Thing, or Not a Thing?

Reading for the *Autosocial* in Life Narrative

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For a quarter century, since we first introduced the concept of autobiographical acts and practices, we have turned from using 'autobiography' as the term of reference to framing the field as life writing when referring only to written texts, and life narrative when it extends to the visual, digital, or performance arts. In so doing, we have argued that autobiography is only one of the many autobiographical genres that we define and explore. These genres emerge, mutate, or disappear as the discursive practices, routes of circulation, and tastes, desires, and politics of reading publics shift. Because of the heterogeneity of autobiographical acts and practices, historically and geographically, we have found it important to track the multiplicity of 'I'-formations that constellate in different geographical locations and circulate through varied modes and media. We have observed that the 'I' is sometimes presented as a collective 'we', a 'you', a third-person 'they', or a transpersonal 'one'. That is, far from being the solitary individual posited by Descartes, an autobiographical subject is inescapably embedded, at least imaginatively, in social contexts.

Over the years, we have marvelled at how some readers and theorists have coined terms for new genres by riffing on the syllables in the word 'autobiography'. These coinages include, among others: alterbiography, autie-biography, autoethnography, autofiction, autographics, autohagiography, autopathography, autosomatography, autothanatography, autotheory, autotopography, autrebiography, biomythography, ecobiography, erratography, gastrography, heterobiography, jockography, otography, periautography, and prosopography (see Smith/Watson 2024: 209–11). We welcome this innovative thinking among critics of autobiographical acts and practices as they read through nuanced lenses and engage with the continuous change of our dynamic field.

This volume proposes yet another concept, *autosociobiography*, a term that has recently gained currency in Europe as a new 'thing' or formation in life writ-

ing. But *is* it a new 'thing'? Should we instead read the corpus of texts proposed for *autosociobiography* as a strand of academic memoir, or an example of what is now called *autotheory*? Might we more productively understand this emphasis on social dimensions through a reading practice that casts it as *autosocial*, emphasising the social dimension that informs all life writing? In what follows, we lay out the contours of what comprises an *autosocial* reading and apply it to a heterogeneous corpus of texts, both older and contemporary.

First, however, let us describe our approach to life narrative in its complexity. 'Autobiography' is a term commonly used to designate works that inscribe the personal narrative of the author; a literal synonym is *self-written biography*, though recently *memoir* is often the term used. We note that 'autobiography' is used primarily when referring to the Western tradition of retrospective self-narrative, one that was not widely practiced until Rousseau's *Confessions* were published in the late 18th century. Indeed, the term 'autobiography' first emerged in English at the end of that century (Folkenflik: 5). Yet, there are many works of self-narration before Rousseau's, such as the late-fifth-century *Confessions* of Augustine, the meditations of medieval mystics, the self-focused texts of some Renaissance Humanists, and explorers' narratives of conquest and colonisation in Africa and the Americas.[1] These antecedent modes of writing are specific to their historical moments and geographical locations, their social uses, and their narrative trajectories. They suggest that practices of self-life-writing adapted many existing generic forms such as confession, meditation, poetic self-exploration, and travel narrative. Now, many more kinds of autobiographically inflected works circulate, including trauma and testimonial narratives, graphic memoirs, and interactive online storytelling, some incorporating the diverse media of photography and performance art or incorporating technologies from film, video, or digital platforms.

As narrators selectively engage with their lived experience in composing narratives that construct or probe complex social identities through personal storytelling, they engage in historically situated practices of self-representation. It is helpful *not* to gather this diversity of works under the umbrella term 'autobiography', but to regard that term as shorthand for a canon of retrospective self-narratives long prized in the West. Rather, as noted above, in contemporary autobiography studies scholars now have widely adopted the umbrella

1 See the discussion by Christian Moser (2019) of autoethnographic elements in such life narratives.

term 'life narrative' to refer to myriad genres around the world that display aspects of autobiographical acts and practices.

That is, life narrators engage in boundary-crossing practices as they incorporate their personal archives and processes of remembering and seek to address the expectations of disparate readerships. In representing family, friends, or historical and religious figures, some life narrators may perform relational acts by incorporating micro-biographies of these others. They may also project the multiple histories in which their stories are embedded – of communities, nations, social or political movements. They may strategically adopt various fictional conventions to shape the narrated I's experiences into stories capturing the narrating I's reflections. In all these practices, autobiographical texts 'touch' the referential world, in Paul John Eakin's phrase: that is, they maintain a relationship to the referential world in its socio-historical contingency. Paradoxically, then, self-life-writing is, as we have observed, not a Procrustean bed but 'a rumpled bed' with ever-changing variations and heterogeneous norms (Smith/Watson 2001: 1).

Part One: Troubling the Concept of *Autosociobiography* – Three Issues

Keeping these observations in mind, we engage several theoretical issues concerning the coinage *autosociobiography*: the status of the autobiographical 'I', the status of the sociological, and the status of valuation. We do so to illuminate how the conceptualisation of *autosociobiography* by its proponents raises questions of expertise, authority, and literariness.

How is the 'I' of *Autosociobiography* Conceptualised?

In *Reading Autobiography Now*, we observe that "life narratives, through the memories they construct, are records of acts of interpretation by subjects inescapably in historical time and in relation to their own ever-moving pasts" (Smith/Watson 2024: 49). Thus, every autobiographical 'I' is complex in that it is comprised of an assemblage of autobiographical acts and practices. Among these are: the flesh-and-blood author (unavailable to readers); the narrating 'I' as the agent of storytelling; the narrated 'I' as the past version of the protagonist made available to the reader by the narrating 'I'; and the ideological 'I'. As noted in *Reading Autobiography Now*, the ideological 'I' as a historical and

cultural phenomenon is "at once everywhere and nowhere in autobiographical acts, in the sense that the notion of personhood and the ideologies of identity that constitute it are so internalised (personally and culturally) that they seem 'natural' and 'universal' characteristics of persons" (2024: 116). Given this complexity, the autobiographical 'I' is not stable, but may shift its referent or speaking position.

