

8. Conclusion

My subject is both simple and impossible: Why write? I seem to be facing the void of late. This has been one of those times in a writer's life that questions the most fundamental assumptions about life and oneself in particular, and it seems unavoidable that if this self-weeping is going on, then one can't help but consider the possibility that writing is useless. It won't help you eat, certainly, and it won't help you breathe, and it certainly won't stop the war in Iraq. Or Palestine. (Orfalea 226)

These lines from the chapter "Why Write?" in Gregory Orfalea's autobiography *Angeleno Days* reveals a fundamental struggle writers face. It is the question of meaning and thus also a question of effect. With respect to the writing of autobiography, this question has usually been answered in a twofold way by literary authors and scholars of life writing. In an era in which the self largely depends on narrative formation and performance, the act of writing first and foremost benefits the self. As Orfalea puts it, writing helps make discoveries that "can be as psychologically shaking as they can be healing" (231). With respect to the effects of autobiographical writing, this focus on the self and, in the case of ethnic writing, the focus on a particular collective, has always been interpreted as the major effect of life writing as agency-building and counter-discursive. But does agency stop a war? Does it stop the Palestine conflict? The answer Orfalea suggests is no. If one looks at literature not as a weapon of words but as a weapon of mediation, the answer can be more positive.

The reason why autobiographical writing has hardly been regarded to make an impact beyond the literary realm is because the literary has never truly looked beyond its limited theoretical confines. Especially with respect to literature as a medium, the framing analysis has demonstrated that a new theoretical angle to approach autobiography allows for new audience effects to be explored. This ap-

proach takes the term discourse seriously and defines it within the media reality of today. The results reveal a detailed picture of how autobiography functions within the larger media discourse thereby also pointing to the possible potential it currently has and might have in the future. As the (re-)framing of the Arab/Muslim achieved by the authors in this study reveals, life writing is not unarmed in the battle for public opinion. An overview of the results structures the theoretical and practical implications that a reformed view of life writing as mediation brings about.

Life Writing as Mediation: Arab Americans in the Theoretical Borderland

Despite Orfalea's bleak outlook with respect to the effectiveness of writing in fighting wars, Arab Americans still seem to believe in the impact of literature. The number of fictional and non-fictional works continues to rise. Some of these new book releases become a subject of media debates due to the fame of the author or the timeliness of the issue. In a similar vein, the media increasingly become a topic in the writings of literary authors as a result of the constant mediatization of Arabs and Muslims. With respect to the academic analysis of these works, however, the bridge between the media and the literary realm has not been built so far. Literature continues to be read and analyzed as *literature* by *literary* theorists. The media continue to be seen as *media* and analyzed by *media* scientists. Only the overcoming of this artificial academic division recognizes the empirical reality that public discourse today almost exclusively takes place in a mediated environment. In result, the hegemony of media discourse can be regarded as a major source of potential for literary writing to make an impact on public discourse. This also unveils audience effects that have previously been neglected.

The interdisciplinary theory transfer from Media to Literary Studies has demonstrated that life narratives due to their specific characteristics do not stand in opposition to other media forms in public discourse. The key to installing this understanding is to leave the merely theoretical ground of the respective disciplines and look at autobiography from the viewpoint of production and reception. This fulfills the urge of Stanley Fish who draws attention to a "strategy of self-consciousness" in the disciplines (108). This consciousness needs to take into account the larger trajectories surrounding literary works. Such a move ultimately transforms the nature of literary criticism altogether, as Fish extrapolates. "Once you turn, for example, from actually performing literary criticism to examining the 'network of forces and factors' that underlie the performance, literary criticism is no longer what you are performing" (108-9). When putting this call into practice, it turns out that the supposed semi-fictional nature of life narratives does not explain why autobiography tends to be read as fact rather than fiction. What combines media content

and life writing, and what distinguishes life writing from other forms of fictional writing from the angle of the audience – not from the position of the postcolonial critic – are the truth and authenticity of information. Said already acknowledged this finding in his discussion of scholarly life writing. The perceived authenticity of autobiography provides the key for the audience “to see the story within the story” (“Scholars, Media” 301). This crucial link of life writing as information medium grants it a position outside the literary market and inside mediated social discourse.

This definition of autobiography as a medium allows for further insights into the social function of contemporary autobiographical writing. One of the most far-reaching findings is that truth and authenticity *do* matter, despite any constructivist assumptions dominating the scientific discourse. Hilfer thus urges literary theorists to not neglect this realist stance in her chapter “Get Real” in which she claims: “In becoming real, our chance of resisting the unreality that surrounds us becomes more possible” (73). Part of this “unreality” today is shaped by the emergence of new media. This in turn allows for new types of life writing. These “hybrid forms” that continue to emerge in “ongoing metamorphoses” no doubt blur the lines between media and literature (Arida 5). These *new* media formats, however, should not make researchers blind out the fact that *old* media life writing still constitutes a powerful instrument of social discourse.

