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The Textualities of the AutobiogrAfrical

By Sally Ann Murray, F. Fiona Moolla,  and Mathilda Slabbert 

In your mind’s eye, summon a map of the world—that famous text. There, *there* is Africa. The familiar, highly visible bulge of head to horn and curve, and the islands as you travel down to the continent’s southernmost point. It is likely that your imagination, like ours, has archived the inherited template of a Mercator projection, the powerful sixteenth-century cartography which remains influential offline and e-nfluentual on Google Maps, even though it misleadingly distorts the size of continents. The 30.2 million square kilometers of the African continent appear much smaller than, say, the areas of the US (9.1 million square kilometers), Russia (16.4 million square kilometers), or China (9.4 million square kilometers). In comparison, the corrective cartographic morphing of the Gall-Peters projection revises the habituated representational geography of the world’s landmasses, showing the relational sizes of continents more accurately.¹

Such tensions are not surprising, for the map, we know, is not to be equated with the territory and, in the context of our interest in this special issue in the textualities of the AutobiogrAfrical, divergent cartographies of the same space, drafted from different ideological perspectives, remind us to ask questions about how life narratives might make Africa intelligible. If, as Frances Stonor Saunders observes, “the self is an act of cartography, and every life a study of borders,” then “[e]nvisioning new acts of cartography that give substance and dynamism to the spaces between borders ... produces new selves—or, at the very least, new ways of thinking about selfhood—and thus new objects of autobiographical enquiry.”² Any map of Africa reflects assumptions about a collective (“Africa”), as well as the political-geographical divisions of nation-states. “Africa” implies degrees of commonality among the (possibly more than) fifty-four countries that comprise the continent. Yet we know the dangers of a single story. Africa is not, after all, a country. Bear in mind, too, that our editorial team is located at the bottom end of the continent in South

Africa. This is a country whose politicians (whether before or after apartheid) have been slow to cut loose from hubristic or celebratory preferred versions of national biography that tout a logic of exceptionalism, in which a superior South Africa—supposedly unlike “the rest of Africa”—is distinguished by political influence, economic success, and the promise of a robust constitutional democracy. However, this simple self-congratulatory story is one that now patently needs reworking, and without invoking simplistic oppositional narratives of gloom or optimism, this special issue welcomes the chance to situate life-writing scholarship that addresses African and South African auto|biographical narratives in a space of shared relation. This relationality, we suggest—of various African and international viewpoints, text types, angles, and interests—itself aims in small ways to contribute to a reworking of the received fixity of inherited mapping, whether geographical or conceptual, and embodies a wish for decolonial, Afrocentric explorations of auto|biography.

But let us for the moment glance back to IABA Africa, and its beginnings. In early 2017, on the strength of its application, the Department of English at Stellenbosch University was awarded the International AutoBiography Association (IABA) charter to found an Africa chapter of the organization. The present special issue derives from the founding colloquium, which was organized under the theme “The Textualities of the AutobiogrAfrican” and held in South Africa in October 2017 at the Stellenbosch Institute for Advanced Study. Participants came to the Stellenbosch Institute from Cape Town, Sierra Leone, and England, and their academic backgrounds reflected the contemporary “proliferation of life narrative discussions into and across disciplines” such as sociology, anthropology, psychology, history, gender studies, and literary-cultural studies.³ The event supported graduate-student attendance and fostered a collaborative environment for those interested in the wide range of auto|biographical studies in African contexts, creating conversations among established forms such as letters, archival research, biopics, and fiction, and new social media, digital platforms, orality, and creative work. Circumstances meant that the plenary address had to be delivered virtually by Ricia Chansky (of the University of Puerto Rico at Mayagüez and coeditor of *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies*), since the devastating hurricanes that had ravaged Puerto Rico scuppered her travel plans. Chansky’s enforced virtual presence at the colloquium made for an extremely moving address on “Instability and Autobiography: Rereading Lives in Times of Crisis.” The topic was awfully apt.

