochukwu Ukwueze, “Nigerian Facebook Poets and the New Tasks of Postcoloniality,” *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* (forthcoming in 2026).

community, fail to narrate her own experience? Shame! She was ashamed of being tagged a near-rape victim. Even as a teenager, I understood my mother's struggle, because I too was ashamed of being called a lesbian. There is so much a label can do to a person, especially if it is a weapon wielded by those who consider that person a *crime* to be punished, a misfortune to be erased. I am often seen as a crime in Nigeria and a calamity in the world. So, depending on where you look from, I should be penalized or obliterated from existence. But my experience of shame as a queer person in Nigeria is not an isolated case. Obi-Achimbá, a victim of kidnap and physical attacks driven by homophobia many years after the heyday of my struggles, suggests that homophobia has calcified in the country. He notes that:

As a queer body living and surviving Nigeria, this very body I carry with me has been criminalized. As a queer body who spent most of his formative years amongst a Christian fundamentalist sect, my body is despicable, ridden with sin and, therefore, condemned. This is the reality and yet it appears to be one of the very few things people fail to see. The queer body is always, always under persistent attack and pressure from every quarter; from childhood to adolescence to maturity, you are measured with a rigid yardstick that has been carved in accordance with specific gender binaries. There's this sense of shame that the society drapes around the [necks] of those whose lives appear different, people who don't fit in. They are ridiculed and "othered," irrespective of the psychological and emotional implications. It's safe to say that I picked myself, this body, from the debris of society's relentless shaming and abuse.²

In Nigeria, shame is a tool for silencing queer people. Most young queer people living in Nigeria are afraid of expressing themselves on the social media for the shame of being outed or targeted by an insanely homophobic social space. There are similar experiences even in the US. I still shudder with sadness at the passing of Channing Smith, a junior at Coffee County Central High School in Manchester, Tennessee, who was pushed to committing suicide on September 23, 2019, after his private Facebook exchanges with another boy were shared on Snapchat and Instagram. A world that pushes queer people to the margin is one that wants to erase us. I discovered this for myself. Like Obi-Achimbá, I undertook quite early the journey of self-liberation, knowing that it was

² Chibuihè Obi-Achimbá, "Poetry of Redemption and the Brief History of a Queer Body," interview by Darlington Chibueze Anuonye, *The New Black Magazine*, June 12, 2024, <https://thenewblackmagazine.com/2024/06/12/poetry-of-redemption-and-the-brief-history-of-a-queer-body/>.

something I had to do myself. The most significant part of my journey was taking on the vital task of telling my story, of narrating who I am and the things I have experienced. I like how Achebe rendered the African proverb that underscores the significance of taking charge of our own stories: "Until the lions have their own historians, the history of the hunt will always glorify the hunter".³ Although Achebe was in this passage addressing Europe's dark and old colonial history in Africa and the darker and much older orientalist myth-making that initiated and sustained the colonial project, the truth he espouses is unique to my experience as a lesbian. So, in writing my memoir, *Embracing my Shadow: Growing Up Lesbian in Nigeria*, in narrating my life as a Nigerian lesbian despite the precarity in doing so, I chose to become the historian of my own life.

Writing offered me the miracle of self-expression and self-liberation. It gave me the agency to legalize my desires and the voice to name myself. So, I am not a lesbian because I was derogatorily named so; I am a lesbian because that is who I am. This attempt to define myself and to limit the hierarchy of those struggling to define me might appear as a semantic squabble, but it is not. There is a difference between being named and naming oneself, especially if those who exercise this responsibility arrogated the power to themselves and intend to use it to diminish one. In this context, the *namer* becomes the all-knowing, all-seeing judge whose opinion determines the fate of the named. It is risky to carry the identity of shame given to one by people who have made no attempt to truly understand one. What is left, then, is for one to redefine oneself, as I did for myself in *Embracing my Shadow: Growing Up Lesbian in Nigeria*.