The conceptual link allowing one to see this parallel is the precise definition of discourse as based on knowledge exchange. This ultimately brings in a larger political dimension of life writing as medium; a dimension which autobiography theory so far has only explored in the context of ethnic life writing. Here, “talking back discourse” has been seen as the major instrument of formerly colonized groups to reverse public identity definitions. Obviously, this assumption is based on political and normative grounds rather than on analytical discourse analysis. The latter in turn states that the biggest impact on public opinion is not achieved through counter-images but by providing affective and cognitive knowledge. Just like journalistic life narrative occupies a particular place in the literary realm, life narrative takes a particular position in the “economy of news” (Whitlock 137). Only factual and credible information can therefore achieve opinion changes by altering cognitive frames (Aruri 35; Hart 319). This new knowledge allows audience members to place stereotypes in a different cognitive context and thus also arrive at different normative evaluations toward issues and individuals.

This interdisciplinary link between cognitive and affective opinion influence is provided by the theory of framing which is a strategic, analytical, and effects-oriented theoretical model (Hart 315). The detailed theoretical transfer of the theory from Media to Autobiographical Studies reveals that framing fulfills the following functions: 1) It is a necessary mechanism to reduce complexity on the part of the author and thus structure information; 2) it allows the audience to process information in a structured manner; 3) as an effect, it alters the cognitive as well as the

affective perception of issues and thus also impacts attitudes, behavior, and stereotypes; 4) as a strategy, it helps authors achieve certain discursive goals. This view of framing as partly unintentional process to structure information and as process of strategic communication is what marks the particular theoretical value of framing as a theory of literary production and reception. Frames can be detected in literary works as well as in the environment surrounding the production of these works. Autobiography and ethnic autobiography in particular can therefore never be “[l]ocated outside the frames sustained by the media networks,” as Whitlock claims, since it is an inherent part of this framed environment (Whitlock 139).

The intradisciplinary model that regards life narratives as media also has implications for the status of ethnic life writing within the larger field of autobiography research. As the analysis demonstrates, there is no justified reason to treat ethnic life writing merely within the limited confines of Ethnic Studies (Whitlock 179). Rather, its structural features situate the genre within the overall market of autobiography and thus also as part of non-literary public discourse. This underlines the “great power” that lies in personal stories without reducing this power to the emotional component of autobiographical reflection (Sadaawi qtd. in Arida 5). Neither is the discursive potential solely based on a political or specifically postcolonial axiom. It rests on an analytical understanding of how public images of individual and collective identities can be affected. This investigative coherence marks the strength of (re-)framing as an analytical tool in life writing research.

In sum, life writing as mediation helps the genre of ethnic autobiography in particular to escape the theoretical borderland position it has been caught in. Ethnic life writing therefore serves as a special *example* of the practical and theoretical potential of life writing at large, not as an exotic *exception*. This redefinition of autobiography as a medium consequently contributes to life writing research at large and to a more realistic analytical position therein. “Outside Theory, in the real world, readers not only form relationships with literary works but discover possibilities for richer human relationships inscribed within them,” Hilfer states (81). As the close-reading analysis of contemporary Arab American and Arab Muslim life narratives has demonstrated, this realist-minded analytical model helps reveal the mechanisms through which autobiographers impact public discourse and thus (re-)frame the public image of the Arab/American/Muslim. It is now time for scholars in Cultural Studies to further explore discourse based on a changed scientific ideology.

(De-)Orientalizing Orientalist Scholarship

The goal of Orientalist criticism has essentially been to get rid of Orientalism by bringing to light and subverting the underlying power regime of the *West* without, however, falling into the trap of using knowledge as power in the form of reduc-

tionist Occidentalism. The underlying assumption has always been that Orientalism is nothing but the incarnation of an evil system of suppression. When turning this worldview upside down by regarding the cognitive frame of Orientalism as an analytical category, the question remains in how far this affects the larger tropes of Orientalist scholarship. Are postcolonial scholars losing their academic right of existence? The answer is ‘yes,’ if they continue to indulge in endless discussions on “Occidentalcentrism,” native informants, and counter-discourse (Varisco 265). The answer is ‘no’ if contemporary Cultural Studies successfully manage the process of redefining some retracted definitions of concepts that have become outdated if looked upon from a more empirical perspective. In short, Orientalist studies need to (de-)orientalize their own field by means of including framing and other interdisciplinary approaches in their methodological toolkit. The major critical issues arising from this study provide starting points to such a reformation.

The first point of criticism can be derived from the very lack of studies found on contemporary Arab American life writing and the limited scope of themes under scrutiny in the scarce criticism that does exist. Scholars have been preoccupied with detecting Orientalist stereotypes in any possible piece of cultural production – by *Western* and *Eastern* writers, as well as by critics in the academy. Directly following the events of 9/11, due to the global media-bashing of Arabs, scholars first critiqued a “neo-Orientalist establishment within the academy” (W. Hassan, “Arab-American Autobiography” 32). In line with this warning, they then developed a hyper-sensitivity to anything that might point to differences between *East* and *West*, thus also targeting the conceptual twin of Orientalism, namely, Occidentalism. Mignolo’s chapter “Post-Occidental Reason: The Crisis of Occidentalism and the Emergenc(y)e of Border Thinking” strikingly illustrates this aversion (91). The last step of the obsession to chase Orientalism like a ghost haunting cultural production has caused critics to blame members of the Arab world for supposedly reiterating Orientalist stereotypes. The ping-pong debates on the “Native informant over here” (Khan 2023) and the “Native informant over there” (Khan 2026) are only the most outstanding examples underlining this paradox. These debates bundled in Lisa Lau’s formulation of Re-Orientalism as almost inevitable reiteration of the binary between the “Western world” and the rest of the world (Lau, “Re-Orientalism” 574). As Baneerjee’s study on Iranian life narrative shows, the thematic scope of this “re-Orientalist trend” is mostly limited to feminist issues and large media critique (302).

