

Abstracts

1. **Helen Bain** (King's College London, United Kingdom): "Sylvia Plath and the Missing Foie Gras: How Subject, Author and Reader Collide to Create 'Realness' in Biofiction"

As a genre, biography is dependent on hindsight, however disruptively it may be structured. But life is lived in the present tense. As the writer and critic Craig Brown says, 'We hurtle forwards, but the front window is blacked out: we are only ever able to see out of the back and side windows.' Life-writing biography may take liberties, but by doing so might it not also offer a more 'authentic' representation of consciousness? At a conference on life writing held by the London Modernism Seminar, the writers Alison Light and Susan Sellers each debated the ethics of biofiction, arguing that as a genre it engages the reader's imagination in what they described as a 'live reading' that brings 'life writing' to life through experimental narrative technique. My paper contends that biofiction creates a mutually advantageous, ever-shifting meeting point between subject, author and reader. It demands creative input of the reader as well as the writer beyond that of biography. Furthermore, the 'offering up' of the writer-self to the subject, and the corresponding demands placed on the reader, addresses the ethical challenges raised and, paradoxically, also contends with the contemporary reader's demand for that elusive ideology: authenticity. I will use one incident in Plath's life – a falling-out with a friend in the South of France in the summer of 1960 – to demonstrate how biofiction can bring to life an event the way that original source material and conventional biography does not. By comparing the very different individual accounts of this single incident, both primary and secondary, personal and impersonal, I will show the possibilities of experimental narrative to illuminate both event and subject anew for the reader – and better convey 'realness' in life experience.

2. **Tomasz Basiuk** (University of Warsaw, Poland): "*Plunder*: Menachem Kaiser's Quest for Family Heirloom"

Menachem Kaiser's *Plunder. A Memoir of Family Property and Nazi Treasure* (2021) is a topical account of the author's attempt to reclaim an apartment building in Sosnowiec which belonged to his family before the Second World War. During a visit to Poland, Kaiser unexpectedly learns that his grandfather's first cousin Abraham Kajzer not only survived the war but published an account of his time as a slave laborer at several Gross Rosen camps before emigrating to Israel. This once-forgotten book of Kaiser's long-lost relative has since become a cherished source of information for people searching for Nazi treasure troves in Lower Silesia—the group enthusiastically embraces Kaiser because he is related to the author they revere. Kaiser's own writing breaks from the pattern of the typical memoir of a descendant's pilgrimage to the *alte heim* because it is shaped like a detective story which withholds resolution by means of multiplying obstacles and surprises, somewhat in the manner of Jonathan Safran Foer's humor-filled novel *Everything Is Illuminated* (2002) and Daniel Mendelsohn's monumental memoir *The Lost. The Search for Six of Six Million* (2006). Like the mix of narrative and argument in the latter, Kaiser's account is interspersed with commentary, focusing on the treacherous process of recovering the past, which is described as a kind of plunder. The aesthetic device of withholding narrative closure becomes the figuration of ethically motivated humility vis-à-vis the unknowable past. It also informs a meditation on the fine line dividing fiction from nonfiction—a

compulsive hoarding and its abiding sense of incompleteness, fills both writers with a sense of dizzying detachment. For Cascella, it's a chance to build herself anew. For Hanson, a chance to see the world afresh. Yet, with dizziness comes nausea, and both use a succession of experimental methods to try and recreate these unpleasant effects, from the loss of words to the loss of identity itself. By touching on the theories of collecting put forward by Freud and Derrida, Borges and Benjamin, this paper argues, through Hanson and Cascella, for a renewed appreciation of the ephemerality of cultural objects. Fire as a drastic cure for archive fever, on the one hand, and, on the other, the value of the written word as a physical object persisting (precariously) through time. It will also consider the persistence of writing in the face of destruction and the renewal of meaning that this might generate.

5. **Laura De La Parra Fernández** (University of Salamanca, Spain): "The Lyric Essay as Life Writing: Negotiating Neoliberal Femininity"

This paper will present an example of an emerging genre in contemporary women's life writing that blurs the borders between the novel, autobiography, the essay, poetry and autofiction. Named the "lyric essay" by John D'Agata and Deborah Tall in the Fall 1997 *Seneca Review* issue, the genre "does not expound. It may merely mention" (n. p.). Like the personal essay, the lyric essay becomes an intellectual, poetic and emotional response to a given topic, as well as a site of "self-creation" (Smith and Watson 2010: 201). This paper will delve into the different literary strategies deployed in Heather Christle's *The Crying Book* (2019), a text that begins with a personal traumatic event—the death of a friend—and moves toward collective concerns by means of a fragmentary structure. It is clear that we live in an age of exposure, where social media and reality TV infer fictional constructions of the self based on neoliberal principles of self-making and self-management of one's own life in order to achieve economic and moral success (Brown 2003, 2009). However, women have long been accused of "oversharing" (Skyes 2017) and even in the age of #metoo, their testimonies are not credited as the truth (Gilmore 2017). In this sense, by deviating from traditional forms of narrating a story, gendered notions of shame (Bartky 1990) and overexposure may at once be present and avoided. At the same time, the aesthetics of the lyric essay may coincide with contemporary aesthetics of distraction, consumerism and excess of information (Menkedick 2014) while ambiguously defying them by trying to project a fragmented self into the hardly-graspable world (Moran 2018). This paper will analyze Christle's case study through Rita Felski's concept of "recognition" as an epistemological reading tool (2008) in order to assess how the lyric essay as life writing offers the possibility for women authors to negotiate and contest neoliberal discourses of subjectivity and femininity by demanding collective engagement in meaning-making.

