

.667363; Silvia Schultermundl, “Auto-Assembling the Self on Social Networking Sites: Intermediality and Transnational Kinship in Online Academic Life Writing,” in *Intermediality, Life Writing, and American Studies*, ed. Nassim W. Balestrini and Ina Bergmann (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2018), 191–210.

15 Friedman and Schultermundl, eds., “Autobiography 2.0.”

Intermedial and Transnational Hip-Hop Life Writing

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The growing popularity of celebrity life writing and of memoirs which focus on the respective memoirist’s specific social, professional, ethnic, or other context has also spawned a large number of autobiographical publications by persons in the music industry. The field of musical autobiography is a recent development for which a niche in life writing scholarship has only been carved out in the past decade. The growing number of autobiographical book publications as well as autobiographical self-representations in non-analog, non-printed, not primarily verbal formats raises the question as to whether specific genres of hip-hop life writing have been evolving and as to the perspectives from which scholars should discuss them.

Situating musicians’ life writing in general and hip-hop life writing in particular within the larger field of life writing studies poses multiple challenges. The asymmetrical power relation between a celebrity artist and her/his writer or editor in co-authored autobiographies, for example, sits uneasily with representing the artist/star through the lens of Enlightenment-style autobiographical discourse. Such discourse implies a narrative not only of social and economic upward mobility but also of a concomitant accumulation of knowledge and insight that the reader should emulate. Nevertheless, the Enlightenment autobiographical model is often used as a means of providing “high cultural legitimacy,”¹ particularly for artists in popular music genres.² A prominent example of a hip-hop artist’s memoir that takes up this challenge of not following a traditional formula is Ahmir “Questlove” Thompson’s *Mo’ Meta Blues* (2013),³ which includes multiple jabs at the traditional supremacy of the co-writer or editor and at the expectations regarding the stable-self narrative established by Enlightenment autobiography.⁴ As I discuss elsewhere, Questlove upends the often racially informed imbalance between autobiographical subject and representatives of mainstream publication contexts through a polyvocal narrative that privileges his life narration and his (written) exchanges with Richard Nichols, the former manager of Questlove’s group The Roots, on the one hand, and that gradually and humorously diminishes the role of his editor and a representative of his publisher whose email exchanges are interspersed into the main narrative. Eventually, the editor and the publisher’s representative admit that Questlove

effectively derailed traditional autobiographical formats and created his own version of life narrative based on his development as a musician and on his worldview.⁵ As a result, he challenges reading practices that expect autobiographical narratives to be monovocal and unidirectional.

Questlove's memoir, which relies on verbal narrative, assumes an intermedial strategy through visually perceivable differences of typesetting in order to indicate the interplay of voices (*Illustration 1*). He thus employs and interlaces verbal and visual means of processing his text. Other bestselling hip-hop autobiographies go far beyond typographical visual semantics and develop complex intermedial discourses in which the call-and-response between word and image creates a relational intermedial grammar. In the case of artists like Eminem and Jay Z, large-format book publications with myriad images, with text superimposed on images, and with numerous intermedial references to music call for analytical methods that acknowledge medium-specific affordances of meaning construction as well as the historical embeddedness of verbal life writing narratives and of the visual elements that share the semantic fields evoked in these texts. Such intermedial life writing not only transfers some of the components of hip hop into a book publication, but it also serves to elevate hip hop as an art form. Hip hop thus constitutes part of the subject matter because hip-hop artists' memoirs usually contain their philosophical approach to hip hop as a socially oriented art form; at the same time, hip hop offers new forms of self-expression that transcend hitherto prevailing autobiographical models.

