

## Contemporary American Women's Memoir and Theories in Life Writing

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The memoir has been long marginalized as a form by critics of both literature and history to be excessively personal, incomplete and unreliable. However, there is a growing trend where many various contemporary writers appreciate the memoir in expressing their personal lives in their own words, rather than in other forms of life writing. The memoir is useful in the expression of self-representation for contemporary women whose constructions of identity become complex in a society exposed to intersecting issues between race, gender, and class. Whereas the autobiography tends to require more of "truth" and an integrated and coherent story of the writer, the memoir is more fictitious and flexible form that enables writers to explore their fantasy and imagination without restraint. Due to this flexibility, what women exclude in their writings tells as much about their interests and concerns as the themes and issues women choose in their works. Moreover, memoirs moves readers to be active participants, making author-reader relationship distinct. Therefore, the memoir is important as a genre and needs to be examined more, and contemporary women's memoirs are among the useful materials for study of the lives of women and their realities today. In this essay, I treat the memoir as a life writing practice, and examine the form by investigating issues about the memoir and other autobiographical works of self-representation.

During the 1990s and after, a dramatic growth in memoir writing has occurred. Many memoirs were published, and the number has approximately tripled from fifty years ago. Academics also

contributed to the trend. Leigh Gilmore analyzes the progress of the memoir due to four factors; 1.Social and political movements of the past thirty years which have enabled various people to publish stories of their life experiences; 2.The naturalized speaker of one's "real life" came to permeate media of contemporary culture; 3.New appearance of the autobiographical "I" has been introduced from the genres of "personal criticism" and "creative nonfiction" and; 4.Literary markets encouraged to publish memoirs responding its growing sales (16-17).

The memoir has long history as confessional narrative, but it has been historically marginalized as a genre. Memoir as a term started to be used in the sixteenth century to record events which is not complete history, treating matters within the writer's subjective personal knowledge. In comparison, the "autobiography" was first used in the early nineteenth century to account for and focused on the writer, and originated from the revolutionary period and the Romantic movement. Because the memoir was not historically recognized by literary critics and theorists, the autobiography has come to occupy the central role in the history of life writing. Helen M. Buss claims that the reason for the lack of examination of memoir may be its identification with life writing. Life writing is more associated with history than with literature. Because memoir is personal writing and does not give comprehensive history but only a selected part of writer's knowledge of the events, the era, or the people, therefore memoir is marginalized merely as "a historical resource rather than a historical discourse." Thus, memoir is marginalized in both historical and literary study (Kadar 2).

Memoir is one of autobiographical writing, a genre in life-writing and represents the self, as autobiography and other autobiographical writings. Memoir is similar to autobiography but different in that

it tends to focus more on the exclusive self, than the self in relation with other people and social and historical events. In *Life-Writing: A Glossary of Terms in Biography, Autobiography, and Related Forms*, Donald J. Winslow defines memoir as follows:

a record of events, not purporting to be a complete history, but treating of such matters as come within the personal knowledge or within the memory of the writer, or are obtained from particular sources of information. The incidents recorded may come from a person's own life or from persons whom he knows or has known. Memoir ordinarily differs from autobiography in being less formally organized and in centering more upon social and historical background, less upon private life" (39-40).

Thus, accounts in memoirs can be broader in content coverage, and concern not only the self, but also the relationship of the writers to their surroundings.

Memoir as life writing has flexibility and more possibilities. In *Essays on Life Writing: Genre to Critical Practice*, life writing is considered as the most flexible and open term for various kinds of autobiographical texts and in contemporary definition, the genre includes the traditional genres of autobiography, journals, memoirs, letters, testimonies, and metafiction. Life writing was viewed as equivalent to "biography" in the eighteenth century when it was considered to include broadly the autobiography and other kinds of autobiographical writings. Until the Greek and Latin rooted words of "biography" and "autobiography" came to have their current meanings, the Anglo-Saxon rooted, inclusive term of "life writing" was popular.

According to Marlene Kadar the study of life writing is "a way of seeing literary and other texts that neither objectifies nor subjectifies the nature of a particular *cultural truth*" (1). She states that life

writing is not a fixed term but in flux, and exploration of the term will lead to represent both as a genre and a critical practice, pointing out that the way we view life writing evolves along with political and literary movements (1-3). "Cultural truth" that we can find in memoir is different from "truth," in the strict and objective sense, but it is writers' perception of reality that is true to them.