Further, autobiographical acts are dynamically *performative*. That is, a single identity is not a fixed or essential attribute of an autobiographical subject. Rather, identities are enacted and reiterated through cultural norms and discourses; as such, they remain provisional and unstable. Subjects are performative, situated at particular axes through the social relations of differential power; they are subjects of *positionality*. As such, they inhabit, negotiate, reproduce, and/or contest one or more discursive locations. Effectively, subjects are *both* located and unstable, spatially and psychologically.

This performative subject is also enmeshed in *relationality*, the mutual imbrication of self and others that renders the boundaries of self-definition permeable. This relationality structures how a narrating 'I', as a subject, is always in process and within networks of affiliation in the social world. Thus, the 'I' is never autonomous, even when claiming to be, but always 'socialised'. Importantly, autobiographical texts are also embedded in the cultures and materials of writing that involve phenomena beyond the frame of a single subject and a single text as fixed points of reference. Intrinsically, then, the subject is inscribed within social networks.

How does this understanding of the autobiographical 'I' correspond to the subject of *autosociobiography* discussed in some recent scholarship? As the editors' introduction suggests, a tendency is evident in essays by scholars such as Eva Blome (2020) and Philipp Lammers and Marcus Twellman (2021) to narrowly frame the small corpus of texts designated as *autosociobiography*. They tend to be sophisticated explorations of the narrator's working-class origins in European nations by trained academics (usually sociologists) who offer sustained structural analyses of identity formation, alienation, and social trauma.

This framing of the narrating 'I' yields an 'I'-dynamic that is defined as distinctive of *autosociobiography* as a new formation. The referential 'I' (or flesh-and-blood author) composing the text is a sociologist or similarly-trained person with expertise in the structural analysis of social systems. The narrating 'I' ('I-now') is that expert's persona and is focused on the intersection of sociological theory and intimate life storytelling. She, he, or they performs that expertise in narrating an experiential history of origins and transformation to

a position of academic authority. The narrated 'I' ('I-then') whose story is being told is the earlier child, adolescent, or adult originally interpellated in a working-class social identity and struggling with social alienation and trauma. The narrating 'I' tries to remember and embody the feltness of lived experience of this younger version of the self, and to trace the impact and affect of disentangling the narrating subject from this earlier self-identification and its *transclasse* anxiety. Further, the narrating 'I' chronicles how the narrated 'I''s experiential training in class relations enabled a journey from membership in the working class to status as a professional expert capable of analysing the intimate everyday effects and dynamics of social relations. In effect, the credentialed status of the author (referential 'I') secures the authority of the narrating 'I'; and the insertion of 'socio' between 'auto' and 'biography' designates the ground of that expertise as the personalisation of social theory.

For us, this framing is too narrow a ground upon which to adequately theorise a new generic and cultural formation and to specify a form of sociality and relationality distinct from the intrinsically relational construction of most life writing. The initial corpus of texts designated as *autosociobiography* remains slim and its geographical range limited because so few life narratives qualify for inclusion in the category. We applaud the impetus to extend the collection of features indispensable to such a designation. But can this be done without losing the distinct contours of the proposed genre? The editors seek to extend the corpus of *autosociobiography* to life narratives by non-sociologists such as those of French writer Annie Ernaux and American Tara Westover. While this is a promising invitation encouraging scholars to engage with a wider range of texts, both established literary life narratives and more diverse, automedial acts and practices such as graphic memoirs, performance art, disability narratives, refugee narratives, and trauma narratives, as well as texts from diverse and transnational global locations, this question will need to be confronted.

What is the Status of the Social and the Sociological in Texts Labelled *Autosociobiography?*

It strikes us as problematic to focus on the figure of the expert narrator as one who displays deep knowledge of sociological theories and methods, and directs targeted attention to the sociological milieu, the systematic analysis of social relations, and the institutions through which they are lived out. The editors of this volume insightfully expand this category to include life writers who may be or become public intellectuals hailed for disciplined social analyses. But we

note that many life narrators who recount their lived experience as embedded in social relations or class identity have been non-credentialed writers. Thus, we understand the narrating 'I"s relationship to the socius in life narrative in broad terms; that is, as a condition of all social relations and of subjectivity itself. It is not a feature of only one mode of life writing, but an essential aspect of all autobiographical acts and practices.

For, neither the referential nor the narrating 'I' need be a trained social scientist in order to link structural analysis of social identity formation and deformation to narration of the lived experience of trauma, disavowal, and alienation. Self-reflexive 'I's who narrate their informal education in the dynamics of structural inequality and social alienation from familial and communal origins may serve as social analysts 'from below'; that is, such life narrators expand the criteria for expertise beyond academic credentials and professionally conferred authority. For example, many graphic cartoonists now focus their storytelling and imaging on class formation and subjective alienation.

Further, the subtleties of class formation and *transclasse* mobility rely on the historical moment and geographical location of the social analyst. Social relations are, of course, implicated in class stratification; but the dynamics of stratification differ among social systems around the globe. The scale of relationality also depends on several factors that shift with location and historical moment: the family, clan, or tribal system; the local, regional, national, or transnational structural system; and the norms of the settler-colonial, postcolonial, or emerging democratic or authoritarian nation-state.

Finally, while analysis of social class involves investigating social stratification as it is refracted through identity formation, social relations, and institutional contexts and dynamics, subjects are multiply positioned – and differently positioned – throughout their lives. Their identities are not fixed, but become multiple in ways that are not additive; one identity cannot just be added to another to specify the position from which someone speaks. Rather, various vectors of identity interpenetrate; they are intersectional, as Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) and many subsequent commentators have explored (see Crenshaw 2017).