This short synopsis of Orientalism in the academy provides evidence that Orientalism is not a dead concept. It is highly vivid in the sense that almost no publication can live without elaborations on the return of Orientalism, neo-Orientalism, re-Orientalism, and the like. Critics thus ironically infer that Orientalism has gained the status of a “conspiracy” (Marrouchi, “Counternarratives” 213). This conspiracy undergoes constant transformation in the sense that it is not limited to the Middle

East anymore but refers to the construction of Otherness in any possible context. Despite the negative connotation of the term Orientalism as such, it is therefore very much in fashion to associate oneself with the “community” of “counter-interpreters” which now includes highly paid professors and other intellectuals from *East* and *West* of whom many have developed not only a passion for countering counter-narratives but have also turned the enterprise into a “Stardom Syndrom,” as Dabashi critically remarks (7-8). This intellectual community meanwhile also includes scholars of Arab and Muslim descent who set out to reframe public images of the Arab but now find themselves torn between countering the discourse on Arabs and Muslims and countering the accusation of being “producers of counter-discourse” (Cainkar 156). These former but officially not-so-called “Orientals” are probably fighting the most difficult battle against Orientalism (Behdad 710).

This head-buzzing back and forth between different concepts of Orientalism strongly underlines that scholars have always focused on Orientalism as power division without allowing for alternative interpretations of the concept. Braginsky calls attention to this shortcoming when stating that “it seems clear that making an absolute of the factor of power only prevents the scholar from reaching a more realistic understanding of the multidimensional process of West-East attractions and repulsions which progressively reveals both their need for one another and their self-definition through reflection in one another” (530). Especially his calling attention to the aspect of “realistic understanding” is noteworthy in this far-reaching critique of Braginsky since it directly points to key concepts of border thinking, truth, and authenticity. All these terms today count as conceptual enemies in post-colonial scholarship and in the humanities at large. As the comprehensive study of life narrative in the context of production and reception demonstrates, it is this social reality that counts most for the writers and readers of contemporary ethnic life narratives. This realistic approach also to a large extent determines the very meaning and impact of life writing in society. The scholarly detachment from this reality and the neglect of “real contrasts” in the lives and narratives between *East* and *West* thus also explains the missing embracement of contrast as a value.

As Braginsky in his critique also highlights, this one-sided approach to Orientalism prevents postcolonial scholarship from moving on to reveal novel insights into the actual relations of *East* and *West*. In other words, “Said’s specious Homo orientalicus is for many critics a revolutionary dead end” (252). Gradually, these critics in the fields of Ethnic and Arab American Studies draw attention to the need of overcoming the Orientalist legacy to develop novel approaches. Nadine Naber, one of the most progressive voices within this movement, identifies the most important question occupying the field: “How can Arab American Studies scholars respond to Orientalism in ways that do not reinforce it, or encourage Arab-bashing?” (“New Texts Out”). Naber in this context also criticizes that the preoccupation with Orientalist practices in the media and in scholarly criticism disregards

“intra-Arab American relationships and differences,” such as sexuality, gender, and class (“New Texts Out”). As Naber explains in an interview, her book *Arab America: Gender, Cultural Politics and Activism* is an effort to respond to this challenge. It suggests diasporic feminist critique as “de-Orientalizing theory and method” for analyzing the situation of Arab Americans from a new perspective (“New Texts Out”). Naber puts particular emphasis on the link between the academy and the social world by explicitly regarding “academic audiences” as well as Arab Americans and social movements as her audience (“New Texts Out”).

A similar suggestion to the problem with an equally high emphasis on the role of the scholar in responding to the challenges of Orientalism was proposed by Dabashi. In his study *Post-Orientalism: Knowledge and Power in Time of Terror* (2009), he identifies what he calls an “*epistemic endosmosis*” as the recent stage of knowledge production about the Middle East (xvi). To him, both Said and Spivak as most prominent figures in postcolonial scholarship fail in tackling the underlying trajectories of Orientalist knowledge production by taking the idea of the *West* too seriously to weaken it. Dabashi sees the solution to this problem in a new form of “Post-Orientalism.” As he emphasizes, this alternative Orientalism stresses the role of the intellectual not merely as critic but as “social category” represented mostly by exilic scholars (1). The core pillar of this thesis is an “altered interlocutor” to speak on behalf of a global collective (272-73). The ultimate purpose of this changed interlocutor lies in the breaking of the vicious cycle around counter-discourse to arrive at “post-Orientalist knowledge production” (278). What is needed for this, as he argues, is a “politically pointed and powerful language that is not trapped in circuitous discourse of merely talking back to the self-appointed interlocutors of the world” (278). Ultimately, Dabashi sees the potential of this post-Orientalist discourse rooted in the normative agency of the postcolonial critic to produce and spread alternative knowledge in the period after 9/11 (280). In sum, he thus regards the intellectual as “paramount site for the cultivation of normative and moral agency with a sense of worldly presence” (xiii).¹