6. **Wojciech Drag** (University of Wrocław, Poland): "The Self as a Database in Digital Biography: David Clark's *88 Constellations for Wittgenstein*"

In *The Language of New Media* (2001), Lev Manovich calls the database "a new way to structure our experience of ourselves and of the world" after the demise of the grand narratives and the arrival of the World Wide Web. On account of its nonlinearity and refusal of sequence, the database is regarded by Manovich as the "natural enemy" of narrative – the other competing mode of representing reality. Victoria Vesna argues that our age makes us "increasingly aware of ourselves as databases," since we are

frequently identified by our Social Security number or our genetic structure. Ed Folsom speaks of the database as “the genre of the twenty-first century.” Still, there have been relatively few attempts to take advantage of the literary possibilities afforded by that structural principle. In my paper, I want to examine the new genre of digital/online biography, where, according to Katharina Prager and Vanessa Hanneschläger, “the subject is dissolved into a space of possibility comprising data, objects ... and interchangeable fragments.” The stable biographical subject (coherent and comprehensible) is replaced by the self as a database – a mere network of criss-crossing relations, not reducible to a single biographical truth. Among the most successful examples of the genre is *88 Constellations for Wittgenstein* (2008) by Canadian multimedia artist David Clark – an interactive biography of the Austrian philosopher in the form of 88 stellar constellations, each of which contributes a fact, a concept or an association with its subject. Clark’s ambition is not to find a new “take” on Wittgenstein or to weave a compelling explanatory narrative of his life but, on the contrary, to assert the plurality and elusiveness of his subject and to create an astounding array of cultural associations between Wittgenstein’s legacy and other, seemingly unrelated, figures (Anthony Perkins), works (*2001: A Space Odyssey*) and events (9/11).

7. **Dagmara Drewniak** (Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, Poland): “Expressing the Self through Silence – Connie T. Braun’s *Silentium and Other Reflections on Memory, Sorrow, Place and the Sacred*”

“Silence is an open space – capacious, calm – a sanctuary amid the din of life,” writes Connie T. Braun (2017: 2), a Canadian poet, writer, and academic as well as the author of two memoirs: *The Steppes Are the Colour of Sepia* (2008) and *Silentium and Other Reflections on Memory, Sorrow, Place, and the Sacred* (2017) and a collection of autobiographical poetry *Unspoken: An Inheritance of Words* (2016). Indeed it is silence, or *silentium*, as she puts it, which the author speaks from while recollecting her inherited identity rooted in Eastern European and German-Dutch Mennonite traditions and juxtaposing it with the 21st century Canadian perspective. This paper aims at analyzing the most recent memoir by Connie T. Braun in the context of her thematic and formal approach to life writing. First of all, Braun retraces her family’s past through memory, delving into the troubled Polish and Mennonite history, several travels to Poland and a self-imposed scrutiny. As a person belonging to the “generations of postmemory” to use Hirsch’s term (2012), Braun also relies on shards of memory gathered and inherited from her closest relatives, whose painful recollections also determine her narrative. Secondly, in order to offer a rendition of her identity as a Canadian Mennonite, she calls for an experimental form of palimpsestic narrative which turns out to be a fusion of essays, poetry, and fragmented historical and personal narratives. The aesthetics of the text is immensely informed by its palimpsestic and bricolage like nature, as defined by Bronfen and Marius (in Raab and Butler 2008: 2), and, as a result, can be included in the multifaceted body of experimental life writing.

8. **Dominika Ferens** (University of Wrocław, Poland): “Incorporated Cities: Formal and Social Fragmentation in D. J. Waldie’s *Holy Land: A Suburban Memoir*”

Published by Norton in 1996, D. J. Waldie’s experimental memoir/history of a Los Angeles suburb was bound to become a classic. Yet although it is treasured by both Angelenos and American suburbanites across the US, it remains unfamiliar to most American studies scholars, and rarely appears on canonical reading lists. Consisting of

316 short pieces, each of which fits on a single rectangular sheet of paper, as Waldie explains, *Holy Land* “took shape as I took this daily, hour-long walk through my neighborhood and across the grid of its streets.” Occasionally defensive, *Holy Land* was written as much for outsiders as for insiders: “My intention was to speak as plainly as possible to my neighbors of what they had made of themselves by living here. Their habits raised on the framework of their city, did not shame them” (182-183). This paper is an attempt to read the fragmentary form of this engrossing, highly informative, and at times lyrical text as intimately connected with its subject matter: the development of Lakewood, the prototypical incorporated city, which owed its success (replicated by hundreds of other post-World War II suburbs) to fragmentation, or what LA historian Mike Davis called “suburban separatism” (*City of Quartz* 165). On the one hand, I want to pay homage to a white male author, whose book had the misfortune of being published at the height of multiculturalism. On the other, I am compelled to ask: What did the fragmented, achronological narrative allow Waldie to conceal that would have undermined his vision of Lakewood as humble, vulnerable, and quintessentially democratic: “a pattern of sidewalk, driveway, and lawn that aspires to be no more than harmless” (vii).