The serial life writing of Ayaan Hirsi Ali exemplifies the complexity of identity as both intersectional and shifting. An émigré from Somalia and subsequently other African nations, Hirsi Ali, raised as Muslim, was a child victim of genital mutilation who escaped an arranged marriage by relocating to the Netherlands. *Infidel: My Life*, her eloquent 2006 coming-of-age memoir, narrates how, after being targeted by a Muslim fanatic in Amsterdam, she became

an activist and member of Parliament, critiquing many aspects of Islam. She later relocated to the United States, where she served as a media commentator sharply critiquing what she calls 'radical Islam'. Hirsi Ali is internationally controversial both because of her activism and her ongoing exploration of the socio-political aspects of religion, reflected in her dramatic self-characterisation as an "atheist" in her second memoir *Heretic: Why Islam Needs a Reformation Now* (2015). In late 2023, she made a further conversion to Christianity (see Hirsi Ali, 2016). Her ongoing shifts of position may reflect both her process of changing identities and what William Grimes called her position as an alienated "permanent outsider" (Grimes 2007).

Identity itself is a concept for which conventional rubrics no longer apply. Recent theorists increasingly regard identities as effects of "encounters" rather than as "attributes" or ontological phenomena (see Smith/Watson 2024, 64–75). In this view, identities unfold within a constellation of agencies – human, technological, phenomenal, material, expressive, and linguistic. Identity formation, then, draws on the concept of assemblages to recentre the human being not solely as an agency-bearing subject intent on inscribing an identity. Instead, identities shift as they become imaginable, coalesce, find a medium of communication, travel along publication and reception circuits, and are taken up through diverse technologies by various audiences.

We also note that this engagement with aspects of identity formation and reformation in the contemporary social world may be presented through multiple media and embedded in divergent genres of life narrative. Consider some recent German texts with an explicitly social orientation. The graphic memoir *Sonne und Beton* [Sunlight and concrete] (2021) by Felix Lobrecht and the later film adaptation of the same name, present the alienated but astute perspectives of streetwise youth, who cannot simply be regarded as marginal, on the tensions of navigating Berlin's social contradictions. Nora Krug's *Heimat* (2018; *Belonging: A German Reckons with History and Home* 2018) graphically explores a family's conflicted memories of the Second World War that raise troubling questions.[2] In life writing, Carolin Würfel's collection *Drei Frauen träumten vom Sozialismus* [Three women dreamed of socialism] (2022) gathers essays by three eminent women writers who probe the contradictions of having lived in the German Democratic Republic. Slightly fictionalised

2 Krug's graphic memoir has been awarded several literary prizes, including, in translation, the American National Book Critics Circle Award for Autobiography in 2018, and awards in England, France, and Germany.

recent life narratives by well-known authors Marion Brasch, in *Ab jetzt ist Ruhe: Roman meiner fabelhaften Familie* [After this, silence; a novel about my fabulous family] (2012) and Jenny Erpenbeck in several narratives also probe social class and relations across both the earlier East and West Germanies. While literary historians may dismiss some of these memoirs as insufficiently literary, they are prized by reading publics. Although the mode of comics had been disparaged for decades, autographical comics by such artists as Art Spiegelman, Marjane Satrapi, and Alison Bechdel are now internationally regarded as 'literary' accomplishments. Other examples of socially conscious life narrative in Anglophone nations abound. Some embed a refugee's story of becoming 'American' in the narrated 'I"s experiences of being stigmatised as a refugee Other, as does GB Tran in *Vietnamerica: A Family's Journey* (2010). Clearly, the category of 'literariness', to which we turn next, is now acknowledged as a feature of socially-focused life narratives in various media.

What Are the Criteria for Identifying and Valuing Texts as *Autosociobiography*?

In the life narratives identified with the new genre of *autosociobiography*, where would claims to authority reside? We suggest they are located in three sites of evaluation: systematic structural analysis, intimate personal truths of classed identity, and literariness.

In the first instance, the authority of a text is attached to the density of its structural analysis and the explanatory power of a school of sociological inquiry. Its authority derives from its convincing performance of expertise and from the persuasive documentation of its claims. In the second instance, the authority of a text is conferred by a narrator's performance of particular social identities that are persuasive, compelling, and transformative enough to gain the recognition of readers at a given historical moment. In the case of *autosociobiography*, authority derives from two things: how the narrated 'I' embodies a sociologically defined identity – such as that of the alienated, the misfit, or the outsider who achieves professional status; and how compellingly the narrating 'I' attests to experiences of classed identity.

A third site of authority associated with *autosociobiography* is its degree of literariness. As the editors' introduction asserts, the inclusion of a narrative in the category of *autosociobiography* may depend on its being sufficiently 'literary'. That is, such narratives will be intellectually committed to understanding the sociology of the self and offer more powerful evocations of the past than do

popular memoirs. Such narratives are valued for the quality of their prose; their density of description, narrative plot, and self-characterisation; and their ability to evoke felt personal experience. In other words, these texts are valued for having 'novelistic' effects to a greater degree than do many popular kinds of life writing. Their 'authenticity' emanates from presenting a credible and consistent voice, displaying narrative tropes, and asserting both convincing subject positions and a persuasive mode of rhetorical address.

Advocates of *autosociobiography* as a new genre implicitly set out a distinction between what they define as 'autobiography' and the privileged category of *autosociobiography*. But this argument depends, as we have seen, on a reductive definition of life writing as only 'autobiography' – rather than the dozens of genres discussed above – and implies a 'high-low' notion of degrees of literariness. It is reminiscent of Serge Doubrovsky's argument positing autofiction as a more supple and metacritical form than 'autobiography', as he limits 'autobiography' to a static and monological form of self-narration (see Smith/Watson 2024, 29–31). But it seems unproductive to situate *autosociobiography* in such a binary model in order to establish an exemplary canon of texts.

