



## Is Relationality a Genre?

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**Anne Rügemeier**, *Die relationale Autobiographie: Ein Beitrag zur Theorie, Poetik und Gattungsgeschichte eines neuen Genres in der englischsprachigen Erzählliteratur* [Relational Autobiography: A Contribution to the Theory, Poetics, and Genre History of a New Genre in English-language Narrative Literature] (Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2014)

Anne Rügemeier's *Die relationale Autobiographie* (*Relational Autobiography*) lays out an ambitious and nuanced argument encompassing a wide range of theoretical claims about autobiography and narrative studies, and is organized carefully into detailed modules that take up key concepts more generally. Its subtitle, roughly, *A Contribution to the Theory, Poetics, and Genre History of a New Genre in English-language Narrative Literature*, announces its scope. Rügemeier makes the claim that "relationality" is a recent genre-formation; she proposes a "systematic" exploration of a "paradigm shift" that she asserts has not yet been analyzed in autobiography studies; and she elaborates a typology of numerous examples to indicate the breadth of "relational autobiographies" published around the globe over the last few decades in English (14). This is an ambitious first book, with both the strengths and the issues of the Germanic style of dissertation from which it was derived.

In the interest of full disclosure (as we say in the US), I preface this review by acknowledging that, singly and with Sidonie Smith, I have often called for a full study of relationality that would theorize this to-date fuzzily used concept, one that has gained traction in recent years but is in need of more precise definition. For example, my 2008 essay on Bechdel's *Fun Home* asserted, "The notion of relational life narrative is both too capacious and too vague. There is a relational aspect to nearly all life narratives" (29–30). I also expressed reservations about theorizing relationality

as a “genre,” citing the trenchant observation of Nancy K. Miller: “The challenge that faces autobiographers is to invent themselves despite the weight of their family history, and autobiographical singularity emerges in negotiations with this legacy” (“Entangled” 543). Miller’s emphasis on *negotiation* among personal histories and the competing demands of individual and collective stories suggests a view of relationality as an ongoing process among modes of storytelling rather than a fixed form. How, then, might we think about relationality—as a genre, a negotiation among the competing claims of single and collective stories, or some other possibility? Rüggeheimer’s extensive overview argues for the first option and documents her case extensively. It remains for readers to decide the merits of her argument, while appreciating her wide-ranging examples and efforts to systematize “relationality” as not a mode of address but a genre.

Rüggeheimer’s introduction defines relationality as a prime autobiographical genre of the current century in distinction to an earlier genre called “autobiography” and does not entertain what others reference as the multiple genres of the autobiographical—such as testimony, autographic, confession—usually recognized as distinct formations. Her argument relies on the important formulation of relationality in Paul John Eakin’s chapters in *How Our Lives Become Stories* that distinguish between an autobiography engaging “a key other individual” and a story encompassing “an entire social environment,” a point on which I will have more to say (Eakin 69, cited on 15). Rüggeheimer’s aim is to lay the groundwork for a genre theory of relational autobiography that will serve as a “descriptive model” including its narratological features, rhetorical strategies, and structural design. She also wants to probe the literary and cultural functions of relational autobiography by invoking Eakin’s theorizing of “narrative identity systems” in both literary and everyday realms that has informed his work over the last fifteen years (*Living Autobiographically* 22). And she intends that her wide-ranging study organize an exemplary corpus of texts often discussed as relational memoirs, thereby legitimizing relationality as a distinct genre.

Indeed Rüggeheimer asserts that the focus of most contemporary theorists on autobiographical discourse rather than the category of genre (39) has led to increasing “conceptual anarchy” (“Begriffsanarchie” 40). Her example is *Reading Autobiography* in which Sidonie Smith and I responded to the exclusionary hegemony of “autobiography” by positing ever more genres of life narrative: fifty-two in the 2001 edition and sixty in the 2010 edition, including the “fake” genre of “oughtobiography” (258).<sup>1</sup> (And now there are more—I keep notes on the explosion of genres of self-narration in digital media.) Rüggeheimer views such a classificatory scheme as a flawed, “content-based” classification of genres (“inhaltsbasierten

Gattungsklassifikationen” 41). In her view a genre theory should attend to its literary aspects such as the process of representation (“Darstellungsverfahren”—difficult to translate) and “a description of the formal elements” of the form in order to account for alternative ways of writing and deviations that develop, as well as historically or culturally conditioned modifications (40–1). This argument, which strikes me as a structuralist one derived from narratology critics including Todorov via Ansgar Nünning, seems insufficiently flexible for the idiosyncrasies of autobiographical writing, which readily takes up and adapts multiple discourses and genres.

