

Marlene Kadar, Linda Warley, Jeanne Perreault and Susanna Egan.  
*Tracing the Autobiographical*. Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier UP, 2005.  
Pp. 276. \$32.95 paper.

This collection of essays by established and emerging scholars of autobiography studies stresses the diversity currently in the field in its approach to “the autobiographical” as a discourse. Although there were times that I wished for a little more focus, the strength of this approach is that there is something for everyone. There is much to admire in the variety of approaches found here.

*Tracing the Autobiographical* begins with an introduction by Marlene Kadar and Jeanne Perreault subtitled “Unlikely Documents, Unexpected Places.” For Kadar and Perreault, “the autobiographical” is a discursive construct that surfaces in all kinds of texts that are usually not assumed to be part of autobiography. They want to “stress the scope of the autobiographical” and not the limits of autobiography as a genre (1). They also see the scope of the autobiographical as the site of and means for producing new ways to know about historical documents and new media. Reading for the “traces” of autobiography can mean looking through what they call “unlikely documents” such as online home pages, letters and memos in an archive, or it can mean examining autobiographies produced by women in contexts that are removed from North America. As Kadar has written elsewhere, “tracing” is like the approach to life writing: an act of politically-engaged reading that is alive to text and context in a wide variety of modes (152–53).

Kadar and Perreault’s introduction places this collection well within a current in auto/biography<sup>1</sup> studies that stresses the discursive nature of autobiography and memoir.<sup>2</sup> What these approaches have in common is the assumption that a consideration of autobiography as a consistent genre does not address the variety of self-representational practices in existence, and that the concept of genre itself acts to constrain our understanding of how people represent themselves. *Tracing the Autobiographical* widens this approach to a consideration of historical documents and to other forms, like stage drama, poetry and best-selling memoirs.

Perhaps because the collection is based on a 2001 conference called “Auto/biography: Contemporary Issues,” held at the University of Calgary, all of the essays in it are about issues that concern many of us today: issues like the problems of memory and trauma related to the Holocaust and to Israel/Palestine, the ethics of online and televised narration, or the legacy of the Aboriginal Stolen Generations in Australia. One way to bring the disparate concerns of these scholars together would be to discuss their common concerns with the

ethics of representation and of research, which cohere remarkably with other concerns about national questions, with interests in alternative genres like poetry or theatrical performance, or with meditations about new technology and its dynamic relationship to selfhood at the current time.

Essays by Helen Buss, Linda Warley and Gabriele Helms are about identity and online or televised ways to represent it: Buss' essay about Katherine Tarbox argues that Tarbox's memoir restores the agency that she lost when she was molested by a man she met in an internet chat room. On the other hand, Warley says that the creation of online home pages represents a need for online authenticity, while Helms carefully delineates how reality television works and why critics of autobiography should take it seriously. The next three essays examine the autobiographical in three "unusual" genres: Sherill Grace looks at drama, Kathy Mezei discusses domestic space in a variety of interiors from a memoir by Mary Gordon to essays by Dionne Brand, and Susanna Egan reads Daphne Marlatt's long poem "Steveston" as a type of autobiography.

The collection shifts to a consideration of documents and ephemera as autobiography, especially in Cheryl Suzack's reading of legal proceedings by Aboriginal women as a context for Maria Campbell's *Halfbreed*, and in Jeanne Perreault's reading of the activist Muriel Rukeyser's "ego documents" of World War II. Bina Friewald's examination of autobiographies by three Israeli women, and Christina Crawford's analysis of narratives that have been published in the wake of the Stolen Generations report in Australia ask us to consider how autobiographies by women are used in nation-building and searches for strategies of resistance. The last two essays deal with ethical issues in research and interpretation involving the Holocaust. Adrienne Kertzer examines her own efforts to grapple with the legacy of the Holocaust in the lives of her parents while she looks at an art exhibition. In the most theoretical piece in the collection, which takes on the ethics of "trace" as a practice, Marlene Kadar examines the almost obscured traces of gypsies who were part of the Holocaust.

The essays in *Traces of the Autobiographical* demonstrate the importance of looking at autobiography as traces or fragments that tell a quite different story than what we see when we look at canonized texts or autobiographical classics. As Kadar and Perreault say in the introduction, "the forces at the heart of this collection are the inexhaustible variety of human identity and experience, and the irrepressible impulse to explore, express and understand it" (2). This collection is itself a tribute to the varieties of human existence, and the decision to take them seriously.

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Notes

1. I use the term auto/biography as a way to include both terms and to signal their close relationship to each other in various texts (Smith and Watson 184–85).
2. See Smith and Watson on reading “the autobiographical” as a performative act (184–85). Autobiography also has been characterized as a discourse about identity (Gilmore 1-5), an “outlaw genre” (Kaplan 155–56), or as an everyday practice (Stanley 132).

Works Cited

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