Memoir form has replaced the popularity of autobiography, in the same sense as a work of self-representation. Development of studies made on autobiographical writing reveals what is expected from works of representation and what made the memoir form popular. Lauren Rusk describes by stages the development of criticism made on autobiographical writings, including memoir. As a first stage, in the nineteenth-century, critics evaluated autobiographical writings for merits of the author's life and as a source of historical facts. Second, at the turn of the century, in the period of modernism, autobiographical writing was examined to see one's psychological attitude toward the past. This led in regarding autobiographical writing as a creative and interpretive act. Third, postmodernism has "challenged the referentiality of language and the authenticity of the self, rejecting notions of internationality, truth, meaning, and authority," the emphasis moving to "locus of the play of signification" and "artifice of identity" (Smith qtd in Rusk 1). In this stage, critics have considered the relationship between reader and text, and Rusk emphasizes this relationship of "interplay" as a distinguishing feature. She talks about the importance of life writing "not only for its personal approach to social problems but also for the aesthetic complexity and freshness that enliven its concerns" (Rusk 1-3). As Rusk explains, criticism has changed to discuss "interplay" with reader, text and importance of personal approach to social problems. Buss explains that the memoir's particular intense reader-text relationship

“allows the reader to be a more active participant, to understand the very tentative and multi-directional nature of reality,” and the great attractions of memoirs for readers to be “drawn actively into the narrator’s reality-building process” (Buss 16). The memoir also takes up the self more in relations with social and political surroundings. Joseph Childers and Gary Hentzi also state that in postmodernist works, it is sometimes difficult to tell differences between autobiography, a history, a novel, and literary criticism. It is significant to consider these distinctions as artificial and to focus on the fragmentary quality of all texts (235). The features of postmodernist works are evident in memoir. Thus, as contemporary memoir contains fertile elements for criticism, academics have turned to examining memoirs.

As a work of self-representation and memory, discussion on memoir has been made mainly on its form and genre, treatment of “truth” in telling about self, and interpretation of one’s experience regarding gender in scholarship of memoir. As to its form, in *Repossessing the World: Reading Memoirs by Contemporary Women*, Buss values and establishes reading strategies for the memoir form. She points out that “reviewers, critics, and readers are beginning to pay close attention to these texts, as the memoir begins to challenge the novel by large number of readers who prefer to read memoir. According to this trend, life writers name their texts ‘memoirs’ rather than ‘autobiographies’” (22). She notices the growing attention given to memoirs and examines this trend by studying how the memoir form works. By using the memoir form, she states that one can “repossess” identity which has been “possessed” by “male-based disciplines of medicine and psychology, history and literature” (13).

Buss explains the memoir form as follows:

Memoir is a form in which one cannot rely only on the facts

of official history; yet it is a form in which one must respect one's sources, respect the others that make one's own story; yet it is a form in which one must suspect one's sources, doubt them while affirming them. It is a form in which one cannot be entirely in control of self-construction, but must come to see that the act of self-making as a process of *performing* the self (14).

Buss argues as most important that “the memoir is a form in which history must come into concourse with literature in order to make a self, a life, and to locate that living self in a history, an era, a relational and communal identity.” She explains that she chooses the form for “difference” of memory; positioning that as gender like other factors, influence our lives in different ways, it is natural that women's memories of life events are often different from men's. Its elastic mode as a form makes repossession of the cultural world. The cultural world allows the writer to have more agency in the world, since writing acts as performative of a subjectivity. The personal autonomy is enhanced through the acts of “reflective/reflexive writing.” That autonomy helps the writer's realization of herself and the form becomes a bridge to historical and literary discourses to build connections between the private and the public, as well as the personal and the political, and therefore becoming popular with contemporary women (3).

bell hooks finds significance of memoir for the need for more experimentation and creative strategies. She picks up the conditions surrounding African Americans and states that “constantly faced with the paucity of nonbiased information about our lives as black women and men, it is both reassuring and affirming that we are witnessing a resurgence of interest in autobiographical narratives by African Americans... . Experimental memoirs have become the

cultural sites for more imaginative accountings of an individual's life" (qtd in Quashie 10).

