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Lesbian Autobiography and Memoir

Gertrude Stein's *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (1933) is emblematic of lesbian autobiography, if not typical. It is not typical in that although it obeys most of the generic conventions of autobiography, it is written in the voice of another: it is *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* by Gertrude Stein. Further, Alice B. Toklas is not just another person, not just *not* Gertrude Stein, she is Gertrude Stein's life partner, lover – wife. They are buried together in Père Lachaise cemetery. Although it follows the “I was born” trope of autobiography by starting with Alice's early life, it dispatches with this information in a brief initial paragraph, in the very short first chapter, “Before I Came to Paris,” suggesting that Alice's life truly began on “My Arrival in Paris,” the title of the second chapter. Indeed, the first chapter covers all of Alice's life before she meets Gertrude Stein, ending with a long paragraph that is already a prologue to that life with Gertrude. It describes at some length how she came to make Stein's acquaintance and notes how “in this way my new full life began.”¹

Unusual as this “autobiography” is, it does what other lesbian autobiographies do: disobey the conventional rules of autobiography. Stein does it by writing the life of her lover in her lover's voice and from her point of view, as well as by extension turning an autobiography into the story of a couple, not of one person.² She links them, marries them, as it were – an act of course impossible at that time – by making their voices indistinguishable: they speak interchangeably. Many other lesbian autobiographies mess with the rules, as in the case of Audre Lorde's *Zami* (1982), which she calls not an autobiography but a biomythography.³ These variations on the form suggest that the extant genre, the available parameters, of autobiography will not do for lesbians. Generic disruption may in fact be the most prevalent distinguishing characteristic of lesbian memoir or autobiography, although this maverick take on the genre assumes different forms throughout the centuries. There are two ostensible reasons that lesbian memoirs resist generic conventions: sometimes lesbian lives do not fit into the available narrative

structures and strictures and, therefore, writers need to invent their own, and sometimes writers deliberately break the rules. These reasons are not always clearly discernible.

Beginning with one of the earliest examples of lesbian autobiography, we encounter what will become recurrent generic challenges. A fragment by Sappho presents what might be considered a lesbian exchange:

I have not heard one word from her
Frankly I wish I were dead
When she left, she wept

A great deal; she said to me, "This parting must be
endured, Sappho. I go unwillingly."

I said, "go, and be happy
but remember (you know
well) whom you leave shackled by love."⁴

The reasons for considering this an example of "lesbian autobiography" are, ostensibly, straightforward: it is written by a woman, in a first person, nonfictional voice; it is personal – that is, it addresses an episode in the life of the writer – and it is written about another woman in a longing, romantic, or sexual way. But as Bidy Martin suggests at the beginning of her 1988 essay on this very subject, "No theoretical reading of 'lesbian autobiography' can fail to take up the question of the category itself."⁵ Indeed every term and category here – "woman," "romantic," "sexual," even "personal," not to mention "autobiography" and "memoir" – invites contestation and scrutiny.

In this case, a poem is never understood necessarily to fulfill the terms of the personal. Poetry, like prose fiction, may be written in the first person, without being assumed to be in the voice of or about the life of the author, even when the protagonist shares the writer's very name; however, in such cases – as in Sappho's fragment – it is often a clue that we are reading a roman (or poème) à clef, a fictional or fictionalized version of the truth. Whether there can be truer versions of the truth, which are not fiction or fictionalized, is another contested issue about memoir and autobiography: all writing after all is mediated, constructed, crafted; this is not a contestation particular to lesbian life writing, although disguising "truths" or constructing "fictions" might be particularly important to a writer concerned about the dangerous or taboo subject of same-sex desire.

A particularly fruitful genre for finding the writing of lesbian lives is not only in poetry that might be passionately or intimately addressed to another woman but also in the even further distilled version of that exchange: letters.

And indeed, sometimes poems and letters are not always easily distinguishable. Emily Dickinson wrote passionate poems and what are thought to be love letters to her sister-in-law Susan Huntington Gilbert Dickinson, or “letter-poems” (“a category that includes signed poems and letters with poems or with lines of poetry”⁶). “Oh Susie,” Emily writes to Sue in February 1852 in a letter recognizable as a letter: “I would nestle close to your warm heart, and never hear the wind blow, or the storm beat, again.”⁷ In the mid-1860s, Dickinson wrote a similar sentiment in a letter-poem:

Sweet Sue,
...
 for the Woman
whom I prefer,
Here is Festival –
When my hands
are Cut, Her
fingers will be
found inside –
Our beautiful Neighbor
'moved' in May –
It leaves an
Unimportance.
Take the Key to
the Lily, now, and
I will lock the Rose –⁸

Gertrude Stein wrote regularly to her companion Alice B. Toklas in a similar conflation of poem and letter. Here we have one of many examples:

Baby precious
The stars are bright and I love
my baby, I made lots of literature
and I loved my baby I am going to
bed and I love my baby, ...⁹

And yet another early scribe of fervent letters and poems is the African American writer Angelina Weld Grimké. In 1896, Grimké's friend Mamie Burrill asks in a letter, “Angie, do you love me as you used to?” Sixteen-year-old Grimké replies:

Oh Mamie if you only knew how my heart beats when I think of you and it yearns and pants to gaze, if only for one second upon your lovely face... I hope, darling, that in a few years you will come to me and be my love, my wife! How my brain whirls how my pulse leaps with joy and madness when I think of those two words, “my wife.”¹⁰

Grimké later penned what we might understand to be a more public version of this private passionate sentiment in the poem “Rosabel”:

Rose whose heart unfolds red petaled
Quick her slow heart's stir;
Tell her white, gold, red my love is;
And for her, – for her.¹¹

Like the coupling, or marriage, that is constructed by Gertrude Stein’s “autobiography” of her lover, the imputed exchange of these letter-poems sustains a courtship, in a more public form than is experienced and played out in private. The language is more elided and circumspect, but the sentiments are often underwritten by what we find in the personal letters.

