Life Narrative: Definitions and Distinctions

My life is history, politics, geography. It is religion and metaphysics. It is music and language.


Defining Kinds of Life Narrative

What could be simpler to understand than the act of people representing what they know best, their own lives? Yet this act is anything but simple, for the teller of his or her own story becomes, in the act of narration, both the observing subject and the object of investigation, remembrance, and contemplation. We might best approach life narrative, then, as a moving target, a set of shifting self-referential practices that, in engaging the past, reflect on identity in the present. We intend in this book to complicate ordinary understandings of the concept and practices of self-referential narrative. A first step is to define terms and draw distinctions between autobiographical self-representation and other closely related kinds of life writing.

In Greek, *autos* denotes “self,” *bios* “life,” and *graphe* “writing.” Taken together in this order, the words *self life writing* offer a brief definition of *autobiography*. British poet and critic Stephen Spender cites the dictionary definition of *autobiography* as “the story of one’s life written by himself” but notes its inadequacy to the “world that each is to himself” (115). French theorist Philippe Lejeune expanded that definition in a pronouncement many would call definitive: “We call autobiography the retrospective narrative in prose that someone makes of his own existence when he puts the principal accent upon his life, especially upon the story of his own personality.” But if *life* is expanded to include *how* one has become who he or she is at a given moment in an ongoing process of reflection, the concept of the autobiographical as a story requires more contextualizing. We here offer some historical, geographic, and generic contexts for the term.

In English the term *autobiography* first appeared in the review of Isaac D’Israeli’s *Miscellanies* by William Taylor of Norwich in the *Monthly Review*
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(1797). Its first use, however, is often ascribed to Robert Southey’s anglicizing of the three Greek words in 1809. In his extensive survey of the term autobiography, Robert Folkenflik specifies the exact dates of the word’s emergence in the West: “The term autobiography and its synonym self-biography,” “having never been used in earlier periods, appeared in the late eighteenth century in several forms, in isolated instances in the seventies, eighties, and nineties in both England and Germany with no sign that one use influenced another” (5). Folkenflik also notes that until the twentieth century the word memoirs (in French les mémoires) was commonly used to designate “self life writing.”

Autobiography, now the most commonly used term for life writing, thus describes writing being produced at a particular historical juncture, the period prior to the Enlightenment in the West. Central to that movement was the concept of the self-interested individual of property who was intent on assessing the status of the soul or the meaning of public achievement. By the eighteenth century, notions of self-interest, self-consciousness, and self-knowledge informed the figure of the “Enlightened individual” described by philosophers and social and political theorists. And “autobiographies” as studies in self-interest were sought by a growing reading public with access to affordable printed books (see Krailsheimer, Weintraub, and Sturrock).

But the relatively recent coinage of the term autobiography does not mean that the practice of self-referential writing began only in the later eighteenth century. In earlier centuries, terms such as memoir (Madame de Staël, Glückel of Hameln) or the life (Teresa of Avila) or the book of my life (Cardano) or confessions (Augustine, Rousseau) or essays of myself (Montaigne) signaled the writer’s focus on self-reference through speculations about history, politics, religion, science, and culture, and often involved developing a method of and vocabulary for self-study. Moreover, since the end of the eighteenth century a host of terms, such as testimonio, autoethnography, and psychobiography, have been coined to designate new kinds and contexts of self-referential writing. This rich and diverse history of self-referential modes requires that we make some crucial distinctions among key terms—autobiography, memoir, life writing, life narrative—that may seem to imply the same thing.

Autobiography, as we have seen, became the term for a particular generic practice that emerged in the Enlightenment and subsequently became definitive for life writing in the West. It remains the widely used and most
generally understood term. But because the term privileges the autonomous individual and the universalizing life story as the definitive achievement of life writing, it has been vigorously challenged in the wake of postmodern and postcolonial critiques of the Enlightenment subject. Early twentieth-century theorists installed this master narrative of “the sovereign self” as an institution of literature and culture, and identified a canon of representative self life writings. Implicit in this canonization, however, is the assumption that many other kinds of life writings produced at the same time have lesser value and were not “true” autobiography—the slave narrative, narratives of women’s domestic lives, coming-of-age and travel narratives, among others.

