Self in Struggle: Levels of Resistance in Nonwestern Autobiography

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“Everyone has a story,” proclaims Steve Hartman as he travels across America, interviewing randomly selected people, in search of their unique, individual story. Hartman is a CBS television reporter, filming segments that are sometimes featured at the end of the evening news hour. Each quest for a story is started by a dart thrown at a map of the United States; upon arriving at this destination, Hartman picks up the phone directory, flips through it and, while closing his eyes, selects the next candidate for an interview. It’s a whimsical trip across the nation, undergirded by the rather attractive and democratic philosophy that everyone has something worthy to say. And Hartman is not the first to attempt it— he follows in the footsteps of American reporters before him: David Johnson, author of No Ordinary Lives, Charles Kuralt, and Ernie Pyle. All contribute to this belief that an autobiography exists in each person, waiting to be told, waiting to be listened to.

Is the fact that these reporters are American significant? Perhaps. For it is tempting to believe that in the United States, we have a corner on valuing the individual. Historically, the study of autobiography has centered on the western world, and certainly this nation has made its own mark on the genre, from early autobiographies as Benjamin Franklin’s to more recent works, such as Mary Karr’s memoir, The Liars’ Club. But perhaps by locating the concept “everyone has a story” only in the western world, we are denying the meaning of the phrase
itself. If everyone indeed has a story, then we need to hear what nonwestern people are saying, both in autobiographies and about autobiography.

This paper focuses on what the study of nonwestern autobiographies can bring to the understanding of the autobiographical genre as a whole. Often, in article and essays concerning nonwestern autobiographies, writers will engage in a meta-discussion, a discussion not about the specific text, but about the genre that the text resided in. These writers apparently need to preface their more specific discussion of the actual work with a wrestling out of terms, an attempt to describe the genre of autobiography. Sometimes this discussion doesn’t just preface, but instead pervades the entire essay or article. These writers’ discussions clearly show that nonwestern autobiographies are questioning and testing the borders of the autobiographical genre.

**Autobiography: An exclusive club?**

Historically, most theorists of autobiography have seen the autobiographical genre as a literary phenomenon unique to the western world. They trace its beginnings to western schools of thoughts and western ideas of individuality. William Hanaway, while questioning the existence of autobiography in Iran, suggests that “autobiography is more of a cultural form,” particularly since he sees the genre as an outgrowth of “post-Renaissance thought about the worth of an individual and the uniqueness of a human life” (61). Georges Gusdorf, a major theorist of autobiography, credits the rise of Christianity for the development of autobiography: “Christianity brings a new anthropology to the fore: every destiny, however humble it be, assumes a kind of supernatural stake . . . Each man is accountable for his own existence, and intentions weigh as heavily as acts” (33). This accountability presumably leads to a propensity towards self-examination and a preoccupation with one’s own destiny, which are both essential
elements in autobiographical writing. Both Gusdorf and Hanaway’s comments attempt to
demonstrate that autobiography grows out of an intellectual environment unique to the western
world, out of a chemistry of ideas and thoughts not to be found elsewhere. Thus the canon of
autobiography consists entirely of western works: Augustine’s Confessions is seen as the
germinal work, and other frequently referenced works include Rousseau’s Confessions and
Benjamin Franklin’s Autobiography.

Georges Gusdorf’s essay “Conditions and Limits of Autobiography,” published in 1956,
most clearly argues for the exclusivity of autobiography to the western world. All discussion of
culture and autobiography eventually return to this essay because it played such a crucial part in
setting autobiography’s boundaries. “It would seem,” Gusdorf wrote, “that autobiography is not
to be found outside of our cultural area” (29). In some ways, Gusdorf’s statements seem to ring
true. In his recent book, The Geography of Thought: How Asians & Westerners Think
Differently . . . And Why, Richard Nisbett presents research on the difference between eastern
and western thought. Nisbett suggests that Asians are more oriented to the community, while
westerners like Americans are more focused on the individual. This east/west dichotomy can
influence how one approaches autobiographical studies. Because autobiography is popularly
defined as writing about your own individual life, it might seem reasonable to assume that people
in a community-oriented culture do not have the interest or the worldview to accommodate this
genre. One could indeed conclude that this genre is only a western literary construct: its
prominent works, the whole philosophy of its purpose, all seem to point to western exclusivity.

In the past decade however, many critics have challenged, or at least questioned,
Gusdorf’s conclusions about autobiography’s exclusively western nature. One major challenge
occurs when these critics show that other autobiographical traditions existed pre-western contact.
Susanne Enderwitz, in her essay about Arabic autobiography, uniformly opposes Gusdorf's claims of exclusivity, by asserting, “in every literate society people have always felt inclined to record their own lives” (75). Dwight Reynolds, editor of a book on Arabic autobiography, lambasts Gusdorf for perpetuating the idea that autobiography is only a western genre. Reynolds suggests that "autobiography's shift from a general category of literature . . . to a culturally specific genre advocated by Gusdorf, May, and Pascal represents a highly significant, and politically suspect, turning point in western intellectual history" ("Fallacy" 18-19). Reynolds expresses frustration with this cultural specificity when he asks, "How many exceptions are needed to cast doubt on the assumption of western origin and exclusivity and allow it to be critically reexamined" (19)? These exceptions are provided in essays such as Vytautas Kavolis' "Histories of Selfhood, Maps of Sociability," where Kavolis discusses autobiography as it appears over the course of time and also how it appears in other cultures. Kavolis provides a list of exceptions to Gusdorf's exclusivity when he names four nonwestern traditions of autobiographies, each as old if not older than the western tradition: the Islamic, the Chinese, the Japanese, and the Indian traditions (59). Lisa McNee adds onto this list, with her assertion that "oral forms" of autobiography existed in Africa before western contact (Selfish Gifts 9).

Several scholars ascribe the continual dismissal of these traditions to a too-narrow conception of autobiography's generic borders. This is the argument that Reynolds holds in his provocatively titled essay, "The Fallacy of Western Origins." In this essay, Reynolds argues for the recognition of the Islamic tradition of autobiography and suggests that the negligence of this tradition is due to scholars' failure to accept different self-presentations. Responding to a theorist's complaint that, in Arabic autobiography, "the personality behind the events remains
shrouded” (28), Reynolds writes scathingly, “scholars are unable to address effectively an auto/biographical tradition possessed of different literary conventions” (29).

One of Arabic autobiography’s major conventions is its focus on the author’s intellectual achievements. Susanne Enderwitz describes the Arab-Islamic tradition of “Ilm al-rijāl” as a “science” which sought to prove the “reliability of the conveyers of religious traditions;” religious leaders and philosophers used autobiography to prove this reliability (75). Reynolds more clearly explains this relationship between the scientific and the autobiographical. He writes, “It is fact and specificity, along with a fascination for individual accomplishments and intellectual production, that most interested and most commonly structured biographical and autobiographical texts of the Islamic Middle Ages” (“Introduction” 5). This is certainly different from the popular conception of autobiography as an emotional genre, as a type of literature that aims more for the heart than the head. Ancient Arabic autobiography purposely aims to teach, and could even be described as didactic. Consider medieval Islamic writer, Al-Suyūṭī, whose autobiography is described as “an emulation of earlier respected figures and an act that will enable later generations to emulate the autobiographer” (4). It is this didacticism and focus on the intellectual, public self that led to this tradition’s marginalization in autobiographical study. For as long as autobiographical study is transcribed by western traditions, these Arabic texts will inevitably be dismissed due to their difference.

