

How Lives Come to Matter – Rethinking Mediation and Materiality in Autobiography

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Abstract:

Stories of the Self opens the purview of autobiography studies to come to terms with the proliferation of ‘self-life-inscription’ in media and matter beyond the book. In analyses of a variety of phenomena, Poletti argues that the material dimension of autobiographical practices fundamentally determines not only how they are produced and received but also what significance we attach to them. Innovatively combining theories from neighboring disciplines in this way, Poletti develops a number of specific ways of reading mediated lives and selves in their inescapable relationality.

In Sachen Leben – Zur Bedeutung des Mediums und der Materialität für Autobiografien

German Abstract:

Stories of the Self eröffnet den Horizont traditioneller Autobiografiestudien, indem es Praktiken der Selbstverschriftlichung in Medien jenseits des Buchs fokussiert. In den Analysekapiteln, die sich je unterschiedlichen Phänomenen widmen, argumentiert Poletti, dass die mediale und materielle Dimension der jeweiligen Autobiografien ihre Produktion und Rezeption beeinflusst, und, dass ihnen erst qua dieser Bedeutsamkeit beigemessen wird. Hierbei werden innovativ Theorien aus benachbarten Disziplinen verbunden, um passgenau individuelle Zugänge zu entwickeln.

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Why do we willingly share our every move and thought online, knowing full well the negative consequences of doing so? Anna Poletti takes this conundrum, coined the privacy paradox in recent scholarship, as the point of departure for *Stories of the Self – Life Writing after the Book*. Following *Intimate Ephemera* and *Life Narratives and Youth Culture*, their latest monograph sets out to investigate our seemingly inescapable need for mediated relationality through the scenes and material conditions of our sharing of life with and to others. To do so, the framework and readings draw from a diverse range of critical theory from media studies, queer theory, and material culture studies, to name but a few. Poletti approaches different autobiographical practices comparatively in order to highlight “the specific affordances and ideologies that each media form materializes” (p. 170).

In *Stories of the Self*, Poletti also seeks to reframe how we conceptualize the term autobiography. ‘Auto’ does not refer to the one doing the writing, but rather to the self – as well as the life – being the object of the inscription (cf. p. 14). What is more, they also emphatically negate the prevailing centrality of the linguistic and narrative dimension of common life writing approaches in the subsequent readings. The monograph then applies this redefinition to autobiographical products from a wide variety of media from the last decades in its analyses, asking the reader to think of the different chapters of the book “as an exhibition made up of a series of rooms” (p. 8). Each one of the metaphorical rooms is designed to come to terms with a specific media materiality used for autobiography and puts forward a medium-specific way of reading them.

Firstly, the chapters “Cameras” and “Collage” represent two different autobiographical uses of audiovisual media. The former argues that the presence and use of a camera decidedly shapes

the life and the self by exploring the two documentary films *Stories We Tell* and *Catfish*. In this reading, cameras are the essential part of an assemblage “that produces life, rather than merely records or presents it.” (p. 78). Through a ‘periperformative’ re-combination of other audiovisual media, Poletti argues that, in the examined collages, “the voices of others become resources for giving an account of queer life” (p. 128) – one which autobiography generally does not afford them. This form of collage is seen to showcase “a creative reuse of the power of existing forms of media” that destabilizes the “importance accorded to uniqueness of voice as grounding autobiography” (p. 140).

The next readings explore how “Cardboard Boxes” and surveillance “Dossiers” both produce two versions of the same individual. The first analysis chapter takes a closer look at Andy Warhol’s *Time Capsules* and understands the seemingly mundane containers filled with ephemera as a “prosthetic for memories and sense of self” (28). It highlights how such boxes represent a way of “storing, but not storying, lived experience” (p. 55) that sits “between [...] two versions of Andy Warhol” (p. 45). The final reading of the book takes up “the artistic remediation of surveillance dossiers” (p. 144) to return to the question of privacy and control that opened the monograph. Assembled from innumerable documents, the dossiers are understood as “a materialization of the government’s instinct to possess and manage the racialized subject” (p. 158). Accordingly, Poletti investigates how two minority group activists substantially differ from their data-doubles produced by the white supremacist institutions that interpreted their actions and statements.

“Crowdsourcing” and the analysis of Ai Weiwei’s use of selfies in the conclusion, lastly, explore two forms of digital media practices and their different functions. On the one hand, “Crowdsourcing” explores how ‘confessional entrepreneurs’ establish intimacy and affect online to profit from the “coaxing and remediating of crowdsourced life narration” (p. 81) proffered by anonymous participants. The formalized parameters of the confessions, however, Poletti notes, prioritize “*universalizing truths*” over “salacious insights into the lives of others” (p. 112). By taking and exhibiting selfies with asylum seekers, on the other hand, Ai Weiwei “presents a critique of European government’s selective approach to whose lives are worthy of protection” (p. 172). Using his own status as political refugee in this way, his selfies are understood as materializing the legal inequality of migration laws into conceptual art.

Ultimately, *Stories of the Self* foregrounds an often-overlooked dimension of autobiographies by bringing perspectives from media studies and insights from the material turn into a productive dialogue with established approaches to life writing. It lucidly argues that the choice of media and material for ‘self-life-inscription,’ as Poletti terms it, is instrumental not only in shaping the identity and relationality of the subject, but also in what significance is attached to them. Subsequently, this inextricable entanglement of life and mediation Poletti posits is also the key to answering the initial question. The otherwise observant and theoretically sound readings in *Stories of the Self*, however, frequently feature underdeveloped references to narrative. Combined with the emphatic disavowal of all things narratological in the underlying approach, this inevitably raises the question of how an addition of media-conscious narrative theory might have supported the overall argument of the monograph. This holds especially true for readers enticed by the prominent position of stories in the title.

Nonetheless, as the subtitle emblemizes, *Life Writing after the Book* marks a promising change of scholarly focus from narrow literary autobiography to other media materialities. With a productive reorientation and vivid analyses, Poletti extends a convincing invitation to researchers from life writing studies “to spend less time in bookshops” (p. 24) in order to take into account an even larger variety of contemporary media and material practices that shape how diverse lives come to matter. To media studies scholars, likewise, it is a vivid showcase of how verdurous and unexplored a field life writing still is for questions of participation and mediation.