I confess, however, my preference for a theory of multiple micro-genres as a “bottom-up” way of thinking about the explosion of life writing over the past few decades, particularly among formerly disenfranchised subjects—people of color, women, gay, bi-, and transsexual writers, those with disabilities—and modes, including film and video, performance, comics, etc. In defense of that view of genre I would point to Montaigne’s *Essais* (my own dissertation project), which engaged and altered inherited genres of classical Antiquity while incorporating everyday “subliterary” vernacular forms; like much emergent Renaissance literature of self the *Essais* invented what might be thought of as a portmanteau of genres within prose nonfiction. This concept of genres was influenced by Renaissance scholar Rosalie Colie’s exploration of Renaissance prose genres as “small things.”<sup>2</sup>

The latter half of Rüggeheimer’s book exemplifies the scope of her theory in discussing numerous examples of relationality, with each chapter focused on a different aspect of self-other-social world relations. I will briefly enumerate these before returning to her theoretical case for relationality. In chapter 4 Rüggeheimer identifies recent memoirs concerned with the dialogical constituting of an autobiographical I within familial relations: Hanif Kureishi’s *My Ear at His Heart: Reading My Father*; Alison Bechdel’s intersubjective autographic *Are You My Mother?*; Mary Gordon’s parental memoirs, *The Shadow Man* and *Circling My Mother*; Julian Barnes’ *Nothing to Be Frightened Of*; Barack Obama’s coming-of-age political narrative, *Dreams from My Father*; Diana Abu Jaber’s cooking memoir, *The Language of Baklava*; and Joan Didion’s thanatographic work, *The Year of Magical Thinking*.

In chapter 5 she focuses on how relational autobiographies, in incorporating a metadiscursive dimension, can problematize and critique “traditional” theories of the autobiographical subject. She draws on Nancy K. Miller’s *What They Saved* and Rudy Wiebe’s *Of This Earth* as “we-moir” meditations on family mediated through the found objects they left behind, and returns to Miller’s *Bequest and Betrayal* to think about the moving target of family relations at the heart of several of her works of

autocritique. (A version of this chapter appears as an essay in English in this volume.) She also takes up Vikram Seth's *Two Lives*, Lisa Appignanesi's *Losing the Dead*, Modris Ekstein's *Walking Since Daybreak*, Mai-Lee and Winberg Chai's *The Girl from Purple Mountain*, and Arnold Zabel's *Jewels and Ashes* as family memoirs working relational axes.

Chapter 6 explores the third aspect of Rüggeheimer's notion of relational autobiographies as "subversive new orientations of the cultural implications of the west's genre of autobiography" in Pat Mora's *House of Houses* as exemplary of Chicana autobiographical narrative; J.-M. Coetzee's *Summertime*, an "autobiography"; Sally Morgan's *My Place*; Narendra Jadhav's *Untouchables*; Cherrié Moraga's Chicana lesbian manifesto, *Loving in the War Years*; Michael Ondaatje's genealogical chronicle, *Running in the Family*; and Maxine Hong Kingston's metanarrative, *I Love a Broad Margin to My Life*. These memoirs are grouped under the rubric of "post-colonial," a loose and less successful linkage, given not only the different points of departure from which each writer narrates experiences of border-crossing but also the discussions in which these texts have been caught up over the past few decades (17–18). With Morgan's *My Place*, for example, the question of "borrowing" others' narratives without crediting them sparked a controversy around indigeneity in Australia, signaling the ethical issues that may arise about claims of relational life writing. Nonetheless, Rüggeheimer's discussions are insightfully conducted and closely wedded to the case she builds for relationality, though that focus at times flattens the multifariousness of both the narratives and the diverse critical approaches of recent decades that have illuminated them.

