SHIFTING SUBJECTS

Plural Subjectivity in Contemporary Francophone Women's Autobiography

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SHIFTING SUBJECTS
Introduction: Writing the Self;

From the Individual “I”
to the Non-unitary Self

Only a critical ideology that reifies a unified, transcendent self can expect to see in the mirror of autobiography a self whose depths can be plumbed, whose heart can be discovered, and whose essence can be definitively known. No mirror of her era, the female autobiographer takes as a given that selfhood is mediated; her invisibility results from her lack of a tradition, her marginality in male-dominated culture, her fragmentation—social and political as well as psychic. At both extremes of subjectivity and publicity, the female autobiographer has lacked the sense of radical individuality, duplicitous but useful, that empowered Augustine and Henry Adams to write their representative lives large.

—Bella Brodzki and Celeste Schenck1

THERE ARE MANY DIFFERENT WAYS TO SAY “I.” SOME AUTOBIOGRAPHERS have written a loud, proud, and forceful “I” that signifies what they deem to be their specific mark on the world. Some authors have written fictional accounts of their lives, using an “I” that is an indistinct marker of identity. Some have preferred to render the self in an epistolary format, writing their “I” from within letters. Others have written “I” from within a memoir, weaving self-representation with references to political and social aspects of the period. Some have published their journals, thus blurring the distinction between the public and private “I.” Still more have written the “I” of somebody else. Nor are such innovative and divergent approaches to writing “I” limited to literary endeavor. As an array of fascinating interventions by contemporary critics of autobiography have shown, authors have written “I” in internet diaries, in blogs, in court documents, in CVs, in job applications, in film, in psychotherapy, and even in literary criticism.2

Despite the variety of, and the preponderance of, self-representation in contemporary society, writing “I” has traditionally been problematic for any individual outside of the dominant group. As Tess Cossette, Celia Lury, and Penny Summerfield so succinctly see, entry into the coveted realm of autobiography has depended upon “the traditional construction of the ideal autobiographer as a unified, transcendent subject, representative of the age.”3 Many marginalized and dispossessed groups thus lay beyond the scope of these necessary requirements, and women are just one example. Given women’s traditional role in the private sector of the home and family, the transition into the public eye has, for many, been fraught with difficulties. Leah Hewitt has demonstrated that many female-authored autobiographies exhibit the writer’s reluctance to enter the public domain due to the risk of appearing self-indulgent, self-aggrandizing or arrogant.4 Writers of autobiography prior to the nineteenth century were primarily public figures who published accounts of their lives, their public service, or their travels. Evidently, such public activities could usually only be carried out by men.5 The few women who practiced life writing wrote principally journals, letters, or memoirs that were often published posthumously.6 The explosion in autobiography that occurred in the nineteenth century, largely due to the introspection of the romantic movement, encouraged more women to explore the genre, yet many
still felt obliged to preface their writing with an explanation of why they entered a genre with which they felt a clear discomfort. Only in the closing decades of the twentieth century have women so often, so clearly, and so daringly written “I,” and only at a time at which, as Nancy K. Miller has identified, “I” no longer has any meaning; now that the author is proclaimed to be dead, and that recent critical theory has mounted an assault upon the self, what does “I” mean anyway?

For the women who appear in this study, who have struggled to develop modes of representing themselves in words, and who have proceeded to publicize those words, “I” means a lot. Much has been written on the original and innovative narrative techniques that women autobiographers have developed as they strive to engage in self-narrative. In this book, I hope to contribute to these discoveries of the intricacies of authors’ reflections upon self-representation by comparing women autobiographers who write “I” as a plural construction. Many autobiographical texts published by women, both recently and further back in history, display a self that resists the traditional notion of an individual, unitary self at the heart of autobiography and instead inscribes subjectivity as in some measure non-unitary. While all self-narrative is necessarily non-unitary insofar as it is predicated upon a narrating “I,” the self in the present of the narration, and a narrated “I,” the self in the past, there are many examples of self-writing that deliberately play with the notion of an individual “I” that clearly refers to narrator and author.

