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# Workshop Report | Narrated Lives, Remembered Selves: Emerging Research in Life Writing Studies

Verena Baier and Tamara Heger - University of Regensburg

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The Regensburg American Studies doctoral researchers Verena Baier and Tamara Heger report on the online workshop *Narrated Lives, Remembered Selves* that was held in May 2021. They reflect on how contributions from early career researchers and encounters with seminal scholars from the field of life writing studies are positioned in relation to the spatial, transnational and global turns in cultural studies and area studies. They also consider how life writing studies might embrace a shift towards collaborative, multidisciplinary approaches evident in the presentations that covered a wide range of themes and geographies, from activist movements, including BLM and #MeToo, through issues of identities, trauma and illness, to posthumanism and environmental questions. The event's findings inspire reflections on methodological aspects, including how to work with the diverse mediality of life writing and how to account for multiple temporalities and global-local entanglements.



*“Well, who would have thought that an online workshop during a pandemic would take us all away from Bavaria, on a journey with a NASA rover, allowed us to get on board of a cruise ship, had us travel to Nicaragua, and Chile, and even to Mars?”*

With these words we, the conference conveners Verena Baier and Tamara Heger, doctoral candidates in American Studies at the University of Regensburg, concluded our two-day international workshop on Life Writing Studies in May 2021.<sup>[1]</sup>

Besides offering fruitful insights into emerging research in the field of life writing, many papers also discussed the role and challenges of spatial entanglements and transnational perspectives when dealing with narrated self-representations. But it was not only individual presentations and talks that provided access to different spaces and spatial connections: despite remaining in our very own office spaces or living rooms, we soon found ourselves deeply entangled in conversations with other young scholars and experts in life writing studies from all around the world. On Thursday, May 13 and Friday, May 14, 2021, we had the pleasure of welcoming early career scholars together with invited discussants from the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, the Czech Republic, Austria, Spain, Canada, the United States, Chile, and Germany, who spanned several time zones from Bavaria's CET to Hawaii's HST.

During the dullest months of the ongoing pandemic, we felt the urge to break the isolation of the long-lasting lockdown by doing what we like to do best: talking about life writing studies and engaging in discussion with other like-minded scholars. Looking back, we are very proud of having managed to create our own space in the virtual sphere to do so, and to have ignited lively and fruitful discussions about fourteen exciting dissertation and post-doc projects that show the enormous versatility of life writing studies.

Of course, we were not alone in this endeavor, but supported by the expertise of three great scholars and role models: SIDONIE SMITH (professor emerita at the University of Michigan), JULIA WATSON (professor emerita at Ohio State University), and MITA BANERJEE (Professor and Chair of American studies at the Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz[2]), who not only gave us great insights into their ongoing work in the workshop's keynote lectures, but also took the time to discuss our projects with us, helping to improve our work immensely.

Like many scholars in the field, we trace our "academic upbringing" back to Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson's work on life writing. One quote in particular inspired us and made us think: In 2017, they announced that while life writing was "a 'rumpled bed' in 2000, it is now a messy multi-sensorium, teeming with the potential—and the pitfalls—of vibrant self-presentations across media, geographies, and worlds" (Smith/Watson 2017, xlvii).

But what would this messy multi-sensorium look like now, in 2021? How would self-presentations be connected and entangled across media, geographies, and worlds? How would thinking about and between spatial connections be productive for reading life writings and vice versa? And something that we, as Americanists, especially asked ourselves: how would transnational and comparative perspectives on life writings emerging in or connected to the United States help us to illuminate current debates and concerns? A quick spoiler: What we got to learn during our workshop by far exceeded our hopes!

Using our workshop as a departure point for further thinking and research about the abovementioned questions, this report not only attempts to give a brief summary of the individual contributions, but also aims to zoom in on two broader topics. First, we will elaborate on multidisciplinary approaches to life writing studies, what these collaborative approaches and new insights manage to reveal, what new and unexplored territory of the field we moved into, and what we can learn from the insights gained during the workshop. Second, we want to highlight the uses and usefulness of space and transnational entanglements for reading life writings.