Letters and journals, or diaries, provide two categories of life writing that we might see as more straightforward and less contested than other forms and genres. We might take the authenticity and veracity of letters and diaries as more likely, even certain. Invention pervades letters and diaries, of course, but a narrative is not being formulated in the same way – or is not thought to be. In times of homosexual oppression and stigma, however, even the most private writings might be censored, coded, elided, or repressed: the history of lesbian autobiography is a history of elision.

Anne Lister, a nineteenth-century Yorkshire landowner, boldly claimed her desires in her diaries but nevertheless wrote the more romantic and intimate portions of her diary in code. Helena Whitbread discovered, in the 1980s, that among Lister’s accounts of a “rigorous programme of intellectual study, the purchase of a horse and gig, days out at the races, accounts of petty squabbling of the provincial gentry” were to be found accounts “in a cipher of her own devising [of] her passionate love affairs with other women.”¹² On July 13, 1822, Lister confides to her diary: “Two kisses [Lister’s code for ‘orgasm’] last night, one almost immediately after the other, before we went to sleep.... Felt better, but was so shockingly low last night I cried bitterly but smothered it so that M – scarcely knew of it. At any rate, she took no notice, wisely enough.”¹³ Lister’s coded writings serve as a more obvious historical example of the ways that women with passions for women were compelled to write about their feelings but went to some trouble to disguise or elide their expression.

In plundering troves of personal writing for lesbian life stories, we are confronted with the rarity of more overtly expressed texts. The “Great Man” genre of autobiography was inaccessible to women generally, and really to anyone who was not considered important enough to write his life story; however, lesbians had additional reasons for caution and circumspection. Even letters, which seem to be the most unmediated of writing – they

are presumably privately addressed to one other reader – might be disguised in a world where women’s same-sex passions are considered deranged, or not considered at all, in what we now refer to as “lesbian invisibility.” In other words, for all the writing that can be decoded and interpreted in the light of increased lesbian *visibility*, there is still all the writing that we do not have: either because such writing is inscrutable to our interpretive gaze – there are codes that remain unbroken and codes that we perhaps do not even recognize as codes – or because, for all the reasons of fear and stigma, it was never written.

Another “disguise” historically for lesbianism is heterosexuality. Even if letters and diaries as archives of lesbian desires seem relatively uncomplicated as documents, we still have the contested term lesbian, for many of these declarations of ardor are expressed by otherwise married women. So we might say that the declarations and the passions are lesbian if not (necessarily) the declarative individuals.

Virginia Woolf, for example, long married to Leonard Woolf, writes to Vita Sackville-West, wife of Harold Nicolson, on January 3, 1929: “Do you really love me? Much? passionately not reasonably?”¹⁴ Vita writes to Virginia on January 21, 1926: “I am reduced to a thing that wants Virginia.”¹⁵ Further, we know from Adrienne Rich, among other theorists, that lesbian desire might exist on a continuum, whereby passionate friendships between women can be understood in the same light as more sexual and romantic feelings between women.¹⁶

On one end of the continuum, correspondences like that between Sylvia Townsend Warner and Valentine Ackland readily convey that these women were engaged in a lifelong romance: there is little decoding or speculation necessary to discern the intimacy of their relationship. On December 18, 1968, Warner writes to Ackland:

Thirty-eight years ago I brought you a little bunch of herbs when you lay ill in a large bed with Sir Walter Raleigh and a tortoise. In all those years, my dearest, I have never doubted your love, nor my own.... You are my faith, I will live and die in it.¹⁷

Their exclusive commitment to one another is assumed, in part, because when they were together neither of them was married to a man. However, in the case of many married women whose same-sex intimacies are available to lesbian readings, it is precisely the letters, however guarded some of them still might seem (or published with an editorial policy of obscuring lesbian love), that commend them to the archive of lesbian life writing. The examples are myriad and include correspondences between Janet Flanner and Natalia Danesi Murray, collected in Natalia’s record of their nearly

lifelong relationship as reflected in their transatlantic correspondence, *Darlinghissima*. On May 31, 1946, Flanner writes to Murray:

Oh, my fine, intelligent, good, darling friend, my true and sweet generous friend, I send you over the ocean like a cloud moving from this continent to you, on whatever pavement you are standing or in whatever address with its particular chair where you are sitting, I send you my heart beat, my head beat, my beating of my soul against time.¹⁸

A writer whose circumspection has made it challenging to read lesbian desire is Elizabeth Bishop, who spent many years in Brazil with the woman she met there and with whom she fell in love – Lota de Macedo Soares. There are few letters between them or indeed about their romance and relationship. Although Bishop is among the most guarded of these lesbian letter writers, her poem “The Shampoo” (1955), is thought to be an intimate invitation to wash Lota’s hair. It ends:

The shooting stars
in your black hair
in bright formation
are flocking where,
so straight, so soon?
– Come, let me wash it in this big tin basin
battered and shiny like the moon.¹⁹

However unrevealing this poem might seem to us, Bishop refrained from publishing it, and any others that show intimacy or passion (like the very sensuous one that begins “[i]t is marvellous to wake up together”), in her lifetime.

