



# Life Writing

Autobiography, Biography, and Travel Writing  
in Contemporary Literature

Proceedings of a Symposium Held by  
the Department of American Culture and Literature  
Haliç University, Istanbul, 19-21 April 2006

Edited by  
Koray Melikoğlu

*ibidem*

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Cover illustration:  
Rembrandt: Self Portrait, 1629

Koray Melikoğlu (Ed.)

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## Bibliografische Information Der Deutschen Bibliothek

Die Deutsche Bibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation in der Deutschen Nationalbibliografie; detaillierte bibliografische Daten sind im Internet über <<http://dnb.ddb.de>> abrufbar.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from:  
Die Deutsche Bibliothek  
<http://dnb.ddb.de>

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ISBN-13: 978-3-8382-5764-8

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## Acknowledgements

We wish to extend our warmest thanks to the participants of the symposium for their illuminating and thought-provoking presentations which led to stimulating discussions on the theory and practice of life writing during the symposium. We are also deeply grateful to the Academic Committee and the Organizing Committee for their invaluable work; without their contribution this event would not have been realized. We would also like to thank our colleague, Oya Berk, for her help with the proceedings as well as for her commitment and support during the organization of the symposium.

Our heartfelt thanks go to Professor Atilla Özalpan, Vice Rector and Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences at Haliç University at the time of the event for his invaluable help and support throughout all stages of the organization of this symposium. We also want to express our sincere gratitude to the Rector, Professor Ahmet Çakır, and to Professor Gündüz Gedikoğlu, Chairman of the Board of Trustees of Haliç University, for their generous support and encouragement.

Çiler Özbayrak  
Department of American Culture and Literature  
Chair  
Haliç University

## Welcome Address

Dear Guests,

It is my great pleasure and honor as president of the board of trustees of Haliç University to welcome you all to the symposium on ‘The Theory and Practice of Life Writing.’

I would like to extend my deep appreciation and many thanks to the organizing committee for realizing this symposium.

Events such as this one are very important bridges for scholarship and exchange of knowledge both nationally and internationally, and more lectures, symposia and congresses will contribute to world peace and the improvement of international scholarship.

As you attend our symposium, please take the opportunity to visit our lovely city. As you know Istanbul is a beautiful city bridging Asia and Europe. It is also a bridge between civilizations, cultures and historical eras. We count amongst our treasures the legacies of the Roman, Byzantine and Ottoman Empires. You can see these cultural crossroads in many of our prominent landmarks, such as the Topkapı Palace and its walls that date back to Byzantine times. And you can see it in the commingling of churches, mosques and synagogues which represent the peaceful co-existence of the three great religions of the world.

Our cuisine, whether it is our famous Turkish coffee or our world-renowned Turkish Delight, also represents a bridge between the East and the West.

I will finish by welcoming you again to Istanbul, to Halic University and to our interesting and stimulating symposium and by thanking you for your important contributions.

Prof. Dr. Gündüz Gedikoğlu

Chairman

Board of Trustees of Haliç University

## Foreword

Showing one of the dozens of self-portraits by Rembrandt, the cover of this volume may lead the reader to reflect on possible parallels between the history of one of these in particular and life writing, the subject of these proceedings: At the beginning of the new millennium the portrait by one of Rembrandt's pupils of a fictitious Russian aristocrat was revealed to hide underneath its layers of paint a self-portrait by the master himself, who had apparently ordered the transformation in order to make an unsold painting profitable by adapting it to a marketable pattern of his time (see, e.g., Johnston; "'Lost' Rembrandt" [with illustrations]; Vogel). From the first suspicion in the 1930s to the final confirmation of the picture's palimpsestic nature it went through a number of stages in which the Russian nobleman gradually was robbed of his features, hat, some hair, parts of his moustache, and earrings to allow for his predecessor underneath to appear. This display of both a real and a fictitious person's features at the same time and the resulting tension between self- and other-portrait may lead one to consider the difficulties attendant on judging the accuracy of any biographic or autobiographic account, no matter which medium it utilises—a consideration which is aided, for example, by the fact that Gore Vidal called his first memoir *Palimpsest*.

