

On the Globality of Autosociobiography

An Introduction

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When, in October 2022, the French writer Annie Ernaux was awarded the Nobel Prize, the reactions in the international literary community highlighted a significant challenge: critics struggled to categorise her work. Time and again, the genre-transcending character of Ernaux's texts was emphasised – the Swedish Academy, for instance, saw the originality of her *œuvre* precisely in its “shifting between fiction, sociology and history” (Olsson 2022). The attribution of generic hybridity was chiefly predicated on the author's extensive references to various academic discourses.¹ In keeping with her self-characterisation as an “ethnographer of her own life” (Ernaux, 1997: 38)², some commentators even went so far as to equate her writings with ethnographic sources.³ Yet despite the eminent difficulties in assigning Ernaux's publications to a traditional genre,⁴ the apposite concept of *autosociobiography*, already established in Franco-German academia, was not commonly used – instead,

- 1 Spanish journalists, for example, situated Ernaux's narratives at the intersection of history, sociology, and individual memory: “El resultado ha sido una obra minuciosamente elaborada a lo largo de las últimas cinco décadas y situada a medio camino entre la narrativa y las ciencias humanas, donde la historia y la sociología cuentan tanto como el recuerdo individual.” (Bassets/Vicente 2022)
- 2 “[E]thnologue de soi-même”. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are our own.
- 3 “When future ethnographers want to study what it was like to be a woman in Europe in the decades between the second world war and today, they could do worse than pick up the collected works of Annie Ernaux, who this week became the first female French writer to win the Nobel prize in literature.” (“The Guardian” 2022)
- 4 “‘Her tone is remarkably unsentimental, even when she's talking about very difficult material,’ said the writer Francine Prose, who said she's been a reader of Ernaux's work for decades. ‘I can't think of anyone quite like her, period. You can't really say what the genre is, it's not autofiction, it's not, strictly speaking, memoir. It's as if she invented her own genre and perfected it.’” (Alter et al. 2022)

critics deployed, the author's outspoken disapproval notwithstanding, a more prevalent term that had likewise originated in France: "It will be said that this is the first Nobel Prize awarded for *autofiction*, a sub-genre the writer has nurtured more than anyone, although she disavows this label and everything that confines her to her mere biography." (Bassets/Vicente 2022; our italics)⁵

In fact, as early as in 2003, Ernaux herself had attempted a differentiation to characterise her texts, which are autobiographical but not 'novelistic', and systematically avoid fictionalisation:

But I'm not satisfied with the term 'autobiographical narrative', because it doesn't go far enough. It underlines an aspect that is certainly fundamental, a posture of writing and reading that is radically opposed to that of the novelist, but it says nothing about the aim of the text, its construction. Worse still, it imposes a reductive image: 'The author is talking about himself'. Yet *La place*, *Une femme*, *La honte*, and, in part, *L'événement* are less autobiographical than auto-socio-biographical. (Ernaux 2003: 23)⁶

The awarding of the Nobel Prize created increased visibility for texts that were compatible with Ernaux's neologistic self-categorisation. Concurrently, the concept of autosociobiography further gained in popularity in German-language academic discourse, where the reception of said texts from France and elsewhere had, in effect, been accompanied by a quasi-parallel theorisation. International resonance, on the other hand, remained more subdued, which is why the present volume aims to subject the current state of autosociobiographical research to a critical revision in a global perspective.

A 'global perspective' as we understand it does not merely mean an expansion of the field of research with an eye to investigating the occurrence of or reflection on comparable texts and ways of writing in other cultural and historical settings; taking our cue from recent trends in the study of history, we use

5 "Se dirá que este es el primer Nobel que premia la autoficción, un subgénero que ella ha alimentado más que nadie, aunque la escritora reniegue de esa etiqueta y de todo lo que la encierne en su mera biografía."

6 "Mais ce terme de 'récit autobiographique' ne me satisfait pas, parce qu'il est insuffisant. Il souligne un aspect certes fondamental, une posture d'écriture et de lecture radicalement opposée à celle du romancier, mais il ne dit rien sur la visée du texte, sa construction. Plus grave, il impose une image réductrice: 'l'auteur parle de lui.' Or, *La place*, *Une femme*, *La honte* et en partie *L'événement* sont moins autobiographiques que auto-socio-biographiques."

the term 'globality' in reference to the complex interrelatedness of phenomena that transcend (often supposedly well-established) boundaries. The goal of Global History, then, is not a totalising ('universal') view on the past, but the non-teleological description and analysis of boundary-crossing lines of connection that engender historical phenomena in the first place (Conrad 2016: 5). Accordingly, if we speak of literary globality, we seek to engage with the historical and cultural entanglements a text is embedded in, that it performs or enacts in its specific spatio-temporal context and that produce it as a meaningful entity in the first place, without resorting to (Eurocentric) master narratives as explicatory paradigms.⁷

A global perspective on autosociobiography is therefore not limited to conceptualising its object of study as a phenomenon of interweaving Franco-German discourses, something that has already been done in a kind of *histoire croisée*⁸. If, in the following, we briefly outline this approach, we do so to orientate the reader in current debates most of which are not accessible in English. A truly global perspective on autosociobiographical texts involves surveying their emergence (as individual texts, but also as a "*genre in the making*", Blome et al. 2022: 12, original emphasis) in a way that takes into account the interplay of all known contributing factors including (but not limited to) writers, critics, literary institutions (including international scholarship), and the book market. It entails engaging with the characteristic mixture of sociological concerns and literary practices that gave critics such a hard time when it came to classifying the works of Ernaux. Keeping in mind that globality has a temporal dimension, it also means considering how these writings are related to earlier forms of textual production and how they are distinguished – or attempt to set themselves apart – from other kinds of life writing past and present. And last but not least, it necessitates a thorough reflection on how the texts under consideration here (and the concomitant critical discourses)

7 For a concise summary and critique of the scholarly debate on the 'global', see Johnston (2020). Johnston argues that there is a specifically *textual* globality characterised by a "historical self-reflexivity" that goes far beyond the here and now of a given performance or narrative (ibid.: 184).

