

THE CHALLENGE OF GOING TRANSETHNIC: EXPLORING AMERICAN AUTOBIOGRAPHY IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY¹

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Received May 9th 2011
Accepted July 25th 2011

KEYWORDS

American life writing, “transethnicity” / transethnic approach, autobiography criticism, postethnic, cross-ethnic / inter-ethnic. Names: Couser, Gilroy, Hollinger, Boelhower, Eakin, Stone, Payne

PALABRAS CLAVE

autobiografía americana, “transetnicidad” / enfoque transétnico, crítica del género autobiográfico, postétnico, interétnico. Names: Couser, Gilroy, Hollinger, Boelhower, Eakin, Stone, Payne.

ABSTRACT

One of the quandaries that American Studies scholars currently face is whether or not to “go transethnic.” “Transethnicity” both emphasizes the desirability of “crossing” ethnic boundaries and, more importantly, suggests a problematization of the very term “ethnic,” without entirely dismissing it. But how “transethnic” are we in our explorations of American literatures and cultures? Not as much as we should, and this is especially noticeable in the study of American autobiography. Transethnic projects

¹ I would like to thank the anonymous referees for their perceptive comments and suggestions.

were rather meager in the 20th century, comprising only a few book-length studies that gradually put American autobiographies from different ethnic backgrounds in dialogue with each other. It is the main contention of this article that a transethnic approach would enrich and deepen our understanding of American life writing, and the analysis of the scholarly books that have fostered such a comparative and revisionist agenda should constitute the first contribution to that transethnic project.

RESUMEN

Uno de los dilemas a los que se deben enfrentar los/las especialistas en American Studies hoy en día es la conveniencia o no de “volverse transétnicos.” La “transetnicidad” insiste en la necesidad de “cruzar” las fronteras étnicas a la vez que cuestiona el propio término “étnico,” sin por ello desecharlo del todo. Pero ¿hasta qué punto son “transétnicos” nuestros análisis y estudios de las literaturas y culturas norteamericanas? No tanto como sería deseable, lo que resulta aún más obvio si nos referimos al estudio del género autobiográfico. Pocas monografías realmente transétnicas sobre la autobiografía americana han visto la luz a lo largo del siglo XX, entre ellos varios libros que poco a poco consiguieron “hacer dialogar” entre sí a escritores americanos de distintas minorías étnicas. Este artículo mantiene que una visión transétnica de la autobiografía americana sería sumamente enriquecedora, y que la consecución de tal objetivo pasa por analizar la crítica especializada en autobiografía y (re)descubrir todos aquellos libros que han hecho posible el enfoque transétnico, comparatista a la vez que revisionista.

One of the quandaries that American Studies scholars currently face is whether or not to “go transethnic.” The very term I have chosen, “transethnic,” even though it is not altogether new – Gilroy, for instance, mentions it in his introduction to *Against Race* (2000) –, deserves some preliminary explanation. In 1995, when David Hollinger published *Postethnic America: Beyond Multiculturalism*, he argued for the need to go beyond the rigidity of ethnic labels in American Studies. Instead, he put forward an alternative term, “postethnic,” which, according to the critic, conveyed both the desirability of keeping the insights associated with the notion of “ethnicity” – especially the awareness that racist attitudes are still attached to “ethno-racial blocs” – and the equally pressing need to interrogate those “ethno-racial” constructions. And yet, as Hollinger himself explained at the beginning of *Postethnic America*, the “posting” of a term can dangerously be construed as “a way of repudiating a preceding episode rather than building upon it and critically refining its contributions” (5). Even though this was certainly not the author’s aim, the adjective “postethnic” can be – and has been – blatantly appropriated and (mis)used for rather devious purposes. In order to avoid the dangers of “posting,” I propose the alternative “transethnic,” which both captures the crucial idea of “crossing” ethnic boundaries and/or “color lines,” and, more importantly, suggests a problematization of the term “ethnic” while not erasing the concept altogether. Similar terms, such as “cross-ethnic” or “inter-ethnic,” would have emphasized the “crossing” of comparative analyses, but they would have kept untouched the

lexical content of “ethnic.” “Transethnicity,” in contrast, both suggests a revisionist agenda, and keeps ethnicity as a central, if disputed, category.

It can be argued that a transethnic approach to criticism does not reflect the kind of writing being produced, which in many cases seems to remain rather “intraethnic” in its scope and themes. And yet, both fiction and autobiography recently published by contemporary American writers significantly cross many ethnic boundaries (e.g. Obama’s own life writing, or some of the latest works by Richard Powers, Chang-Rae Lee or Maxine Hong Kingston, to name just a few prominent authors). However, even if the choice of an “intraethnic” scope continued to be statistically dominant, it would not necessarily follow that the critical choice should also be “intraethnic” instead of comparative or “transethnic,” just as it would make little sense to avoid engaging in a comparative study of, say, Gabriel García Márquez’s and Salman Rushdie’s magical realist strategies just because the two authors come from different cultural or national backgrounds. It is their literary commonalities (and disparities) that are relevant, not whether they share a given culture or actually refer to each other’s imagined realities.

