The Self as Other in Minority American Life Writing

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Edited by

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Cambridge
Scholars
Publishing

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This book first published 2019

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN (10): 1-5275-2797-2
ISBN (13): 978-1-5275-2797-3

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

For their thorough, accurate, and insightfully "relational" peer-reviewing, we wish to give our warmest thanks to: Kathie Birat (Université de Lorraine), Anne Garrait-Bourrier (Université Blaise-Pascal, Clermont-Ferrand), Michel Feith (Université de Nantes), Daniel Ferrer (ITEM/CNRS), Claire Gallien (Université Paul-Valéry, Montpellier 3), Marie-Agnès Gay (Université Jean-Moulin, Lyon 3), Bénédicte Meillon (Université de Perpignan Via Domitia), Judith Misrahi-Barak (Université Paul-Valéry, Montpellier 3), and Tanfer Emin Tunc (Hacettepe University, Ankara, Turkey).

INTRODUCTION

WRITING THE SELF AS OTHER: MODES OF OTHER-WRITING IN MINORITY AMERICAN LIFE WRITING

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To examine the manifold manifestations of the self as other in autobiographical writing supposes that one accepts that the genre contains no aporia, but rather that it is run through inevitable ambivalences and fruitful paradoxes. "I is an other," Philippe Lejeune defiantly proclaims in his 1980 essay, a critical analysis of seven "borderline cases" that points to the aesthetic, socio-cultural, and ethical factors informing the author-reader relationship at the core of autobiography and that necessarily complicate the referentiality of the writing subject.[1] Lejeune's titling his essay after Rimbaud's celebrated statement in his letter to Paul Demeny on May 15, 1871 might seem surprising, considering that the French critic excludes poetry from his definition of autobiography.[2] Furthermore, what the poet yearns for in his "letter of the seer" happens to be what traditional autobiography has kept at arm's length for the sake of referentiality. "[A] long, boundless, and systematized disorganization of all the senses," Rimbaud claims (Schmidt 1976: 103), is the only way for the poet to let

[1] The full French title is: *Je est un autre: l'autobiographie, de la littérature aux médias* (1980).

[2] Lejeune defines the genre of autobiography in *Le Pacte autobiographique*: "Retrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality." (Lejeune 1989 4). In *Essays on Life Writing*, Marlene Kadar includes all forms of personal literature, even narrative poetry, in her broader definition of life writing material: "texts that are written by an author who does not continuously write about someone else, and who does not pretend to be absent from [the texts]." (Kadar 1992: 4-5).

his art break loose from the formal shackles of the early French Romantics (Paliyenko 1993: 434), to unleash his creative unconscious and ultimately, to reach (or "see") "the unknown."[3] Yet how can the autobiographer attempt to transcend the mundane and the familiar without risking transgressing the "autobiographical pact," namely the author's foundational promise to the reader that he/she and the text's narrator refer to the same person? (Lejeune 1975: 13-14, 23-25). What if formal and aesthetic experimentations, resulting from creative freedom and unbounded imagination, led him/her away from him/herself?

When asked within the field of minority American autobiographical writing these questions raise further concerns: what risks does a writer considered as other by the dominant culture, on whose genre he/she dares to tread, run when flirting with its outer confines? Where should the limits be (re)drawn as one explores a land delineated by the other? Going "too far" for those whose socio-cultural and political experience has been historically kept in the margins might result in a self-alienating/self-annihilating double negation. Minority American autobiographical writing bespeaks the urge for a reconceptualization of the vexed notions of (self)representation and identity: who is this "I" that the author-narrator-character of the autobiographical text contractually claims to be? Who (else) hides behind the autobiographical "I(s)"?

In what she calls "the life writing of otherness," Lauren Rusk tackles these issues. She depicts the genre as "innovative personal writing by those the dominant in society define as 'other' than themselves," stressing the common impulse of these life writers who seek "to recreate experience that has been erased, falsified, and devalued by the construction of otherness." (Rusk 2002: 1). In writing their own lives, those who have been "othered" by the dominant society hope to achieve the social, cultural, political and historical presence and significance—or, "consequentiality"[4]—they have been denied. The "life writing of otherness" takes on a performative value as, in the very act of narrating their experiences of self-negation, these life writers inscribe themselves and their selves—the inner and outer selves to whom they are inevitably related—onto the social and political space from which they have been excluded. Precisely by exposing the torn-up *and* mended fabric of the self can they reinstate themselves as subjects, as "full" referents, not

[3] "He attains the unknown, and if, demented, he finally loses the understanding of his visions, he will at least have seen them!" (Schmidt 1976: 102).

[4] "[T]hose in muted groups […] are both delineated in ways that do not answer to their experience and ignored as inconsequential." (Rusk 2002: 5).

preexisting complete entities, but complex, textured beings shaped by the upheavals of their experiences of otherness.

Rocío G. Davis's reading of Asian North American autobiographies of childhood as "literary acts that articulate [the writers'] individual processes of self-identification and negotiation of cultural and/or national affiliation" (Davis 2007: 2), draws attention to life writers' troubled relationship to the notion of culture which determines their self-representation as political subjects and consequently informs the self-authoring process. Contrary to Rusk, whose study includes Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, Jeannette Winterson's *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*, James Baldwin's *Notes of a Native Son,* and Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*, Davis chooses to understand "culture" mostly, in David Leiwei Li's words, as "a euphemism for race" (Li 1998: 7) in the long-standing debate over national belonging and identity,[5] in which the Asian American and Asian Canadian writers in her corpus are necessarily involved. The selected works in this collection consider otherness through the lens of race and ethnicity since they were produced by twentieth-century and contemporary Native American, African American, Caribbean American and Asian American life writers. As Davis suggests, the question of national inscription, or rather positionality, is key to understanding the cultural and aesthetic claims of minority American life writers, whose "negotiation of cultural and/or national affiliation" first and foremost hinges on their relationship to land, territory and national space. This is literally evinced in Oskison's and Erdrich's respectively auto-topo-graphical and eco-autobiographical modes of writing, explored in the first section of this book, and more generally, in minority American life writers' narrativization of their complicated sense of place and location. In this regard, as the other sections of this collection of essays foreground, self as *terra incognita* is to be roamed, explored, probed and