Thus, many postmodern and postcolonial theorists contend that the term autobiography is inadequate to describe the extensive historical range and the diverse genres and practices of life writing not only in the West but around the globe. Indeed, these critics contend, the concept of autobiography, celebrated by an earlier generation of scholars such as Georges Gusdorf and Karl Joachim Weintraub as the highest achievement of individuality in western civilization, has been defined against many coexistent forms of life writing. Thus, its politics is one of exclusion. Other critics, among them Julie Rak and Leigh Gilmore, address this troubling, exclusionary aspect of autobiography by shifting the term of reference to autobiographical discourse, that is, to discursive formations of truth-telling “sustained by the trappings of identification that have underwritten what the self is and how it has been seen in much of the Western World” (Rak, Negotiated Memory ix). This shift from genre to discourse opens to the scenes of autobiographical inscription beyond the printed life story. It also attends to the aspects of power inherent in acts of autobiographical inscription and recognizes that those whose identities, experiences, and histories remain marginal, invalidated, invisible, and partial negotiate and alter normative or traditional frames of identity in their differences (Rak, Negotiated ix).

At this moment, another term has gained currency in popular and scholarly arenas. Predating the term autobiography, memoir is now the word used by publishing houses to describe various practices and genres of self life writing. Historically, memoir was understood as mémoire (les mémoires), recollections by the publicly prominent who chronicled their social accomplishments (see Quinby). These recollections often bracketed one moment or period of experience rather than an entire life span
and offered reflections on its significance for the writer’s previous status or self-understanding. Rak suggests that memoir has long been attached to popular forms of life writing and used as a nominal marker to distinguish stories about unacknowledged aspects of people’s lives, sometimes considered scandalous or titillating, and often written by the socially marginal (Negotiated 316–20). In contemporary writing, the categorization of memoir often signals autobiographical works characterized by density of language and self-reflexivity about the writing process, yoking the author’s standing as a professional writer with the work’s status as an aesthetic object. For Nancy K. Miller the term memoir captures a dynamic postmodernism in its movement between the “private and the public, subject and object” (Bequest 2). The term memoir, then, seems more malleable than the term autobiography, foregrounding historical shifts and intersecting cultural formations; and so when a narrative emphasizes its mode as memoir, as in Maxine Hong Kingston’s The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts, readers are invited to think about the significance of that choice and the kind of reading it invites.

In this book, we have chosen to use the term autobiography only to refer to the traditional Western mode of the retrospective life narrative. We have chosen not to use the more common term memoir. We often use the adjective autobiographical to designate self-referential writing. And throughout we use the terms life writing and life narrative as more inclusive of the heterogeneity of self-referential practices. We understand life writing as a general term for writing that takes a life, one’s own or another’s, as its subject. Such writing can be biographical, novelistic, historical, or explicitly self-referential and therefore autobiographical. The autobiographical mode of life writing might more precisely be called self life writing, but we employ this phrase only for occasional emphasis because of its clumsiness. Both memoir and autobiography are encompassed in the term life writing. We understand life narrative, by contrast, as a general term for acts of self-presentation of all kinds and in diverse media that take the producer’s life as their subject, whether written, performative, visual, filmic, or digital. In other words, we employ the term life writing for written forms of the autobiographical, and life narrative to refer to autobiographical acts of any sort. As G. Thomas Couser has noted recently, “the use of the terms ‘life writing’ and ‘life narrative’ does not deny generic distinctions but rather reflects an impulse toward catholicity and toward reconsideration of traditional definitions and distinctions” (‘Genre Mat-
Furthermore, by shifting from autobiography and memoir to life writing and life narrative, we suggest the terms in which a new, globalized history of the field might be imagined, although the scholarship for undertaking such an encyclopedic project is still emerging, much of it not yet available to the English-speaking reader.

The preliminary distinctions clarified here are developed throughout the book. Chapter 2 explores in detail the components of autobiographical subjects: memory, experience, identity, space, embodiment, and agency. Chapter 3 elaborates the narrative features of particular autobiographical acts in their multiple contexts. These two chapters suggest the processes, formal options, and rhetorical addresses that, taken together, comprise the resources on which life narrators draw and the diverse contexts they negotiate and mobilize. Chapter 4 offers a brief historical survey of the many kinds of life writing that have emerged in the West over the past two thousand years, many of them by subordinated subjects, and chapters 5 and 6 track aspects of contemporary life narrative in many media. Chapter 7 tracks the history of autobiography studies to the 1990s; and Chapter 8 tracks key concepts that inform contemporary theorizing in the field. And chapter 9 is a “tool kit” offering twenty-four sets of questions for engaging concepts central to life narrative.

Now let us turn to distinctions between autobiographical writing and the practices of related kinds of life writing, namely, biography, the novel, and history writing.

