

## CALL FOR PAPERS

\*Deadline for submissions: 1<sup>st</sup> July 2024\*

### **\*The Textual Self: Aesthetics and Politics of Contemporary Self-Narration\***

IBZ, Munich

\*21<sup>st</sup>-22<sup>nd</sup> November, 2024\*

#### \*Keynotes\*

- Kirsty Bell (Author of *The Undercurrents*, Berlin)
- Claire Squires (Stirling)
- Corinna Norrick-Rühl (Münster)
- Alexandra Effe (Oslo)
- Julia Lajta-Novak (Vienna)
- Sabine Erbrich (Editor, Suhrkamp Verlag, Berlin)

Over ten years have passed since Oasis front man Noel Gallagher wrote fiction off as a “waste of time” and his then provocative opinion seems only to have grown in popularity. As the display tables of any major British bookstore will confirm, the book market has since been flooded by texts dealing, to borrow Gallagher’s words again, with “things that have actually happened” – in most cases to their author (see Bury 2013). Already in 2001, in their manual on *Reading Autobiography*, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson offered an open-ended list of circa sixty genres within the permeable boundaries of life writing alone. The list has only grown, culminating recently in the Nobel Prize being awarded, two years in a row, to writers of autofiction, widely regarded as “the hottest literary trend of the last decade” (Folarin 2020). Many see these modes as responding to a dissatisfaction with the conventions of novel writing, newly perceived – as per Rachel Cusk’s much-cited dismissal – as “fake and embarrassing”, or radically mismatched with the complexity and crises of the contemporary world (see Kellaway 2014).

While much life writing presupposes the authenticity and sincerity of the text, along the lines of Philippe Lejeune’s “autobiographical pact” (1975), autofiction is based on a freer understanding of the truthfulness of the narrated events. The autofictional author replaces honesty with sincerity: they may well lie, “but in an attempt to reflect the world with justice” (Ferreira-Meyers in Dix 2018). Leaving the reader unsure of the confines between truth and fiction, thus stoking their curiosity, autofiction eschews at once prurient promises of authenticity and the phoniness of novel-writing decried by Cusk and Shields alike.

Taking literally that venerable mantra of creative writing workshops, ‘write what you know’, writers of life writing and autofiction produce – in their mode-specific ways – allegedly ‘immediate’ (see Kornbluh 2023) records of personal experience. The concurrent de-aestheticisation of literature – whose value is increasingly located more in the *what* of the story than the *how* of its telling – can be framed as a form of artistic renewal and expression of a cultural ideal of sincerity (see Voelz 2016), particularly in response to the ‘post-truth’ political climate. Autofictional representations of the world are frequently centred around the

Romantic image of the singular (traumatised/suffering) author as a creative subject; yet in contrast to the Romantic notion of the solitary genius, these subjects are now intended as ‘relatable’ to ordinary readers (see Reckwitz 2012; Mead 2014). Stylistic simplicity and essayistic forms of writing are hallmarks of a new cultural ideal of witnessing, of telling stories that are anchored in authentic experience.

In these new forms and formats of writing, authors regain primary importance as a key link between their stories and their lives, as well as the lives of their readers. As witnesses to their own experiences (e.g., of social marginalisation), authors can testify to the singularity or universality of these experiences, just as they can – quite literally – embody particular identities. At the same time, the burden of representation, proportionate to the degree of intersectional marginalisation of the speaking voice, is not negotiated in a vacuum. On the contrary, works included in the commodification processes of cultural industry production reckon with, and often thematise, the imperative to speak from the core of one’s lived experience. This serves to at once legitimise the author’s right to speak – about certain experiences and themes – and to maximise the commercial appeal (the ‘marketability’) of the works themselves (see Brouillette 2020). Complicity with, and/or critique of, these broader cultural industry dynamics and their calls for authentic material are another crucial aspect of contemporary life writing, particularly in Anglophone contexts (see Nicol 2018).

Despite these works’ refusal of fiction-making, their narrative artistry is based on strategies of authentication, which in turn draw on established patterns and tropes of literary fiction, on creative forms of citation and world-representation developed in the history of the novel (hence: *auto-fiction*). In the book market, autofiction and its aesthetics of relatability are one example of the persistence of “subject-centric authorship models” (Maitra 2020, 116). However, these dominant practices of personal, or personalised, literary authorship are being challenged by the digital revolution, making technological innovation powered by vast resources, including the spread of generative AI, an important context to reckon with.

This conference explores trends in contemporary Anglophone life writing and autofiction against the background of the social, institutional, and political conditions of making selves and others. With a focus on the aesthetics and politics of textual self-formation, as well as their interaction, we invite papers addressing a range of topics including but not limited to:

- new forms and formats of (literary) subjectivity and self-formation
- connections between publishing and writing, access to writing/publishing
- autotheory and the essay
- long-form novel vs. shorter vignettes
- life writing/autofiction across media (graphic novels, film, drama, TV series, etc.)
- new realism(s)
- genre and privilege: the ‘right to fiction’, and racialised, gendered, classed biases in critical reception
- life writing as feminist/intersectional adaption/adoption
- life writing and cultural industries
- style and politics
- postcolonial/global-majority autofiction and life writing

\*Please send 300 words abstract and 150 words bio by 1<sup>st</sup> July 2024, to [textualselfconference@gmail.com](mailto:textualselfconference@gmail.com)\*

Notification of selection will be no later than 1<sup>st</sup> August.

\*Conference Organization\*

Prof. Dr. Ingo Berensmeyer (LMU Munich)

Dr. Lianna Mark (LMU Munich)

Sonja Trurnit (LMU Munich)

### Works Cited

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