Janet Walker, in her cross-cultural study of autobiography, sees this dismissal as irresponsible because “[Gusdorf’s] argument that non-Western literatures have no indigenous forms of autobiography was invalidated by the fact that he did not consider evidence from non-Western traditions in the long period before Western influence” (206). She gives evidence from her own study of the Japanese autobiographical tradition, particularly the Japanese form called
nikki, which developed during the tenth century. She points out the many ways in which niki (translated as “fictionalized memoir” or “poetic memoir”) transgresses the boundaries set by western autobiography. For example, instead of always being lengthy “full-life” narratives, works in the niki tradition are often brief and cover only one small part of a life (210-211). Walker suggests “[Gusdorf and May’s] preference for the full-life autobiography may have kept them from seeing the other forms in which autobiography occurred in those traditions” (214). Her research joins the research of others in exposing the narrowness of autobiographical research as it has been conducted in the past. A new field has opened in which researchers are approaching the traditional canons of other cultures, ready to accept new definitions of autobiography.

Nonwestern Autobiographies Today

As scholars reconsider older nonwestern autobiographies, there should also be an examination of recent nonwestern autobiographical works. What can be said about nonwestern autobiographies today, after western influence has touched almost every society? Do nonwestern works still retain some difference – can study of these autobiographies lead to a different understanding of autobiography? When Gusdorf wrote “Conditions and Limits” in the 1950’s, there were already several examples of nonwestern-authored autobiographies already in existence, Gandhi’s autobiography providing one such example. However, Gusdorf states that the transfer of autobiography to other cultures is “a sort of intellectual colonizing to a mentality that was not their own” (29). He suggests that there is nothing nonwestern contributing to these works, but rather this is western thought adopted wholesale by nonwestern authors. Lisa McNee, in her book on Senegalese autobiography, expresses first dismay at, then rejection of the idea that “nothing exists in the wake of colonialism but the West” (Selfish Gifts 9). She seeks to
refute this idea through her research into *taasu*, the autobiographical performance poetry created by the Senegalese. She is not alone in this rejection. Contemporary scholarship on nonwestern autobiographies identifies the differences that these texts bring to the genre.

Theorists are moving away from the idea of setting narrow conditions and limits to autobiography and instead are looking at ways of expanding the genre. Nonwestern autobiographies provide one of the main reasons why the genre needs to be expanded. In the article “Twentieth-Century Literature in the New Century: A Symposium,” Andrew Hoberek describes how, in the latter half of the twentieth century, there has been a “global expansion” in the English literature, a moving away from the hegemony of the United States and England to include South Africa, India and other countries (14). Autobiographical scholarship seems to be part of this same movement. According to Janet Walker,

[t]he intercultural study of literary genres such as autobiography has the effect of placing the Western student of literature squarely in a global literary context appropriate to the political situation of a world united in familiar ways – through trade, warfare, and individual contracts. (223)

Autobiographical scholars need to participate in this movement away from ethnocentrism, and focus on the contributions of nonwestern texts to their study.

Because these nonwestern texts exhibit different conventions, any effort at intercultural autobiographical study will involve redefining and rethinking the boundaries of the genre. Any reassessment of the generic boundaries will necessitate an investigation into the characteristics of nonwestern autobiographies. In this paper, investigation will center on the scholarship generated around these autobiographies, as opposed to the autobiographies themselves, though they too
will be referenced. In this way, we can see how nonwestern autobiographies have already contributed to scholarship and hope to find a coherent way to categorize these contributions.

Through a survey of essays and articles, the theme of resistance continually resurfaces. Resistance, of course, implies a conflict between at least two parties: the one that is resisting, and the one against whom that resistance is directed. Nonwestern societies often display resistance because so many of these societies have experienced oppression. Traditional western autobiographies don't have this same quality, because this tradition revolves around white males, and not around autobiographies of minorities or women. Like minorities and women, many nonwestern people have experienced a prejudicial social/governmental structure. In Africa, most countries were colonized and exploited by European countries. In the Middle East, various people groups, and particularly women, also experience marginalization. In India, there are both postcolonial issues and caste issues. China's Communist government also foments resistance. This list could go on and on, but this is just to demonstrate the frequent existence of oppressive environments — environments that lead to resistant acts, such as the composition of autobiographies.

In this paper, I will explore the different levels of resistance as they are found in nonwestern autobiography. First, autobiographical texts are a form of resistance for marginalized, nonwestern people who are threatened by silence and/or misrepresentation. Nonwestern autobiographical texts also resist by challenging western ideas about the nature of the autobiographical self and of the autobiographical genre. Indeed, this theoretical resistance can lead to an entirely different way of viewing autobiography.
Resisting Silence and Bearing Witness

Over the past century, the perception of autobiography among theorists has started to shift. Though some still cling to the perception of this genre as the bastion of white males, many are now viewing autobiography as especially suited for women, minorities, and people from other cultures. Several theorists argue that particular features and aspects of autobiography make it empowering to traditionally marginalized people. Robert Folkenflik, editor of The Culture of Autobiography, states in his introduction: “part of the current appeal of autobiography has to do with its democratic potential, with its suggestion that each person has a possible autobiography allotted him or her” (12). This is, of course, the concept of “everyone has a story” resurfacing. This concept is empowering because it grants everyone the right to tell his or her story.

Throughout history, the dominant western society has considered the stories of others (women, minorities and nonwestern people) unworthy of telling. Autobiography and biography were reserved for people who had “done something” with their lives, the people in power. Now people are utilizing the equalizing force intrinsically found in autobiography; they realize that their own lives can legitimately become recorded stories, no matter where they are located in the social strata.

Autobiography also seems especially suited to marginalized people because of its aim to convey real life. Autobiographical texts often function as doorways inviting their readers to come and vicariously experience the truth of oppression. James Olney, a major contemporary autobiographical scholar, argues that autobiography gives “a privileged access to an experience that no other variety of writing can offer” (qtd. in Wang 5). He bases his conclusion on the observation that the study of autobiography often intersects with studies such as Women’s Studies and African Studies. These kinds of studies seek to elevate the experiences of
marginalized people; autobiography frequently provides the means of elevating those experiences.

Indeed, the autobiographical genre seems to value the experience expressed more than the skill of the expression. Many autobiographies are written by people who are not writers by profession; for several of the authors cited later in this paper, this autobiography is their only published book. This is not to say that the skill of writing is not important; certainly to convey experience effectively to readers, one needs to be able to write well. However, as Folkenflik quotes one of his undergraduate students as saying, “When I read a bad novel, I wind up with nothing; but when I read a bad autobiography I still have something” (11). An autobiography has worth that survives incompetent writing, for it provides access to all kinds of human experience.

