Experimental Life Writing: Redefining Women's Autobiography

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For most of history, the genre of autobiography has been dominated by male writers. The "confessional" works of prominent men like Augustine and Rousseau established the genre of life-writing, and particularly in the light of Enlightenment dualist philosophy, which banished mind and the physical to separate spheres, that genre came to exemplify the idea of the self as a coherent and consistent entity that existed independent of the body. Male scholarship on autobiographical writing, even on outliers to the male canon such as Margery Kempe or Julian of Norwich, proceeded for many years to configure women's autobiographies as exceptions to an established rule, for example describing them as "fragmentary" as opposed to the standard (masculine) "whole" or "cohesive" narratives, rather than indications of an imperfect, biased rule.[1] That these narratives are fragmentary is a strategic move that in itself calls the notion of a coherent self into question, rather than an indication of their shortcomings.

Until the 1970s, there was a poverty of critical commentary on women's autobiography, especially commentary written by women about women. The second-wave feminist movement prompted a shift in academia towards closer examination of women's autobiographical works, as well as of the philosophy and theories upon which they are grounded. Psychoanalytic theory and the French school of deconstruction informing much feminist criticism argued for a view of language as a structure which intersects with history, geography, and the power relations operating between and

[1] Mary G. Mason, "The Other Voice: Autobiographies of Women Writers," in *Life/Lines: Theorizing Women's Autobiography*, ed. Bella Brodzki & Celeste Schenck, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), 19-44.

within construction of racial, class, and gender distinctions – all of which are interdependent and work to construct each other. For all human subjects, such thinking suggests lived experienced is conditioned by these interdependencies; for marginalized subjects, including women, such interdependencies may feel especially determinative or constraining.

This project seeks to examine the ways in which women writers in the 20th and 21st centuries take up the question of interdependence of language and the self in their autobiographical writing. Gertrude Stein, Audre Lorde, Dionne Brand, and Maggie Nelson are four authors whose forms of experimental life writing have reworked the genre of autobiography and challenged its norms. I refer to the genre as "women's experimental life writing" to signal an active process of renaming the genre of women's autobiography even as I remain aware of the assumptions built into that re-naming. There is great value in asking what is meant by the remote Latin terms, "self" (*auto*), "life" (*bio*), and "writing" (*graphy*). It is no less critical to re-examine what one means by adding the qualifying, familiar yet ambiguous, term "women." Judith Butler points out that subjects regulated by the structures of identity politics are, "by virtue of being subjected to them, formed, defined, and reproduced in accordance with the requirements of those structures."[2] Any feminist critique of a text inevitably naturalizes how feminism itself constructs the subject it claims to represent, the woman.

Through experimentation, female identifying authors adopt the basic form of autobiography by writing about personal experience, while challenging the form's assumptions of a whole and coherent self. Gertrude Stein's notable work *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* is one of the early challenges to autobiographical assumptions and an experimental reworking of the genre. Not only does Stein challenge what theorist Philippe Lejeune calls the "autobiographical pact," in which the

[2] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, (New York: Routledge, 1999), 4.

reader is expected to accept the Trinity of the "I," or the unity in one person of the "I" who is narrating, the "I" who is narrated, and the author's name on the cover (the "I" who is written about, Alice B. Toklas, is not the "I" who is writing, Gertrude Stein), but she experiments with the way we perceive these boundaries as being conclusive, set out clearly and permanently.[3] In positing their individual lives as intertwined, Stein is able to write her own biography from the perspective of Toklas. Gertrude Stein's perception of herself is constructed through the imaginary conception of Alice B. Toklas' perception of her (Alice's) self, dramatizing the ways in which one's idea of identity is constituted by recognition by others and relationality to things outside of this "self."

The assumption of the self's coherence extends beyond the premise of a cohesiveness of author, narrator, and subject to the idea of relationality. The genre of autobiography rests upon the idea that the story of one's life (*bio*) can be attributed to a primary self *(auto*) which exists before its lived experiences. However, this is a privileged stance for those who are able "to view the universe as one's own, to consider oneself as guilty of its faults and take pride in its progress" and who try to "work out the fate of all humanity in their particular lives."[4] These words of Simone de Beauvoir reflect the social condition of men and the privilege of not having to divide oneself between awareness of one's existence and humanity and awareness of one's embodiment and social limitations. However, according to de Beauvoir, it is not true that men are not shaped by their relationality, or are not subject to the influence of outside forces, only that women's historical circumstances have made the reminder of relationality much more obvious and persistent. Therefore, the social constraints which women face, and the role these play in defining identity, are

[3] Sidone Smith; Julia Watson, "Autobiographical practices," in *Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader*, ed. Sidonie Smith & Julia Watson (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998).
[4] Simone de Beavoir, *The Second* Sex. Translated by Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier. (London: Vintage Books, 2011), 766.

not the result of a fixed destiny which confines women to the sphere of the social and men to the sphere of the existential, but are rather the reflections of social fictions. Through experimenting with autobiography, which traditionally ignores relationality, Stein and subsequent women autobiographers I explore here powerfully highlight the independent and unitary self as itself a fiction.