8 The term was coined by Michael Werner and Bénédicte Zimmermann, who define it as follows: "In most cases, it refers, in a vague manner, to one or a group of histories associated with the idea of an unspecified crossing or intersection [...]. [In] a more specific approach [...], *histoire croisée* associates social, cultural, and political formations, generally at the national level, that are assumed to bear relationships to one another." (Werner/Zimmermann 2006: 31)

reflect on the intersectional nature of social exclusion and marginalisation, social modes in which class, gender, and *race* are indissolubly intertwined. Such an approach promises to yield a more complete picture of the specific circumstances that enable or stimulate the production and the critical and commercial success of comparable texts, literary practices, and writing styles in different cultural contexts and historical constellations.

While this approach foregrounds the question of the comparability and potential connectedness of texts and their respective preconditions, it seeks to do so without falling back on a totalising 'history of influence' that constructs the spread of a given genre, writing style, or literary *topos* from a European centre, and without setting up a select canon of European texts as a sort of standard against which the diversity of literary writing is to be measured. Rather, inquiring after the globality of literary texts means to recognise them in their specific made-ness and to aim for honest, unbiased comparisons. Before we go into detail on how this volume's contributions address the questions outlined, however, we would like to stress the relevance of viewing autosociobiographical texts through the lens of their global entanglements by tracing how they and the corresponding critical debate emerged, and by addressing the as-yet liminal status of autosociobiography as a genre.

1. Autosociobiography – a Franco-German Phenomenon?

As indicated, the notion of autosociobiography first gained critical traction in Germany. Instrumental in this regard was Tobias Haberkorn's German translation of Didier Eribon's *Retour à Reims* (2009; *Returning to Reims* 2013a) for the publishing house Suhrkamp,⁹ a book in which the author-narrator reflects on his family and upbringing, and condemns the homophobia he faced and the manifold obstacles he encountered in his career due to his social origins. By analysing his own trajectory, Eribon draws attention to overarching class differences, shedding light on social phenomena such as the migration of left-wing voters from working-class backgrounds to the far-right populist party *Front National* (now *Rassemblement National*).

Retour à Reims became an enormous success in Germany (even more so than in France), and has been extensively studied as an extraordinary phenomenon

9 *Rückkehr nach Reims* (2016).

of delayed reception and international transfer (Kargl/Terrisse 2020: 5).¹⁰ Its publication coincided with the rise of right-wing populism across Europe in general, and the entry of the right-wing populist party *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD) into the German parliament in particular. 2017 saw a renewed focus on France as the German public observed with keen interest the newly elected President Emmanuel Macron and the high expectations associated with his leadership. France was also the guest country at the Frankfurt Book Fair, which prompted a heated political argument between Eribon and Macron (see Rhein 2020).¹¹ Subsequently, Eribon's profile has transformed into that of a prominent public intellectual, turning him into a much sought-after French representative in discussions pertaining to the rise of right-wing nationalist inclinations, the trajectory of the working class, or even broader socio-economic matters (Hiden 2020: 105–6). Eribon's insights, already expressed in *Retour à Reims*, have evidently been regarded as applicable beyond national borders (Ernst 2020: 80), a remarkable reception attributable not only to the prevailing socio-political climate, but also to the distinctive form of his work: arguably, it was precisely the hybrid nature of his publications, their oscillating between autobiographical self-description and political-sociological analysis, that allowed them to resonate in such a broad range of social, political, and literary contexts.¹²

10 In the year of its publication alone, the book sold an impressive 90,000 copies in Germany; it had taken six years to reach 65,000 copies sold in France (see Kargl/Terrisse 2000: 5; Edy 2000: 93).

11 Macron was scheduled to give a speech during the Fair's opening night; hence, Eribon declined the invitation to attend and opted to publish a counter-speech instead (see Eribon 2017).

12 Eribon's recourse to autobiographical *topoi* and the dramatic procedures of tragedy, in particular, has served as a major source of inspiration for other writers and artists. The most striking similarity is with Édouard Louis's debut novel, *En finir avec Eddy Bellegueule* (2014; *The End of Eddy* 2017), in which Louis (who studied sociology in Amiens and later in Paris at the École nationale supérieure, where he found mentorship in Eribon) recounts his challenging upbringing in northern France. Both works share the common theme of racism, violence, and homophobia in their authors' milieu of origin, and the sense of being an outsider in the intellectual circles of Paris. The generic hybridity of *En finir* is exemplified by Thomas Ostermeier's 2017 theatrical adaptation at the Schaubühne Berlin (Kargl/Terrisse 2020: 5–6). Louis's subsequent works, *Histoire de la violence* (2016; *History of Violence* 2018) and *Qui a tué mon père* (2018; *Who Killed My Father* 2019), were likewise staged by Ostermeier in 2018 and 2020, respectively.

Since then, hybrid texts of this kind have gained much attention internationally, and, by turning towards the factual, to social analysis and commentary, seem to be moving away from certain forms of autofictional writing, the hitherto prevalent paradigm. Ironically, the 2022 conferral of the Nobel Prize to Ernaux, whose texts were then hailed as autofictional, may be seen as the present pinnacle of the favourable reception of such writings with a noticeable claim to factuality (more on this later) that reflect and analyse conflicted class relations and various forms of discrimination in an autobiographical mode. Ernaux's first text classified as autosociobiographical was published in 1983: *La Place* (*A Man's Place*, 2012) is about her father and his 'place' in society, described from the perspective of a daughter painfully alienated from her family after becoming a teacher and writer. Outside of France, this and other early works did not receive much attention prior to the completely unexpected international success of *Les Années* (2008; *The Years* 2017).¹³ Generally speaking, Ernaux's works negotiate her social origins and gender issues, with her personal experiences depicted as shaped by collective identities and frequently expressed by a transpersonal 'I' (*je transpersonnel*, Ernaux 1993).

