Contested Identities in American Writing

By

Wilfried Raussert

Contested Identities in American Writing

By Wilfried Raussert

This book first published 2026

Ethics International Press Ltd, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Print Book ISBN: 978-1-80441-644-0

eBook ISBN: 978-1-80441-645-7

Acknowledgments

I want to thank some dear colleagues that have accompanied me over the years and with whom I have discussed my work in different stages of my academic life. A heartful thanks goes out to Mita Banerjee, Alfred Hornung, Rüdiger Kunow, Giselle Anatol, Afua Cooper, Maryemma Graham, Stephen Joyce, Sebastian Thies, Matti Steinitz, Gabi Pisarz Ramirez, Martin Butler, Yolanda Campos García, Graciela Martinez Zalcé, Sarah-Lena Essifi, Susana Rocha Teixeira, Maria Diana Fulger, Julia Andres, Miriam Brandel, Olaf Kaltmeier, Ann Fisher-Wirth, Emily Holloway, William Ferris, John Lowe, John Carlos Rowe, and Jay Watson for enriching conversations, critical insights, and fruitful encouragements. I also want to thank my international groups of MA students with whom I have discussed many of the primary texts in seminars and colloquia throughout the years. Your input has been very inspiring. A very special thanks goes to Wallace Bond Love for critically proofreading the book manuscript and, most of all, to Alexa Kenter, who formatted and edited the manuscript with such careful attention to detail. Portions of this book were previously published elsewhere in somewhat different versions, and this material is used with permission here. In this context, I would like to thank a series of journals (*Journal X*, *Journal of Transnational American Studies, fiar forum for inter-american research*, *Verbum et Dictum*, *A.R.T.E.S,* and *Perspectivas Afro*) and the publishing houses of de Gruyter, WVT/UNO, Winter, and Kipu for granting me the permission to use previously published material for this book manuscript – their generosity is much appreciated. Finally, my love goes to Rike, Lilith, and Yolanda for keeping me inspired by love, life, joy, shared sorrow, and happiness.

Wilfried Raussert

Bielefeld 12/01/2025

Table of Contents

Introduction
The Life Writing Impulse and Contested Identities in American Writing: Transforming Experience into Text

"When I discover who I am, I'll be free."

(Ralph Ellison)

"Life isn't about finding yourself. Life is about creating yourself."

(George Bernard Shaw)

Drawing upon Transnational American Studies paradigms, this book explores contested identities in novels, autobiographical essay writing, poetry, and life writing from the U.S.A., the Caribbean, and Canada. It starts from the premise that we can distinguish between identities that, at certain historical moments, are stable though confronted with crises; identities that, forcibly or not, are constantly changing and moving; identities that are defined by their spatiotemporal relationship to the territory and culture they inhabit; and identities that are made fluid or fractured by migrations, spatial or territorial movement, affections, emotions, and the trauma of uprooting or abuse. This is why it is important to consider how these identity dynamics articulate (or not) with the macropolitical processes that the Americas have long been experiencing, which are characterized by increasing crisis, politics of exclusion, and polarization. As the book argues, identities in conflict and mediation are the propelling force behind writers' ambitions to create narratives of cultural critique, redemption, and resilience. Contested identities, and the ways they have been represented, constructed, and expressed in different periods of Caribbean diaspora and North American

literary production from the late eighteenth to the twenty-first century, are looked at through overall intersectional lenses of gender, race, class, property, migration, diaspora, disability, and practices of comparison.

As Manuel Castells puts it, "identity is people's source of meaning and experience" (1997, 6). "We know of no people without names, no languages or cultures in which some manner of distinctions between self and other, we and they, are not made." (Calhoun, 1994, 9). I would add that we need to be aware that construction of identity is changing from context to context. I understand identity not as a fixed concept but always relational, evolving, changing, and dependent on biological, social, cultural, and political contexts. Identity as a concept also plays historically distinct roles, as becomes clear when we consider the colonial emancipation and nation-building processes in the Americas, as well as the migrations and formations of diasporic communities that have shaped lived experience in the Americas. It represents much more than an individual's search for affiliation, belonging, and self-definition. Because the Americas, as we see them today, represent a hemispheric entanglement which, ever since the beginnings of modernity, has been continuously shaped by cultural encounters; intercultural conflict and transcultural communication; multiple diasporic experiences; mobility of people, goods, and ideas; and processes of uprooting and newly rooting, they are a rich site for studying identities as they are (re)negotiated in American writing. From the very beginning of writings in the Americas, different genres like journals, captivity narratives, travel accounts, criminal narratives, slave narratives and autobiographies, and, later, North American poetry and novels have shared a strong life writing impulse that I see behind the bulk of American writing. This life writing impulse addresses experience as a base for individual and collective negotiations of identity.

Arguably, since the beginning of human life, forms of expression and their possibilities for human self-positioning have contributed to new and changing forms of representing, narrating, and reflecting oneself and others through images and texts. As mentioned, we find the impulse of life writing in various textual genres such as autobiography, slave narrative, the novel, or the autobiographical essay to name but a few. In contemporary times, internet blogs, social media, portraiture, (documentary) films, dance, and performance have challenged and expanded what life writing can mean.[1]

Considering American writing as textual forms of identity construction and the life writing impulse can open possibilities for challenging distinctions between fact and fiction and related claims to veracity, authority, and authenticity that Lejeune's autobiographical pact and scholars like Couser associate with non-fiction (sub-)genres such as biography, autobiography, and diary.[2] According to this view, life narratives are heavily based upon lived experience. This experience might be shaped by context and be mediated, reflected, or imaginatively transformed like other forms of cultural or artistic production. Despite the presence of imaginative storytelling and fictionalizing elements, according to this 'school' of thought, the presumably non-fiction (sub-)genres contain an air that seems always a step closer to real lives and their baggage of memory, trauma, reality, hope, and vision.