9. **Zuzana Fonioková** (Masaryk University, Brno, Czech Republic): “The Present and the Past Self in Innovative Life Writing: Second-Person Narration in Mary Karr’s *Cherry*”

Combining narrative theory with life writing studies, this paper will discuss experimental methods of representing the perceived relationship between the present and the past self, or the narrating and the narrated “I” of autobiographical discourse. The first part of the paper will introduce diverse narrative strategies observed in published life writing, which writers employ to express various attitudes towards the narrated past and towards their earlier incarnations. For example, some narratives emphasize the distance of the narrating self from the narrated self by flaunting the narrator’s current wisdom and making the character in the past the target of irony. Other narratives might underline the sense of continuity in attempting to recreate the past as it was lived rather than from the vantage point of the present. The techniques that work towards such effects include figural perspective (internal focalization), historical present tense, and the use of third-person and second-person narration as well as switching between different pronouns. However, there is no one-to-one correspondence between a technique and an effect. The second part of the paper will zoom in on second-person narration in life writing. Drawing on narratological research into second-person narration in fiction, such as typologies of *you*-narratives or discussions of the potential correlation of *you*-narration with readerly involvement, I will briefly discuss examples of auto/biographical texts employing the second person pronoun for various purposes (e.g., *you* referring to another character; to the autobiographical subject; to the reader). I will then analyse Mary Karr’s *Cherry* (2000) with regard to its representation of the present and past self. This narrative uses the second person primarily to refer to the autobiographical protagonist in the past and combines this technique with figural perspective and the historical present tense to recreate the author’s adolescent identity search as well as to enhance the reader’s immersion and emotional involvement.

10. **Urszula Gołębiowska** (University of Zielona Góra, Poland): “Episodic, Emotional, Associative – a Life Narrative in Mavis Gallant’s Linnet Muir Cycle”

Mavis Gallant's 1981 "Linnet Muir" short story cycle, by the author's own admission the most autobiographical of her writings, combines an innovative form with the themes of social non-conformity, personal authenticity, and freedom from the determinism of the past. The cycle's episodic form – it is composed of six loosely connected stories centered around its retrospective narrator – defies both the linear, unified structure of conventional auto/biography as well as Paul Ricoeur's narrativist conception of life narrative. In Gallant's stories, the absence of temporal, logical, and teleological order underscores the textual resistance to entrenched social and cultural models and an authentic response to life. What the cycle's emotional and associative, rather than logical, structure also highlights is a specific conception of self, which stands in contrast to the idea of "narrative identity" emerging from Ricoeur's writings as intelligible, interpretable, and narratively constructed in compliance with social scripts. Likewise, the cycle departs from Ricoeur's conception of self-understanding as predicated on conventional narrativizing and interpretation, which the philosopher, himself firmly embedded in the hermeneutic tradition, likens to Freudian analysis. In Gallant's text, the focus on emotional insight, not interpretation, marks a paradigmatic shift in approaching life narratives. The departure from masterful interpretation shows affinity with the British psychoanalyst D.W. Winnicott's idea of analysis as promoting growth rather than knowledge, authenticity instead of mastery. Gallant's valuation of this ideal anticipates a similar focus in more recent specimens of life writing, such as Alison Bechdel's *Are You My Mother?: A Comic Drama* (2012) or Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts* (2015), which approach with equal boldness the themes of non-conformity and authenticity while radically challenging generic conventions through their structural fragmentation, textual fusion of personal and theoretical focus, and the use of associative strategy.

11. **Jarosław Hetman** (Nicolaus Copernicus University of Toruń, Poland): "Life as a Form of Art in Paul Auster's Works"

Paul Auster's debt to the legacy of world literature is large and well-examined, especially his numerous references to such masters as Cervantes, Borges, Beckett and Kafka. But perhaps his fascination with American prose requires more scholarly attention. Tracing the many connections to authors such as Benjamin Franklin, Henry David Thoreau one can come to the conclusion that Auster seems to be most interested in the works of the above mentioned in light of their reflections on the relationship between one's life and their literary output. In my presentation I would like to study three seminal books by this acknowledged American author focusing on how he combines the perspectives on life-writing of these seminal writers in order to formulate a distinct view on the matter, and then how he develops their findings further. While *The New York Trilogy* and *Moon Palace* can be seen as a form of homage to his great literary forefathers, *Leviathan* seems like a step forward towards an innovative, distinctly postmodern application of his conclusions, an application that reaches beyond the format of a classic novel and into the domain of conceptual art through Auster's collaboration with the French artists, Sophie Calle. In my presentation I would also like to reference Auster's numerous biographical and semi-biographical works, such as *The Invention of Solitude*, *The Red Notebook*, *Winter Journal* and *Report from the Interior* and reflect on the ways in which the author's own life forms a complex relationship with his prose.

12. **Martina Horakova** (Masaryk University, Czech Republic): “Between Life Writing and Nature Writing: Australian Landscape and Eco-Memoir”

In modern Australian autobiography and memoir, the narratives of the self are often framed with the narratives of specific landscapes, places, regions. This interweaving of place- and self-writing has a long tradition which goes back to the late 19th century formation of a distinct national identity for settler Australians. In this tradition, settler belonging (both national and personal) is inseparably tied to the process of home-making, which in turn is heavily marked by the history of colonization and dispossession of Indigenous populations. Thus, life writing in Australia is also inescapably political. Like everywhere else, Australian life writing has recently witnessed an even more intense interest in the narrative articulation of the human self’s interaction with its environment. While ‘eco-biography’ has been ventured as a term already in the 1990s, more recently Jessica White has used ‘eco-memoir’ to represent the literary expression of the interlacing of memory and the natural environment. In addition, ‘landscape memoir’ is another term that resonates in contemporary Australian life- and nature-writing. My presentation will introduce recent Australian landscape and eco-memoirs, making references particularly to Mark Tredinnick’s *The Blue Plateau: An Australian Pastoral* (2009), Kim Mahood’s *Position Doubtful: Mapping Landscapes and Memories* (2016) and Angela Rockel, *Rogue Intensities* (2019) as three representative examples showcasing various experimental strategies: Tredinnick’s account is a collective tribute to a place and its people, celebrating the symbiosis through minute, staged histories of forgotten families, while inscribing the author’s self in the larger history of Australian settlement. Mahood’s multimodal landscape memoir interweaves narratives of the self, the process of representing quintessential Australian landscape—the Outback—in her own artwork, while framing all of that with a commentary on current politics of Indigenous-settler relationships. Finally, Rockel wrote a highly poetic, experimental journal documenting five years of her life spent in rural Tasmania and recording her observations of nature, farming, family and community, history, mythology, philosophy and literature. I will argue that these eco-memoirs capture Australian settlers’ strategy of securing a sense of belonging through an intimate knowledge of their environments, while often tiptoeing around the continuing, and still unmet, calls for the sovereignty of Indigenous Country.