Although these suggestions promise considerable potential for breaking the vicious cycle of counter-discourse analysis and its ceaseless reproduction, the study at hand reaches further in its critique of the present state of Cultural and Arab American Studies. Based on the findings at hand, the plea for an “altered interlocutor” and the embracing of new methodologies has certainly received confirmation by the results at hand. What this study denies, however, is that the potential of this altered

1 Although Dabashi regards his approach partly as a critique of Said’s notion of Orientalism, his clinging to the normative agency of the academic as interlocutor nevertheless traps him in a similar tautology as Said. The latter has been criticized for his vision of scholars who “act in the interest of truth and justice and fairness and honesty” while at the same time challenging notions of absolute truth (Lewis et al. 306).

intellectual is rooted in normative concerns or in a post-Orientalist stance. It is the very opposite of the constant struggle against Orientalism or the overcoming of Orientalism toward a post-something-era that this work argues for. It has demonstrated that the major shortcoming of present postcolonial scholarship can be found in the fact that Orientalist critics by constantly reinvoking the issue of counter-discourse have limited their thematic scope ad infinitum to Orientalism. This has led to the paradox result that they themselves are the major actors in keeping the Orientalist/Occidental binary alive as the most dominant power mechanism circulating through the global academy. Instead of accepting and embracing the “real” differences found in the cultural material at hand, their spontaneous impulses immediately make them turn those differences into artificial boundaries symbolizing power relations. Not only is this approach highly ignorant of historical dynamics and findings derived from the empirical sciences which analyze discourse on less normative grounds. This resilience to alternative theories is also highly Orientalist in nature since it neglects alternative interpretations that do not necessarily originate in the *Western* academy. Rationality and enlightenment continue to be the buzzwords in this scholarly discourse which now also increasingly targets Middle Eastern writers. A telling example of this is provided by Banerjee who states that “In this brave new world in which re-Orientalist writers happily recreate the American neo-colonialist structures of popular culture, enlightenment is not quite what it used to be” (“Between the Burqa” 313).

Obviously, statements of this kind underscore instead of subvert the cultural presumption which postcolonialism seeks to tackle. This incremental finding that alarmingly many in Postcolonial and Cultural Studies seem to ignore successfully is again formulated to the point by Taylor. He identifies the tenacious clinging to the concept of equality in the *Western* academy as an “axiom” in the contemporary humanities. This axiom especially haunts Cultural Studies, as he states:

[W]hatever it is that has pushed modern western culture to study others, at least nominally in a spirit of equality (it is because they recognize this spirit as legitimate that orientalists feel calumniated by the attacks of such critics as Edward Said), is missing in many cultures. Our very valuing of this equality² seems to mark our superiority of our culture over some others. (C. Taylor, *Philosophical Arguments* 156)

2 The finding that the value of equality itself is a *Western* invention is linked to a much larger debate on the definition of human rights and ethics towards a supposedly common goal of “Universal Personhood” (Ta 167). The critique of equality as *Western* axiom also highlights that the field of ethics at large continues to be dominated by the *West* (Christians 37). Scholars like Spivak clearly operate with Orientalist binaries when speaking of “Western ethics” (Spivak, “Interview” 27).

Taylor in these lines unfolds the powerful logic of how a supposedly positive value such as equality can become the instrument of hegemony because its inherent goodness is derived from its definition by the *West*. Instead of constantly enforcing the normative value of equality on the social world, scholars in Postcolonial and Literary Studies alike have the opportunity to take the “social inequality” existing in the world as an empirical given. This inequality is not merely rooted in the intentional or unintentional ideological thinking of the *unenlightened* but in the fact that comparison naturally leads to judgements of one kind or another. Only this rethinking of the fundamental axioms of postcolonial scholarship really creates room for *other* concepts to emerge.

(De-)orientalizing Orientalist scholarship consequently has a double meaning when it comes to the effective development of Postcolonial Studies. On the one hand, Orientalist scholars should be deorientalized in the sense that axiomatic theoretical concepts such as Orientalism lose their imperial status as normative and ethical theory axioms. This should also lead to more thematic variety. On the other hand, Orientalist scholarship can consciously orientalize itself by “prizing otherness” based on alternative forms of Orientalism (Khair 150). Framing provides an analytical tool to performing this step in the sense that it allows for the structured investigation of difference as produced and circulated in the global literary and media discourse. It fulfills what critics of postcolonial scholarship have been calling for, namely, “negotiating similarity and difference” (Khair 155) without reinvoking “old-style Orientalism”³ (Schueller 481). Naber introduces the concept of a “De-Orientalizing Pedagogy” to move away from the same and highly abstract categories of analysis toward the study of the real-life circumstances of Arab Americans (Naber, “De-Orientalizing Pedagogy”).⁴ The key to offering a changed episteme thus does not lie in the normative agency of the scholar but in his/her analytical capacity to reveal mechanisms of knowledge production in the social world. As the life writers in this study have proven, this knowledge production can be facilitated

3 Malini Schueller in an article entitled “Orientalizing American Studies” from 2008 especially critiqued the continuous rise of Orientalism in the field post 9/11. By calling it “old-style Orientalism,” Schueller explicitly targets the normative implications of *Western* scholarly dominance (481).