Rüggeheimer's theoretical scaffolding in the book's first half, however, is crucial to her argument and a salutary effort to construct a coherent position. Chapter 2 seeks to put autobiography studies and narrative theory into closer conversation, a welcome and not surprising effort, as her "Doctor-Father" was eminent narratologist Ansgar Nünning at Justus Lipsius University-Giessen, Germany. Concepts and models from narratology inform her theorizing of relationality throughout. Certainly, more precise use of concepts such as focalization and homodiegetic narration could enhance the reading of autobiographical texts. But as a scholar working with the Project Narrative faculty at The Ohio State University and someone who has explored the intersection of narratological and life writing studies, I have found that the taxonomy of narratology does not map seamlessly onto the dynamics of acts and practices in life writing. The heterogeneous modes and media of the autobiographical require recognition of its different limits and audiences, as well as attention to issues of referentiality and verification, aspects rarely acknowledged in narrative theory. Given the constraints of this review, I leave further discussion of this point to my narratological colleagues.

Rüggemeier has done considerable research on the history of autobiography theory and her overview in Part II of the Introduction, while not new, offers a thorough account, especially for scholars working in Germany (see pp. 19–54.) Hers is a compressed history, perhaps inevitably so in a non-English national setting. But it does not sufficiently acknowledge how the expansion of the canon from “autobiography” to life writing was enabled by retrieval from the archives of many previously unrecognized genres of life writing, some going back two centuries: the slave narrative and the immigrant genealogical story, feminist “coming to voice” stories, the narration of illness or disability as a mode of gaining agency, the comics autographic. These and many other templates are in fact not within the official terrain of a genre of “autobiography”; rather, they are its “outlaws” (in Caren Kaplan’s term), outliers that have long subverted the notion of the autonomous, sovereign self Rüggemeier wants to assert as definitive of “autobiography.”<sup>3</sup>

Rüggemeier’s historical account, tracing a theoretical line from Dilthey and Misch, through Shumaker, Gusdorf, Pascal, and Weintraub, to Lejeune, de Man, Eakin, and narratology theorists, with a nod to postcolonial life-writing scholars Françoise Lionnet and Bart Moore-Gilbert, is in the end inadequate to the theoretical work and rich conversations that have enlivened the field over the last three decades. That said, she offers a helpful and genuinely interdisciplinary overview of theorizing the “self” within philosophical and communicative contexts, with brief discussions of Hegel, Freud, William James, Mead, and Foucault, as well as recent social psychologists. A separate section briefly takes up feminist theorizing of a few key concepts such as “the other voice,” which is oddly bracketed as an offshoot in autobiography studies (pp. 54–5). Second Wave feminist theorizing in England, France, and the United States, however, was deeply involved with rethinking personal writing as an intersubjective and therefore relational genre, which greatly influenced discussion of the concept. Similarly Rüggemeier offers a brief discussion of Lionnet’s use of *métissage* as a concept for reading the linguistic and cultural hybridity of postcolonial memoirs (56–7).

Central to Rüggemeier’s argument is her extended discussion of Eakin’s 1999 study and, appearing in the same year, Susanna Egan’s *Mirror Lives*, though she gives the latter short shrift. Egan took up the relational aspect of life writing as a central focus, locating her project in the intersubjectivity created by various kinds of “mirrored” memoirs between subjects and analyzing how such practices both engage and alter the autobiographical in telling dual or multiple stories. Rüggemeier focuses on a particular reading of Eakin’s work, which leads her to emphasize certain aspects of relationality while minimizing others, including some of Eakin’s important claims. My reservations cluster around these points:

