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Beyond the Subject. New Developments in Life Writing

Introduction

Tobias Heinrich

Ludwig Boltzmann Institute for the History and Theory of Biography, Vienna

Monica Soeting

VU University, Amsterdam

Recent developments in the field of digital communication technology pose crucial problems to the practice of life writing. Whereas some authors consider digital communication a threat to traditional biographies – which sources are left to a biographer when there are no letters, no notebooks and no manuscripts? – others, like Philippe Lejeune, find new advantages in writing about the self digitally. Online, he wrote in *On Diary* (2009), “the diary can finally breathe, stretch out on a chaise lounge, and relax. Computer files and loose leaf paper lend themselves wonderfully to writing fragments but files are even better than notebooks and endless accumulation.” (316) However, when it comes to life writing research, digital communication poses more fundamental questions concerning the relationship of “old” and “new” media, as well as questions concerning the methodological approach towards digital sources: how to deal with the volatility of a website or the complexity of Big Data? Ultimately we have to question the status of the subject itself in a culture that increasingly regards the network instead of the individual as its central point of reference.

Following two successful conferences in Amsterdam in 2009 and in Tallinn in 2011, the third International Auto/Biography Association Europe biennial conference, held from 31 October to 3 November 2013 in Vienna and hosted by the Ludwig Boltzmann Institute for the History

and Theory of Biography, was entitled “Beyond the Subject. New Developments in Life Writing” and aimed at bridging the gap between historical forms of life writing and the most recent medial transformations in the genre of life writing, like personal websites, blogs and social networks as new spaces in the autobiographical public sphere. At the same time, the conference focused on auto/biographical practices that consciously undermine the traditional Western concept of the subject and develop alternative models of life writing.

In her speech on the eve of the conference in Vienna, Susanne Weigelin-Schwiedrzik, vice-president of the University of Vienna, demonstrated how the multi-dimensionality of a historical figure as well as fundamental differences between Chinese and European traditions in life-writing oppose notions of a unified subject, a challenge she illustrated in relation to the life of Mao Zedong. In Weigelin-Schwiedrzik’s perspective, any attempt to narrate the life of the Chinese political leader necessarily needs to remain fragmented and contradictory if it aims to represent the full complexity and diversity of his public and private representations.

During the conference, three keynote speakers concentrated on different aspects of biographies in the digital age. By using the example of the *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Paul Arthur, Professor of Digital Humanities at the University of Western Sydney, exemplified benefits and challenges of translating long-running projects of national biography to the digital sphere. He demonstrated how elaborate search mechanisms and innovative approaches to data visualization make digital biography a research environment in its own right. Especially when it comes to the interconnectedness of lives, online resources provide a multitude of different ways to represent ties between individual biographies. On the other hand, digitalized data can be used for research on a larger comparative scale than traditional print volumes would allow. In this regard, online editions of national biography contribute to the rapid developments in Digital Humanities.

Margaretta Jolly, reader in Cultural Studies at the University of Sussex, director of the Centre for Life History and Life Writing Research at the same university, and editor of the *Encyclopedia of Life Writing* (2001) impressed the audience with “The Sound of a Life,” a presentation of one of the lives she captured in sound for “Sisterhood and After,” the first British oral history project documenting the memories of the women who powered the women’s liberation movement in Great Britain. This pioneering and important project was launched at the British Library in cooperation with the Women’s Library and directed by Jolly.

Kirsti Niskanen, Professor of History at the University of Stockholm, pointed to some of the empirical and epistemological challenges that

remote digital access to archival material present to social historians in general and scholars of life writing in particular. Using the example of a database at the City Archives of Stockholm, comprising documents on Early Modern bankruptcies, she indicated how it is possible to reconstruct the social and economic circumstances of individual lives in the respective period. On the other hand, Niskanen also demonstrated how lack of meta-data and contextualization, as well the structural predetermination of databases can limit and preform possible findings by researchers of digital archives.

Following the key note presentations, different aspects of life writing beyond the subject were discussed in more than twenty-five panel sessions, like “Mediated Memories,” “Prefiguring the Virtual Subject,” “Intermedia and Identity,” and “Networked Subjects and the Society.”

After the conference, participants were invited to submit articles based on their papers presented at the 2013 IABA Europe conference, to be published in the *European Journal of Life Writing*. In this section of the journal you will find more samples of the different topics that were addressed during the conference; the first six articles based on papers presented at the conference can be found in Volume III of the Journal.