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Rosalía Baena, ed. *Transculturating Auto/biography: Forms of Life Writing*. New York: Routledge, 2006. 129 pp. \$150 cloth.

*Transculturating Auto/biography: Forms of Life Writing* presents as a modest project. A slim volume, this provocative collection bears substantive implications for scholars engaged with the subjective, social and representational effects of geopolitical mobility and stasis—chosen, coerced, or both. The editor, Rosalía Baena, has been part of an extended scholarly community navigating these questions for some time, across the humanities and fine arts. An earlier collection, co-edited with Rocío G. Davis, explores how the compelling figure of the child functions as a salient signifier in many transcultural aesthetic projects. Both the previous volume and this one propose transcultural analysis as a register of the expansive dimensions of consciousness. By transposing the adjective, “transcultural,” to a verb, “transculturating,” for the title of this collection, Baena and her colleagues press for ever-deepening critical engagement with the effects of transcultural experience, on subject formation across an impressive spectrum of possible lexicons—from text to image to food to clothes to music to comix to film.

Read together, these essays suggest that the burgeoning diversity of transcultural experiences informing historical and contemporary life-writing projects—broadly imagined and articulated, are opening new communities of mutual compassion and critical discomfit. The rich politics of hope and loving critique that inform these essays leave the reader with a thirst for more.

For the most part, the essays gathered in this volume confine themselves to experiences of migration or extended travel that follow upon the project of European colonization, each reflecting some measure of choice, however minimal or subject to external imperatives. A resistant post-colonial subtext permeates the selection of essays. Baena’s introduction invites a reading across autobiographies and the essays in this volume, for processes of social positioning in relation to newly imagined or hoped-for audiences.

William Boelhower’s opening essay takes up the possibilities of “Shifting Forms of Sovereignty” by proposing that the life wager of immigrant ancestors creates new kinds of existential debts. Migration as a personalized form of “regime change” is always already subject to the built-in effects of “scattered hegemonies” (see Grewel and Kaplan). Idealized environments, past or newly entered, cannot be immune or even disconnected from variously expressed, but inevitably chafing, hierarchical power dynamics. Boelhower suggests that subjective meaning-making projects by members of minoritized groups inevitably undermine and shift the terms of reference around what might constitute power, affirming the sacred gift of the wagered life.

## Book Reviews

Tradition, claimed or denied, also takes on a sacred tone in relation to lives staked in the transformational potentials of movements to new environments. Alison G. Goeller examines gendered material culture across autobiographies by Italian American women, particularly in relation to cherished (and/or derided) food preparation traditions, with evocative references to textile and other “domestic” arts. Participation in, reclamation of, or resistance to these practices, she argues, enable projects of self-positioning, often laced with a bittersweet or troubling recognition that there is gain and loss in each embodied separation from or embrace of culturally-grounded practice.

Gita Rajan draws on Jeanne Perreault’s use of the term “autography” as a way to enable cross-talk among the transcultural self-portraits produced by visual artists Siona Benjamin, Annu Palakunnathu Matthew and Ambreen Butt. Gathered together in a necessarily make-shift category of South Asian American women, each artist interrogates what it might mean to be and not to be “native” to a country, a culture, a religious world view, a visual art practice. In ways that Perreault would argue leave subjective boundaries “relentlessly mobile,” Rajan demonstrates that these artists deploy their transnational experiences to achieve brilliantly pointed commentary on the individual and collective effects of nationalisms, colonialisms, and other hegemonic projects.

Marjane Satrapi’s graphic memoir, *Persepolis*, sparks Rocío G. Davis’s discussion of the strategic mixed-media approach to meaning-making projects undertaken by comix artists. He argues that by combining visual and textual media, Satrapi deploys of graphic text in a compellingly accessible demonstration that creates sharply critical engagements across conflicting cultural frames of reference.

Dorothea Fischer Hornung explores the ways that film editing processes enable sequential juxtapositions of symbolisms that can simultaneously affirm and destabilize projected and received constructions of self. Rita Monticelli’s analysis of Anna Jameson’s travel writings and Danielle Schaub’s discussion of Fredelle Bruser Maynard’s autobiographical story cycles also show the ways that autobiographical texts particularize and take advantage of the formal characteristics of received genres to enable new interpretations of horizons of possibility for themselves and others. The volume concludes with Ana Beatriz Delgado’s proposal that literary biography, with its deep focus on context, might go a long way to providing a sound literary history for Canada, as imagined by Robertson Davies, after “four hundred years” of history.

Ultimately, *Transculturating Auto/Biography* provides its reader with opportunities to knit a wide range of existing and possible self-representations and critical methods, raising new questions that might expand the project of

transcultural analysis. The transcultural experiences and displacements that shape the unfolding effects of contact and de-colonization may serve as a rich ground for revising long-standing injustices. Cross-pollinating discussions with transnational feminisms also leap to mind, as a way to consider the relative and interpenetrating scales of global, national, cultural, interpersonal and subjective frameworks for imagining the transcultural lives. Migrations that skirt the west altogether also seem fruitful ground for transcultural analysis, as do interdisciplinary discussions of mediated social relations. The demands of negotiating relative velocities of change and shifting needs for personal and shared experiences of creative security suggest that the questions posed by complex transnational lives are critically informative to a wide range of social and creative projects and problems. This text will be of interest to interdisciplinary scholars of autobiography, and anyone who appreciates wide-ranging scales of critical reference in a shrinking world.

**Works Cited**

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Marie Lovrod

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Judith Lütge Coullie, ed. *The Closest of Strangers: South African Women's Life Writing*. Johannesburg: Wits UP, 2004.

The title of Judith Lütge Coullie's book, *The Closest of Strangers*, offers us our first intimation of what to expect from this anthology of South African women's life writing—a glimpse into both the dissociation and the interconnect-edness of women's lives and voices over the span of the last century. Coullie writes in her introduction that

... the paradoxical intimacy and alienation embodied by the title is tragically apt and has resonance for each of the women represented here. But it also, in a sense, embraces every reader, for we are each alone in our selves. (3)