1. Rüggeheimer's historicizing of the concept of relationality is flawed. A book chronicling the history of relational autobiography needs to attend more closely to feminist theorizing of life writing. Sidonie Smith and I observed that Eakin's analyses in *How Our Lives Become Stories* and elsewhere were a retheorizing of relationality as a notion that had been pioneered in feminist interrogations of relational bonds (*Reading* 216). The concept, then, has a long history in, for example, the work of feminist theorists such as Nancy Chodorow, Mary G. Mason, Susan Stanford Friedman, and Nancy K. Miller in her early work (see Smith and Watson, *Women*, 16–18 and 37–8). Miller, before Eakin, had identified psychologist Jessica Benjamin's essay, "A Desire of One's Own," as a milestone in psychoanalytic theorizing of relationality; it later became a touchstone for her own books of auto-critique (1994). Although these discussions, referencing the porous ego-boundaries forged in relationships between women as an effect in part of mother–child bonds, focused on middle-class white women at particular historical moments, their wider applicability for situating the genealogy and psychodynamics of a concept of relational connectedness was, and continues to be, referenced. Eakin's 1999 work did not engage this scholarship, however, in part because of his interest in expanding the concept from women's to all autobiography as inherently relational, some of it as autoethnographic.
2. Rüggeheimer's assertion that she is enhancing Eakin's delineation of relationality avoids addressing his strong claim that relational life writing is "the autobiography of the self and the biography *and* the autobiography of the other," a significant other who may be known so intimately that a narrator can tell her or his story "from the inside" (58, my italic). Rüggeheimer thus extends Eakin's concept of relational storytelling from an intimate and radical practice to a blending of one's autobiography with the biography of another. Eakin, however, is among those who have claimed that, while the notion of relational autobiography problematizes an older sense of an autonomous identity and a sovereign "I," there has long been a relational dimension to most life writing. But Rüggeheimer's large claim, that the relational is a recent formation sparked by cultural and literary shifts, finesses this longstanding aspect of the relational in autobiographical writing. As Françoise Lionnet observed, examples of "traditional" autobiography—hers are Augustine and Nietzsche—can also be read as dialogical texts centrally addressing an other (the possible exception may be Descartes).
3. Similarly Rüggeheimer's notion of "autobiography" as a single genre is ahistorical and universalizing across diverse national traditions.

Philippe Lejeune recently observed that “The problem is that in France or Italy, the umbrella term [“autobiography”] is used at the same time as the name of one of the genres covered by the umbrella, whereas in English there is no such confusion, “life-writing” not being used for any particular genre. In French, we have also tried to find a really general term, but it never succeeded: we tried “*récit de vie*” or “*histoire de vie*,” but are letters and diaries really “*récit*” or “*histoire*”? We tried “*écriture de soi*,” but testimonies are not always centered on the self. So we keep “autobiography” as an umbrella term, which is a pity, as so far the word often has a negative connotation in French.”<sup>4</sup> The generic concept of “autobiography” itself, then, is problematic, with different connotations and histories in different national traditions.

4. Ruggemeier’s claim for relationality as a genre seems less enabling than a focus on autoethnographic texts, the larger concept that Eakin extensively develops in chapter 2 (1999), might be. Several critics, including Eakin, Besemeres, Watson, have argued that autoethnography is an “umbrella” term for the life writing of collectively composed “I”s who locate themselves in contact zones between unevenly situated nations, languages, and/or ideological groups. Unlike “relationality” the concept of autoethnography, with its reference to specifics of ethnography, enables critics to confront some knotty issues about distinctions between “speaking as” and “speaking for” that have been probed in G. Thomas Couser’s critiques of collaborative life writing as a means of overwriting indigenous subjectivity in the name of co-producing a story. Indeed a theory of relationality would need to account for its potential for inequitable narration. In sum, when particular heterogeneous texts are subsumed under the term “relationality” rather than regarded as sites of negotiation among competing histories, subjects, and generic traditions, both the geopolitical and the intersubjective dimensions of life writing may be muted.
5. Ruggemeier’s enthusiasm about characterizing relationality as a single genre leads her to downplay other competing aspects at play in the texts she takes up, notably those of medium. For example, the formal limits and affordances of comics in Bechdel’s *Are You My Mother?* or *Fun Home* need addressing: how is relationality differently configured across the boxes and gutters of a visual-verbal medium than in a written text? A full model of relationality would need to attend to such issues as intersectionality and automediality—how life narratives are now cast across multiple story templates, temporalities, and media, in the polyphonies of autobiographical discourse.

6. Rüggeheimer's notion of the "we-moir" may be too narrow to account for current examples of the "autobiography of things" in life writing such as Edmund De Waal's *The Hare with Amber Eyes*, with its ambitious historical scope, or the theorizing of "embridry" made by refugees on Nauru Island that Gillian Whitlock explores. How should relationality be reconceptualized when its other has the status of an object that does not "speak" in a conventional sense?