Similarly, Willa Cather, whose recently published letters shed little light on the vexed question of her sexual orientation, now is generally agreed to be lesbian but not with any proof.²⁰ May Sarton’s *Journal of a Solitude* (1973) and other journals written for publication are examples of texts that can be reread in the light of later disclosure. Perhaps even without that, a canny reader can tell that “X” and “Z” who inspire (they are her “muses”) and torment her are facile codes for lesbian lovers: “All summer I have been wavering before the decision that has been slowly ripening in me that the time has come to break away from X,” and “This book is less and more than I had imagined it might be. But it could not have been written without all that X gave me, nor, for that matter, without what was lacking between us.”²¹ We could let these writers whose guardedness did not finally obscure the reality of their lives – that they were passionately involved with women – stand in for the many whose lives we might still not be able to decode or read as lesbian.

Among the lives that are easier to read as lesbian, we still have those whose legibility may be obscured by the *ordinariness* of lives intertwined over time. While ardor is persuasive in some correspondences, so is – perhaps more so, if less exciting to encounter – the dailiness of love and life. For example, the letters between H.D. and Bryher are not particularly passionate; nevertheless they attest to the prosaic aspects of their lives together when they exchange shopping lists while employing their pet names for each other. “Kat darling,” Bryher writes to H.D.:

75 trees for lining drive
 900 bulbs anemones, gladiolus, liliiums for garden
 2 cases grass seeds for lawns, in different varieties (shade, terrace, lawn, slope)
 1 parcel special bulbs
 1 fruit trees, thrift etc.²²

Although Bryher’s memoir, *The Heart to Artemis* (1962), is not at all revealing about her personal alliances, it nevertheless provides this lovely moment describing her first encounter with H.D.:

The door opened and I started in surprise. I had seen the face before, on a Greek statue or in some indefinable territory of the mind. We were meeting again after a long absence but not for the first time. “Won’t you come in?” The voice had a birdlike quality that was nearer to song than to speech. There was a bowl of wild flowers on the table, another pile of books on a chair. We sat down and looked at each other or, more correctly, I stared.²³

In turn, H.D.’s 1956 autobiography is an account of her psychoanalysis with Freud and mentions her lover only briefly in a nearly Steinian aside: “[A]nyone who knows me knows who this person is. Her pseudonym is Bryher and we call her Bryher.”²⁴

It becomes clear that lesbian lives have tended to be discovered or revealed rather than declared. Among the decidedly lesbian manuscripts that were probably never intended for publication is, for example, Vita Sackville-West’s frank account of her affair with Violet Trefusis, posthumously revealed and made popular when her son published the manuscript in *A Portrait of a Marriage* (1973).²⁵

Another more recent journal writer, whose posthumous publications provide glimpses of private lesbian desires, is Susan Sontag. On January 12, 1958, Sontag records:

Friday night, a mediocre *Der Rosenkavalier*, I, alone, riding the crest of erotic fantasy, the tide of the familiar gorgeous music.... Met H [Harriet Sohmers Zwerling] at the [Cafe] Flore afterwards, and had 5 or so whiskeys at the club St. Germain and the Tabou. Not stupefied drunk, but enough to get with the

so-so jazz we were hearing at the St. Germain, and with the superb sex we had near dawn, in bed.²⁶

Such ardent avowals are nuggets of ore suggesting the “true” passions of a writer or historical figure, and there are more to unearth among the letters of Emma Goldman, Radclyffe Hall, and Eleanor Roosevelt.²⁷ Not all lesbian life writing is as straightforward as this, and not because it is as or more coded than Lister’s, but because the genres employed beyond letters and diaries to construct and convey lesbian desire complicate the terms and genres. If autobiography as a genre has several recognizable parameters and characteristics, lesbian autobiography has a history of both adhering to and playing with those parameters and rules – sometimes in the same text. The story of lesbian memoir and autobiography is the story of exceptions.

One “alternative” to the straightforward lesbian autobiography is the roman à clef, the novel that may or may not be “true,” which is based on real events in the life of the author. And it may be unclear whether the masquerade is artistic, playful, or cloaked, particularly because of the impossibility of declaring the truth of one’s desires and experiences. A modernist example is Djuna Barnes’ nearly inscrutable text *Ladies Almanack* (1928), about which Daniela Caselli explains in an afterword titled, “The Unreadable Pleasures of *Ladies Almanack*”: “Mostly following the indications of Natalie Barney’s and Janet Flanner’s annotated copies, the almanac has been read as a *roman à clef*.”²⁸ For example:

Among such Dames of which we write, were two British Women. One was called Lady Buck-and-Balk, and the other plain Tilly-Tweed-In-Blood. Lady Buck-and-Balk sported a Monocle and believed in Spirits. Tilly-Tweed-In-Blood sported a Stetson, and believed in Marriage. They came to the Temple of the Good Dame Musset, and they sat down to Tea, and this is what they said: “Just because woman falls, in this Age, to Woman, does that mean we are not to recognize Morals? What has England done to legalize these Passions? Nothing!”²⁹

If we are able to read Una Troubridge, Radclyffe Hall, and Natalie Barney, respectively, as the strangely named characters in this story, then an inscrutable text starts to make sense as a playful gesture toward lesbian representation, making figures visible but still obscurely peculiar. Further, by making it so hard to discern who is who or even what is happening, Barnes’s text suggests not only that literary representation or “visibility” does not elucidate the particulars of lesbian lives but also that any straightforward representation of such a life would simply reproduce, as its flipside, what is already known and normative. Lesbian lives cannot simply be *revealed*: there needs to be a new language to understand or express them.

