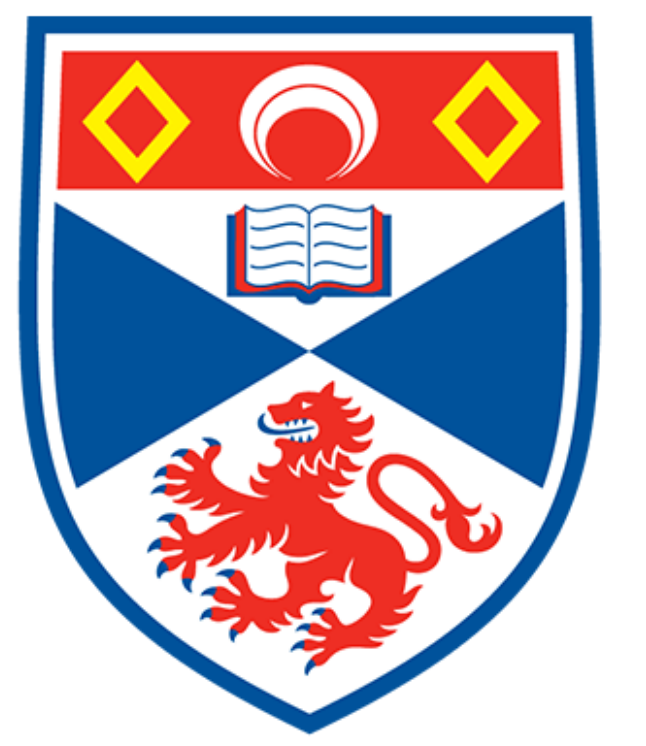


# Experimental Life Writing: Redefining Women's Autobiography

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## What is “experimental life writing”?

*“The articulation of difference cannot be undertaken with old metaphors and familiar recipes.”*  
—Nancy K. Miller

In referring to women's autobiography as **women's experimental life writing**, we are making a conscious engagement with the ways in which we discuss autobiography, and working to unravel the underpinnings of the genre. Even a single word like “autobiography” is entrenched in a deep fund of assumptions, connotations, and histories, which are simultaneously valuable and dubious. **A study of this experimental form involved close readings of the works of the monumental female authors below...**



**Gertrude Stein**  
*The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*  
(1933)

**Audre Lorde**  
*Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*  
(1982)

**Dionne Brand**  
*A Map to the Door of No Return*  
(2011)

**Maggie Nelson**  
*The Argonauts*  
(2015)

### “self”

### “life”

### “writing”

## Auto·bio·graphy self life writing

*Does a primary self exist before it is articulated? ... What elements does an individual life encompass, and which do we attribute to our own doing and to forces beyond our control? ... How can we write a true account of our lives if the story is filtered through memory and the hidden assertions and associations of language? .....*

The genre of autobiography rests upon certain assumptions about the nature of self, life, and writing.

*“The representation of the world as the world itself is the work of men; they describe it from a point of view that is their own and that they confound with the absolute truth.”*

—Simone de Beauvoir

Predominantly defined and developed by men, autobiography has overlooked the differing ways in which women experience these questions of self, life, and writing.

The way of speaking about identity in autobiographies has long depended upon the existence of a primary, unified, and consistent self, to which the bodily experience was secondary and subservient. However, our experiences and conception of identity depends on our relationality – how others perceive us, how we want to be perceived, and how we affect others' lives. These relationships are lived and experienced through our bodies. This means that women's experiences are especially attached to the prevailing myths and cultural associations of one's society regarding the female body.

*“Identity is recognition”*

—Gertrude Stein

*“Myth is of course seductive, but it needs material power to enforce it.”*

—Dionne Brand

*“We carry our traditions with us...Recreating in words the women who helped give me substance.”*

—Audre Lorde

*“I guess I wasn't ready to lose sight of my own me yet, as for so long, writing has been the only place I have felt it plausible to find it (whatever “it” is).”*

—Maggie Nelson

**In/conclusion: “Experimental life writing”** is in no way the culmination of the revisions necessary to describe the ways in which women articulate the self. Perhaps it will remain impossible to identify in any satisfactory way what women's autobiography consists of and why it is different from men's autobiography. Still, the salience of this mystery should prompt us towards deeper investigation. It may be difficult to identify difference without risk of essentialising – **but to acknowledge that there is difference to be celebrated is an act of power.**

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