In her attempt at creating a sense of "critical self-distance" (Blome et al. 2022: 7) in a literary form, Ernaux draws heavily on the works and methodological approaches of the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. Bourdieu's contributions to sociological theory as well as to the sociologies of education and aesthetics have had a profound impact on a broad range of academic disciplines, but also on literature. His autobiographical *Esquisse pour une auto-analyse* (*Sketch for a Self-Analysis*), a key source of inspiration for French writers like Eribon, Ernaux, and Édouard Louis, was first published posthumously in a German translation in 2002 – again by Suhrkamp – even before appearing in French and English in 2004. Prefaced with an ironic reference to René Magritte that challenges the very notion of autobiography ("Ceci n'est pas une autobiographie", Bourdieu 2004: 5), the text reflects on Bourdieu's career as a scholar and situates his work in the post-1950s French intellectual field. As he discusses the balancing act between his milieu of origin and his milieu of arrival, Bourdieu employs the term *habitus clivé* (cleft habitus) to describe his own intellectual non-conformity and methodological unconventionality (Bourdieu 2002: 130–1). Rejecting the conventional autobiographical mode of showcasing the

13 Published in France in 2008 and in Germany in 2017 (again by Suhrkamp), *Les Années* links the author's life story to the overarching social history of France from 1941 to 2006.

author-narrator's uniqueness, his sober self-analysis paradoxically helps him to interpret his distinguished career as an anomaly within his own theoretical framework as laid out in *La distinction* (1979), where he denounces the reproduction of social inequalities and class differences.

But what are the reasons for and preconditions of this rare exception to the principle of social reproduction? In her 2014 essay *Les transclasses ou la non-reproduction*, the French philosopher Chantal Jaquet followed up on Bourdieu's reflections and analysed the conditions that enable individual upward social trajectories. In so doing, she introduced the term *transclasse* (analogous to the term 'transsexual') to describe those who have managed to transition between social classes. This process is often painful and likely to result in feelings of estrangement: *transclasse* individuals experience a profound sense of ambivalence, grappling with the perception of having 'betrayed' their former social class while simultaneously being reduced to mere actors trying to adopt the codes and norms of their new social environment. Jaquet's essay can be seen as a transdisciplinary exploration of a blind spot within sociology that she navigated by drawing upon philosophical models and by using literary texts, including autobiographies, as her objects of study. In the context of the Franco-German reception of autosociobiographical texts, it is interesting to note that literary scholar Carlos Spoerhase contributed an epilogue to the German edition of Jaquet's essay wherein he elaborated on the explicit link between her own work and contemporary autosociobiographical writing (Spoerhase 2018: 244), which he himself was among the first German scholars to examine in 2017.¹⁴

While the years 2016 to 2018 marked an important milestone in the research and theorisation of the texts in question, the first profound attempt at defining their "narrative format"¹⁵ was undertaken by Eva Blome in 2020 (545). Blome identifies autosociobiographies as individual life stories that tell of an upward social movement through education (numerous obstacles notwithstanding) while simultaneously analysing the mechanisms that govern the reproduction and non-reproduction of social relations.¹⁶ Focusing on French

14 In his previous paper, Spoerhase addressed works by Louis and Eribon along with J.D. Vance's *Hillbilly Elegy. A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis* (2016), published against the backdrop of the election of Donald Trump as the 45th President of the USA (see Spoerhase 2017).

15 "narratives Format".

16 "Es handelt sich dabei um Darstellungen individueller Lebensgeschichten, die von einem Klassenwechsel qua Bildung und dessen Hindernissen erzählen und sich zu-

and German texts, Blome characterises autosociobiographies as *narratives of return*: the protagonist's visit to their former home (often occasioned by the death of a family member) triggers a reflection on intergenerational relations, including the description of class dynamics (Blome 2020: 548–52).

Moreover, autosociobiographical texts seem to negotiate and transcend all forms of symbolic demarcation: on a broader systemic level, they traverse boundaries of genre (see below) and media, as they often contain prominently featured photos, film stills, and historical documents (Blome 2020: 552–7); on a thematic level, they are characterised by “individual acts of border crossing” (Lammers/Twellmann 2023: 54) – most notably, of course, between social classes – that are linked to spatial distance and generational differences (Blome 2020: 547). Having traversed these boundaries, the writers act as “translators of the social” (Spoerhase 2017: 35),¹⁷ explaining lower-class social realities to a mostly higher-class reading public.

At the same time, Blome points out, many of the texts under consideration here testify to a practice of overt intertextual exchange between sociology and literature: for example, Ernaux, Eribon, and Louis portray their work as an extension or contemplation of Bourdieu's theories through explicit references within their texts and interviews, and Eribon and Louis are directly involved in researching their precursor's work (see, for example, Louis 2013);¹⁸ Louis dedicated his first novel *En finir avec Eddy Bellegueule* (2014; *The End of Eddy* 2017) to Eribon; and German authors such as Daniela Dröschner, Christian Baron, and Thomas Melle also cite the works of Eribon, Louis, and Bourdieu as a key impetus for their own writing (see Blome 2020: 564).¹⁹ Public references to each other can likewise be interpreted as a strategy to signal a “specific collectivity” (Blome et al. 2022: 10).

gleich als Analysen der Mechanismen von Reproduktion und Nicht-Reproduktion bestehender Sozialverhältnisse zu erkennen geben.” (Blome 2020: 542)

17 “Übersetzer des Sozialen”.