More extensively than pure fiction writing, these forms of life narrative turn lived experience into storylines, maintaining the thread between lived life and storytelling most if not all the time. However,

[1] Cf. Smith and Watson (2010); Hornung (2013b, x); Maguire (2018, 9); Poletti (2020); Raussert and Rocha Teixeira (2025).
[2] Cf. Couser (2021, 7, 13, 68); Boldrini and Novak (2017, 13); Rak (2013); McLennan (2013, 10–11).

it is important to note that while there is a strong mimetic impulse guiding conventional, nonfictional forms of life narrative, all forms of cultural production are creative acts. I would argue that many American writings considered to be more artistic, aesthetic, and fictitious return to lived experience as a matrix for narrating identity. Many novels build on the author's lived experience and draw from imagination to unfold their protagonists' quest for identity, affiliation, and belonging. We may think of Herman Melville's months on a whaling ship, Nathaniel Hawthorne's preoccupation with family history and colonial guilt, William Faulkner's lived Southern experience of guilt after defeat, or Edwidge Danticat's experience of migration and diaspora, and the ways these experiences find voice in the writers' texts. The life writing impulse in all forms of textual production anchors the latter in their cultural and historical environments.

This book compiles scholarship I have conducted over the years about the construction, representation, and negotiation of identity in American writing. It revisits and reworks the research, concepts, and ideas of two decades of scholarship. What I wish to highlight is the omnipresence of identity as a thematic, cultural, and political concern in American writing spanning different epochs of cultural and literary expression. The reader will encounter various case studies loosely grouped by conventions of genre, thematic links, and practices of creating and expressing identity. What the reader will not encounter, I should say, is a linear narrative delineating consecutive historical developments in textual representations of identity. Since texts are produced in context, they are always relational, and this is true for all epochs of textual production. The book aims to combine solid scholarship with free-wheeling connections between texts that negotiate identity, texts that at first glance might appear far apart. The chapters then show the omnipresence of different, at times clashing,

identity discourses, but with a specificity characterized by different cultural contexts, conventions of genre, thematic links, and representational practices.

When it comes to writing identity, creativity, and performativity nourish the act of narrating and propel authors to link identity and individual life stories with larger stories of social embeddedness, conditioning, and transformation, thereby pushing new forms of historiography, fictional life writing, and other forms of nonfictional writing. Accordingly, the creative impulse fuses individual and collective experience with a larger understanding of the social, including the latter's local and global embeddedness. Since I am particularly concerned with identity formation processes in writing, I do not intend to plunge deep into the discussion of the selected texts' relation to fiction or non-fiction genres. Still, I want to address some points related to critical debates about fact and fiction here, which Susana Rocha Teixeira and I also discuss in our introduction to *Life Writing, Creativity, and the Social in the Americas* (2025). Some scholars have pointed to the blurred lines between the novel (and other forms of fiction) and presumably non-fictional forms of writing, such as the memoir. One example is the "recent explosion of experimentation in life-writing" (Novak 2017, 2) that includes forms such as "'autofiction,' 'biofiction,' [and] 'auto/biografiction,' or [the] 'autobiographical non-fiction novel,'" all of which challenge genre conventions (4) and distinctions between fact and fiction. However, this fuzziness regarding fact and fiction in the context of life narratives is not new. Scholars have long emphasized the joint development of autobiography and the (realist) novel in the nineteenth century, their shared interest in character development, and their similar narrative strategies (5; Couser 2021, 13), which some critics have attributed to the residual importance of the realist novel (cf. Novak 2017, 5–6). Consequently, it's not surprising that non-fictional forms like

autobiography, biography, and even 'raw' and 'unmediated' written expressions such as the diary are, like their fictional counterparts, products of creativity[3] that tend to follow their expected genre conventions and resort to narrative strategies, literary devices and methods for producing particular effects (Cardell 2014, 5; Nünning 2022, 29ff.; Novak 2017, 6–9; Gudmundsdottir 2017, 54, 164) – such as a reality or authenticity effect that creates the impression of unmediated insight into reality or (past) truths or facts (Raussert and Rocha Teixeira 2025).

The life writing impulse behind American writing not only constructs individual selves in memoirs, essays, poetry, and fiction, but also represents the act of writing and creation of self as connected with the social and larger collective forms of identity. Kyle Cardell claims that "contemporary diaries make visible the intimate and the personal," but also "blur and destabilize conventional boundaries between public and private" (2014, 3).[4] For Cardell, diaries are "a popular form … through which key social discourses are played out and made visible" (4). With a nod to Susana Rocha Teixeira's and my introduction to *Life Narratives, Creativity and the Social in the Americas* (2025), I argue that this also applies to fictitious forms of narrating oneself and others. The life writing impulse behind American writing reflects, critiques, affirms, and negotiates social practices and change, and in doing so not only reflects, but also participates in national and transnational conversations and contributes to social developments (cf. Kleinreesink 2017, 14, 125; Danielewicz 2018, 1, 3, 8). Life writing scholarship in particular explores these issues, as the interest in

[3] On creativity in Thoreau, cf. Couser (2021, 17). For a more detailed discussion of autofiction, cf. Dix (2018); Effe and Lawlor (2022); Novak and Ní Dhúill (2022).
[4] For example, Douglas and Poletti show via current life writing scholarship that sharing of intimate details is not limited to social media. Diaries or letters were once "read aloud to family members, shared and reported on" (Douglas and Poletti 2016, 19, 21–22).

writings' entanglement with the social world grows (Douglas and Poletti 2016, 11, 47).