Interestingly, it is not so much Rembrandt's self-portrait than its transformed version that may hold a lesson for students of autobiography, the latter picture making evident a possible trait to the real artist's character that the former with its many mates might conceal: What was taken as a sign of introspectiveness in Rembrandt, the proliferation of his self-portraits, may turn out to have been a commercial strategy designed to leave several sale options open (see Johnson).

Of course the reflections do not stop here. If at some future time the authenticity of the newly-discovered Rembrandt should be ques-



tioned, as happens with so many works attributed to the master, this would offer further interesting perspectives on the present volume.

Many of the studies in these proceedings deal with difficulties of this kind. They grew out of the international symposium ‘The Theory and Practice of Life Writing: Auto/biography, Memoir and Travel Writing in Post/modern Literature,’ held at Haliç University, Istanbul, on 19-21 April 2006. The majority of contributions to this event, some of them heavily revised for publication, is collected in this volume.<sup>1</sup> The symposium was the fourth in a series organised by the Department of American Culture and Literature at Haliç University.

A first group of the papers included here, treatments of more comprehensive and/or theoretical aspects of life and travel writing, discusses genre history (Nazan Aksoy; Manfred Pfister), typology (Manfred Pfister; Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson), issues of narration (Gerald P. Mulderig; Rana Tekcan), the recent phenomenon of blogging (Leman Giresunlu), and therapeutic narrative (Wendy Ryden).

A second group—whose concern often heavily overlaps with that of the first in that it also pursues theoretical goals—concentrates on individual authors and artists: Sabâ Altınsay and Dido Sotiriou (Banu Özel), Samuel Beckett (Oya Berk), the sculptor Alexander Calder (Barbara B. Zabel), G. Thomas Couser and his filial memoir, Moris Farhi (Bronwyn Mills), Jean Genet (Clare Brandabur), Henry James (Laurence Raw), Orhan Pamuk (Dilek Doltaş; Ayşe F. Ece), Sylvia Plath (Richard J. Larschan), the British and American Oriental travelers Caroline Paine, Sophia Poole, and Mary Eliza Rogers (Tea Jansson), Edouard Roditi (Clifford Endres), Sara Rosenberg (Claire Emilie Martin), the dancer Mrinalini Sarabhai (Leena Chandorkar), Alev Tekinay (Özlem Ögüt), and Uwe Timm (Jutta Birmele).

Questions relating the history of the Rembrandt portrait to many of these discussions come to mind immediately: Can the traces of the

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<sup>1</sup> Of the participants, Hülya Adak, Sema Bulutsuz, John Eakin, Trevor Hope, Meltem Kiran Raw, Margaret Russett, and Daniel Roux did not submit their papers for inclusion in this volume.

original painting visible in the transformed version be accommodated in Pfister's typology of traces? Was the reworked picture a hoax of the kind discussed by Smith and Weston or was it rather the contrary, because it understated the significance of its subject? Is the interplay between artistic and commercial considerations in Rembrandt similar to that which Larschan claims for Sylvia Plath's works? Is our route to Rembrandt via the Russian aristocrat a complexly mediated process of the kind described by Couser which brings us closer to the real Rembrandt than an unmediated study of his works would have done, just as Couser feels his posthumous reading of his father's papers gave him a better knowledge of the deceased than his parent's actual presence did?

The reader is invited to extend this list of questions. Among them may be the question whether the confidence emanating from Rembrandt's features on the cover of this book stems from his youth or from his knowledge that a portrait that cannot be sold can always be painted over.

Koray Melikoğlu

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# **I COMPREHENSIVE STUDIES**

# Travellers and Traces: The Quest for One's Self in Eighteenth- to Twentieth-Century Travel Writing

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**Abstract:** Travelling is always a travelling in traces—looking for traces of past cultures or following the traces of previous travellers. These traces can be material or textual, visual, performative or mnemonic. In some of the best of twentieth-century travel-writing such quests for traces do, however, take an inward and self-reflective turn in which travel writing becomes a form of self-writing and self-staging.