Life Writing and Biography

While life writing and biography are both modes of narrating a life, they are not interchangeable. To be sure, bookstores shelve both in the biography section, and people may think of autobiography as the biography someone writes about him- or herself, as Nigel Hamilton suggests in his often admirable Biography: A Brief History, but there are crucial distinctions in how these forms narrate a life. In biography, scholars of other people’s lives document and interpret those lives from a point of view external to the subject. In life writing, subjects write about their own lives predominantly, even if they write about themselves in the second or third person, or as a member of a community. And they write simultaneously from externalized and internal points of view, taking themselves as both subject and object, or thematizing that distinction. Moreover, as Louis
Menand observes, “all biographies are retrospective in the same sense. Though they read chronologically forward, they are composed essentially backward” (66). That is, the events the subject becomes renowned for determine what the biographer selects to interpret as formative. By contrast, in self life writing the interpreter often recognizes that her or his choices of what to narrate as formative are subjective and idiosyncratic.

These kinds of life writing are fundamentally different. But what is the significance of that difference? Stephen Spender suggested that the life writer confronts not one life but two. One is the self that others see—the social, historical person, with achievements, personal appearance, social relationships. These are “real” attributes of a person living in the world. But there is also the self experienced only by that person, the self felt from the inside that the writer can never get “outside of.” The “inside,” or personally experienced, self has a history. While it may not be meaningful as an objective “history of the times,” it is a record of self-observation, not a history observed by others. Spender writes that “we are seen from the outside by our neighbors; but we remain always at the back of our eyes and our senses, situated in our bodies, like a driver in the front seat of a car seeing the other cars coming toward him. A single person . . . is one consciousness within one machine, confronting all the other traffic” (116). To continue Spender’s metaphor of driving the automobile, the biographer can circle the car with the driver in it to record the history, character, and motivations of the driver, the traffic, the vehicle, and the facts of transportation. But only the life narrator knows the experience of traffic rushing toward her and composes an interpretation of that situation, that is, writes her subjectivity.

Matters of time and timing also differentiate biography and life writing. For a biographer the death of the subject is not definitive. A biography can be written either during the life or after the death of the person being written about. In fact, biographies offering different interpretations of particular historical figures may appear periodically over many centuries, as have biographies of Caesar, Galileo, Michelangelo, and Byron. For the life writer, on the other hand, death is the end of the matter. While self life writing can be, and often is, written over a long span of time, as is the case with the multiple narratives of Edward Gibbon and Maya Angelou, it must be written during the writer's life span—or be published posthumously “as is.”

In writing a life, the life narrator and the biographer also engage different kinds of evidence. Most biographers incorporate multiple forms of
evidence, including historical documents, interviews, and family archives, which they evaluate for validity. Relatively few biographers use their personal memories of their subject as reliable evidence, unless they had a personal relationship to the subject of the biography (as a relative, child, friend, or colleague). For life narrators, by contrast, personal memories are the primary archival source. They may have recourse to other kinds of sources—letters, journals, photographs, conversations—and to their knowledge of a historical moment. But the usefulness of such evidence for their stories lies in the ways in which they employ that evidence to support, supplement, or offer commentary on their idiosyncratic acts of remembering. In autobiographical narratives, imaginative acts of remembering always intersect with such rhetorical acts as assertion, justification, judgment, conviction, and interrogation. That is, life narrators address readers whom they want to persuade of their version of experience. And, as we will see in chapter 2, memory is a subjective form of evidence that cannot be fully verified externally; rather, it is asserted on the subject’s authority.

The biographer almost invariably writes about the object of his or her study in the third person, while the life narrator usually employs the first person. Certainly, there are autobiographical narrators who present their subjects in the second and/or third person. In The Education of Henry Adams: An Autobiography, Henry Adams refers to himself as “Henry Adams,” “he,” and “him.” But readers understand that this is Adams’s convention for presenting himself and that the teller and protagonist of the narrative are one and the same. “Henry Adams” appears as both subject and author on the title page. The biographer, however, cannot present his or her subject in the first person—except when quoting statements or letters or books written by that person.

Of course, there are texts that combine biographical and autobiographical modes of narration. As early as the second century B.C.E., Plutarch wove his own ethical observations and judgments into his parallel Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans. In the seventeenth century, aristocratic women in England such as Anne, Lady Halkett, and Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle, appended brief narratives of their lives to the adulatory biographies they wrote of their husbands. More recently, life narrators have blurred the boundary separating autobiographical and biographical modes by embedding their versions of the life of a family member in their own personal narratives, as does Kim Chernin in In My
Mother’s House: A Daughter’s Story, John Edgar Wideman in Brothers and Keepers, and Drusilla Modjeska in Poppy; or they entwine the case history of a patient with the writer’s own self-analysis, as Annie G. Rogers does in A Shining Affliction: A Story of Harm and Healing in Psychotherapy or Kay Redfield Jamison in An Unquiet Mind. As much as we have argued for distinguishing life writing and biography, contemporary practices increasingly blend them into a hybrid, suggesting that life narrative indeed is a moving target and an ever-changing practice without absolute rules.