[5] Reflecting on the contradictions underpinning the history of Asian American citizenship, Li points out the unexpected outcome of the Civil Rights movement, which he contends actually reinforced the state's and American society's reliance on the idea of a dominant culture and the notion of culture—inevitably conflated with the concept of race when it comes to (Asian) American minorities—in their understanding of national identity: "Rather than pronouncing the demise of culture as citizenship's constitutive element, the state's insistence on fundamental formal equality has enhanced the role of culture as the pivotal site of national contestation. A euphemism for race, culture has become an objective political force to either sustain or subvert the state's social rearrangement, and Asian Americans are compelled again to justify their newly acquired citizenship on cultural grounds." (Li 1998: 7).

continuously mapped out through as many forms and thanks to as many readings as there are routes to one's "home(s)."

What Lejeune has compellingly brought to light in the context of French autobiography should be kept in mind when exploring the genre of life writing: "[the autobiographical] I is an other" for it is the un/conscious (re)product(ion) of multiple "authors"—not only the auto/biographer(s) or the ghost/writer(s), but also the readers—whose intentions and expectations originate in common preexisting socio-cultural paradigms of selfhood and self-representation (Lejeune 1980: 7-9). However, at stake in the field of ethnic life writing lies the contentious assumption of a cultural common ground. Therefore, because the "dominant communicative system" (Ardener 1975: 22) only contributes to silencing and ignoring minorities, causing them to see themselves as voiceless and insignificant, ethnic life writers need to rewrite "the self as different from cultural prescription" (Friedman 1988: 39). By calling for and prompting a creative rethinking of the self beyond the narrow contours of the autonomous, individualized, and ideally homogeneous Western self, ethnic life writing has productively incited the autobiographical genre to renew itself.

The three main "aspects of the *textual* self"[6] Rusk identifies in her critical reading of life writing works from "those in muted groups" (4-5) constitute helpful critical tools in that they contribute to articulating the *raison d'être* of the genre. Indeed, they shed significant light on the historically and socio-culturally informed aspirations which have initiated and fueled the ethnic self-writing gesture. These three dimensions of the othered autobiographical "I", which Rusk calls "in order of increasing breadth, the unique, the collective, and inclusive," hint at "the competing claims of individuality, social difference, and hoped-for common ground," (3) precisely by "assert[ing] the selfhood [the writing subjects] have been denied—in its uniqueness, which those who stereotype them cannot see, its collective experience of being treated as 'other'; and its kinship within the family of humanity." (5). Secondarily mentioned are the "familial" and "communal" aspects of the self, the latter contrasting with the "collective" dimension as it suggests "affinity within a group, rather than awareness of prejudice against the group." (3). The essays collected bring to the fore how these main declensions of the othered self are intricately woven

[6] "The dimensions of selfhood this book treats are aspects of the *textual* self. I do not suggest that people have 'inside' them an essential, discrete, coherent self. People do, however, put together self-conceptions; they tell stories about and characterize themselves. The ways they can imagine themselves depend, of course, on the cultural and historical concepts of personhood that they have been steeped in." (Rusk 2002: 4-5).

together and how they translate on paper—or onscreen in the case of Josephine Baker's performances and of Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's intermedial self-expression. In turn, and all at once, the self appears as "unique," collective" and "inclusive." No longer bundled up in stereotypes it has at last misshapen, outgrown, or even torn up, the self stands out as multidimensional and incontrovertibly human.

Yet Rusk's choice of the term "inclusive" to refer to the self's multiplicity and its potential for communal, even global kinship risks reducing the other-self relationship to a dialectics of exclusion/inclusion, which is precisely what her analyses sensitively manage to invalidate. Because the self suffers and heals, forgets and remembers, writes and reads not only *against*, but also *through*, *for* and *with* others, the term "relational" describes both the dynamics underpinning the modes of self-writing under study and the critical approach at hand. Critical works like Paul John Eakin's *How our Lives Become Stories* and Susanna Egan's *Mirror Talk*, both published in 1999, have demonstrated the applicability of the notion of relational connectedness, inherited from psychoanalytical and feminist theories,[7] to critical writing on autobiography, thereby contributing to theories of intersubjective autobiographies.[8] Eakin defines "the relational life" which initiates and underpins the self-writing process

[7] In "Is Relationality a Genre?", Julia Watson puts forward the feminist roots of the concept of relationality, whose applicability Eakin's works have contributed to expanding in the field of life writing studies. She traces the concept back to the work of feminist theorists such as Nancy Chodorow, Mary G. Mason, Susan Stanford Friedman, and Nancy K. Miller, whose particular interest in psychologist Jessica Benjamin's essay, "A Desire of One's Own," has fed her works of autocritique. Watson stresses the significant contribution of feminist and psychoanalytical theorizing of relationality to broader reflections on "relational connectedness": "Although these discussions, referencing the porous ego-boundaries forged in relationships between women as an effect in part of mother–child bonds, focused on middle-class white women at particular historical moments, their wider applicability for situating the genealogy and psychodynamics of a concept of relational connectedness was, and continues to be, referenced." (Watson 2016). For a more extensive historicization of the concept, see "Introduction: Situating Subjectivity in Women's Autobiographical Practices (1998)" in Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson's *Life Writing in the Long Run* (2017).