In my presentation, I will survey this development from the eighteenth century to the present, beginning with Grand Tour accounts of journeys to Italy, to then focus on modernist and postmodernist travel writing. This will take us not only to *Etruscan Places* with D. H. Lawrence or Patagonia with Bruce Chatwin, to Asia Minor on *Alexander's Path* with Freya Stark or to the Caribbean with Amryl Johnson but back into these writer's lives, their deepest memories and desires. What should emerge in my readings is how writing the Other can become a way of writing the Self.

## I

Travellers search for and follow traces—and they leave their own traces in turn. Both, the traces followed and those left, are inscribed in the cultural memory relating to a particular place and can become powerful *topoi* in the mnemonic archive that makes up culture—*topoi* revisited, re-cited and re-enacted. 'Places' and 'traces' do not only rhyme, they also converge semantically as powerful inscriptions in our cultural memory: without traces there are no places and vice versa, and together they construct both cultural difference and identity.

Travel writing plays an important role here. Even if there have always been travellers who have insisted on not following traces and on relying for their accounts on autopsy alone, only on what they have seen with their own eyes, at a closer look it becomes evident—be it

only in their forceful gestures of negating intertextuality and erasing traces—that they, as all travellers, have always tapped the archives of the cultural memory of both their own and the other culture (cf. Pfister, “Intertextuelles Reisen”). And this is, of course, particularly true of a place like Istanbul, which is itself so rich in multi-layered cultural traces and which has been so densely overwritten with the traces of generations of travellers that the impossibility of saying anything new about it has become an often evoked exordial *topos*.

## II

It is at this point, however, that I should, perhaps, explain what I mean by ‘traces’ in this context.

Let me, as a first step, distinguish between material and textual traces. **Material traces** must be considered as the semantic prototype of what we call ‘traces’: footprints in the sand or the field, which previous travellers have left and which continuous traffic can gradually turn into trails and beaten tracks; the sedimentations, relics and landmarks they or previous inhabitants of the lands have left and which the traveller follows and will try to decipher in his text. The Grand Tourists of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries followed such material traces, which had turned into beaten tracks (cf. Buzard), a network of connections made up of roads and passes, of coaching and guides, of ancient ruins, splendid buildings of the past, important collections and other *videnda*, other sights one had to have seen to qualify as a true traveller. Such material traces are part of the archives of cultural memory—both of the traveller’s and the travellee’s culture.

Material traces are often under- or overwritten by **textual traces**, i.e. the accounts of previous travellers distilled into maps, guidebooks or travelogues, but also texts originating in the other culture. This is what entangles travelling and travel writing in a web of intertextual references and allusions. Shakespeare’s contemporary Thomas Coryate on his way to Venice already saw himself as a “tombstone travel-

ler” (1611) and traced with great enthusiasm the birth and burial places of classical authors, and with the Romantic period the abodes of English poets in Italy—Keats, Byron, Shelley, the Brownings—have become the destination of literary pilgrimages for British tourists in Italy, not to mention Julietta’s or Julia’s balcony in Verona! Before them, in the eighteenth century, a Grand Tourist like Joseph Addison travelled through Italy in the tracks of the classical Greek and Roman poets—whom he considered much more a part of his own, than of Italian culture—with the express intention “to compare the natural face of the country with the landscapes that the poets have given us” (*Remarks on Several Parts of Italy*, 1705; qtd. in Pfister, *Fatal Gift* 467)). As Horace Walpole put it cuttingly: “Mr Addison travelled through the poets, not through Italy” and he “might have composed [his travels] without stirring out of England” (letters to Richard West, 2 Oct. 1740, and to Henry Zouch, 20 Mar. 1762; qtd. in Pfister, *Fatal Gift* 467). In one particular case, a few lines of verse sufficed to launch generations of English travellers on a poetic quest: Milton’s epic simile comparing the hosts of fallen angels in *Paradise Lost* with

[. . .] autumnal Leaves that strew the brooks  
In Vallombrosa, where the Etrurian shades  
High overarched imbower [. . .] (page 480, I, 302-304)

sent hosts of Grand Tourists on a “Milton trail” to the monastery hidden in dense forests a day’s ride away from Florence<sup>1</sup>—a classic case of a poetic trace turning into a trail and that trail turning into a beaten track and overwriting the Italian landscape with the travellers’ own “pretexts” and cultural memories!