In the past two decades innovative forms of biographical writing have emerged that shuttle between the fictive and the autobiographical. Writers—professional biographers, novelists, literary critics—have adapted the form of biography to new kinds of stories that make critical interventions in conventions of biographical narration. “The new biography” is a phrase employed by such literary critics as Ramón Saldívar, whose The Borderlands of Culture: Américo Paredes and the Transnational Imaginary entwines a study of the Mexican American author and scholar with the development and growth of Chicano studies as a field attentive to border identities and transnational imaginaries and implicitly with his own identity formation as a scholar in this field. Carolyn Steedman’s Landscape for a Good Woman could also be considered a form of “new biography.” In it she considers her mother, the “good woman” of the title, as a working-class woman with middle-class aspirations, and tells the story of frustrated ambition in a protofeminist moment rarely considered by historians of social class. That story is combined with the biography Steedman largely omits of a father who abandoned them. And this case study of the Lancaster working class is joined to her obliquely autobiographical narrative of education and movement into the professional class where she achieves the status that eluded her mother.

Edmund Morris’s Dutch was also heralded as a “new biography” of President Ronald Reagan. In a mode of telling that is subjective, speculative, and buoyantly playful, Morris employs fictive characters, including a version of himself as biographer and gossip columnist making droll comments on the inscrutable President Reagan. In a quite different register, W. G. Sebald in The Emigrants uses biography to undermine its premises and show the deep personal investment people have in this apparently objective form. Sebald’s conflation of the storytelling tactics of biography and autobiography is fully exploited in Austerlitz, where the unnamed narrator describes becoming a biographer of someone he meets in a railway carriage who is eventually persuaded to narrate his story of growing up in
World War II–era Europe, experiencing arrest and incarceration in Theresienstadt and becoming a stateless exile of an identity both indeterminate and overdetermined. Sebald’s struggle to find a form adequate to narrating the traumatic events and aftermath of the Holocaust incorporates fabricated biographical documentation and conflates events of an individual life with the historical panorama of mass memory dispersed in archives of many sorts. New biography, then, signals many kinds of practices that exploit the boundaries drawn between biography and fiction at particular moments and seeks innovative modes adequate to the complexity of narrating a life at various moments of paradigm shift.

While recognizing distinctions between autobiographical and biographical forms, we note, in conclusion, the popularity of biography as a contemporary form of life writing as well as its capaciousness, variety, and experimentation. Biographies of founding fathers continue to fly off the shelves and top best-seller lists, as did David McCullough’s John Adams and Walter Isaacson’s Benjamin Franklin. Writing Abraham Lincoln biographies might be considered an industry, and celebrity biographies fill megastores across the Western world. Always in demand are biographies on television (such as the Arts & Entertainment series in the United States) and filmic biographies of sports figures and musicians. What scholars call the “biopic” has become an innovative and ubiquitous mode for telling a life. Some biopics offer straightforward chronological narratives of their subjects as heroes, villains, or innovators; others offer complex explorations of a life and its moment, as does Raoul Peck’s Lumumba and Olivier Dahan’s rendering of the life of French chanteuse Edith Piaf, La Vie en Rose. Todd Haynes’s biopic on Bob Dylan, I’m Not There, employs six actors less to impersonate Dylan than to stand in for aspects of his protean presence at various moments in his career. With each episode narrated through a different genre and visual style, the ensemble interrogates the notion that a “life,” especially one so diverse and creative, can be told as a single story.

Life Writing and the Novel

People often confuse life writing and fiction. Typically, they call autobiographical texts “novels,” though they rarely call novels “autobiographies.” An autobiography, however, is not a novel, and calling life writing “non-fiction,” which is usually done, confuses rather than resolves the issue. Life writing and the novel share features we ascribe to fictional writing: plot,
dialogue, setting, characterization, and so on. But they are distinguished by their relationship to and claims about a referential world. We might helpfully think of what fiction represents as “a world,” and what life writing refers to as “the world.” Further complicating matters, many contemporary writers deliberately blur the boundary between life writing and the kinds of stories told in the first-person novel that some call “faction,” others “autofiction” (see Rachel Toor). Yet differences that have historically arisen between these forms are crucial to understanding the distinct practices, audiences, truth claims, and traditions of autobiographical writing.