In proposing to establish an Africa chapter, a small group of local scholars had taken an audacious risk, since Africa is much vaster and more diverse than “Stellenbosch,” as different and as expansive as the

mobile forms and voicing of auto|biographical inflection. The continental challenges of distance, language, borders, and cultures associated with Africa were almost too daunting to contemplate and could have thwarted even the best intentioned of our imaginative endeavors well before the fledgling IABA Africa initiative took off. Still, our hopes took courage. Firstly, we were sustained by the extensive existing work already done in the field of life narrative by researchers from or focused on this continent. A few suggestive examples must give a sense, however incomplete, of the rich resources available: Adetayo Alabi's *Telling Our Stories: Continuities and Divergences in Black Autobiographies* (2005), Judith Lutge Coullie's *The Closest of Strangers: South African Women's Writing* (2004), Devarakshanam Govinden's "Sister Outsiders": *The Representation of Identity and Difference in Selected Writings by South African Indian Women* (2008), Debra Kelly's *Autobiography and Independence: Selfhood and Creativity in North African Postcolonial Writing in French* (2005), Litheko Modisane's *South Africa's Renegade Reels: The Making and Public Lives of Black-Centred Films in South Africa* (2013), Bart Moore-Gilbert's *Postcolonial Life-Writing: Culture, Politics, and Self-Representation* (2009), and Jennifer Muchiri's *Women's Autobiography: Voices from Independent Kenya* (2010). Such inspirational Africa-centered scholarship helped us to remain aware, in our early IABA Africa efforts, of the range of ideas and approaches that are necessary in addressing forms of the autobiographical that have arisen in African contexts. Also reassuring was the adage that is often invoked to sustain creative writers who are struggling to find their subject matter and style: "Write what you know." Start with where you are. *Here*, we accepted, was at least a place to begin. At the same time, though, we had been widely encouraged in attempting to initiate an Africa chapter by conversations at "Excavating Worlds," the 2016 IABA World Conference at the University of Cyprus. Executive members of the existing regional IABA chapters urged the founding of an African-based initiative that was homed on the continent, willing to generate important forms of local auto|biographical knowledge, yet looking also to net|work in both Pan-African and wider world contexts. Think of Apollo Amoko's 2009 chapter "Autobiography and *Bildungsroman* in African Literature," Kgomotso Michael Masemola's *Black South African Autobiography after Deleuze* (2017), and Achille Mbembe's "African Modes of Self-Writing" (2001). In getting started on IABA Africa, the desire was to develop the African presence of the organization, diversifying and extending. This was a wish expressed not only by IABA attendees from African institutions, but also by prominent academic leaders and emerging scholars in the global IABA community. As IABA has supportively acknowledged, a growing number of nascent scholars of auto|biography are from Africa, their

investigations productively drawing on extant auto|biographical scholarship and methodologies, *and* striving to reconfigure established approaches, texts, and ideas so as specifically to situate African lived realities, experiences, and life storying on the changing maps of life-narrative studies. In the Department of English at Stellenbosch University, research in the field of African autobiography has become the focus of many doctoral students' work, spotlighting versions of the Afrocentric as content, method, and range of meaning, and giving new energy to life narrative as key among the department's research areas. For instance, University of Malawi lecturer and Stellenbosch University doctoral candidate (and now Stellenbosch University alumnus) Nick Mdika Tembo was one of two graduate students to receive from *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies* the 2016 Timothy Dow Adams Award for his paper "Writing the Self, Writing Human Rights Violations in Two Post-Genocide Rwandan Testimonios."⁴ Regionally, in the Western Cape, presentations at the annual postgraduate conferences hosted alternately by the University of the Western Cape and Stellenbosch University show that life narrative is a prominent area of research interest among early career scholars, while the long-standing Eastern African Literary and Cultural Studies Conference, originally fostered by colleagues at Stellenbosch University and now extended to the University of the Witwatersrand, and hosted in different years by Makerere University, the University of Nairobi, the University of Dar es Salaam, and Woldia University, has strengthened African autobiography studies as a subfocus of literature and cultural expression in the eastern regions of the continent.