4 Naber especially values the meaning of the Arab spring movements as opening up new opportunities for scholars to teach about the Middle East (Naber, “De-Orientalizing Pedagogy”). This impact of political key events as “pedagogically crucial” was also demonstrated in the aftermath of 9/11. The extremely derogatory and discriminatory coverage of Arabs in turn triggered a movement in favor of a more balanced representation of Arabs and other ethnic minorities at large. Merskin summarizes the positive side-effect of this defining moment: “Perhaps then, in an odd twist of fate, the experiences of Arab Americans after September 11 will ironically serve as a crucible of our times” (Merskin 173).

by the reinforcement of binary oppositions. The denial of these differences on intellectual, political, and above all normative grounds does not correspond to this social reality. The major step toward (de-)Orientalizing Cultural Studies thus rests on the acknowledgement that Orientalism as cognitive structure is part of the social present. This will naturally eliminate some of the preoccupations currently preventing scholars from devoting themselves to more nuanced analyses. The Chinese scholar Wang Ning summarizes this claim: “Orientalism is – and does not simply represent – a considerable dimension of modern political-intellectual culture, and as such has less to do with the Orient than it does with ‘our’ world” (57).

Marketing the Market of Mediated Lives

Image 11: *The Media World as Market of Ideas*



Source: Comic adaptation of *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (McMillen).

“Our” world is not only a synonym of the *Western* world anymore. Instead, the *Eastern* and the *Western* world are becoming increasingly unified by their common

embrace of the media revolution. The comic adaptation of Postman’s *Amusing Ourselves to Death* draws attention to the centrality media play in the life of the people. Several decades ago, the spread of TV culture triumphed over more traditional forms of media entertainment. Meanwhile, the internet has made an even more central impact on the social life of people around the world. The fear of cultural critics has always been that old forms of media might be pushed aside by newer ones, as the debate by Aldous Huxley and George Orwell in the comic demonstrates. The book counts as the “biggest loser” in this development. The reality of media consumption, however, has proven these gloomy scenarios wrong. The often-declared death of the book has not occurred. Instead, new forms of media entertainment such as television and film have complemented old media. This has also supported the marketing of print publications (Padley 107-08). The growing demand for the publications of Arab and Muslim authors in the recent period serves as another example of the fact that the book is *not* dead. In addition, this demonstrates that TV culture has not turned the media audience into brainless losers of the entertainment industry. As the present study reveals, media consumers still turn toward books to gain knowledge. Autobiographies as interlocutors of cultural and

theoretical knowledge have considerable potential to meet this demand because of the high degree of authenticity granted to them. Orfalea underlines this unique potential for literary reframing in powerful words:

[I]t is truth evoked in moving language that gives us readers a twinge inside. [...] We readers live for that effect. The best imaginative fiction cannot, by definition, utilize stereotype, which is the antithesis of imagination. Stereotype causes the hungry reader a wince, rather than a twinge. Stereotyping involves a breakdown in the perception of the plentitude of existence. Simple laws of perception admit reality's diversity. The keen eye, ear, and heart of a storyteller will not allow for the reduction of the individual to a mathematical equation or one characteristic ([...] Jews are stingy, Arabs are wily, Blacks are slow [...]). (169)

Just like new media with their “moving language” have not replaced old media but complemented them, life narratives complement the media discourse in popular culture. They have distinctive features that still allow and even require them to be read as part of the global media market, not outside of it. Such an opening requires an altered mindset on the part of literary scholars to approach books as market commodities. The bourgeois thesis of Huxley and Postman that values the book as higher cultural good than the TV set is still reflected in the Literary and Cultural Studies departments around the world. This particularly holds true when it comes to postcolonial scholars whose major preoccupation has been attacking Arab American writers for marketing their works as native informants for the purpose of lining their pockets. It seems that also in this case, the normative paradigm of Orientalism has prevented the field from moving further. Capitalism has always been connected to the *Occident* and *Orientalism* thus forms a tool of economic exploitation by the *West*, as cultural critics like to argue (Mignolo 65; Braginsky 518). Questions to the role of ethnic life narrative in the book market have therefore either been denied completely or treated from an anti-capitalist standpoint which sees the market as place of cooptation. Huggan’s provocative book title “*Marketing the Margins*” is only one example of this practice.

The condemnation of market trajectories has naturally led to the result that those supporting this market, namely, the general readership outside the Literary Studies departments, has mostly been excluded from the analytical picture. The audience is therefore, although mostly implicitly, regarded as “uninformed American readership” (Whitlock 165). In the Arab American context, the assumption is that readers enjoy the “one-sided jingoism” on Arabs spread by the American media (Cainkar 155). Instead of exploring the motives why readers consume the life narratives of particular ethnic groups, cultural critics continue to judge these motives in the first place. This partly causes that the primary audience of cultural literary critics still consists of “cultural literary critics” themselves (El-Haj 547). The study of popular culture therefore remains slightly *unpopular* among postcolonial scholars. Joli Jen-

sen's critique of the "Fear of Trash" raised in 1988 therefore still holds true. Jensen states "that popular culture study is acceptable in academic life only when it becomes, via the jargon of 'high theory,' unrecognizable to its actual audiences" (97).