Importantly, literary canons are not transhistorical and universal verities, but provisional and dynamic lists that shift with the times and the tastes of readerships, and may be differently valued outside academia than within it. Indeed, autobiographical narrative, long considered 'sub-literary' by academic arbiters, is now studied across disciplines as diverse as education, communications, sociology, and the fine arts, as well as in many literature departments.

Part Two: Reading for the *Autosocial*

In thinking through these issues of status, we have raised questions related to defining a corpus or canon of *autosociobiography* as a separate genre. Scholars seeking to validate *autosociobiography* in those terms may, however, wish to undertake projects concerning the particulars of historical moments, transnational formations, and the intersectionality of *transclasse* dynamics. They might establish a genealogy by searching for 'precursors' around the world that historicise an interactive relationship between the individual and the social world inhabited. They might extend geographical and transnational frameworks by examining the complexities of social stratification in sites of colonisation, as well as decolonised nations where multiple formations of domination and oppression persist. Scholars might also attend to indigenous communities in set-

tler-colonial contexts of the Americas, Australia and New Zealand, the Middle East, and South Asia. The search could consider several further issues: how to expand the corpus of *autosociobiography* through investigations that allow for more heterogeneous texts; how to widen the notion of what constitutes expertise and who can lay claim to it; how to complicate the concept of social class as an analytic by foregrounding intersectionality; and how to trouble the implicit binary of literary and 'less-than-literary' narratives. These are substantial but exciting prospects.

The project we propose is of another kind. The term *autosociobiography*, as used in critical and theoretical discussions so far, applies to a small corpus of texts drawn predominantly from late-twentieth- and twenty-first-century European texts. We seek to broaden the generic diversity and the transnational contexts and practices of life narration by exploring autobiographical narratives from around the world that do not conform to the narrow definition of *autosociobiography*. To do so, we will read for the *autosocial* aspects of life narratives that emphasise heterogeneous aspects of identity and class position, while illuminating the relationship of the autobiographical to the social through structural analyses. Several of the life writers we will take up have achieved professional status, but that is not universally the case.

Our point, in taking this wider historical and geographic perspective, is that the *autosocial* does not emerge as a 'thing' or new formation; rather, it is an aspect of autobiographical texts discoverable in the process or practice of close reading with an eye to the social relations and positionings life narratives present. In our view, developing this nuanced reading practice productively shifts us away from reliance on hypostatised definitions and norms towards a more fruitful engagement with particular issues. It is an exercise in reading for particular features that our "A Toolkit of Strategies" recommends, with its sets of questions clustered around thirty key issues for readers (Smith/Watson, 2024, 169–92).

Here, we briefly examine four kinds of life writing that emphasise diverse social contexts, coming-of-age dynamics, and class and racial politics through a contemporary *autosocial* lens. We regard this as an exploration in placing particular cases of life writing in a more supple framework that is both historical and transnational. These case studies suggest why reading for the *autosocial* may helpfully be regarded as a practice or method for illuminating the heterogeneous contexts of changing social relations.

The Self-Case-Studies of Trained Writer-Sociologists from the Working-Class – Steedman and Emecheta

Consider the examples of two writer-sociologists whose self-case-studies were both published in England in 1986. In these texts, intersectional differences of gendered and racial identity inflect how the narrators' social positions are contextualised, as each gradually transitions from her working-class origins to professional status and, indeed, international fame.

British feminist social scientist and writer Carolyn Kay Steedman's *Landscape for a Good Woman* (1986) is an acclaimed life narrative of a mother-daughter relationship that probes the cultural meanings attached to membership in a family of working-class women in Britain in the 1950s, a time when those meanings were overwritten by White-male sociological accounts of the class values and norms that marginalised them. Similarly, Nigerian-British writer Buchi Emecheta's second life narrative, *Head above Water* (1986), charts her rise, after migration to London, from what her first memoir – *In the Ditch* (1972) – characterised as immigrant life to status as a credentialed social worker and accomplished writer. While Steedman's narrative focuses on her working-class identity in northern England, Emecheta's narrative emphasises her experience of the effects of British colonialism, in racialising Africans and other people of colour, that she confronted in making her way to professional status.

Landscape for a Good Woman's relational life narrative focuses on Steedman's story of her mother, the 'good woman' of the title. As a working-class woman with frustrated middle-class aspirations, her mother lived at a protofeminist moment rarely taken into account by British historians of social class of the time, such as E.P. Thompson in *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963). Steedman combines her mother's story with a brief biography of her father, who abandoned his family early on. She joins this case study of the Lancaster working class to the narrative of her own education and rise as a professor and writer who achieved the recognition that eluded her mother. By taking her own family as a case history, she refutes earlier claims of social historians about the 'naturally' subordinate place of women and children in rural class structures.

Steedman's materialist focus on gendered social relations expands the concept of a universalised 'patriarchy' by examining the social positions of men within British patriarchy. She characterises her father not as an uncontested and powerful figure at the centre of socioeconomic, political, and cultural regimes; rather, he was, like her mother, an outlier. Asserting that, in a culture's ideology, "class and gender, and their articulations, are the bits

and pieces from which psychological selfhood is made" (Steedman 1986: 7), Steedman locates herself and her mother problematically in relation to mid-twentieth-century London by reading their lives *against* the norms of British working-class autobiography.

Steedman's eloquent metanarrative about coming to historical consciousness of the meaning of class in Britain offers a tempting lens through which to read Emecheta's less self-consciously staged presentation in *Head above Water*, published the same year. But doing so would reproduce the colonial relationship that characterised British domination of what is now Nigeria and would ignore the differences of her representative West African woman's 'I' in relation to multiple collectivities. Emecheta contextualises London as a site where relationships of racially-based domination still play out, a perception that escapes Steedman despite her acuity about class politics. While the two writers' ethnic identities signal their different positionings, their cultural histories also need to be specified. For Steedman, English is literally the mother tongue, while for Emecheta it is, as she asserts in *Head above Water*, a language she writes in "that is not my first nor my second or third but my fourth" (Emecheta 1986: 2); and English is, of course, the colonial language of Nigeria.