In their hugely important *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson use autobiography to "refer only to the traditional Western mode of the retrospective life narrative," although they "often use the adjective *autobiographical* to designate self-referential practices."⁵ They suggest that both "life writing" and "life narrative" are more "inclusive of the heterogeneity of self-referential practices" than the inherited term "autobiography," even while they motivate for some forms of distinct inflection. "Life writing" they invoke as "a general term for writing that takes a life, one's own or another's, as its subject. Such writing can be biographical, novelistic, historical, or explicitly self-referential and therefore autobiographical. The autobiographical mode of life writing might more precisely be called *self life writing*, but we employ the phrase only for occasional emphasis because of its clumsiness."⁶ In comparison, they understand "life narrative" "as a general term for acts of self-representation in any medium: written, performative, visual, filmic or digital."⁷ These are complicated nuances and, in featuring scholarship on African life narrative in this issue, we certainly bear in

mind such debates around terminology, but do not seek fixity. In our guest-editing, like Dorothy Driver and Sue Kossew in their editorial for a 2014 issue of *Life Writing*, we “have not insisted on patrolling strict generic boundaries around the use of ... terms” related to the autobiographical, preferring to “re-fram[e]” life narratives with expanded optics in engaging “the generic possibilities and the limitations of the life narrative itself.”⁸ Our special issue recognizes that there remains much work to be done in recording and commenting on African lives and deaths in the discourses of life narrative, and that this work might also be innovatively imaginative, reaching beyond the borders of the literary page and the aesthetics of received genres and formats—autobiographical fiction, biofiction, and even the highly mobile, rapidly changing digital communication landscape of tweets, WhatsApp, Instagram, blogging, and vlogging. Despite academic apprehension about the dangers of social media’s tendency to flatten thought and provoke inimical anti-identification and a venal masking of truth, perhaps such digitized modes can sometimes manifest new kinds of subject positionings, interrupted but interconnected potentials, strategies of auto|biographical narration which, just as with traditional print media and film, might have the enabling capacity to effect valuable links between lives different from those in a person’s immediate cultural-experiential ambit. In working on African life narrative, it is crucial to acknowledge the slipperiness of categories. As Folasade Hunsu notes in “The Future of African Women’s Autobiography,” for example, many African women writers “commute freely between the world of autobiography and fiction,” which has mistakenly led some scholars to assume that their writing mirrors their lived experiences. Instead, such writings have generated significant debate about “the possibility of mapping a literary tradition that can be delineated as life writing in African women’s literature, and arguably orchestrated the growth of women’s writing in African literature.”⁹

Our awareness of the instability of terms is deliberately carried in the neologism the “AutobiogrAfrical.” It is, admittedly, a strange new creature we have envisaged, one that performs difference in similarity. The “AutobiogrAfrical” pushes its conceptual luck, pushes back against a coherent, naturalized sense of the “autobiographical” and of “Africa” as self-evident. The term at once challenges a reader and *entrusts* that reader to encounter its irregular conceptual shape, learning when to fill the gaps and when to leave them necessarily be, finding creative (re)alignments with known expanses and precepts. As Patricia Geesey notes in her introduction to the 1997 special issue of *Research in African Literatures* on the topic of “Autobiography and African Literature,” “[e]ven to the casual observer looking at the development of contemporary African writing,

autobiography would certainly seem to stand out as a major component in the vast array of cultural production from that continent”—or, in our case, this continent.¹⁰ Nancy Jacobs and Andrew Bank observe that “[b]iographies and autobiographies are far and away the most popular genres of nonfiction in post-apartheid South Africa,” noting that “approximately 800 biographies or autobiographies have been published in English in the 28 years since the liberalisation of apartheid and freeing of Nelson Mandela in February 1990.” Further, they remark, in “South African life histories, the political overshadows the rest.”¹¹ If the submissions to this special issue are anything to go by, a similar emphasis on life narrative as|and the political characterizes auto|biography in Africa more broadly, although what we see, especially in life narratives by African women, is an attempt to reconfigure established ideas of what counts as “political,” for women and men, with new attention to the influence of domestic spaces and emotional claims on lives and their recounting.