[8] In "Is Relationality a Genre?", Julia Watson sums up Egan's argument in *Mirror Talk* as follows: "Egan took up the relational aspect of life writing as a central focus, locating her project in the intersubjectivity created by various kinds of 'mirrored' memoirs between subjects and analyzing how such practices both engage and alter the autobiographical in telling dual or multiple stories." (Watson 2016).

by highlighting how the story of a life is always the story of intersecting experiences and memories, the product of interrelating subjectivities. These subjectivities are themselves the products of socio-culturally and historically informed discourses due to the fundamental plurality of the self's construction (Eakin 1999: 43). Indeed, as Michael Jackson observes:

> Life stories emerge in the course of *inter*subjective life, and intersubjectivity is a site of conflicting wills and intentions. Accordingly, the life stories that individuals bring to a relationship are metamorphosed in the course of that relationship. They are thus, in a very real sense, authored not by autonomous subjects but by the dynamics of intersubjectivity. (Jackson 1998: 23)

Such a relational aesthetics invites an intersubjective approach to the issues of self-representation and, concerning the writers featured in this collection, to the relationship of the ethnic self to history and its resulting sense of national/cultural identity. Retracing the origins and evolution of the biographical perspective and the use of life histories as sociological and anthropological methods, Christine Delory-Momberger foregrounds the "paradigmatic place" of autobiography in Wilhelm Dilthey's "science of the mind" (*Geisteswissenschaft*), in which intersubjective critical approach to life writing originates (Delory-Momberger 2007: 110). She stresses the pivotal role of the genre in the construction of an epistemology of the human being and his/her contextual, historical inscription, through the particular, personal angle it provides on History.[9] As manifested in the ethnic modes of self-writing examined in this collection, "what is at stake in autobiographical discourse is […] a question of the subject's location in the world through an active interpretation of experiences that one calls one's own in particular 'worldly' contexts." (Gunn 1982: 23). The othered self can hope to recover agency, write him/herself back into history by telling the world about his/her own story. As Davis contends, by allowing the autobiographical "I" to share its experience of socio-cultural and political otherness with its readers, ethnic life writing texts "creat[e] a

[9] "As mediation giving access to the other, the matrix in which the historical gaze originates, autobiography provides the particular story through which one can apprehend History, the *singular text* through which one can read and understand the *universal text* of humanity." (Delory-Momberger 2007: 110). Unless otherwise indicated the translations from the French are Nelly Mok's.

reader and a community," thereby contributing to "the production and preservation of cultural memory" (Davis 2007: 2).[10]

Because life stories stage the relational nature of identity formation and the interplay of subjectivities at work in life itself, they necessarily redraw the boundaries of the autobiographical genre, as Eakin points out, "offer[ing] not only the autobiography of the self but the biography *and* autobiography of the other" (Eakin 1999: 58). While, in a variation of Rimbaud's phrase, the poetic "I" is to become another by venturing to the outer confines of language—away from the paths traced by its predecessors—the autobiographical "I" is to approach its own "truth" in the liminal spaces where modes of self-writing overlap. Such generic relationality leads critical discussions of the genre to consider the ethical limits of the "autobiographical pact": the life writer's responsibility towards the reader, his/her commitment to "telling the truth" about his/her life and about him/herself is what the poet is not subjected to, in his unreserved quest for his "authentic" "true" self, for the places where something in himself is likely to crack (Sager 2018). Yet the referential contract is what invariably—and safely—restrains the writer's poetic license, as Arnaud Schmitt reminds us in his discussion of autofiction (Schmitt 2010: 94).[11]

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[10] Davis highlights the ways in which Asian North American autobiographies can contribute to the building of Asian/American cultural memory: "These autobiographies should be […] read as active interventions on existing historical or cultural records as they reinscribe official versions or provide supplementary material for cultural construction. They function also as palimpsestic and intersecting 'systems of remembering,' which Smith and Watson argue are both personal—manifested in dreams, photographs, family histories—or public—contained in documents, historical events, collective rituals." (Davis 2007: 29).

[11] See Arnaud Schmitt's *Je réel/je fictif: au-delà d'une confusion postmoderne* for his thorough discussion of the genre of autofiction, which re-asserts the fundamental divide between reality and fiction, Schmitt argues, in the wake of Philippe Gasparini's reflections. To him, autofiction is not a third "hybrid" genre resulting from the blending of autobiography and fiction, from generic indeterminacy (with which postmodernism has been too easily conflated), although he believes it logically—chronologically—proceeds from the autobiographical novel (94). Rather, he sees autofiction as a "generic intuition," the author's "seme" whose identity will depend on the writer's oscillation between the two genres. This come and go between autobiography and fiction will generate the reader's hesitation which is encouraged by the "mutability" of the authorial figure (caused by, among other factors, the reader's access to extratextual information on the author and his/her alleged generic intentions) (Schmitt 2010: 188).

The life writing works under examination in this collection illustrate the writers' penchant for liminality, hybridity, and even intermediality, discouraging any critical attempt to grasp and subsume the texts under one category. By exploring the playful, subversive and memorializing potential of the various modes of self-writing—autofiction, auto/biography, experimental poetics and avant-garde prose writing, among others—these works exemplify Schmitt's statement that "the real is that of the one who narrates it, not the one who proves his/her sources" (Schmitt 2010: 83). The autobiographer and the autofictionalist/ autonarrator should make a "postmodern commitment" ("*engagement postmoderne*"),[12] that is, a pledge to tell the reader *his/her own* truth(s), to provide a narrative that is not *stricto sensu* "true" but faithful to *his/her own* reality (Schmitt 2010: 77). At stake, in this revised referential pact, is the postmodern conception of the real, which is always the product of interacting socio-culturally and historically predetermined subjectivities and is thus, in essence, relative. Drawing on Edmund J. Smyth's *Postmodernism and Contemporary Fiction*, Schmitt articulates the paradox at the core of our postmodern era, i.e. "the victory of the subjective over the objective, combined to the conviction that no subjectivity is trustworthy." (Schmitt 2010: 49). Hence what mostly characterizes postmodernism is its "anti-paradigmatic" position (Schmitt 2010: 51) evinced by the texts analyzed in this book.