18 An ongoing research project at the RPTU Kaiserslautern-Landau is dedicated to the scientific and literary reception of Bourdieu in French contemporary literature: <http://ksw.rptu.de/abt/romanistik/mitarbeiterinnen/prof-dr-gregor-schuhen/dfg-projekt-t-bourdieu-erben-zur-rueckkehr-der-klassenfrage-in-der-franzoesischen-gegenwartsliteratur>

19 See for example Daniela Dröschner's *Zeige deine Klasse* [Show your class] (2018), Christian Baron's *Ein Mann seiner Klasse* [A man of his class] (2020), and Thomas Melle's *Die Welt im Rücken* (2016), *The World At My Back* (2023).

Marcus Twellmann, meanwhile, has reconstructed the unique reception of British cultural historian Richard Hoggart's *Uses of Literacy* (1957) in France by intermediaries like Jean-Claude Passeron and Claude Grignon (Twellmann 2022: 99–100). In English-speaking literatures, the engagement of authors such as Liz Heron (*Truth, Dare or Promise: Girls Growing Up in the Fifties* 1985) and Richard Rodriguez (*Hunger for Memory: The Education of Richard Rodriguez* 1982)²⁰ with Hoggart's work may itself be understood as a certain form of performative class formation ("Klassenhandeln", Nollmann 2008: 188), which in turn suggests a re-evaluation of 'class' as a category that is based on a shared consensus on norms and values rather than on professional affiliation or union membership.²¹ It seems, then, that the emphasis on class addresses and negotiates a broader spectrum of delineations and constraints that are entangled with discriminatory practices.

What this brief overview reveals is that both the success of the texts under discussion *and* the success of the theoretical concept of autosociobiography have been significantly influenced by political and academic discourses as well as cultural actors and institutions (the publishing house Suhrkamp and the theatre Schaubühne Berlin are but two of many examples) – in fact, the prominent role played by German academics in this process has prompted Philipp Lammers and Marcus Twellmann to ironically inquire if the notion of autosociobiography should not be classified as a mere scholarly whim (a "caprice allemand", Lammers/Twellmann 2021) or a "German re-invention of a French genre and its history" (Lammers/Twellmann 2023: 48).

While, as stated above, the story of the emergence of autosociobiography may be told in the form of a Franco-German *histoire croisée*, it is our contention that these transnational and transdisciplinary processes are but a small part of this literary phenomenon's wider – that is, *global* – entanglements. Accordingly, recent research has already turned its attention to writings from other contexts that function in comparable ways, with Hoggart's *Uses of Literacy* (see above) and bell hook's *Class Matters* (2000) being adduced as two especially striking discussions of the *transclasse* experience that predate Eribon's works

20 For a detailed exploration of Hoggart's reception by Richard Rodriguez and the evolution of the social archetype of the *scholarship boy*, see Spoerhase 2022.

21 The postulate of the death of social class emerged in the 1980s and 1990s across Germany, Great Britain, and the USA. It was not the idea of group-related social inequalities in general that was rejected, but the (supposedly antiquated) notion of class in particular (see Nollmann 2008: 193).

and originate from a different social and cultural environment (see Blome et al. 2022: 8–9; Twellmann 2022: 93–5). Further examples could be (and have been) given of texts that qualify as autosociobiographical even though they were written by authors who are neither sociologists nor refer to sociological theories, schools, or movements, and who do not engage in the above-mentioned reference practice (e.g. Saša Stanišić, Darren McGarvey, Kerry Hudson; see Spoerhase 2017; Blome 2020). Clearly, this militates against a too narrow focus of research – instead, what is called for is a broader discussion of what texts may or may not be reasonably identified as autosociobiographical.

2. Genre Trouble

To this day, most scholars working on texts identified as autosociobiographies speak more or less tentatively of a ‘genre in the making’, which is hardly surprising given the problems and limitations inherent in genre distinctions of any kind, not to mention the fact that such classifications are a performative act in which critics and scholars play a decisive role (Blome et al. 2022: 1; Eßlinger 2022: 196–7; Twellmann 2022: 91). Claims for a new genre should therefore be treated with caution. That said, it seems appropriate to discuss in more detail the characteristics of texts that have repeatedly been read as autosociobiographical, and their differences from other forms of life writing.

Modern autobiography has frequently been associated with the emergence of individualism in Early Modern Europe (see Burke 2011), enabling predominantly bourgeois subjects to narrate the formation of distinctive personal identities over the course of their independent lives. Since the 1980s, many feminist and postcolonial critics, chief among them Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (1988), have observed that the concept itself is a result of not only a Eurocentric, but also a male and bourgeois bias (Rippl 2019: 1266): Autobiography constitutes merely one of many possible forms of life writing.