When D. H. Lawrence in 1927, on his last journey, turned towards reading the traces of *Etruscan Places*, he sought to liberate himself as much as possible from the intertextual burden of previous writings and follow alone the **mnemonic traces** of a life-affirming and death-

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Pfister, *Fatal Gift* 321-322 and 451-452.

accepting mode of existence in the depth of his own unconscious. Such mnemonic traces are the third category of traces I wish to identify. They may, to a certain extent, be part of an intertextual web of associations and be conditioned by the formations of a cultural memory, yet the textual inscriptions lie so deep here that they cannot be adequately described in terms of specific verbal pretexts. They are, therefore, less immediately related to textual traces than to **iconic** and **performative traces**—to traces of images going back to one's earliest memories or dreams, which, consciously, half-consciously or unconsciously, give orientation to the traveller's desires; traces of earlier, kinaesthetically remembered performances, which can give to travelling the sensation of a re-enactment.

### III

The quest for traces of buried memories merits a separate category, if only because much of modernist and postmodernist travel writing is programmatically dedicated to it. Bruce Chatwin's memories of a prehistoric piece of brontosaurus skin in the glass-fronted cabinet of his grandparents' living room, which had stimulated his childhood fantasies and which sends the adult on a quest to its place of origin, is the postmodern *locus classicus* for this phenomenon. His search for traces of the lost material relic does not only take him to the "Lost Hope Sound" at the end of the world, in Patagonia, and back to a lost palaeontological past and its traces in the European cultural memory, the archives of images and texts about Patagonia, but also back to his childhood. As the great searcher for traces, W. G. Sebald, commented in an essay on Chatwin: his "wanderings to the end of the world are search expeditions for the lost boy in him" (140; qtd in Pfister, *Nachwort* 359; my translation).<sup>2</sup> Chatwin's *In Patagonia* is just one instance of a general tendency in modernist and postmodernist travel writing to

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<sup>2</sup> "Auch für Chatwin waren die Wege an das Ende der Welt Suchexpeditionen nach einem verloren gegangenen Knaben [. . .]."

stage self-consciously what previous travel writers have tended to play down: the fact that travelling is always a travelling in traces, is always the pursuit of traces to be followed and read, and that the reading of these traces is more of an adventure or challenge than the travelling itself. Rather than erasing traces modernist and postmodernist travellers tend to foreground the material, textual and mnemonic traces which motivate and orientate the journey in complex and often aporetic narrative structures. For what is at stake in the reading of traces is both the traveller's and the travellee's cultural memory, and the private memories of the individual traveller. In an attempt to substantiate this claim, I shall highlight four variants of such travelling in pursuit of traces, which self-consciously turns the quest for traces into the main concern of travel narrations and which seem to me of particular significance in recent travel writing.

My first variant is the **archaeological quest**. Let me take as an example for this a travelogue that bears the notion of a trace already in its title: Freya Stark's *Alexander's Path* of 1958. In contrast to her best-known book, *The Valleys of the Assassins* of 1934, where this archetypal British women traveller still staged herself in a typically female pose as travelling without a purpose, for travelling's sake—"I travelled single-mindedly for fun" (*Valleys* 9; cf. Bode)—here she is engaged from the beginning in a geographical, archaeological and ethnological project. What she intends to do is to reconstruct the Persian campaign of Alexander the Great in Cilicia, Pamphylia and Lycia. For that she has studied beforehand the sparse classical sources, Arrianos' *Anabasis* in particular, and read all the available accounts of modern travellers before her, and now checks their frequently contradictory information *in situ* by carefully reading the material traces and literally counting her footsteps to get things right at last. Exploring the inland regions of the Turkish Mediterranean coast on often impenetrable or abandoned paths, she constantly looks up from her old maps and texts to the landscapes surrounding her and back from the landscape to the text to work out some kind of congruence between the