Although Rüggeheimer acknowledges, in accord with Egan, that relational texts have long existed, her central claim is that relationality as a new genre introduces "a new ethic of the autobiographical" by "integrating the perspective of the other," in which the representation of both self and other remain open (68–9). She helpfully grounds this relationship in social communications theory, which is more integrated into the humanities in Germany than in the United States, as well as narratology. But is her emphasis on both openness and a coherent system an effort to have it both ways? As much postmodern life writing is characterized by dialogism, with its shifting contexts and interpretations, the memoir's protean and mutable openness may be too slippery for a unitary systematic classification. Indeed, Rüggeheimer's effort to bracket off a genre brings up an issue that haunts the theorizing of the autobiographical, which Leigh Gilmore's *Autobiographics* made explicit: to what extent is "autobiography" a practice of writing, to what extent one of reading? In my view it is more productive to open out the genre binary of autobiography-relationality constructed by Rüggeheimer to a multiplicity of writing and reading practices with varying limits.

I do not mean this critique to take away from Rüggeheimer's accomplishments in *Die relationale Autobiographie*, which are many. She has admirably defined and traced a genealogy and contemporary praxis of "relationality" and provided readings of the relational aspect of numerous English-language, primarily North American, memoirs over the last two decades. Her bibliography, which is extensive and helpfully separated into primary autobiographical works (including American, English, various "postcolonial," and a few translated German memoirs) and hundreds of secondary sources, will be a resource, particularly for scholars working in German and for those coming from narrative theory. But how far can the concept of relationality be extended and still retain its precision and usefulness across sharply differing life writing practices and discourses?

My reservations thus center on Rüggeheimer's larger claim to define a genre, rather than a storytelling practice that has implications for the heterogeneous genres of the autobiographical. I want to resist her notion of "relationality" as a systematic theory establishing a new paradigm in

distinction to traditional “autobiography,” a configuration that places them in a troubling binary relationship, one abandoned by most theorists of life writing two decades ago. Too many important distinctions among the genres, voices, cultural moments and audiences of the memoirs she discusses are obscured or flattened in making a case for relationality as the binary other of “autobiography” *tout court* and its new-model revision. Her theory becomes at points ahistorical, particularly in the discussion of the “postcolonial,” which conflates different histories of imperialism and appropriation, geographic sites, and generations of immigrant ethnic groups.

At the same time, I recognize that the dissertation mode in which this book was originally cast requires long sections of justification and clarification, as distinct from a critical study focused concisely and directly on its object of study. *Die relationale Autobiographie* is a first book offering a trove of definitions, histories, and analyses that can be mined for many future projects. With these reservations, I welcome Anne Rügemeier’s study as an important and wide-ranging exploration of the scope and modes of relational life writing that is exemplary of the flowering of autobiography studies in the German-speaking world, now in vigorous bloom. I hope that she will distill from this ambitious dissertation—an archive for her life’s work—a monograph in English of about 200 pages that can more easily circulate internationally. And I welcome her as a presence on the international autobiography scene, not only in Europe but also in the International Auto/Biography Association and its Western-hemisphere affiliate in the Americas. She has much to contribute to our conversations.

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## NOTES

- 1 Rüggemeier alludes to *Reading's* appendix on "Genres of Life Writing," but finds it a "reaction" indicative of a lack of "clearly defined genre boundaries" that depends almost "exclusively on content-related criteria" without a "systematic concept of genres" (40).
- 2 Colie's work on Renaissance literature, particularly *The Resources of Kind: Genre-theory in the Renaissance* (University of California Press, 1973), emphasized the embryonic origin of modern genres. In this view I was influenced by working in literary theory at the University of California Irvine, particularly with my mentor, Professor Max Wei Yeh, and my graduate-school predecessor Louis Renza, part of whose dissertation became the essay, "A Veto of the Imagination: A Theory of Autobiography," which remains a landmark in the field.
- 3 See Kaplan's "Resisting Autobiography: Out-Law Genres and Transnational Feminist Subjects," which explores how traditional criticism of "autobiography" struggled to "stabilize and fix generic boundaries" (117). But, as Derrida suggests in "The Law of Genre," such a law is "based on a 'counterlaw'; that is, the possibility of genre limits is always already undermined by the impossibility of maintaining those very limits" (116-17). Kaplan explores such emergent "outlaw" genres as prison memoir, testimony, ethnography, "biomythography," "cultural autobiography," and "regulative psychobiography."
- 4 See "Note 2."