As a teenager, I carried the burden of kissing my friend and classmate, Star, for a very long time, although I enjoyed the moment and longed for it again. Mine was the case of a child fighting what I had taught to believe was the filthiness of my desire, my sinful life. In *Embracing my Shadow: Growing Up Lesbian in Nigeria*, I sought to restore all the nights I spent hiding from my teachers and fellow students, all the days I spent hiding from my family and community, all the love I could not have because it was forbidden. For the first time in my life, I found that I could speak to the things that mattered to me without guilt, without needing to speak in tongues and heavy metaphors. I realized I could let Star's light shine so steadily on me, that I could fall in love without guilt, that I could name my desires without thinking of wars. I am a lesbian. This is the whole truth.

³ Chinua Achebe, "'The Art of Fiction': Interview with Chinua Achebe," interview by Jerome Brooks, *The Paris Review* 133, no. 139 (1994). <https://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/1720/the-art-of-fiction-no-139-chinua-achebe>.

But this truth has consequences. The Same Sex Marriage Prohibition Act in Nigeria, signed into law in 2014, stipulates that people like me, who express their queer identities, could be jailed for up to 14 years. In Uganda, we are sentenced to death. However, I like how Obi-Achimbá announced his own truth:

I have no shame, and by this I mean I have done nothing to be ashamed of. To be queer is to be free from any kind of limitation. In a world of boxes and borders, that privilege is priceless. Queer is a world of endless possibilities. To be queer is to transcend cultural, religious, ideological ghettos.⁴

Speaking of wars, I was born just before the end of the Nigerian civil war. And, as I stated earlier, I am the child of a Nigerian soldier and an Igbo woman, who met in a complicated situation during the war. So, my life is shaped by that war in a manner that predates me, in a way I may never fully account for. As a young woman living and fending for myself in Lagos in the early 1990s, I received constant rape threats, even from strangers. And, that's because I am a lesbian. There was this immoral belief, some people still hold onto it, that raping a lesbian is a way to correct and normalize her sexuality. So, sex became a weapon wielded against me. These experiences often reminded me of my mother's near-rape story and of the stories of other Igbo woman and girls raped during the war.

But what I learnt from the Igbo experience has helped me a lot. The world does not often expect the victims, the marginalized and the defeated to tell the stories of their victimhood, their marginalization, their defeat. But the Igbo challenged that popular notion by taking on the responsibility of accounting for the war in their writings. It is only fifty-three years since the war ended, but the number as well as the quality of books written and produced by Igbo writers and historians on the war is impressive. The efforts of writers like Flora Nwapa in *Never Again*, Chukwuemeka Ike in *Sunset at Daw*, Cyprian Ekwensi in *Survive the Peace*, Alexander Madiebo in *The Nigerian Revolution and the Biafran War*, Buchi Emecheta in *Destination Biafra*, Chukwuemeka Odimegwu Ojukwu in *Because I am Involved*, Anthonia Kalu in *Broken Lives and Other Stories*, Alfred Obiora Uzokwe in *Surviving Biafra: The Story of the Nigerian Civil War*, Ralph Uwechue in *Reflections on the Nigerian Civil War: Facing the Future*, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie in *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Emefiana Ezeani in *In Biafra Africa Died: A Diplomatic Plot*, Achebe in

⁴ Obi-Achimbá, interview.

There Was a Country, and Chinelo Okparanta in *Under the Udala Tree*, lend credence to Lucien Goldmann's observation that

Periods of crisis and of deep social transformation are particularly favorable to the birth of great works of art and literature because of the multiplicity of problems and experiences that they bring to men and of the great widening of affective and intellectual horizons that they provoke.⁵

As Goldmann suggested, this corpus of literature on the Nigerian civil war helped me to see the possibility of telling my own stories, as well as taught me the discipline of resisting marginality by positioning that marginal construct as a tool of protest. So, *Embracing my Shadow: Growing Up Lesbian in Nigeria* is protest, as it is literature. I hope to add to a growing alignment of creativity with resistance.