Many nonwestern autobiographical authors write in order to share the reality of their experiences with readers. In his essay, “Theory versus Autobiography,” John Sturrock describes one of the common motivations for writing autobiography:

It is not necessary to be paranoiac in order to write one’s autobiography, but it surely helps to have a weakened sense of contingency, to be able to believe that one has been the victim either of ill-informed attention in the past or else of an unmerited neglect. (27)

interestingly, Sturrock makes this statement using the example of Rousseau, one of the most well known western autobiographers, and yet, in a way, this motivation also informs many nonwestern autobiographers. Robin Ostle, in her introduction to a book on Arabic autobiography, suggests “autobiography may spring from a sense of powerlessness on the part of the subject” (22). Sturrock’s “ill-informed attention” and “unmerited neglect” directly
correspond to the misrepresentation and silence with which many nonwestern autobiographers must contend.

Of silence and misrepresentation, silence may be the more potent enemy for nonwestern authors. The threat of silence is often referred to in nonwestern autobiographies and in articles about these autobiographies. In this era of postcolonialism, the new generations seem to be speaking up for those previous generations that suffered the silence of colonialism. Even in non-colonial situations, there is this sense that one is speaking for previous generations who were deprived of a voice. Omprakash Valmiki’s autobiography Joothan is dedicated to “Ma and Pitaji” and throughout the book he references how it was his father Pitaji’s dream that Valmiki would “improve the caste” through education (67). Valmiki is the first of his Dalit settlement to complete high school. His autobiography seems a tribute to his parents, to his parents’ generation of Dalits who did not have such an education. Similarly in the book jacket of her book, To the Edge of the Sky, Anhua Gao writes:

I wanted to tell the whole world the truth about China. People living outside didn’t really understand what happened – because my parents died a long time ago I could not do my duty and look after them. So I have written this book for them.

This tribute extends into Gao’s writing, demonstrated by the fact that the first two chapters of her book give a biography of each of her parents’ lives. In this way, these authors break not only their own silence, but also that of their parents.

In addition, nonwestern autobiographers often write on behalf of contemporaries who likewise were denied a voice. In her article, “Voyaging toward freedom: New voices from South Africa,” Julie Dietche describes three autobiographies written by black women of South Africa. She focuses on these authors’ accounts of their prison experiences, and suggests that these
experiences compelled the women to write their stories. Prison was apartheid’s attempt to hush those who were calling for change. These women reacted to this attempt by becoming louder, setting down their experiences in writing. In the conclusion of her article, Dietche writes:

> In the end, the voices we hear in these books cry out with a strength that comes from knowing that if you are not strong, you will die . . . You sing freedom songs, you go to jail, you are beaten, you get out. You write about it . . . You tell your story because so many have been silenced.

This last statement is strongly echoed by Sam Munson, a reviewer of Azar Nafisi’s *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, who states, “ultimately, every memoir of life under tyranny is an attempt to give voice to those who never survived but were lost to the prisons, the executioner, the torture cells” (2). Both Dietche and Munson highlight how, for many nonwestern autobiographers, silence is not an abstract concept, but one that is represented by the physical loss of their contemporaries.

Writing against silence is a very urgent business. Lisa McNee describes the autobiographical act of a woman escaping the silencing power of “ethnic cleansing” in Mauritania:

> Dieng has made the blank space of an individual identity under erasure into the sign of a new identity that is at once individual and collective . . . Similar acts of resistance make it possible for other Senegalese women to break the silence and name themselves in autobiographical discourses. (“Autobiographical” 1)

“Erasure” is an apt metaphor for the force of silence; to erase is to turn text into nothingness. Erasure of people constitutes rubbing out potential autobiographies, autobiographies that will never have the chance to be heard. By committing autobiographical acts, marginalized people
resist being rubbed out. They put their selves and their stories into text, or in Dieng's case, in public performance. These autobiographers write because what they write has often never been written before. They are writing to change, to open eyes. Autobiography empowers the author with the hope of powerfully affecting the reader.

In Milan Kundera's *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, one of his characters states: “The struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting” (4).

Autobiography is, arguably, *the* genre of memory. Thus, one of the primary ways of resistance for nonwestern autobiographers is simply to keep record. Autobiographers use their memories almost as evidence, using them to make their case and appeal to justice. In the introduction to Omprakash Valmiki’s *Joothan*, Arun Prabha Mukherjee discusses the charge that “excessive resentment is heard in Dalit literature” (xxxiii). This charge probably stems from the fact that Valmiki and other writers like him unrelentingly keep close records of the wrongs afflicted on them for being Dalit. This keeping of records is a reaction against the silence of before.

Frequently in his autobiography, Valmiki discusses an incident of injustice and how no one would say anything about it: “Most people in our basti suffered everything in silence” (22). By recording these wrongs in a book today, Valmiki rebels against that unspoken rule of silence. No one would say anything then, but he will say something now, in this book.

*To the Edge of the Sky*, by Anhua Gao similarly keeps record; the book jacket proclaims that the autobiography is “brilliant documentation of what life was like under Communist rule.” The word “documentation” proves to be an accurate description of Gao’s book, for she fills the memoir’s almost four hundred pages with very specific details on how Communism affected her life as well as the lives of others. For example, Gao describes how the people were ordered by Chairman Mao to kill all the birds over Nanjing: “Of course, you will think, How stupid! What
about all the insects the birds eat? But when Chairman Mao said we should kill the birds, we did it without question” (65). Gao often remarks on the flaws of the Communist propaganda, and how at the time neither she nor anyone else spoke up about it: they were “without question.”

Like Valmiki, she now sets down a careful record of everything that she never voiced before, a record of wrongs inflicted upon her and the people of China. These autobiographers indict their oppressors with these detailed records, and entreat their readers to judge and deliver a verdict.

Misrepresentation – Sturrock’s “ill-informed attention” – is another threat that nonwestern people seek to fight through their autobiographies. In her essay on Iranian women’s autobiographies, Farzaneh Milani writes that the most common concern in these works is “the desire to destroy a ‘false’ image. Their primary purpose proves time and again to be the rectification of misperceptions regarding the author, setting the record straight once and for all” (“Veiled Voices” 13). Valmiki engages in a similar mission: he spends many pages explaining why he uses his caste name – Valmiki – as his surname. Many people misperceive, misunderstand, or simply ridicule him as a result of this name. Even his wife does not understand it: Valmiki states that his choice of surname is “an item on her list of my shortcomings” (145). Writing his autobiography provides Valmiki with the opportunity to develop a full defense of his name.

Black women from apartheid South Africa had to contend with the fact that the law considered them minors. In her book, Call Me Woman, Ellen Kuzwayo describes how she applied for a passport to go to New York for a conference in 1969, and the officials told her that she could not receive one until her son signed permission for her to go overseas (240). She explained to the officials that her son was responsible to her, not the other way around, but they ignored her. The law unfairly reversed the positions, so that the mother was made into the child.
It is against this kind of misrepresentation that Kuzwayo writes her story. As Julie Dietche observes, "[i]n writing, Kuzwayo finds a new voice and defies not only the authorities but also the image of herself as afraid, victimized, silenced, unable to articulate her vision of her self and her people" (3). Autobiography allows its authors to construct a self-image apart from the image projected on them by society.

