# **Experimental Life-Writing:** From Roland Barthes to Digital Biography

 $\bullet \bullet \bullet$ 

### Wojciech Drąg





## life-writing

"all kinds of accounts of individual lives and life experience" (Cuddon)

"language is a transparent medium capable of representing the world; character and the self are **knowable**; the cause-and-effect linearity implied by the chronological plot is a reliable way of ordering reality; and the author is a **trustworthy** narrator who understands the relationship between the private self and the public world" (O'Brien)

"we inevitably organize or form fragments of memory into complex constructions that become the **stories** of our lives" (Smith & Watson)

self-narrative = identity (Eakin)

## experimental life-writing

Donald J. Winslow (1980)

"[b]reaking new ground, especially in method, by biographers and autobiographers"











A GLOSSARY OF TERMS IN

Life-

BIOGRAPHY, AUTOBIOGRAPHY,



AND RELATED FORMS

Second Edition

Donald J. Winslow

## experimental life-writing

### Irene Kacandes (2012)

"employ[s] a technique for the purposes of fact or of enhancing, reinforcing or drawing attention to the referential level [and] aim[s] to convey some aspect of the 'realness' of certain life experiences that could not be conveyed as well without pushing at the form itself"

"[1] time; [2] medium; [3] the relational (the number of individuals at the heart of the work); and [4] the focus (the specific topic of the work)"

### ROUTLEDGE

The Routledge Companion to Experimental Literature



## experimental life-writing | time





### experimental life-writing | medium



HEARTBREAKING WORK

> STAGGERING GENIUS

> > DAVE EGGERS

### experimental life-writing | the relational



### Patrick Modiano Prix Nobel de limerature Dora Bruder



### experimental life-writing | the work's focus



### experiments in life-writing

Julia Novak (2017) works that "push at the boundaries of existing forms to mould them into something that better suits the writer's efforts of representation"

(1) subject, (2) genre, (3) style, (4) structure, (5) intertextuality and metalepsis, (6) play with names and pronouns, and (7) media



### experiments in life-writing | subject





### experiments in life-writing | genre



### experiments in life-writing | style



### experiments in life-writing | structure



### experiments in life-writing | intertextuality and metalepsis



### experiments in life-writing | play with names and pronouns



### experiments in life-writing | media



## **Related concepts**

anti-biography (David E. Nye) autobiografiction (Max Saunders) autofiction (Serge Doubrovsky) digital biography (Paul Longley Arthur) metabiography (Caitríona Ní Dhúill) paramemoir (Irene Kacandes)



Wrocław, Poland 22-23 April 2022

Guest speakers Irene Kacandes Teresa Bruś & David Clark

Organized by Vanessa Guignery and Wojciech Drąg http://vanessaguignery.fr/



blurring the distinction between non-fiction and fiction anti-narrative disposition fragmentation hybridity elusiveness and indeterminacy of the auto/biographical subject

### archive

"archive fever" (Derrida), "archival impulse" (Foster), "archival craze" (Giannachi), "archival turn"

"our obsession with the augmentation, documentation, and transmission of our own presence" (Giannachi)

self-documentation in apps (activity trackers) and social media

not just a structure to understand the past but also a way of "mapping the everyday"

personal data arranged in alphabetical, chronological, associative order

### ARCHIVE EVERYTHING

MAPPING THE EVERYDAY



### database

"a new way to structure our experience of ourselves and of the world" + dominant cultural form (Manovich)

"prototypical genre of the twenty-first century" (Manoff)

a structured collection of digital data

representation of the world as a list of items with no hierarchy and no sequence

"natural enemy" of the narrative (Manovich)



### **Alphabetical archives**

### A

Аму

For a while I wished my name was spelled Aimee; it seemed so much more original, innovative, so chock-full of vowels. I like that my name can spell May and yam. When I was growing up, my parents would sing the old song "Once in Love with Amy." I always liked when they did that. In my dating years, the song was "Amie," by Pure Prairie League. Boy: (singing) "Amie / What you wanna do?" I always liked that little serenade as well. The Japanese word *amai* means *the feeling of being cherished and expectation to be loved*. The amygdala is the emotional center of the brain. People close to me call me Aim, and that feels affectionate and validating; conversely, I am wary of people I've just met who are prematurely chummy and refer to me that way. I've been signing my name like this



The amygdala acts as the storehouse of en Without the amygdala, life is stripped of per passion depends on it.