The late twentieth century brought a purposeful antidote to earlier secrets and codes: autobiographical accounts that were meant intentionally to break the silence and fill in the invisibility of lesbians. The most significant of these texts, for the purposes of this account, is *The Coming Out Stories*, published in 1980. *The Coming Out Stories* were exemplary for the ways they distilled the genre and tropes of life writing. These stories variously declared the awareness of or the courage to speak of one's true, essential, discovered sexuality. As Biddy Martin puts it:

Many of the coming-out stories are tautological insofar as they describe a process of coming to know something that has always been true, a truth to which the author has returned. They also describe a linear progression from a past shrouded in confusion or lies to a present or future that represents a liberation from the past. Coming out is conceived, then, as both a return to one's true self and desire and a movement beyond distortion and constraint, grounding identity and political unity in moral right and truth.³⁰

For example, one author writes: "I first realized I was a Lesbian in 1968 when I was 26 years old. I had always known that I loved, was attracted to, was comfortable with women, but before the Women's Movement I didn't have a word for someone who felt those feelings."³¹ Another admits: "I was perfectly sure I was a lesbian at the age of sixteen (although I would not have used that term to designate myself), but I managed conveniently albeit nervously to forget that fact until I was twenty-nine."³² Another comments: "It confuses me now to find out that I wasn't nearly as naïve as I'd remembered, that I knew I was a lesbian two years earlier than I'd remembered."³³ As these comments indicate, the transformation often centers on naming oneself as a lesbian, and putting that label to previously recognized desires. "Hence, many writers claim to be (re)born to a new self when they identify as lesbian, and hence they assert an essential ... and a constructed self."³⁴ Some might say that every autobiography, every story of the self turned into a narrative, is of the "I once was lost and now I'm found" variety. The coming-out story certainly follows this model. This volume was one of several anthologies that emerged at this time that applied a political intent to the articulation of the personal as a political act. "Personal writing, in other words," writes Margaretta Jolly "has been part of queer psychological survival and self-definition, and in recent years, crucial to political liberation."³⁵

Some of the significant anthologies of, or containing, lesbian life writing that emerged at this time were *This Bridge Called My Back* (1981), *Nice Jewish Girls* (1982), and *Home Girls* (1983). We might include the 1983 *Powers of Desire*, a collection of scholarly essays, personal essays, and poetry – which includes the conversation between Amber Hollibaugh and

Cherríe Moraga, “What We’re Rollin Around in Bed With” – and the 1984 collection of three essays by Elly Bulkin, Barbara Smith, and Minnie Bruce Pratt, *Yours in Struggle: Three Feminist Perspectives on Anti-Semitism and Racism*.³⁶ The thrust of these anthologies is that women’s marginalized sexual, racial, and ethnic identities cannot be separated: they are conflated, connected, indivisible. These anthologies, along with *The Coming Out Stories*, emerged in the immediate aftermath of the feminist development of, and investment in, consciousness-raising groups.

In the late 1960s and through the 1970s the Women’s Liberation Movement, specifically the group New York Radical Women, generated consciousness-raising groups in which women would gather together in small groups to express and share experiences and feelings. This had many purposes and effects: chiefly, it allowed women to see that they were not alone, that many of the travails of the private sphere were in fact tribulations that were common among women. This had the result of empowering women to see their situations politically, rather than as a result of specific, individual, or idiosyncratic circumstances. From this recognition of common personal experience and its necessary and obvious collision with the public sphere came the feminist slogan, “the personal is political.” The requirements of the consciousness-raising group – “a high degree of honesty about intimate matters in front of relative strangers” – is a useful description of the confessional personal accounts that emerged during this time.³⁷ Susan Brownmiller comments, “We expected that the pooled information would clear our heads and lead to analysis and theory, and it did.”³⁸

If *The Coming Out Stories* marks the quintessence of lesbian autobiography – perhaps even autobiography in general – it is contemporaneous with, and also anticipates, another constellation, if not genre, of lesbian autobiography: the lesbian memoir of liberation. Some of these were published at the same time as *The Coming Out Stories*; others, published later, reflect back to this time of change and liberation. The memoir functions in both cases as a political text for both enacting and recording the political historical moment.

Collecting the life writing of ordinary women, these volumes intentionally give voice and visibility to those otherwise invisible and disenfranchised. This political act in turn violates another code of life writing: that only the preeminent have lives worth recording and voices worth hearing. “The personal is political” is not only reflected on but enacted here, suggesting that the stories of ordinary lives are as important to tell as those of autobiographers of higher status. Anticipating these collections and manifestos, *Our Bodies, Ourselves* is an important political example of the ordinary woman given a voice in print.³⁹ Other texts that give

voice to women who are not otherwise renowned include collections such as *Inventing Ourselves: Lesbian Life Stories* (1989) and *Between Us: A Legacy of Lesbian Love Letters* (1996).⁴⁰ Several anthologies giving voice to women during the AIDS crisis include lesbian autobiographical perspectives, for example, *AIDS: The Women* (1988) and *Positively Women* (1992).⁴¹

Other writing that anticipates and also might be said partly to initiate these first-person personal feminist texts are Kate Millett's nearly stream of consciousness books that were provoked by, accompany, and personally comment on her important scholarly text, *Sexual Politics* (1970). As Millett retrospectively comments on her 1974 autobiographical work, *Flying*: "*Sexual Politics* was dogma, but *Flying* is an attempt at praxis."⁴² Millett describes the text's tenor and content in her 1990 preface:

Flying is a strenuous effort to live one's conviction to the letter, to watch and keep track, thus its self-conscious awareness of each moment, its rigorous praxis, its reckless assurance, its aura of discovery and conversion, its necessary belief in friendship and art, its determination to find another, better way to live, its obsessiveness, even at the end its frenzy to escape living in a book.⁴³