Like poststructuralist and feminist thought in the second half of the twentieth century, postmodern and postcolonial literary and cultural studies have contributed new perspectives and objects of study regarding identity and life narratives. James Olney's 1980 publication *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical* exemplifies how the autobiographical canon (traditionally considered as an exclusive product of Western male culture) was expanded to include previously neglected forms of self-representation and narration (e.g., those by African American writers), and how the central position of the white, heterosexual, healthy, Western male subject was increasingly challenged and decentered in life narratives (Jones 2007; Gilmore 2001; Rak 2013; Smith and Watson 2001, 2006, 2010; Douglas and Poletti 2016, 8).

This change of perspective and expansion of the life narratives canon continued into the late 1980s and 1990s with works such as Paul John Eakin's *Fictions of Autobiography: Studies in the Art of Self-Invention* (1985) and Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson's influential *De/Colonizing the Subject: The Politics of Gender in Women's Autobiography* (1992). Since then, the interdisciplinary study of identity and life writing has increasingly opened the floor to the expressions of women, who have added female perspectives, personalities and notions of the self, as well as (sub-)genres (such as the diary) that had been neglected before.[5] This also holds true for LGTBIQ+ persons (cf. Novak and Ní Dhúill 2022, 16), (postcolonial) migrants, and ethnic minorities. "Personal narratives no longer depend [exclusively] on speakers belonging to dominant social groups but emerge … from minority

[5] Cf. D'Amore (2012, 2); Kadar (2005, 2); Hart (2004); Novak and Ní Dhúill (2022, 8); Olney (1980); Raussert and Rocha Teixeira (2025).

positions, cultivate the value of undervalued experiences, and risk distinctly intimate subject matter" (Egan and Helms 2013, 216; Douglas and Poletti 2016, 11). As Douglas and Poletti put it, "life narrative has moved from being a cultural form associated with the lives of 'great men' to being a dynamic and influential means for people and communities to write themselves into culture and history" (8). As I argue here, the life writing impulse opens new venues for looking at American writing as a medium for identity-making. Throughout the centuries a passionate and critical concern with linking narratives of self with those of others, positioning those stories within contact zones and shifting social environments, marks poetic and literary attempts to understand the complexities of the American experience in writing.

Responding to the somatic turn in academia in recent decades, scholarly interest in the body has grown in the field of narrating lives and identities. This includes the landmark study by John Paul Eakin, *How Our Lives Become Stories. Making Selves* (1999) and works by GT Couser such as *Recovering Bodies: Illness, Disability, and Life Writing* (1997) and *Signifying Bodies: Disability in Contemporary Life Writing* (2009). The study of bodies in life narratives does not just revolve around healthy male and female bodies, which conform to hegemonic and heteronormative standards. As accounts during the AIDS pandemic or of cancerous bodies show, it also very much includes narratives about disabled, ill, disfigured, or deceased bodies, which have played a significant role in the fight for 'minority' rights (Couser 2021, 5ff) and transformations of the social. In contemporary fiction and life writing, disability has gained center stage, even more so in post-pandemic times (Raussert and Essifi 2024).

As these more recent developments underscore, the life writing impulse in American writing continues to be crucial for rethinking the

self in relation to the larger social world. As G. Thomas Couser puts it, life writing "acts in and on history in significant ways" (2021, foreword n. pag.). When examining the connectedness of the Caribbean and North American worlds, a hemispherical approach to the social in the Americas can help us challenge the concept in news ways, throwing into question as it does the postmodern assumption that the social is dead (Kaltmeier and Raussert 2019, 3). Hemispherically, I conceptualize the Americas "as transversally related, chronotopically entangled, and multiply interconnected" (Raussert 2014, 62). In that sense a hemispheric approach envisions a post-territorial understanding of area(s). With its critical positioning at the crossroads of cultural studies and area studies, such an approach "pushes further the postcolonial, postnational and cross-border turns in studies of the Americas toward a model of horizontal dialogue beyond constructed areas, cultures as well as disciplines" (62). Caroline F. Levander and Robert S. Levine stress that "recent tendencies to conceive of the United States in the American hemisphere solely in terms of empire and imperialism tend to overlook the complex series of encounters that collectively comprise national communities in the Americas" (2008, 7). They maintain the necessity of acknowledging and exploring the entanglement of regions and nations within the Americas against binary structures of hegemony versus periphery. And within such an understanding of people, ideas, and goods in regular flows and connections, new social worlds emerge as well. In the twenty-first century, Bruno Latour has been among the major voices articulating the crisis of the social. Stressing the "many … contradictory cartographies of the social," he emphasizes the interaction between human and nonhuman actors and raises new questions about interconnections and interrelationships within and between plural societies (Latour 2005, 34). Ethnic, environmental, religious, and women's movements have been a major factor in breaking with traditional concepts of the social, identity,

inducing change and provoking right-wing backlash. Due to migration and displacement, post-territorial narrations of the social have emerged that go far beyond nation-state projects. Concepts such as family, community, society, state, and nation are too narrow and specifying to do justice to the "fluidity of the social" (Bauman 2000, 25).