13. **Eva C. Karpinski** (York University, Toronto, Canada) and **Elżbieta Klimek-Dominiak** (University of Wrocław, Poland): “Malleable Embodiment: Experimental Body-Writing in Alison Bechdel’s *The Secret to Superhuman Strength* and Wanda Hagedorn’s *Twarz, Brzuch, Głowa* [Face, Belly, Head]”

The feminist focus on the body and experience of embodiment has given rise to experimental forms of writing and performance that Hélène Cixous has labelled *écriture féminine*. This creative archive has deconstructed the norms and taboos around how we look at and how we inhabit our bodies as both socially constructed and phenomenologically messy. In the 21st century, autographics (Whitlock), the innovative subgenre of life writing, has embraced comics as a particularly suitable and powerful representational medium to materialize the body in its thematic and physical dimensions. Our presentation examines two recent graphic memoirs by Alison Bechdel and Wanda Hagedorn (in collaboration with cartoonist Ola Szmida) that foreground the “queer body” and the “perfect female body,” respectively, as projects to be pursued, acted upon, sculpted, shaped, and performed through various body regimes and

practices such as exercise, hikes, martial arts, dieting, and plastic surgery. Bechdel's word/image blend documents her lifelong obsession with fitness as a path to inner transformation. Paradoxically, it is through working on her body that she achieves spiritual transcendence and rewrites the meaning of "human being" as "be-in" the body, where subject/object become one. Hagedorn and Szmida portray the narrator's pursuit of a timeless, perfect beauty through age-defying technologies, fragmenting the body into three major parts: face and belly (commonly associated with judgemental assessment of women's age) and head (associated with critical analysis). Through unconventionally-framed images, they reveal contradictory, conflicted, and "scandalous" scripts of femininity, viewed from different feminist perspectives. In reading these graphic memoirs, we will discuss and contrast the gendered and cultural attitudes to the aging body and body image; abjection and perfectionism; fragmentation and fantasy of wholeness; and the idea of the body/self as intertextual graft.

14. **Elżbieta Klimek-Dominiak** (University of Wrocław, Poland): "Queering Auto/biographical Comics: Experimental Representations of Sexual Trauma in Maria Stoian's *Take it As a Compliment*"

Life writing about gendered self-representation in the context of queer abuse has recently gained critical attention primarily due to its experiments with genre-mixing of intertextual prose and poetic autofiction as in Carmen Maria Machado's *In the Dream House*. Following Irene Kacandes, who suggests in *The Routledge Companion to Experimental Literature* (Bray, Gibbons and McHale 2012) that the medium of comics has been the site of the most daring experiment in contemporary life writing, I argue that graphic representations of sexual trauma as experienced by vulnerable young LGBT+ people challenge the conventional portrayal of sexual abuse as predominantly heteronormative and deserve attention as innovative works of auto/biographical comics. In contrast to Una's critically acclaimed, long-form graphic memoir about sexual assaults *Becoming Unbecoming* (2015), I focus on experiments in short auto/biographical comics conveying the effects of queer sexual violation which are prominent in Maria Stoian's *Take It As a Compliment* (2016). Her comics collection, developed from an unusual relationship between her anonymous contributors of digital narratives and interviews, inspired her vivid, layered artwork and anticipated the outburst of #metoo life writing. Modifying and extending Hillary Chute's notion of "affective witnessing", which she developed in reference to the visual portrayal of the complexities of heterosexual child abuse in *Graphic Women: Life Narrative and Contemporary Comics* (2010), I show that Stoian's LGBT+ comics also encourage its readers/viewers to become affective witnesses by queering comic life narrative, defamiliarizing its form by rendering sexual trauma in misleadingly bright panels, playing with framing as well as creating tension between pictorial embodiment and verbal self-expression. In this way, I demonstrate that Stoian not only offers visibility to more diverse queer sexual experiences but also engages the readers to decode the unusual and nuanced ways in which she portrays queer lives in the comics medium.

15. **Héloïse Lecomte** (École Normale Supérieure de Lyon, France): "The Stamp of Loss: Impressions of Grief in Karen Green's *Bough Down* (2013)"

In 2013, five years after American author David Foster Wallace took his own life, his widow, visual artist Karen Green, published a mixed-media grief memoir, which combined fragments of autobiographic prose-poetry and miniature collages (partly

taken from her previous exhibition “Tiny Stampede”, 2011). The innovative book bears witness to the traumatising event and remains haunted by the ghostly presence of the deceased by carving out a visual and poetic cenotaph whose very form and style convey the violence of his suicide, with blank spaces, unfinished sentences and collage-like quality. Likewise, the generic (de)composition of the poet/artist’s identity as a widow (a status primarily defined by loss) is represented by miniature reproductions of stamps and fingerprints, upon which collages of phrases and broken-up quotations have been superimposed. However, paradoxically, while recounting the harrowing experience of loss and deprivation, Green’s book remains a synesthetic experience, a multisensorial clash of colours and sounds throughout. Green’s visual journal appears to map out an itinerary of mourning that borrows from the codes of both the elegy and the anti-elegy and opens up a median way between mourning and melancholia. While elegy is traditionally defined as a “poem of mortal loss and consolation” (Sacks 1987, 3), which endeavours to heal the wounds of grief, its melancholic and often ironic counterpart aims to “not to achieve but to resist consolation, [...] not to heal but to reopen the wounds of loss” (Ramazani 1994, xi). Drawing on memory, trauma and vulnerability studies, this paper purports to investigate the experimental nature of Karen Green’s deeply visual and multi-generic elegy. Indeed, both senses of the verb “recover” appear to be articulated and questioned in Green’s work: the recovering of the deceased’s memory and the artist’s own faltering attempt at recovering from the shattering event.