For instance, Jay Z's *Decoded* (2010) features his rap lyrics accompanied by annotations regarding stylistic devices, literary, musical, and historical allusions, and autobiographical and political comments (*Illustration 2*).⁶ All of this is visually reminiscent of a scholarly edition of a poem or other work of art that is taken seriously as a long-standing artifact rather than an ephemeral performance. The emphasis on the creative process counteracts clichéd notions of popular music and of non-white self-expression as spontaneous, shallow, and not worthy of analysis.⁷ Similarly, Eminem's *The Way I Am* (2008) includes facsimiles of the lyricist's notebook pages, complete with captions that explain the contexts and thought processes of his creative work (*Illustration 3*).⁸ The same innovative and respectability-oriented impetus characterizes hip-hop memoirs, for instance by M. F. Grimm (Percy Carey) and 50 Cent,⁹ that opt for what Gillian Whitlock terms "autographics"¹⁰—that is, life writing in the form of graphic narratives.¹¹ As indicated, hip hop as subject matter and artistic form has been confronted with long traditions of prejudice. Autobiographical self-expression thus frequently takes up prejudicial perspectives and counteracts them by not simply adopting but rather adapting and revolutionizing life writing formats which used to be the prerogative of economically secure white men.

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We added up all these factors and came up with a battle plan for *Phrenology*, which was that we were going to make the world’s first anti-Roots Roots album. “We’ll make every type of song that the Roots aren’t supposed to do,” someone said, and that became our template.²¹

When we started to collect material for the album, some of it came from unfinished tracks from Tariq’s solo album, and for the rest, we relied on these extended jam sessions. Before we knew it we had a collection of songs that were as diverse and surprising as anything we had ever done. We had a cheesy R&B jam (“Break You Off”), a sexy strip song (“Pussy Galore”), a hardcore song (“!!!”), a twelve-minute antidrug screed (“Water”). We wanted to take the attention and goodwill we had generated with *Things Fall Apart* and present a catalog album of everything we were able to do. We wanted to shatter people’s myths, not only about what rap groups could do, but also about what black groups could do. And we wanted to show everyone that our main reason for being was to change. *Do You Want More?!?!?!?!?* was acid jazz, *Illadelph Halflife* was a kind of Wu-Tang-influenced hard hip-hop production, and *Things Fall Apart* was definitive neo soul. We were going into the cocoon again. I wasn’t worried about our audience. They would follow us or they wouldn’t—I was used to losing about half our audience each time and picking up new fans—but I was determined to extend our artistic winning streak.

21. Let’s face it—*Phrenology* (by design, and mostly out of necessity) was a mishmash. It was a reification of your state-of-the-minute (post D-tour) musical leanings grafted onto Tariq’s recalcitrant line in the sand *Masterpiece Theatre* (which, may I remind you, was itself a project he started because you went Michael Eugene Archering yellow-brick-road-style). It was a messy, circling-the-drain type of affair that ultimately revealed its own pretzel logic. But I guess good shit come to those who “weight,” or maybe Cracker Jack-like prizes can be found after things fall apart.

Illustration 1: Questlove’s *Mo’ Meta Blues* employs intermedial strategies to highlight the interplay of numerous voices.

Illustration from Ahmir “Questlove” Thompson and Ben Greenman, *Mo’ Meta Blues: The World According to Questlove* (New York: Grand Central Publishing, 2015), 194. Image used in accordance with Austrian copyright law pertaining to the use of images for critical commentary.

MOST KINGS

Inspired by Basquiat, my chariots of fire / Everybody took shots hit my body up I'm tired / Build me up, break me down, to build me up again / They like Hov we need you back so we can kill your ass again / Hov got flow though he's no Big and Pac but he's close / **How I'm supposed to win they got me fighting ghosts . . .¹ / Same sword they knight you they gonna good night you with² /** shit that's only half if they like you / That ain't he even the half what they might do / **Don't believe me ask Michael³ /** See Martin, see Malcolm / You see Biggie, see Pac, see success and its outcome / See Jesus, see Judas / **See Caesar, see Brutus⁴ /** See success is like suicide / **Suicide, it's a suicide⁵ /** If you succeed prepare to be crucified / Hmm, media meddles, niggas sue you, you settle / Every step you take they remind you, you ghetto / So it's tough being Bobby Brown / **To be Bobby then, you gotta be Bobby now⁶ /** **Now the question is, is to have had and lost / Better than not having at all⁷ /** **Everybody want to be the**