In autobiography, writers find a place for truth as they have experienced it. Here, in these narratives, they create a space where their thoughts and memories acquire a more permanent and lasting form – that is, in words. Yves Gonzalez-Quijano, in his essay on Mahmūd Darwīsh’s Memory for Forgetfulness, describes autobiography in a way that makes the genre almost tangible, something to hold onto when memory and the truth are threatened by silence, misrepresentation, and forgetfulness:

To survive the loss of this imaginary country that was Beirut, leads to the choice to put down the events of this life, to testify and to keep track of Palestinian history in order to prevent its erasure. When there is no more ground under one’s feet, when there are no more signposts or milestones, there remains writing to bring together the thousand splinters of an existence denied. For Mahmūd Darwīsh, voice of the Palestinians in exile, autobiography is the only territory, the only possible expression in an existence that has no referential space. (191).

In this passage, Gonzalez-Quijano underscores autobiography’s empowering qualities. Where fiction is like creation, making something out of nothing – autobiography is re-creation, making something out of what is fading into nothing. In a version of the old saying, “I think, therefore I am,” an autobiographer could say, “I write, therefore I am,” or “I write, therefore my people are.” For, in nonwestern autobiography, the author often writes more than their own story: they
also write the story of their people. As Robin Ostle argues, “autobiography may be an
empowering act which is undertaken just as much on behalf of groups or communities as it is on
behalf of those individuals in whose name it is proclaimed” (22).

Because nonwestern autobiographers often speak for others and not just for themselves,
their autobiographies are often colored by a deep sense of responsibility. These individuals seek
to publish their story, in part so that they fulfill their sense of responsibility to their community.
For authors such as Omprakash Valmiki and Burmese tribesman, Pascal Khoo Thwe, this
responsibility is placed upon them because of their hard-won education. Valmiki has his father’s
injunction to improve his caste. Thwe is spurred on by a promise he made while still in Burma,
fighting against an unjust regime. In his autobiography, Thwe recounts a conversation he had
with a compatriot. In this conversation, Thwe tells his friend that he will be leaving Burma to
study at an English university. His compatriot responds by saying: “But once you settle down in
the soft Western world, you might not even want to visit us . . . You will forget us altogether.”
Thwe replies: “I will be able to let people outside know what is happening to us. If I get an
education, I will be able to write about it in a way that will move people” (235). These words
testify to the urgent purpose underlying many nonwestern autobiographies.

Comparing nonwestern autobiographies to the African-American autobiographical
tradition brings a further dimension to this discussion of resistance. This comparison has
precedent: Carol Boyce Davies makes parallels between the African-American tradition and
Ellen Kuzwayo’s autobiography (279). Like nonwestern texts, African-American
autobiographies exhibit resistance against silence and misrepresentation. Frederick Douglass, in
*The Life of Frederick Douglass* challenges the misrepresentation of slaves as ‘happy’ in their
bondage, and as ignorant and incapable of learning. Like Valmiki and Gao, Douglass records the
wrongs inflicted upon him and upon the other slaves around him. In his book *Living Our Stories, Telling Our Truths: Autobiography and the Making of the African-American Intellectual Tradition*, V. P. Franklin calls the African-American autobiographical tradition an “intellectual tradition of ‘bearing witness’” (12). This phrase “bearing witness” can be transferred to the study of nonwestern autobiographies as well. Keeping record, fighting silence, these authors choose to be vocal about what they have witnessed.

By “bearing witness,” nonwestern autobiographers also participate in the creation of alternative histories of their people and of their nation. By writing their personal histories, these authors often end up rewriting history, or at least questioning the dominant historical narrative. Again, Robin Ostle shows how autobiography can empower the marginalized:

[these autobiographies] are personal histories of those from marginalized sectors of society whose histories do not correspond to the official prevailing history. These new histories are written so that the margin becomes a site of intervention. (22)

In this quote, Ostle is speaking primarily of Arabic women’s autobiography, but her words are applicable to other peoples as well. In Japan, writing self-histories became an entire movement. These self-histories, called *jibunshi*, are defined as

a negotiation between a personal sense of the past constructed through the memory of specific lived experiences (real or imagined) and a hegemonic “Story of the Japanese” reproduced in a general mass media and taught in government-approved history textbooks. (Fical 3)

Because of its intrinsic valuing of specific and personal stories, the autobiographical genre invites writers to subvert the generalized and impersonal history.
When nonwestern writers intertwine their own story with the story of their people or their nation, there is bound to be a different perspective, if not a contradiction of the dominant historical narrative. Judith Lütge Coullie asserts that “much South African autobiographical writing seeks to rewrite history” (“Power to Name” 1). She later discusses how South African worker testimonies, a type of autobiography prominent in the 1980’s, struggle for democracy by fragmenting from grassroots the grand narratives of history and sociology, by attempting to individualize the statistical abstractions that can numb one’s sense of what the people who are part of the statistics experience. (7)

Autobiographies thus allow their authors to assert history the way they saw it happen, which in turn allows the reader to experience a nation’s history from an “insider’s” perspective.

Often this insider’s perspective provides the reader with an account that may seem incongruent with the dominant perspective. Anhua Gao and Omprakash Valmiki demonstrate this incongruency with their perspectives on major historical figures, Ho Chi Minh and Mahatma Gandhi, respectively. Gao describes how she met Ho Chi Minh as a Communist Young Pioneer: “As we climbed the 392 steps, Grandpa Ho asked about our studies, and as we answered him he patted our shoulders and said ‘Very good’. Then, unexpectedly, he gave me a naughty, conspiratorial wink. I felt like I was his best friend” (75). Later she writes, “a few years after his visit, history was rewritten again by Mao and we were told that Grandpa Ho was not an absolute revolutionary in the international Communist cause” (76). Gao cannot accept this new history, and so she consciously diverges from it, and chooses to tell a history that is more favorable to “Grandpa Ho.”

Valmiki similarly diverges from the dominant historical narrative of his country, with a perspective that may even clash strongly with western historical perspectives. Unlike Gao with
Ho Chi Minh, Valmiki never met Mahatma Gandhi. His viewpoint on Gandhi came from reading and listening to other Dalit writers. Valmiki gives a different picture of Gandhi than the very saintly view westerners are used to reading about: while fully acknowledging Gandhi’s “uplifting of the untouchables” (3), Valmiki also criticizes Gandhi for creating the Poona Pact in 1932, which denied the Dalits separate representation in India’s government (84). Writing autobiographies offers people a chance to write history as they see it and to resist conformity to the prevalent historical discourse.

Nonwestern autobiographers demonstrate the power of the genre by using it as a means of resistance. Their autobiographies remind us of the strength that can be found in words. In a postmodern climate, readers and writers have learned to distrust words and while this perspective has its legitimate points, it would be a mistake to forget what words can still accomplish. As a study of nonwestern autobiographies reveals, articulating one’s story is a triumph over the forces that would silence or seek to suppress dissenting voices.