16. **Grzegorz Maziarczyk** (John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin, Poland): “In Things We Trust: Auction Catalogue as Life Writing”

Taking its cue from Leanne Shapton’s genre-defying *Important Artifacts and Personal Property from the Collection of Lenore Doolan and Harold Morris, Including Books, Street Fashion and Jewelry*, this paper will explore the semiotic potential of a form that has by and large remained outside the purview of both narrative fiction and life writing – an auction catalogue. A book-length fictional inventory of “lots,” representing the vicissitudes of a four-year relationship between the two eponymous figures, Shapton’s work was inspired by her encounter with the catalogue for an auction of Truman Capote’s personal effects: “It was in reading that catalog that it struck me that it was like reading a kind of autobiography of Capote’s later years” (Shapton, qtd. in Kennedy). The paper will juxtapose the digital version of the Capote inventory, still available on the website of the auction house Bonhams, with Shapton’s print book to identify major aspects of the multimodal interplay between word and image, peculiar to the auction catalogue, and tease out the tension between database logic and narrativity. Far from an innocent enumeration of items, Shapton’s experimental fictionalisation of the catalogue form exploits mechanisms of emplotment, endowing her work with the narrative arc. By contrast, the digital inventory, which lists Capote’s belongings according to their type, can be construed as a fragmentary, non-narrative representation of the famous writer. Irrespective of its amenability to narrativisation, central to the auction catalogue as a form of life writing is the ontological status of the things it represents, their materiality metonymically anchoring the biographical subject(s) in reality. Drawing on recent developments in multimodal studies and new materialism, this paper will ultimately seek to demonstrate that Shapton’s creative

endorsement of auction catalogue as a life-writing genre is yet another manifestation of “the return of the real” (Foster) in contemporary culture.

17. **Hiba Moussa** (Lebanese University, Lebanon): “The Auto/biographical Tact in Constructing the Dead Mother’s Voice”

Both Lebanese Hanane al-Shaykh and French Annie Ernaux have written the life-stories of their dead mothers. While al-Shaykh’s autobiography of her illiterate mother (*Hikayati Sharḥon Yaṭwl* published in Arabic in 2005) utilizes the ‘I’ to construct Kamila’s voice, Ernaux in her *A Woman’s Story* (1991) speaks about her in the third person pronoun, making a clearly biographical choice in depicting the mother and giving her voice after she lost her mental abilities to Alzheimer’s prior to her death. This paper aims to address the issue of daughters voicing their dead mothers while maintaining the ‘tact’ of the auto/biographer as author. While Ernaux’s narrative starts and ends with the mother’s death, laying both dead mother and anguished daughter to rest, al-Shaykh follows the bildungsroman structure but does not restrict the life story to the life of the protagonist, for the voice continues even after the mother’s death. This narrative choice obviously challenges the paradigms of auto/biographical narration that Al Shaykh has painstakingly tried to sustain throughout the narrative. The daughter as biographer and author as autobiographer recreate these mothers’ lost voices tentatively, experimentally, yet very subjectively. My paper argues that while Ernaux’s book restrains itself to the biographical tact with regard to the mother to commemorate her, al-Shaykh challenges both genres by experimenting with notions of authority, authorship and narrative voice to resurrect her.

18. **Krystian Waldemar Piotrowski** (Jagiellonian University, Kraków, Poland): “The Many Lives of Anna Kavan: An Exercise in ‘Affectography’”

Anna Kavan, a mythical figure in her lifetime present as much amongst the upper echelons of respectable society as in the shadows of a metropolitan *demi-monde*, did no favours to her future biographers. Always shrouded from sight by a façade of fiction and fabrication, the notoriously elusive author believed – not unlike one of her literary creations, a thinly-veiled presence of an unnamed narrator – that she would eventually become “the world’s best-kept secret; one that would never be told.” Her entertaining the notion of forever remaining “a thrilling enigma for posterity” seems almost a self-fulfilling prophecy insofar as Kavan’s legacy resisted inclusion into the mainstream, and Kavan herself attracted what can only be identified as a cult following, with all that it entails. The present paper attempts to shed some light on her fascinating life and *œuvre*, focusing on two semi-autobiographical novels, *Let Me Alone* (1930) and *Who Are You?* (1963). Both works, read side by side, constitute a palimpsestuous account of Kavan’s first marriage; both, too, may be interpreted as a game of intellectual brinkmanship whereby the latter text – a hybrid chimera of an experimental memoir – dismantles and reworks the former, thus solidifying the author’s wish to disown her previous identity. Filtering the novels through the critical lens of affect and somatic theory (Brian Massumi, Stephen Ahern, Sarah Ahmed), the paper will offer a preliminary conceptualisation of a new category of “affectography” – a strand of deeply personal writing, frequently on the brink of tantalizing intimacy, which endeavours to expand our affective and emotional literacies. Within its ambit lies a search for a unique and highly idiosyncratic experiential vocabulary – the grammar of affects and

sensations – that underlies twentieth-century British experimental and avant-garde prose, be it autobiographical, factual, or somewhere in between.