But how “transethnic” are we critics in our explorations of American literatures and cultures? In general, I would like to argue, American Studies scholars continue to tread upon the “safer” ground of “intra-ethnic” analyses (“African American only,” “Asian American only,” “Euro-American only,” etc.), and only occasionally do we venture into the rather shaky ground of comparative “inter-ethnic” studies, compelled as we still are by the “currently fashionable obligations to celebrate incommensurability and cheerlead for absolute identity” (Gilroy 6-7), by what Gilroy describes as the continued “interest in reifying “race” that has repeatedly arisen in academic analysis” (43). Discussing the challenge of transethnicity as negotiated by book-length publications on US literature would require another book-length publication; instead, I can attempt to offer a more modest – and shorter – analysis by focusing on “just” one genre. Since autobiography is still construed as the genre most clearly prone to “truth-claims,” life writing could actually become a privileged site for the exploration of transethnicity. It is the aim of this article to examine the extent to which the scholarly work on American autobiography has either ignored or fostered the comparative, revisionist agenda inherent in the transethnic approach.

“Intra-ethnic” studies of specific autobiographical traditions within the US have proliferated in the last decades. There is, indeed, no scarcity of monographic studies of African American, Jewish American or Asian American autobiography, to name just a few traditions². In contrast, it is less common to find explicitly cross-

² Genaro Padilla’s *My History, Not Yours: The Formation of Mexican American Autobiography*, Iraida H. López’s *La autobiografía hispana contemporánea en los Estados Unidos: A través del caleidoscopio*, Rocío G. Davis’s recent *Begin Here: Reading Asian North American Autobiographies of Childhood* (analyzing both Canadian and US works), Jid Lee’s *From the Promised Land To Home: Trajectories of Selfhood in Asian-American Women’s Autobiography*, Ilaria Serra’s *The Value of Worthless Lives: Writing Italian American Immigrant Autobiog-*

ethnic, comparative inquiries into the genre. Studies of women's autobiographies constitute the exception to such dearth of consciously transethnic studies³. One can say, therefore, that non-gendered transethnic readings are comparatively meager, comprising only a handful of book-length studies that, hesitantly first (in the 1980s) and more deliberately later (1990s onwards), put US autobiographies from different ethnic backgrounds in dialogue with each other. Without in any case undervaluing detailed intraethnic studies, which continue to be necessary, it is the main contention of this article that a transethnic approach would enrich and deepen our understanding of American life writing, and a first step towards that goal should be the analysis of the scholarly books that have contributed to fostering that comparative and revisionist agenda.

As Robert Sayre argued already in 1977, multiethnic autobiographies not only have "broken the old restrictive [American] civilization and its dangerous assumption that it alone offered a rewarding life," but they have concomitantly "extended concepts of self and society" (29). Indeed, for Sayre, American autobiography

raphies, Edvige Giunta's *Writing with an Accent: Contemporary Italian American Women Authors*, Arnold Krupat's anthologies and studies of Native American autobiography, Hertha Dawn Wong's *Sending My Heart Back Across The Years: Tradition and Innovation in Native American Autobiography*, David J. Carlson's *Sovereign Selves: American Indian Autobiography and the Law*, David Brumble's *American Indian Autobiography* (recently re-edited); and the many volumes devoted to slave narratives and other forms of African American life writing, from early examples such as Stephen Butterfield's *Black Autobiography in America*, to Frances Smith Foster's *Witnessing Slavery: The Development of Ante-Bellum Slave Narratives*, William Andrews's *African American Autobiography* and *To Tell a Free Story: The First Century of Afro-American Autobiography*, Roland Williams's *African American Autobiography and the Quest for Freedom*, V.P. Franklin's *Living Our Stories, Telling Our Truths: Autobiography and the Making of the African-American Intellectual Tradition*, Kenneth Mostern's *Autobiography and Black Identity Politics: Racialization in Twentieth Century America*, or Adetayo Alabi's *Telling Our Stories: Continuities and Divergences in Black Autobiographies*. Such a "mono-ethnic" or monocultural approach to autobiography can reach a high degree of specificity, as shown in Laura Bush's recent *Faithful Transgressions in the American West: Six Twentieth-Century Mormon Women's Autobiographical Acts*.