When it comes to the “AutobiogrAfrical,” we do not pretend to know precisely what our neologism designates. It is a purposefully speculative projection beyond the known, one that aspires further than givens and risks an impulse toward animated improvisation. The “AutobiogrAfrical” is a heuristic invention for thinking auto|biographical forms with, through, in, of, above, and beyond “Africa.” We wanted a memorable inaugurating term that signaled the capacities and capaciousness of life narratives and of autobiographical scholarship related to the African continent, bodies of making marked by clusters of continuity and vectors of disruption. The double upper case in the “AutobiogrAfrical” visually asserts the significance of autobiographical enterprises in African contexts, signaling not only a provisional space for the solitary self, but also an emphatically relational being. A ... A: this is a duplication and separation which also implies both the original homeplace of Africa and the ongoing dispersals of diaspora. The term reworks the familiar *graphie* and *graphical* associated with the autos and bios of life *writing* into a near homophone that morphs meaning from that assumed necessarily to be written (paragraphs, colloquially turned into *grafs*) to the soundings of the spoken word, orality, and aurality, *and* to the visibility of graphics|grafics. A ... A: here, there is also an invocation of the indefinite article, implying an element of uncertainty, a scope that eludes clear definition, for, let it be said, the neologism, as well as pointing to the Africa-located materialities of auto|biography, wants to break loose and free to imagine wonderfully inventive potentials.

The present special issue includes revised versions of papers delivered at the founding conference, along with new contributions, with the goal being to give credence to an informing premise of IABA Africa—namely,

that Africa is necessarily processual and relational, a space made in dialogues of the local and international, the intimate and expansive, the literary and forms of mediated culture and oral expression. The guest editors circulated a call inviting submissions that addressed the divergent forms of life narration from across the African continent and its diasporas, our wish for reach and inclusion expressed in a context in which national borders and imaginaries appeared to be tightening, becoming less permeable and more policed, hardening into dangerous categoricals determined to designate that “You belong,” “*You* don’t.” Xenophobia. Raced, gendered, religious, and ethnic intolerance. Huge disparities of wealth and opportunity. In grim circumstances, attention to life narratives is well placed to develop humane reciprocities and mutual understanding, the lives and lifelines in life writing holding the promise of imaginative connection across damaging difference. Our curating was fraught with the self-awareness that, for millions of people in Africa, life is becoming harder, more vulnerable, and more unequal. Death is the one constant. Who pays attention to the storying of such vulnerable lives? How much resilience can be demanded of people in order to bring their lives to attention, and to justice? How many unnoticed lives end as the detritus of ungrievable salvage in the Big Wo|Man egotisms so typical of African countries’ self-aggrandizing post-colonial inheritances?¹²

In the course of our guest-editing, for an intense few weeks in August 2019, the local news was afire with the premeditated rape and murder of nineteen-year-old South African student Uyinene Mrwetyana, her life ended by a clerk who connived to strike when she went to collect a parcel at the Cape Town post office where he worked. In the devastated mutual sorrow and anger of South Africans at this young woman’s casual, violent obliteration there rose a potent, thousandfold immersion of self in a tide of collective agency that moved men and women, black and white, young and old. Is it preposterous (academically farfetched) to imagine that the shared distress of asserting hope for Uyinene’s life and affirming the desire, even in a ravaged country, for the right to the pleasure and safety of living together in the face of everyday death, affiliates to a #MeToo groundswell of “life narrating”? Here, perhaps, emphasis is simultaneously on self and yet displaced from self-regard toward a suffering other, an emotionally moving script that wills *life* and shared, lived narration against the random, repeated casualties of gender-based violence. The post-office worker has since been found guilty and handed three life sentences. What are the rhetorical and ethical modes of life-writing sentence that might do justice to a story such as this? Perhaps the writing of activist-scholar Pumla Dineo Gqola, in *Rape: A South African Nightmare*, can help us to process this deadly life narrative as linked to the cultural

biographical shape of our South|African times, in the dangerously naturalized endorsement of violent masculinities enacted against the disposable bodies of women and members of marginalized groups.

At the last IABA World Conference in São João del Rei, Brazil, Craig Howes, in his presentation, referred to the necessary work, for journal editors, of collaboration.¹³ We have found this to be a productive form of co-laboring and shared learning—from each other and from the contributors. Also, we think of “colabs” as an important feature of contemporary creative practice in visual art and design communities, where participants from different subdisciplines work together in the hope of making something new: an object, but also an approach, a way of thinking that shifts the boundaries of isolated self and thought that are such established features of academic scholarship. Such collaboration is something that the flexible, adaptive format of the journal *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies* encourages, publishing academic articles in the varied company of sections that foreground methodological and pedagogical practices, and experimental essays.