Concerning the nature of memory in memoir works, Buss explores it in relation with self, others and reality. She states that the memoir form facilitates the changing nature of memory, and allows her and many other contemporary women "to assert our versions of reality and revise them as we assert them, by questioning our own reality, pointing to the ways all memory and documentation rest on precarious foundations." She writes that "memory is a dialogue between the self and others, and it is caught up in the process of identity making in the present moment of writing." Buss' motive in writing a memoir was to play between recall and imagination, self and other, and second motive was to suggest how historical narratives change when read through women's lives in memoir form (Buss 17). She writes about her mother's traumatic and isolated experience in wartime as examples of ordinary women's wartime experiences, which is personal as well as public history. Buss believes that "for women to find a solidarity that can bridge the differences caused by factors such as race, class, generation, and sexual orientation, they must recognize and understand their diversity" and "at the same time they can also discover a similarity in reliable and repeatable processes of revision of received history and memory which can help them to perform effective and satisfying selves in their time and place." By writing memoirs, she insists that "they can begin to repossess the public world for themselves and for other women" (23).

Hertha D. Sweet Wong mentions that in the autobiographical essay by Native American writers *I Tell You Now*, "community is seen as place (earth, land, reservation, neighborhood), people (relatives, clans, neighbors), and history as well, but more consistently as a place, a people, a history *lost*." She describes that many of the

Native American writers focused on loss or destruction of land, broken lineages, and lack of access to the histories and stories of their people, as well as their own personal histories. She asserts that memory and relationship to place are central to the process that allows writers to define themselves as Native Americans through selecting and arranging the fragments of myth, history, and identity (qtd in Smith and Watson 174-175). Kevin Quashie and Joyce Lausch also state the importance of memory as a theme for African American writers in *New Bones: Contemporary Black Writers in America*, stating that the concept and construction of memory, as a part of the contemporary interrogation of selfhood. Taking up the relationship between memory, history, truth and time, they position that memory is crucial because of the inaccurate histories have been recorded about the lives of African Americans and about “the Black experience.” Personal memory can refute an error of history. They think that “the act of remembering is dynamic and fluid, always changing how the event or experience happened, giving new contours to the edges of the remembered thing.” Furthermore, it is significant in that “memory as literary and psychic construct also facilitates the interest in the African Diaspora, the literal and emotional community of people of African descent, living wherever they do in the world, whose lives are linked by forced dispersion from their homeland” (Quashie 11-12). Life writings such as autobiographies, biographies and diaries, are expected to contain more “truth” than other writings, and they have been used as historical source. Compared to them, memoir is more fictitious, creative writing, and does not necessarily reflect “truth.” Therefore, those accounts of memoirs are subjective rather than objective, and not reliable sources of history.

Johnny M. Stover acknowledges that to use a historical approach to the writings of people of color can lead to the marginal-

ization of such writings, as they focus on their historical accounts rather than their literary value. He challenges “the idea of mutual exclusivity” and suggests that these autobiographers and their texts are significant both on historically and literally and appreciating one aspect should not exclude evaluating the other (3). Unlike poststructuralist or textual critique values creativity, autobiography is the one that is suitable for both historical and literary approaches among all the literary genres. Autobiography, as creative nonfiction, suggests the importance that place and time have on the development of the author, because writers of autobiography re-interpret “self” for others. Therefore, readers need to what social, spatial, and locational contexts that self comes from. He exemplifies especially the African American woman’s autobiographical writings, and asserts that it rejects binary categorization of literature and history, and rather taking on hybrid characteristics (4). Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson also speak about telling truth in autobiographical writing but notice that academic and historians regarded it as source of biographical information and sometimes considered it unreliable since life stories have been modified to make it worthy of critical investigation (4-5).

Though a memoir contains more creative and fictive elements compared to other autobiographical writings, therefore it is appropriate to study it more in the context of literary study. The idea of “truth,” according to Trev Lynn Broughton and Linda Anderson, as well as Jane Mason Ellerby is adapted better to works of memoir. In *Women’s Lives/Women’s Times*, they treat subjectivity in life-writing, declaring that “it is only through an understanding of subjectivity in, and as, active engagement with the material world, rather than just as textual ‘effect’ or just as ‘product’ of historical determination, that we can restore women life-writers their dignity as ‘self-historians’” (6). In *Intimate Reading: The Contemporary Women’s Memoirs*, Ellerby

affirms that memoir teach us about living through life and overcoming adversity, demonstrating the way that honesty can lead us to transformation, stability, and empowerment. She thinks that “honesty” must be created and memoirs show the way of telling our truth (20). By calling them “self-historians” and talk about “honesty” to tell “our truth” in memoir means to capture and interpret lives and circumstances from the writers’ point of view and judgment. Therefore, it can be said that memoir reflect “cultural truth,” their perception of reality. In order to examine and understand “cultural truth” in women’s memoir gender issue is inseparable, therefore it is important to see the history of criticism that has been made on women’s autobiographical writings.

