



# CRITICAL APPROACHES TO LIFE WRITING METHODS IN QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

THALIA M. MULVIHILL AND RAJI SWAMINATHAN

“Beginning and established scholars in biography, autobiography, autoethnography, and oral and life history will profit from Mulvihill and Swaminathan’s trans-disciplinary commentary and analysis of life writing. Ably contextualizing theory and generalizing practice, the authors offer experienced and well-reasoned guidance to those who want to write competently researched, readable, and honest narratives. The strategically positioned research journal and sketchbook exercises make the book a highly usable text for life writing courses. My only regret is that *Critical Approaches to Life Writing Methods in Qualitative Research* was not published fifty years earlier when I began my career as an historian and biographer of education.”

**Gerald L. Gutek**, *Professor Emeritus,  
Loyola University Chicago*

“Thalia Mulvihill and Raji Swaminathan offer a great gift to those qualitative researchers entering the burgeoning field of life writing and educational biography. This primer guides the life writer into new research realms and, from their well-conceived metaphor of dreamscapes, permits the neophyte to embrace, understand, and rejoice in the adventure and freedom of blending detailed scholarly research with imaginative, thoughtful writing. With carefully constructed research activities, the reader begins *Critical Approaches to Life Writing Methods in Qualitative Research* with great interest and concludes with great knowledge, prepared to embark upon the journey and joy of life writing and biographical inquiry.”

**Craig Kridel**, *E. S. Gambrell Professor of Educational Studies and  
Curator of the Museum of Education, University of South Carolina*

“Mulvihill and Swaminathan masterfully situate life writing methods in the realm of theoretical, historical, and methodological underpinnings of qualitative research. They invite readers to the forest of complex life writing with invaluable resources, creative ideas, and inspiring suggestions that readers can savour when they embark their own journey of life writing. *Critical Approaches to Life Writing Methods in Qualitative Research* is a must-read that will serve as a safety net for those who are hankering for a quality guide to understanding the value of storytelling. This book makes a remarkable contribution to the field of narrative inquiry!”

**Jeong-Hee Kim**, *Professor of Curriculum Studies and  
Teacher Education, Texas Tech University*



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Life writing projects have become part of the expanding field of qualitative research methods in recent years and advances in critical approaches are reshaping methodological pathways. *Critical Approaches to Life Writing Methods in Qualitative Research* gives researchers and students looking for a brief compendium to guide their methodological thinking a concise and working overview of how to approach and carry out different forms of life writing.

This practical book re-invigorates the conversation about the possibilities and innovative directions qualitative researchers can take when engaged in various forms of life writing, such as biography, autobiography, autoethnography, life history, and oral history. It equips the reader with the tools to carry out life writing projects from start to finish, including choosing a topic or subject, examining lives as living data, understanding the role of documents and artifacts, learning to tell the story, and finally writing/performing/displaying through the voice of the life writer. The authors also address the ways a researcher can begin a project, work through the issues they might face along the journey, and arrive at a shareable product.

With its focus on the plurality of life writing methodologies, *Critical Approaches to Life Writing Methods in Qualitative Research* occupies a distinct place in qualitative research scholarship and offers practical exercises to guide the researcher. Examples include exploring authorial voice, practical applications of reflexivity exercises, the relationship between the narrator and participants, navigating the use of public and private archives, understanding the processes of collaborative inquiry and collaborative writing, and writing for various audiences.

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# 1

## INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

Qualitative researchers are storytellers. There are many ways to tell a story. Biographers, autobiographers, autoethnographers, life historians, and oral historians all engage in the process of storytelling through life writing. Our opening premise for this book is that storytelling matters; it matters to individuals, it matters to cultures and subcultures, and it matters to our individual and collective beings as we engage our imagination about past, present, and future human experiences. Critical approaches to all of these forms of life writing require certain preconditions for storytelling; namely, that the storyteller be mindful of the powerful agency vested in the meaning-making storyteller, who must also understand that they are a story-creator first before they are a storyteller. The motivations qualitative researchers have for creating stories, the tools life writers use, and the various containers and vessels they shape to hold and transport these stories are worthy of continued examination.

Life writing projects have evolved as part of the expanding field of qualitative research approaches and have benefitted from the methodological musings of many scholars, which we will selectively highlight throughout the book. This book will introduce and discuss the similarities and distinctions between biography, autobiography, autoethnography, life history, and oral history approaches to life writing,

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as well as the arguments surrounding the often artificial boundaries between “fiction” and “non-fiction” in social science representations of life stories. Examples from each will be used to illustrate the exciting work being done within each of these approaches and prepare the reader for the intellectual challenges and questions that life writing projects entail. We hope that as you contemplate your own life writing projects, you will find companionship within these pages and that you will revel in the possibilities for multiple pathways for creating and telling stories of lasting meaning using qualitative inquiry traditions, approaches, and tools.