The issue opens with an article that intervenes from a life-writing perspective in the well-developed scholarship on African accounts of war. Florence Ebila’s “Loss and Trauma in Ugandan Girls’ Ex-Child-Soldier Autobiographical Narratives: The Case of Grace Akallo and China Keitetsi” thoughtfully identifies the specificities of sociopolitical context, literary techniques, and, most importantly, particularities of personal experience in the genre of the war narrative. Ebila studies the autobiographies of China Keitetsi, a child soldier who enlisted in Uganda’s National Resistance Army, and Grace Akallo, an abducted girl “soldier” who fought in the Ugandan rebel Lord’s Resistance Army, for what they reveal about the gendered impacts of sexual and other forms of violence perpetrated in wars. Ebila thus disaggregates the category of the African “child soldier” narrative to identify the particularities of the experiences of girl soldiers and, within female experience, the unique responses of individual girls to gendered trauma. In addition, the author argues, these narratives provide a valuable counterdiscourse to the official Ugandan stance on child soldiers in the civil war. Ebila’s essay orientates the special issue toward ordinary lives, giving specific individual texture and substance to examples of African life narratives that have come to the fore in Africa’s war-torn contexts, but which nevertheless can tend too quickly to be glossed as stereotypical “truth,” rather than engaged with as difficult, contested experience.

The next section, an essay cluster on “Life Narratives of African Political Womanhood,” brings together three articles which signal the existence of an important and growing subgenre of African women’s life

narrative—namely, the biographies and autobiographies of women directly involved in national politics, women indirectly exposed to politics as wives of major political players, and, interestingly, women who often straddle the political insider|outsider position. Marciana Nafula Were's "African Political Womanhood in Autobiography: Possible Interpretive Paradigms" surveys a wide range of autobiographies going back to the first autobiography of an African female political figure—Sophia Mustafa's 1961 Tanzanian account about her life as one of Africa's first female parliamentarians. Were suggests that African female political autobiography is an inherently hybrid genre since the narratives interweave performative conceptions of pre-colonial patriarchy and understandings of womanhood introduced by colonial modernity. The narratives thus are constructed as liminal spaces within which autobiographers negotiate the multiple selves generated by their position at the nexus of a range of discourses of womanhood. "Taboos and Their Subversion: Reconceptualizing the Proper African Woman in Oluremi Obasanjo's Autobiography *Bitter-Sweet: My Life with Obasanjo*," by Folasade Hunsu, considers the political intervention effected through life writing of the politician's wife. Hunsu argues that in breaking taboos that shape expectations of the proper African woman and the proper African wife, Nigerian first lady Oluremi Obasanjo continues the tradition of fiercely rebellious literary presentations of the female self instantiated by Buchi Emecheta's 1986 autobiography, *Head above Water*. "The Burden of Representation in the Life Stories of Wambui Waiyaki Otieno and Winnie Madikizela-Mandela" is an article by Grace A. Musila that explores the life narratives of African women who are significant political actors in their own right—in Winnie Madikizela's case, a position attained through shifting out from the shadow of her legendary political husband, Nelson Mandela. Musila suggests that, like Obasanjo's autobiography, the life writing about both these iconic African political women presents lives that challenge gendered conventions of wifedom and widowhood, even as in their earlier lives they embraced these roles. Musila uncovers a similar story in the life narratives, where these political women are valued in anti-colonial, anti-apartheid national projects only insofar as they conform to gendered patriarchal expectations. In becoming independent political figures, the script of dominant national discourses is rewritten to constitute these women as unruly daughters, rather than faithful wives and submissive widows accepting of the perpetual tutelage of family or national patriarchs after the death of their husbands.