In *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*, Audre Lorde explores how traditional forms of life-writing must be reworked in order to tell her story and speak about how the self is embedded in its relationships to other people and to political and cultural structures. The novel is subtitled as "A Biomythography," presenting itself as neither biography nor myth, but a confluence of the two, as well as something outside of them. Lorde reworks the traditional autobiography into a biomythography in order to illuminate the importance of difference in the articulation of the self. She is concerned particularly with racial difference, but more generally with difference meaning the ways in which individuals are always distinct from the identities which they choose to associate with, or are associated with them.

As an adult, having grasped the power and strength in articulating difference, Lorde demands in her momentous essay "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House" that we reach beyond the first patriarchal lesson of "divide and conquer" – we must "define and empower."[5] The refusal of Lorde's circle of friends in high school, "the Branded," to acknowledge and define Lorde's racial difference was not equalizing, but stifling. This is symptomatic of a wider societal trauma, in which women "have been taught either to ignore our differences, or to view them as causes for

[5] Audre Lorde, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," in 1984. *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches.* (Berkeley: Crossing Press, 2007), 110-114.

separation and suspicion rather than as forces for change."[6] If we accept a world where racial difference is ignored, there can be no true community between women, no liberation, and nowhere to house the "polarities between which our creativity can spark like a dialectic."[7] Lorde deepens the questions asked by women's experimental life writing as she explores how one's life (*bio*) is dependent on the interplay of external factors such as one's genetics, cultural history, structures of power, and ideas of race, and she uses language in the text as a tool to dismantle the structures that constrain the articulation of identity investigates.

The idea of an exalted self is sustained by traditional life writing, but this idea is reshaped by Lorde in her acknowledgement that while the "I" provokes captivating questions in that it is incapable of being confined to a given role or set of roles, it is not a primary entity which can articulate itself independently from external influences. Rather, by presenting a story of her own life as a biomythography, Lorde reworks the genre of life writing to pertain to the self, or the *auto*, without making any of the claims about the self and its independence. Lorde's sense of being a subject instead depends upon the "field of women" which she calls her life in the book's epilogue.[8]

In myth there are the elements of both the linear, the "bridge" between past and present, as well as the totality of the story being told, as in the field.[9] The African goddess MawuLisa, "the great mother of us all," is incarnate in Kitty, or Afrekete. Lorde concludes the biomythography with a litany of names similar to that with which she begins it, where she answers the question, "To whom

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[6] *Ibid.*
[7] *Ibid.*
[8] Audre Lorde, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*, (Berkeley: Crossing Press, 1982), 255.
[9] Claudine Raynaud, "'A Nutmeg Nestled Inside Its Covering of Mace': Audre Lorde's Zami," In *Life/Lines: Theorizing Women's Autobiography* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), 223.

do I owe the symbols of my survival?" with, finally, "*Afrekete*."[10] Afrekete represents the community of women, the "field of women" which is Audre's life. In Kitty, Audre sees Gennie's stepmother, Ella, whom the goddess spoke through, revealing to Gennie and Audre "that our survival might very well lay in listening to the sweeping woman's tuneless song."[11] She also sees her own mother, with whom Kitty shares a language "from time immemorial," using the phrase "I got this under the bridge" as a way of explaining something's authenticity, it's nearness to home."[12]

It was Kitty who "taught me roots, new definitions of our women's bodies – definitions for which I had only been in training to learn before," writes Lorde.[13] Kitty shares in mythmaking through exercising the power to define in a way that unites language with the bodily and the tangible, in the same way that Audre's mother taught her to read and write, "tracing letters and calling their names," saying the alphabet "forwards and backwards as it was done in Grenada."[14] Their use of language resists male-defined norms of writing (*graphy*), in which past and present are wholly separated and exist in linearity.[15]

In *A Map to the Door of No Return*, Dionne Brand experiments with autobiography in telling the story of tracing her understanding of her own identity through her history and the ways in which its disruption complicates an understanding of family lineage. Her history is obscured by the Door of No Return, through which her ancestors passed into the Diaspora. Because it is impossible for her to locate her origins and construct her identity in what she describes as the "European shape,"

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[10] *Ibid.,* 3.
[11] *Ibid.*, 251.
[12] *Ibid.,* 249.
[13] *Ibid.,* 250.
[14] *Ibid.,* 23.
[15] Raynaud, "'A Nutmeg Nestled Inside Its Covering of Mace': Audre Lorde's Zami," 223.

which "obscures its own multiplicity" through selectiveness with what it chooses to call or not call its origins, she cannot ignore the history which resulted in this fragmentation and even prevents her from being able to articulate her life and self in the traditional way.[16] Brand challenges the traditional assumptions of a coherent and consistent identity in life writing by acknowledging the myths perpetuated by this type of selective creation of history, and how through these myths, history makes itself part of a present, lived experience.