## Life Writing in 2021 – Entangled Research, Multidisciplinary Approaches, Unexplored Territories

In the workshop's first keynote lecture, "Narrated Lives after 2020: Emerging Life Stories in the United States," SIDONIE SMITH and JULIA WATSON not only elaborated on the basic principles of reading life writings – common ground for all participants – but also pointed toward future directions for the field and offered encouragement for emerging research in life writing studies that is still in its starting blocks. They specifically pointed out how crises, and an awareness thereof, has not only inspired new stories to be told, but also new ways of doing so – in other words how new forms of life writing are created under the influence of crises, narrating not only past and present, but also diverse visions of the future.

They identified six broad categories of current events, which are particularly productive in this respect: pandemic precarity, the eco-crisis and survival, Black Lives Matter revaluations, the stakes of feminisms at the suffrage centennial, the plight of migrants and refugees, as well as the growing addiction crisis. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson are examining these developments in their current research project.

In our workshop, they focused on the BLM movement, as well as the #MeToo movement. In examining life narratives in both realms, Smith and Watson's core axioms and theories of contesting singular, stable, and fixed notions of autobiographical subjects prove particularly fruitful. This is because narratives of crises are embedded in collective responses to ruptures and frictions in societies, as well as current waves of activism. As such, life narratives in the context of the BLM movement contribute to and are part of the struggle against injustices. They also make innovative use of traditional as well as new forms of life writing to denounce and challenge present inequalities. #MeToo movement narratives in particular tackle existing gaps, ruptures, and absences as they try to evoke missing voices and creatively use silences to piece together lives. Smith and Watson stressed that with their new project they want to point toward future possibilities in the field of life writing and open up conversations.

On the second day of the conference, MITA BANERJEE continued this inspiring and fruitful path. In her lecture on "Writing Life, Life Writing: Disability and Relational Autonomy in Jason Kingsley's and Mitchell Levitz's *Count Us In*," she re-configured the entanglements of autobiography and biography. In doing so, she not only sharpened the audience's awareness of theories and genres, but also challenged societal ideals of healthiness and what constitutes worthwhile lives.

By going back to the autobiography of Benjamin Franklin, which not only reflected the traditional concept of the genre with its assumption of an autonomous subject, but also paved the way for neoliberal standards of biopolitics with its ideal of the physically strong and healthy body of a white heterosexual man, Banerjee explored what happens when "other" lives are written according to these standards. She introduced Emily Kingsley and her son Jason, who was born with Down Syndrome, and examined the tensions between their autobiographical and biographical texts, which show on the one hand how the standards set by Franklin are both embraced and challenged in *Count Us In*; on the other hand, they demonstrate how autobiography and biography need to be

considered as different, yet deeply connected, forms of writing lives.

According to Banerjee, *Count Us In* can serve as an example of how the genre of life writing can not only be inhabited but transformed. At the same time, life writing can serve as a powerful model to address and reveal structural inequalities raised by questions of gender, race, ability, class, and sexual orientation. Elaborating on the tension between *life* and *writing* in life writing studies, she also touched upon issues relating to representationality and the ways different forms of narrative provide or withhold agency.

These and other themes addressed in the keynote lectures shaped discussions throughout the event, which critically examined currents in the field while shifting conversations into new realms.

## Exploring the Diversity of Life Writing's Media

As a concept, life writing has paved the way to exploring acts, forms, and media of self-thematization that have been overlooked in traditional autobiography studies. They thus offer an inclusive angle to analyze the well-known forms, such as autobiography, letters, and diaries, as well as enabling investigation of new arenas of self-presentation and autobiographical discourse, likewise on the non-textual level.