These considerations invite to envision the generic identity(ies) of a text from the angle of the author-reader relationship. As Stanley Fish posits, the reader apprehends and decides the genre of a given text through his/her "contextual assumptions" (Fish 1999: 70, qtd. in Schmitt 2010: 67-68) which also inform the production of the text. Retracing the evolution of studies in autobiography from "the life (*bios*), to the self (*autos*), to the text (*graphe*)" (Smith 1987: 1), Sidonie Smith points to the postmodernist focus of critics of life writing on the complex interaction between the (author's) text and its reader(s). Such interest in the intersubjective dynamics of the author-text-reader triad[13] has led to a metareflexive

[12] Schmitt opts for the term "autonarration," which is based on a clearer reading contract, thus making the author's responsibility toward the reader more explicit than "autofiction." What autofiction/autonarration suggests about autobiography, is the pressing need for the writer of the self to make and assume a "postmodern commitment" (Schmitt 2010: 77).

[13] "It always comes down to the same triad: the author, the text, and the reader (who may engage in critical work) who meet one another in the reading experience. Any attempt at defining a text is necessarily determined by this experience." (Schmitt 2010: 94).

discussion on life writing "both as a genre and a critical practice" (Kadar 1992: 3), whose subjectivizing potential Gillian Whitlock puts forward as she advocates "a connected reading across autobiographies" that consists in "pulling the loose threads of autobiography, and use them to make sutures between, across and among links […] to ultimately use criticism and reading as a means of suggesting new ways of thinking" (Whitlock 2000: 203-204). Drawing on Marlene Kadar's discussion of life writing, Rosalía Baena, in her introduction to *Transculturing Auto/Biography*, argues that such a critical practice, by "encourag[ing] the reader to develop and foster his/her own self-consciousness" is likely "to humanize and make the self-in-the-writing less abstract" (Baena 2007: 4).

Acutely aware that writing proceeds from reading and that writers, just like readers, are reading/writing subjects, as Roland Barthes observed (Macé 2008), the authors in this book adopt a "relational reading practice," which Julia Watson advocates in "Is Relationality a Genre?", mainly through their dialogic sensitivity to the issues of intertextuality, polyphony, and polyglossia. Ultimately, what drives the critical readings of the minority self-writing texts featured in this collection is a common thrust towards the "transcultural" or, in Janice Kulyk Keefer's words, the ways in which the dominant culture "becomes part of a larger, looser structure within which literary texts which foreground the experience of 'minority' as opposed to 'dominant' groups both present themselves and are received as representative, even paradigmatic forms for an entire social formation, and not just for the ethnic or racial group with which the text's author is associated." (Keefer 1993: 265, qtd in Baena 2007: 1-2). Intent on averting the "castrating" critical gesture that "[cuts] the braid," in Barthes's words from *S/Z*,[14] the essays in this collection provide and allow a plural, multidimensional reading of these modes of self-as-other-writing.

The first section of the collection garners articles dedicated to the output of two Native American writers that highlight how ethnic self-writing radically diverges from conventional notions of autobiographical

[14] "The text while it is being produced is like a piece of Valenciennes lace, created before us under the lacemaker's fingers […]. This process is valid for the entire text. The grouping of codes, as they enter into the work, into the movement of the reading, constitutes a braid (*text, fabric, braid*: the same thing): each thread, each code, is a voice; these braided—or braiding—voices from the writing: when it is alone, the voice does not labor, transforms nothing: it *expresses*; but as soon as the voice intervenes to gather and intertwine the inert threads, there is labor, there is transformation. […] [T]o reduce the text to the unity of meaning by a deceptively univocal reading is to *cut the braid*, to sketch the castrating gesture." (Barthes 1970 trans. Miller 1974: 160).

writing, notably its focus on individual life and probing of the inner psyche. Writing the self is here undertaken with and against the memory of the theft of the land and the genocide, with and against dispossession. Lionel Larré has published and annotated John Milton Oskison's memoirs *A Tale of the Old Indian Territory* (2012). In the present essay he focuses on Oskison's writing of his territorial identity, his struggle with his disputed legitimacy to the Indian Territory, itself the forced destination of his Cherokee ancestors. The notion of identity is complex within what remains a colonial context for Native Americans: is it blood or one's adoption by a community, one's responsibility vis-à-vis Native American culture? The "indigenous" being first and foremost a question of location and place, the autobiographical text performs a threefold function: it is the site of self-expression, of the reinvention of a lost territory, and their inscription within the national narrative. Yet who can represent? Who has the tribal knowledge and experience? An insider/outsider, a biological and cultural *métis*, the son of an English father and a Cherokee mother, Oskison wanted to write the territory before its disappearance. His Cherokee identity was contested by the authorities (the Dawes Commission in 1893) due to his cosmopolitan life as a modern progressive Indian whereas he asserts that identity is more a matter of cultural connection than biology and genetics (he was nonetheless granted that identity in 1903). The dilemma is that acculturation has precisely led to a loss of identity while Native Americans need to be self-defined rather than stereotypically other-defined. The historiographic dimension of Oskison's autobiographical writings and the content of his novels trouble the notion of "authenticity" (the wild, the savage, the warrior, the Indian as he should be) to relate the progression of Native American identity as it indeed was in the early twentieth century. This "relative and relational identity" (Roudeau) linked to the "regionalist bias" (Howells) leads to the truthful representation of an Indian inserted in a social, political and economic network and reflects life in I.T. between the Civil War and the creation of the state of Oklahoma. *A Tale* is an auto-topography that writes the territory to write the self. It exemplifies both the fight for geography of the colonized and their struggle to literally take place: it says the land made me what I am. The narrative of the member of a people exiled within their own country, it also illustrates the tension between rootedness and motion of the American national narrative.