School assignment, first grade.

#### AMY ROSENTHAL

My father-in-law informed me that my produce these two anagrams: Hearty Salm cannot tell you how much I love that.

Answering Machine

## glossary/encyclopaedia/index



#### Actif / réactif ~ Active / reactive

In what he writes, there are two texts. Text I is reactive, moved by indignations, fears, unspoken rejoinders, minor paranoias, defenses, scenes. Text II is active, moved by pleasure. But as it is written, corrected, accommodated to the fiction of Style, Text I becomes active too, whereupon it loses its reactive skin, which subsists only in patches (mere parentheses).

#### L'adjectif ~ The adjective

He is troubled by any *image* of himself, suffers when he is named. He finds the perfection of a human relationship in this vacancy of the image: to abolish—in oneself, between oneself and others—*adjectives*; a relationship which adjectivizes is on the side of the image, on the side of domination, of death.

(In Morocco, they evidently had no image of me; my efforts, as a good European, to be *this or that* received no reply: neither *this* nor *that* was returned in the form of a fine adjective; it never occurred to them to *gloss* me, they unwittingly refused to feed and flatter my image-repertoire. Initially, this matte quality of human relationships had something exhausting about it, but gradually it came to seem a triumph of civilization or the truly dialectical form of erotic discourse.)

#### L'aise ~ Ease

Being a hedonist (since he regards himself as one), he seeks a state which is, really, comfort; but this comfort is more complicated than the household kind whose elements are determined by our society: it is a comfort he arranges for himself (the way my grandfather B., at the end of his life, had arranged a little platform inside his window, so as to obtain a better view of the garden while he was working). This personal comfort might be called: *ease*. Ease can be given a theoretical dignity ("We need not keep our distance



## glossary/encyclopaedia/index

### LEAVING A TIP

When leaving a tip at the counter, I often do so with exaggerated gestures, or take a bit longer than necessary to place the dollar in the dish, just to make sure they know what a nice and generous customer I am.

#### PEDESTRIAN

When I'm about to cross a street and a car stops to let me go, I don't just walk—I sort of jog-dodge across to, you know, show the driver that I'm not taking advantage of this situation. Yes, I, the pedestrian, have the right of way, but see, I care about you, too, here, just a sec, I'll cross quickly and get out of your way.

### Encyclopedia of an Ordinary Life

I have not survived against all odds.

I have not lived to tell.

I have not witnessed the extraordinary.

This is my story.



AMY KROUSE ROSENTHAL

## glossary/encyclopaedia/index

### Suicide: act of attempt to imagine, 1-4bare-bones account, 5-6 immediate aftermath, 7-34 anger about, 35 attitude toward his. 36-42 mine, 43 belief that change of scene might unlock emotion concerning, 44-47 day after brother's appearance, 48-53 concern that he will be viewed differently now, 54-55 "little room" discussion with his business partner, 56-58 search warrant, 59-60 speculation relating to bulge, 61-66 deviation from chronological narrative of, 67-71



## bibliography

### PRIMARY SOURCES<sup>1</sup>

Abbé, William Parker.<sup>2</sup> A Diary of Sketches. Concord, N.H.: St. Paul's School, 1976.

<sup>1</sup>Born 10.18.61 in NYC. Childhood pretty uneventful. We moved to the suburbs. I always read a lot. I did some kid stuff, but mostly I read. So this sketchy and selective bibliography—this list of some of the books I have around the house now—is really an autobiography.