In the nineteenth century many novels were presented as autobiographical narratives, the life stories of fictional characters. Think of Charles Dickens’s *David Copperfield*, Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship*, and Fyodor Dostoyevsky’s *Notes from Underground*. The narrators of these texts employ the intimate first person as protagonists confiding their personal histories and attempting to understand how their past experiences formed them as social subjects. Such narratives and the traditions from which they emerged are part of the development of the bildungsroman, a form that German scholar Wilhelm Dilthey defined as the story of an individual’s struggle to become a social subject who “becomes aware of his purpose in the world” (cited in Burt 105). The individual’s potential, thwarted by circumstances of birth and repressive social convention, by constraints of class and gender, is discovered in the extended process of becoming educated; and that education involves encounters with mentors, apprenticeship, and eventual renunciation of errant idealism followed by adherence to social conventions and structures.

Many twentieth-century novels are also narrated as first-person autobiographies, for example, Rainer Maria Rilke’s *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, J. D. Salinger’s *Catcher in the Rye*, Thomas Wolfe’s *Look Homeward, Angel*, and Jamaica Kincaid’s *Autobiography of My Mother*. But, as Raymond L. Burt suggests, the teleology of the bildungsroman collapses throughout the twentieth century (105). The great modernists, Thomas Mann, Marcel Proust, Virginia Woolf, and Robert Musil, invoke its tropes of individuation to also show the fragmentation of selfhood and the constructed nature of the social. The fractured selves and inhospitable sociality of the twentieth-century bildungsroman find a parallel in many of the century’s autobiographical works, making distinctions between the two modes increasingly tenuous. Nonetheless, first-person novels con-
continue to signal readers in various ways that they are reading a novel and not an autobiographical narrative. Most obviously, the author’s name on the title page differs from the name of the character narrating the tale. That is, Malte is the named narrator of Rainer Maria Rilke’s *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* and Holden Caulfield the named narrator of *Catcher in the Rye*. Readers of such narratives are challenged to observe the biases and fantasies of these young protagonists and discover discrepancies between how each views himself at various moments and how we, as readers, regard the limitations or the blind spots of their knowledge.

The identification of authorial signature with the narrator, by contrast, is a distinguishing mark of autobiography, argues Philippe Lejeune in his seminal essay “The Autobiographical Pact.” Lejeune usefully defines the relationship between author and reader in autobiographical writing as a contract: “What defines autobiography for the one who is reading is above all a contract of identity that is sealed by the proper name. And this is true also for the one who is writing the text” (19). For Lejeune, two things indisputably distinguish autobiography and, by implication, a wide range of life narratives, from the novel: the “vital statistics” of the author, such as date and place of birth and education, are identical to those of the narrator; and an implicit contract exists between author and publisher attesting to the truth of the “signature” on the cover and title page (21). When we recognize the person who claims authorship of the narrative as its protagonist or central figure—that is, we believe them to be the same person—we read the text written by the author to whom it refers as self-reflexive or autobiographical. With this recognition of the autobiographical pact, Lejeune argues, we read differently and assess the narrative as making truth claims of a sort that are suspended in fictional forms such as the novel.

There is also a temporal distinction between a novel and an autobiographical text. Novelists are not bound by historical time. They can situate their narratives at any time in the past, present, or future. This does not mean that life narrators only and simply offer a retrospective narrative in chronological order about the life lived to the point of its writing. They can return to the past, even the cultural past before the writer’s birth, or offer an imaginative journey into a fantasized future. The narrator of Thomas De Quincey’s *Confessions of an English Opium Eater*, for example, is stimulated by opium to transport his life to other centuries and continents; yet corporeally he remains located in nineteenth-century London, increasingly the victim of his addiction. Unlike novelists, life narrators have to
anchor their narratives in the world of their own temporal, geographical, and cultural milieu.

Novelists are bound only by the reader’s expectation of internal consistency in the world of verisimilitude created within the novel. They are not bound by rules of evidence that link the world of the narrative with a historical world outside the narrative. As Samuel Taylor Coleridge famously observed, we practice a “suspension of disbelief” when engaging fictional or poetic worlds. In contrast, life narrators inevitably refer to the world beyond the text, the world that is the ground of the narrator’s lived experience, even if that ground is in part composed of cultural myths, dreams, fantasies, and subjective memories or problematized by the mode of its telling, as in Georges Pèrej’s W, or the Memory of Childhood. Audre Lorde may subtitle Zami: A New Spelling of My Name a “biomythography,” thereby emphasizing the mythic resonance of her story of growing up as an African American child of a woman from Carriacou, Grenada; but the struggles of her young self are embedded in the New York of the 1950s, no matter how the myth of Carriacou women’s friendship lets her valorize and explore the differences of lesbian identity. Moreover, autobiographical narrators are expected to remain faithful to their personal memory archives while novelists need not observe this constraint (Eakin, Touching the World 28).