material and textual traces, yet still finds time to compare Alexander's path with the marks of modernisation and progress which Kemal Pasha's new Turkish national state has imprinted upon the landscape. Negotiating between the contradictory writings and maps of ancient and modern historians and explorers, she puts all her trust in what she sees with her own eyes and experiences with her own body and not in her throughout male authorities, whom she puts in place with sportive condescension: "They were splendid young men, however erratic their time-table may have been up the hill" (*Alexander's Path* 183).

But why all this physical and intellectual effort to trace Alexander's path more precisely than before? Was it learned pedantry or know-it-all arrogance, or did she need a scholarly pretext to give the dignity of a serious purpose to mere adventuring. The answer she herself proffers—"The pure wish to understand, the most disinterested of human desires was my spur" (168)—cannot really satisfy as it withholds her own fascination with him whose traces she follows, and with what the traces lead her to: her fascination with Alexander the Great, "the most dynamic being that the world has perhaps ever known" (230), and with his vision of an *oikumene* of Occident and Orient, which found its first expression in the Persian campaign and was to culminate—and fail tragically—in his march towards India. It is for this that Freya Stark's quest for the traces of Alexander ends elegiacally in an identification of her own failure with the failure of Alexander's dream:

So the young dream died, of the brotherhood of men. [. . .]  
That, I thought suddenly, is why I am so unhappy. I have  
failed this brotherhood. I should have stayed. [. . .] Alexander's  
vision ended and was lost for over two thousand years;  
and we, who are dreaming it again, look extremely like failure  
at the moment [. . .]. (225)

And this dream of a *West-östliche Divan* takes her far back in her life, back to her childhood, where it began with a book: “An imaginative aunt who, for my ninth birthday, sent me a copy of the *Arabian Nights*, was, I suppose, the original cause of the trouble” (*Valleys* 9).

In my second variant the search for traces is focussed on one particular previous author and his work. Intertextuality is, therefore, paramount here, though material and performative traces can also play an important role. I am speaking about biographies cast in the mould of travelling in the traces of the biographee, of following his footsteps across the trajectory of his life. Let me call this type **biography as travelogue**. Of course, researching a biography has always involved a certain amount of fact-gathering travelling in the footsteps of the author, but in the writing of the biography the traces of these journeys have then been usually erased. After all, who wants to know how the biographer got hold of the facts? It’s the facts that count. More recently, however, we increasingly find texts which position themselves between travelogue and biography and make the biographer’s search for the traces of his author, and not the author’s life itself, the dominant principle of narrative organisation. To my knowledge, the first to do so was James Albert Symons in his *Quest for Corvo* (1934), drawing attention to the novelty of his method in the subtitle *Experiment in Biography*. This is not the life-story of the mysterious and scandalous *fin de siècle* writer Frederick William Rolfe, who called himself Baron Corvo, but the story of the quest for Corvo, the search for traces of his life, which takes Symons to strange and dark places in Venice or Rome. Accordingly, Corvo’s life is not narrated in a linear and conclusive fashion, but emerges in a series of journeys by a literary sleuth dedicated to identifying and reading the traces of the various phases of Corvo’s life and of the various places his texts project in order to unravel its mysteries. What is particularly modern about this “Experiment in Biography” is, of course, that it does not only drop the conventional claims of biographers to be able to offer the truth, the whole truth, about an author and his works, but exposes such claims as mere

pretence. Since then, many have followed Symons' model in factual or fictional travelogues, among them Julian Barnes in his novel *Flaubert's Parrot* (1984), which takes an English dentist and hobby Flaubert specialist to Normandy to establish once and for all the actual model for the parrot in "Un coeur simple," only to end up in an aporia of proliferating parrots. Or, to give another example closer to our immediate concerns here, the travel writer, critic and biographer Richard Holmes has given to his book about English Romantic poets in Italy the significant title *Footsteps* (1986) and has defined his biographical project as "a kind of pursuit, a tracking of the physical trail of someone's path, a following of footsteps," as "acts of self-identification" or "self-projection" sought and performed in the encounter with "landscapes, buildings, photographs, and above all the actual trace of handwriting on original letters and journals" (Holmes 27 and 67).