³ Among those book-length studies published in the last decades that focus on women writers across ethnic (and at times national) boundaries, we can name the following: Linda Anderson's *Women and Autobiography*, Shari Benstock's *Private Selves*, Bella Brodzki and Celeste Schenck's *Life/Lines: Theorizing Women's Autobiography*, Helen Buss's *Repossessing the World: Reading Memoirs by Contemporary Women*, Margo Culley's *American Women's Autobiography: Fea(s)ts of Memory*, David Fowler's *Revelations of Self: American Women in Autobiography*, Anne E. Goldman's *Take My Word: Autobiographical Innovations of Ethnic American Working Women*, Leonor Hoffman and Margo Culley's *Women's Personal Narratives*, Jelinek's *The Traditon of Women's Autobiography*, Françoise Lionnet's *Autobiographical Voices: Race, Gender, Self-Portraiture*, Sidonie Smith's *A Poetics of Women's Autobiography*, Domna Stanton's *The Female Autograph*, and Smith and Watson's numerous volumes on women's autobiography, such as *Getting a Life: Everyday Uses of Autobiography or Before They Could Vote: American Women's Autobiographical Writing*, among others.

constitutes the “true Song of [...] Ourselves” (11), in that it manages to capture the immense diversity of people along the lines of gender, class, age, ethnicity, etc.⁴ In this context, what remains somehow paradoxical is the manner in which the studies of the autobiographical genre in the US have incorporated, or, more often than not, have failed to incorporate the ethnic perspective until very recently.⁵ Before 1980, most book-length explorations of American self-writing included only “white” or Euro-American writers, although a few did explore Gertrude Stein’s *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* and/or *Everybody’s Autobiography*, even if they did not openly acknowledge her Jewish origins. In *Educated Lives* (1976), for instance, Thomas Cooley traces the changes that the development of modern psychology in the late 19th century brought to American autobiography. After covering the usual Adams, Twain, Howells and James, in his final chapter he moves on to Steffens, Sherwood Anderson, and Stein, and it is precisely Stein that, according to Cooley, inaugurates a new autobiographical mode “embrac[ing] the multiplicity of her times” (177). In 1979, Thomas Couser devotes part of his *American Autobiography: The Prophetic Mode to The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, thus helping consolidate this African American text—which had already been the object of interest of mono-ethnic studies of black self-writing—as one of the major autobiographies to have been written in the US, alongside the by then “canonized” Franklin or Adams. However, as Albert Stone rightly points out in *Autobiographical Occasions and Original Acts: Versions of American Identity from Henry Adams to Nate Shaw* (1982), criticism of American self-writing prior to 1980 was too prone to put forward “generalizations about American autobiography and culture on the foundation of a relatively few classics, a single theme, rhetorical stance, or historical

⁴ In “The Representative Voice” (1982), James Craig Holte argues that the very feelings of “rootlessness” underlying much of the immigrant and ethnic experience accounts for the “large body of autobiographical writing” produced by these collectives in the US (33), while most critics coincide in finding a strong link between American national ethos and the genre of autobiography. For different explanations of such link, see Sayre 1964, p. 33; Doherty 1981, p. 95; Holte 1982, pp. 25, 30, 33; Holte 1988, p. 5; Couser 1989, viii, p. 13; Stone 1991, p. 115, etc.

⁵ The first, and by now classical, explorations of the genre of autobiography were primarily concerned with establishing the “conditions and limits” of the genre, to paraphrase Gusdorf’s seminal essay *Design and Truth in Autobiography* (1960). For instance, Roy Pascal exhibits a blatantly restrictive view of what constitutes a genuine autobiography. And even among those critics who purport to be descriptive rather than prescriptive, some (at times inadvertently) fall into the temptation of setting boundaries and “regulations” for the genre. One such case is *Autobiographical Acts* (1976), where Elizabeth Bruss, though very careful not to be prescriptive about form, is clearly prescriptive about function, as befits her structuralist position. Due to space constraints, I cannot dwell on studies such as Gusdorf’s, Bruss’s or Pascal’s, published prior to the 1980s, because our primary concern is the “ethnic perspective,” which will not be noticeable until that decade. For an excellent overview of the first stages of autobiography criticism in the US, see Olney’s “Autobiography and the Cultural Moment” (1980) or Payne’s “Introduction” to his *Multicultural Autobiography* (1992), especially pp. xi-xv.

period” (18), thus precluding the multiethnic project that he and other critics would try to launch in the following years.

In contrast with earlier decades, therefore, the 1980s was probably the most productive as regards the number of book-length studies that aimed at a comprehensive, pluralistic reading of American life writing: Stone’s *The American Autobiography: A Collection of Critical Essays* (1981) and the aforementioned *Autobiographical Occasions and Original Acts* (1982), William Boelhower’s *Immigrant Autobiography in the United States* (1982), James Craig Holte’s *The Ethnic I: A Sourcebook for Ethnic-American Autobiography* (1988) or Thomas Couser’s *Altered Egos: Authority in American Autobiography* (1989), to name just the most prominent examples.