Of course, the boundary between the autobiographical and the novelistic is, like the boundary between biography and life narrative, sometimes exceedingly hard to fix. Many life writers take liberties with the novelistic mode in order to negotiate their own struggles with the past and with the complexities of identities forged in the present. This fluid boundary has particularly characterized narratives by writers exploring the decolonization of subjectivity forged in the aftermath of colonial oppression. Such writers as Michelle Cliff in Abeng: A Novel (Jamaica), Tsitsi Dangarembga in Nervous Conditions (Zimbabwe), Maryse Condé in Hérémakhonon: A Novel (Guadeloupe), Myriam Warner-Vieyra in Juletane (Guadeloupe-Senegal), and Camara Laye in The Dark Child (Guinea) create hybrid forms tied to local histories of struggle and claim the novel as a translation of their experience to distance themselves from autobiography’s alliance with colonial regimes. As Françoise Lionnet notes of her decision to treat such narratives as self-referential texts, they function to illuminate the processes of identity formation through a subjectively rendered consciousness (“Of Mangoes and Maroons” 321–23).
Life Writing and History

Sometimes people read autobiographical narratives as historical documents, sources of evidence for the analysis of historical movements, events, or persons. From this perspective, autobiographical narrative and history writing might seem to be synonymous. Although it can be read as a history of the writing/speaking subject, however, life narrative cannot be reduced to or understood only as historical record. While autobiographical narratives may contain information regarded as “facts,” they are not factual history about a particular time, person, or event. Rather, they incorporate usable facts into subjective “truth,” a concept we take up in the next section.

When life narrators write to chronicle an event, to explore a certain time period, or to enshrine a community, they are making “history” in a sense. But they are also performing several rhetorical acts: justifying their own perceptions, upholding their reputations, disputing the accounts of others, settling scores, conveying cultural information, and inventing desirable futures, among others. The complexity of autobiographical texts requires reading practices that engage the narrative tropes, socio-cultural contexts, rhetorical aims, and narrative shifts within the historical or chronological trajectory of the text. To reduce autobiographical narration to facticity is to strip it of the densities of rhetorical, literary, ethical, political, and cultural dimensions.

Jeremy D. Popkin, a historian interested in both the parallels and the differences between autobiographical writing and history, points to a distinction between the modes of life narrative and history writing in terms of temporality. Life writing, Popkin suggests, “privilege[s] a temporal framework based on the individual author’s lifespan, whereas historical narrative takes place in collective time.” The “arbitrary and concrete” personal time of experience in life writing does not have to engage the moments of shared experience that historians identify as significant in the collective time of an era, nation, or culture, or present the “big picture” expected of a historian (727).13

Now, it is true that historians, like life narrators, “tell a story” about the past, as Hayden White so persuasively argues, proposing the “truth” of the past through a narrativization of events that “is always a figurative account” (48). Like life writing, history writing is replete with literary tropes (metaphor and metonymy, for instance) and intelligible plots (a rise and fall, for
instance). But historians, attentive to the norms of the discipline, place themselves outside or at the margin of the historical picture, even as they remain present in the discourses they mobilize, the very words they use, the shaping of the story they tell.\textsuperscript{14} They preserve the professional norm of objectivity and the truthfulness it pledges by establishing distance from their material and typically removing or qualifying any reference to themselves in the narrative. Autobiographical narrators, in contrast, place themselves at the center of the stories they assemble and are interested in the meaning of larger forces, or conditions, or events for their own stories.

The power of Sally Morgan's \textit{My Place}, at once the narrative of a young woman coming to claim her identity as an Aboriginal Australian and an exposé of the effects on the older generations of her family of colonial practices of forceful removal and assimilation, resides in its acknowledgment of an official history of the Australian nation. Morgan insists on inserting the history of indigenous Australians into the national narrative. The power of William Apess's "A Son of the Forest" and "The Experience of Five Christian Indians of the Pequot Tribe" derives from the way in which Apess situates himself as an agent of American history, negotiating his status as Native American in his relationships to a series of white people and to literacy in the new republic. In the details and the immediacy of the lived lives of such autobiographical narrators, the political and cultural contexts of the historical past become vivid and memorable.