Though the history of autobiographical writings has stretched over many centuries, criticism of women’s autobiographical writings are only about two decades old. Smith and Watson describe the history of the latter is divided in two stages. The first stage was made around the 1980s by feminist critics who claimed that women should express themselves in their own words, not as the “other” in men’s writings. This period in the time of second wave feminism, critics such as Estelle C. Jelinek, the author of *Women’s Autobiography: Essays in Criticism*, theorize women’s autobiography to be distinguished from men’s. Later, it was viewed as “essentializing of gendered experience to the exclusion of other differences in women’s autobiographies and criticized for its sweeping analogy between lives and texts” (Smith and Watson 9). Smith and Watson explain that “a focus on women’s experience as the true feminist ‘content’ of women’s autobiography and the transparent ‘expression’ of their lives enabled critics’ intervention in autobiography, but it essentialized woman” (10). It also supported the idea that “the egalitarian sisterhood of all women as a collectivity undifferentiated in its

subordination is also evident in early analyses of women's autobiography, where the 'we' of women was asserted unproblematically." This generalizing assumption was later severely criticized in autobiographical writings by women of color who were invisible in these accounts and who would "write to announce their differences in an irreducible plurality of voices" (10).

In the second stage, women's autobiography was theorized beyond the experiential. Francoise Lionnet viewed "autobiography as a multi-voiced act, emphasized orality and the irreducible hybridity of identity" (qtd in Smith 12). Rita Felski criticizes "the gender essentialism of much feminist writing foregrounded the social contexts of a wide range of women's confessional narratives that enforce gender-based identifications and examined their discursive practices" (qtd in Smith 13). Many critics took part in studying ethnic identity in women's autobiography. One of them is the critical scholarship on Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*, which inspired examination of narratives of immigration and theorizing national identities, hybridity, and histories. Critics have explored both the reception of Hong Kingston and immigrant autobiography in second-generation Asian American women's writing (14). Jeanne Perreault also indicates that feminist of color have resisted the presumptions of white feminists who have inappropriately generalized their own experience to that of all women. She claims that "feminist self-writing" encourages a consideration of relations of difference. "Difference" connotes ideological and ethical issues for feminist and recognition and definition of the concept are significant. She also asserts that the meaning of "difference" changes according to who defines it and "difference, then, like sameness, that is, a reified category based on a principle of an essential binary, may distract from coalition building" (129-130). Thus, scholarship of women's autobiography has started

from finding generalized women's voice, and later developed to treat issues of "difference" intersecting race, gender and class due to the contribution of various women writers. Women have been historically silenced by society, and therefore transforming the personal to political is to make their own history and turn memory into their own creation and as Buss puts it, is like, "repossessing the world." Various women have realized it by producing autobiographical writing to share their voices and experiences with the public. Perreault also positions self as a political issue, because women's senses of self in the world have changed in the process of an growing consciousness and women have resisted the definitions imposed by various male authorities. She states that "the strong presence of 'I' in feminist discourse continually reasserts the belief that the personal is political - one of the basic principles of feminist consciousness," positioning "self" as inescapable issue in feminist ideology (129-130).

In criticism of women's autobiography, critics also focused on postcolonialism and postmodernism. Postcolonialism has evoked serious engagement with women's colonized status in the world, and these studies brought forward issues and practices that relate to the material and economic conditions of women's lives, recasting the theories rooted in autobiography of dominant culture. Postmodernist theorizing "explored the relationship between subjectivity and autobiographical practice by posing questions about how women, excluded from official discourse, use autobiography to 'talk back,' to embody subjectivity, and to inhabit and inflect a range of subjective 'I's". These critiques informed by theoretical discourses of postcolonialism and postmodernism on women's autobiography, "have strategically opened new doors for the articulation and analysis of women's autobiographical practices in a global framework" (Smith and Watson 15-16).