Two of the diverse new arenas of life narrative that reveal new dynamics and flexibilities were purposefully addressed and innovatively expanded upon by our panel on life writing and intermediality with presentations by Elisabeth Kriebler and Megan Perram. The first part of the panel focused on the entanglements and differences of various medial representations of life writing. Drawing from her dissertation project, ELISABETH KRIEBER (University of Salzburg) talked about autographics – i.e. life writing in comics – and the adaptation of transgressive female autographic selves from page to stage and screen. Her corpus includes Alison Bechdel's graphic memoir *Fun Home* and Phoebe Gloeckner's *The Diary of a Teenage Girl*, which she investigated in light of the formal transgressions of the comics medium. This forms part of processes enabling transgressive feminist and queer identity performances that destabilize coherent and autonomous autobiographical subjects. Furthermore, she analyzed how these performative autographic subjectivities, and their transgressive potential, were affected by the adaptation in different media.

MEGAN PERRAM (University of Alberta) expanded the horizons of life writing studies by moving it into the digital space. Drawing on her dissertation project on literary hypertexts as illness narratives for “womxn” with hyperandrogenism, her talk investigated from a digital humanities perspective the practices of illness narratives destined to reclaim agency and voice, in particular for marginalized groups, and discussed what the future of illness narratives might look like. Perram elaborated on the coding of health liberation through literary hypertext technology, a form of rhizomatic digital story writing that calls on readers to participate in the narrative's unfolding by selecting different hyperlinks. Her case study focused on the software *Twine*, which allows users to write their own story, investigating the value of a nonlinear digital storytelling tool for women with the gendered illness hyperandrogenism to write their body and interactive experiential-based narratives with alternative, nonlinear, and multiple plot lines representing the disruptions, openesses, and insecurities illnesses create in life journeys.

## The Composition of Memory and the Construction of Lives

Another angle of the workshop threw light on memory making and the production of memory in and through life writing. One approach focused on the question of how life narratives are composed as an interplay of written text and other media, fostering awareness of how these need to be analyzed in relation to each other.

Treading this path, LEA ESPINOZA GARRIDO (University of Wuppertal) discussed Laura Jane Grace's self life narrative *Tranny: Confessions of Punk Rock's Most Infamous Anarchist* (2016). Her study not only demonstrated how it challenged the traditional idea of queer life writing as a teleological self-development and identity formation toward the "coming-out" moment, but also highlighted the composition of the life narrative. Examining the multimedial and multimodal interplay between text, image, and the paratextual apparatus - i.e., the co-written account as the main text and diary entries and added images - reveals how the self is situated, produced, and constantly disturbed, and thus challenges the notion of a coherent self and story. Espinoza Garrido argued that the autobiographical text by Grace, frontwoman of the punk band *Against Me!*, who publicly came out as transgender in 2012 as one of the first openly trans punk rock musicians, not only challenges the cis-male-dominated genre of music autobiographies, but also draws attention to queer life writing as a material, mediated, and performative practice.

BETTINA HUBER's (University of Passau) talk demonstrated how life writing also enables exploration of how discourses of memory are made. Huber drew from her dissertation project on representations of trauma in self life narratives written by US veterans who were deployed during the War on Terror. She elaborated on the narrative representation of negotiations of and challenges to individual agency in light of prevalent imaginations of traditional masculine behaviors and the ideal of the (white) male soldier, as well as the diagnosis of PTSD and reintegration in society. She argued that the figure of the soldier is embedded in a perpetrator-victim discourse that needs to be investigated within larger institutional, societal, and political settings beyond the self life narratives themselves. This approach makes it possible to fully grapple with the interrelations between the individual war veteran's narrative and larger discourses of discussing and remembering wars in US society. Soldiers' memory making is thus positioned at the intersection of multiple discourses in society.