As this study of ethnic life writing based on a theory of production *and* reception has shown, the hostility toward the market would ultimately change with a less normative understanding of Orientalism and with the inclusion of more empirical methodology in the humanities. Instead of theoretically assuming that literature is written for general audiences, literary scholars should start studying these audiences with a more practical mindset. This would call into question some of the most resistant theoretical myths in the field and make room for new research topics. One of the myths related to ethnic life writing remains the lasting focus on identity negotiation and possible benefits ethnic audiences might derive from the reading experience. The present analysis clearly demonstrates that the audience of *Arab American* life narratives mostly consists of *Americans* with no multi-ethnic background and that, in addition, most authors explicitly focus on reaching this audience. "Especially in the post-9/11 context," Carol Bardenstein confirms, "a significant segment of Arab American authors are writing very consciously for a 'Western' audience" (Personal interview).

An important research path to pursue therefore is the study of different audience motivations for consuming ethnic life narratives. This in turn sets the basis for identifying audience effects in more differentiated ways. Previous analyses on ethnic readerships, their features as media consumers and their reading habits provide first starting points for such novel findings (Greco, Rodríguez, and Wharton 173).⁵ Arab Americans, however, have so far been absent from the range of ethnic groups appearing in these studies. Their inclusion would ultimately benefit the status of Arab American Studies in the academy at large. Furthermore, the inclusion of formerly neglected audiences and the detailed study of readers as media consumers would contribute to life writing studies at large, since especially audience re-

5 Greco, Rodríguez, and Wharton in their study entitled *The Culture and Commerce of Publishing in the 21st Century* provide a thorough data analysis of the relation between the book market and audience reception. With respect to the variables that highly impact book consumption, the authors identify ethnicity and gender to be decisive criteria. As they explain, the vast majority of data available on this subject focuses on Latinos and African Americans (173). The analysis largely draws on a study released by the National Endowments for the Arts (NEA) from 2007 that bears the revealing title "To Read or Not to Read: A Question of National Consequence." The latter study also strongly highlights the impact of ethnicity on reading habits and purchase decisions (94).

search is in need of further theorization in Autobiography Studies (Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography* 92).⁶

Such a theoretical and practical opening of life writing scholarship toward the market as major source of knowledge gain would naturally lead to an altered image of the intellectual as interlocutor between the social world and the iron tower. Nadine Naber with her longing to write for multiple audiences located outside the academy provides a promising example of this quest. Only very few scholars in the field of Postcolonial and Arab American Studies have so far successfully managed this step of overcoming the boundary between scholarship and popular culture. Tamim Ansary and Haider Ala Hamoudi, due to their public presence in the mass media, constitute such examples. With their writing and public advocacy they stimulate a dialogue on Arab and Muslim Americans inside and outside the academy that also helps Arab American cultural production to become a part of the Ethnic Studies canon (Aoudé 151). Such an inclusion fosters the further differentiation of Ethnic Studies and ideally allows Arab American Studies to develop as an acknowledged field in the academy (Salaita, "Ethnic Identity" 162). This recognition of Arab American Studies based on progressive theoretical approaches would invite more young scholars to contribute novel insights without having to fear the ideological battlefield of traditional Orientalist (counter-)arguments. Above all, these young critics are desperately needed to push the field (Orfalea 191). Eventually, this positive marketing of the market of life narrative within the realm of the academy might turn Said's vision of the public intellectual into academic reality.

The embracing of the media market and its opportunities for reframing collective images of the Arab/Muslim similarly applies to the side of Arab and Muslim writers themselves. So far, most of them have intentionally and unintentionally accepted the glass ceiling existing between the media market on the one hand and the literary and scholarly market on the other. Kaldas as someone who is not very prominent outside scholarly circles confirms this position. Her lack of media presence is at least one of the major reasons why her memoir has not become widely read in the public. This is not to argue that publicity guarantees market success. Nor does market success allow for any far-reaching claims concerning the content of respective literary works. Still, the mere sales figures are indicators of how much impact this literary content can potentially have on the readership. Academic writing in contrast to journalism and new media writing clearly reaches a more limited radius of audience members. This logic of academic seclusion only tends to be broken whenever the core pillars of academic integrity are violated and scandals sweep the field. Whitlock realizes this paradox in stating that only the hoax was

6 Smith and Watson in their brief discussion of the lack of audience studies in *Reading Autobiography* point out that the commercial success of a book remains one of the only indicators at hand to gain insights into audience reception (92).

able to bring Arab American life narratives out of the “specialized academic journal and into the popular press” (Whitlock 119). This certainly should not count as an appeal to writers to sell untruthful accounts as personal memories. Rather, the sensitive reactions of the media audience in such cases point to the fact that there is a large potential to trigger public discourses by means of literary production.

The texts analyzed in this study and the respective audience responses have illustrated that this discursive impact can undoubtedly be achieved by life writing. The problem remains that the scope of audience members reached remains minimal compared to best-sellers in other fields. A number of only a few hundred copies sold certainly cannot count as major impact on what is considered public opinion.⁷ Nevertheless, the example of Ansary and the media popularity following the publication of his e-mail suggest that cross-media communication can indeed widen the circles of target audiences. Again, writers and scholars alike should not denigrate this media presence as the longing for personal fame merely. Rather, authors like Ansary should serve as models to merge the different forms of mediated discourse to a common end. Only this heightened presence of Arab Americans in various media markets will continue to satisfy the steady demand for more knowledge created and narrated *by* not *about* Arabs and Muslims. Since this demand naturally produces economic potential on the part of publishing houses, the number of presses issuing special series such as Syracuse can be expected to rise. Above all, the reading of life narrative therefore not only relies on an autobiographical pact but on an economic pact as well. The acknowledgement of this finding will also eliminate much of the “repressive publishing culture” that authors of Arab and Muslim descent previously faced as a consequence of the political impact of the Middle East conflict (185). In fact, many of the instances in which Arab American authors faced difficulties were caused by Orientalist hegemony played out by publishing houses. If the market forces the presses to learn more about the Orientalist dichotomy itself, normative arguments preventing Arab American voices to appear in the public would automatically be overruled by economic interest.

