



## What's Next? Mediation

By Anna Poletti

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Historically, auto|biography studies has had sporadic contact with media studies. This is because the question of the aesthetic, psychological, social, and political formations of life narrative have largely been treated within the context of literary studies (see Smith and Watson, *Reading* 193–211; Rak, “Are”). Yet the need for closer attention to how mediation and media institutions contribute to the practice of autobiography is increasingly felt in the field. The inclusion of a new chapter acknowledging that mediation can no longer be ignored in the study of life writing was an important update to the first edition of Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson’s *Reading Autobiography: A Guide to Interpreting Life Narratives*.<sup>1</sup> Julie Rak’s recent work has also argued that the field must analyze the role of media industries (*Boom!*) and mediation (“Life”).

Perhaps it is unsurprising that the study of autobiography and media has not meaningfully intersected sooner. Early media studies was driven to theorize and account for two characteristics of media: concentrations of power and the reach of mass (broadcast) media, and the material realities of media production. The recent changes in media production, circulation, and reception brought about by networked and digital media forces the intersection of auto|biography and media studies. Contemporary media studies must come to terms with the central role of life narrative in media practices, and this has resulted in increased attention to identity and sociality (Couldry; Papacharissi), the shift from broadcast to participatory media cultures (Jenkins et al.), and the changing conditions of media production, such as the rise of “producers” (Bruno). Existing concepts and approaches in auto|biography studies can usefully contribute to how media studies accounts for the increasing importance of autobiography in the contemporary media environment. However, to make this contribution meaningful and lasting, auto|biography studies must advance accounts of how life narrative and mediation intersect.

In *Keywords*, Raymond Williams suggests that *mediation* has had three distinct, yet murky, uses in English. The first is to refer to the political process of negotiation, often led by an intermediary (204–05). The second refers to a

negative process where specific agents “are seen as deliberately interposed between reality and social consciousness, to prevent an understanding of reality” (206)—a way of using the term reflected in concerns about the impact of social media on the experience of social life (as argued by Sherry Turkle in *Alone Together*). The third meaning of the term, which Williams traces to Theodor Adorno, refers to a “direct and necessary activity between different kinds of activity and consciousness” that “has its own, always specific forms” (206).<sup>2</sup> This final definition is closest to how “mediation” might be used by future scholars of auto|biography who wish to pay close attention to the fact that all autobiographical acts are also acts of mediation. Our scholarship must begin with an acknowledgement that the increasingly diverse media environment provides an unprecedented array of choices regarding mediation that autobiographers, and audiences, negotiate. We must pay attention to these choices, asking why and how autobiographers and their readers use media. Why does Ai Wei Wei use Instagram, not Facebook? Why did Maggie Nelson choose to write about gender and family in a book (*The Argonauts*) and not a blog? Each text is a choice of mediation—the necessarily specific forms given to auto|biography. And, as José van Dijck has argued, mediation can also act as a means of negotiating between competing social or ideological forces.

Williams concludes his entry by stating that each sense of the word *mediation* would be better served by an alternative term: “conciliation”; “ideology or rationalization”; and “form” (206–07). However, Lisa Gitelman argues that “media become authoritative as the social processes of their definition and dissemination are separated out or forgotten, and as the processes of protocol formation and acceptance get ignored” (6–7). Attention to mediation requires analysis of the interconnectedness of conciliation, ideology, and form.<sup>3</sup> In my own work, this has led me to ask why it is that one form of media (the book) continues to dominate our understanding of what auto|biography is and does.

Attention to mediation would require that scholars of auto|biography strike out beyond the established approach of focusing on the representational component of texts. One way that auto|biography studies might undertake this work is to take up “media-specific analysis” (MSA), a way of reading proposed by N. Katherine Hayles. For Hayles, “MSA moves from the language of ‘text’ to a more precise vocabulary of screen and page, digital program and analogue interface, code and ink, mutable image and durably inscribed mark, texton and scripton, computer and book” (69). Hayles’s thinking about media specificity offers an important indication of how the field can contribute to an examination of the “way ‘human users’ are actually formed—not just *as users* but also *as humans*—by their media” (Zylinksa and Kember, ch. 1). I hope this examination is part of what’s next for the field.

## Notes

1. See the two issues of *Biography: An Interdisciplinary Quarterly* on the subject of “Online Lives” (2003, 2015) for an indication of how rapidly the relationship between life writing and media studies has changed. Rak and I also consider the lack of integration of media studies perspectives in the field in the introduction to *Identity Technologies*.
2. “All ‘objects,’” Williams further explains, “and in this context notably works of art, are mediated by specific social relations but cannot be reduced to an abstraction of that relationship; the mediation is positive and in a sense autonomous” (206). For further extrapolation of the term mediation, see Chun; and van Dijck.
3. Morrison’s work on the affordances of the Facebook status prompt is one example of how life-writing scholars can pay attention to the complexity of mediation.

## Disclosure Statement

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