Another approach highlighted the complex relationships between individual memory and collective, societal discourses. This became particularly evident in DUYGU ERBIL's (University of Utrecht) presentation, which elaborated on the theoretical framework of her dissertation project focusing on the cultural afterlife of Deniz Gezmiş, the Marxist-Leninist student leader of the Turkish '68 movement. She discussed ways of navigating different meanings of "memory" in light of the memory-activism nexus, which reveals interplays between memory activism, memory of activism (i.e. the cultural production of narratives on Gezmiş' life and the broader 1968 generation), and the use of memory in activism as a symbolic resource constitutive for the collective identity of new political generations. Erbil called for a new focus on the memory agents who narrate the life of Deniz Gezmiş. Those remembering subjects serve as representatives for a new form of activist practice and transform both the memory cultures and the political culture in Turkey by challenging older definitions of activism.

KAROLÍNA ZLÁMALOVÁ's (Masaryk University Brno) talk discussed negotiations of identity in nonbinary memoirs, drawing attention both to life writing's potential to challenge traditional notions of identity construction and to its visionary function of driving debates on future possibilities. She focused on the linguistic aspects of life writing to show how it has developed creative ways to write new identities even where the lack of appropriate language to describe oneself and discriminatory language hinders such processes. Defining nonbinary life writings within the realms of queer life writing, she complicated the understanding of autobiographical texts constructing coherent narratives and identities. She discussed three texts, Jacob Tobia's *Sissy: A Coming-of-Gender Story* (2019), Maia Kobabe's *Gender Queer: A Memoir* (2019), and Akwaeke Emezi's novel *Freshwater* (2018), focusing specifically on how these three texts negotiated identity in light of a lack of mainstream recognition, a lack of legal recognition and appropriate health care, and especially a lack of available language for nonbinary, genderqueer, genderfluid, and other identities. Zlámlová diagnosed that to counter this prevailing threat of abjection, the texts developed strategies of "writing back" in order to construct identities. These included the use of metaphors and alternative forms ('shero', *Sissy*) as well as processes of renaming and self-naming, but also the reclamation of slurs to strip them of their threat. Instead of avoiding the problem of formulating identities that cannot (yet) be named, the authors became forerunners in language creativity and active engagement to develop and explore future possibilities of narrating lives.

## Cultural History, Spatial Entanglements, and Transnational Perspectives

As many of the presentations highlighted, life writing studies challenge the ideas of a unified story and a coherent self, thus acknowledging the complexities of autobiographical acts and subjectivities. They are of a performative nature, meaning that "selves" are constantly produced and remade through memory, experience, identity, spatial location, embodiment, and agency. One particular stimulus the contributions to our two-day conference provided was on the role of space and transnational entanglements in writing lives. Many papers encouraged us to think about space as a productive category for the writing and reading of life narratives.

EAMONN CONNOR (University of Glasgow) elaborated on shipboard passenger diaries and other forms of life narratives composed by passengers and workers on leisure cruises during what is known as the British 'Golden Age' of the ocean liner from 1880 to 1960. In his talk, he enriched approaches from maritime studies with insights from life writing studies, arguing that the close reading of literary and cultural productions by passengers and crew can counter an overly narrow focus on the technological and economic aspects of leisure cruises and oceanic travel. He also questioned conceptions of ships as static and stable entities and, more broadly, fixed notions of space as a passive container. He framed the production of the life narratives as material-discursive practices, which inscribe present realities on board cruise ships, thus not only reflecting, but also (re-)shaping these realities. The manifold life narratives reveal diverse discourses around embodied experiences of traveling at sea that also take into account histories by hidden actors, such as ship workers. This approach reveals how passengers wrote themselves as actors of an increasingly connected and mobile Atlantic world, challenging and reconceptualizing prevailing notions of modernity.

Probing a different notion of traveling, ISABEL KALOUS (University of Giessen) focused on Emily Raboteau's

autobiographical travel narrative *Searching for Zion: The Quest for Home in the African Diaspora* (2013) in her project presentation on African American travel writing. *Searching for Zion* as a 'story of immersion' showed not only the author's literal journey from the United States to Africa and back again, but also revealed her emotional journey towards finding herself and her home country, something that was only possible in light of her often disillusioning experiences in Africa. Like the rest of her corpus of African American and Black British travel narratives, the text is situated between the fields of life writing, travel writing, and Black diasporic literature. Kalous sees travel writing as a hybrid genre that highlights different positions and identities in relation to space and is therefore particularly fruitful for African American and Black British writers as it can incorporate negotiations of identity, origin, belonging, home, and homelessness, as well as displacement from a transnational perspective - all of which are key themes in Black diasporic literature.