**Breaking the Rules**

Not only do nonwestern autobiographies resist by *what* they tell in their stories, but they also resist in the *way* they tell those stories. Recent scholarship on ancient nonwestern autobiographical traditions seeks to explain the differences that caused these traditions to be ignored by the western world. Similarly, there are also current efforts among scholars to elucidate the differences in more recent autobiographies and explore how these works challenge the ‘rules’ of traditional western autobiography. ‘Rules’ may be a misleading term, because it implies that someone somewhere set down the universal standard, but it does accurately convey the rigidity of the autobiography’s generic boundaries.
In the past couple of decades, autobiography has enjoyed a surge in popularity, not only in the mainstream setting, but also in literary criticism. Sidonie Smith calls autobiography “the genre of choice among literary and cultural critics” but notes that before, it was in “the margins of critical inquiry” (17). This new critical focus seems to have shaken up the genre, as more attention has resulted in more diverse perspectives. Critics are questioning the traditional “rules” of autobiography. In his book *How our lives became stories: making selves*, Paul John Eakin discusses how discourse shapes autobiography; people write only in accepted ways of talking about self. For example, one of these accepted ways is to depict the self as unified and cohesive; the autobiographer should look back on his or her life and see how events and actions all formulated their particular identity. Eakin questions this accepted autobiographical form and argues that we are actually multiple selves:

The selves we have been may seem to us as discrete and separate as the other persons with whom we live our relational lives. This experiential truth points to the fact that our sense of continuous identity is a fiction, the primary fiction of all self-narration. (93)

Thus Eakin deconstructs the idea that self can be understood as a unified entity.

Eakin’s type of deconstruction contributes to a general unsettledness to the genre, a state that theorist Sidonie Smith sees as advantageous for people in the margins. She describes how marginalized people question the generic borders:

their engagement in fluid entanglements with selves and narratives has often eventuated in unconscious or conscious interrogations of the master discourse, interrogations that position them to take advantage of this current instability. (Smith 18)
Nonwestern autobiographers demonstrate these interrogations frequently in the ways they challenge western concepts the autobiographical self, as well as the western ‘rules’ of autobiography.

Autobiography, in its traditional western sense, is often understood as a genre of the individual. John Sturrock gives a typical description of this aspect of autobiography:

The writer’s urge to establish singularity is an inaugural topos of the genre . . . In reflecting on his life, the autobiographer traces the purposeful, seemingly anticipated course of his own separation out from others, his escape from among the great mass of the anonymous. (26)

Western autobiographies frequently emphasize the independent self. On the contrary, many nonwestern autobiographies depict an autobiographical self that is interdependent – one among others, one among a collective. “Separation out from others” is not their theme; though their own self usually remains the central figure, these autobiographers show that the self has many ties to the community around them.

Arabic and African autobiographies in particular show the connection between self and others. While differentiating modern Arab autobiography from its western counterpart, Susanne Enderwitz remarks on the Eastern autobiographer’s “rootedness in a collective identity” (77). This rootedness is seen in the autobiography of Palestinian Mahmūd Darwīš: “He does not regard himself as merely an individual, but powerfully links the individual to the collective” (Hallaq 201). Arabic and African autobiographies often weave the story of a self with the story of a family, of a community, even of a nation. Carole Boyce Davies describes African women’s autobiographical self as a self “constantly in dialogue with culture, society – its ‘others’” (278).
Ellen Kuzwayo’s autobiography, Call Me Woman, particularly embodies this dialogic stance. Kuzwayo’s autobiography is divided into three parts: “Soweto,” “My Road to Soweto,” and “Patterns Behind the Struggle.” The first and third parts, although related to Kuzwayo’s own experience, address social issues, describe the community she grew up in, and offer praise for other women activists. It isn’t until the second part that Kuzwayo begins a chronologically linear account of her life: the first line of that second part begins with the requisite “I was born . . .” and this linear account continues until the conclusion of this second part. Davies says of Kuzwayo’s book: “this text is the most graphic illustration of the concept of the individual self ‘tucked away’” (280). Davies’ point can be clearly seen in how the book begins and ends. The first section of the book, “Soweto,” begins with a letter written from prison: “Darling Mama, It was so wonderful to see that familiar handwriting . . .” (3). The reader might presume that this is a letter written by Kuzwayo, as it is her autobiography. However, reading further reveals that this is a letter that was written to Kuzwayo, by a young woman she knew through the YWCA. The last two pages of her book, after the completion of the third section, consist of two lists: “South African Black Women Medical Doctors Qualified 1947-1981” and “South African Black Women Lawyers Qualified 1967-1982.” The letter and these lists both function to illuminate others’ bravery and courage so that Kuzwayo’s life is richly contextualized.

Judith Lütge Coullie finds that Kuzwayo’s descriptions of the other women “serve . . . to situate Kuzwayo’s autobiographical subject as being one of that company, to define her self as almost a palimpsest of the innumerable selves of South African black women” (“(In)Continent” 140). Call Me Woman is a testament to a self that, rather than seeking singularity, seeks instead to place itself among others, in a community. Kuzwayo says at one point in her book that the black community of Soweto is based upon the saying “Motho ke motho ka mothoyo mongoe” –
No man is an island (16). It would seem that her autobiography is based around that saying as well.

It is possible to over-generalize this individual/collective binary supposition however, and of this we may need to be cautious. Lisa McNee impatiently addresses the flaws of this supposition. She criticizes those who would ignore the diversity within a group, those who would always perceive the individual and the group as one entity (“Autobiographical” 4). Still, this recurring connection between self and community in nonwestern autobiographies is a significant trend, and shows how autobiographers from different cultures resist the western expectation of the autobiographical highly individualistic self.

Nonwestern autobiographies also challenge the boundaries of the autobiographical genre. One of the generic rules of autobiography expects the inclusion of “self-reflexivity” which means “the self is a problem unto itself and thinks about itself” (Milani “Veiled Voices” 2). This emphasis on self-reflexivity leads to an expectation that all autobiographies should be introspective. There is an expectation, furthermore, that the result of self-reflexivity is self-revelation. Western autobiographical standards privilege those works that delve into the private self and freely reveal private matters. William Hanaway uses these standards to judge Iranian works as non-autobiographical. He expects that “[w]eaknesses and darker aspects of the life are not suppressed, and the emphasis is not on making a public image but rather on trying to understand the meaning of the life in its context” (59). Because Iranian self-narratives do suppress weaknesses and do emphasize the public image, Hanaway does not consider there to be many “true” autobiographies in Persian literature (61).

This expectation of introspection and self-revelation is largely grounded in Western conceptions of self-narratives and, as Hanaway’s conclusion demonstrates, this expectation
proves problematic when one looks at autobiographies based in other culture's conceptions of what a self-narrative should contain. Arabic autobiographies are particularly problematic in regard to this expectation. It seems that the characteristics that defined ancient Arabic autobiographies - a focus on the public self - still continues today, and still provides problems for the theorist expecting a certain degree of revelation about private matters.

Autobiographers in the Arab world show an aversion to exposure of the private self. Samira Aghacy's description of Lebanese autobiographers demonstrates this: "Far from writing about their inner lives, they project themselves as public figures who have participated and succeeded in the making of history" (217). Susanne Enderwitz also notes this in her essay "Public Role and Private Self," because she similarly describes modern Arab autobiography as "devoid of introspection," possessing an "inclination to concealment" (77). She attributes these characteristics to the culture, where the line between public and private is sharply delineated. In an article for The Southern Review, Iranian writer Farzaneh Milani also sees self-revelation as a cultural expectation. She uses the metaphor of the veil to describe the constraints implicitly contained in Iranian culture; for women, "publishing life-narratives is the ultimate act of unveiling" ("On Walls" 1). The confession-type autobiography is thus rarely seen in this culture (3).