To live in the Black Diaspora is "to inhabit a trope… to live as a fiction – a creation of empires, and also self-creation."[17] Brand remembers how, as a child living on Trinidad, she was "inhabited by British consciousness" and "by an unknown self. The African."[18] The British self was inscribed by BBC broadcasts, English schooling, and Christian prayers, where the African self was "informed by colonial images of the African as savage." These two selves are constructed by storytelling. They are the product of an effort to attribute reality to a text or historical narrative, therefore neither is organic. Other narratives such as *Disgrace* by J.M. Coetzee and *Paradise* by Toni Morrison are explored by Brand as she considers how writing is a conversation between any kind of text or mode of storytelling. Morrison's work enters a conversation about myth, speaking particularly with America's national ("official") narrative of "grace, redemption, and that quintessential American ideal, happiness."[19] It is an unbalanced conversation, though – "Myth is of course seductive, but it needs material power to enforce it," writes Brand. The American myth dominates Morrison's Black mythmaking, frustrating her attempt to "narrate the African-American presence that underpins the official story" as violence and injustice compound upon Black America.

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[16] Dionne Brand. *A Map to the Door of No Return.* (Toronto: Vintage Canada, 2011), 72.
[17] *Ibid.*, 18.
[18] *Ibid.*, 17.
[19] *Ibid.*, 128.

Brand's later account of reading *Lady Chatterley's Lover* as a young girl with her schoolmates explores the integration of one's reading into the construction of self. "The book had begun outside of the book in the rumour. We had begun outside of the book also, the colonial consciousness, the female consciousness," Brand writes. The questions which it explores and the conversation it engages in, of "culture, class, technology, and sexuality," exist outside of the narrative, and Brand and her classmates exist in this outside world. Yet, when they enter the novel, they "disintegrate," and emerge "having reconstructed the novel into a more complex, more fluid sense of desire."[20] The girls' subjecthood and conception of identity exists in relation to not only the structures of society, but the narratives which these structures impose through textual archives and the ways in which we are expected to embody their images of subjectivity.

Brand does not portray textual archives as "building blocks of history," but rather as "performances of a world view."[21] Brand's own "maps" of Diaspora converse with these views and counter them. In creating what critic and historian Tavia Nyong'o calls "countermemories," which chart Brand's own feelings and memories over historical maps "without the pretense of using it to build a complete or coherent historical narrative," she exposes the limitations and inconclusiveness of the collective and archival memories which are asserted as the true telling of history.[22] The exhibits at the museum which the narrator visits at the end of *A Map* profess solid evidence and artifacts, yet they are full of empty space and only lead the mind to wonder about dates and names, to whom these bones and arrowheads and amulets belonged.

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[20] *Ibid*., 191
[21] Erica Johnson. "Memoir and Memory Traces," in *Cultural Memory, Memorials, and Reparative Writing.* Palgrave Studies in Affect Theory and Literary Criticism. (Palgrave Pivot, 2018), 38.
[22] Johnson. "Memoir and Memory Traces," 38.

In her transparency about the creation of her map in the present, Brand demonstrates that history is not segmented from the present as the "past," but rather that history is a fiction which is constructed in the present. "The Past—or, more accurately, pastness—is a position. Thus, in no way can we identify the past as past," wrote anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot.[23] This is especially true for those in the Black Diaspora, as Audre Lorde recognized in her vision of a "field of women" who transcend the linear conception of time which conceals the conscious creation of history. "To the people in a small place, the division of Time into Past, the Present, and the Future does not exist," wrote Jamaica Kincaid in *A Small Place*.[24] Brand echoes this: "In a small place nothing is ever over."[25] This interplay between history and the present challenges notions of the self in autobiography. Like the museum, our accounts of our "selves" are prone to gaps and forgetfulness. Moreover, that which we tell the story of is not an essential self, but a being created and shaped by structures of power which determine which version of history is true, and how that history reverberates into the present.

Maggie Nelson explores the continuous construction of the self in her work of experimental life writing, *The Argonauts*. Nelson challenges the traditional idea of a primary and transcendent "self" portrayed in life writing by exploring the innumerable and unknowable ways in which the "I" is formed by external forces. The title of Nelson's work refers to the problem of the Argonauts' ship, which is constantly being renewed until none of its original materials remain, without changing its name. This understanding informs Nelson's view of subjectivity and also organizes the way she takes up the genre of life-writing in this text. Through recounting her fears and desires in her relationship

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[23] Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being.* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014).
[24] Jamaica Kinciad, *A Small Place*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1988), 54.
[25] Brand. *A Map to the Door of No Return*, 10

with her partner Harry, who identifies as gender non-binary, Nelson explores how the constraints of genre frustrate and limit, and are ultimately unsustainable.