Building on Transnational and Hemispheric American Studies, Inter-American Studies, and Caribbean Studies,[6] this book looks at Anglo American, African American, Asian American, Caribbean American, and Caribbean Canadian texts. It challenges the often limited, limiting, exclusive, and excluding focus on the United States within the field of American Studies (cf. Couser 1989; Eakin 1991; Sayre 1978) by exploring literature, poetry, memoir, and autobiographical essay writing in the Americas. In doing so, the book takes previous discussions about life narratives in the Americas (Chansky 2017; Graham and Lucero 2020; Ortiz-Vilarelle 2021) as a starting point for exploring the myriad connections between narratives of life and the social world in the Americas, and the role of the life writing for reflections on and inventions of identity from a variety of perspectives. It further seeks to explore textual identity-making and the ways that social context, developments, and transformations related to aspects of migration, mobility, illness, racism, sexism, oppression, and exclusion challenge and redefine how writers shape identity formation processes in their writing. Why bring together Caribbean diaspora, Canadian, and American writers in their multiethnic diversity here? Cultural critics Frances Aparcio and Susana Chávez hope "to contribute a polydirectional and multivocal approach to the politics of representation, seeking to avoid the

[6] Cf. Fisher Fishkin (2005); Hornung (2007); Thies and Raab (2009); Fluck, Pease, and Rowe (2011); Lenz (2011a, 2011b); Hebel (2012); Davis (2013); Raussert (2014).

pervading binarism in the field and the colonial gaze that essentializes and fetishizes subaltern cultures and privileges dominant ones" (1997, 14). As they suggest in their introduction to *Tropicalizations: Transcultural Representations of Latinidad*, we are in need of a theoretical framework that departs from simple dichotomies towards a mode of conceptualizing asymmetrical power relations. While I am not concerned with developing theoretical models in this book, with a nod to the above critics, I put so-called canonical texts side-by-side with those of lesser known writers from the Americas, as a challenge to canonical power relations.

Looking at writing from the perspectives of Hemispheric American Studies, it is important to include discourses that go beyond hegemonic U.S. paradigms and address various contact zones and forms of (im)mobility in the Americas. For example, Smith and Watson argue that "[i]mmigrant narratives … have long been sites through which formerly marginal and displaced ethnic and racialized subjects explore terms of their cultural identities and their diasporic and transnational allegiances" (2010, 156). Moreover, Rosemary Marangoly George argues for a distinct 'Immigrant Genre' – defined according to "political and ideological contents rather than by formal attributes – which is marked by a disregard for national schemes, the use of multigenerational cast of characters … [and] a curiously detached reading of the experience of 'homelessness' …" (George 1999, 171).

Referring to the Caribbean diaspora context, Lisa R. Brown argues that modes of life writing have long served an important function in Caribbean literature: "Prose narratives, travel narratives, fictional autobiographies, … slave narratives, community histories, biographies, autobiographical poems, [and] memoirs … all represent points on the vast continuum of use through which Caribbean creative

writers and 'real people' alike have made self-representation" (Brown 2011, 276). However,

> [t]he use and function of each mode has varied over time from the earliest writings by colonial subjects transplanted to the Caribbean either as slaves, colonial masters, or indentured labourers, to the writings of the first wave of nationalist writers who migrated to England, to the most recent writers residing in the region or in the diaspora. (276)

Each of these modes may be viewed as having a particular "performative function" (276) which, pertaining to the most recent writers, seems to have shifted "from a very political nation-building enterprise to a more personal life-saving project" (277). Concepts of "performativity, positionality, and relationality" (Smith and Watson 2010, 214) in particular have contributed to theorizing and contextualizing this immense variety of (auto-)biographical forms of self-expression. Many of the texts analyzed in this book move in between community- and nation-building endeavors and more personal life- and memory-saving narratives. The performative function mentioned by Brown also impacts the creation of identity in more explicitly artistic forms such as poetry and the novel.

Among the most prominent topics in Hemispheric American Studies, Transnational American Studies,[7] and Transcultural American Studies[8] have been questions of identity, belonging, and affiliations, particularly regarding processes of globalization. This trend is also recognizable in Canadian and in postcolonial Caribbean cultural and literary studies (Brydon and Dvorák 2012; Dobson 2009; Kamboureli

[7] Cf. Davis (2013); Fisher Fishkin (2005); Fluck, Pease, and Rowe (2011); Hebel (2012).
[8] Cf. Hornung (2007); Lenz (2011b); Raussert and Isensee (2008), Raussert and Essifi (2024); Raussert and Rocha Teixeira (2025).

and Roy 2007). Citizenship "has become deeply self-different and has lost its traditional all-comprising claims of a public identity … and its basis in a closed concept of national territory and unified national culture that was seen as providing an abiding sense of belonging" (Lenz 2011a, 5). New transnational and transcultural perspectives are needed not only to explain (post)modern phenomena but to open up innovative and intriguing ways of thinking about how identity, belonging, and affiliations are narrated. As Günter Lenz states:

> The decentering and deconstructing forces of the transnational conceptions and practices of citizenship threaten the traditional sense of home, of belonging, of community, but they also open up new options for forging more complex, multifaceted, and more experimental and localized visions of communal political and cultural practices in the globalizing world. (7)

