

Kinship as Relationality, Relationality as Kinship: Inquiries into Contemporary Life Writing

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As an idea that informs a broad range of concepts in philosophy and social and cultural theory, 'relationality' seems at once well-established and open for further explorations. At its most basic, relationality implies that meaning emerges through relations and interdependence rather than in isolation, and that all entities, whether human or more-than-human, are always already part of relations and emerge from them rather than from a position of independence and autonomy.

Since the 1990s, the reflection of such interdependence has become indispensable for the understanding of narrative self-construction in the study of life writing, such as when Paul John Eakin insisted that "all identity is relational, and that the definition of autobiography, and its history as well, must be stretched to reflect the kinds of self-writing in which relational identity is characteristically displayed" (1999, 43-44) and consequently notions of the 'relational self' replaced those of the autonomous subject. Initially, 'kinship' tended to be a primary relation denoting first and foremost 'biological family', with the understanding of 'family' ranging from a constitutive framework for identity and narrative to larger issues of memory, power, and intergenerational transmission and justice.

However, contemporary life writing and the study of it have complicated traditional family narratives, and more recent conceptualizations – e.g. in critical race studies (Essi 2023), queer studies (Garwood 2023), or the Environmental Humanities and posthumanism (Batzke et al. 2021) – have expanded the meaning of kinship to cover other manifestations of relationality as well. Yet, while kinship is thus certainly an important manifestation of relationality, it is – at least for most scholars in the field – not synonymous with it. Rather, kinship as a specific manifestation of relationality overlaps and intersects with other forms of relationality, sometimes reinforcing, sometimes challenging them.

In this workshop, we set out to examine 'kinship' as a specific form of relationality and, conversely, 'relationality' as informing notions of kinship in narrative self-constructions. We invite proposals that address the following and further questions:

- What implicit or explicit role do life writers assign to relationality and kinship?
- When and how is 'relationality' cast as 'kinship' in life writing? What kinds of relations do autobiographical subjects present as kinship and to what effect?
- What role does the experience of intersectionality play for the exploration of relationality and kinship in life writing?
- How are relationality and kinship reflected upon in terms of societal power structures?
- Which aesthetic forms do life writers choose to negotiate relations and kinship between human and more-than-human entities? How does form impact the conceptualization of kinship and relationality and, conversely, how do notions of relationality and kinship influence form?
- How do specific media impact how relationality and kinship are constructed in life writing?

- How are neighboring concepts such as filiation, affiliation, or solidarity reflected upon in life writing and as forms of kinship?
- To what effect are relationality and kinship explored in collaborative life writing?
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Confirmed speaker: Martha Swift (Oxford University).

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References

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