Millett wrote many first-person personal books to follow, including the heart wrenching *Sita* (1976), about her love affair with a capricious older woman, and *The Loony Bin Trip* (1990), about her experience with manic depression and institutionalization.⁴⁴

There are many texts that reflect and comment on that same moment of second-wave feminism. These are not all political in the same way: they are not all trying to claim voice and visibility, but they are parsing and analyzing that time and, importantly, recording it. Here we have Millett explaining the function of the look backward:

Right now the thing is just to get [*Flying*] back into print – it's been unobtainable for three years – and there's a whole generation of young women into whose hands I want to put this book, like a vade mecum; if not a little manual on how to live, at least a record of how my generation of women tried to invent our lives. Just a moment ago when things were fresh and open.⁴⁵

Another example of the political look back is Jane Gallop's 1997 *Feminist Accused of Sexual Harassment*, which is not only an explanation of her case – "I am a feminist professor who was accused by two students of sexual harassment" – but also a reflection on her emerging feminist consciousness: "Thanks to feminism. Not only did I become a better student, but my sex life improved."⁴⁶ In a further example, Karla Jay writes:

During the fall of 1969 my life became a whirlwind of activity. Weekdays I worked a full-time job at Collier's; two evenings per week I attended

graduate classes. I was still involved in my Redstockings consciousness-raising group, which continued to meet weekly. Then, as if I didn't have enough to do, I joined the Gay Liberation Front.⁴⁷

Another look back is Terry Castle's long essay "The Professor" (2010) in which she recalls – through an occasion of extreme embarrassment that bleeds into nostalgia, listening to Women's Music, of the Alix Dobkin, *Lavender Jane Loves Women* variety from back in the day – an early emergence into lesbianism and feminist consciousness out of the fire of an affair with a university professor.⁴⁸ These texts underwrite the notion that lesbian autobiography is still political, that even a moment of nostalgia or memory, of the kind that anyone might have, is indulged and deployed in the spirit of feminism.⁴⁹

Beyond lesbian feminist politics, there are other contexts for understanding the ways in which the expression of lesbian lives skews the available literary genres. The New Journalism of the 1960s and 1970s brought forth the genre of autobiographical essays. The *Village Voice* was a central organ for such writers, including Blanche McCrary Boyd and Jill Johnston, the author of *Lesbian Nation* (1973).⁵⁰ Important examples of autobiographical essays that followed include those of Joan Nestle. In *A Restricted Country* (1987), she explains the political benefits and necessities of erotic writing: "Erotic writing is as much a documentary as any biographical display. Fantasies, the markings of the erotic imagination, fill in the earth beneath the movement of great social forces: they tell deep tales of endurance and reclamation. They are people's most private historic territory."⁵¹

Following the early 1980s anthologies of writing by women of multiple marginal identities, later lesbian autobiographical writing continues to insist on the communal and community as integral aspects of the self. Amber Hollibaugh describes her collection of autobiographical essays published in 2000 as "the products of my dialogues with many people in many communities."⁵² Not all contemporary lesbian life writing is political in precisely this way, of course. Furthermore, although the move from private writing in the form of journals and letters, to lesbian feminist life writing that takes all individual lesbian lives to be forged by and within community, to more generically stable expressions of a lesbian life is not unproblematically chronological, it nevertheless marks historical shifts from lesbian invisibility to lesbian visibility. Looked at this way, we might note that the political lesbian memoirs are not only accounts of making the personal political but also part of the political arsenal that made it so.

More recent lesbian autobiographies that do not meddle with the form – and perhaps do not need to – include those by Jackie Kay, Jeanette Winterson, and Alison Bechdel.⁵³ That these are not strictly declarations of

lives but searches for and attempts to understand parents suggest that the genre stabilizes when something else besides lesbianism itself is at stake. Saying that, Bechdel uses not only the comic form to convey the details of her life but also the recursive form, told out of order. Also, both Kay and Winterson have previously attempted to express similar stories more fictionally: Jackie Kay's *The Adoption Papers* (1991) is a volume of poems that tells in verse what she will go on to narrate more extensively in *Red Dust Road* (2010), her book describing her search for her birth parents.⁵⁴ Jeanette Winterson's 2011 *Why Be Happy When You Can Be Normal?* (the question her adoptive mother asks her when Jeanette comes out to her) is considered to be a more candid account of the same story recounted in her first novel, *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* (1985).⁵⁵ Similarly, Dorothy Allison's novel *Bastard Out of Carolina* (1992), considered to be "semi-autobiographical," is followed by more uncomplicated autobiographical writings in Allison's collection of essays, *Skin* (1994), and her book *Two or Three Things I Know for Sure* (1995).⁵⁶ Rita Mae Brown and Lisa Alther, both authors of influential early lesbian novels of the American south – *Rubyfruit Jungle* (1973) and *Kinflicks* (1976), respectively – wrote memoirs, perhaps similarly clarifying some of the fictions of their novels.⁵⁷ Although more generically sound lesbian autobiographies have recently emerged, there is still contestation and elements of inscrutability in the forms deployed to express lesbian lives. Categories that seem to stretch or exceed the parameters of lesbian autobiography are those that, respectively, challenge the term lesbian or the term autobiography.