#### Elissa Washuta 🔹 45

FAULKNER, WILLIAM. ABSALOM, ABSALOM! 1936. NEW YORK: RANDOM HOUSE, 2002. I read this in college, sitting at the foot of my bed, in the four hours before my junior American Lit class started. When I got to class, I couldn't enter the discussion, because I couldn't remember the characters' names, or what the book was about, or anything that had happened in it. But I had read it for class, and as a writer, I was supposed to read Faulkner. That's the kind of thing writers do. If you asked me now, I'd probably say the book is about the South.

#### SHAKESPEARE, WILLIAM. KING LEAR.

I read five of his later plays junior year. The only lines I cared about, or even remember, are, "Use me well. / You shall have ransom. Let me have surgeons, / I am cut to th'brains," because I was.

#### ROTH, PHILIP. AMERICAN PASTORAL. 1997. NEW YORK: VINTAGE BOOKS, 1998.

A girl from New Jersey commits an act of political terrorism; she becomes a murderer. The girl is raped twice; "The New Jersey girl rises to the level of psychosis" (261); couldn't the same be said about me? But I never killed anyone. I know my parents never thought, as Swede thought, "The worst of the world had taken his child. If only



## bibliography

### Self-Portrait as a 1980s Cineplex Movie Theatre (An Abecedarian)

Steve Fellner

Amadeus (1984):

I never knew who I wanted to be: Amadeus or Salieri?

In the movie, Amadeus wins. Who doesn't want to have an inevitable triumph, a defiant legacy? We know his music will live forever. The final scene shows us a decrepit Salieri in a wheelchair, rolling around in a nursing home, bellowing, "Mediocrities, everywhere! I absolve you! I absolve you all!"

When I was fourteen and watched the Oscars, everything changed.

I wanted to be Salieri.

F. Murray Abraham who plays Salieri won the award for Best Actor, beating out Tom Hulce who

FreeCamsToday. "Would You like to Hook Up?" 2013. E-mail. FreeCamsToday. "You've Been FAVORITE LISTE Feb. 2013, E-mail. FreeCamsToday. "Angelina Likes Your Picture." I 2012, E-mail. FreeCamsToday. "Angelina Likes Your Profile." M 2012. E-mail. FreeCamsToday. "Jennifer Sent You a Message o author. 8 Dec. 2012. E-mail. FreeCamsToday. "Our Meeting Today!" Message E-mail. FreeCamsToday. "Take a Look at My Pics Online Dec. 2012. E-mail. FreeCamsToday. "View Jennifer's Cam!" Message to the author. 26 Nov. 2012. E-mail. Freer, Muston. "Don't Pay a Fortune for Printer Ink. Save with 101inks! Free Shipping Available." Message to the author. 13 Jan. 2013. E-mail. Freescore360. "Get Your 3 Credit Scores Today." Message to the author. 8 Dec. 2012, E-mail. FreeWebCams. "Angelina Thinks Your Hot!" Message to the author. 11 Jan. 2013. E-mail.

## **Chronological archives**



## Chronicle



Alexandra Nemerov "First My Motorola"

First, my Motorola Then my Frette Then my Sonia Rykiel Then my Bulgari Then my Asprey Then my Cartier Then my Kohler Then my Brightsmile Then my Cetaphil Then my Braun Then my Brightsmile Then my Kohler Then my Cetaphil Then my Bliss Then my Apple...







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Value

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### Anthology of posts/social media archive







es Figues Press Los Angeles

### Other archives

HUENEME SCHOOL DISTRICT 559 629 629 Hollywood Beach School SHOPPING SPREE 281 W. 24TH ST ., SUITE 152 PUPIL PROGRESS REPORT YUMA, AZ. 85364 Dear Parents: EARNINGS This report is to help keep you informed on the progress of Uang 3938 REG. 1100 If you desire more information prior to the scheduled conferencing period in , please feel free to request a conference, serious reading problems at this time. The is becoming a good out reader. Her attitudes toward reading are pointive and she enjoys doing the follow up work. I am hoppy to have her in READING - Green Light So - Dana is having no 3938 CURR 28640 Y.T.D. GROSS INC TAX This is a record of your earnings and deductions my class. Dana has completed her level (2) moth book as well as an Individualized math tit for third grade the is working more at a third grade level with good success. Dana is a good math student, she does well,

