


Participating in the International Formation of The Autobiography Society and Its Flagship Journal *a|b: Auto|Biography Studies*

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ABSTRACT

This essay reviews a German American Studies scholar's participation in the formation of The Autobiography Society and in the foundation of the journal *a|b: Auto|Biography Studies*, during stays in the US and as chair at the Johannes Gutenberg University in Mainz. It recalls the international efforts to establish worldwide organizations, such as IABA, and to institute life writing centers. The practice and theory of life writing represent major tools of coping with all aspects of life as writers and critics and play an important role in the academy and in public.

KEYWORDS

Anglo-American;
international life writing;
publications;
transdisciplinary approach

Georg Misch's comprehensive *Geschichte der Autobiographie* [*History of Autobiography*] represents the first major German contribution to autobiography studies. Following the prize question of the Prussian Academy of Sciences of 1900 in Königsberg (since 1946 the Russian city of Kaliningrad) and probably influenced by the legacy of its famous philosopher Immanuel Kant, Misch submitted the beginning of his *Geschichte der Autobiographie* and won the first prize in 1905. This first part of his history was also accepted for his second doctoral degree, the Habilitation at the University of Berlin, directed by his later father-in-law Wilhelm Dilthey, author of the *Grundlegung der Geisteswissenschaften* [Principles of the Humanities]. The first volume of his magisterial study of the history of the genre appeared in 1907 and eventually comprised four volumes of two parts each to cover autobiographical expressions from classical antiquity in Greece and Rome to representatives of European Romanticism (Misch 1949–1969).

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My engagement with autobiography studies began when I decided after my dissertation on the Muckraking Movement to write my thesis for the Habilitation degree on an area not considered in Misch's voluminous study, namely American autobiographies. Unaware of Misch at that time, I was inspired by the publication of James Olney's *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical* in 1980, when I had a postdoctoral ACLS fellowship at Yale researching for my thesis on "*Kulturkrise und ihre literarische Bewältigung: Die Funktion der autobiographischen Struktur in Amerika vom Puritanismus zur Postmoderne*" ["Cultural Crises and Literary Solutions: The Function of the Autobiographical Structure in America from Puritanism to Postmodernism"] (Hornung 1985b). Olney's new and interdisciplinary approach to the subject reconfirmed my opinion of the importance of this genre, often neglected and on the sideline in literature departments. In spite of Misch's pioneer work, German historians continued to see the study of autobiography as "*Hilfswissenschaft*," an ancillary discipline to objective historiography, defining its outsider status in the humanities. James Olney's volume was the starting point for the overdue recognition of autobiography and its eventual redefinition as life writing.

It was my good luck that I could spend the final leg of my three-year stay in the US as a fellow at the National Humanities Center in North Carolina where the eminent New Critic Cleanth Brooks was my office neighbor and fellow James Olney an immensely important support for my academic work and for feeling at home thanks to his guidance and all-inclusive hospitality. Our concrete cooperation began when Peter Nagourney and Roy Weitzel, who had accepted my paper on "The Autobiographical Mode on Contemporary American Literature" (Hornung 1985a) for their MLA workshop on "Autobiography and Biography: Evaluating Criticism and Critical Approaches," wrote to me with the request to take over the chair of that workshop because they were unable to come to the convention. Inexperienced in these matters and as a first-time participant in an MLA I turned to James and was very relieved when he agreed to share the task with me. So, we both chaired session No. 349 in Houston in 1980 where I also met Julia Watson as a panelist and Timothy Dow Adams in the audience. This was my initiation into the field of "Nonfictional Prose" which was the beginning of an autobiography studies group of mostly American colleagues and eventually led to a formal institution of "special sessions" on auto/biography and the foundation of an auto/biography journal.