In his 1981 volume, *The American Autobiography*, Stone compiles articles by Sayre, Kazin, Spacks or Doherty, among others. Apparently, most of Stone’s anthology continues to focus on “canonical,” “white” autobiographers⁶. However, a few of the contributors to Stone’s book seem especially aware that the ethnic inflection is a prerequisite of contemporary autobiography criticism. Stone’s introductory essay explicitly acknowledges the impact of gender, historical context, and other social factors on the author’s existence and hence in his/her life writing (*American* 3). In other words, if what we call “life” is the arena where differences (class, gender, ethnicity...) are played out, it is only logical to assume that autobiographical writing should somehow reflect such factors. Indeed, as Stone rightly points out, “oppressed groups” in the US, such as African Americans, have traditionally “turned to personal history as a means of understanding and protesting against the social realities which have decisively affected their lives and identities” (*American* 4). Sayre’s “The Proper Study: Autobiographies in American Studies,” originally published in 1977, claims the urgency of the multiethnic perspective when approaching American self-writing, and he insightfully links cultural and generic diversity: “I don’t think we can have an adequate history of American autobiography which is not as plural in genre as it is pluralistic in subject matter [...] we cannot talk about concepts of self (and selves) without realizing the that concepts inevitably take different literary forms as well as different social and cultural ones” (19). This becomes most poignantly relevant for “minority” writers, for whom autobiography turns into “an important ideological weapon” both as a means of protest and as the vehicle for the joyful vindication of one’s self (“Proper” 22, 29). If we turn our attention to the other contributions to the anthology, very rarely, if at all, do we find an attempt to cross the ethnic/racial boundary in a comparative analysis⁷. The transethnic thrust is still very much in the background.

⁶ Only two of the ten essays in the collection are formally devoted to “ethnic” literatures and these follow a monocultural (even if minoritized) paradigm of life writing: Rosenfeld’s article focuses exclusively on Jewish autobiography and Schultz’s on African American self-writing.

⁷ Only in her diachronic study of which stages of life have been privileged in autobiographical writing in the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries and the reasons behind that choice, does Spacks

It is in his later monographic study, *Autobiographical Occasions and Original Acts* (1982), where Stone most clearly strives to engage in a transethnic exploration of American autobiography by focusing, for instance, on self-writing from authors “on both sides of the color line” (*Occasions* 20), namely Du Bois and Adams, in one of the chapters, by comparing Black Elk’s and Thomas Merton’s spiritual life writing, in another, or by studying “the self as child and youth” in Sullivan’s and Wright’s autobiographies. Although Stone never dwells on the novelty of this comparative, cross-ethnic project at length, he warns us against simplistic connotations and generalizations that neglect social and individual differences (*Occasions* 97, 187), while revealing his desire “to establish some continuities in the development of modern American autobiography” (*Occasions* 26):

As Robert Sayre puts it, American autobiography is the Song of Ourselves. Yet the whole oratorio is, I repeat, composed of separate Songs of Myself. Until we learn to read these scores and individual stories and cultural narratives, it will be dangerous or impossible to imagine or hear the whole. (Stone, *Occasions* 26-27; cf. Stone, *American* 1)

Despite its shortcomings, as Paul John Eakin would recognize several years later, Stone’s project is praiseworthy, among other things, for its pioneering attitude of “cultural pluralism” in autobiography criticism (12).

Also published in 1982, William Boelhower’s *Immigrant Autobiography in the United States* lays out an ambitious plan: a descriptive framework that would work across ethnic boundaries. To be more specific, Boelhower puts forward a “macrotextual model” (18), reminiscent of Propp’s structuralist analysis of the Russian folktale and of later narratological projects, a model which, in theory, can be applied to any instance of immigrant self-writing in the US. Although he prefers to narrow down his description and focus only on Italian American autobiographies for most of the book, Boelhower claims that his model would also successfully apply to other ethnic communities (*Immigrant* 20); what is more, according to him, this macrotext, basically an “immigrant model,” can be extrapolated to the “larger category of ethnic autobiographies” (*Immigrant* 21-22), since the “new ethnic literatures [...] are all governed by the same formal premises,” which they share with “deconstructionist theories”: both oppose the “monocultural paradigm” that dominated American society until fairly recently (*Immigrant* 220). In order to prove the versatility of his model, Boelhower opens the book with a chapter—reprinted in *MELUS Journal* in 1982—devoted to several autobiographers who had emigrated from different European countries: Mary Antin, Louis Adamic, Marcus Ravage,

introduce life writing by Maxine Hong Kingston, Anne Moody or Malcolm X in an implicit and timid transethnic move. Even Rosenfeld’s and Schultz’s respective analyses of Jewish and African American autobiography remain within the relative safety of intra-ethnic studies of life writing.