In sum, these repercussions on the importance of life narrative as part of the larger media market provoke the urgent need to accept that capitalism is not merely an evil legacy bequeathed by the *Western* colonizer. Capitalism is the economic and social reality in most countries around the world and this system therefore also rules the media market. Life narratives as part of this market are written to be read – not by literary scholars merely, but by the general audience. Every single audience

7 Alsultany emphasizes the decisive impact of life stories on the larger media audience while also pointing to the crucial disadvantage written autobiographies still have in comparison to other media material. “Life stories do impact public stereotypes in many ways,” she states, but “stories in the media generally have a bigger impact than written autobiographies because more people watch than read” (Personal interview).

member is part of the collective forming public opinion in the polls. The reaction of the market thus also determines who is allowed to have a voice in the larger public dialogue (Whitlock 10). The media market as stimulator and indicator of social discourse therefore does not limit but emphasize the value of life writing – in material and immaterial terms. Writers and especially scholars should develop a more market-oriented attitude toward the potential the media market has to offer. Instead of “Marketing the Margins” they should thus market the market of ideas arising from life narratives as consumer commodities.

Outlook: The “All-American Muslim” Memoir?

Ten years after 9/11, a new reality TV show, called “All-American Muslim,” tackles stereotypes by following five families in Dearborn, Michigan. They focus on a cop, an expectant mother, a bride, an entrepreneur and a football coach. [...]

UNIDENTIFIED TEEN #1: Our school, we’re 95 percent Muslim.

UNIDENTIFIED TEEN #2: When we play teams away from Dearborn, they start calling us names.

UNIDENTIFIED TEEN #3: You f-in(ph) Arabs, terrorists.

UNIDENTIFIED TEEN #4: You’re the A-rabs, camel jockeys. (“Ali Calls”)

In December 2011, the “Talk of the Nation,” not only on National Public Radio but across the country, focused on one topic: Arab American Muslims. This time, however, the debate did not target a new terrorist threat or female veiling. Instead, the nation talked about the “ordinary” Arab American who was now displayed weekly at prime time on public television. Not long after the “All-American Muslim” aired for the first time, the discourse on the new reality show inflamed. Above all, reality soaps were nothing new in the number one country of soap entertainment. Witnessing the reality of Arab American lives on television, though, was a new experience for the American audience.⁸

Many Arab Americans highly welcomed the new show. As the Arab American playwright and journalist Wahajat Ali stated on NPR’s most famous talk spot: “I think it’s refreshingly bland. It’s honest, it’s real, it’s human. And it’s nice to see a show where Muslims aren’t terrorists, taxi cab drivers or potential terrorists, you

8 In connection with the “All-American Muslim,” media critics also point to the lasting lack of detailed audience research, even in the field of Communication Research itself. “When we talk about the audience of ‘All-American Muslim,’” Alsultany explicates, “we do not know who this audience is; there are no figures.” Despite the lack of comprehensive audience data, though, Alsultany and other scholars in Arab American Studies share an educated guess about the likely audience. “Definitely, Arab American families are watching,” she adds (Personal interview; cf. Bardenstein, Personal interview).

know? They're just people" ("Ali Calls"). Others in turn criticized the homogeneity created by the selection of cast members. As a caller on the program who teaches at an Arab American high school near Detroit summarized the reaction of her students: "They feel that the show has sort of chosen very Westernized Muslims as opposed to more conservative ones that they feel are reflective of the community" ("Ali Calls").⁹ The responses of the mainstream American media audience were even more divided and mostly framed in political terms. While many appreciated the insider view on Arab American life in the U.S., especially conservatives were outraged to see potential terrorists in their own living room on Sunday evening. As a consequence, one of America's largest retailers decided to ban ads of the show from its stores. The retailer thus bowed to the pressure of a conservative group claiming that the program advocates "propaganda that riskily hides the Islamic agenda's clear and present danger to American liberties and traditional values" (Associated Press, "Lowe's Threatened"). Despite this torn audience evaluation, media critics and journalists received the show mostly in positive terms. Their reviews praised it as "intimate and informative" and "deeply intriguing" (Wajahat).

This recent example of discourse on Arab American Muslims illustrates that Arab Americans themselves are becoming increasingly aware of the importance mediated lives have as tools of social and political activism. This realization of the potential of mediated discourse grants Arab Americans and Muslims new means of public engagement which were long concealed due to the long history of media bashing applied to TV Arabs. In employing the media's own logic of news management and agenda setting, Arab Americans thus gradually succeed in affecting "The Pictures in Our Heads"¹⁰ (McCombs 68). As Wajahat furthermore stated, "the fact that Muslims have their own reality TV show means, you know, the Muslim agenda is successful" ("Ali Calls").