Exploration of identity-making processes in American writing plays a key role in this endeavor. The life writing impulse, I argue, propels creative interplay between fact and fiction, memory and imagination in the texts explored in this book. New connections between self and society, as well as self and environment emerge as part of textual identity-making. Jocelyn Stitt emphasizes that "[t]he capaciousness of life-writing allows … authors to refashion the genre to create hybrid or creolized forms that can be understood as archives of experience and memory" (2017, 180). She further elaborates that "genre and form are reworked through the use of fragmented stories, combining multiple genres in one text, such as letters, legal documents, maps, photographs, drawings and personal narrative" (180). It appears, for example, that one of the reasons for why research in the field is so dynamic is that it understands life, art, and criticism as interconnected rather than separate (Banerjee et al. 2011; Hornung 2009a, 2009b, 2013a). Life writing has "developed into a privileged form of self-expression and into a major field of scholarship" (Hornung 2009a,

536). As such, it is a field that continues to expand and include previously neglected texts and other audio-visual narrative genres. Consequently, this field is in persistent need of revaluation in terms of definition and methodology, as concepts of self and narrative are never fixed. And its approaches and insights also offer new ways to look at identity construction in all forms of literature.

This book explores various forms of textual creativity that encompass but also transcend conventional notions of creating identity in/through text. The production of these texts is strongly embedded in both individual and collective experiences that go beyond representational and constructivist discourses. What all the texts share despite their differences is a concern with a life writing impulse and an exploration of text as a matrix for identity construction. Hence, a critical look at the intersections of experience, creativity, identity, and the social world at large characterizes my approach to critical close readings of American writings. Particularly in light of colonial origins and Puritan notions of a new millennium, even the writing of personal diaries had a larger social claim as part of a new historiography. Early colonial texts fulfilled the function of documenting the new world, at the same time reflecting on the encounter with this unknown world. From the beginning, social as well as individual self-understanding were closely intertwined in colonial text production. This might explain why there is a pronounced autobiographical impulse in the literatures of the Americas, especially in U.S. literatures to this day (cf. Couser 2012; Eakin 1991). Certainly, there are periods in which the autobiographical impulse is more prominent. Nevertheless, the idea that individual writing and the textual creation of identity is always political and carries social implications (if not explicit messages) has clearly long been at the core of American writing.

Creative intervention, translation, and interpretation of lived and imagined lives via narrative shape synthetic and conflictive relationships between experience and imagination. Literature and life writing add alternative stories to local, national, and global historiographies. Perhaps more powerfully than any other form of cultural or artistic expression, life narratives pursue and push an intense dialogue, from the production to the reception of the narratives, between self and other. Life narratives attempt not only to make sense of experience, life, and larger history but to connect self and other, simply by inviting readers/viewers/listeners to enter life stories more intimately, based on personal experience and memory. As Martina Wagner-Egelhaaf asserts, "The new awareness of the 'real' and of people's 'real-life experience' … is not only due to the rapid developments in media and especially digital technology but also to the inexorable process of globalization which threatens to level out diversity and heterogeneity" (2018, 4). We need to take a close look at the "specific experientiality" of the selves created in literary texts and life narratives in order to keep track of lived difference, heterogeneity, and dissidence in times of homogenizing global discourses (Fludernik 1996, 6).

Without a doubt, the act of narrating, writing, expressing, and reflecting identity is a profoundly creative action. Calling for new directions in studying cultural creativity as a socio-cultural phenomenon, leading scholars in the field of creativity studies point out that "creativity will become a necessity for the dignity and survival of the human species." This assumption rings true for communities in the past as well as present. And it also rings true for individual attempts to create identity through writing. As the manifesto highlights, "creativity takes the form of action or activity" and occurs "in a given symbolic, social-institutional, and material context" (Glaveanu et al. 2019, 3). Given these recent developments in

creativity studies, creativity is best defined as "a form of action in and on the world, performed in relation to others, and leading to continuous renewal of culture" (Glaveanu 2018, 84). This implies meaningful novelty in thought and action. Writing is precisely such a form of action, and the life writing impulse consciously and intentionally embraces thought and action. Thus narratives about identity and self are manifestations of an instrumental function of art, which is the creation of new experience. "The first great consideration," says the American pragmatist philosopher John Dewey, "is that life goes on in an environment, not merely in it, but because of it, through interaction with it" (Dewey 1981, 535). Art and culture do not arise in an autonomous space, but as a result of the interaction of the individual with their environment and their society.

Likewise, Dewey sees experience as always involving a larger social context, which he expresses in the following: "Experience in the degree in which it is experience is heightened vitality…; at its height it signifies complete interpenetration of self and the world of objects and events" (1981, 540). As he concludes: "[e]xperience is the result … of that interaction of organism and environment which, when it is carried to the full is a transformation of interaction into participation and communication" (543). Writing identity, I will add here, is an example of precisely this intense interpenetration of self and world. So, my invited reader, let us begin our selective journey through various epochs of writing identity, and through decades of research into identity-formation in American writing.

Works cited

Aparicio, Frances, and Susana Chávez-Silverman, ed. *Tropicalizations. Transcultural Representations of Latinidad*. Hanover: University Press of New England, 1997.