This general tendency towards reticence is doubly true when it is applied to women in the Arabic world. Milani provides another example of how self-revelation is not encouraged of women in Persian-Islamic culture: "A woman's proper name is improper in public. Disclosure of her identity is an abuse of privacy, while her minimal exposure is the accepted - in fact for long the ideal - norm" ("Veiled Voices" 5). In such a cultural context, autobiographies become a site for negotiation, as women struggle with how to talk about their story while still feeling
bound to their culture’s propensity for concealment. One Algerian Islamic woman reveals this struggle when she comments on her work, saying, “I had included such an autobiographical component that it bothered me as an Arab woman” (qtd in Mortimer 1). Even Azar Nafisi’s best-selling memoir Reading Lolita in Tehran, which seems very westernized in many respects, seems to retain some of that cultural reticence. This is demonstrated by Nafisi’s rather stern author’s note, which precedes the narrative:

Aspects of characters and events in this story have been changed mainly to protect individuals, not just from the eye of the censor but also from those who read such narratives to discover who’s who and who did what to whom, thriving on and filling their own emptiness through others’ secrets . . . I have made every effort to protect friends and students, baptizing them with new names and disguising them perhaps even from themselves.

While name changing is not unusual in the western world, Nafisi’s statement seems to indicate more than the procedural sort of name changing; her note exhibits a strong distaste for exposing people’s private lives to the prying of a public readership.

Nafisi’s name changing and attempt to distance names from their actual stories relates to another common literary practice among Arabic writers. In his essay, “Why Novels – Not Autobiographies?” Stephen Guth explores why Arabic writers tend to write their autobiographies as fiction. He gives three historical stages of this practice, and describes how the writers’ motivations developed throughout history. In the earliest stage, if an author did not believe that his/her life was an example of success, then that author would “take refuge in fiction as a means that allows him to write about his experiences truthfully, yet in disguise” (140). The second reason comes out of the first – as authors realized that fiction was a ‘safer’ way to reveal their
lives, they came to perceive fiction as a more truthful genre than autobiography. The third stage, the present one, follows from the previous two: in this stage, the dividing line between autobiography and fiction undergoes deconstruction (141). This conclusion may seem surprising, especially since other nonwestern groups, such as the Dalits, embrace autobiography precisely because they feel they can best tell the truth of their experience through this genre (Mukherjee xxxv). In contrast, Guth suggests that, for Arabic writers, fiction is closer to reality because culture constrains authors from writing the truth under the ‘I’.

It becomes clear that there are different norms for Arabic autobiography. The expectation that a text should be judged as autobiographical based on its degree of self-revelation seems a culturally narrow one. Dwight Reynolds does not hold self-revelation to be the determinant of autobiography, calling it a “subjective” criterion (“Introduction” 9). Indeed, how can one measure the amount of self-revelation in a text? how can one call writing about the public self, not writing about self? It may not be how westerners would write about their lives, but we need to move away from using westerners’ love of self-revelation as a standard for judging whether other cultures’ styles of self-presentation are autobiographical or not.

Perhaps it would be useful to turn a critical lens on this love of self-revelation. Consider Farzaneh Milani’s words on American culture:

I had never seen so many people eagerly recount their lives in books, magazines, on radio and television, in films, in therapy sessions. People made autobiographical statements on their license plates; they marketed their confessions for mass consumption. They competed for airtime to sensationalize their private lives on talk shows. (“On walls” 3) This excerpt underscores how western expectations for autobiography may be too bound up in our culture; used to a culture where talking about the private self is common and everyday,
westerners don’t understand why other culture’s autobiographies are so reticent. This eastern perspective on western culture also challenges and makes one question whether this expectation for self-revelation has gone too far. In The Book of Laughter and Forgetting, Kundera describes a societal phenomenon he calls “graphomania” as “a mania to write books (to have a public of unknown readers)” (127). He further explains:

“[t]he invention of printing formerly enabled people to understand one another. In the era of universal graphomania, the writing of books has an opposite meaning: everyone surrounded by his own words as by a wall of mirrors, which allows no voice to filter through from outside. (128)

The similarity of graphomania to Milani’s description of American culture is striking: those who reveal their lives for “mass consumption” are like the graphomaniacs who seek a “public of unknown readers.” The implication then is that talking incessantly about our private lives may lead to a societal state where no one listens to each other anymore.

And yet, Milani has further insight that shows that the west and east may not be such polar opposites. She suggests that westerners are not quite the unrestrained self-revelators she took them to be at first; this culture too has its own taboos:

It took me years to realize that in America other kinds of walls existed . . . Heaven knows how often, like an untrained dog, I stepped through the invisible fence and found myself trespassing on someone else’s privacy . . . Eventually I had to admit that this compulsively self-narrating culture, too, has its code of silence: its own veils; its own walls. (“On Walls” 3)

It would be a mistake to think that all westerners have turned themselves into open books, completely open autobiographies. There are cultural restraints on westerners too about what is
acceptable to talk about. The degree and type of self-revelation then is completely culturally relative; therefore it would be unfair to limit autobiography to one culture's standard of appropriate self-revelation.

This is not to say that self-revelation cannot be used as a way to discuss and evaluate autobiography. For it may be true that introspective works are more emotionally effective. Confessional types of autobiography may help us identify with the author more. And when it comes to resistance against silence and misrepresentation, more self-revelation probably will grip the reader and help them understand the situation better. In the end, however, the degree of confession and the level of self-revelation should not determine whether something is or is not autobiography. It can be used to judge the value of it, but not whether it is in fact autobiography. A different set of criteria must be used to determine that.

**Toward a Re-conceptualization of Autobiography**

Determining what those criteria are proves problematic when considering all that scholars are trying to put under the label of autobiography. Consider the case of Farugh Farrokhzad, an Iranian poet who published works in the 1950's and 1960's. William Hanaway asserts that her poetry is not autobiography because "it has no narrative which could give meaning to the scattered 'facts' that appear there" (59). Another critic, Michael Hillmann, while acknowledging that generally poetry cannot be considered autobiography, considers Farrokhzad's work as an exception, "owing to its special form and circumstances" (44). Hillmann alludes to Lejeune's autobiographical pact when he says that "Farrokhzad herself claimed that poetry was a mirror for her" (44). Philippe Lejeune wrote an influential essay on autobiographical theory called "Le pacte autobiographique." This pact made by the author indicates to the reader that "narrator and main character are identical," and furthermore that "the narrated events are really part of his own
experience and life” (de Moor 131). Hillmann seems to regard Farrokhzad’s statement as evidence of this kind of pact.

Hillmann also uses reader response as evidence, highlighting the fact that almost all Iranian readers took Farrokhzad’s poetry as “autobiographical truth” (44). Ironically, he uses the controversy caused by her poetry as additional support for this autobiography categorization. Farrokhzad’s reading public concluded that she had transgressed the boundary between private and public – that she had revealed her self too much. This is ironic, because by using self-revelation as a criterion for autobiography, Hillmann participates in a culturally bound view of autobiography. In any case, Hillmann’s push for Farrokhzad’s poetry to be considered as autobiography still requires a major stretch of the usual generic boundaries.

There is also a movement to consider oral forms and oral histories as autobiographies. Lisa McNee, as mentioned before, considers certain Senegalese performance poetry to be autobiographical. She includes one of these poems in her article, of which the following has been excerpted:

Ngone Mbaay, what burned in your fire?

N.M.: Leroi, don’t you know about my fire?