Further, although both Steedman and Emecheta write as working-class autobiographers, and Steedman's announced focus is "lives lived on the borderlands" (5), the kinds and degree of their class privilege differ dramatically. Steedman, in 1986, was a childless White woman graduate of the University of Sussex. Emecheta was an African immigrant mother of five whose husband had abandoned the family while she was studying for her master's degree in sociology at the University of London, receiving welfare and working evenings in a factory. While Steedman can draw narrative authority from the tradition of British working-class women's autobiographies throughout the twentieth century (such as Kathleen Woodward's 1928 *Jipping Street*), in the absence of a tradition of women's autobiography in Anglophone African writing, Emecheta's sources are primarily oral stories and genealogies narrated by her mother and aunts.

Intriguingly, in *Head above Water*, Emecheta presents herself doubly: as both a caseworker and a 'case' of the immigrant welfare mother. Much of the narrative focuses on her pursuit of a master's degree and publication of her first book in the early seventies. But in detailing her life of struggle, she assumes the stance, vocabulary, and analytical methods of the caseworker to describe her social milieu and the obstacles her family faced. By adopting the address, rationale, and chronological structure of British life narrative,

Emecheta links her practical *Künstlerroman* to a critique of the welfare state's abandonment of immigrant teenagers. Her autobiographical engagement is thus double: in part, she addresses an audience needing how-to help in negotiating the social contradictions immigrants of colour, particularly children, confront in postcolonial Britain; in part, she addresses institutions and representatives of the dominant culture that preserve the status quo.

Thus, Emecheta asserts the experiential reality of her past self as a multiply-positioned African woman writer and her authority as a trained social analyst to translate her 'case' for a metropolitan audience. She thereby remakes traditional autobiography from a genre of introspection and interiorisation into a resonantly social genre that calls on readers to address material inequities between First-World and developing-world subjects. Her voice is implicitly collective in representing herself as a subject split between the objective methods of the caseworker, focused on the abject situation of African immigrants, and her own 'case' as an example of the need for collective decolonisation.

In positioning themselves as social case studies, both Steedman and Emecheta, despite their differences, reflect on how they are situated within, yet defined against, complex British codes of gendered citizenship and authorship. Both focus on the mid-century British working class and consciously employ materialist analyses of how class differentially positions women and children. As trained academics, both writers interweave the interpretive position of the social analyst with the experiential authority of a subject concerned to intervene in the cultural itineraries of women as mothers and daughters.

The Effects of Racialisation on Class Structure among Black American Writers – Coates and Jefferson

Many life narratives in the United States engage in complex intersectional analyses of how class differences are racialised. For example, African American writer Ta-Nehisi Coates's *Between the World and Me* (2015) is a relational, hybrid text composed as a set of three letters addressed to his teenage son. The letters narrate a searing account of his experience of being racialised in the US, with an emphasis on continuing police violence against Black bodies and the social failure to hold police accountable. Here, the use of the personal letter form invites readers to 'listen in' on intimate 'father-son talks' critical to the boy's knowledge of how best to stay alive as a young Black man, written 'conversations' that exemplify what Black Americans colloquially call 'The Talk' about how to survive while growing up Black.

In the letters, Coates crafts a kind of *Bildungsroman* by charting his own educational opportunities and accomplishments in his rise from urban working-class to middle-class status as he became a well-known writer and cultural spokesperson. His education and talent catapult him into a professional class and enable him to develop a sharp-edged structural analysis. Coates employs it to fiercely expose the failure of the American Dream of racial uplift, and its promise of escape from the nightmare of racism; rather, he insists on the precarity of Black male life, no matter what a man's class position is. Advising his son that education gives him the tools to interrogate the structural conditions of Black experience in the US, including the "visceral experience" (10) of racism and White supremacy, he observes: "The greatest reward of this constant interrogation, of confrontation with the brutality of my country, is that it has freed me from ghosts and girded me against the sheer terror of disembodiment" (12).

In *Between the World and Me*, Coates narrates how his experiences of encountering dead or mutilated Black bodies are the felt, embodied effects of White supremacy. For him, these persistent assaults partially erase differentiations of class. Shifting class positioning cannot ensure that Black fathers will succeed in keeping their children safe; nor can it prevent racial violence from erupting against Black male bodies. Indeed, for Black Americans, the education enabling that shift can intensify the force of violence exacted on their bodies.

While his searing critique confronts the entanglements of structural racism, Coates nonetheless salutes the struggles and fortitude of African Americans, observing that "They (white people) made us into a race. We made ourselves into a people" (Coates 2015: 149). He also recognises alternative kinds of education, especially for young Black males, in reflecting how the education he received from young men 'on the streets' brought him communal wisdom and survival skills from 'below'.

Pulitzer-Prize-winning cultural critic Margo Jefferson presents a different version of the effects of growing up Black in the US. Her memoir *Negroland*, also published in 2015, situates family history over generations within an American history of enslavement and inequity imposed during colonial transport to the United States. But while many African-American narratives focus on the personal and structural effects of struggling to move from the pre-Civil-War coding of enslaved Blacks as three-fifths human, without rights to property or literacy, to enfranchised citizenship, Jefferson's narrative has a different focus: she disrupts the dominant Black narrative that *race* and ethnicity inevitably disenfranchised African Americans. Instead, she traces a genealogical story of generations of an elite Black family in Chicago located

within the African-American leadership class that W.E.B. Du Bois, adopting the phrase from Henry Lyman Morehouse, termed "the Talented Tenth" (Du Bois, 2003 [1905]) whose children attend top American universities and thrive in professional positions as doctors, lawyers, and teachers. Importantly, Jefferson stresses that hers is not a narrative of exceptionalism, but one "where the Talented Tenth positioned themselves as the Third Race poised between the masses of Negros and all Caucasians" (2015: 51). Their motto is "Achievement, Invulnerability, Comportment" (book jacket blurb). *Negroland* includes many photographs – among others, of Margo as a cheerleading team co-captain in a predominantly White high school (152), of her two-parent family's cross-country trip, of her mother and aunt in furs – that offer visual evidence of the family's social prominence.

