

ALEXANDRA WAGNER, *Wissen in der Autobiographie: Zur narrativen Konstruktion von Wissensordnungen in US-amerikanischen autobiographischen Texten* (Trier: WVT, 2014), 232 pp.

The field of autobiography studies, as Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson have proposed, has taken on “virtually intergalactic” proportions in the past few decades (ix), enlivened by the growing recognition of the interdependencies and fragmentations of writing subjects through fields such as postcolonial studies,¹ ecocriticism, and disability studies. Alexandra Wagner’s *Wissen in der Autobiographie: Zur narrativen Konstruktion von Wissensordnungen in US-amerikanischen autobiographischen Texten* adds to this ever expanding field by examining the interconnections between literature and knowledge through the genre of autobiography. In her elegant study, Wagner investigates the ways in which the genre shapes the production and representation of knowledge, considering autobiography as a specific knowledge system characterized by a poetics of knowledge (as developed by Jacques Rancière and Joseph Vogl) situated between fact and fiction (3). The book is organized into five main sections. Following an introduction and general overview of the role of narrative and knowledge in autobiography (section II), Wagner theorizes narrative points of view, motivations, the role of the addressee, and temporal and spatial dimensions of autobiographical writing (section III). In section IV, which takes up about half of the study, Wagner pursues close readings of (mostly) American autobiographical texts to exhibit the various orders of knowledge in the genre. She closes with an exemplary reading of Dave Eggers’s *What Is the What: The Autobiography of Valentino Deng. A Novel* (2007) as a contemporary example of the fusion between fact and fiction in autobiographical writing that serves to recap some of her study’s major claims.

Genre, according to Wagner, goes beyond mere classification of texts, providing frames and formulas for the organization and production of knowledge (22). An investigation of

poetic knowledge construction in autobiography, as she asserts, not only offers insights into autobiographical narrative as a practice of self-assurance but may also shed light on the possibilities, limitations, and formations of knowledge systems in general (11). Wagner’s emphasis on the poetic dimensions of autobiography aims to serve as a corrective to the more common linkage of the genre in popular perception with facticity rather than fictional creation (23). This focus, as she seeks to demonstrate, opens up new avenues toward understanding autobiographical texts: setting aside dichotomies of right and wrong, truth and falsehood, she instead concentrates on genre specific modes of (re)presentations of autobiographical knowledge through an analysis of narrative structures (24). Narrative has a mediating function in the production, dissemination, and communication of meaning (20), and it is shaped by a tension between knowing and non-knowing and the sociohistorical structures in which this relationship emerges. Often, the author suggests, it is precisely the state of unknowing that propels the narrative in an attempt to move toward knowledge (8).

Wagner situates the production of knowledge in the act of translating experience into narrative, an act which is mediated through the relationship between the experiencing and narrating I (10). Referring to Lejeune’s autobiographical pact, Wagner emphasizes readers’ expectations of clear identity boundaries between author, narrator, and character. Nonetheless, she makes clear that knowledge in autobiography occupies a liminal space between fact and fiction that is ultimately shaped by its unattainability and open-endedness (11). Through this, Wagner investigates the relation between experiencing and narrating subjects, highlighting the disparities in knowledge and experience arising from the distance between these two modes, which she regards as constitutive to the autobiographical narrative situation (28).

To establish autobiography as a genre that is in essence dialogical, Wagner draws on Heinrich von Kleist’s essay “Über die allmähliche Verfertigung der Gedanken beim Reden,” in which he stresses the role of the addressee as central to the dialogical dynamics at work in a narrative approach to knowledge. Moreover, narrative knowledge obtained through autobiography is always bound to the specific positioning of both speaker and addressee as well as to social structures, institutions, and

¹ See: Alfred Hornung and Ernstpeter Ruhe, eds., *Postcolonialism and Autobiography*. *Studies in Comparative Literature* 19 (Amsterdam and Atlanta: Editions Rodopi, 1998).

power relations (13). In her analysis of the addressee's role in autobiography, Wagner stresses the prominent role of the recipient as a point of orientation that influences the ways in which the author's experiences will be reflected and represented in the text (63). She suggests that the addressee is so central to the creation of autobiography that one ought to read autobiographical texts less as a mere retrospective of the narrator's personal life and more as a text oriented toward the addressee's knowledge, values, and norms (68).