A central aspect in characterising autosociobiographical texts more accurately within the diversity of life narratives may be an emphasis on *relationality*: their focus lies not so much on individual choices or specific family dynamics (as is frequently the case with ‘classic’ autobiographical writing), but on the exposure of the individual to collective identities and larger social forces. To describe the floating or fluctuating nature of *transclasse* identity, Jaquet has introduced the concept of *complexion*, which refers to a set of diverse characteristics including social position, gender, *race*, sexual orientation, family dy-

namics, and emotional life, that do not, however, add up to a unified, singular identity (see Jaquet 2014: 95–105). On the narrative level, the complex *transclasse* identity can be articulated by the use of the aforementioned *je transpersonnel*, which, rather than propagating an individual style, is characterised by the integration of other voices, for example via the inclusion of different sociolects and idioms. The autobiographical ‘I’ becomes a narrative ‘we’, or, in the case of Ernaux, an unpersonal ‘one’, evoking an alternative concept of subjectivity that challenges the autonomy of the (privileged) individual.²²

This distinct relationality may imply a methodological shift, a turning away from the psychoanalytical paradigm that has often governed autobiographical reflection and towards other explanatory modes. Such a shift is implied in Eribon’s remarks on the explanatory potential of sociology:

Perhaps a sociological vocabulary would do a better job than a psychoanalytic one of describing what the metaphors of mourning and of melancholy allows one to evoke in terms that are simple, but also misleading and inadequate: how the traces of what you were as a child, the manner in which you were socialized, persist even when the conditions in which you live as an adult have changed, even when you have worked so hard to keep that past at a distance. (Eribon 2013a: 18)

While this may first and foremost be the point of view of an academically established sociologist, the question is whether autosociobiographical writing and reading practices indicate that a focus on sociological issues must necessarily sideline the psychoanalytical. In *Cold Intimacies* (2007), sociologist Eva Illouz has shed light on how, under the influence of psychoanalytical concepts, the nuclear family became the twentieth-century cornerstone for “the story and history of the self”, symbolising “a biographical event symbolically carried throughout one’s life and uniquely expressing one’s individuality” (Illouz 2007: 7).²³ While the family is still relevant in Eribon’s above-quoted text, it is perceived primarily as the site where larger, collective, and transgenerational forces are transferred, which in turn shape and bring forth the individual. This perspective chimes with the premises of biographical research, a field that has been developing since the 1960s in association with the sociology of migration

22 Schuhen describes the autosociobiographical ‘I’ as the “carrier of a social identity” (“Träger einer sozialen Identität”, Schuhen 2023: 150).

23 On the nexus between psychoanalytical concepts and twentieth-century autobiography, see Holdenried 2019.

and that postulates the necessity for biography and family history to reconstruct long-term processes of change and development in social phenomena (see Rosenthal 2019).

Professionally motivated as it may be, the foregrounding of sociology by the trained (and academically successful) sociologist Eribon raises the question of how 'sociological' a given text needs to be in order to be read as autosociobiographical – after all, works such as Darren McGarvey's *Poverty Safari: Understanding the Anger of Britain's Underclass* (2017) and Saša Stanišić's *Herkunft* (2019; *Where You Come From* 2021) have been read as autosociobiographies even though they do not draw on specific sociological studies, schools, or concepts. In cases like these, academic credentials appear to have been supplanted by a widened social scope and much more far-reaching aims. In a sense, the texts in question embark on what Eribon, in *La société comme verdict* [Society as a verdict] (2013b), calls the "recuperation"²⁴ of one's own past: here, "the narrative subjects not only claim interpretive sovereignty over their own lives, but also over the social present in which they actively participate as actors and to which they feel equally exposed" (Blome et al. 2022: 3);²⁵ here, the authoritative aspect becomes a defining feature that outweighs traditional questions pertaining to the demarcation of autobiographical genres, like the one of fact vs fiction (see Blome et al. 2022: 3–4).

It could thus be argued that what is indispensable is not sociological analysis in a narrow sense, but rather a *sociological gesture*. In the words of literary sociologist Carolin Amlinger, the texts in question "lay claim to sociological insights by *narrating* the I as a social fact" (Amlinger 2022: 44).²⁶ From this perspective, credentials in a particular scholarly discipline are less important than the insights into larger social dynamics enabled by the narration of a personal

24 "[T]he reconciliation with oneself and the re-appropriation of one's own past [cannot] be accomplished by simply 'going back' to what was once left behind". "[C]'est que la réconciliation avec soi-même, la récupération de son passé, ne peut pas s'opérer comme un simple retour à ce qu'on a quitté" (Eribon 2013b: 96).

25 "Mit der Begriffsumbildung zur 'Autosociobiographie' geht eine Verlagerung des bekannten autobiographischen Authentizitätsversprechens einher. Die Aussagen der Erzählsjekte beanspruchen nicht nur die Deutungshoheit über das eigene Leben, sondern auch gegenüber der sozialen Gegenwart, an der sie als Akteur:innen aktiv mitwirken und der sie sich gleichermaßen ausgesetzt fühlen."

26 "Sie behaupten soziologische Erkenntnisse, indem sie das Ich als sozialen Tatbestand erzählen."

life experience. Their ambition to contribute to a broader socio-political discourse may even mark such texts as a form of committed literature (*littérature engagée*, see Schuhen 2023) that challenges the standards of the social sciences as well as received assumptions about literariness, especially with regard to the criterion of fictionality. Such a commitment is implied or even made explicit in many texts, most prominently by way of subtitles as in McGarvey's *Poverty Safari* (see above) and J.D. Vance's *Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis* (2016).

While such intra- and paratextual statements insist on the social relevance of literature, they also draw attention to the role of the author-figure as an authority turned public intellectual due to their personal experience and analytical insights. In this context, the notion of authenticity has been highlighted by several critics.²⁷ Yet whereas all of the texts in question claim that their narrative is based on personal experience, and whereas one may speak of an alignment between self-representation in the media and an individual's biographical data,²⁸ scholars of autosociobiography have argued that things are, in fact, considerably more complex – according to Amlinger, for instance, autosociobiographical texts actually attempt to move away from what she calls the “authenticity function” of the subjective (autobiographical) narration, and instead prioritise an “ontological truth function” (Amlinger 2022: 45).²⁹

Moreover, the recurring invocation of ‘truth’ and ‘authenticity’ in academic debates should not obscure the fact that autosociobiographical texts themselves exhibit an acute awareness of the constructedness of these concepts that becomes tangible, for example, in their deliberate use of literary methods and procedures. As a result, these texts manufacture a kind of “second-order authenticity” (Weixler 2012: 9), showcasing and creatively negotiating the