19. **Ángela Rivera-Izquierdo** (University of Granada, Spain): “Experimental Life-Writing in Caleb Klaces’s *Fatherhood*: Towards a Patricentric *Écriture Masculine*”

Caleb Klaces’s *Fatherhood* (2019) investigates the conflicting emotions of a father (and writer) concerned with the signifying process and the role that he may play in the formation of his daughter’s identity. The text could be classified as experimental life-writing or autofiction in the strict sense for its ambiguous borrowing of discursive strategies from first-person narrative and autobiography, the onomastic correspondence between author and narrator/protagonist, and its strong psychoanalytic angle. In particular, this paper proposes that *Fatherhood* is a *metamodern* work of experimental life-writing for its truthful representation of feeling and *aesth-ethical* commitment to the present in its affective engagement with socio-political events, particularly the response of the male narrator/protagonist to feminism and his awareness of a crisis of patriarchal masculinity and authoritative forms of fathering. Drawing on Julia Kristeva’s psychoanalytic distinction between the semiotic and the symbolic, this paper argues that the narrator/protagonist rejects the controlling Logos of the symbolic order (the Law of the Father) and the rigid categories that govern it, privileging instead the maternal semiotic, expressed with the sensuous, rhythmic elements of poetic language. Klaces’s experimental poem-novel epitomizes Gertrude Stein’s concept of ‘liveliness’ or Julia Kristeva’s notion of ‘revolutionary text’ in its reconfiguration of the father-daughter relationship. Through its thematic, formal, and stylistic elements, Klaces’s text works to unsettle the hegemony of the symbolic order, representing a form of *écriture masculine* or men’s writing that advances an antiphallogocentric politics of language that stems from the (male) body and upsets conventional reading practices through its emphasis on texture of speech. As such, it indicates a hopeful generational move towards a patricentric, pro-feminist poetics that radically rewrites fatherhood and de/reconstructs masculinity through an emphasis on vulnerability and embodied experience.

20. **Kim Schoof** (Open University in The Netherlands): “The Renegotiation of Narrative Optimism: Throwing New Light on the Literary Experimentation in Ta-Nehisi Coates’s *Between the World and Me* with Berlant and Moten”

In the academic reception of Ta-Nehisi Coates’ 2015 instant classic in anti-racism literature, the memoir *Between the World and Me*, two traits are highlighted in particular. Firstly, its experimental literary set-up: the book has the form of a letter to Coates’ son and, hence, is largely written in the second person. With this epistolary form – an explicit reference to James Baldwin’s 1963 *The Fire Next Time* – the book is thought to oppose traditional American literature and join a Black counter-tradition instead. The second trait highlighted in the reception of *Between the World and Me* is its fierce critique of the optimistic national narrative of the American Dream of Upward Mobility (ADOUM). With this critique, the book is thought to not only distance itself from the ADOUM narrative, but also from the position of Baldwin, who did not contest the ADOUM narrative in itself, but pleaded for making it accessible for Black Americans. What has not been noted before is that precisely through its experimental epistolary form *Between the World and Me* paradoxically also *inscribes* itself in the tradition of the ADOUM narrative. Indeed, the book recounts a father’s *Bildung* –

moving upward from youth in a Baltimore ghetto to a successful career as a journalist – to a son, thereby inherently expressing optimism about the next generation’s prospect of leading a more prosperous life. Thus, as the book both opposes and takes up the conventions of the ADOUM narrative, and both opposes and takes up the conventions of a counter-tradition represented by Baldwin, its literary experimentation amounts to more than a simple move away from tradition and into a counter-tradition. This presentation will provide a new perspective on the complex and subtle movement of *Between the World and Me*’s literary experimentation. It will do so with the help of Lauren Berlant’s considerations on optimism in literary genres and Fred Moten’s thoughts on Black optimism.

21. **Lola Serraf** (Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona/École Normale Supérieure de Lyon, Spain and France): “On the Use of Social Media in Holocaust Life-Writing: ‘emotional pedagogy’ in Eva.Stories (2019)”

The International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance website features an article on ‘Using Social Media in Holocaust Education’ in their ‘Educational Resources’ section. This organisation is one of the very few to publicly recognise and actively promote the use of social media in Holocaust education, highlighting the potential benefits of ‘participatory culture’ in creating ‘historical empathy’. Empathy is indeed at the heart of Holocaust education and what Rachel Baum calls ‘emotional pedagogy’. A recent initiative by Israeli entrepreneur Mati Kochavi and his daughter Maya Kochavi led to the creation of an Instagram account revolving around the life of Holocaust victim Eva Heyman. The project, *Eva.stories*, consists of a series of 70 short episodes which retrace Eva’s experiences in 1944 Hungary, shortly after the German invasion. The Instagram ‘stories’ star British actress Mia Quiney, who holds the camera as if it were a smartphone on ‘selfie mode’. Causing much controversy, *Eva.stories* aims to trigger an empathetic relationship with the past, despite the viewers’ generational and geographical distance from it. The digital tool strives to overcome the limits of temporal dimension and narrative personae. This paper aims to reflect on the moral and ethical issues of the shift in genre of memory and life-writing in the digital age. Can, and more importantly should the Holocaust be made relatable? To what extent can social media platforms be seen as safe tools to share authentic resources about the Holocaust? How cautious should educators be when opening up online discussions about the Holocaust?