In this regard, transgender writing particularly stretches and complicates sex/gender categories, including the category of lesbian. Leslie Feinberg writes in *Transgender Warriors* (1996), "I've been called a he-she, butch, bulldagger, cross-dresser, passing woman, female-to-male transvestite, and drag king.... When I was born in 1949, the doctor confidently declared, 'It's a girl.' That might have been the last time anyone was so sure."⁵⁸ The protagonist Jess Goldberg in Feinberg's important novel, *Stone Butch Blues* (1993) – another likely roman à clef – is Jewish and working class, mirroring what has emerged as the details of Feinberg's life.⁵⁹ Other transgender memoirs include those of the doyenne of trans life writing: Kate Bornstein, who writes about her life in her first book *Gender Outlaw* (1994) and then in more detail in *A Queer and Pleasant Danger* (2012) (in a prologue detailing her many transgressions in the imagined eyes of her estranged daughter, she writes, "Right, I'm a dyke on top of all this"); Jennifer Finney Boylan, *She's Not There* (2003) (whose wife wavers then stays with her after her transition from man to woman); and Chastity Bono, whose first memoirs describe coming out as a lesbian, in *Family Outing* (1998), and *The End*

of *Innocence* (2002), and then, as Chaz Bono, in *Transition: The Story of How I Became a Man* (2010).⁶⁰ We might include here the exposé by Norah Vincent, a lesbian who disguises herself as a man to penetrate men-only spaces and report back, as well as her subsequent account of the mental breakdown it led to.⁶¹

Formally, contemporary lesbian autobiography continues to mess with generic rules. Even “novels” that are written in the first person about lesbian exploits and escapades and in which the protagonist is called by the same name as the author give us the same vexed question of category as Sappho’s poem. Recent writers such as Michelle Tea and Eileen Myles have published books that, naming their protagonists Michelle and Eileen, respectively, are variously thought of as novels and as memoirs.⁶² Another rather magnificent recent example is Lidia Yuknavitch’s *The Chronology of Water* (2010).⁶³ Clearly labeled a memoir, the book quotes Emily Dickinson in its opening epigraph: “Tell all the Truth but tell it slant—” suggesting that “telling it slant” continues to be the only method for telling a lesbian life.

Life writing has now leaked into all manner and category of writing, including scholarship; Ann Cvetkovich, however, takes it a step further by using interviews with her subjects, lesbian AIDS activists, as her primary methodology, in her book *An Archive of Feelings* (2003).⁶⁴ Cvetkovich’s subsequent book, *Depression: A Public Feeling* (2012), includes “Depression Manifesto,” on which she comments that “[m]emoir became one of my research methods.”⁶⁵ “This combination of memoir and essay,” Cvetkovich writes, “constitutes my version of what Jill Dolan has called ‘critical memoir’ and is inspired by the desire to craft new forms of writing and knowledge that come from affective experience, ordinary life, and alternative archives and that don’t necessarily follow the usual methods of cultural critique.”⁶⁶

Conclusion

In contrast to the earlier circumspection of lesbian life writing there is now a genre of celebrity lesbian life stories, which include the lives of women known to smaller circles and also to the world at large, for example *Blood, Bones and Butter* (2012) by the chef Gabrielle Hamilton, *Coal to Diamonds* (2012) by the punk singer Beth Ditto, and *Eating Fire: My Life as a Lesbian Avenger* (2014) by Kelly J. Cogswell.⁶⁷ Along with Chaz Bono’s autobiographies, we have also the recent writings of, for example, Ellen DeGeneres, Jane Lynch, and Melissa Etheridge.⁶⁸

If the inquiry into lesbian life writing begins with the early intimations of ancient poets and nineteenth-century landowners’ coded writings, with a

traipse through the political effusions that define the identities that same-sex desires strive for, then we might end with the more ordinary and everyday: social media, blogs, and oral histories. Facebook, Twitter, and blogs (including myriad specifically lesbian blogs) provide daily updates, poems, dreams, and politics, themed and general, that instead of being passed hand to hand as books are readily accessible online and ever changing. The ACT UP Oral History project is an archive that attempts to interview all the survivors of ACT UP/New York, a substantial number of whom are lesbians;⁶⁹ another relevant oral history project that includes the first-person personal life stories of lesbians is the Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, archived in the Sophia Smith Collection at Smith College.⁷⁰ Not that these are less political for being so uncontested and immediate – in fact, this might be the most political expression of all: that fame and land and publication are not the criteria for knowing or understanding or announcing lesbian desire.

NOTES

- 1 Gertrude Stein, *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (New York: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1933), 5.
- 2 Leigh Gilmore's argument is very compelling on this in her *Autobiographics: A Feminist Theory of Women's Self-Representation* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994).
- 3 Audre Lorde, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (Watertown, MA: Persephone Press, 1982).
- 4 Sappho, *Sappho: A New Translation*, ed. and trans. Mary Barnard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1958), fragment 42.
- 5 Biddy Martin, "Lesbian Identity and Autobiographical Difference(s)" (1988), in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, eds. Henry Abelove, Michele Aina Barale, and David M. Halperin (London: Routledge, 1993), 274.
- 6 Ellen Louise Hart and Martha Nell Smith, "A Note on the Text," in *Open Me Carefully: Emily Dickinson's Intimate Letters to Susan Huntington Dickinson*, eds. Hart and Smith (Ashfield, MA: Paris Press, 1998), xxv.
- 7 Emily Dickinson, *Open Me Carefully*, 13.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 130–131.
- 9 Gertrude Stein, *Baby Precious Always Shines: Selected Love Notes Between Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas*, ed. Kay Turner (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), 121.
- 10 Angelina Weld Grimké, *Selected Works of Angelina Weld Grimké*, ed. Carolivia Herron (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 7.
- 11 Grimké, "Rosabel," in *ibid.*, 61.
- 12 Helena Whitbread, ed., "Introduction," in Anne Lister, *I Know My Own Heart: The Diaries of Anne Lister (1791–1840)* (London: Virago, 1988), ix.
- 13 Lister, *I Know My Own Heart*, 194.
- 14 Virginia Woolf, *Congenial Spirits: The Selected Letters of Virginia Woolf*, ed. Joanne Trautmann Banks (London: Pimlico, 2003), 242.