Leslie Bloom has demonstrated that the notion of non-unitary subjectivity has been one of the main foci of feminist scholarship in recent years, and scholars such as Rosi Braidotti, Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva, Toril Moi, and Henriques et al. have all advocated this as one of the hallmarks of subjectivity. In a critique of the humanist self, which is based upon a unique, fixed, and unitary essence, these critics have posited the non-unitary subject as a mechanism for understanding the changes in our conception of selfhood and the way in which traditionally powerless subjects experience subjectivity. Bloom states that the idea of a unitary subject as it has been designated by Western rationalism “denies the possibilities of changes in subjectivity over time; masks the critical roles that language, social interactions, and pivotal experiences play in the production of subjectivity; and ignores the multiple subject positions people occupy, which influence the formation of subjectivity.”

Sidonie Smith underlines the importance of this turn away from a unitary conception of the self by asserting how such a conception constructed a “centrifugal power” must be overcome for the oppressed to realize their selfhood. This is not to say, however, that the self should be considered as an endlessly fragmented concept that is based upon inconsistency and instability. The non-unitary self is not equivalent to a loss of self but is rather an appreciation of its intricacies; as Teresa de Lauretis writes, subjectivity is “an ongoing construction, not a fixed point of departure or arrival from which one then interacts with the world” since subjectivity is formed through encounters with “practices, discourses, and institutions that lend significance (value, meaning and affect) to the events of the world.”

The reformulization of selfhood as non-unitary, fragmented, and mutable, as opposed to static, coherent, and unitary thus opens the way for women and minorities in general both to express their selfhood and to be interpreted.

Non-unitary subjectivity is particularly relevant to the study of women’s autobiography, which is at once, as Nancy K. Miller has commented, an ideal testing ground for feminist theories and a site for experimentation in the construction of selfhood. In this book, I examine specifically literary autobiography in terms of this notion of the non-unitary self, since literary autobiography rests upon an interrogation of and a search for new modes of representation of selfhood in narrative. In particular, I analyze literary autobiographies that highlight the non-unitary selfhood of the author by writing “I” as a plural construction. Such writers incorporate numerous voices into their work, multiplying the narrative voice rather than resting upon a single, unitary “I.” Several examples of such writing are evident in recent French autobiographical writing. Nathalie Sarraute, who is well known for her rejection of literary convention and her involvement with—and quarrels with—the
Exponents of le nouveau roman (new novel), toyed with the plural nature of self-writing in Enfance (Childhood). In this, one of the principal texts that multiplied the autobiographical “I,” Sarraute juxtaposed a first-person account with that of another voice who frequently interrupts the narrator, interrogating her on the validity of her memories and the accuracy of her present writing. The two voices, both the voice of the principal narrator and that of her interlocuter, contribute to the construction of a multifaceted, non-unitary, and fragmented narrative self. Marguerite Duras, also known for her literary experimentation and her interrogations of the representation of the female self, developed a similar technique in L’amant (The Lover). In this partially autobiographical text, Duras switches the narrative voice unexpectedly from the first to the third person and back again with no explanation or justification of her transposition. The two voices thus present different versions of a self and move the autobiographer between the positions of subject and object of her text: both speaking (“I”) and spoken of (“she”). Thus Duras’s self-representation occurs through plurivocal, non-unitary narrative. Likewise, the four authors who form the corpus of this study all respond to the question of how to inscribe the female self in writing by creating narrative techniques that represent the self in plurivocal, non-unitary ways. I detail their nuances below.

The choice to examine works by female writers emanates from the specific stage at which criticism of women's autobiography finds itself. The notion of subjectivity, and specifically of non-unitary subjectivity, constitutes one of the main domains of enquiry into women’s autobiography at the present time, as shall be discussed in the following section of this introduction. By limiting my study to female-authored texts, I intend to contribute to the specific terms of this debate and interrogate a number of authors' responses to the question of how to inscribe the female self in narrative. Since critics such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak have alerted us to the dangers of essentializing “women” as identical irrespective of their differences in a global context, I do not contend that all women writers experience the self in similarly fragmented, non-unitary terms, or that their subjectivity is constructed by similar events or discourses. In a similar vein, I do not contend either that the non-unitary self is never to be found in male-authored autobiographies, -Roland Barthes is a prime example of such writing, as are Georges Perec and Patrick Modiano in the French canon. Indeed, as these examples demonstrate, non-unitary subjectivity opens the way for minorities (homosexuals, Jews, and immigrants, for instance) to narrate the self. Rather, this book is intended as a contribution to one of the main currents in criticism of women’s autobiography, a field that is characterized by what Spivak would call “strategic essentialism.” In this introduction, I first discuss the ways in which subjectivity has been formulated within autobiographical criticism, from the unitary models of early scholarship to the more recent theories of non-unitary selfhood, paying particular attention to analyses of female subjectivity. I then explain how this book contributes to this debate.