Banerjee, Mita, Carmen Birkle, Bärbel Höttges, Manfred Siebald, and Nicole Waller. *Living American Studies*. Heidelberg: Winter, 2011.
Bauman, Zygmunt. *Liquid Modernity*. Cambridge: Polite Press, 2000.
Boldrini, Lucia, and Julia Novak. *Experiments in Life-Writing. Intersections of Auto/Biography and Fiction.* Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017.
Brown, Lisa R. "Caribbean Life-Writing and Performative Liberation: Beyond the Boundaries." In *The Routledge Companion to Anglophone Caribbean Literature*, ed. Michael A. Bucknor and Alison Donnell, 276–84. London: Routledge, 2011.
Brydon, Diana, and Marta Dvorák, eds. *Crosstalk. Canadian and Global Imaginaries in Dialogue*. Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2012.
Calhoun, Graig, ed. *Social Theory and the Politics of Identity*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1994.
Cardell, Kylie. *Dear World: Contemporary Uses of the Diary*. Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 2014.
Castells, Manuel. *The Power of Identity*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1997.
Chansky, Ricia Anne, ed. *Auto/Biography across the Americas. Transnational Themes in Life Writing.* New York: Routledge, 2017.
Couser, G. Thomas. *Altered Egos. Authority in American Autobiography*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989.
———. *Memoir. An Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.
———. *The Work of Life Writing: Essays and Lectures.* London: Routledge, 2021.
D'Amore, Jonathan. *American Authorship and Autobiographical Narrative.* Mailer, Wideman, Eggers. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012.
Danielewicz, Jane. *Contemporary American Memoirs in Action. How to Do Things with Memoir.* Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018.
Davis, Rocío G., ed. *The Transnationalism of American Culture. Literature, Film, and Music.* New York: Routledge, 2013.
Dewey, John. "The Live Creature." In *The Philosophy of John Dewey,* ed. John J. McDermott, 525–40. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981.
Dix, Hywel. *Autofiction and Cultural Memory,* London: Routledge, 2018.
Dobson, Kit. *Transnational Canadas: Anglo-Canadian Literature and Globalization*. Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2009.

Douglas, Kate, and Anna Poletti. *Life Narratives and Youth Culture. Representation, Agency and Participation.* London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.

Eakin, Paul John. *Fictions in Autobiography*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985.

———, ed. *American Autobiography. Retrospect and Prospect*. Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1991.

———. *How Our Lives Become Stories: Making Selves*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999.

———. *Living Autobiographically*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008.

Effe, Alexandra, and Hannie Lawlor. *The Autofictional: Approaches Affordances, Forms.* London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022.

Egan, Susanna, and Gabriele Helms. "Life Writing." In *The Cambridge Companion to Canadian Literature*, ed. Eva-Marie Kröller, 216–40. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011.

Fisher Fishkin, Shelley. "Crossroads of Cultures: The Transnational Turn in American Studies: Presidential Address to the American Studies Association, November 12, 2004." *American Quarterly* 57.1 (March 2005): 17–57.

Fluck, Winfried, Donald E. Pease, and John Carlos Rowe, eds. *Re-Framing the Transnational Turn in American Studies.* Hanover: Dartmouth College Press, 2011.

Fludernik, Monika. *Towards a 'Natural' Narratology*. London: Routledge, 1966.

Gilmore, Leigh. *The Limits of Autobiography. Trauma and Testimony*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001.

Glaveanu, Vlad Petre. "Perspectival Collectives Futures: Creativity and Imagination in Society." In *Imagining Collective Futures: Perspectives from Social, Cultural and Political Psychology*, ed. Constance de Saint-Laurent, Sandra Obradovic, and Kevin Carriere, 83–106. Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillian, 2018.

Glaveanu, Vlad Petre et al. "Advancing Creativity Theory and Research: A Socio-Cultural Manifesto." *The Journal of Creative Behavior* 54.3 (September 2020): 741–45.

George, Rosemary Marangoly. *The Politics of Home: Postcolonial Relocations and Twentieth-Century Fiction*. Berkeley: University of California Press. 1996.

Graham, Maryemma, and Mercedes Lucero. "Life Writing." In *The Routledge Handbook to the Culture and Media of the Americas*, ed. Wilfried Raussert, Giselle Liza Anatol, Sebastian Thies, Sarah Corona Berkin, and José Carlos Lozano, 121–35. London: Routledge, 2020.

Gudmundsdottir, Gunnthorunn. *Representations of Forgetting in Life Writing and Fiction*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017.

Hart, Kathleen. *Revolution and Women's Autobiography in Nineteenth-Century France.* Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2004.

Hebel, Udo, ed. *Transnational American Studies.* Heidelberg: Winter, 2012.

Hornung, Alfred, ed. *Intercultural America*. Heidelberg: Winter, 2007.

———. "Transcultural Life-Writing." In *The Cambridge History of Canadian Literature*, ed. Coral Ann Howells and Eva-Marie Kroeller, 536–55. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009a.

———. *Autobiography and Mediation*. Heidelberg: Winter, 2009b.

———, ed. *American Lives*. Heidelberg: Winter, 2013a.

———. "American Lives: Preface." In *American Lives*, ed. Alfred Hornung, ix–xvii. Heidelberg: Winter, 2013b.

Jones, Elizabeth H. *Spaces of Belonging: Home, Culture, and Identity in 20th Century French Autobiography.* Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007.

Kadar, Marlene, Susanna Egan, Linda Warley, and Jeanne Perreault. *Tracing the Autobiographical*. Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2005.

Kaltmeier, Olaf, and Wilfried Raussert, eds. "Introduction." In *Sonic Politics: Music and Social Movements in the Americas*, 1–18. New York: Routledge, 2019.

Kamboureli, Smaro, and Roy Miki. *Trans.Can.Lit. Resituating the Study of Canadian Literature*. Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2007.

Kleinreesink, Esmeralda. *On Military Memoirs. A Quantitative Comparison of International Afghanistan War Autobiographies, 2001–2010.* Leiden: Brill, 2017.

Latour, Bruno. *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2005.

