

KATJA KURZ, *Narrating Contested Lives: The Aesthetics of Life Writing in Human Rights Campaigns* (Heidelberg: Winter, 2015), 271 pp.

More than any other genre, life writing illustrates the interdependence of narrative strategies and cultural understandings of selfhood and recognition. Selves are performed narratively, through memories pieced together anew for an audience. To be believable, life narratives cater to cultural concepts of sincerity and authenticity; to evoke empathy, they employ culturally available plots from the literary realm. Treading this thin line between the literary and the sociocultural realms, a cast of interdisciplinary scholars from literary and cultural studies, rhetoric criticism, philosophy, and the social sciences have examined the narrative assemblage of cultured selves. Katja Kurz's doctoral thesis, *Narrating Contested Lives*, contributes a new angle in this field. It examines life writing designed to incite activism, empathy, and involvement in international human rights campaigns. As vehicle of political activism, this form of autobiography builds on subjecthood in Western human rights laws and speaks for victimized groups.

*Narrating Contested Lives* develops an interdisciplinary view that roots in life writing and forages into philosophy, psychology and anthropology. The author locates the project in American Studies in a double sense, regarding, first, the reception context (human rights campaigns are directed at an American-European public), and second the transnational turn that views U.S. national culture in a greater continuum of cultural flows and mobilities (1, 43).

*Narrating Contested Lives* thus demonstrates how literary studies lays bare the strategies of political activism. Kurz selects campaigns that deal with female genital mutilation (FGM), child soldiers, and sexual violence against women of ethnic minorities (6). She close-reads six cases of campaign-embedded collaborative life writing, including the books by Somalian top model Waris Dirie and Somali-German activist Korn, the child soldiers Ishmael Beah and Emmanuel Jal (the latter UK gospel musician and hip hop artist), and the women activists Halima Bashir in the "Save Darfur"-campaign and Somaly Mam, who became a media icon in the U.S. These are selected for their "contemporary, US-based production and reception, [as] bestsell-

ing auto/biographies [...presenting] women and children as vulnerable groups in international law" (3-4). To show how life stories are made "legible to the public and how they attempt to gather support and empathy" (5-6), Kurz focuses on genre, narrative modes, and collaborations between activists and coauthors. She reads together the auto/biographies with the paratexts and the discourses of the campaigns at large to extrapolate the entanglement between lived experience, subjective truths, sincerity, trust, and authenticity (42). *Narrating Contested Lives* thus addresses how culturally remote and victimized identities are reassembled in conclusive narratives that present a sane, (partially) healed, activist-narrator-self speaking to her American-European audience.

Since Kurz devises her own method for reading her corpus, the study faces the challenge of mapping the state of interdisciplinary research in the opening chapters leading up to the campaign readings. Her strategy renders it difficult to identify the state of research and scholarly location of the study. In the introduction, the author name-checks "transnational American studies, life writing and human rights" (1); the theory chapter's first part postulates law and literature as "interdisciplinary spaces" and proceeds to an essayistic treatment of life writing, human rights, and empathy/affect. This part (13-40) wedges life writing in between other debates, without a road map for orientation. While the overall linkage between life writing and human rights becomes clear, the "interdisciplinary space" evoked here appears fragmented. Readers from life writing, literary studies, human rights jurisdiction, or American Studies, are tasked with mining for their disciplines. In particular, three interrelated questions come to mind: First, about the link between self-narration and embodiment, second, about the cultural value attributed to authenticity and sincerity, and third, about the cultural specifics impacted by *Transnational American Studies*.

The brief section dedicated to "human rights, enabling fictions and the question of form" (24-27) cites the novel as origin of human rights discourses, pleading for a study of genre instead of theme. However, it neglects the issue of corporeality (included in the cloud of terms on the book cover), both with regard to law discourses and self-narration. Kurz also discusses the breach of Philippe Lejeune's au-

tobiographical pact when coauthors and ghost writers mold autobiographies into pieces of activist literature. However, she links self-narration not to the autobiographical tradition but to the affective turn in the social sciences (30). Kurz argues with psychologist Paul Slovic that a single individual's story has a bigger impact than group narratives, and compellingly critiques Slovic's neglect of cultural perspective. She points out that (lacking) prosocial behavior is influenced by the fact that "we do not value all lives in the same way" (32). This assertion gestures at cognitive narratology, rhetoric criticism and the philosophy of narrative identity that might have anchored this book more firmly in Literary and Transnational American Studies. Conversely, Kurz links this idea to marketability and the commodity status of life writing, transitioning towards the impact of the human rights campaigns. The impression that literary studies and narratology should have weighed in more gains further traction when reading the final part of chapter 1, which summarizes the methodology and approach (40-43). Kurz's aims, as she states here, include uncovering the "narratological strategies used in the text" with a "special emphasis [...] on the collaboration with coauthors" to demonstrate how human rights campaigns have created their "own forms of recognition in terms of language and genre" (41). This clarifies the potential of Kurz's study: to establish human rights discourses (including life writing and paratexts for advertising and critical reception) as a distinct genre of cultural (self-) production.