I lost so much!

Ngone Mbaay, what burned in your fire?

N.M.: Spare me from evil tongues,

Don’t let them touch my guests!

Ngone Mbaay, what burned in your fire?

N.M.: Leroi! When I lit the fire, before I slept

I put it out.
I always put out the fire

Before I left, in order to be safe.

I, Ngone Mbaay, I’ve lost a lot. (qtd. in McNee “Autobiographical” 5).

The poem continues after this point, with the question, “Ngonne Mbaay, what burned in your fire?” forming the refrain. This poem is far from what most westerners would consider autobiography, and yet McNee argues for its “autobiographical character” (5). Similarly, transcribed oral histories are another claimant for the title of autobiography. In her article on South African worker testimonies, Judith Lütge Coullie maintains that these testimonies are autobiographies because “each relies on the reader’s sense of the narrative being based on the personal testimony of living individuals” (“Power to Name” 2). Inclusion of oral testimonies as autobiography is appealing because it aligns with the theory of autobiographies as the medium for marginalized voices. Certainly, illiterate people such as these South African workers are marginalized voices, especially because of their lack of literacy.

But if all these are considered autobiography, then where are the generic boundaries of autobiography? I am reminded of a children’s story, where a mouse finds a mitten in the snow and crawls inside it for warmth. Soon another creature happens by and asks if they can share the space. The mouse acquiesces, and the creature squeezes into it. This continues on as more and more animals want to share the mitten: even a bear climbs inside. The last creature to happen by is a cricket. It decides there is room for one more and hops inside – and the mitten bursts into pieces. Will this be true of autobiography too? If there is always room made for every new expansion, then won’t the genre burst? Sidonie Smith sees this kind of end for autobiography:

Inevitably, traditional autobiography, like the self, can be expected to shatter, disperse.

“With each deeper penetration into the workings of the text,” notes William C.
Spengemann, "the connections between autobiography and what it appears to describe have become increasingly problematical, and the differences between autobiography and other written forms correspondingly indistinct, until there no longer seems to be anything that either is or is not autobiography"... As the end of this century approaches, the genre as such seems threatened with generic extinction. (17)

Smith's observation here doesn't seem too far from truth when considering the challenges that nonwestern autobiographies bring to the study of the genre. So is it too much to ask these texts to be included? Some might wonder why there is this insistence to name all these texts "autobiographies." Does the name really matter? A brief answer says "yes" because exclusion from this title carries the connotation that these works are inferior because they don't meet the standards of autobiography. In addition, there is a fear that identifying these texts only as non-autobiographies will result in the misplacing and forgetting of these texts.

Thus theorists and scholars attempt diverse categorizations strategies, trying to squeeze in this kind of text or this other. One tactic is to qualify the category that the text is in. For example, instead of calling the South African worker testimonies "autobiography", Coullie calls them a "subgenre" of autobiography ("Power to Name" 1). Similarly, Julia Watson describes another African text as "poised discursively between the competing genres of autobiography and ethnographic memoir" and also as "autoethnography," a "hybrid form of autobiography" (1-2). Gerald Figel is perhaps the most creative in trying to respond to the definition of autobiography. In talking about jibunshi, Figel states: "I also want to distinguish jibunshi from jiden or "autobiography," although jibunshi are in the same generic constellation as autobiographies or memoirs" (2). Subgenre, hybrid form, constellation – these are all evidence of semantic negotiation, as scholars try to bring a degree of clarity to the categorization process.
Other common sites of negotation are between the categories of autobiography and memoir, literary autobiography and pragmatic autobiography, autobiography and autobiographical. However, when trying to determine the difference between these categories, one realizes that the differences might not be all that clear-cut. Reynolds addresses the attempt to differentiate autobiography and memoir, with "the focus of the latter being the external events that took place during the author's life rather than the development of the author's life per se" ("Introduction" 9). Reynolds says of this differentiation: "Although the two categories appear to be separate and clear in the abstract, when addressing actual texts this clarity often proves ephemeral" (9). This statement seems to apply to other categories as well. For instance, the difference between literary and pragmatic is not all that easy to distinguish, and there seem to be different definitions everywhere. Some say that literary autobiographies are those written by people who have written other non-autobiographical works, others that literary autobiographies are those that employ self-reflexivity. The first definition, at least, would work, but the second seems so subjective that delineation would be fairly impossible. The difference between autobiography and autobiographical is similarly fuzzy. Autobiographical seems a way to hedge out of direct claims to the genre – as if one was saying, well it's like autobiography, but not exactly, or that it has some characteristics of autobiography but not all. Thus, trying to separate the autobiographical from "pure" autobiography proves to be a completely subjective task.

Another way to qualify the text, before claiming that it is autobiography, is to put a prefix indicating its regional status. This is in effect what this paper has been employing throughout: qualifying the text as Arabic autobiography, or Dalit autobiography, or South African autobiography, or the catch-all of nonwestern autobiography. However, this can become somewhat problematic if used too rigidly. We can become so caught up and excited about
showing how *different* these other culture’s takes on autobiography are, that we go to the
extreme and don’t see intercultural literary exchange. Lisa McNee, skeptical of homogenization,
states:

we cannot characterize particular autobiographical discourses as purely European, Arab,
African . . . given the centuries of trade and communication that bind different
communities . . . Literary production offers multiple, changing models of identity, rather
than one timeless emblem of cultural identity. ("Autobiographical" 4).

Certainly, as this paper shows, nonwestern autobiographies contribute a degree of difference to
the study of autobiography. They may also influence westerners in their attitude toward
autobiography. It would be a mistake, however, not to acknowledge the influence of western
autobiography on nonwestern autobiography. While Gusdorf’s “colonizing” of mentality is still
highly ethnocentric, it would also be faulty to ignore the effect that western autobiographies have
had on nonwestern autobiographies.

Sometimes works from the western autobiographical canon have functioned as models
for nonwestern autobiographers. Susanne Enderwitz, while disagreeing with Gusdorf’s
ethnocentricism, nevertheless connects the beginnings of modern Arabic autobiography to the
European presence in the Middle East. She writes: “Others, who were to follow, not only
modeled their life histories but also their life stories on autobiographies such as *The Education of
Henry Adams*” (76). In his book *Self and Nation: Autobiography and the Modern
Representation of Indonesia*, C.W. Watson describes a recent autobiographical endeavor, a
 compilation of young Muslim Indonesians’ autobiographies. The editors’ requirements of the
 contributions were as follows: “confessional autobiography was required – St. Augustine’s
*Confessions* is mentioned as an early example of the form” (208). Carol Boyce Davies finds that
African male autobiographies and traditional western autobiographies are quite similar in their narrative framework: "For the African male, autobiography generally comes, as it does in the Euro-American tradition, after a triumph, the documentation of his passage through, and transcendence over, a tortuous experience" (270). This intercultural exchange of autobiographical practices demonstrates McNee's point well.