264

1919

FICA Detach and retain

### inventory

### Mon Catalogue

#### Ma lampe fluo

Equipée d'un tube économie d'énergie, ma lampe fluo me procure un éclairage d'ambiance très agréable et durable. Sa poignée articulée me permet de la transporter facilement et de me déplacer sans risque dans l'obscurité totale. Et pour parer à toute éventualité, elle est équipée d'une lampe rouge clignotante pour signal de détresse. Etanche à la pluie et aux projections d'eau, je la fais fonctionner sur piles.

#### Mon canapé

Telle une pièce de maître conçue avec un intense amour du détail, mon canapé, fruit du design contemporain, s'adresse à tous ceux qui, comme moi, ont le goût de la perfection et attachent de la valeur à la réalisation d'un style de vie personnel. Façonné à la main point par point par des tanneurs, selliers et bourreliers, mon modèle est un original : c'est le résultat d'un travail artisanal unique dans un cuir naturel d'exception. Car si ce que je possède me révèle, mon objectif n'est pas seulement de répondre à un souci utilitaire mais de donner une âme à mon mobilier.

#### Mon pouf-lit

Le jour, mon pouf-lit est une table basse ou un siège. Je peux aussi glisser mes revues dans une de ses douze poches latérales, y ranger ma télécommande et mes journaux... Mais lorsque j'hôte sa housse en coton, je le transforme en quelques secondes en un lit confortable.

## inventory

Espèces d'espaces

**Georges** Perec

GEORGES PEREC

### PENSER/CLASSER

galilée

HACHETTE
#### catalogue/list

#### IREMEMBER

'I remember a little boy who said it was more fun to pee together than alone, and so we did, and so it was.'

'I remember Liberace.'

'I remember one very hot summer day I put ice cubes in my aquarium and all the fish died.'

Joe Brainard







source hat on the sofa (light beige) unless we

and the people who moved in

I remember "no toilet paper", when it's too late.

I remember "B.L.T."s that fall apart at the first bite.

I remember Halloween. And the annual problem of whether to wear a mask or to see. (Glasses)

I remember glasses on top of satin eye masks.

I remember, the day after Halloween, talk about car door windows getting soaped, and of lawn furniture appearing on unfamiliar porches.

I remember next door neighbors who don't keep up their lawns.

I remember a girl who could bend her thumb all the way back. And a boy who could wiggle one ear at a time.

I remember a lady almost talking my Mother into a set of Encyclopedias.

I remember starting a set of super-market Encyclopedias, but three was as far as we got.

I remember fantasies of someday reading a complete set of Encyclopedias and knowing everything.

I remember enormous dictionaries.

### catalogue/list

#### LIDIA YUKNAVICH The Chronology of Water

#### 1987

The day my daughter was born, after I held the future stillborn and pink and rose-lipped in my shivering arms, lifeless tender, the nurse gave me tranquilizers and a soap and sponge. She guided me to a special shower. The shower had a stool and the spray came down lightly, warm. She said, you probably want to wash yourself. She said, you are still bleeding quite a bit. Ripped from vagina to rectum, sewn closed. I sat on the stool and melted into the water for over an hour. I bled, cried, peed, and vomited. I became liquid. I forgot myself. Finally she had to come back and save me "from drowning in there." It was a joke. It made me smile.

#### 1990

Little tragedies are difficult to keep straight. They swell, cluster and swim in and out between one another, collect and pool in sinkholes of the brain. It's hard to know what to think of a life when you find yourself knee-deep, hard to hold it in your mind. You want to climb out, you want to explain how there must be some mistake. And then you see the waves without pattern, scooping up everyone, throwing them around like so many plankton, and you can only laugh at all the silly bobbings. Laughter can shake you out of deliriums. You need some hilarious vision to save you: once when I was standing naked murderous hate for a man with no memory. When memory does flash up it is sweet and kind.