The field of autobiographical criticism has moved a long way from the earliest formulations of the immediate post-war period. These early critics, to whom we owe the transition of autobiography from a second-rate literary genre to a valid and rigorous field of intellectual inquiry, began by interpreting the “I” of autobiography as a strictly individual concept. These scholars each attempted to establish precise definitions of the genre of autobiography, and these definitions centered upon an individual approach to self-narration. Philippe Lejeune’s oft-quoted text on the autobiographical pact defined autobiography as “un récit rétro-spectif en prose que quelqu'un fait sur sa propre existence quand il met l'accent principal sur une vie individuelle, en particulier sur l'histoire de sa personnalité” [retrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality]. The subject of autobiography for Lejeune is clear: a single (male) writer’s articulation of his life and of the development of his “I.” The nature of Lejeune’s autobiographical pact is that the name of the author, character, and narrator must refer to the same person; that is to say, that the identities constructed by these three entities should be reducible to one demarcated and coherent subject.
Lejeune famously listed the works that fell into his category of autobiography, from works by Jean-Jacques Rousseau to Jean-Paul Sartre, and included only one female-authored text, Histoire de ma vie (Story of My Life) by George Sand.

It was Georges Gusdorf who wrote the first essay in French on autobiography, which was later reprinted and translated for an Anglophone audience as part of James Olney's pivotal volume On Autobiography. In Gusdorf's essay, “Conditions and Limits of Autobiography,” this critic also lists a set of requirements for a text to be considered as autobiographical, and claims that such a text “reveals the effort of a creator to give the meaning of his own mythic tale.” A self is brought to life by the text that he writes, according to Gusdorf, and the autobiographical text is strictly literary in nature. As was the case with Lejeune’s definition, Gusdorf’s theory thus only permits one creator, one meaning, and one tale: the “I” is an individual, unitary construct, and Gusdorf goes so far as to suggest that autobiography is only discernible in societies that view the individual as singular and autonomous. Critical works by John Sturrock, who believed that autobiography is “a process of singularization,” Elizabeth Bruss, and James Olney contain similar assertions; autobiography was supposedly based upon a notion of a conscious, individual subject at the center of his (and only very rarely her) text, and this was the required format to be considered part of this newly legitimated genre.

More recent interrogations of the representation of subjectivity within autobiography have deconstructed the notion of an individual, complete, and coherent self, demarcated from others by clear boundaries of identity. The closing decades of the twentieth century have forced us to reassess our trusted, comfortable terms of intellectual enquiry. Post-structuralist and postmodern philosophers have exposed many of the categories on which we rested for so long as assumptions at best, fallacies at worst. Suddenly the principal grand narratives of the twentieth century—Freudian psychoanalysis, Russian formalism, and Marxism—were shown to be nothing more than mere narrative. Generic typology and categorical thinking came to be regarded with skepticism. We have reconsidered the functioning of ideology, authority, and representation, and reversed any belief in the universality or essentialism of human nature. Words like history, category, identity, agency, and subjectivity now cause consternation.

So where is the self placed amidst all of these reformulations, and how have these affected our understanding of autobiography? The recently reformulated “subject” is understood to be constituted by history, language, and culture and is a product of specific discourses and social processes. As subjectivity is posited as a social construct, the subject is necessarily discursive; individuals construct themselves through language and adopt positions available within the language at a given moment. And this process is necessarily in flux, as the intersections between social relations and individual subjects constantly changes, thus creating inconsistent and contradictory subjects. Jacques Derrida, for example, argued that there is no such thing as a “full subject” as the discourses that produce it are constantly in evolution. Julia Kristeva, in a similar example, asserted that the Cartesian subject is now “on trial” as we no longer believe in the self as a single, demarcated unit of unified individuality.