Lenz, Günter H. "Redefinitions of Citizenship and Revisions of Cosmopolitanism – Challenges of Transnational Perspectives." *Symposium: Redefinitions of Citizenship and Revisions of Cosmopolitanism – Transnational Perspectives*, ed. Günter H. Lenz, Rob Kroes, Rüdiger

Kunow, Alfred Hornung, and William Boelhower. *Journal of Transnational American Studies* 3.1 (2011a) : 4–17.

———."Toward a Politics of American Transcultural Studies: Discourses of Diaspora and Cosmopolitanism." In *Re-Framing the Transnational Turn in American Studies*, ed. Winfried Fluck, Donald Pease, and John Carlos Rowe, 391–425. Hanover: Dartmouth College Press, 2011b.

Levander, Caroline F., and Robert S. Levine. "Essays Beyond the Nation." In *Hemispheric American Studies*, ed. Caroline F. Levander and Robert S. Levine, 1–17. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2008.

Maguire, Emma. *Girls, Autobiography, Media Gender and Self-Mediation in Digital Economies.* London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018.

McLennan, Rachel. *American Autobiography*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013.

Novak, Julia, and Caitríona Ní Dhúill. *Imagining Gender in Biographical Fiction*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan. 2022.

Novak, Julia. "Experiments in Life-Writing: Introduction." In *Experiments in Life Writing: Intersections of Auto/Biography and Fiction*, ed. Lucia Boldrini and Julia Novak, 1–36. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017.

Nünning, Ansgar. "Fiktionalität, Faktizität, Metafiktion." In *Handbuch Biografie. Methoden, Traditionen,* Theorien, ed. Christian Klein, 29–35. 2nd ed. Berlin: J.B. Metzler, 2022.

Olney, James. *Autobiography. Essays Theoretical and Critical*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980.

Ortiz-Vilarelle, Lisa. *Américanas, Autocracy, and Autobiographical Innovation. Overwriting the Dictator.* New York and Oxon: Routledge, 2021.

Poletti, Anna. *Stories of the Self. Life Writing after the Book.* New York: New York University Press, 2020.

Rak, Julie. *Boom! Manufacturing Memoir for the Popular Market*. Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2013.

Raussert, Wilfried. "Mobilizing 'America/América': Toward Entangled Americas and a Blueprint for Inter-American 'Area Studies.'" *fiar. forum for inter-american research* 7.3 (2014): 59–97.

———, and Reinhard Isensee. *Transcultural Visions of Identities in Images and Texts*. Heidelberg: Winter, 2008.

Raussert, Wilfried, and Susana Rocha Teixeira, eds. *Life Writing, Creativity, and the Social in the Americas.* Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, 2025.

Raussert, Wilfried, and Sarah L Essifi, eds. *Narrating, Framing, Reflecting Disability. 21st Century American Perspectives*. Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, 2024.

Sayre, Robert F. "Autobiography and the Making of America." *The Iowa Review* 9.2 (Spring 1978): 1–19.

Smith, Sidonie, and Julia Watson. *De/Colonizing the Subject: The Politics of Gender in Women's Autobiography.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992.

———. *Getting a Life: Everyday Uses of Autobiography*. Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 2001.

———. *Before They Could Vote. American Womens Autobiographical Writing, 1819–1919.* Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2006.

———. *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives.* Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 2010.

Stitt, Jocelyn Fenton. "Postcolonial Life-Writing." In *The Bloomsbury Introduction to Postcolonial Writing: New Contexts, New Narratives, New Debates*, ed. Jenni Ramone, 177–91. London: Bloomsbury, 2017.

Thies, Sebastian, and Josef Raab, eds. *E Pluribus Unum? National and Transnational Identities in the Americas. Identidades nacionales y transnacionales en las Américas.* Berlín: LIT, 2009.

Wagner-Egelhaaf, Martina, ed. "Introduction Autobiography/ Autofiction Across Disciplines." In *Handbook of Autobiography/ Autofiction*, 1–7. Berlin and Boston: de Gruyter, 2018.

Chapter 1
From Colonial Writing to Modernist and Contemporary Text: 'An Aesthetics of the Cool' or the Performativity of Identities in Life Writings by Olaudah Equiano, Zora Neale Hurston, and James Baldwin

Regardless of whether the text is colonial, modernist, or more contemporary, it is striking that the textual representation or construction of identity in American writing is strongly influenced by elements of performativity (Fischer-Lichte 2004; Butler 1999). Performativity proves to be a cross-epochal phenomenon that unfolds in a specific and variable manner in each historical context. Of course, an author's individual writing style also shapes how identity and performativity are linked in relation to aspects such as memory, body, age, race, ethnicity, gender, material culture, and their intersectional overlaps. In this first chapter, I illustrate the performative dimension of textually produced selves using three examples of Afro-Caribbean and African American life writing from different historical epochs, whereby I am also concerned with highlighting common impulses of self-expression and identity in the texts, in addition to historical specifics.

Performativity and textual production are closely linked. Although there is a direct connection to "performance" in the field of art, the term performativity is best explained in its current usage by looking at its linguistic history: in linguistics, Noam Chomsky (1965) introduced the distinction between competence and performance. The former refers to linguistic knowledge, while the latter refers to how

and what someone actually says – in other words, the realization of the "knowledge system" of language by speakers. In his book *How to Do Things with Words* (1961), John L. Austin added another important level to this reflection on language and speech. Not only does "language" that describes the world exist exclusively in the performance of the speaker, but certain forms of linguistic expression change conditions in the social world. Austin's theory of speech acts has been further developed in various ways in philosophy and cultural studies. Jacques Derrida (2016), among others, added the important layer that performative speech acts only work because they cite a convention, i.e., they are repetitions. According to performativity theory, social reality is thus constructed linguistically. The meaning and significance of social practices are negotiated communicatively. Judith Butler (1999) made performativity significant for gender studies by emphasizing its importance in text. Of course, the application of performativity differs from discipline to discipline. Therefore, I would like to emphasize that here I will be treating performativity as a textual expression of attitude, conviction, stance, and agency, and as an active textual positioning of self in the social world.