Over the course of one's lifetime (*bio*), one is always in a state of *becoming*, transforming like the Argo. "We develop," Nelson writes, "even in utero, in response to a flow of projections and reflections ricocheting off us. Eventually, we call that snowball a self (*Argo*)."[26] Reflecting the words of Deleuze and Guattari, Nelson describes *becoming* as paying "homage to the transitive, the flight, the great soup of being in which we actually live." Nelson points out how the categorizing of static phases of existence derives from the "Aristotelian, perhaps evolutionary need…*predator, twilight, edible*."[27] This mode of thinking has extended deeper into the development of identity politics. One must define oneself and acknowledge difference in the struggle for agency. However, definitions of group identity are dependent upon the exclusionary requirements of representation and fail to acknowledge how identity is relational, performative, and exclusive to the individual.

Nelson explores this problems of representation through articulating her feelings about her relationship with Harry. She notes how Harry is happy to identify as "a butch on T" rather than adopting the understanding of "transitioning" meaning leaving one gender behind – "*I'm not on my way anywhere*," Harry tells inquirers.[28] While it may seem politically advantageous in "a culture frantic for resolution" to categorize identity, it is impossible to do so, because "sometimes the shit stays messy" – no general representation is capable of capturing the complexities of individual experience.[29]

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[26] Maggie Nelson, *The Argonauts*. Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2015), 94-5.
[27] *Ibid*., 53.
[28] Nelson, *The Argonauts*, 53.
[29] *Ibid*., 53.

Nelson writes her personal experiences of desire not in the attempt to reconcile a contradiction within the self or between ways of being, but rather in order to reject the need for such reconciliations. "I am interested in offering up my experience and performing my particular manner of thinking, for whatever they are worth," Nelson explains, but she also questions how she might be aiding the formation of a constricting representation, of women or of mothers, in writing her experiences – "I don't want to represent anything."[30] By offering up her experiences without seeking to reconcile them in agreement with each other or any form of representation, *The Argonauts* reworks the traditional form of personal narrative which seeks to make a life coherent and always advancing towards some goal or end. Instead, she resists conclusion, accepting that "contamination *makes deep* rather than disqualifies."[31]

According to Nelson, the ideas of self, life, and writing in women's autobiography should not become fixed but should be forever renewed, like the Argo, as Roland Barthes describes: "the very task of love and of language is to give to one and the same phrase inflections which will be forever new, thereby creating an unheard-of speech in which the sign's form is repeated but never is signified."[32] Nelson weaves the ideas and quotations of other writers and theorists throughout her own life story. In pulling their influences into the written body of her text, she writes her narrative in a way that illustrates how reading other narratives is a part of constructing and performing the self. Nelson describes this performance as the dramatization of "the ways in which we are *for another by virtue of another,* not in a single instance, but from the start and always."[33] This performance does not

[30] *Ibid.,* 93.
[31] *Ibid.*, 9.
[32] *Ibid.*, 5.
[33] *Ibid.*, 60.

demonstrate inauthenticity or infidelity to a pre-existing self, but rather acts as evidence against such a self.

Stein, Brand, Lorde, and Nelson each grapple in their own way with the constraints of the genre and the notions of identity that it seems to enforce. The experimentation with the form of autobiography which they have undertaken is an effort to continually renew the ways in which understand identity, including gendered and racialized embodiments of it. Gertrude Stein posited identity as being intertwined with recognition, as the form of *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* obscures the barrier between that which we call "I" and the outsiders who construct and steer its articulation. Lorde further adapted this idea with the realization that the narrow genre standards of autobiography could not adequately support the story of a self which is inseparable from its surrounding structures and yet still escapes total definition by these structures into a single role. Brand further explored the idea that one person may take on or be inhabited by many identities that have been shaped by multiple roles and functions and histories, but one is not *only* these things. In uncovering the processes of creating these identities, Brand introduced into her experimental form a transparent mythmaking that had been absent from the form of autobiography which upheld the barriers between fiction and non-fiction, claiming itself to be non-fiction. Nelson also rejected these binaries, asserting that to "demand that anyone live a life that's all one thing" is unsustainable.[34] Her work offers up an experience of the unruliness of life and the ways in which the entangled and innumerable factors which construct what we call an individual's life always escape our ability to articulate them in language. These works of experimental life writing demonstrate how language can work as a tool to dismantle dominant narratives and begin to rebuild new structures made of

[34] Nelson, *The Argonauts*, 74

fragments and only partially known or knowable pasts and histories for understanding both "life" and "writing."

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