Edward Bok, Jacob Riis, etc. Useful though this macrotextual schema, with its Old World/New World paradigms, can be, when applied to certain microtexts, it is far from universal and can prove particularly problematic because it disregards generational disparities (first or immigrant generation, and second-generation American-born writers), historical circumstances, and ethnic difference, as Sau-ling Wong eloquently proves in her “Immigrant Autobiography” (1991). Wong elucidates how Boelhower’s chosen microtexts belong to a subgenre that should be known as “autobiography of Americanization” rather than “immigrant autobiography” (152). In trying to answer the question of “How valid are the claims of transethnic and transhistoric applicability that Boelhower makes for his theoretical model?” (152), Wong concludes that his macrotext does not work for non-European, non-Judeo-Christian ethnic groups such as Chinese American immigrant autobiographers: “As immigrant experiences differ, so must immigrant autobiographies,” so that it is more desirable and “productive to conceive of multiple, provisional *axes of organization*,” that is, “different salient features [which] are revealed when an autobiography is read with different intertexts,” than trying to work out “some totalizing system in which autobiographers speak from a priori fixed positions and follow a finite set of trajectories” (159, 160), which is precisely what Boelhower does. And yet, his transethnic vision, even if simplistic and probably premature in 1982, as Wong rightly points out at the end of her article (161), prefigures what has become an urgent task now, when we are inaugurating the second decade of the 21st century.

In 1982 *MELUS Journal* published a special issue entirely devoted to ethnic (auto)biography. Apart from the aforementioned article by Boelhower, “The Brave New World of Immigrant Autobiography,” there were other influential contributions, such as Holte’s opening essay, “The Representative Voice: Autobiography and the Ethnic Experience” (1982), shortened and adapted in 1988 in order to serve as introduction to *The Ethnic I*. In both pieces, Holte underscores the contribution of hitherto marginalized voices to American culture. “Ethnic and immigrant writers,” notes Holte, “saw America with new eyes” (*Ethnic 7*), thus providing not only new insights into American society, but also fresh answers to the recurrent question of what it means to be an American. In “The Representative Voice” Holte carries out a cross-ethnic analysis of Panunzio’s *The Soul of an Immigrant*, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* and Piri Thomas’s *Down These Mean Streets*. The critic explores how these texts echo, depart from, and/or rewrite, the conversion narrative, while he emphasizes the “striking” similarities between the last two works (Holte, “Representative” 42). By concentrating on just three autobiographies and avoiding blanket statements that would only result in unfair simplifications, Holte’s article is a good example of how a cross-ethnic analysis can be not only possible, but also illuminating.

In 1989 Thomas Couser published his seminal *Altered Egos: Authority in American Autobiography*. Although Couser had already published an important monographic study of American life writing in 1979, *Altered Egos* was the first

book to overtly function as a bridge between the new post-structuralist moment and those critical schools that had figured most prominently in autobiography studies until then, namely, liberal humanism and structuralism. Coming to terms with Paul de Man's assertion that autobiography is merely "a figure of reading, an effect of language" (Krupat 175), Couser questioned the dubious referential premises that still operated in most critical studies of autobiography. Couser specifically targeted the thorny issues raised by poststructuralists, such as the increasing suspicion of the referential value of language, the discredit of the naïve empiricism of "reality testing," which had been so common among traditional critics of life writing, and, most importantly, the very dissolution of the "self" that had long been the bedrock of autobiography itself: "If the self is inherently a function—even a fiction—of language, then autobiography is doubly so; after all, it is a literary capitalization of the 'I'" (*Altered* 18). The "self" that apparently inhered in self-life writing was no longer fixed or steady, but a linguistic construction – *il n'y a pas de hors-texte* – always in flux, or, in Couser's words, a textual or "dot-matrix 'I,'" "a particular configuration of the otherwise indistinguishable dots that serve to make up all the other characters" (*Altered* 18). Couser went as far as to state that "even the supposed progenitor of the American success story [Franklin], which exalts individual autonomy, generated his Life by working from, with, and against a multiplicity of textual models" (*Altered* 248). This textual constructedness and other poststructuralist "threats" to the authority of autobiography constitute Couser's main interest throughout the book, which ends in a compromising note, "admitting, on the one hand, that the authority of autobiography is not susceptible to definitive determination, and asserting, on the other, that it is nevertheless necessary and desirable to monitor it carefully in each case" (*Altered* 248). Instead of lapsing back into a referential, positivistic, or "correspondence" theory of language, or uncritically embracing the poststructuralist view of language, Couser opts for a "third way," what he calls the "dialogical paradigm," whereby "linguistic elements may precede, but they do not entirely predetermine the self" (*Altered* 251).