From a literary studies perspective, *Narrating Contested Lives* falls a little short of these aims, due to the usage and application of terminology. Throughout the book, the components of literary genre and narratological analysis paraded in the beginning are marginalized. Kurz frequently uses genre labels (celebrity memoir, travel adventure, survivor's story, conversion narrative, confessional, auto/ethnography) without delving into their histories and conventions, thus blurring rather than illuminating the confluence between literary and cultural components in human rights campaigns. In this regard, a more detailed distinction of *Narrating Contested Lives* from the method and approach of Joseph R. Slaughter's *Human Rights, Inc. The World Novel, Narrative Form and International Law* (2007) is recommended. Americanist readers might trip over the mentioning

of the American slave narrative when talking about the function and reception context (22, 30, 37). This is explored further in the chapter in human trafficking, albeit in a truncated way. Kurz merely reiterates to critics' readings of Mam's story as slave narrative (170-72); a little further down, she maintains that Mam "never [thought] it possible to leave" (178), which distinguishes Mam's from the American slave narrative. The study here misses this opportunity to foster a more distinct cultural link between human rights campaigns and abolitionism, to flesh out the linkage with the slave narrative, and to ask about the aesthetic and philosophical foundations of both.

In contrast to these theoretical weaknesses, the analysis part of the study yields a host of intriguing insights. Kurz treats the three issues of human rights campaigns in three chapters, focusing on FGM, child soldiers and human trafficking. While the chapters are structured differently, each features a part on "Authorship, collaboration and truth claims" in the texts Kurz analyzes (35-56, 84-85, 116-19, 137-40, 167-70 and 203-07). These parts of varying length and detail might easily be overlooked (given they have no chapter numbers), but when read together, they function as a scaffolding for the individual argument Kurz makes about the campaigns and their protagonists. These chapters outline the debates around the campaigns and the bone of contention at the heart of life writing in human rights campaigns: articulating a survivor's voice in a story that appeals to an audience invested in Western literature and justice concepts.

Kurz's analysis yields a layered and multifaceted perspective on life writing in human rights campaigns. In each of her chapters, Kurz addresses the cultural gaps and shortcuts inherent in this process in each of the chapters: talking about FGM, she pits the aggressive feminist activism of supermodel Dirie against Korn's more conciliatory stance, contextualizing Dirie's cosmopolitanism and beauty narrative (even though only one page is dedicated to Dirie's biopic, which capitalizes on this angle). The comparison also shows the wide range between moral condemnation of FGM practitioners and a cultural relativist grassroots approach that addresses individual members of the practicing communities. In the chapter on child soldiers and warfare, Kurz demonstrates how the two narratives of Beah and Jal oscillate between autobiography and fiction, literature and music, ethnic identity and religious

conversion, and last but not least, the palatable story, as the sales of Beah's *A Long Way Gone* in Starbucks coffee shops reveals. Sustaining the company's charitable image, for their customers, Beah's memoir linked consumerism to a general good feeling of humanitarian cause. The chapter on child soldiers is also remarkable for its discussion of narrative reliability, genre convention, authorship and childhood: the reception of the Beah's and Jal's books hinges on the reviewers's disappointment with the lack of metanarrative reflection of the adult author on his childhood killing rampages (145). This expectation reiterates the challenge of child soldier campaigns to reconcile the images of victim of military abuse and predator. Children with guns are hard enough to stomach, but the narrative convention of the war memoir requires that the adult narrator intervene in the childhood narrative to acknowledge the atrocities committed. Finally, the chapter on Somaly Mam's and Halima Bashir's anti-sex-trafficking activism canvasses the question of corporeality and the impact of an attractive face on the life story and campaign: Mam's close ties to the fashion and film industries, as well as her partnership with the Body Shop for merchandise, clash with Bashir's burka-veiled

identity and "reluctant" activism. Bashir, a doctor, had her story ultimately taken over by the larger "Save Darfur" campaign.

Kurz's study unfolds its potential in her three analyses of FGM, child soldiers, and human trafficking of women of color. The complexity of these issues, the richness (in quality and quantity) of the corpus selected, and the intersection of marketability, cultural narrative convention, and individual suffering represent a task Kurz manages most conclusively in her analyses. Her study is commendable for its treatment of a complex field, even if (or because?) it also reveals the typical complications of a complex interdisciplinary approach. Scholars will find this a starting promising point to define the literary and life writing dimension of human rights campaign narratives, and to claim this genre as a field of critical inquiry in and through (transnational) American Studies. In this sense, the title *Narrating Contested Lives: The Aesthetics of Life Writing in Human Rights Campaigns* reads as double reference to both the life stories and the method of analysis for reading human rights campaigns: both remain contested.

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