#### Leonard Michaels In the Fifties

IN THE FIFTIES I LEARNED TO DRIVE quently in love. I had more friends than now When Khrushchev denounced Staliu

blood, turned yellow, and lost most of his ha

I attended the lectures of the exceller...... Senator McCarthy ended his tenure. I imagined NYU would burn. Miserable students, drifting in the halls, looked at one another.

In less than a month, working day and night, I wrote a bad novel.

I went to school–NYU, Michigan, Berkeley–much of the time. I had witty, giddy conversation, four or five nights a week, in a homosexual bar in Ann Arbor.

I read literary reviews the way people suck candy.

#### Wayne Koestenbaum My 1980s

Les Fleuves m'ont laissé descendre où je voulais. – ARTHUR RIMBAUD

I MET TAMA JANOWITZ ONCE IN THE 1980S. (WAS IT 1987?) She probably doesn't remember our encounter. She was a visiting fellow at Princeton, where I was a graduate student in English. At a university gathering, Joyce Carol Oates complimented the ostentatious way that Tama and I were dressed. Seeking system, I replied, "Tama is East Village. I'm West Village."

\* \* \*

\* \* \*

I had little to do with art in the eighties. I saw Caravaggio in Rome, and Carpaccio in Venice. I neglected the contemporary. For half the decade I lived in New York City, and yet I didn't go to a single Warhol opening. Missed opportunities? My mind was elsewhere.

### catalogue/list

#### Annie Ernaux Les années



—a bar and a jukebox that played Apache at Tally Ho Corner, Finchley

—a house at the very back of a garden, 35 avenue Edmond Rostand in Villiersle-Bel

—the gaze of the black-and-white cat the moment the needle put her to sleep

—the man in pajamas and slippers who wept every afternoon in the lobby of the old folks' home in Pontoise, and asked visitors to call his son, holding up a piece of soiled paper on which a phone number was written

—the woman of the Bentalha massacre in Algeria in the photo by Hocine that resembles a Pietà

—the dazzling sun on the walls of San Michele Cemetery, seen from the shade of the Fondamenta Nuove

## portfolio





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- and go: Accepted at all Chevron stations in the U.S. and Canada and at participating Texaco stations — more than the static locations. The card is also accepted at most Texaco Nurses University Index
- One convenient monthly statement for your Chevron and Texaco purchases, plus secure internet access to your account — check your purchases and pay bills online.
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EXAMINATION FORM



"Subtotals" Gregory <u>Burnham</u>

Number of refrigerators I've lived with: 18. Number of rotten eggs I've thrown: 1. Number of finger rings I've owned: 3. Number of broken bones: 0. Number of Purple Hearts: 0. Number of holes in one, big golf: 0; miniature golf:3. Number of consecutive push-ups, maximum: 25...

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How many times I've dreamed the day away:											

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## transcript

#### SOLILOQUY

#### KENNETH GOLDSMITH

out in whatever way I can and also if you guys at its a done. I'm available for that Tally an yeah. I like the in getting a site done I'm available for that. Tell Mat uh, it depends really how deep you want to go and add you know, how big how big you want to go I mean source can be very done very simple very quickly something out be done very very complicated and could take a long in It really it's not an easy question to. Which one? Yours' We I'm a I'm a natural collect I'm naturally a collector adi cate categorizer 3, 3, you know, 3 years worth of collecting so. But you'll read about it. The article is all about this box and, you know, if you want I'll just do a print out for you, it un. It's only 600 you're not going to read the whole this 's impossible to read I mean you can't read it start to find lright, well, do be in touch. Do you have email, you per nally? Well, I have I I maintain an AOL account. 11 this hink they're great. Why why don't you give me yours and I'll oh you have it on there, OK. Well, I'll tell you aboil I can recommend a before you are set up in the office should consider, um, you should sort of consider where