I was glad to join these new ventures as a German Americanist from abroad and to participate in MLA conventions. James Olney organized "The Borders of Autobiography: 1815–1914" in Los Angeles with panelists Thomas R. Smith and Julia Watson, and Julia Watson ran the special session "Theory of Women's Autobiography" at the Washington, DC,

convention in 1984 for which she had accepted my paper “The Recovery of the Self in Social Work and Modern Art: Jane Addams and Gertrude Stein” (Hornung 1990) in a group of eminent auto/biography critics: panelists Janet Varner Gunn, Mitzi Myers, and Mary G. Mason as discussant. It was one of fourteen sessions on “Nonfictional Prose” on auto/biographies in the US and Latin America. This summation of important research seemed to be like a preview and opener of the first significant venue, the International Symposium on Autobiography and Autobiography Studies organized at Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge by James Olney in cooperation with J. T. Ellenberger and Lucinda Cole. I had just finished my thesis and was very happy when James invited me to this first International Symposium in February 1985. It felt good to move in the circle of a burgeoning movement of autobiography scholars and to be a respondent to the section on “Interpretation of Autobiography” with presentations by James M. Cox, Geoffrey Galt Harpham, Paul John Eakin, and Ira B. Nadel (Olney 1988).

In “Foreword: What’s Past?” Rebecca Hogan and Barbara Sher describe how this international venue became the starting point of an autobiography journal and they were the first editors (2017). Barbara Sher started immediately after the Baton Rouge symposium to take up James Olney’s initiative for this journal, and in April 1985, I received vol. 1, no. 1 of “Autobiography Studies”: a one-page legal size, doubled-sided “newsletter founded to improve communications among colleagues interested in autobiography, biography and other life-writing.” It promised, “to serve the needs of those of us who are doing work in the field of Autobiography and related Life-Writing. It will be by, and for the benefit of those of you who are on the mailing lists from the 1983 and 1984 MLA meetings and the International Symposium of Autobiography and Autobiography Studies held at Louisiana State University” (Sher, recto). It contained a flurry of questions and information about existing auto/biography journals and bibliographical data on the subject. Since Barbara Sher, a resident of New York, did most of her research in the Butler library of Columbia University where she also attended an eight-lecture series entitled “Self-Portraits in Literature” given by Carl Woodring, David Damrosch, Carl Hovde, and Carolyn Heilbrun. Barbara Sher signed as editor assisted by Tim Adams, Rebecca Hogan, Tom Smith, and J.T. Ellenberger. It was a fortunate coincidence that I had a visiting professorship at Columbia University in 1986–87 where I taught a graduate seminar on “American Autobiography” and connected with the productive life writing colleagues in the Department of English and Comparative Literature. This year also allowed me to intensify my cooperation with the growing autobiography community and to participate in promoting the newsletter in Europe on its way to becoming a full-blown journal. Emily Hipchen encouraged me to write

about the German situation, and a review of “German Contributions to Autobiography Studies” appeared in the third volume of *a|b* (Hornung 1987), reprinted as part of the 30th anniversary issue of the journal in 2014. When I was appointed chair professor of American Studies at the Johannes Gutenberg University of Mainz in 1988, I was determined to dedicate my work to autobiography studies. In cooperation with Ernstpeter Ruhe, professor of Romance literature, I organized two international conferences with Anglophone and Francophone writers and autobiography scholars. At the 1990 conference on “Autobiography & Avant-garde” Alain Robbe-Grillet presented his ideas on the “*nouvelle autobiographie*,” Serge Doubrovsky elaborated his term of “autofiction,” Rachid Boudjedra presented his “*autobiographie plurielle*,” Maxine Hong Kingston called her autobiographical work “global novel,” Raymond Federman and Ronald Sukenick adopted the label of “postmodern autobiography” (Hornung and Ruhe 1992). We were glad to have Timothy Dow Adams as one of the presenters. In the 1996 conference on “Postcolonialism & Autobiography” we invited writers with a Caribbean or Algerian background, Albert Memmi, Daniel Maximin, Michelle Cliff, David Dabydeen and Assia Djebar. Sidonie Smith and Leigh Gilmore were two of the prominent autobiography scholars of the constantly growing American life writing group which influenced and promoted the international spread of autobiography studies (Hornung and Ruhe 1998a, 1998b).