I believe that literature and all arts can perform useful ideological and social functions especially in societies whose history, humanity, and art were subverted by European colonialism. This is where I turn again to Achebe. I admire his understanding of and artistic response to the ways in which European colonialism and its agents subverted the history and humanity of Africa. The colonialist arrogates to themselves the power to define history and people, to approve and disprove the humanity of the colonized. This is why colonialism, among other things, is deadly. For resisting the myths that enabled colonialism to thrive in his novels and essays, Achebe uses literature to revolutionize the mind of his readers, and to free his African audience from the stifling hold of spurious narratives intended to malign them. This vision was so important to him that he announced it remarkably:

I would be quite satisfied if my novels [...] did no more than teach my readers that their past—with all its imperfections—was not one long night of savagery from which the first Europeans acting on God's behalf delivered them.⁶

Achebe excelled in this vision of emancipating Africa through literature, for in *Things Fall Apart*, he recreated the traditional Igbo worldview in all of its dignity, and in telling the story of Okonkwo's brave resistance of colonialism and its attendant cultural assault, he creates a revolutionary model for a queer woman like me resisting homophobia. The critic M.J.C.

⁵ Lucien Goldmann, "Dialectical Materialism and Literary History," *New Left Review* I, no. 92 (1975): 50.

⁶ Chinua Achebe, "The Novelist as Teacher," in *Morning Yet on Creation Day: Essays* (Garden City: Anchor Press, 1975), 59.

Echeruo helps us to understand the significance of Okonkwo's character and the centrality of his suicide in the overall project of self-actualization.

We thank the Almighty One, that Okonkwo took that decision, although paying a supreme price for his daring to unilaterally cancel his contract of life. We are as proud as we are today, as Africans, because of what Okonkwo decided not to do, and what he actually did: say 'NO' to colonization. If Okonkwo had not died on his own terms, but been hanged by the Empire, there would have been nothing to signify our attempt at the resurrection of our selfhood. And so Okonkwo has become the icon for a universal anticolonial struggle, and the beginning of proper inculturation. There is no one like him—none in all of African literature and history. He made history without a palace, without a chorus of mistress, without calvary. Igboland bred him; Chinua Achebe told his story. The rest, as they say, is history.⁷

I found that if Achebe could tell Okonkwo's story so powerfully that the life of a fictional character in the village of Umuofia could keep Nelson Mandela company in prison and inspire him to pursue the ideals of human freedom, which the apartheid system in South Africa negated, if Okonkwo's life could inspire people and nations in Africa and around the world to resist political and cultural domination, then my story as a queer woman deserves to be told as well and to be told properly. Just as Achebe's writing showed us how the European literary canon helped to establish the colonial project and went on to confront its underlying myth, I hoped that sharing my story would contribute to the documentation of queer lives, since the historical silencing of queer people has proved potent in the continuous spread of homophobia in Africa. And, just as his novels depict and sometimes celebrate Africa's cultural heritage, I resolved that mine would depict and celebrate queerness.

So, at the core of *Embracing my Shadow: Growing Up Lesbian in Nigeria* is the ethical project of reclaiming queer desires from the depth of moral decadence where they had been banished, while also centering queer lives in the human canon where they undeniably belong. So, while I wrote the memoir, I was constantly guided by Achebe's belief that "every literature must seek the things that belong unto its place, evolve out of the necessities of its history, past and current and the aspirations and destiny

⁷ M. J. C Echeruo. "The Beloved Son: A Tribute to Late Professor Chinua Achebe, 1930-2013." A Paper Presented at a Memorial Event titled "A Day of Tributes in Honour of Late Professor Chinua Achebe." Ikemba Ojukwu Centre, Owerri, Imo State, Nigeria, 17 May, 2013.