"Travelling in pursuit of traces" always involves tapping into the archives of cultural memory. There is, however, a specifically post-modern version of engaging with the resources of cultural memory in travel writing which I would like to call, in Bakhtinian terms, the **car-nivalisation of traces**. Pitt-Kethley and her engagement with the Sibyls of Italy have already provided us with an example of this mode. It highlights traces by playing games with them, in particular with traces of great cultural status, with traces that represent great cultural capital. This can begin already with the narrative form: Travelling in pursuit of traces, as we have already seen, often invokes the time-honoured myth of a quest, a quest for some sacred site, object or experience as in the Arthurian romances of the Middle Ages. Postmodern travelling in pursuit of traces, however, where it evokes this narrative archetype, tends to subvert and exploit its cultural pretensions and sacred aura to comic effect. Thus, for instance, William Dalrymple alludes quite explicitly both in the title and the subtitle of his *In Xanadu: A Quest* (1989) to the pregnant shape cultural memory has given to journeys to make them significant and memorable. The title quotes, of course, the first line of Coleridge's opium and Chinese dream, "In Xanadu did

Kubla Khan,” which in turn evokes a host of European travelogues about China, and at the same time it commemorates the great modernist classic of literary sleuthing, John Livingston Lowes’ *The Road to Xanadu* (1927), which unravels the textual traces underlying Coleridge’s romantic poem. One of these traces is Marco Polo’s *Milione* and it is Marco Polo’s quest for the *meraviglia* of the East that Dalrymple’s “Quest” re-enacts. But he does no longer undertake it with the scholarly high seriousness with which, say, Freya Stark followed *Alexander’s Path* or Richard Holmes the *Footsteps* of his poets. Indeed, Dalrymple follows Marco Polo from Venice to Xanadu without bothering much about reconstructing his exact traces or reading his readings of cultural traces. What he focuses upon instead are the often absurd adventures on his way, which highlight the performative differences between his own modern mode of travelling and that of his legendary forerunner and stage them with comic narrative zest. Marco Polo’s *meraviglia* do not, of course, survive unimpaired such carnival conjunctions of high and low, of myth and modern banality. The disenchantment they work begins already with the phial of Holy Oil, which Dalrymple, like his medieval precursor, carries from Christ’s burial chapel in Jerusalem to China: his modern oil does not burn miraculously for ever, but has to be renewed and refilled from a mundane can of sunflower oil and is transported in an equally banal plastic bottle from Body Shop. And, of course, reaching the destination is not the moment of ecstasy a quest would suggest; it is a let-down rather, neither Marco Polo’s nor Coleridge’s China: “Our vision of Xanadu was nearer the heath scene in *Lear* than the exotic pleasure garden described by Polo” (Dalrymple 298).

All the travels in pursuit of traces and the quests for traces I have discussed so far have been, in terms of colonial voyages, “voyages out,” not “voyages in,” journeys away from one’s origins and not towards them. It is, however, mainly “voyages in” that we find among my fourth variety, which I will give a rather Proustian name: **journeys of remembrance of one’s origins**. Though they do occasionally occur

in male travel writing, they are more typically the form that female travelling tends to take.<sup>3</sup> I have chosen an example from a postcolonial context, Amryl Johnson's *Sequins for a Ragged Helm* (1988). This is the account of a *nostos*, a homecoming by a Black British writer in search of the traces of her origins in the Caribbean. Such a journey cuts across the colonial divide of "voyage in" and "voyage out," for it is at one and the same time a quest for Johnson's homelands and thus a "voyage in" and, as a journey away from the long-time home of the naturalised Briton, a "voyage out." Accordingly, the perspective of the traveller is an instable one, oscillating between that of a British tourist sightseeing in former colonies and that of a migrant without a fixed centre to her life far away from her island of birth.