Without a doubt, the 1999 Beijing conference of the Chinese Autobiography Association, organized by Zhao Baisheng who had invited scholars and critics mostly from North America and Australia and three Europeans (Philippe Lejeune, Margaretta Jolly, and me) to accompany the Chinese venue. The consequent foundation of IABA and its success story, thanks to Craig Howes, was a major boost for autobiography scholarship and for *a|b: Auto|Biography Studies* which profited from the editorial expertise of Bill Andrews, Rebecca and Joseph Hogan. The internationalization and to a certain extent the (Anglo-) Americanization of the new field of life writing took on momentum in the series of biennial IABA conferences, one of which I organized in Mainz in 2006 on “Autobiography and Mediation” (Hornung 2009). To answer to the needs of international scholars, Monica Soeting and I suggested the creation of regional IABA sections at the Hawai’i IABA meeting and proceeded to found IABA Europe in 2009 with a conference in Amsterdam (Huisman et al. 2012), eventually followed by IABA, Chapter of the Americas, and IABA, Asia-Pacific Chapter. Ricia Chansky encouraged me as a supporter of the IABA, Chapter of the Americas founding conference in Puerto Rico to present a paper online from my position at a summer school in Beijing eventually published in *a|b: Auto|Biography Studies* (Hornung 2022). A major step in the history of the journal was

its adoption by Routledge in 2013, which I had strongly supported as one of the reviewers for the press, in the same way in which I reviewed very positively Ricia Chansky's and Emily Hipchen's proposal to establish the Routledge *Auto|Biography Studies* series in 2014. Both have become major publication outlets for the life writing community and presentations at IABA venues (Hornung 2017a).

At Mainz, we continued to make autobiography studies one of the major teaching and research topics, organized the annual convention of the German Association for American Studies in 2012 on "American Lives" with keynote addresses by Sidonie Smith and Craig Howes and a reading of Siri Hustvedt (Hornung 2013). In cooperation with Zhao Baisheng at Peking University and Elizabeth West at Georgia State University in Atlanta, we established a circle of doctoral candidates working on life writing, which became the basis of a Research Training Group on "Life Sciences, Life Writing: Experiences at the Boundaries of Human Life between Biomedical Explanation and Lived Experience," in which the German Research Foundation funded three cohorts of twelve doctoral students from the humanities and the medical school for a three-year period each (2015–2024). This collaboration also led to a two-part joint conference on "Ecology and Life Writing" conducted at Peking University and the Johannes Gutenberg University in Mainz in 2009 and 2010, a continuation of the Chinese relations begun in 1999 (Hornung and Zhao 2013). The internationalization of the field also recognized the increasing importance of inter- and transdisciplinary approaches reflected in recent issues of autobiography publications (Heinze and Hornung 2013). Based on our Columbia University connections we conducted joint workshops with the narrative medicine project headed by Rita Charon and the autobiographical implications of medical humanities (Banerjee 2018; Wohlmann 2015, 2024).

On the occasion of the 40th anniversary of *a|b: Auto|Biography Studies*, we can be proud of the tremendous success of the widespread and diversified field and the journal. The once-neglected genre has moved from an outsider position to the mainstream of public and scholarly attention and enjoys global recognition (Wagner-Egelhaaf 2019). The initial leadership in the field by mostly Anglophone autobiography scholarship, due to the prominence of the practice and scholarship of the life writing genre predominantly in English as the lingua franca, has profited from practices and publications in other languages and cultures, challenging some of the familiar assumptions (Misch 1909; Wang and Money 2015; Hornung 2017b, 2017c, 2025). The Autobiography Society and its flagship journal *a|b: Auto|Biography Studies* enjoy leading positions in the prolific life writing world.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributor

Alfred Horning is Research Professor and Director of the Obama Institute for Transnational American Studies at the Johannes Gutenberg University of Mainz and an Honorary Chair Professor of Shandong University. His publications are in the field of modernism, postmodernism, ecology and life writing. He is editor-in-chief of the *Journal of Transnational American Studies* and on the editorial board of several journals, including *Atlantic Studies*, *Contemporary Foreign Literature* (Nanjing), *Life Writing in Europe, a/b: Auto/Biography Studies*, and *Life Writing*. He is a founding member of IABA and of IABA-Europe, the recipient of the Bode-Pearson Prize of the American Studies Association and an elected member of Academia Europaea. Among his latest publications are a biography of Jack London (2016), the Chinese translation of *Ecology and Life Writing* (2016), *The Routledge Companion to Transnational American Studies* (2019), and a biography of Al Capone (2021).

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