Life Writing in the context of diaspora was also the topic of XIMENA GOECKE's (University of Chile) reflections on what she identified as the Chilean-Jewish life writing boom in contemporary Chile, meaning the ongoing production of life writings centering on three recurrent topics: Shoah memories, migration memories, and genealogic history. Goecke argued that the Chilean-Jewish community experienced a growing tension between an identity that has acquired visibility in the Chilean society and the recurrent threat of assimilation and antisemitism, as well as the experiences of transgenerational traumatic memory. In these negotiations, life writing becomes the medium of a collective voice and the expression of an undoubtedly transnational identity. Among other things, she also elaborated on the dialogue of Chilean-Jewish self-referential writings with other traumatic regional or local memories of the military dictatorship of Chile by drawing on Leonor Arfuch's theoretical approach of life narrative as an act of witnessing trauma and violence.

VERENA BAIER's (University of Regensburg) presentation explored how debates about one's own society are led through discourses on other societies and guided by imaginaries of other places. Drawing on her dissertation project on life writings by US participants in the 1980s Nicaraguan Revolution and Contra War, she focused on the role of imagining Nicaragua in narratives that both bear witness to the Contra War and write themselves into the tradition of transnational activism. She thus examined the dynamics of how the authors entangle their own experience with an awareness of other experiences across national and generational geographies. Baier argued that a narrated Nicaragua, as well the strategic positioning of the narrating self in space are not only used to strengthen the collective identity of peace activists, but also to make a bold call for action against the US government's stance toward Sandinista Nicaragua during the Contra War. However, despite this criticism of US imperialism voiced by the life narratives, the texts also reveal diverse self-interests and personal agendas. Within the acts of remembering transnational activism, Nicaragua thus becomes a projection surface for self-identification and the background of the best version of the self; its rewriting as the 'Other' also entails the writing of a new version of the narrators' selves and at the same time connects the activism of the here and now with visions of the future.

Yet another dimension of transnationality and life writing was explored by HANNES KOBERG (Ruhr-University Bochum), who scrutinized the body and its relation to the nation by applying poststructuralist and



phenomenological approaches to transnational life narratives that contest national ideology and decenter the national and autobiographical. In his workshop presentation, Koberg analysed Audre Lorde's *Zami* (1983) through the prism of Merleau-Ponty's concepts of "body-subject" and "chiasmic flesh" to complicate the relationship between body and mind. Koberg explained that *Zami* presented a performative body conception as the narrator tried to break the physical boundary between herself and her lesbian lover by formulating the skin as a permeable organ rather than the protective surface of a body, sealing it off from the outer world. He concluded that Lorde's construction of the body, as a means to create a transnational identity, evoked the performative temporality of the national narrative and confronted the nation with its own inconsistencies.

TAMARA HEGER's (University of Regensburg) presentation drew on her dissertation on life narratives by US-American soldiers about the liberation of the Flossenbürg Concentration Camp, showing how Flossenbürg offers more than merely a passive setting for the texts. It is, as she shows, constructed as an actor in its own right, shaping the narrators' perceptions through the natural challenges the area poses together with the complex entanglements of the concentration camp and its surroundings. The texts constituting the project's sample greatly differ in genre, form, length, objective, and production time. What they have in common, however, is that they reflect their narrators' attempts at making sense of how a very specific space, a concentration camp in Eastern Bavaria, shaped their experiences and memories. Diving deeper into two texts, a letter home from Flossenbürg by a soldier written in May 1945 and an oral history interview conducted with another veteran in the US in 1981, she demonstrated how multiple factors influenced the construction of the life writings as meaningful narratives. Among the most important factors are the text's imagined audience, the author's intended objectives and perception of their identity as liberator, as well as the temporal distance between the experience and the construction of the narratives.