The figure of the unruly daughter morphs in the first article of the "Critical-Creative" essay cluster into the figure of the daughter who reconfigures conceptions both of self and of the father in what is termed

the moment of the pause. Nadia Sanger's "Bending Bodies, Signing Words: Re-shaping a Father and a Feminist Practice" is a highly personal, highly reflective piece. In the moment of the pause after the death of her father and the birth of her son, Sanger questions those feminist ideological certainties that demonize black men as violent and abusive presences in the family—when they are not negligently absent as fathers. Sanger's father, shaped by a racialized apartheid South Africa, is memorialized in her multimodal piece as a man who, despite being affected by rheumatoid arthritis and alcohol, defied the supposedly inevitable script of the necessarily damage-doing man of color. Sanger's essay foregrounds ideologically intimate transformations in the process of writing the self through crisis and doubt. "One Moment, Three Bullets, a Lifetime," by Gillian Rennie, is another piece that highlights process in the writing of life narrative. Rennie draws on her experience as a journalist, print editor, and lecturer of journalism studies to recount the story of Neville Beling, a white victim of the 1993 Highgate Hotel massacre in the run-up to the first democratic elections in South Africa. But Rennie's approach is also deeply personal, since, as a doctoral researcher, she has lived with Beling's ongoing quest for truth and emotional closure for more than a decade. For Beling, who suffered permanent physical injury and emotional scars, "closure" comes in the discovery that there are multiple truths (and also lies) associated with the Highgate attack. As part of a mediation conversation Beling has with the leader of the black militant group assumed to be responsible for the attack, he discovers that the massacre was probably part of covert "third force" activity orchestrated by the apartheid state to derail political negotiations. He is faced with the likelihood that his life was destroyed "by his own." While this threatens to engulf him in a new debilitating darkness, Rennie aims to honor his resilience in moving forward and affecting new lived connections and hopes. The articles by both Sanger and Rennie essay instances of autotheory and autoethnographic scholarship, embodying in their form and voice the challenges of mediating intimate lived experience in the academic space, and venturing an inclusive impulse toward exploratory, experimental life storying that blurs the boundaries of lyricism, testimony, and traditional critical analysis.

Rennie's self-reflection on the writing of her biography of a white South African victim of apartheid is followed by a closely related article by Annie Gagiano, "Complicating Apartheid Resistance Histories by Means of South African Autobiographies." Gagiano's pairing of twelve well-known South African autobiographies around key themes in South African individual and social discourses foregrounds how autobiography may be one of the most nuanced ways to appreciate and understand apartheid history. Life writing emerges in Gagiano's essay as an important

pedagogic intervention in the teaching of history. Her contribution illustrates that “[l]ife histories serve many needs” beyond simply “assuag[ing] our curiosity about famous people. By showing us more about those who have led lives of usefulness and reputation, they inspire us. They instruct South Africans”—and those in farther world contexts—“on what it means to be members of a society in transformation and citizens of a new country.”¹⁴

The focus on South African life writing continues in the next essay cluster, where Isaac Ndlovu, Louise Viljoen, and Uhuru Portia Phalafala zero in on specific areas of the broad collage that constitutes South African biography and autobiography. Ndlovu picks up on the period post-1994 where an emerging South African black middle class begins to define itself in the South African social landscape, as well as in its relationship to continental Africa and the claims of being “African.” Ndlovu argues that the African travel narratives of popular South African corporate executive Sihle Khumalo perpetuate a colonial and imperial gaze of Africa, despite Khumalo’s assumption that, as a black individual, he is constituting a new African social imaginary. Viljoen turns her gaze to the intensely personal but also audience-oriented correspondence of one of South Africa’s most well-known literary lovers. Viljoen reads *Flame in the Snow*, the recently published love letters of André Brink and Ingrid Jonker, against Brink’s novel *Orgie*, composed in the period of their intimate relationship. Viljoen’s analysis of the letters and the novel suggests the epistemological differences between epistolary forms and fiction, both complex modes of life writing, while also shedding light on questions of privacy, authorship, and ownership when intimacies are incorporated in published literature. Phalafala, in “The Matriarchive as Life Knowledge in Es’kia Mphahlele’s African Humanism,” looks at Mphahlele’s life narratives, as Gagiano does in the earlier piece, but extends the focus beyond *Down Second Avenue* to *Afrika My Music* and the autobiographical novel *The Wanderers*. Phalafala makes a case for the deeply constitutive influence of what she terms “the matriarchive” on Mphahlele’s decolonial African humanism. The matriarchive is the lived episteme of the African homeplace, which intertwines the values, wisdom, philosophies, and aesthetics of a female-informed domestic space of subject formation.