In her essay, Elisabeth Bouzonviller posits that the family is a synecdoche for the tribe in Louise Erdrich's autobiographical writings: *The Blue Jay's Dance*, *Books and Islands in Ojibwe Country,* and the series initiated by *The Birchbark House* that retraces her family history. Of

German, French and Ojibwe heritage, Erdrich offers a hybrid text that mixes Western and Native American traditions in what might be termed a postethnicity narrative. Erdrich defines herself first as a mother, then as a writer, her cultural legacy making her link motherhood and writing in one single gesture. Native American women as life bearers were indeed powerful before colonization. Gender roles might have been strictly delineated yet individuals chose the role they wanted to fit, regardless of biology. While the two nonfiction texts fit the category of motherhood memoirs, *The Birchbark House,* written for a young adult readership, is an autofictional version of Erdrich's family history. Motherhood (childbirth, mothering) enables the experience of wholeness, of a self, merged and temporarily erased, that must be first told in its physicality. Beyond the individual familial story, writing family, i.e. genealogy, means writing the tribe. When reclaiming ancestral tribal history, the narrator invents herself, reclaims Ojibwe country, writes an eco-autobiography, or even a gastrography in which food, natural resources, wall painting, and writing converge. The autobiographical text as postcolonial palimpsest erases official history. Erdrich's writing is multifarious *métissage* where one encounters foreign words at the heart of English texts, native orality in the midst of Western literary tradition, *mises en abyme* of the act of reading, a self-portrait drawn with a pencil, inclusions of and references to various other autobiographical texts (such as Catlin's or Tanner's), the link between the genocide of Native Americans and the Holocaust. The postmodern text holds the native and prehistoric memory that writing can occur on any medium: the bark, the rock, the stone, the sand. Autobiography as life writing is ultimately the sign, not of survival (*survie*), but of surviving (*survivance*), and its totemic animal might very well be the vivacious sturgeon that resists extinction.

The second section focuses on contemporary African American life writing in two contrasting articles. The first one deals with music-hall artist Joséphine Baker and refers to another medium than text, the motion picture as privileged evidence of the live body, while the other brings together John Edgar Wideman's *Fatheralong* and Ta-Nehisi Coates *Between the World and Me* for both memoirs meditate on the Black father-son relationship. The two essays foreground the necessity for the othered self to recover agency and allow intergenerational transmission through artistic, aesthetic, and political subversion. Claudine Raynaud's reading of Joséphine Baker's *Memoirs*, along with the 1935 film *Princess Tam Tam,* leads her to highlight the scene of writing the autobiographical text as the locus of a tension where the artist's life remains her own, even in the midst of a stereotypical eroticized vision of the Other as primitive, exotic and

savage. The text of Baker's 1927 *Memoirs* is "told to" Marcel Sauvage who explains how he met the star and wrote down her memories on and off over a period of time. Indeed, a silent short film clip to advertise the book stages the relationship between Sauvage, Paul Colin, the illustrator, and Baker taking time off from the set of *Sirens of the Tropics*. The essay places this *mise en scène* in correspondence and contrast with the scene in *Princess* where the Parisian writer Max de Mirecourt, faking a romantic interest in the Tunisian shepherdess Alouina, provokes Baker's character's reactions while his "*nègre*" (secretary or ghost-writer) writes down her replies, hidden behind a screen. The result of that theft of the other's life will be published as the best-seller *Civilisation* that restores the writer's blemished reputation and helps him reconquer his estranged wife. Using the notions of "variation" that she borrows from genetic criticism and of Lejeune's "autobiographical space," Raynaud demonstrates how the intricate array of *mises en abyme* and mirror effects between fact and fiction foregrounds the othering of the Black female as sexualized/racialized. Yet the multiple modalities of their embeddedness, reversibility, and variations (text, clip, film) motion towards the insistence on/of the referent: it is ultimately Baker's life, *her* performance, *her* talent, and no other.

Flora Valadié's article, subtitled "Self-Engendering and Autofiction beyond the Color Line in *Fatheralong* and *Between the World and Me*" brings together black fathers who write letters to their sons. John Edgar Wideman writes to his imprisoned son, Jake, and Coates writes to his own adolescent son in the wake of a school friend's death, a victim of random police murder. The self is relational, and the memoir is indeed a way of writing the other into the self as autobiography feeds on biography, creates another kind of filiation that offers the possibility of self-engendering through shared authority. While "race is the child of racism" for Coates, Wideman similarly sees race as interrupting transmission, severing filial relations. What is inherited is an alienated black male body on which the past of racial America is written beyond personal experience. History must be told in a different way, both in terms of content and of form. "Race" is bequeathed to sons by their fathers who must debunk the master narrative, deconstruct the way in which race has been naturalized. If Coates uses the word "plunder" to explain how the Dream rests on the looting of black bodies, Wideman sees History as a silencing of the other. His trip to the South is both a denunciation of a specific writing of history and a way of reconnecting with the voice of the father. If the Dream (Coates) and History (Wideman) are collective fictions or "lies," their memoirs exemplify the need to rely on individual stories to break with linear time.

Wideman asserts the right to use autofiction as a generic middle ground, mixing fact and fiction, to operate a constant birthing of the self, whereas Coates envisions the advent of a people that shall defy the Dreamers.