In addition to the challenges that structuralist, post-structuralist, and postmodern thinkers have posed to the notion of the unitary self, the progress of psychoanalysis has cast further doubt over this category of thought. Since psychoanalysis is predicated upon the notion that human beings are split subjects with an unconscious, that which one cannot know of oneself, it necessarily questions the idea of a cohesive, unified, and knowable self. The awareness that there exists a myriad of unconscious processes that combine to create one’s image of self immediately negates any drive towards a continuously stable, comprehensible, and coherent selfhood. And the attempt to know or define any self that is created from, modified by, and subject to such unconscious processes is simultaneously exposed as an illusion.
Another important factor in this questioning of unitary identity is an increased awareness of non-Western approaches to subjectivity. The process of globalization has increased our sensibility to the ideas prevalent in other cultures and called many of our assumptions into question. In literary and cultural studies in particular, postcolonial critics have brought our awareness to texts that offer an array of representations of selfhood. Scholars are now confronted by a range of self-narratives, both written and oral, that are based upon group identity, family identity, tribal identity, and community identity rather than any single entity. Such representations force us to admit the ethnocentric character of our thinking about subjectivity and push us to reformulate what is at stake in interpreting the narrative “I.”

These formulations have necessarily impacted upon theories of autobiographical writing, and this area now constitutes one of the most vibrant and exciting fields in literary studies. Looking back over the development of this field since scholars such as Lejeune and Gusdorf first defined it proves how far criticism has evolved. In the 1980s, some critics went as far as to claim that autobiography was dead, since the traditional categories of author, subject, and character had come under scrutiny through structuralist philosophy. Michael Sprinker suggested that autobiography is the “act of producing difference by repetition,” and that such writing is dead since it is the articulation of what has already been said elsewhere, a product of intertextuality rather than a statement of individuality.24 Paul de Man also famously suggested that autobiography is based upon masks, creating a necessarily fictitious self to stand for an identity that may not exist.25 Although such interventions enrich the field, I find it hard to believe that autobiography or autobiographers are dead. Autobiography unarguably constitutes a domain that is extraordinarily prolific; many works of autobiography are currently being published and many writers are producing original and innovative narrative strategies for self-writing. Autobiography now contains several different subgenres, including testimonial narrative, the self-portrait, and mixed-medium work, and this is a testament to how elastic it is as a genre. Given the extraordinary interest surrounding the self in current popular culture, from internet blogs to reality television, the proliferation in autobiographical narrative is unsurprising. If anything, autobiography is more alive than it ever was; it is simply alive in different forms. As Johnnie Gratton comments, subjectivity has been reformulated since the advance of structuralism, and “the subject which ‘returns’ from structuralist exile is neither pejoratively over-specified nor neutrally unspecified, but a concept and a value open to various forms and degrees of positive re-specification in the light of its preceding critique.”26 Similarly, the genre of autobiography that returns from structuralist exile has undergone a rebirth that has opened it up to the development of new forms and to the interrogation of various styles of self-writing throughout the centuries.

There are many different ways to say ‘I.’ This book examines the ways in which four contemporary women writers (HZl_ne Cixous, Assia Djebar, Gis_le Halimi, and Julia Kristeva) have written their autobiographical ‘I’ as a plural concept. These women refuse the individual ‘I’ of traditional autobiography by developing narrative strategies that multiply the voices in their texts. They similarly cast doubt upon current theorizations of the female self in autobiography by questioning the possibility of plural selfhood in narrative and its seemingly cathartic effects. Each writer approaches autobiography as a site of catharsis for a specific trauma and each tells her story through multiple narrative voices in order to find atonement. The women’s experiments with narrative voice are designed to render the female self accurately in narrative, but they simultaneously expose the difficulties inherent in writing the self plurally. Taken together, the women who form the corpus of this study move beyond critics’ current understandings of textual representations of selfhood. Informed by postcolonial and feminist approaches to selfhood, this book charts the history of
theories of autobiography and plots new ways of imagining this genre. This
cross-section of international writers calls for a new understanding of the inscription of
female identity in narrative; not as a binary of individual versus plural selfhood, but as
a cluster of categories of identity beyond 'I' and 'we.'

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