While Jefferson's narrative begins with an account of her childhood identity as both an upper-class Black woman and an Other to White people, it shifts as she becomes an adult. In narrating her years as a college student, she recounts encounters in the Seventies with the Black Power movement and the writings of James Baldwin, revolutionary critiques that compel her to rethink what it means to be a 'Negro' and with which collectivities she will identify. Baldwin's work challenges Jefferson to resist the implication of her social position that there is a binary between the "potent […] deviant Negro" of White fantasy and "the achievements of My Negroes." Rather, she affirms Baldwin's call for "constructing a complex, compound Negro 'We'" as a new social formation (Jefferson 2015: 142). That is, of course, a work in progress.

Clearly, the harsh effects of racialisation in the US imposed with enslavement that extend into this century inform both Coates's and Jefferson's self-presentations as accomplished writers and cultural spokespeople; but, though both write intersectional life narratives that complicate binaries about social class, their inborn social positionings lead them to interpret their experience differently.

Personal Mediation of Social Histories – Pamuk and O'Toole

Another mode of life writing that may be read for how it foregrounds social relationships is narratives linking the history and formation of a national identity to the narrator's personal and familial story. While some life narratives emphasise the personal story and others stress the national story, in these examples each version contextualises and informs the other.

Orhan Pamuk, the 2006 Nobel laureate in literature, is a renowned novelist and the author of the autobiographical *Istanbul: Memories and the City* (2005). In it, he presents the historical past of the city as a site of cultural and political encounter reflecting both the legacy and the imperialising domination of what is called 'Europe'. Pamuk constructs two social entities, self and city, that contextualise each other as he broods on the complex meanings of being an *Istanbullu* at this transnational moment. Published in 2003 and translated into several languages the following year, *Istanbul* is literally bifurcated by the Europe-Asia boundary of the Bosporus Strait, with Old Istanbul in the European part as the locus of its famous mosques and palaces. The narrative traces the city's history in the wake of a century of nationalism that saw the formation of Turkey as a nation-state and inscribed Istanbul within a web of discourses about how urban settings shape personal identity.

While Istanbul, lauded by Europeans as the Paris of the East, is a production of nineteenth-century European Orientalism, the legacy of Western discourses of the introspective individual, the Romantic artist, and the modern bourgeois city permeate the city as both an object of knowledge and, now, a world capital. But Pamuk contests this nationalist view by depicting the city as a *ruin*, invoking the collective memory of its destruction and the marginalisation of its citizens in Europe, including ongoing debates about its admission to the European Union. Istanbul is thus a paradoxical site, both a modern megacity and a palimpsest of European artistic and geopolitical relations to its imagined Asian Other. Pamuk's lengthy, elegiac text gathers memories assembled from a variety of archives, both personal and familial, in reflecting on how collective memory becomes an experiential source for generating social meanings.

With its reproductions of over a hundred black-and-white photographs and engravings interspersing old and current photos of Istanbul with ones of the author and his family members, as well as other renowned or obscure *Istanbullu*, Pamuk's text immerses readers in a vicarious experience of the city. In that sense, *Istanbul* serves as a memory museum of everyday life, with the narrator's ruminative voice reinvigorating the city as the social counterpart of his own coming of age. Pamuk's narration of his and his family's history through archived documents, stories, and photographs of the city's history is thus inescapably a relational story of how the self and the social are co-constructed. The 'Istanbul' he presents is not found in a tourist guidebook or a genealogical or military history. Instead, both the contours of personal memory and the realm of documented fact are reinscribed as an order of intersubjective truth

activated by acts of remembering in the media of writing, photography, and painting. Rather than foregrounding the individual in a conventional coming-of-age story, he focuses on his family's relationship to its shifting urban surround. In recasting memoir as a genre of epic scope, Pamuk, à la Walter Benjamin, immerses his own coming-of-age story in the vast, transpersonal history of his city as subject. Impressions and their 'factual' counterparts become inseparable in Pamuk's "double vision" – his term – by generating a relational world that he summarises in the book's design: "I have described Istanbul when describing myself, and described myself when describing Istanbul." (Pamuk 2005: 295)

In contrast, Republic of Ireland journalist Fintan O'Toole forms a new socio-historical subject in *We Don't Know Ourselves: A Personal History of Modern Ireland* (2021). His "Acknowledgements" state that he aims to personalise Irish history in the second half of the twentieth century by situating his own experience in a collective story of shared unknowingness. As his title signals, his 'I' becomes the collective 'we' of Irish citizen-subjects navigating the era of developing Irish modernity. His personal story, then, is only relevant in relation to a structural analysis of how mid-twentieth-century Irish modernity arose and how its "permanent state of contradiction" (O'Toole 2021: 33) constituted the horizon of possibility for the subject-formation of Irish citizens. Although O'Toole's narrative opens like a traditional retrospective life narrative with his birth in the 1950s, the narrator immediately locates it in the analysis of three historical events that took place during the week of his birth, and uses them as "portholes" (O'Toole 2021: 10) through which to see the three formations that shaped the subjectivity of twentieth-century Irish society: Irish nationalism, the Irish rural economy, and the Irish Catholic Church.

