

**Introduction:**  
**Life Writing in International Contexts**

Marlene Kadar, Jeanne Perreault, and Linda Warley

In this double issue of *ARIEL*, it is our intention to continue the work of contemporary life writing scholars in English language studies who either appreciate or question the potentially monolithic identifier of one language and its political, linguistic, and geographic consequences. We invited contributions that focused on cross-cultural and postcolonial explorations of identity and place in autobiographical texts, but we had not anticipated that the response would be so great, or, more importantly, that authors would be so careful to parse the generalizations embedded in the way we had ourselves envisioned difference in the context of the formidable life writing genres. Only occasionally do these essays use these now frail terms, “cross-cultural” and “postcolonial”; but they all respond to the traditions in which these terms have flourished.

From the outset, the field of life writing has developed alongside feminist, postcolonial, and psychoanalytic understandings of meaning, and scholars have addressed urgent questions of genre, gender, and politics. Although much of the early and ongoing critique of the “Western man” model of autobiography has been undertaken by feminist scholars, postcolonial and other non-Western life writers and their critics have often combined feminist and postcolonial methods to demonstrate that life writing has always been embedded in and attentive to different national, ethnic, and historical contexts.<sup>1</sup>

Over the past three decades, autobiography and its variants (diaries, letters, journals, ego documents, memoir, documentary film, video, live dramatic performance pieces, and indigenous oral narrative, etc.) have become increasingly important and have gained the attention of scholars who found in life writings a rich literature that could open up ways of understanding experience-based narratives of geographical and social places and historical periods. Great historical forces—wars, eco-

conomic and political shifts, ecological changes—redraw boundaries, and populations and individuals are swept along, struggling to find expression for the changes they experience. Concepts of identity and selfhood are often left in exciting or troubling disarray; embodiment and community are central now to analysis of life writings; and subjectivity has been scrutinized using postcolonial discourse as a pivot. Life writing also offers peculiarly powerful access to trauma, psychological and physical, domestic or large-scale. Certainly the field of autobiography studies, as a cultural practice and as an institutionalized arena of intellectual and pedagogical work, has rapidly expanded to include voices from Asia, the Middle East, Africa and elsewhere, and these bring new generic and cultural complexities to the mix.

Technologies have also shaped how one's life can be examined and expressed, and while writing has been the dominant technology until recently, non-print technologies such as film and video alter representations, particularly of the body. The current storm of new media life writing genres such as blogs create new possibilities of narrating self. Scholars have found in life writing texts diverse ways of understanding and theorizing how self and subjectivity, identity and representation, authenticity and fluidity bring the past, with memory, and the future, in play with an imagined "text." Scholars have also developed an imaginative leap from fragments to lives, crossing over from examining self-narratives to gathering bits and pieces of what can be recovered and shaping lives from them.

Catharine Malabou, in her meditation on the word 'recovery' (via Derrida and Hegel's assertion that a wound of the spirit can heal and leave no scar), offers a way of thinking about life writing that evokes some freshness in our subject (26). Malabou tracks the possibilities of the word—"to heal, to return, to relocate a lost object or return to a normal state" (26). In life writing texts that configure a speaking "I" this notion of recovery is palpable: only some dis-ease, some pull from the past or some discomfort in the present could make one wish to gather the pieces, sort them, and (re)narrate them in the present. While "heal" may seem to be used in a facile way in our language—it is almost impossible to find a metaphorical vitality in it—we might invigorate it by reading it as a kind of "easing" of distress, and of disease, a thought or action that

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agitates one toward the process of recovery. Rather than a final end point of ease and serenity, of course, recovering wanes and recurs. A return, a relocating—the work of memory and of repetition<sup>2</sup>—are integral to the practice of life writing in any form. Recovery, then, in Malabou's sense of the word, appeals to readers and critics alike with the promise of a "return to a normal state."

Here we could read the life writing text as juridical, as Leigh Gilmore might say (after Foucault). The auto/biographical text provides the evidence and the object of recovery—or is that "discovery"? (Interestingly, Malabou finds in the space between recovery and discovery a "possible future for philosophy" [26]. We may find that life writing also makes use of that space.) At the very least the life writing text provides evidence of the recovered, the subject.

We imagine that the reader, too, including the critic or theorist of life writing moves through a parallel process of recovery, finding in the gathering of texts, the issues, the documents, a movement towards a consciousness of a kind of dis-ease in the particular text and in self-writing traditions, a provocation of questions, puzzles, hungers that speak of one's place in the world or in one's own psyche or history or spirit. The critic's own self-reflective (self-recovering?) process can sometimes overwhelm the ostensible subject at hand; in such cases we might speak of transference, in which the life-writing text becomes a kind of substitute for the reader's and critic's own life story, an evasion or elusiveness that satisfies none of the reader's wish for discovery or recovery, because the gaps and evasions seem too explicit, the exposure too blunt. Feminist theorist, Jane Gallop, following Lacan, writes that "interpretation is always the exercise of power, while transference is the structuring of that authority. To analyze transference is to unmask that structuring, interrupt its efficient operation" (27). Life writing provides a window on authorities and authorizations; critics and scholars interrupt the efficient operation of the structuring of numerous authorities and its consequent grave psychic and social controls.

The essays in this double issue translate writing across languages and cultures, not to erase their differences, but to open them up in order to find what Sherry Simon calls a new speaking position in the face of

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translation itself, translation, she writes, as a translingual practice (28).<sup>3</sup> How many languages, nations, cultures are transversed in this practice to the potent meanings of genre spoken from the position of “I”? How deeply do autobiography and migrancy intersect, and what does this mean for the future of life writing theory and for the recovery of less well-traveled speaking subjects? So important are these questions that they provided the focus of an international gathering of autobiography scholars at the University of Hawai’i this year.<sup>4</sup> Speakers continually returned to the challenges posed by autobiographical subjects who produce life narratives of experiences that traverse boundaries of all kinds, and they engaged in vigorous debate about the possibilities and limitations of transcultural, transhistorical, and sometimes translingual communication between auto/biographer and critic. With respect for the ever-changing movement among different states of being and various spaces the subject inhabits, the authors of this special issue of *ARIEL* make their claim on a form of knowledge that mends; communication between the auto/biographer and the life writing theorist recovers the depth of the personal and awe of the text that reflects it.

The editors of *Life Writing in International Contexts* ask if in the rush of life writing texts do we shore these fragments “against [our] ruins”<sup>5</sup> (Eliot 2627)? Can the surge of life writing in every medium, including critical/scholarly, be understood as our effort to make a frighteningly disturbed world intelligible by focusing on what is at hand, one’s own self, the smallest particle of social reality? This writing of self or about selves allows the sense that one can make a coherent story out of a life; constructing a coherent argument out of self-stories may produce some site of control and thus constitute recovery in Malabou’s sense: a return to normalcy, relocating a lost something, a healing of some philosophical or psychic magnitude, even a healing of the evolving canon of life writing itself.

#### Notes

- 1 An important precursor collection to this special issue of *ARIEL* is *De/Colonizing the Subject*, edited by Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (1992).

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- 2 See Laura Levitt's acute treatment of repetition of symptom—or rather a symptom as a repetition.
- 3 See Manuela Costantino's essay for a discussion of Simon's use of the term.
- 4 Sixth Biennial IABA Conference, "Life Writing and Translations." June 23-26, 2008, University of Hawai'i in Honolulu, Hawai'i, organized by Craig Howes.
- 5 Thanks to T.S. Eliot.

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