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- 27 Authenticity can, as Martina Wagner-Egelhaaf suggests, be understood as the impossible, yet relevant ideal that “guide[s] both the production and reception of texts” (Wagner-Egelhaaf 2005: 4), even if it cannot be considered a feature of the text itself.
- 28 Susanne Knaller has dubbed the latter aspect “subject authenticity” (*Subjektauthentizität*), differentiating it from “reference authenticity” (*Referenzauthentizität*) and the “authenticity of art” (*Kunstaauthentizität*), the first being actualised via external references to authorising entities or institutions, and the second taking the form of self-referentiality, thereby also emphasising the autonomy of art (Knaller 2007: 22).
- 29 “Die personale Authentizitätsfunktion, die Autobiographien oftmals zugeschrieben wird, rückt so zugunsten einer ontologischen Wahrheitsfunktion in den Hintergrund.”

customary norms of autobiographical reception and sociological analysis,³⁰ which in turn allows them to operate as “liminal narratives” (Amlinger 2022: 45)³¹ that self-critically aim at fusing the literary with social reality.

Identifying these characteristics accentuates the manifold entanglements reflected on and enacted within these texts (most prominently the fusion of the sociological and the literary, the interplay between individual and collective identities and experiences, and the relationships in which these texts and their authors stand to each other), but it also leads back to the question as to whether it makes sense to speak of autosociobiography as a literary genre. The similarities between the above-mentioned texts are indeed striking, and their features appear quite distinct from many other forms of life writing – yet in some cases, the dividing lines are much less clear-cut: autoethnography and its variants, which include collectivised life narratives told from the margins of a dominant culture, is just one of several examples that come to mind (Smith/Watson: 258–9).³²

Were we to consider genres as more or less clearly demarcated literary ‘types’, this would obviously be problematic; if, however, we conceded that ‘doing’ genre is not about the ultimately doomed exercise of establishing typological systems, but rather constitutes a symbolic action guiding literary reception, we might yet salvage the term as an investigative lens. Thus understood, genre draws attention to particular features, suggesting (or even demanding) certain lines of inquiry. In the case of autosociobiography, these may include questions about how competing notions of ‘class’ are reflected in a given text (see below), what modes of exclusion operate in supposedly homogenous groups, or how and why parallel social developments emerge in different cultural contexts (see Twellmann 2022: 95–7). The extent to which such queries would have to differ from the ones suggested by, for instance, autoethnographic readings remains to be explored.

Conceptualising genre in this way addresses another problem otherwise attached to European or Western genre classifications: any attempt to ‘apply’

30 “Erzählformen, die ihren Status als ‘vermittelte Unmittelbarkeit’ explizit reflektieren und thematisieren, rufen eine *Authentizität der zweiten Ordnung* hervor, die ich als metadiskursive Authentizität bezeichne.”

31 “Grenzerzählungen”.

32 “Informed by recent work in autobiography, autoethnographic methods recognize the reflections and refractions of multiple selves in contexts that arguably transform the authorial ‘I’ to an existential ‘we’.” (Spry 2001: 710–1)

them beyond their original contexts entails the risk of marginalising or appropriating the diversity of literary modes outside its original focus. As has become evident, the features outlined in this section are shared by texts of French, German, British, Spanish, and US-American origin. With what right and to what extent can this diagnosis be extended to non-European and/or non-Western contexts? Using genre in the above sense invites non-hierarchical comparisons, focused, for example, on identifying different modes of social exclusion and their intersection in different societies, as well as their literary reflections; and as generic ‘standards’ recede into the background, so does the question: “Should we call this text an autosociobiography?”

This is not to say that the question of what may or may not constitute autosociobiography as a genre in a more classical sense is devoid of interest. On the contrary: its relation to and dependence on other forms of life writing past and present is still to be clarified and demands further critical exploration. Following this call will – again – turn the spotlight on processes of genre formation and how they respond to the input of diverse actors, all of whom intervene according to their own perspectives and interests. What taking autosociobiography seriously as a ‘genre in the making’ means, then, is to understand it performatively: as a process and as the product of a multitude of entanglements which readers and critics are able to observe (and contribute to) in real time.

3. Beyond Class?

The question of how contemporary works identified as autosociobiographical relate to earlier forms of textual production implies asking about the time-boundedness of the phenomenon: are there any particular social problems which can account for the rise of this kind of writing in the past years? German scholarship seems to be leaning towards an affirmative answer. Sociologist Oliver Nachtwey, for instance, speaks of a “seismographic” function of literature as it responds to the decreasing permeability of income strata and the widespread pessimism with regard to social mobility in most states of the capitalist West (Nachtwey 2018: 8) – an assessment he links to Colin Crouch’s (2004) view of the political system as elitist, post-democratic, and characterised by the decline in political participation of a disillusioned working class. As autosociobiographical texts seem to promise insights into the motives and mindset of those ‘left behind’, it is relatively easy to explain why they resonate so powerfully with the current media environment (as we have seen in

the reception of Eribon's *Retour à Reims* and McGarvey's *Poverty Safari*).³³ However, the existence of texts like Hoggart's aforementioned *The Uses of Literacy* from 1957 complicates matters somewhat, as it tells of *transclasse* experiences and classist discrimination well before the socio-political decline diagnosed by Crouch. Whether these issues are addressed in even earlier works – and if yes, what that means for the (historical) relationship between the analysis of social dynamics and autobiographical reflection – remains an open question.