Subsequently, using the model of the autobiographical *Bildungsroman*, O'Toole's narrative focuses on the education of the narrated 'I'; but that education is of two kinds – formal and informal. He explores his own interpellation in the mid-century Irish educational system that sought to strike a blow against an earlier oppressive class system calcified in the history of colonialism: "Along with 60,000 other children born in Ireland in 1958", he observes, "I was to be the *tabula rasa* on which this great experiment would be conducted" (O'Toole 2021: 43). Even as the narrative acknowledges the new system of universal secondary education, O'Toole the journalist hones in on the social effects of the informal Irish system of knowledge circulation. The narrating 'I' situates the narrated 'I' of his childhood as an unknowing subject inhaling

a kind of informal education that was 'in the air' with the shifting everyday negotiations of Irish socio-political life. He observes that

> 'Ireland', as a notion, was almost suffocatingly coherent and fixed: Catholic, nationalist, rural. […] But Ireland as a lived experience was incoherent and unfixed. The first Ireland was bounded, protected, shielded from the unsavory influence of the outside world. The second was unbounded, shifting. […] In the space between these two Irelands, there was a haunted emptiness, a sense of something so unreal that it might disappear completely. (O'Toole 2021: 10)

In that emptiness, the everyday quandaries of "unknown knowns" play out as both "the single most important aspect of Irish culture in these decades" (O'Toole 2021: 168) and a psychosocial problem requiring "the maintenance of an acceptable gap between what we knew and what we acknowledged" (O'Toole 2021: 281).

O'Toole observes how this narrated 'I' of the past was educated in strategic unknowingness, with its silences, evasions, and deflections. As a journalist-narrator he suggests how his younger self gained incremental knowledge of the operations of unknown-knowns in Irish culture, including those related to: child sexual abuse in the Church; the forcible separation of unwed mothers from their children; the hypocrisy of nationalist politicians; the persistence of hierarchical class relations; and, later, the illusory Celtic Tiger myth. He also analyses how some fantasies of unknowingness began to lose their power as people voiced and published acts of personal witnessing. In the 1990s, for instance, when the suppressed history of the Catholic Church's sexual abuse of children became public, he describes how victims refused to remain silent: "For the first time in Irish public life, first-hand experience, the direct encounter with power and powerlessness in their rawest Irish forms, was put forward as primary fact. The unspeakable was not merely spoken – it was heard as evidence of the nature of the place we inhabited" (O'Toole 2021: 521). In this way, O'Toole foregrounds the role of the autobiographical as a mode of bearing witness to lived experience that creates a new understanding of national subjectivity.

In sum, in *Istanbul*, Pamuk thoroughly refracts his experiential history through familial and archival memory in evoking the socio-cultural contours of his city-space over centuries. By contrast, in *We Don't Know Ourselves*, O'Toole subordinates his individualised 'I' to a collective Irish social subject emerging

in 1958 that partially effaces it. Wielding their formidable power with words, both writers immerse their narratives in the felt realities of living in dialogue with the social imaginary of the nation.

The Differentiated, Collective 'I'

Sometimes, autobiographical narratives not only ask to be read for the models of classed, gendered, racialised, or national identities they both foreground and critique – they also demand a reading practice that emphasises the social locations and issues that a group confronts in assessing how they are positioned as a necessary condition of transforming lives in their communities. Such collective life writing projects engage autobiographically with the social structures, psychological dynamics, and experiential histories that sustain conditions of inequality and oppression.

A remarkable example of such projects occurs in *Playing with Fire: Feminist Thought and Activism through Seven Lives in India* (2006), a narrative published by the Sangtin Writers and scholar Richa Nagar. The Sangtin were a group of seven women working as rural field agents for an NGO (non-governmental organisation) in Uttar Pradesh, India, who formed a collective to focus on domestic violence and the rights of women in local communities. Collaborating with Indian social worker Richa Singh and Anglo-Indian academic sociologist Richa Nagar, over three years members of the collective wrote and shared their diary entries and engaged in discussions that generated reflections on their lives. Through conversations and the diaries they kept, they created a text that presented their differing analyses of how their experiences were embedded in their families, communities, and nation in ways that articulate their sense of 'woman' as a disempowered, unvalued, and suspect figure. This collectively produced narrative projects a "blended but fractured we" (xxxiv) that "interrogate[s] pregiven notions of what constitutes an expert" (xxxvii). *Playing with Fire* thus undermines notions of expertise even as it prevents readers from either making any easy transnational identification or from speaking for others. It has remarkable *autosocial* features, challenging readers, workers, and scholars in the Global North to imagine and participate in a project of ethical justice-making without reproducing the tropes of neediness and victimisation that have characterised many memoirs about the suffering of individual women in the developing world.

Conclusion: Reading for the *Autosocial*

Many other life narratives could productively be read through an *autosocial* lens. Our point, in taking this wider historical and geographic perspective, is that the *autosocial* emerges not as new formation, but as a process or practice of reading that emphasises the dynamics of social formation and the impediments many life writers have confronted because of their gender, class, or racial status. In so doing, we seek to avoid what we regard as theoretical pitfalls: constricting the historical, geographical, transnational, gendered, and racialised specificities of life narratives; compressing their generic heterogeneity; and undercutting the textual richness of storytelling projects that mine and explore the lived experience of subjects in the socius.

Assuredly, life narratives posit a social world, even in the rare cases when a narrator has withdrawn from it. Thus, the practice of reading *for* how narrators negotiate the narrated 'I"s inherited social location and position through the lens of the narrating 'I"s perspective of accomplishment and understanding may be applied to many kinds of life narrative. The narratives that we have explored may be read through an *autosocial* lens as the self-case-studies of writers, both professionals and accomplished non-professionals, who respond to their position in a world of structural inequality and oppression by narrating how the history of the social worlds they grew up in is intertwined with their own experiences. Some narratives have an autoethnographic cast, as do Steedman's and Emecheta's; some exemplify and are told in relation to an ethnic or racialised history, as are Coates's and Jefferson's narratives; some embed an individual story in a national history, as do the O'Toole and Pamuk narratives; and some are intrinsically collective yet speak in multiple voices, as does the Sangtin's layered text. But these interesting experiments do not necessarily constitute a new formation; rather, they are socially informed life narratives that place their rhetorics and domains in conversation with an established canon.