9 This comment is a tidbit of the discussion that the reality show fueled among Arab Americans. At the center of this debate stood the critique that the show does not reflect an "authentic" view of the average Muslim American family but a minority within it. This debate is particularly interesting since it reflects earlier critiques of the other-representation of the Middle East and Arabs as reductionist and homogenizing. Wajahat in this context points out: "[T]he five families on 'All-American Muslim' should not be asked to represent all Muslims, Arabs or Americans. Does Jersey Shore represent all Italians?" (Wajahat). In an interview on NPR, he furthermore states: "There's no such thing as the, quote, unquote, 'perfect Muslim' ("Ali Calls"). Overall, this underlines that every media representation will always be selective and reductionist in nature. Alsultany thus adds, "the show is not completely unscripted" (Personal interview).

10 The expression "pictures in our heads" which counts as a popular metaphor in communication research was first used by Walter Lippman in the early days of public opinion research dating back to the 1920s (Jasperson and El-Kikhia 135).

Whether this positive effect of mediated lives on public opinion will be successful in the long run remains to be seen. Still, two important conclusions can already be drawn from the current discussion on the “All-American Muslim.” This conclusion again allows for important insights for the further development of life writing research. The first finding is that the public debate continues to revolve around the oppositions between Muslims and Christians, between Arabs and Americans, between *West* and *East*. This binary Orientalist thought pattern continues to be the reality of the social and political world, whether cultural critics like it or not. Secondly, the audience’s high appreciation of findings derived from the depiction of ‘normal’ Arab American life again highlights the strong impact the authentic confrontation with mediated lives has on cultural learning. As one critic put it, the show is “More Educational Than [sic] the Cast Will Admit” (Neddog). This learning benefit is not only fostered by the show itself but also to a large extent by the media discourse that surrounds it. Similar to crucial events like 9/11 and the Arab Spring, this issue-related discourse has triggered a “pedagogical shake-up” in the public (Cainkar 155). Evelyn Alsultany therefore granted the show a large “potential to make a difference” because it is “part of a system of meaning-making” (Personal interview). Many Arabs and Muslims have thus become able to express their views in public who otherwise do not count as prominent media guests. Wajahat counts as one of them, and he is particularly aware of the important function, public communication has for collective self-definition:

A “real Muslim” according to many is this anti-American, extremist, violent stereotype – an image often plastered over news headlines. This myth is unsurprising, perhaps, considering 60% of Americans say they don’t know a Muslim. Furthermore, the No 1 source of information about Muslims for American is the media, and often, the images are negative. Yet, according to all the studies and evidence, the reality of American Muslims is that they are moderate, loyal to America, optimistic about America’s future, in tune with American values, well-educated, and are the nation’s most diverse religious community. (Wajahat)

Wajahat in these lines reveals that social science scholars with their studies on the benevolence of American Muslims are far less recognized than the mass mediated truth of the Muslim extremist. Besides this implicit critique by Wajahat, his words also build an immediate bridge to the life narratives analyzed in this study. Just like Ansary, Kaldas, and Hamoudi, he directly points to the differences existing between Americans and Arabs in order to convey knowledge and understanding of a reality that cannot be seen in other media. Wajahat summarizes this (re-)framing function by pointing to the information that is usually lacking from mainstream media coverage. “So what you do see is, you know, a terrorist stereotype. What you don’t see is, you know, an educated, intelligent American-born Muslim woman who voluntarily chooses to wear the hijab. And even though she wears the hijab, she’s opin-

ionated, she works, she practices her Islam and, you know, she talks back to her husband” (“Ali Calls”). Ironically, it is America’s TV culture that for so many decades vilified Arab and Muslims and now fosters the change of his image. This speaks to the value of Shaheen’s prophecy that the power of the media to distort public images also provides the means to correct them. Carol Bardenstein thus calls the “All-American Muslim” show an “effective demystifier” (Personal interview). Life narratives as media follow this path. The “All-American Muslim” as offspring of America’s dearest family member – the TV-set – provides an important starting point for this mass-mediated reframing of the Arab/Muslim. As Ali points out: “Reality TV is the current zeitgeist of popular culture. Unlike the euro, it is the predominant cultural currency, whose value is skyrocketing” (Wajahat).

It is now up to writers and scholars in Arab American Studies to take advantage of this *zeitgeist* and publicly interfere in public discourse – both on paper and on public television. They have the opportunity to fully explore the potential of life writing to mediate knowledge about Arab and Muslim lives. Framing offers a unique theoretical and practical instrument to link the media and the literary sphere by exposing the cognitive dimension of autobiographical writing and reading. Orientalism in this discourse cannot simply be countered or replaced since it allows *Western* and *Eastern* audiences alike to locate their own identities along necessary lines of interpretation. Only this – at least temporarily – fixed location of the self amidst a globalized world in constant flux allows for the possibility to comprehend and explore the Other beyond familiar frames of interpretation.

Orientalism as an analytical rather than normative concept ruling social reality makes room for novel possibilities of (re-)framing Arab and Muslim identity. This step is a beginning in autobiography research, and as Said described it in his chapter “Beginnings,” “beginning is making or producing difference, but [...] difference which is the result of combining the already familiar with the fertile novelty of human work in language” (qtd. in El-Haj 550). It thereby matters little whether this difference is printed on pages or presented in flickering TV images. What matters most is the common message to be received by the American and global media audience. Arab Americans are *Arabs* because they are different from Americans in some ways. But they are Arab *American* because “[t]hey’re American, too” (Salaita, “Ethnic Identity” 151).