1. This is no shot at Big or Pac. The truth is that you can't compare us; Big only did two albums before he was killed, and Pac was still going through metamorphosis; who knows where he would've ended up. So when people make the comparison—as they always do—they're comparing my work not just with the work of Big and Pac, but with what they could've been—should've been—and what their lives and deaths represented to the entire culture. Their shadows still loom over all of us who were their peers.
2. I wanted to conjure an image here: someone kneeling, first to accept the honor of being knighted, and then being beheaded with the same sword, the posture of honor transformed to one of execution.
3. I wrote this before MJ died, and his death only proves my point: When he was alive, the King of Pop, people were tireless in taking him down, accepting as truth every accusation made

against him, assuming the worst until they drove him away. When he died, suddenly he was beloved again—people realized that the charges against him might really have been bogus, and that the skin lightening was really caused by a disease, and that his weirdness was part of his artistry. But when he was alive and on top, they couldn't wait to bring him down. (In my opinion sharing sleeping quarters with other people's kids is inappropriate, to keep it real.)

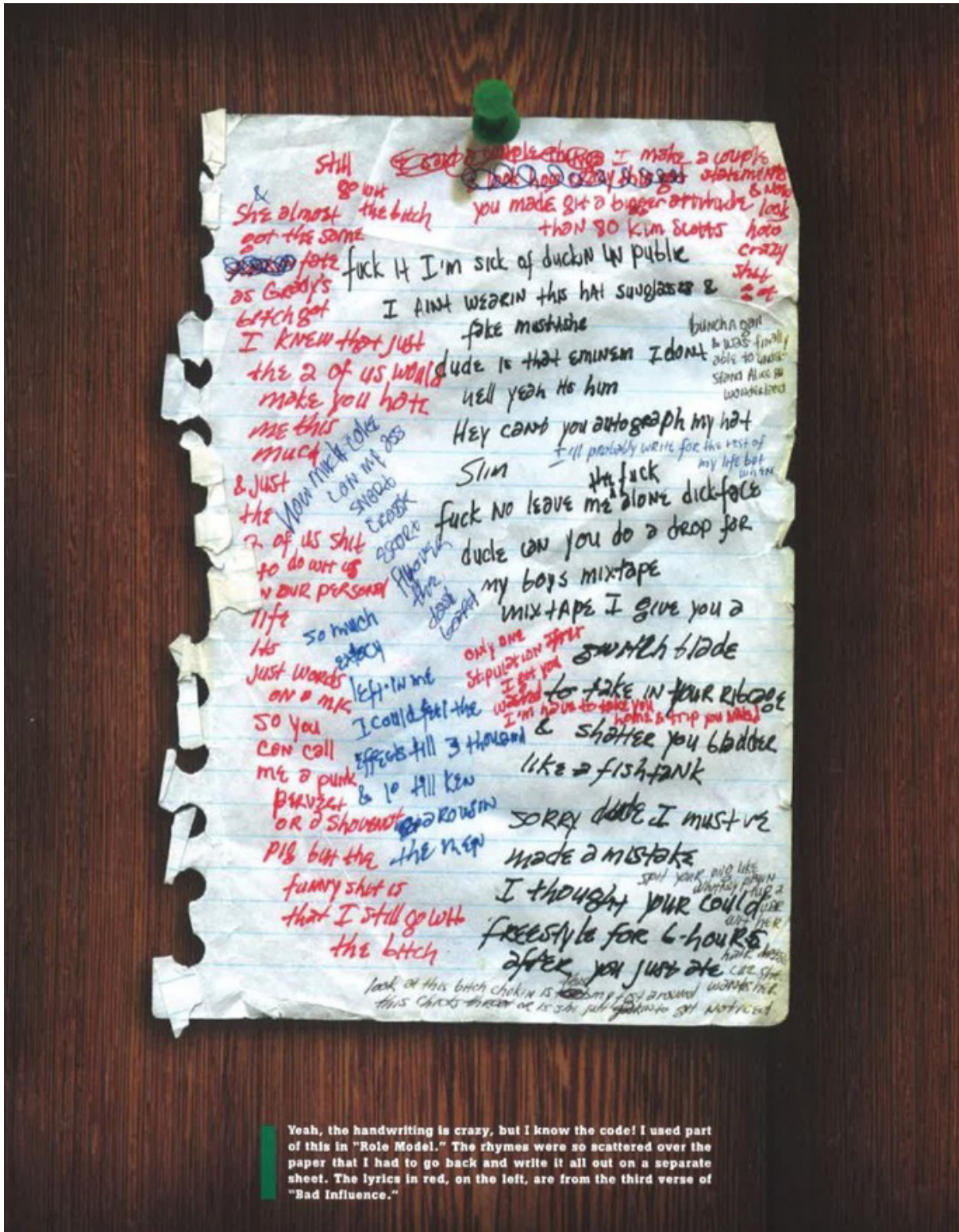
4. Jesus and Caesar were both killed by people close to them, traitors.
5. A reference to KRS-One and Just-Ice's eighties classic "Moshitup." *Buddy bye-bye!*
6. Bobby then was a young star when he was known for his hit record "Every Little Step"; Bobby now is better known for the hit reality series, *Being Bobby Brown*, a cautionary tale about how it can all slip away.
7. Shout-out to Alfred, Lord Tennyson: "'Tis better to have loved and lost, than to never have loved at all."