All this challenges us to inquire after the concept of class, and, in turn, its historicity: in what way is the notion of autosociobiography tied to the concept of class, or, again, to specific sociological schools of thought? While the works of Bourdieu have had a major impact on Ernaux, Eribon, and Louis, for someone like Vance, US-American notions of class appear to play a much more prominent role: when, for example, the latter reflects on the benefits of 'social capital' without mentioning any theoretical position by name, we may suspect closer ties to the ideas of Robert D. Putnam than to those of Bourdieu.³⁴ By the same token, one may suppose that the 'working-class' to which he refers is not identical with the one we encounter in European texts such as McGarvey's *Poverty Safari* or Hudson's *Lowborn. Growing Up, Getting Away and Returning to Britain's Poorest Towns* (2019) – none of which tie class to any sociological theories whatsoever. As social reference points shift depending on their political (and historical) contexts, there may well be a far greater diversity of notions of class than scholarship on autosociobiography has acknowledged so far.

While the focus on class is quite evident in the texts hitherto mentioned, it is far from the only kind of social discrimination that autosociobiographical writing may address. Indeed, although class functions as the main category of difference in prototypically autosociobiographical works and is being reflected as such in current research, many narrator-protagonists explicitly situ-

33 Sociological research has explored the transition from post-industrial societies to "knowledge societies" ("Wissensgesellschaften", Rohrbach 2008: 17), which conceive of knowledge as a form of human capital. While education has expanded, it has not reduced social inequalities grounded on urban-rural disparities, *race*, and/or class (Hadjar/Becker 2006: 12). Most studies focus on data from Western, European, or at least OECD countries, although it has been noted that the expansion of higher education constitutes a world-wide phenomenon in the twentieth century (see Meyer/Schofer 2005). How the highly divergent local manifestations of this process and the concomitant inequalities are negotiated in the literatures of the respective countries has yet to be examined in detail.

34 A general reference to Putnam can be found in the introduction (Vance 2016: 8).

ate themselves on the intersection of economic disadvantage and one or several other forms of discrimination and repression based on factors such as sex/gender (Dröschner, Hudson), sexual orientation (Eribon, Louis), and *race*/ethnicity (Slaoui, *Illégitimes* [Illegitimates] 2021).

Intersectionality can be conceptualised from various theoretical perspectives. Some approaches, often based on Kimberly Crenshaw's coinage of the term within a legal context, have considered it to be the sum of distinct and analytically separable categories. However, Marxist (Bohrer 2019) and decolonial (Lugones 2010; Vergès 2021) theorists and activists have outlined alternative, more dynamic models that challenge this notion, focusing instead on the intricacies and interdependencies among *race*, sexuality/gender, and class, a relationship which Ashley Bohrer calls "equiprimordial" (Bohrer 2019: 196). In addition to these conceptions, there is the core Marxist critique which claims class to be the most fundamental category of all (Roldán Mendiál/Sarbo 2022), with other forms of oppression understood as epiphenomena of the division of labour. Against the backdrop of this academic debate, it is not surprising that the texts regarded as autosociobiographical do not necessarily adhere to a uniform interpretation of intersectionality, nor do they present these categories as interconnected in the same way.³⁵ In Eribon's case, for example, the intersectional constellation of the working-class homosexual is presented mainly in the form of a temporal sequence that seems to imply a certain separability and/or hierarchical order of categories:

On thinking the matter through, it doesn't seem exaggerated to assert that my coming out of the sexual closet, my desire to assume and assert my homosexuality, coincided within my personal trajectory with my shutting myself up inside what I might call a class closet. I mean by this that I took on the constraints imposed by a different kind of dissimulation; I took on a different kind of dissociative personality or double consciousness [...]. (Eribon 2013a: 26)³⁶

35 For a more general reflection on intersectionality and life writing, see Smith/Watson 2010: 41–2.

36 "Et, par voie de conséquence, il ne serait pas exagéré d'affirmer que la sortie du placard sexuel, le désir d'assumer et d'affirmer mon homosexualité, coïncidèrent dans mon parcours personnel avec l'entrée dans ce que je pourrais décrire comme un placard social, c'est-à-dire dans les contraintes imposées par une autre forme de dissimulation, un autre type de personnalité dissociée ou de double conscience [...]" (Eribon 2009: 22–3)

In other texts such as Dröscher's *Zeige deine Klasse*, the web of repression seemingly cannot be disentangled: here, the concept of *Herrschaftsknoten* ('domination knots') developed by the German feminist sociologist Frigga Haug is employed to describe the intersectional constellation of being an "upwardly mobile child", a woman, and the daughter of a "foreign" mother (Dröscher 2018: 28).

When speaking of the global entanglements of autosociobiography, it is important to consider these intersectional forms of social exclusion and stratification, not least when turning one's attention to postcolonial or migration literature. Can the focus on and of autosociobiographical texts be expanded beyond class in this way? While there have already been attempts to do so in and with texts of, admittedly, European origin – Christina Ernst, for example, has read transition narratives of transgender persons as autosociobiographies (see Ernst 2022) – the answer to this question remains very much open to debate.

Contributions

Taking their cue from the above, the contributions assembled in this collection discuss autosociobiographical texts and autosociobiographical discourse from a multitude of different perspectives.

In the opening paper, **Sidonie Smith** and **Julia Watson** examine the classification of autosociobiographical texts as a distinct genre. Criticising an overly narrow focus on a *de facto* Franco-German, Western European corpus, they caution against restrictive categorisations that fail to do justice to the richness and variety of life writing around the globe, especially when it is concerned with social injustices. As an alternative, they advocate for a broader *autosocial* reading practice that may be applied to a more heterogeneous body of texts past and present, and that avoids potential theoretical and methodological pitfalls.

