

Nassim Winnie Balestrini and Ina Bergmann, eds., *Intermediality, Life Writing, and American Studies: Interdisciplinary Perspectives* (Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter, 2018), 264 pp.

How can the photograph of a knife positioned above a doorframe contribute to a life narrative? In her autofictional novel *Motherhood* (2018), the Canadian author Sheila Heti allows her readers an intimate glimpse into her struggle with the choice between becoming a mother or not, and illustrates her discursive reflections with black and white photographs. The simplicity of these photographic reproductions, for example of a knife positioned above a door frame,¹ underscores the narrator's obsessive engagement with motherhood that openly juxtaposes rational, historical-philosophical arguments with superstitious forms of epistemology. Heti's fictionalized narrator-self taps into a diverse array of media in the hope of finding a cosmic answer to her deeply personal question "to breed or not to breed?"² photography being only one of them. The photographs—due to their 'referential' quality which they supposedly share with life writing—jar the autofictional nature of Heti's novel by seemingly authenticating the narrator's existence and actions, for example by showing her superstitious endeavor of finding a suitable place for the knife in her bedroom, while omitting photos of anyone or anything a reader would expect to find in an autobiographical text. Heti's clever use of "media combination"³ thus complicates the issue at hand even further and asks the reader to think about and question the mediation of life writing itself.

Nassim Winnie Balestrini and Ina Bergmann's recent edited volume for the Anglia Book Series is concerned with such intermedial constellations in American life writing. The main objective of *Intermediality, Life Writing, and American Studies: Interdisciplinary Perspectives* is to highlight the intersection of these three fields for the first time in more detail, which is done in a collection of thirteen essays (including an introduction) by twelve international contributors. Since the emphasis is put on the intersection of these vast fields, the introduction of the volume is kept short and builds on the recent work done by other scholars. By working with the most cutting-edge knowledge from all three fields without providing a general introduction to each of them, Balestrini and Bergmann's collection appeals to an intermediate and advanced readership interested in approaching old material through a new lens. The vast amount of research that has been generated in the past twenty years or so in the field of intermediality studies functions as a particularly important backdrop and the editors rely on their readers to go to Gabriele Rippl's *Handbook of Intermediality* (2015), for instance, to supplement their study. Indeed, the detailed scrutiny of how media work with each other within life writing lies at the heart of this collection:

The broad historical range and the multiplicity of intermedial forms and life narratives covered by the contributions in this collection clearly indicate the usefulness of medium-specific semiotic analyses which take into account traditions and evolving formats of auto/biographical (self-) expression within their respective artistic and social contexts. (5–6)

Balestrini and Bergmann pay an unprecedented amount of attention to media and media history in their systematic scrutiny of life writing. Moreover, their findings are applicable to all interactions between life narratives and intermediality, even though the book title might suggest a unique link to American Studies.

Intermediality, Life Writing, and American Studies offers a rich interdisciplinary approach to a vast array of "biographies, memoirs, graphic novels, perfor-

¹ Sheila Heti, *Motherhood* (London: Harvill Secker, 2018) 63.

² Lara Feigel, "Motherhood by Sheila Heti – To Breed or Not to Breed?" *The Guardian* 6 June 2018.

³ Irina O. Rajewsky, "Intermediality, Intertextuality, and Remediation: A Literary Perspective on Intermediality," *Intermedialités* 6 (2005): 43–64; 51–52.

mances, paratheatricals, musicals, silent films, movies, documentary films, and social media” (3) from the nineteenth century up to the immediate present. This diverse assemblage of American cultural products shows that Balestrini and Bergmann’s conception of ‘life writing’ relies on that of Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, who remarked that life writing “can be biographical, novelistic, historical, or explicitly self-referential and therefore autobiographical.”⁴ Given this wide scope and rich diversity, my discussion of selected essays below is exemplary and does not aim to cover the entire volume.

The collection of essays opens with Christopher J. Lukasik’s “Making an Entrance, Illustrating a Life: Remediating Benjamin Franklin’s *Autobiography* in Nineteenth-Century America,” which sets a remarkable standard for the rest of the volume. Working with W.J.T. Mitchell and Jacques Rancière’s notions of the image, Lukasik explores a selection of illustrations in one of the most famous examples of life writing. By limiting his analysis only to how Benjamin Franklin’s arrival in Philadelphia is illustrated in three nineteenth-century children’s editions of the *Autobiography*, Lukasik shows how illustrators were presenting an increasingly more “refined image of Franklin than his memoirs suggest” as time progressed (22). This, moreover, is connected to changes in U.S. mass visual culture, and shifting readerly habits from “the imaginary to the optical” (27). The success of this first essay is based on its ability to show just how much an inter-medial approach to one image in its various diachronic manifestations can reveal about the changes in the life writing genre and the visual culture of a time period.