Illustration 2: *Decoded* emphasizes the creative process involved in the production of popular music. Illustration from Jay-Z, *Decoded*, exp. ed. (New York: Virgin Books/Spiegel and Grau/Random House, 2011), 98–9. Image used in accordance with Austrian copyright law pertaining to the use of images for critical commentary.

As hip hop is a globally practiced artistic form, transnational American studies offers further options for studying hip-hop life writing. Hip-hop artists' life writing predominately combines autobiographical narratives of personal growth through overcoming terrific obstacles and of emerging as a promoter of social justice with an explanation and defense of hip-hop culture and artistic production. In the US-American context, such success stories often take a detour through phases of poverty, racial discrimination, criminal activity, drug abuse, and the like. In addition to finding one's artistic self and defining one's positionality,¹² life writers find their way into a belief system in which to anchor their social activism.

In France, which constitutes the second-largest hip-hop market in the world, Abd Al Malik, a rapper of Congolese descent, published a memoir that was subsequently adapted for the screen and translated into English.¹³ This matrix of hip-hop practice and reception provides a good example of where transnational American studies concerns can come to fruition. Al Malik's narrative focuses on his experience of individuation through religious belief and through education. Sufism, a mystic movement within Islam, inspires him to work for reconciliation among Jews, Christians, and Muslims, and for human rights in general, while the narrative also expresses his



Yeah, the handwriting is crazy, but I know the code! I used part of this in "Role Model." The rhymes were so scattered over the paper that I had to go back and write it all out on a separate sheet. The lyrics in red, on the left, are from the third verse of "Bad Influence."

Illustration 3: The Way I Am explains the contexts and thought processes of Eminem’s creative work.

Illustration from Eminem, with Sacha Jenkins, designed by Headcase Design, *The Way I Am* (New York: Dutton/Penguin Books, 2008). Image used in accordance with Austrian copyright law pertaining to the use of images for critical commentary.

love for France as a country and a culture.