The third part dwells on the autobiographical ventures of two Caribbean American women whose cathartic and ontological modes of self-writing proceed from their experiences of relocation and dislocation. Nicole Ollier's analysis of polyphony in Edwidge Danticat's *Brother, I'm Dying* signals from the onset that the title of the book points to another than the self, the brother. A family memoir, it explores identity through family relations and the history of the island of Haiti. Ollier first deals with the motion of assembling/dissembling that inscribes life within an ever-mutating world to then address attempts at taming this flux with frames, photographs and figures. She then turns to speech and writing as they shape memory and transmission, which leads her to the genesis of this autobiography, a mixture of both fiction and nonfiction. The expatriation of Danticat's family to the city and then to the United States, tampered by changing migration laws, leads to its dismemberment as her parents emigrate without her and her brother. She joins them eight years later. The family's instability reflects the country's political upheavals: the narrator thus links her uncle Joseph's birthday to the succession of political leaders. She also keeps a precise count of her trips and stays, a mirror of Joseph counting the dead in the streets in his notebooks. Figures and photographs ensure the family's survival while eating and cooking symbolically express togetherness, sharing, heritage. Eating as communion celebrates a body also prey to aging and illness: Joseph's throat cancer and her father Miracin's pulmonary fibrosis. One brother, ironically a preacher, loses his voice, the other, his breath. Danticat then becomes the interpreter of her uncle's voice until a machine helps him recover it. Tragically, threatened to death in a church, Joseph asks for political asylum and dies as a result of this grueling process. Both brothers are buried in the United States. In a confusion/continuation between death and life, the father's death coincides with her pregnancy, which leads Edwidge to see her newly born daughter as a *repozwa*. Writing is a means of giving voice to the voiceless, a continuation of Danticat's role as interpreter, linked to her previous fiction (*The Dew Breaker*, *Breath, Eyes and Memory*) through the theme of muteness. The "I" is plural; it contains many voices. It is a "we" that speaks the resistance of the artists that must create dangerously.

Andrée-Anne Kekeh-Dika, for her part, analyzes "Jamaica Kincaid's Autobio-graphical Performance" through the writer's nonfiction (*Talk Stories*, "Biography of a Dress," "Putting Myself Together") since

Kinkaid's experimental writing approaches the self from impersonal and highly singular shores. Indeed, self-division pervades her fiction as she attempts to map a territory of her own with the recurring image of line(s) —family ties, but also various other lines—which she deviates to build an alternative self and Caribbean text. Toni Cade Bambara's *Gorilla My Love* and John Agard's *Mangoes and Bullets* can be summoned as *avant-textes* for their pointing to the misleading genuineness of the I, the ambiguity of the first person, the use of the third person in autobiographical writing, the figure of the "author," the recourse to autofiction. Kincaid shares Agard's penchant for literary impersonation and for blurring generic boundaries. The article maps out an "unmarked and banal space to perform selfhood in an unobtrusive though strong position" as *Talk Stories* was written for the magazine *The New Yorker*. Kekeh-Dika focuses on four pieces of the collection to show how the impersonal can be turned into the personal. The brackets (named "insides") erode authority, bring extra material to disrupt the fixed form (here the expense account), to perform a process akin to Glissant's *creolization*. Irony and intuitive practice go counter to the logic of thinking; the bracket space is also a radical way of challenging constraints and refashioning self-figuration. "In Central Park" is also about counting and lines, about contiguity, listing, and *lignes de fuite*, delineating ways in which one can re-appropriate public space *and* derail the sentence to make it one's own. Discomfort is essential to the writer, as it is to the observer and to the reader. Kekeh-Dika posits that Kincaid might be said to be "re-marking" (Heidegger) ordinary notions as she revisits and alters common *topoi*. She reads *Talk Stories* as a key experimental matrix for Kinkaid's autobiographical personae/selves as it opens on to the writer's reshuffling of categories. "Where should I place myself?" is the question asked when pondering the writer's figure in language. "Biography of a Dress" and "Putting Myself Together" for their part explore the border between memory and autobiographical truth while stressing the decisive role of clothing and fabric in the process of becoming. In the wake of Rimbaud's celebrated statement "I is an other," Kincaid uses the self as experimental material. She draws on the menial, the ordinary and endlessly ponders on the figure of the mother in a gesture akin to that of the poet. Kekeh-Dika concludes by mentioning her 2013 novel *See Now Then* that "reflects on the passing of time and the many re-adjustments life and writing take" to highlight the radically innovative thrust of the writer's insistent reflexive practice and her borrowings from sundry fields of knowledge and culture.

The last three essays shed light on the ways Asian American autobiographical writing destabilizes traditional generic conventions to

subvert stereotypes, word trauma, preserve memory, and ultimately give birth to a plural self. In "Reaching one's "Supapawa" in Ruth Ozeki's *A Tale for the Time Being*" Nicoleta Alexoae-Zagni discusses the hybridity inherent in Canadian American writer's post-Fukushima narrative. Structured around the notions of time, consciousness, memory, *A Tale* (2013) might deploy biraciality as a "conversation between two cultures and continents," but the article unveils how it performs so much more. At the same time palimpsestic and multivocal, polyphonic and dialogical, the outwardly focused narrative encompasses and claims the other "I"s of real and/or imagined figures. Indeed, *A Tale* makes the diary entries of a fictional first-person character, Nao, and the character of the writer's meditation alternate. A "time being," Nao, back in Tokyo after a sojourn in the United States, attempted to write her grandmother's story and the package of her diary, placed inside the covers of Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*, washed up after the Japanese tsunami, Ruth first assumes. Writing dialogues with historical narratives and literary traditions and masters—13th-century Zen master Dōgen and Marcel Proust—and is variously indebted to the Japanese tradition of the I-novel, Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior,* and the genre of autofiction with its boundary crossings between the referential and the fictional. *A Tale* asserts that reading an other is a necessary prelude to self-writing, itself subverted through hybridized practices and prey to the mystical power of words and names on which both Nao and Ruth rely. Ruth's own awareness of self emerges through interwoven acts of individual and collective reading and recollection. She thus reaches a sense of the truth of the human essence in being-with-others. The act of reading sets the experience of time in motion as one individual experience is made to coincide with another. It creates a network of consciousnesses as it opens personal memory to other temporalities, of both contemporaries and forerunners. Culturally and historically embedded, life writing is engendered by reading (other life writing) in a veritable literalization of Barthes's conception of writing *as* reading, and vice versa.