The journey Amryl Johnson narrates is already her second journey home. During the first, the previous year, she was traumatised by an initial shock: the experience that her house of birth had just been destroyed, together with all material traces of what had always been present in her memories. Her nostalgic desire to tread again in the footsteps of her childhood, to literally to re-live her childhood once again and re-enact it in a commemorative performance—"Heel to toe within every footprint, matching the outlines until I was back on that one road. The same I had travelled" (Johnson 12)—had ended in a void. The traces she now follows on her second journey are mnemonic traces that go beyond the individual, private memories of her childhood, embedding them in deeper, half-lost sediments of a cultural memory of the Middle Passage and of slave labour on the sugar plantations. Fittingly, it is a monument that shows her the way into these depths of cultural memory—a huge iron wheel on Tobago, both material trace and symbolic reminder of the lost world of her origins. "The visit to the wheel becomes the postcolonial turning point of her entire passage, the point from where the scars of history inscribed on Caribbean landscapes can be retraced so that her tour turns from touristic

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. for this gender aspect of travelling K. R. Lawrence.

travelling into a *rite de passage* of personal redefinition” (Döring 47). Only after this act of commemoration and remembrance does a personal homecoming become possible for her, the encounter with her mother, with which the book ends—and not with her return to England.

Having finished this paper, I bought and read Orhan Pamuk’s *Istanbul: Memories of a City* (2005) to tune myself into the history and life of a city I had not visited before. Too late I realised that I might have—perhaps even should have—based my entire paper on this wonderful book. Pamuk, travelling peripatetically in his own city, is a searcher for, and a reader of, traces if ever there was one: the cultural traces left by its Greek, Byzantine, Jewish, Armenian, Anatolian, Ottoman and modern Turkish populations, the traces inscribed upon the city by the travellers from the West such as Nerval, Gautier or Flaubert, and, last but not least, the traces of his own childhood in Istanbul. The “Memories of a City” Pamuk evokes are both his own memories of Istanbul and Istanbul’s memories of its own past. His book is therefore a double, interconnected quest for Istanbul and for his own identity. By tracing the one he traces the other, as he realises late in his book: “I have described Istanbul when describing myself, and described myself when describing Istanbul” (265). And in the end his quest for origins for the identity of his city and himself “come[s] full circle, for anything we say about the city’s essence, says more about our lives and our own states of mind. The city has no centre other than ourselves” (316).

Nor has the world. This is, indeed, where all the traces travellers follow end.

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# Say It Isn't So: Autobiographical Hoaxes and the Ethics of Life Narrative

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**Abstract:** Although autobiographical hoaxes are not a recent phenomenon, the last few decades have seen both an increase in the kinds of autobiographical fakery and intensified cultural attention to their exposure. This essay examines such cultural disturbances by offering a taxonomy of hoaxes that sets out critical distinctions, generic scripts, and ethical implications of the problematic of hoaxes. Our typology surveys several kinds of hoaxing: scam lives; prosthetic enhancements; ethnic impersonation; fantasized lives; plagiarized lives; fabricated lives; and false witnessing. Probing these different manifestations of autobiographical hoaxes suggests questions about the cultural anxieties provoked through the scandal of the hoax: anxiety about the terms of the autobiographical pact; ethical investments in the “truth” of increasingly fragmented lives; the media production of celebrity self-narrators; the heterogeneous desires of readers seeking alternative identities; the impetus to self-reimagining through narratives posing possibilities for ersatz authenticity; and the global commodification of narratives of suffering and survival. Finally, we call for rethinking both the conceptualization of the hoax and its implications for theorizing life narrative in the media and moment of globalization.

