

ALFRED HORNING, ed., *American Lives* (Heidelberg: Winter, 2013), xvii + 563 pp.

This volume edited by Alfred Hornung includes the five keynote lectures plus twenty-four workshop presentations from the 2012 DGfA annual conference on “American Lives” held at the University of Mainz. The collection delves into the myriad variations of American (auto-) biography with its complex, multi-layered modes of story-telling, its various forms and functions, its conceptual frames and narrative strategies to produce authenticity and credibility. And it does so with a vast historical reach, from indigenous and colonial texts to contemporary life writing across genres and media. E-lives, blogs and other social media formats are considered as well as film, photography and graphic story-telling.

The first part of the book presents the keynote lectures of the conference. Sidonie Smith offers a compelling account of how Hillary Clinton’s bestseller *Living History* (2003) shapes a convincing political persona of representative American-ness by drawing on variants of the Bildungsroman, the conventional First Lady Memoir, the buddy story, the celebrity confession and the war memoir. Thomas Bender examines recent biographies about public intellectuals Reinhold Niebuhr, Richard Hofstadter and Christopher Lasch with a focus on intellectual creativity: the formations and transformations that ideas undergo before they appear in print. The contributions by Craig Howes and Birgit Däwes share an interest in Native American life writing. Howes explores nineteenth-century indigenous Hawaiian self-representations as responses to colonization and missionary endeavors while Däwes probes into the emancipatory potential of staged Native American biography. Finally, Siri Hustvedt ventures into the borderlands between life writing and life science where she discusses how the “hard” and “soft” truths of science and art are affected by the choice of first, second or third person narrative.

The following section has a focus on historical variants of (auto-) biographical writing. Patrick Erben traces how the anniversary poems of Francis Daniel Pastorius can be read as a form of immigrant autobiography which deliberately seeks to establish religious community and personal affiliation in a colonial setting. The uneasy relations between Christian ethics and slavery are discussed

by Carsten Junker who reads Samuel West’s unpublished memoirs in dialog with letters from the author’s brother. Kirsten Twelbeck and Hannah Spahn both discuss how life writings help us understand race relations in the context of the Civil War and the Reconstruction period. The diary of Esther Hill Hawks, a white doctor, and the autobiography of Eliza Potter, an Afroamerican hairdresser, offer intriguing insights into the resonances of race and gender, the public and the private, as well as of national identity, social activism and the ambivalences of recognition. This section of the book is rounded out by Kathleen Look’s essay on the functions of humor in early twentieth-century immigrant autobiography. The use of humor, Look argues, signals successful Americanization and the transition from out-group to in-group status.

The essays in the part on politics and American lives range from Dorothy Day’s contested political radicalism and Barack Obama’s autobiographical self-fashioning to discursive shifts in superhero comics and gender politics in Alison Bechdel’s graphic memoirs. Marcus F. Faltermeier takes up the controversy over Dorothy Day’s place in American Catholicism and draws attention to the persistence of ethical self-exploration in her autobiography *The Long Loneliness* (1952). His essay is followed by Kathy-Ann Tan’s reflections on the significance of citizenship and diaspora in the works of Haitian-born authors Edwige Danticat and Dany Laferrière. Cedric Essi reads Barack Obama’s *Dreams from My Father* as a mixed race memoir pushing against its own boundaries, striving for transnational affiliation. Christina Gerken explores how the controversy over the DREAM Act produced immigrant narratives much in line with the political sympathies of their respective authors. Essays by Jochen Ecke, Lukas Etter and Eva Boesenberg then take up the issue of the political viability of graphic arts. Jochen Ecke details how Grant Morrison’s miniseries *Flex Mentallo* (1996) reconfigures the superhero format. While Lukas Etter charts the complex references and revisions of self-exploration in Alison Bechdel’s autographics, Eva Boesenberg takes up the death of the protagonist’s father in Bechdel’s *Fun Home* to discuss renegotiations of gender positions in the family.

The section on media and life writing begins with Nassim Winnie Balestrini’s essay on the participatory online project *Learning to Love You More* which Miranda July and

Harrell Fletcher conducted between 2002 and 2009. As Balestrini argues, online photography projects such as this can help challenge conventionalized viewing patterns and offer a space to transgress the comfort zones of habitualized perception. A similar interactive potential is at work in Deep Maps, with an example in which Birgit M. Bauridl investigates “City of Memory,” a site where users can take self-designed “tours” of New York City, hear the testimony of its residents and acquire a sense of the convergences of geographical and cultural spaces. Katja Kanzler then charts the adaptations from the cooking blog “Julie/Julia” to a bestselling book and into film. Her analysis pays particular attention to the streamlining of the autobiographical plot across genres. The four following essays foreground Afroamerican self-representations in various media and genres. Daniel Breitenwischer examines the authenticity claims in success and coming-of-age narratives by rappers Jay-Z and Eminem. Both artists’ claim “to keep it real,” Breitenwischer argues, needs to be recognized as a performative enactment rather than as affirmation of a core self. The many transformations of basketball legend Karim Abdul-Jabbar, aka Lew Alcindor, are the subject of Christoph Ribbat’s article. Abdul-Jabbar’s life writings reveal a vast range of passions and interests, from sports to minority politics. With the final two contributions in this part of the book, film and TV take center stage. Frank Mehring discusses the record of Audre Lorde’s “Berlin Years” as an important episode of Afro-German life writing. Dagmar Schultz’s successful documentary *Audre Lorde: The Berlin Years, 1984-1992* (2012) is read as a twofold autobiography in which the accounts of the protagonist and the film maker resonate with each other. Finally, Julia Faisst explores the HBO series *Treme* with a focus on the (re-) appropriations of real estate and public spaces after Hurricane Katrina.

In the section on life writing and life sciences, Birgit Capelle identifies transcultural structural parallels in the conceptualizations of place in Thoreau’s *Walden* and in the idea

of “basho” in the work of Japanese philosopher Kitarō Nishida. Several of the essays show how artists tap medical conditions to make sense of social and cultural phenomena. Dirk Vanderbeke explains how in Jonathan Lethem’s *Motherless Brooklyn* the Tourette syndrome appears first as a clinical condition of the protagonist but then becomes a master trope for postmodern America. Henrike Lehnguth’s discussion of serial killer narratives exposes how the reader/viewer becomes an unsuspecting accomplice in the (narrative) act due to destabilized conceptions of normality. The two contributions by Martin Holtz and Jan D. Kucharzewski chart the shift from metaphorically conceived deformations of the mind to sustained medical discourse in contemporary film and fiction. Holtz detects this shift in recent films by Martin Scorsese while Kucharzewski registers a veritable “materialization of the self” (523) in many contemporary novels.

The book concludes with a “Panel on Life Sciences and Life Writing” moderated by Mita Banerjee. The panel proceeds from the assumption that the sciences and life writing both generate narratives of human life, and accordingly the panelists emphasize the need for interdisciplinary dialogue and explore possible interfaces and correlations between the disciplines. Academic disciplines owe their shapes and boundaries mostly to a logic of specialization. They do not mirror the dense entanglements of the social and material world. Knowledge accumulates at a staggering speed, yet it frequently lacks the necessary integration into narratives that are both more expansive and synthesized.

In its entirety, the book makes a compelling argument for the study of American culture through life writing if one remains closely attuned to the diversities, contradictions and silences to be encountered along the way. After having finished reading, one wishes for more of these kinds of testimonies which so well articulate the intersections of the private and the public.

Tübingen

Horst Tonn