Feminist and poststructuralist critical theories also had wide influence on women's autobiography by which "psychological or psychoanalytical category of 'sexual difference' elicited reformulations of what it meant to be 'woman.'" The rereading of Lacan (and Freud) enacted by Cixous, Irigaray, and Kristeva provides a way to challenge patriarchal structures by language, a way to understand the complexity of female positioning in relation to symbolic order and representation and finally, a way in which to comprehend oneself as coherent female subject. These three theorists explored writing of the body and diverse writing practices have encouraged others to developing alternative way of criticism. Smith and Watson say that the current interest in personal criticism is due in part to the experimental texts from Cixous, Irigaray and Kristeva (Smith and Watson 16-20).

Smith and Watson indicate that "to historicize experience is to erode the holding power of the concept of the universal 'woman.'" Women of color criticized the concept, focusing on cultural production of subjects as they had been marginalized by their race and ethnicity. They created a communal tradition and proposed countertexts against the canon, women of color claimed the instrumental role of autobiographical writing in giving voice to formerly silenced subjects. Scholars in and outside United States also contributed by engaging in exploring a various texts, theorizing "the difference of their differences" (Smith and Watson 24-25). Smith and Watson pose important questions to future scholarship:

... to what extent and in what ways does the category of women's autobiography continue to be a useful generic descriptor for women's autobiographical texts and for the *experience* of reading them? Reading other autobiographical texts? As certain postfeminists also argue, isn't it time to move beyond

this preoccupation with woman, women, and women's "this" or "that"? And hasn't the continuing proliferation of theoretical accounts of "difference" undermined any solid ground for focusing separately on women's texts. (Smith and Watson 41)

As they say, it is a difficult issue that while we recognize the need to continually bring cultural constructions of "woman" and of "difference" into question, we also need to pay attentions to the utility and the importance of focusing on the cultural production of women. Therefore, it would cast us into a dilemma where "we have to act as if 'woman' exists even as we continue to resist the fixedness of particular forms of 'woman' and 'femininity.'" They propose significant suggestions to this condition:

... the new geography of identity insists that we think about women writers in relation to a fluid matrix instead of a fixed binary of male/female or masculine/feminine. Rather, feminist criticism needs to consider how gender intersects with other components that comprise identity. Such a focus permits us to locate ourselves even as the theoretical grounds underneath us continue to shift. (Smith and Watson 41)

As they suggest, we need to pay close attention to intersecting issues of race, gender and class to understand works of self-representation. Contemporary American female writers appreciate this personal form of writing to represent self as it is flexible to explore within their fantasies and imagination. Meri Nana-Ama Danquah, editor of *Shaking the Tree: A Collection of New Fiction and Memoir by Black Women*, and a memoirist herself, introduces contemporary Black women writers of memoirs as a people whose voices define a new era of contemporary American literature. She states that her generation was in the middle or the end of the Civil Rights, Black Arts, Feminist, and Gay Pride movements which occurred during

the period of drastic change especially for African Americans. She poses questions to herself and readers, on what she was hoping to find in contemporary Black women's memoirs:

What does it mean for *us* to be Black women today- the *us* being my peers, those women who had frown up roughly around the same time as I had. How similar were our references, our realities? How similar were our interpretations of race, of class, of gender? How different, based on our varied backgrounds, were our expressions of self? (Danquah 17)

She explains that when she was putting memoir collections together, she found that those writers have "bonds" and they "clearly read and draw inspiration from one another." She points out that there is obvious thematic connection and continuity, which are "the themes of love, alienation, displacement, isolation" (17). She believes that "through our honesty and compassion, it is through our sisterhood, that we as Black women will begin to heal ourselves" (20). This motive led her to publish a collection of contemporary Black women's memoirs and fiction of life writing.

Memoir is evaluated and employed by contemporary women writers. As Buss finds communication by memoir realizes "repossession as its goal." As reader-author relationship is intimate in memoir, this communication provides feminist theorists of life writing and women who write memoirs their place in the history of the field, in which they can claim themselves. (184). In memoir's flexible form, contemporary American female writers not only explore their lives, but also locate themselves in their relation to others and various events. Although memoir does not reflect "truth" in a strict sense, memoir reflects "cultural truth," or the writer's perception of reality of one's world. As Danquah finds thematic connection in themes of love and solitude, we can understand not only their everyday lives

but also their cultural truths and realities under the intersecting issues of race, gender and class in contemporary American female writers' memoirs.

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