In a review of previous theorizations of the addressee in narrative texts, Wagner sums up Gerald Prince's stance that everything in the text is directed at a "narratee" (64). Beyond her theoretical overview of the narratee or addressee (including references to Genette, Shlomit Rimmon-Kenan, Seymour Chatman, Robyn Warhol, Wolf Schmid, and Mikhail Bakhtin), Wagner turns to Judith Butler to further explore the role of the addressee. In *Giving an Account of Oneself* (2005)—which Wagner finds to be neglected as a resource for autobiography studies—Butler's central thesis is that "[O]ne gives an account of oneself to another, and [. . .] every accounting takes place in the context of an address. I give an account of myself to you" (Butler qtd. in Wagner 72). Wagner stresses the relational dimension of Butler's approach, in which the self never holds full power over the narrative it strives to create since it "is already implicated in a social temporality that exceeds its own capacities for narration" (Butler qtd. in Wagner 72).

Wagner elaborates further on the significance of temporality in the next segment, in which she examines narrative structuring of time through strategies of expansion and condensation as well as the significance of historicization and production histories of autobiographical texts. In a chapter on "The situatedness of autobiographical narration," Wagner notes that the *spatial turn* is only in its beginning stages in autobiography studies. As she suggests, questions about materiality of space, the relation between embodiment and space, social spaces, geopolitical spaces, spatial metaphors and topoi, the spatialization of temporal distances are among those aspects of space that have not fully been explored—a status that Wagner seeks to remedy through her study (83–84). She proceeds to summarize various theories of space in narratology to explore the different functions space takes on in narrative contexts and asks how specific

spatiotemporal speaker positions facilitate or interfere with knowledge (86). Narrative and space, as Wagner exposes through both theory and close readings, are inextricably connected—only through narrative can space be experienced (89).

To illustrate the various linkages of knowledge and narrative, Wagner predominantly draws on examples of American autobiography, spanning a wide range of contents and historical contexts, from Harriet Ann Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) to Joan Didion's *Where I Was From* (2004). Through these examples, she examines various dimensions of narrative constructions of knowledge, its possibilities and limits, its sources and fluctuations, and the desirability of achieving knowledge.

She begins with an analysis of James Frey's much disputed *A Million Little Pieces* (2004) as an example of a fictionalizing narrative strategy that leads to a breakdown of Lejeune's pact between author and reader, demonstrating the limits of authenticity in autobiographical writing. Refreshingly, rather than adding to the debate over degrees of truth and lies and ethical implications, Wagner focuses her analysis on narrative structures governing the text. For example, she points to the ways in which the text is controlled by the experiencing self (the experiencing self is the focalizing instance); the narrating self (the retrospective "I" looking back at the events) only surfaces in the paratext (the preface, epigraph, and acknowledgments) (102–3). The absence of an authoritative, self-reflective speaker who provides metanarrative comments and explanations throughout the text creates a vacuum in which speculations about the truth of the narrative can develop (109).

Next Wagner tackles the question of authorship in Philip Roth's *The Facts: A Novelist's Autobiography* (1997) and Christina von Braun's *Stille Post* (2007), which she reads as examples of relational autobiographical texts. Both writers consciously perform their roles of authors within the text, foregrounding their identity as the author of novels (Roth) and as a cultural studies scholar (Von Braun), and both use an epistolary model as a device to intervene and orchestrate their authorship (111). While these parallels may partially justify the joint reading of the two texts, given the incongruity of their personal and sociocultural contexts, it was not otherwise clear why the works were read together, especially considering the

many other possible pairings. As Wagner herself points out, the autobiographies of Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Benjamin Franklin, like Roth's, begin with a letter, and may have been a more appropriate choice for a study about American autobiography.²

In the following section, Wagner picks up her previous explorations of the role of temporality in autobiographical writing and applies them to Vladimir Nabokov's *Speak, Memory* (1951) and A. M. Homes's *The Mistress's Daughter* (2007). Both texts, as Wagner summarizes at the end of the chapter, demonstrate the tension between the changeability and instability of life stories and the desire for coherence and connection that frequently drives autobiographical writing (149). In her analysis of *Speak, Memory*, Wagner explores the relationship between time and knowledge, with special attention to the thematic disruptions of the generally chronologically ordered sequence of narration; throughout the memoir, thematic units rather than chronological sequence determine the knowledge order of the text. Wagner uses Homes's *The Mistress's Daughter* to illustrate how sudden and unpredictable moments can lead to a complete reordering of the past. In Homes's case, the unexpected appearance of her biological mother in her life after thirty years of living with her adoptive parents leads to an inevitable reconfiguration of what she knows about her life. Another example of a relational life story, Homes's text evolves around the complex power relations among herself, her biological parents, and her adoptive parents. The story, through Wagner's reading, is predominantly Homes's attempt to recalibrate and reauthorize her own life story through the process of narrating.