Héloïse Thomas's "Experimental Life Writing and Relational Selves in the Works of Cathy Park Hong and Theresa Hak Kyung Cha" illustrates how ethnic autobiographical life writing puts forward the tensions between the subject positions of *immigrant* and *citizen.* To do so, she conjointly analyzes Cathy Park Hong's 2002 *Translating Mo'um,* more specifically "The Shameful Show of Tono Maria," her *Dance Dance Revolution* (2007), and Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *Dictée*. Eschewing the imperatives of lyricism and confessional poetry, Hong turns to experimental poetics that unsettle dominant readings of autobiographical writing. Similarly, the

radical experimental nature of Cha's text continuously imperils its status as a stable autobiographical text and self-reflexively interrogates the ideological, culturally specific, foundations of the genre. In Hong's finding common ground with the Hottentot Venus (Saartjie Baartman) and Tono Maria, the self's otherness is shown to derive from colonial discourses within a global context. The othering of female bodies, their racialization, is a constant that still fashions the self of the minority female individual. Hong's poetry also questions the legitimacy of the Historian and, by displacing the subject of autobiography into other personae, points to their eventually acquiring agency. Cha's text, for its part, necessarily relies on her mother's story as the formation of the self is a result of women-centered intergenerational dialogues. Both outputs, the poetic and the avant-garde prose writing, are political and aesthetic interventions that undermine the illusion of a unified subject, a stable self, the notion of identity, and interrogate subjectification itself as process. Asian American autobiography, and more broadly minority American life writing, thus locates political subversion in formal experimentation within the autobiographical genre itself.

In "Auto/biography as a place of reconciliation with one's other self(ves): self-writing and relationality in Loung Ung's *After They Killed Our Father,*" Nelly Mok explores the intersubjective dynamics of Cambodian American writer and activist Loung Ung's 2005 autobiographical and biographical narrative, *After They Killed Our Father*, in which she tells her own experience as a refugee from the "Killing Fields" in the United States and recounts, in the third person, the everyday life of her sister Chou in post-Democratic Kampuchea Cambodia. The parallel unfolding of the two sisters' contrasting experiences until their reunion in Cambodia fifteen years after their separation sheds light on the enduring sense of rupture inflicted on survivors and refugees by the traumas of genocide and diaspora. If the cathartic value of life writing lies in the wording and narrativizing process of common trauma, it also hinges on the reader's dialogic, intertextual approach to Ung's narrative and more broadly, to her auto/biographical oeuvre, both enclosing/disclosing the Ungs' latent traumatic terrain—the hypotext of *First They Killed My Father*, Ung's testimonial account of her traumatic childhood experience under the Khmer Rouge regime (1975-1979), published five years before *After They Killed Our Father*. In bearing witness to her own and her family's experiences not only of destruction and loss, but also of resilience, notably through its ethnographic descriptions of Chou's observance of Khmer rites and traditions in the chaotic socio-political context of post-genocide, post-civil war Cambodia, Ung's

auto/biographical narrative performs its memorializing function. As it casts Ung's and Chou's particular gazes—the latter being mediated by Ung's narration—on collective, communal history, *After They Killed Our Father* significantly contributes to the preservation and (re)construction of Cambodian/American cultural memory. In so doing, Ung's auto/biographical writing sets out to re-position the Cambodian American self in a global, transnational/transcultural memoryscape.

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PART I.

WRITING THE TERRITORY, WRITING THE TRIBE IN NATIVE AMERICAN LIFE WRITING

CHAPTER I

UN INDIEN COMME UN AUTRE : LE TRAVAIL AUTOBIOGRAPHIQUE DE JOHN MILTON OSKISON

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> It was significant that John Oskison, despite his wide travels in this country and abroad, never left—in spirit—the old I. T. His stories and books dealt with Oklahoma, and the southwest generally. He came home to Vinita, to write his best books. Finally he came for the last time to do his autobiography. He was at work on it when he died. (Anderson 1947)

Alors que je mets les dernières touches à ce texte, une controverse éclate sur la toile canadienne au sujet des origines amérindiennes de Joseph Boyden, auteur salué par le public et la critique. Boyden, qui adopte des perspectives amérindiennes dans ses romans, revendique une généalogie en partie nipmuc et ojibway. Or, à la suite d'une enquête menée par Aboriginal Peoples Television Network (APTN), l'auteur est accusé d'avoir « joué à l'Indien » pour vendre des livres et gagner des prix littéraires. Cette controverse illustre la complexité de toute définition de l'identité, surtout dans un contexte colonial. Cette complexité n'est pas nouvelle, comme l'illustre l'auteur qui est l'objet principal de mon étude, et provient de la multiplicité des facteurs identitaires, tous invoqués dans la controverse actuelle autour de Boyden : la proportion de sang qui coule dans les veines d'un individu (*blood quantum*), son appartenance à une communauté, l'adoption de cet individu par une communauté, sa responsabilité vis-à-vis de la culture revendiquée, etc. Il ne m'appartient pas d'arbitrer cette controverse en un paragraphe, mais au détour d'un des nombreux articles qui l'alimentent en cette fin d'année 2016, je tombe sur ce passage : « When wrestling with cultural identity, answers are always hard to come by, but make no mistake, there are always answers.