New formations can, however, emerge as narrative trajectories that are not exactly autobiographical in their experiments with modes of personal storytelling. A striking example is the remarkable work of French 2022 Nobel laureate in literature Annie Ernaux, who strategically uses ethnographic categories and methods to embed personal trauma in a sociohistorical context. For example, *Shame* (1998), which narrates the primal scene during Ernaux's adolescence of her father's attempt to kill her mother, is situated within an extended recollection of the social contexts of her childhood:

> I have […] to explore the laws, rites, beliefs and references that defined the circles in which I was caught up – school, family, small-town life […] (and) expose the different languages that made up my personality.[…] I shall process (those images) like documents.[…] I shall carry out an ethnological study of myself. (Ernaux 1998: 32–3)

Autoethnographic documentation thus becomes a means for Ernaux to recast her narrative and resist a psychoanalytic reading of personal trauma. By drawing from both the objective records and the subjective memories of her personal history, Ernaux embeds her self-study at the nexus of her narrating 'I"s relation to intimate others and the documentable past they inhabited.

Some readers might be inclined to use Ernaux's declaration in *Shame*, "I shall carry out an ethnological study of myself" (Ernaux 1998, 32–3), to characterise her narration as ethnographic or merely *autosociobiographical*. But that would be reductive. In a later, remarkable work, *Les Années* (2008; *The Years* 2017), Ernaux's narrator recasts the personal so as to seemingly obliterate her 'I', asserting: "There is no 'I' in what she views as a sort of impersonal autobiography. There is only 'one' and 'we,' as if now it were her turn to tell the story of the time-before", a non-individuating strategy (Ernaux 2017: 229). Thus, the relationship of the personal impressions of 'her' to the larger social fabric, as related by a seemingly 'neutral' narrator, has a complexity that the term 'ethnological' – or its variant, *autosociobiographical* – does not fully capture. Rather, her work crafts a new formation in dialogue with the norms and practices of autobiographical writing, with its valorisation of memory and subjectivity.

That is, Ernaux's efforts to craft a prose of material reality that captures the ongoing, 'happening' or unfolding character of living in time, is located in neither the wholly personal nor the wholly social, but in the liminal space of their ever-shifting relationship. In the conclusion of *The Years*, Ernaux's third-person narrator reflects on the form she sought to craft by capturing the sensation of "replicating herself and physically existing in several places she's known over her life, and thus attaining a palimpsest time" (Ernaux 2017: 226). This palimpsest strikingly joins the multiple overlays of temporal moments that form in memory and both enter into and defy representation. Seizing the time of her life as a "sweeping", "indistinct" set of unfolding moments that extend into years impels her towards "a kind of vast collective sensation that takes her consciousness, her entire being, into itself" (Ernaux 2017: 227). As an effect of "her complete immersion in the images from her memory", she is "*taken into* the indefinable whole of the world of now" (Ernaux 2017:

227–8). Thus, "by retrieving the memory of collective memory in an individual memory, she strives to capture the lived dimension of History"; her reflections on her experience are "only to retrieve the world" by using a continuous verb tense that moves through ever-changing time (Ernaux 2017: 228).

Philippe Lejeune, an eminent theorist of life writing, regards Ernaux's interweaving of diary fragments from the archives of her personal and the nation's pasts not as an autoethnography, but as a new genre of self-writing in which diary entries of various kinds are inserted in her reflexive narration to create an ongoing, open-ended process: "They are almost like an installation which exceeds the notion of a closed work or text."[3] Ernaux's palimpsestic openness, at the crossroads of autobiographical and ethnographic writing, incorporates features of each to form a new mode of life storytelling resistant to the norms of both autobiographical and social theory, yet with features of each. Lejeune's emphasis on Ernaux's text as "like an installation" points up how its dynamic dialectics cannot be contained within an autobiographical framing; rather, they are in ongoing conversation with its norms and practices. The field of life narrative studies is nourished both by such new experiments in presenting or performing a life and by the role of scholars in tracing how such narratives draw from and incorporate the perspectives and methods of a range of disciplines. Reading for the *autosocial* aspects of such innovative, self-reflexive texts can only strengthen and expand the canon of life narratives and the criteria for literary value that this volume pursues.

In this essay, we have observed both a breakdown and a breakthrough in some established life narrative genres that were previously employed to engage with social issues. This shift has been generated in part by intensified migration and transnational identifications, by the emergence of new media, and by the deconstruction and reconstruction of textual canonicity. We commend the value and timeliness of an exploration in reading for the social aspects of life narrative as contributing to a new formation, but raise concern about hypostasising it as a genre narrowly linked to sociology and to literary canonicity. Instead, we endorse, and try to practice, a flexible method of *autosocial* reading.

To conclude, we propose some questions for further research.

What value might the practice of reading for the *autosocial* now have as a means to specify and highlight what is 'new' in emergent texts, such as those discussed in this volume, including those we have taken up?

3 "[C]'est presque comme une 'installation' qui dépasse la notion d'œuvre fermée ou de texte", qt. in Kawakami 2019: 255.

How might we understand the *autosocial* relations imbricated in life narratives as a dialectical process in conversation with past histories of inequity and/or with transnational socioeconomic shifts, such as mass displacement and the migration of large groups of people?

In what terms can a case be made that *autosocially*-nuanced texts register social change across time? How do such texts project possible bases upon which social change may occur?

How might the enabling possibilities of such automedia as graphic memoir and online sites, with their distinct affordances and distributed interactivity, impact future iterations of life stories of *transclasse* anxiety and reformation?

How and to what effect does contemporary life writing enabled by new media, the shifting positions of life narrators, and a practice of *autosocial* reading unsettle or reimagine a concept of 'literariness' founded on features of the novel?

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