Autobiographical hoaxes are not a recent phenomenon. The persona of Silence Dogood, a virtuous middle-aged Puritan widow, was adopted by sixteen-year-old Benjamin Franklin, in fourteen “letters” that comprise the earliest essay series in America, for his brother’s *New England Courant* in 1722 (15, n. 2). More generally, the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, in the United States and elsewhere, saw the proliferation of narratives of Indian captivity, Barbary Coast adventures, and other genres, whose “authenticity” in some cases was debunked as impersonation or outright invention. Men posed as women; journalists

posed as pirates. But writers could make a living and, sometimes, large profits, from a gullible and sensation-seeking public eager for stories of other worlds.

In the last few decades, autobiographical fakery has taken a post-modern turn. In 1972, Clifford Irving attempted to publish a bogus autobiography of Howard Hughes based on in-person interviews that he invented. Unlike Franklin's, Irving's caper netted him a sixteen-month prison sentence. Since that attempt, however, Irving has not only established himself as a novelist. His book about it, entitled *The Hoax*, was a publishing success; and the escapade became the subject of a Lasse Hallström film, *The Hoax* (2006). Ironically, Irving tried to sue Hallström, alleging that he was incorrectly represented in the film, which the *New York Times* called "a hoax about a hoax" (Broeske 13).

On the surface a hoax seems a transparent thing, especially a hoax autobiography. It is a narrative claimed to be autobiographical that is actually inauthentic, fabricated, untruthful. But how do we know this is the case? What evidence is cited when the charge of fraud or "hoaxiness" is attached to a published life narrative?

We will briefly summarize the aspects of narratives that elicit the charge of hoax, adapting historian Thérèse Taylor's schema for analyzing one such case (see "Truth"). **External** evidence may include the following: the degree of specificity in the story's geography and its correlation with a "real" world; the version of history it circulates or advocates; the extent to which it includes documentation that verifies both personal life and historical events; evidence about a counter life and/or counter identity; expert testimony on social issues the story raises, such as the status of repressed or recovered memory; and conspicuous attention in the media or what we might call a text's celebrity effect.

**Internal** evidence may involve the hoax's peritextual apparatus—for example, the use of authoritative endorsements that, by shoring up the story's "authenticity," incite readers' suspicion that the life is in fact invented; and the presence or absence of documentation, particu-

larly the use of claims or allegations without evidence. Several narrative issues may also raise suspicion: multiple improbabilities in the story; contradictions or discrepancies from one part of the text to another; the use of a sensationalistic script such as the melodrama of beset victimhood; repeated vagueness about details; and a narrative voice that has a formulaic or generic quality.

In other words, readers inclined to suspect the veracity or authenticity of what a writer claims is his or her life story might read for multiple indices of inconsistency that signal “hoaxiness.” Indeed, while some readers and audiences might allege all autobiographical work is fakery—“lies, damn lies, and statistics,” to paraphrase Mark Twain—the pressures of this historical moment, the heterogeneous desires of partisan audiences, and the commodification of life narrative in the “age of memoir” argue that we need to distinguish among kinds of hoaxes and adopt a more suggestive continuum of terms. We offer the following taxonomy of autobiographical hoaxes to complicate critical thinking about the cultural work that the hoax does and, conversely, the work that its unmasking performs.

### **A. Scam Lives**

Perhaps the easiest hoaxes to expose and the most egregious are what we might call **scam lives**. These are exemplified by the email messages sent by what the website *Scamorama* calls “the lads from Lagos.” Such writers fabricate a pedigree and dire circumstances in making urgent appeals for financial help. Theirs might be relabeled **spam lives**, since appeals from around the globe can arrive in our in-boxes at a staggering rate. Scam lives are financial lives, invented as compelling dramas of fortunes in ruins and calculated for quick profit. Literally asking for an investment in the life story, scammers position email readers as gullible investors. Most readers would concur that scam lives blatantly misrepresent and intend to deceive, that the life is a con and the goal a quick buck, and that readers best beware. Other