Because of his appreciation of a national culture that has a troubled relationship with immigrants, Abd Al Malik's life narrative raises the issue as to whether his autobiography primarily functions as an emblem of mainstream respectability or rather as a site of revolutionizing white supremacist Eurocentric discourses in a transnational context. Having been decorated with the distinction of Chevalier des Arts et des Lettres by the French minister for cultural affairs in 2008, Al Malik's public image of the "good rapper" who stabilizes the republic has been criticized as cooptation. In the United States, a parallel phenomenon exists in the context of using hip-hop artists, particularly rappers who identify as Muslims, for State Department-sponsored cultural diplomacy in Muslim nations although Muslims are not generally seen as well-integrated into society, be it in the United States or in France. This form of soft diplomacy goes back to the equally problematic Cold War policy of sending African American jazz musicians to Eastern European and Middle Eastern countries.

Within autobiographical traditions, however, Abd Al Malik's arguments that Sufism is the heart of Islam that transcends hatred and Othering, that it allows him to be a musician, and that it has had a liberating effect echoes some of Malcolm X's experiences with international Islam as a global community devoid of racism. Simultaneously, Al Malik depicts his allegiance to France in terms of a specific understanding of what the republic stands for: the country he loves is not homogeneous but it is a republic that embraces the full range of religious and other belief systems.¹⁴ He thus suggests that the laicism of the French political system is not to be seen as anti-religious or as exclusively Western in the Judeo-Christian sense, but that it implies the freedom to develop individual notions of selfhood. In contrast to those who rebuke Al Malik as having sold out to French assimilationist policies, his autobiography can be read as an appeal to renew allegiance to the original ideals of the French republic—a strategy that resonates with African American life writing traditions.

A transnational approach to hip-hop life writing allows for comparative research on potentially reciprocal flows of influence. Both in France and in the United States, hip-hop autobiographers face the same dilemmas: their complex understanding of national political ideology and of individual beliefs may be represented in a reductive fashion as a result of the clichéd and financially profitable ways in which they—as popular music celebrities—are portrayed by mass-market media. Their critics may not appreciate their programmatic statements regarding systemic problems in their countries and on a global level when it comes to discrimination on the basis of religion, race, and class. As soon as a rapper becomes a celebrity, particularly through receiving decorations and prizes, the artist struggles with accusations of cooptation, lack of subversion and authenticity, and adherence to neoliberal positions.

Further work needs to be done on how particular rappers who identify as Muslims present themselves as both dedicated religious believers and dedicated members of a nation, even though post-9/11 rhetoric frequently implies that this particular combination is a contradiction in terms. Their predicament is thus emblematic for hip-hop life writing and musicians' life writing in a wider sense, as the current cultural valences of an artist's genre and performance contexts tend to impact what kinds of life writing may be regarded as marketable to a specific readership.