Of the seven chapters that Couser devotes to analyses of individual texts, only the first three focus on "white" autobiographers, while the other four deal with African American, Native American, Asian American and Chicano writers. Chapter 9 proves particularly interesting because it explicitly compares Kingston's and Richard Rodriguez's strategies of self-inscription in their "bicultural" autobiographies⁸. According to Couser, *The Woman Warrior* and *Hunger for Memory* share some characteristics: both narrators/autobiographers develop "temporary speech impediments," both acknowledge that "in writing autobiography, they broke powerful cultural proscriptions," and "both associate pain, loss and confusion with their

⁸ Although less influential than Couser's *Altered Egos*, Fichtelberg's contemporary *The Complex Image*, in its exploration of the "millennial identity" as conveyed in American autobiography, similarly introduces "ethnic writers" (Douglass and Stein side by side with Franklin or Whitman), but Couser's text is far more transethnic, especially in this last section.

assimilation” (*Altered* 213). However, the two books differ in many other aspects, including the degree to which their ethnicity has conditioned the narrators, the way they appraise their respective cultural traditions, and their attitude to their “mother tongues” (Couser, *Altered* 214). This chapter constitutes compelling evidence that “the mutual intelligibility of alien cultures” (Couser, *Altered* 242), as illustrated by Ts’ai Yen’s story at the end of *The Woman Warrior*, is not only desirable, but also possible. Couser’s work proved that a comparative, transethnic approach to autobiography was within our reach.

After Couser, poststructuralist theory could no longer be ignored in studies of life writing. Since the 1990s, many autobiography critics, either willingly or reluctantly, have incorporated the poststructuralist challenge of the very philosophical foundations on which traditional autobiography scholarship had been erected. Paul John Eakin’s *American Autobiography: Retrospect and Prospect* (1991) is a pertinent example of the impact of such new circumstances. Aware of the conflicting theories regarding linguistic access to “reality” and how these affect the realm of autobiography criticism, Eakin observed not only the “continuing uncertainty about generic definition,” but also how such uncertainty is emphasized by the increasing interest in recovering “marginalized literatures of autobiography” based on “a broad definition of literature” (4, 7). Even though elsewhere Eakin describes autobiography as a “construct of a construct,” “doubly structured, doubly mediated, a textual metaphor for what is already a metaphor for the subjective reality of consciousness” (qtd. in Holly 217), in his 1991 volume the critic seems to approach autobiography as a fundamentally “referential art,” and specifically as a carrier of culture. Consequently, Eakin endeavors to expand the corpus of study in order to reflect the increasingly pluralistic American society:

The pool of representative American autobiographies is considerably enlarged and certainly differently construed from its characteristic appearance in many earlier studies. Thus, in addition to commentary on Thoreau, Adams, and James, there are readings of Lucy Larcom, William Apes, and Emma Goldman. (15)

What Eakin underlines, and what becomes even more relevant to us than his inclusive impetus, is that he confers exceptional value to a cross-ethnic comparative approach, even if he does only implicitly point at this transethnic attitude: “It is especially significant [...] that in several essays well-known, lesser known, and virtually unknown autobiographies figure *in relation to each other* for the first time in criticism” (15, author’s emphasis). The foregrounding of such relational, dialogic attitude turns such a critical project into a useful precedent for those of us willing to “go transethnic.”

The first four chapters in Eakin’s *American Autobiography* attempt to trace the development of the genre in the US, from its “prehistory” (Shea) to its modern avatars (Stone), without forgetting the autobiographical writings during the

American Renaissance (Buell) and the Civil War (Egan). Lawrence Buell overtly juxtaposes Thoreau and Douglass, with a contrastive intention in mind (57), whereas Susanna Egan at one point compares Riis, Franklin and Howells, and later Riis and Berkman (82), before explicitly focusing on immigrant and African American autobiography at the turn of the century. In this last section, which she entitles “The Melting Pot,” Egan traces the development from the initial drive towards assimilation and “conformity with the white culture,” to a later moment, when the ethnic autobiographer becomes the spokesperson for her/his collectivity, a shift which is especially conspicuous among African American writers: “the black autobiographer is Representative Man [sic]” (83). Understandably, especially because of the humble aim of that section, which constitutes a brief overview of autobiography at the turn of the century, Egan chooses to describe each of the ethnic traditions separately and does not attempt any comparative foray. A similar intention to offer a quick survey of modern American autobiography from the 1930s until the 1990s partially reins in Stone’s promising transethnic venture, which briefly compares spiritual self-writing by Dillard, Merton and Black Elk, juxtaposes the latter with another collaborative project, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, and finally launches an eloquent defense of the genre from a “socially-inclusive” perspective. Boelhower’s contribution to Eakin’s volume, “The Making of Ethnic Autobiography in the United States,” once more addresses the question of immigrant self-writing, but, one more time also, Boelhower focuses almost exclusively on white autobiographers, with the exception of a passing reference to Bulosan’s *America Is in the Heart* (130). In this article, the critic indirectly equates ethnic and immigrant autobiography, whereas not all ethnic self-writing revolves around the issue of immigration⁹. Nevertheless, the critic proffers illuminating theoretical insights into the very ethnic sign and its implication for American autobiography: “as a genre, ethnic autobiography systematically set about undoing and redoing the so-called American self by creating new American types and new narrative perspectives” (Boelhower, “Making” 138). At other times, however, Boelhower’s theorizing about ethnicity proves too vulnerable to criticism: “Given American mobility and the fact that many ethnics become quickly deterritorialized [sic]—no longer living in a specific ethnic neighborhood—there is no longer any way to control the ethnic subject or ethnic interpretation” (“Making” 135). Statements such as these are primarily based on the experience of American writers who are not “visibly ethnic,” who are not easily racialized, and whose social mobility, therefore, is comparable to that of the “Anglo-Saxon standard.”