me to put up first are like what he co anything about them. Are they good? So ten min unar, anything about uncert and because it's a great press and and Douglas, you know, sent this as being. Alright you guys. Good to meet you. Be in touch. See you around and if you OK, bye-bye. What? Sure. OK, bye. Hey Doug it's Kenny G. How ya doin'? OK is Ken around? OK. Hey. Right. So hi. How ya doin'? Yeah, how's everything going. Hope to see you sometime soon. I hope we can hang out or do something. When you said Harry took his first bike ride what did that mean? You put him on the back of your bike? Cool. Oh. Cool cool, Ken, I haven't seen him in so long. So let's get together at some point soon OK? You know, at any rate, why doesn't this guy have a phone? Is he the guy the guy who like plays Zappa and jazz and he's black he was like with BGO we he, yeah, OK. Good good. Well that would be perfect. We'r going to Greece, Cheryl and I. Great. Yeah great. Very good Oh boy, do you think he it's. Do you think he'll he'll he'll b able to cover for the shifts? Great great. OK. Well those a the two dates. OK good. Well it's extremely political as ye said today earlier. Yeah. No no you did. I suggested and think you reiterated that that we owe a lot of people fav

## scrapbook



### digital database









# I use the facts of Wittgenstein's life not to create a portrait with an internal consistency but instead to emphasize the external relations of his life to the outside world.



## digital database

The End

MESSAGES FROM THE UNSEEN WORLD

FREUD'S CIGAR

THE PALACE AT 4 A.M.

BEAUTIFUL FRIEND

THE MAN BEHIND THE CURTAIN

THE ANGEL OF HISTORY

**OPPOSITION AND SISTER SQUARES** 



Made In Korsakov



🎯 The End

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## the self

- ➢ fragmentation
- consumer behavior
- uniformity vs uniqueness/individuality
- ≻ data

#### "the classical, rounded biographical portrait is replaced by new, dynamic, and interchangeable fragments"

Katharina Prager and Vanessa Hannesschläger

### aggregation effect



Similar to a Seurat painting, where a multitude of dots juxtaposed together form a picture, bits of information when aggregated paint a portrait of a person.





[M]ost of us, to be honest, are just a collection of bits that don't make sense. It's a nice idea that there's a coherent self in each of us with a story that another person could tell but it's a fiction. Anne Carson

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## the self as a network

"The individual ceases to exist as a unitary object and becomes only a series of meeting points, a pattern of possibilities, a set of relationships"

(David E. Nye)

"This dissolving of the subject can be represented in the form of a network"

(Prager & Hannesschläger)



#### **The Invented Self**

An Anti-biography, from documents of Thomas A. Edison

by David E. Nye

Odense University Press

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For a certain type of person, data is the most important thing you can **trust**.

Computers don't lie. People lie.

Once you know the **facts**, you can live by them.

Numbers make problems less resonant emotionally but more tractable intellectually.



We are a culture drunk on numbers.

Perhaps it's that as humans we have a collective predisposition toward what's called apophenia, a **tendency to see patterns in random data**. The pattern of our data seems to carry an explanatory power, a sense that life isn't random or arbitrary, that, over time, the trivial acts of our mundane daily life shape a picture of who we are. We see our data bloom into patterns like a kind of emergent intelligence, becoming a self-generated portrait.

#### computational self

We routinely use the computer as a metaphor for human thought, even though we know that human memory doesn't work the same way computer memory does. We believe that we are knowable through objective, data-driven information.

The computational view of the self doesn't leave room for that which is not reducible to being computed.



Quantitative self-representations can be like visualisations of big data, in that they, represent 'a fantasy of knowing, or total knowledge' (McCosker and Wilken 2014).

Dataism is José van Dijck's term for the common assumption that people and behaviours can be adequately represented by quantitative means and 'big data.'

Neither data nor photographs are truly 'pieces of the world' devoid of interpretation. They are **representations**, but ones that we tend to find more authoritative than more obviously qualitative representations.

We use the data to adjust the stories we already tell ourselves about our lives, and we use our stories about our lives to adjust, excuse or understand our data.