- 15 Vita Sackville-West, *The Letters of Vita Sackville-West to Virginia Woolf*, eds. Louise deSalvo and Mitchell A. Leaska (New York: William Morrow, 1985), 98.
- 16 Adrienne Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence" (1980), in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, 227–254.
- 17 Sylvia Townsend Warner, *I'll Stand By You: The Letters of Sylvia Townsend Warner and Valentine Ackland*, ed. Susanna Pinney (London: Pimlico, 1998), 386.
- 18 Janet Flanner, *Darlinghissima: Letters to a Friend*, ed. Natalia Danesi Murray (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1985), 86.
- 19 Elizabeth Bishop, *The Complete Poems, 1927–1979* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999), 84.
- 20 See Joan Acocella, "What's In Cather's Letters," Page Turner, *New Yorker*, April 9, 2013. <http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/books/2013/04/whats-in-cathers-letters.html>. Accessed March 27, 2014. See also Andrew Jewell and Janis Stout, eds., *The Selected Letters of Willa Cather* (New York: Knopf, 2013).
- 21 May Sarton, *Journal of a Solitude* (New York: Norton, 1973), 206, 208.
- 22 Bryher, *Analyzing Freud: Letters of H.D., Bryher, and Their Circle*, ed. Susan Stanford Friedman (New York: New Directions, 2002), 71.
- 23 Bryher, *The Heart to Artemis: A Writer's Memoirs* (Ashfield, MA: Paris Press, 2006 [1962]), 217.
- 24 H.D., *Tribute to Freud* (New York: New Directions, 1984 [1956]), 40.
- 25 Vita Sackville-West, in *Portrait of a Marriage*, ed. Nigel Nicolson (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1973), 107.
- 26 Susan Sontag, *Reborn: Journals and Notebooks 1947–1963*, ed. David Rieff (New York: Farrar Starus Giroux, 2008), 182–183.
- 27 See letters between Emma Goldman and Almeda Sperry, quoted in Blanche Wiesen Cook, "Female Support Networks and Political Activism," *Chrysalis* 3 (Autumn 1977): 76–80; also see Joanne Glasgow, ed., *Your John: The Love Letters of Radclyffe Hall* (New York: New York University Press, 1999), and Rodger Streitmatter, ed., *Empty without You: The Intimate Letters of Eleanor Roosevelt and Lorena Hickok* (New York: Free Press, 1998).
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- 29 Barnes, *Ladies Almanack*, 18–19.
- 30 Martin, "Lesbian Identity and Autobiographical Difference(s)," 281.
- 31 Miriam G. Keiffer, in *The Coming Out Stories*, eds. Julia Penelope Stanley and Susan J. Wolfe (Watertown, MA: Persephone Press, 1980), 207.
- 32 Susan J. Wolfe, in *ibid.*, 243.
- 33 Judith Niemi, in *ibid.*, 36.
- 34 Nicky Hallett, *Lesbian Lives: Identity and Auto/Biography in the Twentieth Century* (London: Pluto Press, 1999), 145.
- 35 Margaretta Jolly, "Beyond Hagiography: New Books on Gay and Lesbian Life Writing," *Women's History Review*, 10.4 (2001): 722.
- 36 Amber Hollibaugh and Cherrie Moraga, "What We're Rollin Around in Bed With: Sexual Silences in Feminism" (1981), in *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality*, eds. Ann Snitow, Christine Stansell, and Sharon Thompson (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1983), 394–405; Elly Bulkin, Barbara Smith,

- and Minnie Bruce Pratt, *Yours in Struggle: Three Feminist Perspectives on Anti-Semitism and Racism* (Ithaca, NY: Firebrand Books, 1984).
- 37 Susan Brownmiller, *In Our Time: Memoir of a Revolution* (New York: Dell, 1999), 79.
- 38 *Ibid.*
- 39 Boston Women's Health Book Collective, *Our Bodies, Ourselves* (Boston, MA: New England Free Press, 1971).
- 40 Hall Carpenter Archives Lesbian Oral History Group, *Inventing Ourselves: Lesbian Life Stories* (London: Routledge, 1989); Kay Turner, ed., *Between Us: A Legacy of Lesbian Love Letters* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1996), published in England by Thames and Hudson as *Dear Sappho*.
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- 43 *Ibid.*, unpaginated.
- 44 Kate Millett, *Sita* (New York: Farrar, Starus and Giroux, 1976); Kate Millett, *The Loony Bin Trip* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000 [1990]).
- 45 Millett, *Flying*, 1990 preface, unpaginated.
- 46 Jane Gallop, *Feminist Accused of Sexual Harassment* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997), 1, 4.
- 47 Karla Jay, *Tales of the Lavender Menace: A Memoir of Liberation* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), 87.
- 48 Terry Castle, "The Professor," *The Professor and Other Writings* (New York: HarperCollins, 2010), 201.
- 49 Myriad other texts of this kind include Jeanne Córdova, *When We Were Outlaws: A Memoir of Love and Revolution* (Midway, FL: Spinsters Ink, 2011), and Judy Grahn, *A Simple Revolution: The Making of an Activist Poet* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 2012).
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- 52 Amber Hollibaugh, *My Dangerous Desires: A Queer Girl Dreaming Her Way Home* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000), xxi. See also Sarah Schulman, *My American History: Lesbian and Gay Life During the Reagan/Bush Years* (New York: Routledge, 1995); *Stagestruck: Theater, AIDS, and the Marketing of Gay America* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998); *Ties That Bind: Familial Homophobia and Its Consequences* (New York: New Press, 2009); *Gentrification of the Mind: Witness to a Lost Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012); *Israel/Palestine and the Queer International* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013). Also, Cheryl Clarke,