In the final section, we move from heterosexual intimacies and domestic kinship relationships to queer African lives. In “African Queer Autobiographics: Drama, Disclosure, and Pedagogy,” Taiwo Osinubi uses *Stories of Our Lives: Queer Narratives from Kenya*, an anthology of the Kenyan NEST Collective, as a case study to identify differences that may exist between collective, often anonymous, fragmentary autobiographical

queer voices emerging in the form of the anthology and single-authored queer biographies which focus on revealing a single life informed by a monological principle of composition. The queer anthology, *Osinubi* seems to suggest, captures the tensions, denials, impossibilities, instabilities, contradictions, paradoxes, and fluidities of queer identity better than the single-authored life narrative. Christi van der Westhuizen's "I am berated as a Communist because I sometimes wear a red tie': Not Forgetting the Awkward Afrikaner, Dr Petronella 'Nell' van Heerden" considers the various autobiographical texts of and scholarly reflections on the life of the Afrikaner leftist intellectual and first South African female gynecologist, Nell van Heerden. Van der Westhuizen argues that Van Heerden has been doubly effaced from Afrikaner history, firstly, because she was a woman and, secondly, because of her lesbianism, which is evaded even in sympathetic feminist representations of her life. Van der Westhuizen argues further that mid-twentieth-century Afrikaner nationalism, which gave birth to apartheid, excluded and constrained lives like Van Heerden's, even though they may have been racially privileged in terms of Afrikaner ideologies.

Even in collating the excellent papers we received, we are conscious of what is missing and the gaps that remain. We can only hope that other special issues, and the associated scholarship, in time give density to the map-in-formation. We had wanted, for example, to receive short contributions from gender activists in Sierra Leone, but the prospective collaboration faltered when it proved too challenging to have the women write their brief accounts.¹⁵ The material lives struggled to find realization in forms of written, recorded expressive textuality. This attests to the experiential-conceptual differences that may mark activist experience in relation to academic discourse. In hoping to access this important subtradition of African women's autobiography, we ought probably to have anticipated a methodology premised initially on talking and listening, and with this the labor-intensive transcription and collating of *oral* narrations and testimonies. So, we live and learn. Such a method might have succeeded in bringing together activist stories with academic interpretation, working to vocalize women's advocacy efforts and helping to highlight African women's autobiography "as non-elitist and non-exclusive" forms of narration which create a performative, participatory space.¹⁶ As Hunsu notes, "[e]ither in conventional written or transcribed texts or especially evident in social media-produced life stories, African women's autobiography has emerged from the culture of silence, self-effacement, and constraining conventions."¹⁷ The special issue demonstrates examples of resistant and reconfiguring forms of life narration, especially by women and influenced by women, which mediate the tensions between inherited, traditional cultural demands for women's self-effacement

and an autobiographical desire for vocal-expressive affirmation of gendered selves and subjects in relation.

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Notes

1. See, for example, Morlin-Yron, “What’s the Real Size?”
2. Saunders, “Where on Earth?” 7; Winder, “Cartography,” 391.
3. Hipchen and Chansky, “Looking Forward,” 140.
4. “The Timothy Dow Adams Awards.”
5. Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography*, 4.
6. Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography*, 4.
7. Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography*, 4.
8. Driver and Kossew, “Re-framing,” 155–156.
9. Hunsu, “The Future,” 319.
10. Geesey, “Introduction,” 1.
11. Jacobs and Bank, “Biography,” 165.
12. See Butler, *Frames of War*.
13. Craig, “Co-labor-action/Collaboration.”
14. Jacobs and Bank, “Biography,” 166.
15. To Aisha Fofana Ibrahim, immediate past director of the Institute for Gender Research and Documentation (INGRADOC) at Fourah Bay College, University of Sierra Leone, thank you for your efforts in trying to help us curate, for this special issue, a subsection of women’s testimonies from Sierra Leone addressing widowhood, civil society leadership, gender advocacy, and coming out as a rape survivor, accounts which we had hoped would show the necessary blurring of the boundaries—policy, activist practice, lived experience—as they relate to African women’s life narration.
16. Hunsu, “The Future,” 320.
17. Hunsu, “The Future,” 321.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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