Typically, Euro-American, Western models have been imposed on non-western cultures such as Native American ones under the guise of universal norms. In “Native American Autobiography and the Synecdochic Self,” Arnold Krupat convincingly warns us against the Eurocentrism and the “Western bourgeois bias” underlying

⁹ For a detailed critique of Boelhower’s position, see Wong’s “Immigrant Autobiography” (1991), previously discussed, and also included in Eakin’s volume.

universalist claims (171, 186-7)¹⁰. He next explores William Apes's self-writing in order to illustrate his influential synecdochic hypothesis regarding Native American autobiographical tradition, although he is careful not to over-generalize: "I would not want to be understood as claiming that all autobiography by Indians must necessarily be unimpressed by varieties of individualism, nor that all autobiography by Native people take synecdoche as their defining figure" (186). Yet, even though Krupat actually points out specific examples where the synecdochic model might work outside Native American literature (186), his article, like Wong's or Andrews's, largely focuses on autobiography within one single ethnic group. Holly's chapter on 19th century female autobiography does not engage in cross-ethnic comparisons, but ends with an injunction to do so, at least in the realm of women's self-writing: "we must chart the similarities and difference between models of identity that have shaped the autobiographies of all American women—white women and women of color" (227). In the closing chapter, "Speaking Her Own Piece," Gelfant focuses on Emma Goldman's autobiography. Although the essay focuses on just one text, it opens with a striking comparison between Goldman's *Living My Life* (1931) and Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* (1900), and later with a Russian novel, Nikolai Chernyshevsky's *What Is to Be Done?* (1886), an interesting strategy that successfully crosses not only ethnic boundaries, but also national, gender and genre categories, while remaining highly relevant to Gelfant's main thesis.

From this succinct dissection of Eakin's *American Autobiography*, it can safely be argued that, even though some of the essays in the collection fail to live up to the comparatist promise and most of the critics who deal with "non-white" autobiographers do so from a mono-ethnic perspective, other chapters remain true to the relational spirit that the editor underscores in his introductory essay.

One year after Eakin's *American Autobiography*, James Robert Payne publishes the similarly ambitious and all-encompassing *Multicultural Autobiography*. As was the case in many of Eakin's chapters, however, the multi-ethnic spirit animating Payne's collection does not entail a comparative, transethnic perspective. While covering the work of autobiographers from very different ethnic backgrounds, the chapters focus on either a single text/author¹¹ or several examples of self-writing within the same ethnic group¹². This is exactly Payne's intended structure, since he believes that only by "bring[ing] together different critical voices, each speaking from an area of expertise on a particular American cultural tradition," can "American cultural diversity [...] be acknowledged" and properly examined at the time of

¹⁰ See Chinua Achebe's seminal attack of Eurocentric universalism in "Colonialist Criticism."

¹¹ Ruoff writes on Mathews' autobiography, Foster on Keckley's, Byerman on Du Bois, Payne on Cable, Gardaphe on Mangione, Sumida on Sone, Wong on Kingston, and Paredes on Rodríguez.

¹² Tuerk focuses on autobiography by "white" European immigrants, while Rubin deals with first-generation Jewish Americans.

writing his book (xvii-xviii). True to his design, therefore, Payne considers that the most effective strategy involves singling out one ethnic community and studying its autobiographical tradition from an intraethnic point of view, as many authors did in the 1980s (Andrews, Braxton, Brumble, Krupat, etc.) and have continued to do well into the 21st century. And yet, he is aware of the incipient demand for a cross-ethnic perspective on the part of prominent critics. In fact, he commends Tuerk's article as a good illustration, "within the compass of European-American immigrant autobiography," of "the comparative approach in American cultural studies as called forth by Henry Louis Gates, Jr.; Paul Lauter; A. Lavonne Brown Ruoff; and other scholars at present" (xxiii). The only deeply transethnic article featured in Payne's book is José David Saldívar's transnational analysis of Calibanism in Chicano, African American and Caribbean autobiographical writings, which, for Payne, highlights the ways in which "political boundaries may seriously obscure our perception of cultural relationships" (xxix), which constitutes an early – albeit somehow covert – call for a transnational perspective in American studies.