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- 53 Jackie Kay, *Red Dust Road: An Autobiographical Journey* (London: Picador, 2010); Jeanette Winterson, *Why Be Happy When You Can Be Normal?* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2011); Alison Bechdel, *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2006). Bechdel has published a second memoir, about her mother: *Are You My Mother?: A Comic Drama* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2012); Donna Minkowitz’s memoir, *Growing Up Golem*, tells a modern version of the age-old story of developing a lesbian sexuality in the wake of a parent’s mixed feelings and messages. See *Growing Up Golem: How I Survived My Mother, Brooklyn, and Some Really Bad Dates* (New York: Riverdale Books, 2013). Cheryl Burke’s *My Awesome Place* (New York: Topside Signature, 2012) is grappling with similar stresses, as is Kelli Dunham’s *Freak of Nurture* (New York: Topside Signature, 2013). Another memoir that attempts to reconcile not just with parents but with ancestors is Nkunzi Zandile Nkabinde, *Black Bull, Ancestors and Me: My Life as a Lesbian Sangoma* (Auckland Park, South Africa: Jacana, 2008); other lesbian autobiographical graphic art includes that of Ariel Schrag and Nicole J. Georges.
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- 55 Jeanette Winterson, *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* (London: Pandora Press, 1985).
- 56 Dorothy Allison, *Bastard Out of Carolina* (New York: Dutton, 1992); Dorothy Allison, *Skin: Talking about Sex, Class, and Literature* (Ithaca, NY: Firebrand Books, 1994); Dorothy Alison, *Two or Three Things I Know for Sure* (New York: Dutton, 1995).
- 57 Rita Mae Brown, *Rubyfruit Jungle* (Plainfield, VT: Daughters, 1973); Rita Mae Brown, *Rita Will: Memoir of a Literary Rabble-Rouser* (New York: Bantam, 1997); Lisa Alther, *Kinflicks* (New York: Knopf, 1976); Lisa Alther, *Kinfolks: Falling Off the Family Tree* (New York: Arcade, 2007). See also Mab Segrest, *Memoirs of a Race Traitor* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1994).
- 58 Leslie Feinberg, *Transgender Warriors: Making History from Joan of Arc to Ru Paul* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1996), x, 3.
- 59 Leslie Feinberg, *Stone Butch Blues* (Ithaca, NY: Firebrand Books, 1993).
- 60 Kate Bornstein, *Gender Outlaw: On Men, Women, and the Rest of Us* (New York: Routledge, 1994), and *A Queer and Pleasant Danger (The True Story of a Nice Jewish Boy Who Joins the Church of Scientology and Leaves Twelve Years Later to Become the Lovely Lady She Is Today)* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2012), x; Jennifer Finney Boylan, *She’s Not There: A Life in Two Genders* (New York: Random House, 2003); Chastity Bono, *Family Outing* (New York: Little, Brown, 1998); Chastity Bono, *The End of Innocence* (New York: Alyson Books, 2002); Chaz Bono, *Transition: The Story of How I Became a Man* (New York: Dutton, 2010). An excerpt from Boylan’s book and other pertinent essays are collected in Jonathan Ames, *Sexual Metamorphosis: An Anthology of Transsexual Memoirs* (New York: Vintage, 2005).

- 61 Norah Vincent, *Self-Made Man: One Woman's Journey into Manhood and Back Again* (New York: Viking, 2006), and *Voluntary Madness: My Year Lost and Found in the Loony Bin* (New York: Viking, 2009).
- 62 See Michelle Tea, *Valencia* (Seattle, WA: Seal Press, 2000), and Eileen Myles, *Inferno* (New York: OR Books, 2010).
- 63 Lidia Yuknavitch, *The Chronology of Water* (Portland, OR: Hawthorne Books, 2010).
- 64 Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003).
- 65 Ann Cvetkovich, *Depression: A Public Feeling* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 15, 17.
- 66 *Ibid.*, 23.
- 67 Gabrielle Hamilton, *Blood, Bones and Butter: The Inadvertent Education of a Reluctant Chef* (New York: Random House, 2012); Beth Ditto, *Coal to Diamonds: A Memoir* (New York: Spiegel and Grau, 2012); Kelly J. Cogswell, *Eating Fire: My Life as a Lesbian Avenger* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014).
- 68 Ellen DeGeneres, *Seriously ... I'm Kidding* (New York: Grand Central Publishing, 2011); Jane Lynch, *Happy Accidents* (London: Fourth Estate, 2011); and Melissa Etheridge, *The Truth Is ...: My Life in Love and Music* (New York: Villard Books, 2001).
- 69 <http://www.actuporalhistory.org/>. There is a legacy, too, of lesbian cancer memoirs that precede and accompany the voices of AIDS activists and sufferers. Audre Lorde's important *The Cancer Journals* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute's, 1980) is followed by Sandra Butler and Barbara Rosenblum's *Cancer in Two Voices* (Duluth, MN: Spinster's Ink, 1991) and more recently Mary Cappello's *Called Back: My Reply to Cancer, My Return to Life* (New York: Alyson Books, 2009).
- 70 <http://www.smith.edu/libraries/libs/ssc/vof/vof-intro.html>