Christina Ernst, meanwhile, demonstrates that seminal texts included in the autosociobiographical 'corpus' share intimate connections with non-European literatures and forms of life writing. Central to her analysis is Eribon's intra- and extratextual engagement with the works of Afro-American and postcolonial writers like James Baldwin, Assia Djebar, and Patrick Chamoiseau. As Ernst argues, it is these authors' texts and ideas that led Eribon to develop his "theory of minor subjectivation" (61), which describes the formation of a queer *transclasse* self cognisant of the fact that one's own story necessarily exceeds the

personal and includes wider social dynamics, discourse formations, and historical developments.

In a similar vein, **Thekla Noschka** aims at emphasising hitherto overlooked entanglements negotiated within autosociobiographical texts, criticising the reductionism of approaches that almost exclusively focus on the topic of class and sideline, for instance, the experience of women with a migratory background. In her discussion of Ernaux's *Les Années* (2008) and Mely Kiyak's *Frausein* [Being a woman] (2020), Noschka sheds light on the intricate intersectional positions explored in these texts: by way of transpersonal narration, she argues, they not only address class relations as a gendered and generational construct, but also lay bare this notion's inherent *Whiteness*, which can only be countered by a more detailed examination of the exclusionary mechanisms present in autosociobiographical writings.

Mrunmayee Sathye offers a fundamental critique of autosociobiographical discourse based on her readings of Dalit life writing. Focusing on *Aaydan* by Urmila Pawar (2003), she points out that literary reflections on discrimination and social mobility are neither unique to European authors such as Eribon and Ernaux, nor necessarily centred around European notions of class. Addressing the complex entanglements of caste, class, and gender in the life of women in post-Independence India, Sathye underlines the danger of viewing the plurality of sociocritical life writing around the world yet again through a Eurocentric lens.

Michail Leivadiotis's contribution engages with the historical and cultural entanglements negotiated within autosociobiographical narratives by exploring the works of two nineteenth-century Ionian aristocrats, Elisavet Moutzan-Martinegou and Ermannos Lountzis. Both authors question their own privileged position and employ the means of self-narration to make a *sociological gesture*, envisioning and demanding social progress through education and writing. Extending the autobiographical beyond the personal leads Moutzan-Martinegou to develop a feminist, more inclusive projection of days to come, while Lountzis partakes in nation building after the Greek War of Independence, imagining a new Greece built in a collective process that engages with the past to transform the nation's future.

Likewise focusing on time-related aspects, **Peter Löffelbein** discusses the temporal framing of class in Darren McGarvey's *Poverty Safari* (2017) and Kerry Hudson's *Lowborn* (2019) – texts that draw attention to the relentless temporal Othering the poorest members of British society are being subjected to. Accordingly, the texts in question are driven by the need to bring their narrator-

protagonists' temporality in order, to secure a place in time between a past that never leaves them and a present in which they do not feel entirely at home. Time thus becomes a fundamental dimension of the *transclasse* experience as negotiated in autosociobiographical texts – pieces of writing that themselves reflect and perform a global temporality by creating a shared time for readers and writers in the hope of a more inclusive future.

Jobst Welge compares two family narratives, Carlos Pardo's *El viaje a pie de Johann Sebastian* [Johann Sebastian's Journey on Foot] (2014) and Manuel Vilas's *Ordesa* (2018, *Ordesa* 2020), to highlight contemporary Spanish literature's focus on social class. Vilas's diary-like family history paints a favourable picture of his parents while embracing a fatalistic tone that suggests social advancement is ultimately impossible. Pardo's *El viaje*, meanwhile, emphasises social conditioning and literary self-fashioning, constructing a veritable "historical echo chamber" (176) in the process. The relational poetics adopted in both texts enable a distanced, sociological perspective; Vilas engages readers affectively, while Pardo uses intertextual references to universalise the personal.

In his study of Nakano Kōji's autobiographical writings, **Christopher Schelletter** reflects on the traditions and conventions of Japanese *shishōsetsu* literature. Schelletter concludes that despite their different aesthetic and socio-historical frames of reference, Nakano's texts from the 1970s share the "affective experience of social mobility" (201) with the more recent autosociobiographies of European origin. Although Nakano does not explicitly endorse Marxism, he employs characteristic terms such as 'class' or 'class consciousness' in his portrayal of the unjust social order of pre- and post-war Japan, underscoring the sociological approach evident in the texts under consideration.

Another link to sociology is explored in **Paweł Rodak's** paper, which is dedicated to memoirs composed by Polish peasants and factory workers in response to life writing competitions organised by sociological institutions. Illustrating the enormous scale of this phenomenon in twentieth-century Poland, Rodak examines how the events' calls for contributions and rules of participation resulted in texts that could be regarded as forms of autosociobiography *avant la lettre*. In a further step, he demonstrates that the writings in question challenged received notions of literariness and encouraged the feminisation of autobiographical practice and discourse.

Finally, **Marc Ortmann** sheds fresh light on the nexus of sociology and literature by drawing on the distinction between *author* and *writer* as proposed by Barthes and Bourdieu. Ortmann investigates how friendship is explored as an

alternative life model to the nuclear family by the French sociologist Geoffroy de Lagasnerie. The latter's 3. *Une aspiration au dehors* [3. A longing for the outside] (2023) incorporates the individual perspective of the author and scientist Lagasnerie ('I'), whose friendship with Eribon and Louis forms a triadic constellation ('we') which is then elevated to the level of abstract and sociologically informed reflection. In so doing, Lagasnerie assumes the hybrid role of author-writer, allowing him to employ literary methods to more effectively analyse (and re-evaluate) how sociology and literature negotiate social phenomena through the production of texts.

* * *

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It is our hope that the papers assembled here will yield valuable critical perspectives on the ongoing process of genre-making, encouraging further explorations of autosociobiographical writing in all its spatial and temporal variety, or in other words: its globality.

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