22. **Maité Snauwaert** (University of Alberta, Canada): “Mourning Memoirs as Experimental Life-Writing: Joan Wickersham’s *The Suicide Index* and Anne Carson’s *Nox*”

The experience of grief is deemed one of the most shattering of the human spectrum: “Though bereavement is an event experienced by all humanity, there are few events as unfamiliar or as unsettling,” writes M. Katherine Shear, professor of psychiatry and director of the Center for Complicated Grief at Columbia University (2013). She is echoed by Joyce Carol Oates in *A Widow’s Story* (2011): “Death is the most obvious – common – banal fact of life and yet – how to speak of it, when it has struck so close?” ‘How to speak of it, when it has struck so close,’ will indeed be my guiding question. A growing trend in contemporary anglophone literature has emergent and established writers recount their heart-wrenching experience of loss in *grief memoirs* or, as I prefer to call them, *mourning memoirs*. These memoirs share many commonalities, most profoundly that of describing an event that is disfiguring to life as it was known: in *The*

Year of Magical Thinking (2006), Joan Didion writes that “[g]rief, when it comes, is nothing we expect it to be;” while Joyce Carol Oates speaks of “the utter devastation of your life as you have known it” (2011). Yet they also vary greatly in form, not only following their authors’ respective styles, but, beyond that, according to a deep necessity to *innovate* in order to render the devastating experience. In this regard, Joan Wickersham’s *The Suicide Index* (2008) and Anne Carson’s *Nox* (2010) are among the most prominently experimental, dismembering the book form, replacing chronology by a sequence of entries, investigating strange deaths. While mourning memoirs could be said to come under Philippe Lejeune’s concept of *antifiction* (2007), with their passionate attempts to reconstitute the lived experience at its rawest through blunt narratives, they also evidence great sophistication, placing the emphasis of their literary experimentation on the difficulty or even the impossibility to know another’s death circumstances and even, in hindsight, another’s life. It is this paradox I propose to examine.

23. **Honorata Sroka** (University of Warsaw, Poland): “Experimental Biography of Franciszka and Stefan Themerson”

The aim of my proposal is to show in which ways the catalogue of an archive can be understood as an experimental example of life writing. Drawing from research about styles, functions, modes, and poetics of biographies, I will examine one of the two different inventories of the Franciszka and Stefan Themerson Archive, which is the largest avant-garde archive in Poland. While the first catalogue is a classical inventory created by the National Library in Warsaw, the second, which I will focus on in my paper, is an interesting example of experimental biography, edited by art critics Jasia Reichardt and Nick Wadley. The authors did not establish lists of metadata (in contrast to the classical catalogue of the National Library), but created instead an extensive narration about archival artefacts. I will examine the material status and poetics of this biography/catalogue and the authors’ ways of constructing meaning, as well as point to the eventual limitations of this kind of biographical writing. The philological analysis of the text will be strengthened by presentations of microelements of this life-writing composition such as editorial comments, footnotes and hypertexts. The thesis of this research is that in classical biographies the context is a tool used by authors to better understand the trajectory of someone’s life. Reichardt and Wadley, on the other hand, do not interpret the sources but present them as they would for an exhibition in a museum. The aim of the authors was not to give us direct information about the Themersons but to expose their lives through their heritage, which is presented without commentaries. Stefan Themerson remarked that only his bibliography is an appropriate biography. Reichardt’s and Wadley’s work can be considered as an interesting way of dealing with this requirement.

24. **Maria Antonietta Struzziero** (Independent Scholar, Italy): “Writing the Self between Hunting Ghosts and Hurting Bodies in Hilary Mantel’s *Giving up the Ghost* and Maggie O’Farrell’s *I Am, I Am, I Am*”

This paper intends to offer a parallel analysis and discussion of Hilary Mantel’s *Giving up the Ghost* (2003) and Maggie O’Farrell’s *I Am, I Am, I Am* (2017). Both memoirs hinge on some forms of illness: in Mantel’s case, a misdiagnosed illness that took her to “the unlit terrain of sickness” (167) and diverted the course of her life; in O’Farrell’s, a string of near-death experiences, including a severe encephalitis that put her life at

risk. In this light, they could be defined ‘pathographies’ as both foreground the role of pain in writing the self out of trauma. However, while both memoirs inscribe a dismembered ‘subject in pain’, they follow different trajectories. Mantel aims to reclaim her life narrative from other people’s contradictory versions of her and “write [her]self into being” (222). Her past experiences are evoked through a synaesthetic process and recollections are associative rather than chronological, held together by some key images, the most recurrent being that of “ghosts”- of other lives or other selves. O’Farrell’s life narrative is divided into self-contained microdramas - the “seventeen brushes with death” mentioned in the subtitle- each one named according to the part of the body in danger at a particular time and illustrated by a drawing of that body part. These slivers of life offer the reader a collage-like, prismatic self to (re)assemble and decode. Both memoirs, the paper observes, eschew chronology and juxtapose medical discourses, reflections on the process of life-writing, selfhood and the working of memory. Individual recollections surface through drifting thoughts and disjunct sensory impressions, a structural choice which refracts multiple lives and unstable identities. The analysis of the texts will bring to light *how* these life narratives depart from, and flout, the generic conventions of the genre both structurally and formally. The memoirs, it is maintained, subvert and transgress the borders of the genre, and confront the reader not only with lives in fragments, but also with bodies in pieces, a splintering of identities that is mirrored in the texts and reflects the condition of the modern subject.