Beyond simply testifying to the authorship and humanity of the black subject, Equiano's *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African* (2001 [1794]), Zora Neale Hurston's "How It Feels to Be Colored Me" (2020 [1928]) and James Baldwin's "Stranger in the Village" (1953) express unique personal life experiences. Clearly, context and experience differ in Equiano's, Hurston's, and Baldwin's cases. Equiano wrote in the context of the transatlantic abolitionist struggle, Hurston spun her narrative during the heydays of the New Negro movement that propelled black pride in 1920s Harlem, and Baldwin wrote in his self-chosen exile in Europe after World War II. What they share are hemispheric experiences of

the black condition. Equiano, as traveler and 'travelee,' became acquainted with the African, Caribbean, and North American cultural context. Hurston, as anthropologist and folklorist, got exposed to the American South and North, as well as Jamaica and Haiti, where she investigated the remnants of African and Voodoo cultures in the Caribbean. She published her results in *Tell My Horse: Voodoo and Life in Haiti and Jamaica* (1938). Baldwin got exposed to French and Swiss cultures in Europe and used the European platform as a starting point for reflections on historical triangular relationships between Africa, America, and Europe.

Looking at the autobiographical writings of Equiano, Hurston, and Baldwin, this essay begins from the hypothesis that life writing represents an ideal textual space where experience and creativity meet and shape one another. Life writing, as I argue, provides an opportunity to authenticate not just an expression of self but of the experience of self in relation *and* context. With a nod to Mita Banerjee, I view the above texts as centering on "the notion of lived experience" (2018, 359). While experience is frequently dismissed as too abstract a category in poststructuralist thinking, which champions the discourses of cultural construction and representation, I consider individual experience, particularly of black selves, as fundamental for coming to terms with the creation of self in life writing texts.

Let us assume that the generally expected collective narrative about black cultures in the Americas would embark from questions like "What could be harder than creating a sense of self when you were not even master of your own body, 'when even the body was not legally one's own"' (Alexander 2019, 190)? Enslaved, expropriated, dispossessed, and exploited, black people were responsible for their survival, endurance, and liberation; for cultural and social creativity against all odds; for social resistance; and for establishing an aesthetic

vanguard in situations of control, surveillance, and oppression (Butler and Athanasiou 2013).

The above collective narrative clearly expresses a quintessential colonial experience. However, it frequently ignores the significance of lived black experience. As I argue, Equiano's, Hurston's, and Baldwin's texts literally give life to individual experience. Not only do they manifest black authorship, but they also narrate from a perspective of black agency and individualized black subjectivity. They may be puzzling to the reader precisely because they also cherish the author's own creative potential of relating the self to agency in the context of community, migration, exile, and encounter with the other. As their writings move between and beyond fact and fiction, Equiano, Hurston, and Baldwin provide visions of black subjectivity beyond mere representation.

What is more, their agendas as autobiographical authors go beyond reproducing a colonial collective narrative of black oppression and exclusion. While that narrative hovers in the background of their texts, especially in Equiano's and Baldwin's, these writers discover in life writing the creative use of performativity as a means of narrating black experience differently. Looking at black history through the eyes of a reflective, playful, performative life-writing self, they spin narratives of individual experience adding different perspectives and "alternative knowledge" to the discourse of black experience as they further expand the spectrum of black social relations (Banerjee 2018, 324). They do so by effectively bringing together Western and African traditions of thinking and writing, thus creating transcultural expressions of lived experience.

As the autobiographical writings by Equiano, Hurston, and Baldwin show, we need to be aware that, despite shared colonial experiences, black cultures and the narratives about them differ. Whether the black

population occupies a minority or majority status within national boundaries characterizes, for instance, significant differences between African Americans and Africans. Comparing African American and Black British communities, Marie Hélène Laforest emphasizes that "within the black diaspora, despite claims to global brotherhood and sisterhood – not that solidarity between blacks conceptually exclude diversity – there is a constellation of blackness, different ways of being black. This was as true in the past as it is today" (1996, 115). In particular, she points out historical differences between the United States and England that have rendered different shades of consciousness among their black populations.

Equiano, Hurston, and Baldwin migrate and write in different cultural, economic, and historical contexts. We may speculate at this point that the creation of self and identity in Equiano's text is different from its counterpart in Hurston's and Baldwin's essays, partly due to individual and historical differences, partly due to the fact that different conditions call forth the performance of empowered black subjectivity. How Equiano's, Hurston's, and Baldwin's performances of mobile and empowered black selves differ and how they overlap can be determined only after analyzing performativity and transformation in the texts themselves. Reading the selected life writing texts in their transcultural dimension, I maintain that the African concept of 'thinking and acting cool' shapes the expression of poly-local lived experience by all three writers. While critical readings of Equiano's, Hurston's, and Baldwin's writings tend to emphasize elements of fluidity and hybridity in the context of Western autobiography, transatlantic relations, and African American cultures, they downplay traditionally African modes of philosophy and creative action.