Everyone comes from somewhere. Everyone has place. » (McMahon 2016). De fait, être indigène, au sens étymologique du terme, ne devrait pas se comprendre sans parler d'un ancrage dans un lieu.

Plus d'un siècle avant la controverse autour de Joseph Boyden, l'identité de John Milton Oskison fut maintes fois débattue et remise en question, y compris en sa présence. Par ailleurs, le territoire d'ancrage de son identité fut méconnu, mal représenté, et finalement subit une suppression administrative et métaphorique. Il est donc tout à fait significatif qu'Oskison, comme l'indique la nécrologie citée en épigraphe, revint sur les terres qui l'avaient vu grandir, pour y composer son autobiographie (comme il l'avait fait pour ses romans à haute teneur autobiographique), pour y recomposer une identité que d'autres avaient voulu lui nier, c'est-à-dire une identité cherokee du Territoire Indien, qu'il appelait affectueusement, notamment dans le titre de son autobiographie inachevée, « le vieux T. I. ». Dans « A Tale of the Old I. T. » Oskison fait donc d'une pierre deux coups, voire trois : il se représente, il réinvente son territoire disparu, et il inscrit ces deux représentations identitaires dans le récit états-unien.

Bien que longtemps oublié et négligé par les études amérindiennes, John Milton Oskison était un auteur, journaliste et militant cherokee relativement connu en son temps. Il fut l'un de ces journalistes que l'on a appelés *muckrakers* à la suite d'un discours prononcé par Theodore Roosevelt en avril 1906[1], terme qui désignait les journalistes d'investigation qui ont révolutionné la presse au tournant du siècle. Né en 1874 près de Vinita, Territoire Indien, d'un père anglais et d'une mère cherokee, il grandit là, sur la ferme familiale, jusqu'à son départ pour l'université. Sa mère est morte lorsqu'il avait quatre ans, mais il resta proche de sa famille cherokee bien qu'il ne parlât probablement pas la langue. Il effectua une scolarité élémentaire et secondaire en terre cherokee, puis intégra la toute nouvelle université de Stanford (1894-

[1] À une époque où la corruption allait bon train dans le monde politique états-unien, Roosevelt avait encouragé ceux qui s'efforçaient d'exposer « le politicien qui trahit la confiance mise en lui, l'homme d'affaires qui fait ou dépense sa fortune de façon illégitime et corrompue » (Roosevelt 1906 ; je traduis). Il avait puisé dans *The Pilgrim's Progress* de John Bunyan la métaphore de l'homme au râteau pour désigner les journalistes qui faisaient ce travail : « The men with the muck rakes are often indispensable to the well being of society; but only if they know when to stop raking the muck, and to look upward to the celestial crown above them, to the crown of worthy endeavor. There are beautiful things above and around them; and if they gradually grow to feel that the whole world is nothing but muck, their power of usefulness is gone. » (Roosevelt 1906).

1898), de laquelle il fut le premier étudiant amérindien, avant de rejoindre Harvard pour une année. Fraîchement sorti de l'université, et après un long voyage en Europe, il se rendit à New York et publia ses premières nouvelles dans des revues telles que *Century Illustrated Magazine* et *Popular Monthly* de Frank Leslie. Il commença également une carrière de journaliste au *Evening Post*, puis au *Collier's Weekly*. Au cours de sa carrière, il publia de nombreuses nouvelles, quelques romans et biographies, ainsi que des essais sur la condition amérindienne. Il fut également un membre fondateur de la Society of American Indians, une association de réformateurs amérindiens.

On ne peut s'intéresser aux représentations amérindiennes, quelles qu'elles soient, sans prendre en compte les difficultés posées par l'entrelacs des représentations endogènes et exogènes des peuples indigènes. Depuis plusieurs années a lieu un débat, dans les universités états-uniennes ainsi que dans le monde artistique, autour de la question de qui aurait légitimité à représenter les Amérindiens. Des universitaires amérindiens défenseurs de ce qu'ils appellent la « souveraineté intellectuelle » enjoignent les non-Amérindiens à une grande prudence dans leur travail afin de ne pas exercer une nouvelle forme de colonialisme à travers leurs représentations, artistiques ou scientifiques, des Amérindiens. Ils prônent par ailleurs un recentrement sur les connaissances et les expériences tribales pour mieux comprendre les perspectives amérindiennes[2]. Si ces avertissements sont justifiés, et si les

[2] En 1996, Donald Fixico publia un essai dans *American Indian Quarterly* intitulé « Ethics and Responsibilities in Writing American Indian History », dans lequel il tentait une définition de ce qu'il annonçait clairement dans son titre. Il écrivait notamment : « Some American Indians feel that the writing of American Indian history, mostly by non-Indians, is merely another example of the exploitative and unfair treatment of Indian people » (Fixico 1996: 30). Il déclarait que, d'une part, « depuis au moins un siècle, universitaires, écrivains, et historiens ont négligé les Amérindiens en écrivant l'histoire de l'Amérique », et que d'autre part « les universitaires non amérindiens ont cherché à définir les paramètres du champ de l'histoire amérindienne » (Fixico 1996: 30 ; je traduis). Non loin d'une quinzaine d'années plus tard, la même revue publiait un numéro spécial intitulé « Working from Home in American Indian History » dans lequel le débat se posait en termes d'*insider* et d'*outsider*. Dans sa contribution, « 'Wait a second. Who are you anyways?': The Insider/Outsider Debate and American Indian Studies », Robert Alexander Innes écrivait que les « chercheurs de l'intérieur [*"insider scholars"*], indigènes et non indigènes, remettent en question la recherche conduite par des *outsiders* pour sa nature coloniale et parce qu'elle ignore, réduit au silence, et minimise les perspectives provenant de l'intérieur » (Innes 2009: 441-442 ; je traduis). Il soutenait également que les « non Amérindiens ne peuvent vraiment