In addition, the west sometimes figures in the content of the books themselves, often functioning as a kind of mecca for these nonwestern authors, or as a safe haven, or a place of exile. Pascal Thwe, Anhua Gao, and Azar Nafisi are all examples of nonwestern authors who wrote their autobiographies in exile. Then too, the underlying principle of the existence of these texts – "everyone has a story" – is so intertwined with democratic ideals, that at least politically these texts seem to have more in common with the United States than with Africa, Asia, or the Middle East. Yet, in many other ways, these texts still demonstrate difference from traditional western autobiographical practices. The acknowledgment of western influence does not undermine all the previous arguments for nonwestern autobiographies' difference. This acknowledgment does, however, show that qualifying texts as Arabic autobiography, or as western autobiography, might not be a very effective way of categorizing these texts.

Robert Folkenflik puts forward another appealing idea for categorization by differentiating between rules and "norms:"

Autobiography, as I understand it, has norms but not rules. It is usually but not exclusively in the first person . . . Autobiographies may be in prose or verse . . . truthful or mendacious . . . Autobiography is usually written in old age, or at least in mid-life . . . but it may written by the young . . . Autobiographies are generally written by those who
bear the same name as the protagonists of their narratives . . . Autobiographies are generally narratives about the past of the writer. (13-15).

Folkenflik’s idea is appealing because of its flexibility; nonwestern autobiographies have shown how inflexible the rules for western autobiographies are, so projecting norms rather than rules is a movement in the right direction. However, even though Folkenflik certainly meant “norms” in its statistical sense, those that don’t fall into the normal category may still carry the negative connotation of being “abnormal.” However, this is a minor detraction. For the most part Folkenflik’s approach is a useable and satisfactory one. And yet, Folkenflik’s recurrent use of “usually” and “generally” underscores the fact that autobiographies today, as demonstrated by nonwestern autobiographies, are really breaking all the rules. It is not surprising, then, that some theorists have simply thrown up their hands, and declared, like Lingzhen Wang in her dissertation: “there is no universal standard or definition of autobiography” (19).

Perhaps there is another solution to this dilemma of the autobiographical genre. When Michael Hillmann sought to label Forugh Farrokhzad’s poetry as autobiography, he used reader response as justification. Because Farrokhzad’s Iranian reading public understood her poetry as autobiography, and read it as such, Hillmann argues that her poetry is autobiography. Coullie makes a similar justification in her discussion of South African worker testimonies: she reasons that while some of these texts are “hardly recognizable of autobiographies,” she can name them autobiography because “each relies on the reader’s sense of the narrative being based on the personal testimony of living individuals” (“Power to Name” 2, emphasis mine). Both Coullie and Hillmann rely on reader response to determine the text’s categorization: if the readers read a text as autobiography, then it is.
This method for identifying texts as autobiography indicates a new direction for autobiographical study. As the idea of setting generic boundaries becomes more and more problematic, we draw nearer to a more fluid view of autobiography, one where autobiography is defined as a way of reading rather than a set group of texts. Instead of haggling over whether a text is or is not autobiography, one would be able to say that it can be read as autobiography. Thus, the text is free to be read as something else – poetry, ethnography – but reading it as autobiography can be as valid as these others. There is no more exclusive club, where texts vie for inclusion based on narrow criteria. The terms ‘pure’ autobiography and ‘true’ autobiography will be rendered meaningless, because so many texts can legitimately be called autobiography. Nonwestern autobiographies have shown that the old generic definitions are outdated and too rigid. Autobiography as a way of reading could be the key to flexibility."

If autobiography is a way of reading, then our task would be to formulate what set of questions should/could accompany this approach. These questions would have as their foundations the issues that defined the genre’s boundaries in the past, but the difference would be that the answers would not be used to determine whether the text is or is not autobiography. For instance, the degree of self-revelation was used to determine whether a text was true autobiography or not. In this new way of studying autobiography, one would ask, how much self-revelation/private self is contained in this text, but allow for a variety of answers to this question. This way of thinking about autobiography is similar to Folkenflik’s norms, in that it identifies the main issues of autobiography and allows for a spectrum of responses to these issues. Other questions would include queries such as: what is the nature of the self in this text? what cultural influences are evident in this self-presentation? how has the author presented him or herself? what seem to be their purposes of writing this text about self? what is the view of
memory in this text? The definition of autobiography becomes then, a text that is receptive to these sorts of questions.

Conclusion

Moving autobiographical study to the global realm has rewarding results because nonwestern texts contribute a new dimension to the way we think about autobiography. In a society where the autobiographical genre has been accused as being a symptom of a widespread narcissism, nonwestern texts show how autobiography is more than self-aggrandization. Writing autobiographically becomes an empowering act, an act that seeks to change how the world sees the author, a situation, or a specific community. One could argue even, that there is a grain of unselfishness to these texts, because the authors use their own lives to try and help others.

Nonwestern autobiography also challenges commonly held theories about what is or is not autobiography. These texts undermine the assumption that the autobiographical self should be autonomous and individualistic, showing that there are all kinds of ways to view self. Nonwestern autobiographies, and particularly Arabic autobiographies, debunk the myth that one needs a certain amount of self-revelation and unveiling of the private self in order to qualify as autobiography. Overall, these texts challenge the idea that the way a self is presented can determine whether the text can claim the title of autobiography. Autobiography is simply writing about the self, and whatever way that person views him or herself can be legitimately called autobiography.

The study of nonwestern autobiographies shows that we are not the only ones who believe that everyone has a story. This concept underlies these texts as well; moreover, in addition to asserting, “everyone has a story,” these texts assert that there are many ways to tell it, and that all these ways deserve to be listened to as autobiography.
Endnotes

1 A note here should be made on the limitations of my study. In the interest of making this subject more manageable, I limited my focus to those nonwestern societies in Asia, Africa, and the Middle East.

2 Dinah Manisty also uses the idea of resistance levels in her essay “Negotiating the Space between Private and Public: Women’s Autobiographical Writing in Egypt,” but whereas Manisty focuses on gender issues, my focus is more on cultural issues.

3 Kuzwayo provides a good segue into a topic that deserves mention, although it is not the main focus of this paper. That is, any study of nonwestern autobiographies will intersect with studies of women’s autobiographies. Many of the articles referenced here are written in the name of women’s autobiography, not nonwestern autobiography. Women’s autobiographical discourse is another area of interrogation of traditional Western male autobiography. Nonwestern women are a special point of interest in research because they are often doubly marginalized.

4 Figan, in his discussion of jibunshi, argues that jibunshi cannot be considered autobiography proper, because “the content of a jibunshi is virtually indistinguishable from that of an autobiography, the posture taken by a jibunshi writer differs” (2 of 23). He goes on to say that jibunshi is a more history-based form than a “literary autobiographical” discourse. Despite this assertion, I believe that jibunshi is close enough to autobiography that it is pertinent to this discussion, as it sheds light on how writing from experience can question history.

5 Stefan Wild also proposes that “autobiography . . . is as much a way to read as to write” (83), but he arrives at this conclusion from different reasons than I did. An excerpt from his essay is included here: “In the selective process of reinventing the self, the author at the same time defines the reader. The reader of an autobiography expects an autobiographical work to be different from pure fiction . . . The expectations of the reader are more direct, more concrete, and for the writer more binding than in the case of a novel. The authentic autobiography normally aims at heightening the intensity of communication between the writer and the reader. Therefore, the autobiographical pact makes the implied reader of the autobiography more powerful than the implied reader of a novel. Without much exaggeration, it could be said that the reader’s position resembles that of the author. Autobiography, in other words, is as much a way to read as to write” (82-83).
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