Life writing projects have become part of the expanding field of qualitative research methods in recent years. In the last decade, biography and autobiographical genres have expanded to include autoethnography (Carolyn Ellis, Laurel Richardson, Stacy Holman Jones, and Tony Adams), duoethnography, oral history (Groundswell organization), radio and podcast productions (Murder, Someone Knows Something, and Serial), illustrated biographies (Zena Alkayat and Nina Cosford), performance ethnography (Tami Spry), theatrical performances drawn from interview transcripts (Anna Deavere Smith), and various other forms of innovative life writing. This book examines the different ways in which critical auto/biographical methods can enhance and elevate life writing projects by closely examining innovative approaches used in narrating critical life writing. This close examination provides researchers with:

- a. New methodological tools;
- b. A review and discussion of scholars’ approaches to life writing projects;
- c. Guiding questions/prompts to help identify and learn to construct questions for each type of project;
- d. Ways to develop and write a life writing project, distinguishing among the array of types of life writing projects; and
- e. References to help further guide novice life writers.

Our intent in writing this book is to examine five different approaches to life writing—biography, autobiography, autoethnography, life history, and oral history—and compare them side by side so that we

can see their similarities and differences. We do this by exploring how they are used in the usual and standard process of research, viz. starting with the research topic, research questions, data collection, data analysis, and writing up (or otherwise representing) the findings. We include the issues and dilemmas for each type of life writing approach, and some suggestions for evaluating them. We also address some blended versions, mashups, and/or extensions of these five approaches; for example, biography and autobiography have functioned as root and predominant categories. Collective biography can be understood as a methodological mashup between biography and qualitative inquiry in much the same way that collective autoethnography can be a methodological mashup between auto/biography and ethnography. And, using the arts to both create and communicate life writing projects can be extensions of these categories.

In putting together a book that is focused on different approaches to life writing, we wish to acknowledge the diversity in the field while presenting, in one place, a set of navigational tools. While the field of life writing is vast, we were drawn towards those research approaches to life writing that are most often used by students using the social sciences and novice qualitative researchers. We have included the often cited literature about life writing that we feel may be beneficial to qualitative researchers as well as additional writings that might help expand the range of possibilities for thinking about life writing projects. We hope that this book will provide those interested in life writing with a sense of how to conduct research within these approaches, how these particular approaches may differ from each other, and how to best determine the level of appropriateness when selecting an approach for a project, while at the same time encouraging methodological experimentation.

We direct this book towards students or novice researchers who have little or some knowledge of qualitative research and would now like to get a grasp of the diversity within life writing methods while also gaining an understanding of the overall research process. We write for those who are interested in starting a life writing project and would like a map of the territory to find their way into writing. We also write for our peers in academia who are from different disciplines (sociology, anthropology, history, geography, humanities, arts)

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and all those who seek to decolonize the writing of lives, who are advocates for hearing and learning from the messy stories of human beings. We write for those who are not content with telling human stories from a singular perspective.

### **Nesting Approaches to Life Writing within Critical Qualitative Research**

We use the term “life writing” as an umbrella term to encompass a range of writing about lives, including but not limited to autobiography, biography, oral history, life history, autoethnography. While we touch on genres such as memoir, digital diaries, obituaries, or autobiographfiction, we do so to the extent that they emerge from the five categories we have chosen to expand in this book. We acknowledge that these distinctions and categories are not cast in stone. The blurring of distinctions between types of life writing has grown alongside a more general acceptance of life writing as a field of study. Neat categories fall apart when life writers reflect on the complexity of the lives they seek to represent and, instead of a chronological voice, what emerges is pluralistic, gloriously messy, multivoiced, and enhanced by the frames of critical theory.

### **Critical Approaches Signify a Value System**

By the term “critical,” we mean the capacity to interrogate and inquire against the grain. It means to ask questions that confront prevailing assumptions leading to an analysis, dismantling and uncovering omissions and invisibilities. A critical approach propels us toward a more nuanced understanding of intersectionality of identity constructions and reminds us that the way in which we construct life events/experiences and narrate or perform our interpretations can create the conditions for positive social change. Denzin and Giardina describe critical scholars as those

committed to showing how the practices of critical, interpretive, qualitative research can help change the world in positive ways. They are committed to creating new ways of making the