25. **Martha Swift** (University of Oxford, United Kingdom): “‘Hold your story lightly’: Reading the Relations between Reader, Writer, and Character in Ruth Ozeki’s Autofictions”

Autofiction, an experimental form of life writing leveraging both fiction and autobiography, is experiencing a decade of global emergence in Anglophone, and especially American, literature and scholarship. This paper considers the interactions of reader, writer, and character in the autofictional novels of Japanese American author Ruth Ozeki, *A Tale for the Time Being* (2013) and *My Year of Meats* (1998), to expand and complicate developing theories of autofiction in English. The genre’s play on truth and fiction and its thematization of both the act of writing and the narrativization of self have conventionally been considered in the context of the postmodern author’s declining cultural capital and theorized as authorial attempts to reassert ownership of and authority over the text (Marjorie Worthington, 2018). Ozeki, however, reinvents the genre by using the obvious parallels between herself and her author-characters, Japanese American writer Ruth in *A Tale for the Time Being* and Japanese American documentary filmmaker Jane in *My Year of Meats*, to distribute narrative authority and reject the possibility of a stable, enunciating self. She notably describes *A Tale for the Time Being* as a version of the Japanese ‘I novel’ (*shishōsetsu*), a confessional form associated with Zen Buddhist reflections on selfhood and reality. Drawing on the self-stated influence of Zen notions of ‘no abiding self’ and ‘interbeing’ on Ozeki’s writing (Eleanor Ty, 2013), this paper explores how Ozeki deploys autofiction to restage the reading process as a collaborative act of literary and hermeneutic production that unfolds in the interactions between reader, writer, and character. In doing so, it seeks to widen the theorisation of contemporary iterations of the genre beyond its Anglo- and Francophone histories, and to ask, ultimately, how experimental modes of self-narrativization such as autofiction can illuminate a developing postpostmodern investment in storytelling as an expression of subjective truth.

26. **Kateřina Valentov** (University of Lleida, Spain): “Metaphor & Embodiment in graphic illness narratives: *Catalogue Baby* (2021) by Myriam Steinberg and *Hairless* (2020) by Tereza Drahořovsk”

Graphic illness narratives successfully fulfil the premises of experimental writing with the particular insight into the embodiment. In this case, the perception of one’s body and the stable sense of the self become disrupted in the moment of dealing with a disease. This paper aims to analyse selected graphic autobiographies of two female writers who deal with their particular health issues, (in)fertility and alopecia, and the meaning of it within their social context. Not only do they have to cope with their respective illnesses, but they also have to face stereotypes embedded in culture in regard with what is expected from them as women. The study departs from the theoretical framework by Elisabeth El Refaie (2019) who claims that human experience of our bodies is forever adjusting and therefore it is dynamic and fluid, in response to physical and mental state. The experience with an illness is understood as a shift in our bodily perception, which “unsettles our usual relationship with our bodies and in doing so changes our thought patterns” (El Refaie 2019: 5). That is, when we are experiencing illness, our physicality forces itself into our consciousness, our attention is directed inward to the body. On the other hand, the multimodal medium of graphic narratives offers a rich ground for conceptual metaphors constructed as a response to this shift in perception, which, due to the nature of the narratives, brings interesting choices in the formal aspects of this particular autobiographical writing.

27. **Hannah Van Hove** (writer and researcher, Brussels, Belgium): “An Incidental Inventory of Breakdowns: on Experimental Women’s Writing, Archives and Labour”
In the summer of 2014, I came across a quote by the experimental novelist Ann Quin when doing archival research at the Olin Library at Washington University in St Louis, Missouri. Quin doesn’t have her own archive; instead papers of hers are scattered around Europe and the US, in the archives of ex-lovers, friends, her publisher’s. In St Louis, I find some of her letters in the papers of an ex-lover of hers and in one of these letters she describes the process of writing what will become her third novel *Passages*, published in 1967: ‘the way I seem to be going now it seems the writing is v. far removed from the novel. (...) The moving towards words & then from them, v. much like jazz improvisations.’ In my own writing and thinking, I’ve come to rely heavily on Quin’s phrase, her idea of moving towards and from words, the movement reminiscent of a musical pattern in which new or varying melodies are created over a continuously repeating cycle of chord changes. In the spirit of Quin’s musings on her writing practice, then, I propose to present a creative-critical work in progress entitled ‘An incidental inventory of breakdowns’ which attempts to reflect on life writing by experimental novelists, on the experiences of doing archival research and labour.

28. **Paweł Wojtas** (University of Warsaw, Poland): “Disability Life-Writing and Autotextuality in J.M. Coetzee’s *Jesus* Trilogy”

Disability is a pervasive theme in the fictions of J.M. Coetzee. While many of his early novels focus on the debilitating effects of political violence under oppressive authoritarian regimes, some of the later fictions debunk the myths of the culture of disability inclusion characteristic of neoliberal states. These two disparate ways of representing the biopolitics of disability have been shaped by Coetzee’s own as well as his relatives’ experience of political oppression, ageing, illness, and physical

incapacitation. It is therefore hardly surprising that many of these themes found their way into Coetzee's semi-autobiographical trilogy *Scenes from Provincial Life*, in which the representation and language of disability undergirds formal and narrative experimentation of this work, such as the use of third-person narrative in autobiography, narrative polyphony, factual and narrative unreliability, etc. If the experimentalism of Coetzee's recent *Jesus* novels rests on the author's probing of the limits of biblical allegory, it is also ingrained in covert references to his earlier semi-autobiographical trilogy. Indeed, the life, illness, and death of the quasi-eponymous protagonist of the *Jesus* novels, David, carry an echo of the life events of *Scenes*' focaliser, John, as well as author J.M. Coetzee. Taking account of these fictional and autobiographical correspondences, this paper ventures to read the autotextual allusions of the *Jesus* trilogy relating to Coetzee's semi-autobiographical depictions of disability and illness as yet another of Coetzee's forays into unsettling the unstable relation between life-writing and fiction.