Even though Jerzy Durczak's *Selves Between Cultures: Contemporary American Bicultural Autobiography* (1994) was published after poststructuralism had shaken the foundations of autobiography studies, and while the author acknowledges the relevance and impact of works such as De Man's "Autobiography as De-Facement" or Couser's *Altered Egos*, and he espouses Timothy Dow Adams' tentative definition of autobiography (5-7), his approach to literary texts continues to rely on positivist premises. His work is nonetheless praiseworthy for its attempt to cover a great number of what he terms "bicultural" autobiographies across time and ethnic lines, and to trace similarities and differences about these diverse texts. And yet, Durczak shies away from including examples of Native and African American self-writing in his study, convinced as he is that their experiences differ from those of other ethnic autobiographers. For this critic, African and Native Americans "do not undergo an abrupt transformation from one culture to another, but rather live simultaneously in both cultures," and "they do not have to go through the painful process of abandoning their mother tongue" (7). These statements prove rather problematic, since cultural and even linguistic uprooting is a common feature of many African American and Native American autobiographies. And viceversa, living "simultaneously" in(-between) two cultures and in(-between) two languages is a pervasive concern in Latino/a or Asian American life writing, as amply illustrated by two of the texts that the critic analyzes in his book: Richard Rodríguez's *Hunger for Memory* and Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*.

As the 20th century came to an end and we entered the new millennium, the field of criticism of American self-writing has continued to thrive and be enriched, both

with contributions by well-established autobiography scholars and with the work of new critics joining the ongoing debate with new perspectives¹³. In the last few years there is a noticeable shift in trend, as several book-length studies on American autobiography have appeared that incorporate a transethnic agenda in more or less explicit ways. Such publications range from cross-ethnic explorations using new critical paradigms, such as ecocriticism in Mark Allister's *Refiguring the Map of Sorrow* (2001) or trauma theory in Leigh Gilmore's *The Limits of Autobiography* (2001), to revisionist projects such as David Leigh's *Circuitous Journeys* (2000), which revisits spiritual autobiographies from a transethnic and transnational perspective, or case studies comparing two "ethnicities," like Martin Japtok's *Growing Up Ethnic: Nationalism and the Bildungsroman in African American and Jewish American Fiction* (2005). This new transethnic broadening of the field of American autobiography is critical of the excessively rigid pigeonholing of "ethnic literatures." Further than that, transethnic projects encompass two complementary tasks: the continuing need for academics to point out the "absurdities and pettiness or racial typologies," and therefore to "de-nature and de-ontologize" such categories (Gilroy 305, 43), on the one hand, and the honest acknowledgement of the ongoing relevance of the constructions of race and ethnicity, of the persistence of the discrimination and prejudices that still accrue to "color lines" (old racism) or "cultural boundaries" (culturalist or "new racism"; Balibar, Barker), on the other. As has been thoroughly documented in the previous pages, this combined strategy – both explicitly revisionist and still "ethnic" to a certain extent – has been a rare phenomenon in the study of American life writing until fairly recently. Even if the neglect of "ethnic" autobiography has been partially corrected by the praiseworthy efforts of Eakin, Stone and other critics in the 1980s and 1990s, there is still a pressing need for studies of American life writing that we can genuinely call transethnic. Still in 1992, Payne maintained that such an ambitious project was not possible, at least not "for a single critical voice," especially "if American cultural diversity is to be acknowledged and if American autobiographies are to be studied as specific "cultural narratives" as well as "individual stories" (xvii-xviii). Almost two decades after such a declaration, we can safely state that comparative, transethnic ventures are not only possible, but also desirable. When traveling those transethnic roads, we must remain cognizant of all the pitfalls on the way, especially the danger of falling back into previous hierarchical models. Instead, multiple and reciprocal influences should be foregrounded, so as to preclude the perpetuation of the older dynamics of "dominant" versus "minority" cultures. All in all, I would finally argue, much can be gained from an explicit adherence to transethnicity,

¹³ Among the well-known specialists, let's just mention Couser's *Recovering Bodies: Illness, Disability, and Life writing* (1997), and his *Signifying Bodies: Disability in Contemporary Life Writing* (2009). For a recent book with an explicit transethnic agenda, see Simal's *Selves in Dialogue* (2011).

especially if we do not want to forget the common humanity that lies hidden within the stunning beauty of diversity.

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