Ina Bergmann’s own contribution, an essay focusing on Jackie Kennedy’s cousin ‘Little Edie,’ is similar to that of Lukasik in its way of tracing one particular biographical aspect (here the depiction of Little Edie’s “fashion as a metaphor for nonconformity” [104]) across time. In contrast to Lukasik’s essay, however, Bergmann’s diachronic interest is led by the remediation of the same content across multiple media and genres: first a documentary film, then a Broadway musical, and finally an HBO biopic. Her fascinating analysis is supported with a plethora of examples from popular culture and concludes with the following paradoxical insight: “Throughout her life, Little Edie’s behavior developed from nonconformist to aberrant. The remediations of her life, a historical arch of public images, reverse this order” (114). Another intriguing contribution on film is Dennis Bingham’s essay on Bob Fosse’s genre-bending and highly intermedial biopic *Lenny* (1974). Bingham embeds *Lenny* within the New Hollywood or ‘Hollywood Renaissance’ era, shows how its editing rhythm draws from stand-up comedy, and explores the ways in which its collage-like and motif-driven style upends “cinema’s drive toward chronological, sequential time” (80). Both Bergmann’s and Bingham’s compelling essays can be of interest to anyone involved in film studies.

Gabriele Rippl’s and Danuta Fjellestad’s essays, on the other hand, focus on photography and if and how it relates to ekphrastic passages in American fiction. Fjellestad’s analysis of Paul Auster’s *Report from the Interior* (2013) aims to show that Auster breaks with Philippe Lejeune’s ‘autobiographical pact’ by “provocatively substituting private images with public ones” (169). The photography in Auster’s autobiography disrupts cohesion and causality, imitates the workings of memory and “document[s] a historical exterior in which the writing self is embedded” (185). While Fjellestad adds to a large body of research on Paul Auster, Rippl’s investigation of photography and its ekphrastic evocations is directed towards an often neglected group in intermediality studies: hyphenated, trans-cultural writers. Closing in on the autobiographical and autofictional texts by Edward Said, Jamaica Kincaid, Teju Cole, and Aleksandar Hemon, Rippl ex-

4 Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives* (2001; Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2010) 4.

amines how their use of “word-photography configurations as well as ekphrases of pictures [...] raises generic, formal, ethical, and political questions” (147). In doing so, she highlights the creative and subverting ways that the typically white, Western mode of ekphrasis can be used by hyphenated authors.

Another effective addition to this essay collection is the alteration of genre. The final two contributions are transcripts of interviews with Susan Snively and Brenda Wineapple, both scholars and practitioners of life writing. Snively’s interview is largely centered on Emily Dickinson and touches on how music and sound play into her poetry. Life writing, according to Snively, is crucial for women writers in general because it is “dramatic, evasive, and full of coded messages—that is part of its power. For women, it can be a subversive act. Subversive acts are fun and full of mischief. Women need to make mischief, in order to defy power or propriety, but also to give life to their words” (233). Wineapple reinforces this view in her interview and emphasizes the need for genre- and media-fluidity once more: “What has changed is my interest in biography both as a belletristic genre and as narrative, though I have actually stopped writing biography, partly because I think biographical narrative need not be confined within the conventional brick-like house of biography” (246; emphasis in original).

Indeed, all texts in this collection—the introduction, ten essays, and two interviews—illuminate each other’s points from different perspectives across various media and time periods, adding a deeper understanding of the fascinating interplay between life writing, intermediality, and American Studies. If, as Laura Marcus asserts, life writing “is seen to act as a window onto concepts of self, identity, and subjectivity, and into the ways in which these are themselves determined by time and circumstance,”⁵ then Balestrini and Bergmann have exposed media to be crucial agents in this endeavor. Given the brevity of each text and of the volume itself, Balestrini and Bergmann’s collection can only begin to hint at the breadth of this intersectional field and its potential for further studies. There can be no doubt that this thought-provoking and engaging collection will inspire researchers to direct their gaze toward this topic in the future.

Finally, this is also a collection that appeals to readers who enjoy some meta-level blurring of boundaries, in which the product of scrutiny partially mirrors the object of scrutiny. *Intermediality, Life Writing, and American Studies* not only explores the creative overlap between fact and fiction as it appears in intermedial forms of life writing, but it also is itself an object that could have been studied within one of its essays: it combines text and image (numerous illustrations are reproduced to support the arguments), contrasts genres of writing (literary analyses and author interviews), and ends with a “Note on the Contributors” which hints at the biographically, nationally, and institutionally motivated interests behind these essays. There is, for example, a point in Dennis Bingham’s essay where his academic voice gives way to an autobiographical one: “I remember how startling and breathtakingly vivid *Lenny*’s black-and-white cinematography, together with the rapid cutting, looked on the big screen when I first saw it in Arch 1975” (88). In other words, this collection is gratifying in more ways than just an academic one.

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⁵ Laura Marcus, *Autobiography: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2018) 2.