

Autobiography, Ecology, and the Well-Placed Self

The Growth of Natural Biography
in Contemporary American Life Writing



Nathan Straight

Autobiography, Ecology, and the Well-Placed Self expands the field of autobiography studies by describing an emergent genre, natural biography, that embeds the human subject in a more-than-human world. Through an ecocritical analysis of three contemporary U.S. authors—William Kittredge, Terry Tempest Williams, and Mary Clearman Blew—Nathan Straight illustrates how ecologically situated life writing bridges the human/nature divide and responds to the pressing environmental and communal demands of our times. In his exploration of the well-placed self he challenges traditional concepts of the autobiographical subject and considers new models of selfhood in relation to regional and national identities. His illuminating discussions of specific texts engage with ecofeminist and bioregional theory and will appeal to readers in environmental studies, literary criticism, and American regionalism. *Autobiography, Ecology, and the Well-Placed Self* presents an important new perspective on place-based identity and literature, and the inclusion of a “Selected Readings” appendix makes it a valuable resource for scholars and students alike.



Nathan Straight is Assistant Professor of English at Utah State University in Brigham City, Utah. He received his Ph.D. in British and American literature from the University of Oregon. Dr. Straight’s research includes U.S. regional literature, autobiography studies, ecocriticism, and New West cultural studies.

ADVANCE PRAISE FOR

*Autobiography, Ecology,
and the Well-Placed Self*

“This study of natural biography—the ‘absolutely particular’ ways in which self and story and place are co-mingled—is an illuminating pleasure to read and an important contribution both to ecocriticism and the study of memoir.”

*Christopher Cokinos, University of Arizona;
Author of The Fallen Sky: An Intimate History of Shooting Stars*

“I have long felt that autobiography is one of the best generic lenses through which to appreciate and analyze environmental writing. Nathan Straight’s concept of the ‘well-placed self’ is an exciting angle on ‘environmental life writing,’ helpfully extending the field of ecocriticism.”

*Scott Slovic, University of Nevada, Reno; Author of Going Away
to Think: Engagement, Retreat, and Ecocritical Responsibility*

“What a refreshing new view of the American West Nathan Straight offers in this study of three ‘natural biographies’ that challenge the cowboy myth. In nuanced readings of life writing by William Kittredge, Terry Tempest Williams, and Mary Clearman Blew, he shows how autobiographers can questioningly situate themselves in distinctive landscapes and ecosystems, destabilizing traditional narrative authority to create complex new modes of inhabitation.”

*Louise Westling, University of Oregon; Author of The Green Breast
of the New World: Landscape, Gender, and American Fiction*

Autobiography, Ecology, and the Well-Placed Self



Yoshinobu Hakutani
General Editor

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PETER LANG

New York • Washington, D.C./Baltimore • Bern
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by Nathan Straight

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Printed in Germany

For my mother, Mary Straight

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At its core, this book is about our connections to others. As a solitary person in an often solitary profession, I take my bearings from family, friends, and felines. In all respects, no one means more to me than my partner, Kerry.

CHAPTER ONE

“*Who are we? where are we?*”

Self and Place in Dialogue

I stand in awe of my body, this matter to which I am bound has become so strange to me. I fear not spirits, ghosts, of which I am one,—*that* my body might,—but I fear bodies, I tremble to meet them. What is this Titan that has possession of me? Talk of mysteries! Think of our life in nature,—daily to be shown matter, to come in contact with it,—rocks, trees, wind on our cheeks! the *solid* earth! the *actual* world! the *common sense*! *Contact! Contact! Who are we? where are we?*

Henry David Thoreau

Where Are We?: Locating the Study of Autobiography

Autobiography, memoir, personal narrative, self-life writing: the labels multiply and the distinctions blur as more, and more various, lives find literary expression. In autobiographical writing the *literary subject* is a paradox, a double entendre of seeing and being. It is the self-in-process, the “I” arranging its past to suit an ever-shifting present, the retrospective imposition of order and an arc of meaning onto lived experience; it is the dizzying intersection of multiple selves and multiple genres. At once open to divergent perspectives and immune to prescriptive definition, autobiography beguiles us with its assumptions and promises, invites us to confront its contradictions, and eludes our best attempts to declare, finally, that *here* is the *self made text*. Inescapably, autobiographical subjects are also the subjects of history, and the study of autobiography, “by its own definition a referential art, necessarily involves the study of culture” (Eakin 11). The dance of self and culture that is the heart of this “referential art” courts a

wide array of interests and ideologies as it spins out lives to be read and scholarly attempts to read them systematically. Whether as an expression of the individual or as a literature that reflects and constitutes culture, autobiography participates in wider conversations about the purpose and potential of human endeavors. Wearing both public and private faces, autobiographers speak in one breath to our beliefs in equality and in singularity, to our common humanity and to our unmistakable individuality.