In summary, autobiographical narrators establish for their readers a different set of expectations from those established in either the verisimilitude or suspension of disbelief of the novel or the verifiable evidence and professional norms of biography and history writing. Even this rudimentary set of distinctions among the novel, biography, history, and autobiography, however, is tentative. For example, \textit{Summertime}, the third volume of Nobel laureate J. M. Coetzee's extended engagement with his past (here, his thirties), blurs any easy distinction between the fictional and the autobiographical. Confounding the norms of genre, Coetzee's work is a novel about a writer assembling the biography of the deceased writer "John Coetzee." The biographer, as part of his research, interviews characters who knew the young "Coetzee" and cites their critical points of view on him. The pseudo-archive mobilized by the biographer becomes a route of self-investigation for the novelist and life writer to examine the meanings of memory, obligation, and vulnerability. In an intriguing riff on the conventional relationship between
the authorial signature and the narrator of the story, Coetzee appears on
the cover as the author and in the narrative as the object of biographi-
cal representation. Thus Lejeune’s concept of the autobiographical pact
as the negotiated relationship of author, reader, and publisher is frac-
tured. Frank Kermode aptly reviewed Coetzee’s narrative as “fictioneering,” a metatextual reflection that situates writing as fundamentally self-
reflexive, regardless of its declared genre.

Autobiographical Truth

In trying to differentiate autobiographical narrative from biography, the
novel, and history writing, we encounter a fundamental question: what is
the truth status of autobiographical disclosure? How do we know whether
and when a narrator is telling the truth or lying? And what difference
would that difference make? These questions often perplex readers of auto-
biographical texts. For example, a life narrator may narrate his history as
a young person full of illusions subsequently lost by the adult narrator, as
does the young immigrant Edward William Bok in The Americanization of
Edward Bok: The Autobiography of a Dutch Boy Fifty Years After. Life nar-
rators may present inconsistent or shifting views of themselves. They may
even perpetrate acts of deliberate deceit to test the reader or to hint at the
paradoxical “truth” of experience itself, as Timothy Dow Adams suggests
of strategic decisions to deceive in literary life writing (Telling Lies 14–16).
Is autobiographical writing then only a species of “damned lies,” to paraphrase Mark Twain?

We might respond by asking what we expect life narrators to tell the
truth about. Are we expecting fidelity to the facts of their biographies, to
lived experience, to self-understanding, to the historical moment, to social
community, to prevailing beliefs about diverse identities, to the norms of
autobiography as a literary genre itself? And truth for whom and for what?
Other readers, a loved one, the narrating I, or for the coherent person we
imagine ourselves to be?

John Sturrock has pithily noted, “It is impossible for an autobiographer
not to be autobiographical” (52). More recently, Stanley Fish has observed
that “autobiographers cannot lie because anything they say, however mend-
dacious, is the truth about themselves, whether they know it or not” (A19).
Any utterance in an autobiographical text, even if inaccurate or distorted,
is a characterization of its writer. Thus, when one is both the narrator and
the protagonist of the narrative, as in life writing, the truth of the narrative becomes undecidable; it can be neither fully verified nor fully discredited. We need, then, to adjust our expectations of the truth told in self-referential writing.

Of course, autobiographical claims such as date of birth can be verified or discounted by recourse to documentation outside the text. But autobiographical truth is a different matter. Even the author of a life narrative is not an authority on it, for life writing requires an audience to both confirm the writer’s existence in time and mark his or her lived specificity, distinctiveness, and location. Thus autobiographical truth resides in the intersubjective exchange between narrator and reader aimed at producing a shared understanding of the meaning of a life. Susanna Egan’s concept of “mirror talk” captures the refractive interplay of such dialogic exchange between life narrator and reader (or viewer). The multifacetedness inherent in autobiographical writing produces a polyphonic site of indeterminacy rather than a single, stable truth: “Neither the person nor the text can reveal any single or final truth, but both can provide activities of interpretation in which the reader is compelled to join” (Mirror Talk 326).

In The Autobiography of W. E. B. Du Bois: A Soliloquy on Viewing My Life from the Last Decade of Its First Century, Du Bois acknowledges that “autobiographies do not form indisputable authorities.” This insight motivates him to reflect on the difficulties of telling his story “frank and fair”:

Memory fails especially in small details, so that it becomes finally but a theory of my life, with much forgotten and misconceived, with valuable testimony but often less than absolutely true, despite my intention. . . . This book then is the Soliloquy of an old man on what he dreams his life has been as he sees it slowly drifting away; and what he would like others to believe. (12–13)

Refiguring his narrative as a “soliloquy” addressed to “others,” Du Bois accepts the impossibility of recording only factual truth and turns to the compensations of an intersubjective truth—partly dream, partly promissory belief—that invites our confirmation of its interpretation. The authority of the autobiographical, then, neither confirms nor invalidates notions of objective truth; rather, it tracks the previously uncharted truths of particular lives.