Notes

- 1 Daniel Stein and Martin Butler, "Musical Autobiographies: An Introduction," in "Musical Autobiographies," ed. Daniel Stein and Martin Butler, special issue, *Popular Music and Society* 38, no. 2 (2015): 116–7, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03007766.2014.994324>.
- 2 For a discussion of the economic implications of celebrity life writing, see Julie Rak, *Boom! Manufacturing Memoir for the Popular Market* (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2013), 6–7, 12, 16.
- 3 Ahmir "Questlove" Thompson and Ben Greenman, *Mo' Meta Blues: The World According to Questlove* (2013; New York: Grand Central Publishing, 2015).
- 4 Stein and Butler, "Musical Autobiographies," 115.
- 5 Nassim Winnie Balestrini, "Hip Hop Life Writing: An Intermedial Challenge to Essentialist Reading Practices," in *Oxford Handbook of Hip Hop Music Studies*, ed. Justin Burton and Jason Lee Oakes (New York: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).
- 6 Jay-Z, *Decoded*, expanded ed. (2010; New York: Virgin Books/Spiegel and Grau/Random House, 2011).
- 7 Regarding the stereotype of non-white artistic self-expression as "untrained," "natural," "mimetic," and thus not really valuable, see Stuart Hall, "What Is 'Black' in Black Popular Culture?" *Social Justice* 20, nos. 1–2 (1993): 104–14, repr. in *Popular Culture*, vol. 3, ed. Michael Pickering (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2010), 443; Berndt Ostendorf, "Celebration or Pathology? Commodity or Art? The Dilemma of African-American Expressive Culture," *Black Music Research Journal* 20, no. 2 (2000): 217–36, <https://doi.org/10.2307/779468>, repr. in *Popular Culture*, vol. 3, ed. Michael Pickering (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2010), 385–402.
- 8 Eminem, with Sacha Jenkins, designed by Headcase Design, *The Way I Am* (New York: Dutton/Penguin Books, 2008). For a more extensive discussion, see Nassim Winnie Balestrini, "Strategic Visuals in Hip-Hop Life Writing," in "Musical Autobiographies," ed. Daniel Stein and Martin Butler, special issue, *Popular Music and Society* 38, no. 2 (2015): 224–42, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03007766.2014.994318>; Nassim Winnie Balestrini, "Hip-Hop Life Writing and African American Urban Ecology," in *America after Nature*, ed. Catrin Gersdorf and Juliane Braun (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2016), 287–307.
- 9 Percy Carey, writer, Ronald Wimberly, artist, Lee Loughridge, gray tones, and Jared K. Fletcher, letters, *Sentences: The Life of M. F. Grimm* (New York: DC Comics, 2007); 50 Cent and Robert Greene, writers, and Dave Crossland, illustrator, *The 50th Law* (San Jose, CA: SmarterComics, 2012).

- 10 Gillian Whitlock, "Autographics: The Seeing 'I' of the Comics," in "Graphic Narrative," ed. Hillary Chute and Marianne DeKoven, special issue, *Modern Fiction Studies* 52, no. 4 (2006): 965–79.
- 11 Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives* (2001; Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 260; Balestrini, "Hip Hop Life Writing: An Intermedial Challenge."
- 12 Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography*, 215.
- 13 Abd Al Malik, *Sufi Rapper: The Spiritual Journey of Abd Al Malik*, trans. Jon E. Graham (Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions, 2009).
- 14 Jeanette S. Jouili, "Rapping the Republic: Utopia, Critique, and Muslim Role Models in Secular France," *French Politics, Culture & Society* 31, no. 2 (2013): 64.

Postcolonial and Transoceanic Life Writing

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The study of life writing and postcolonial theory have had a long, intimate, and mutually constitutive relationship. The desire to more comprehensively understand the (human) subjectivities of the (formerly) colonized through (their own) cultural expression has driven life writing scholars to significantly expand their canon and their scholarly methods. The human and the non-human are onto-social conditions imposed on colonized and enslaved peoples. In the context of transoceanic studies, various conditions of unfreedom can be found which call attention to the prevalence of lives deemed non-human within the parameters of European Enlightenment. Substantial advances notwithstanding, the field is still grappling with what Lisa Lowe describes as the "economy of affirmation and forgetting that structures and formalizes the archives of liberalism."¹ This short piece contends that recently emerging (trans-)oceanic approaches hold great potential for taking the study of life writing an important step further on its way beyond the liberal economy of affirmation and forgetting.

For postcolonial theorists, the type of liberal Enlightenment thinking, writing, and feeling that dominated early autobiography studies was not—or not only—emancipatory but "commensurate with, and deeply implicated in, colonialism, slavery, capitalism, and empire."² They claim that Western modernity can only be understood if the presumably rational, sovereign, and authentic subject of autobiography (usually Western, gendered as masculine, and racialized as white) is connected with "the less exalted or collective subject of life narrative."³ For this purpose, the field of life writing studies has expanded its object of study to include all "writing that takes a life, one's own or another's, as its subject."⁴ Owing to the work of these scholars, cultural expressions such as slave narratives have now been part of the canon for decades.