Such lively ambiguity has led to renewed interest in autobiography and autobiography studies, prompting Albert Stone to remark that

one of the notable cultural developments in recent decades is the remarkable flowering of American autobiography, not only as a major mode of literary self-expression, but also as a widely popular form of reading and an important new field for scholars and critics. (1)

As Stone indicates, autobiography has only recently received sustained critical attention, and the academic discourse has long failed to reflect the popularity of the genre. The reasons for the relative indifference of scholars to autobiography studies range from elitism to generic bewilderment. Paul John Eakin attributes much of autobiography's status "as a kind of poor relation" to its resistance to "any single, unifying definition" (3, 16). But Eakin also suggests that the relatively recent appearance of autobiography "in our departments of language and literature [...] may be just as well, for our thinking about this late arrival stands a chance of escaping some of the shortcomings of our traditional conception of American literature as a whole" (4). Eakin alludes to the ongoing questioning of what counts in American literature, what defines "literariness," and who gains entry to the carefully guarded library of canonical masterworks.¹ One irony of recent academic and literary "discoveries" of autobiography is that the same attributes which spawned earlier critical dismissals now feed the passion with which contemporary scholars attend to autobiography studies. The same challenges of pluralism and generic indeterminacy which kept autobiography out of serious conversations about literature now provide the starting points for many of the most important discussions of autobiographical writing. Even works which have long held central places in American literary studies—like *Walden* and "Song of Myself"—are being rediscovered and reread *as autobiography* (Eakin 3).

As a descriptive term, "American autobiography" encompasses an uncommonly rich and diverse body of works, and the increased interest in this

corpus has expanded the canon to include forms and faces too long neglected.² Perhaps it is the case, as Robert Sayre insists, that "autobiographies, in all their bewildering number and variety, offer the student in American studies a broader and more direct contact with American experience than any other kind of writing" (11). Sayre's comments reflect a growing enthusiasm for the potential of autobiography studies even as they reinforce some of its most foundational assumptions. His assessment is telling both for its conception of autobiography as a means of "direct contact" with *real* experience, and for its emphasis on the relationship between American literature and autobiography. For many commentators, autobiography and American literature are uniquely intertwined, and autobiography is perceived as a genre particularly suited to American writers and the American experience. According to this perspective, autobiography is a democratic, individualistic, and capitalistic enterprise attuned to the meritocratic potential of American society. It is a form to match the most cherished versions of the American Dream of individual opportunity.

Responding to this view in his introduction to Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography*, Kenneth Silverman writes that "the *Autobiography* owes much of its vast fame to the fact that in tracing his development Franklin gave classic expression to three powerful ingredients of the American Dream: the ideals of material success, moral regeneration, and of social progress" (ix). Silverman also notes that it is not necessary to have read the book to know something of Franklin's rise to riches and fame. Franklin's *Autobiography* has achieved such archetypal status that one might think of Silverman's comment as a broad description of the aspirations of all American autobiography. Of course, very few lives or texts can approach the standards set by Franklin, and as the narrative of an exemplary life, Franklin's autobiography puts forth an image of American success that is, for most, unattainable if not unthinkable. For D.H. Lawrence, it is equally undesirable:

The ideal self! Oh, but I have a strange and fugitive self shut out and howling like a wolf or a coyote under the ideal windows. [...]

The perfectibility of man, dear God! When every man as long as he remains alive is in himself a multitude of conflicting men. Which of these do you choose to perfect, at the expense of every other?

Old Daddy Franklin will tell you. He'll rig him up for you, the pattern American. Oh, Franklin was the first downright American. (20)

The trouble lies in our tendency to conflate the archetype with the “American experience,” all the while neglecting the “bewildering number and variety” of lives that Sayre rightly emphasizes. We fortify the idealized self, dressing our “ideal windows” with bars to keep out the conflicting multitudes, seeking safe-as-houses perfection in what Lawrence calls “the dummy American.” Or, to borrow Franklin’s metaphor, we grind the “speckled Ax” into oblivion rather than accept its valuable discolorations and idiosyncrasies (Franklin 99). This tendency, and the perception that autobiography *should* reflect an ideal of Americanness, has significantly impacted the production, reception, and study of autobiography in the United States. Yet insofar as American autobiography lays claim to the essential attributes of the American Dream, it participates in an experience of Americanness that is perhaps less broad, less welcoming and representative, than the “bewildering number and variety” of American autobiographies might lead us to believe.

The recent “flowering” of American autobiography scholarship represents a growing dissatisfaction with the limitations of reading American autobiography through the increasingly suspect lens of the American Dream. The resulting push to identify a literature that reflects the depth and complexity of American experience has led to both taxonomic and theoretical innovations in autobiography studies. As autobiography grows in popularity it remains a notoriously difficult genre to define, and the field of autobiography criticism continues to be contested terrain. Current critical trends take advantage of the popularity of life writing to question the status of and assumptions surrounding autobiography, and many critics, like Sayre and Philippe Lejeune, are returning to their earlier analyses with new eyes and broadened perspectives on the possibilities of the genre. In revisiting the definition of autobiography from his foundational study, *Le Pacte autobiographique*, Lejeune addresses both the “oblig[ation] to confront the problem of definition” and the subjective limitations of such attempts to cut “the Gordian knot” of genre study (*On Autobiography* 121). By his own admission, his 1973 definition has a “dogmatic appearance”:

Retrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality. (4, 120)

In fleshing out this definition, Lejeune identifies four criteria required of true autobiography: form (prose narrative), subject (individual life), situation of author (named, real person identical to narrator), and position of narrator