If we approach such self-referential writing as an intersubjective process that occurs within a dialogic exchange between writer and reader/
viewer rather than as a story to be proved or falsified, the emphasis of reading shifts from assessing and verifying knowledge to observing processes of communicative exchange and understanding. It redefines the terms of what we call “truth”: autobiographical writing cannot be read solely as either factual truth or simple fact. As an intersubjective mode, it resides outside a logical or juridical model of truth and falsehood, as models of the paradoxical status of self-reference have suggested, from Epimenides of Crete to contemporary language philosophers.15

But having asserted the special case of intersubjective discourse in life writing with some confidence in the first edition of Reading Autobiography, we find ourselves, like many readers and critics, both fascinated and confused by the range of autobiographical hoaxes that always existed but have come to global prominence in the past decade. Both an increase in the kinds of autobiographical fakery and intensified attention to their exposure have gained cultural attention. We have elsewhere articulated a taxonomy that offers critical distinctions, generic scripts, and ethical implications of the problematic of hoaxes (“Say It Isn’t So”). To summarize, hoaxed life writing may be of several kinds: enhanced or exaggerated experience à la James Frey’s A Million Little Pieces; ethnic impersonation; fantasized alternative lives; lives plagiarized from another’s text; lives fabricated at the boundary of documentary history and fiction; and false witnessing to human rights abuses or trauma.

Probing these manifestations of autobiographical hoaxes raises questions about the cultural anxieties provoked through the scandal hoaxes create. How flexible is the autobiographical pact between writer and reader, and does it have limits? What are our ethical investments in the “truth” of increasingly fragmented lives? Does media exploitation of celebrity self-narrators, in print and on reality television or online, render obsolete the notion of the real? We also observe new or heightened characteristics of readers in this Information Age: their desire to participate vicariously in the suffering of others at a moment of global commodification of narratives of suffering and survival; their impetus to self-reimagining through alternative identities; and their thirst for authenticity in a moment of ersatz authenticity. This is to say, even scandalous hoaxes on the one hand and, on the other, charges of fabrication used to discredit certain witnesses expose truths about the commodification of storytelling, the politics of readerly desires, and the social action that constitutes the construction and consumption of lives.

“Tell me your life story” as a readerly expectation is a bid not just for
entertaining distraction but for insight and the possibility of wisdom gained, not least from the recognition of folly. At this cultural moment audiences look to the ethos of a narrator able not just to confess spectacular transgressions or harms but to reflect on, interrogate, and recognize something gained in the struggle to sort out the detritus of the everyday, the ever-faster pace of change, and the myriad personae or “lives” we all must perform. Commitment to self-narration, not as an act for calculated gain in fortune or fame but as an epistemological act of thinking through what one as a subject knows to be or not to be, remains a basis of both writerly tact and readerly trust. It does not rule out the use of the found, the fabricated, the strategic, the consciously invented. But it asks that “my experiments with truth,” Mahatma Gandhi’s fine title for his autobiography, be in the service of a project larger than personal gain, opportunism, an overt political agenda, or a desire to obfuscate and impress. If indeed intersubjective truth, always tentative and provisional, emerges in autobiographical acts, its nurturance is a project requiring the care and active engagement of both readers and writers.

Conclusion

Our working definition of self life writing assumes that it is not a single unitary genre or form, “autobiography.” Rather, the historically situated practices of self-representation may take many guises as narrators selectively engage their lived experience and situate their social identities through personal storytelling. Located in specific times and places, narrators are at the same time in dialogue with the processes and archives of memory and the expectations of disparate others. Ever constrained by occasion and convention, and ever contingent, adaptable, fluid, and dynamic (Couser, “Genre Matters” 125), self life writing shares features with the novel, biography, and history. It can employ the dialogue, plot, setting, and density of language of the novel. It may incorporate biographies of others in its representations of family, friends, historical or religious figures. It projects multiple histories—of communities, families, nations, movements. Even as it does so, however, it maintains its distinctive relationship to the referential world in its temporality.

Our notion of autobiographical practice thus may parallel Carolyn R. Miller’s concept of genre not as fixed form but as social action.16 “Mediating,” in Miller’s words, “private intentions and social exigence” (31), auto-
biographical acts join form to human agency, history, location, and the dynamics of communicative exchange.¹⁷ From this perspective, the autobiographical might be read, as Couser suggests, for what it does, not what it is. Rather than being simply the story of an individual life, self life writing “encode[s] or reinforce[s] particular values in ways that may shape culture and history” (“Genre Matters” 129–30).

With this working definition in mind, let us turn to the components that comprise autobiographical acts.