

Abstract

Re-viewing the Lives of Others: “New Biography” in the Early Twenty-First Century

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Drawing on the insights of modern auto/biography studies, this thesis adapts the term “new biography” to identify and explore innovative examples of biographical representation in the early twenty-first century. Taking a comparative, interdisciplinary approach, I ask: How do biopics, creative nonfiction, graphic and online biographies provide insight into the politics and limits of biographical practice and representation in this “first-person”, technologically-saturated era?

I begin in chapter one by exploring a bestselling print form of biographical writing: the creative nonfiction biography. Conceptualising creative nonfiction as both a marketing label and a life writing methodology, I consider two prominent exemplars: Rebecca Skloot’s *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* and Helen Garner’s *Joe Cinque’s Consolation*. I suggest how creative nonfiction biographies confront and make visible post-memoir boom questions of democratic representation and ethics, and how these biographical works reflect the cultural milieu of the first-person, digital era.

In chapter two, I move from print to a multimodal form of life narrative: the graphic biography. Via readings of Sid Jacobson and Ernie Colón’s *Anne Frank: The Anne Frank House Authorized Biography* and Lauren Redniss’ *Radioactive: Marie and Pierre Curie: A Tale of Love and Fallout*, I explore how the comics form reconfigures the limits of biographical representation and practice. Graphic biographies literally illustrate how life narratives are constructed, authenticated and authorised. Blurring existing boundaries

between high and low art, graphic biographies amplify the social and cultural work of conventional biography, reframing iconic lives for new readers.

Chapter three moves to an examination of the Hollywood biopic. Focussing on Gus Van Sant's *Milk*, and Todd Haynes' *I'm Not There*, I explore how biopics can be potent cultural and memorial sites that invite viewers to learn about individual lives and marginalised histories, or to engage with contemporary social concerns. Additionally, in a similar way to comics, these filmic life narratives make visible the epistemological limits of biography.

Chapter four is the first of two chapters considering some of the ways in which biography manifests online. Here, I consider Wikipedia biographies. As an example of popular, participatory life narrative, Wikipedia biographies indicate the potential of online spaces to replicate off-line traditional scripts and subjects, but also to function as dynamic spaces where the politics and ethics of biography are magnified, broadcast and challenged in unprecedented ways.

Finally, chapter five considers online death narratives – forms of biographical representation that emerge in the wake of an individual's death. I explore three examples: the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's crowdfunded project *In Memory Of...*, the Facebook memorial page of Hayley Okines, and Twitter responses to author Colleen McCullough's *The Australian* newspaper obituary. In doing so, I illustrate how these online spaces encourage the representation of a greater range of lives and deaths, but also how they can be vital tools for challenging the cultural politics of biography.

Ultimately, I argue that these examples of “new biography” work to make visible, revise and remake biographical politics, ethics and epistemologies. They suggest biography's enduring significance as an overlooked, yet vital, complex and evolving practice and representational form in the early twenty-first century.