Returning to the spatial turn, in a chapter focusing on space, spatiality, and place, Wagner chooses Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself* (1861), Richard Wright's *Black Boy* (1945³), and Joan Didion's *Where I Was From* (2003) to spot-

² A recent example of such epistolary autobiography is Ta-Nehisi Coates's *Between the World and Me* (2015), which he composes as a letter to his son.

³ As Wagner points out, Wright's autobiography has a split publication history: While the first part was published in 1945, the second part, *American Hunger*, was published posthumously in 1977. A first complete version

light different connections between spatiality and knowledge in life writing. She argues that both real and imaginary topographies impact the positionality of speakers and therefore the textual production of knowledge (150-51). This section is maybe the most convincing in a book that claims to be about US-American autobiography since it is the only section of the book that truly acknowledges the importance of the text's location. Jacobs's, Wright's, and Didion's autobiographies all grapple with American identity and are firmly rooted in the locations in which they are developed. In Jacobs's text, the contrast between story space (the South, slave states) and discourse space (the North, free states) is constitutive of the entire text (151)—a condition that Wagner takes to apply to all slave narratives. Wagner also highlights the relationship between author and audience as a shaping force: Jacobs writes to educate and appeal to white women in the North and has to frame her narrative in ways that make her political message both credible and digestible for such an audience. In contrast to Jacobs, Wright does not primarily write to educate others but rather to understand himself as an African American in the early twentieth century. By reading Wright and Jacobs in succession, Wagner situates the authors in U.S. society through their narratives, actively shaping their identities in an American context that is marked by racism, exclusion, and oppression. Seemingly the outlier in this section, Didion's *Where I Was From*, as the title makes evident, shares with the other two texts a concern with the positionality of identity and, especially resonant with Wright's work, the desire to gain knowledge through writing. However, more than finding out about herself, Didion aims to solve the puzzle of her home state California in order to gain insights into her own past. California, as Wagner suggests, becomes an agent in Didion's narrative that is inextricably linked to the author's understanding of her own life experiences. Wagner argues that Didion, like Jacobs, writes from a Third Space perspective, since her text, an intertextual hybrid of fact and fiction, invalidates a homogenizing view of the past (187).

Wagner begins the conclusion by briefly glancing back at early colonial U.S. autobiographies, which were mostly concerned with le-

including both parts was circulated by the Library of America in 1991 (164).

gitimizing their own experiences as a reliable and acknowledged foundation of knowledge (193). Following Egan and Vogl, Wagner notes a move toward historicization of knowledge around 1800 and understanding of the historic moment as a point of connection between past and present (194-95). Questions of knowledge, according to Vogl, become questions of discourse, of linguistic and narrative form (195). Further reviewing the history of American autobiography, Wagner observes other shifts like the emergence of slave narratives in the nineteenth century, immigrant autobiographies at the beginning of the twentieth century, or feminist life writing since the 1960s. Finally, Wagner uses the transnational frame of Dave Eggers's *What Is the What: The Autobiography of Valentino Deng. A Novel* (2007) to point toward a future that calls for, citing Alfred Hornung, an "extension of the discourse of auto/biography criticism beyond the predominant Anglo-American scholarship" (qtd. in Wagner 196).

Throughout her theoretical considerations, Wagner draws on a wide selection of autobio-

graphical texts to provide evidence in support of her various claims and observations. Since the focus of her study is US-American autobiography, her frequent references to non-American authors like Günter Grass or Christa Wolf can be slightly distracting. In fact, the one major complaint to be made about the study as a whole is its lack of focus on the US-American context the author claims to concentrate on in the title. The majority of Wagner's theoretical frame remains curiously detached from any specific cultural context, at times missing observations regarding specific conventions of or common characteristics in American autobiography. However, while many of Wagner's insights are equally applicable to and often drawn from autobiographical texts from Germany, both her well-informed theoretical approach and her cogent analysis of U.S. texts certainly constitute an important contribution to American autobiography studies.

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