## Writing Nature and Post-Human Spaces

One panel in particular revealed the openness of the field and at the same time further pushed its boundaries by challenging anthropocentric models of life writing studies. INA BATZKE (University of Augsburg) opened the conversation with her presentation on nature writing. She argued that despite the notion of nature writing with its "man-in-nature" focus as a traditional anthropocentric genre that foregrounds humans as central, driving actors, it can be useful in current conversations for a critical and productive debate on the disastrous human impact on the planet. Instead of decentering the human in contemporary life writing of the Anthropocene, she pointed out the need to reveal the human accountability in endangering the planet, for which the focus on the human self is ideal as it automatically also negotiates human responsibility and morality, therefore putting nature (life) writing at the center of contemporary ecocritical discourses.

JENS TEMMEN (University of Düsseldorf) drew attention to the phenomenon of posthuman life writing, which likewise challenges the role of human agency in and for life writing. He analyzed how emerging visions and recent imaginaries of human life on Mars and a multiplanetary future of humanity related to dystopian narratives of the climate crisis and its consequences. A Mars narrated as a "back up space" thus not only becomes a projection surface for ecocritical debates, but also for narratives of a post-racial, postcolonial, posthuman,

postcapitalist, and utopian multiplanetary humanity, which also draws on traditional North American notions of exploration and tropes of imperialism. By investigating Mars rover missions through the lens of life writing texts and practices, Temmen not only called for a closer look at the interactions of science and literature, but also advocated for the centering of non-human entities and materialities, as well as the fundamental connectedness of human and non-human life, in the realm of life writing studies.

The workshop participants particularly enjoyed the discussion that arose from these highly innovative projects, which also proved the fruitfulness of bringing together early-career scholars and accomplished experts in this shared digital space.

### Transforming the Messy Multi-Sensorium into New Territories of Thinking

Our conference has also sharpened our awareness of crises, breaks, and frictions when it comes to the writing and reading of life narratives. Crises not only offer new perspectives and often illuminate foremost marginalized lives and narratives, but also allow for a new assessment and expansion of traditional approaches, thus contributing to the inclusiveness and openness of the field.

We believe that our workshop not only reflected the immense richness and diversity of the field, but also demonstrated how emerging projects are looking to explore new territories and open up innovative paths that will certainly shape and expand the current state of the “messy multi-sensorium” that is even more complex in 2021 than it was in 2017, when Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson identified it as such. The field keeps moving beyond singular and static conceptions of identities, spaces, and memories.

We have seen that it also encompasses virtual and online spaces, and as such keeps transgressing traditional forms, finding new medial representations for the narration of lives. Transnational entanglements of lives and memories, as well as place-specific notions, can play as big a role as post-human spaces that highlight the non-human in life writing. The common basis of challenging autobiographical subjectivities and coherent story lines is helpful for topics ranging from remembering activism to negotiating and envisioning queer identities.

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We are curious about the new reading practices that emerging research in life writing will bring to light in the future, which debates new approaches will set in motion, and which expansions and shifts they will encourage. If you want to learn more about the speakers at our workshop and their projects, we encourage you to visit our workshop website <https://lifewriting.wixsite.com/workshop>. We would like to thank everybody involved in the

workshop for the great conversations we had and the much-needed escape from the isolation the pandemic forced us into. Ultimately, the online format enabled us to bring together people who would have not been able to meet as easily otherwise. It allowed us to shelter in place, in very different places in fact, and at the same time connect across all our research areas. We are looking forward to keeping up the conversation.

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## Notes

[1] The conference was supported by University of Regensburg's Faculty of Languages, Literatures and Cultures and the Professorship of American Studies (UR). The full program and details of the presenters can be [found here](#).

[2] Mita Banerjee is Chair of the Advisory Board of the Leibniz ScienceCampus Europe and America in the Modern World.

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[Website](#)