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Introduction: “New Biography” for a New Millennium

By Elizabeth Podnieks

ADVENTUROUS, troubled, seductive, commodified, dangerous, and even cannibalistic—such is the condition of English biography as defined over the last few decades in a host of studies on the genre such as *Biography as High Adventure*; *The Troubled Face of Biography*; *The Seductions of Biography*; *Lives for Sale: Biographer’s Tales*; *Understanding Ourselves: The Dangerous Art of Biography*; and *A Higher Form of Cannibalism*? These and other texts alert us to the challenging, provocative, and diverse responses biography invokes in its contemporary practitioners, readers, critics, and theorists. In the early twentieth century, modernist writers such as Harold Nicholson, Lytton Strachey, A. J. A. Symons, and Virginia Woolf experimented with the genre, earning for it the label “the new biography.” About one hundred years later, the contributors to this special issue of *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies* reflect on what is “new” in our own millennial times, exploring biography in relation to theatre, film, comics, the Internet, and archives. In this introduction I want to touch briefly on how innovative forms, theories, and practices intersect with debates that continue to pit the marketplace against the academy, and with the paradoxical perceptions that today biography is a healthy and legitimate as well as an anemic and illegitimate genre.

One of the most significant pieces of evidence testifying that biography had entered a period of revolution in the early twentieth century is the 1927 essay “The New Biography” by Virginia Woolf. In it, she offers both a review of Harold Nicholson’s “new” biography, *Some People*, as well as a meditation on developments of the genre. After tracing the emergence of the modern form in the eighteenth century under Boswell, who understood that personality, not action, is central to comprehending a life and in the nineteenth century under the Victorians, who sought only goodness and eulogistic reverence in the heroic subject, Woolf announces: “With the twentieth century, however, a change came over biography, as it came over fiction and poetry” (475). The most obvious change was the slimming down of the text from “the usual two volumes of a Shelley life into one little book the size of a novel,” but “the diminution of size was only the outward token of an inward change” (475). These internal modifications

include a shift in point of view such that the biographer was now on a more level plain with his or her subject; an acknowledgement that the biographer wrote auto/biographically as opposed to objectively; and a recognition, even appreciation, that the biographer approached the material with the aesthetic eye of an artist rather than the fact-finding precision of a chronicler. Asserting that “the days of Victorian biography are over,” she concedes that a “method still remains to be discovered” by “the biographer whose art is subtle and bold enough to present that queer amalgamation of dream and reality, that perpetual marriage of granite and rainbow” (478). But “Mr Nicolson with his mixture of biography and autobiography, of fact and fiction, of Lord Curzon’s trousers and Miss Plimsoll’s nose, waves his hand airily in a possible direction” (478).

This “possible direction” is further mapped in her companion piece “The Art of Biography” (1939). Here, Woolf reviews Lytton Strachey’s biographical output, and in so doing, she assesses the role of the modern(ist) biographer who must reconcile fact and fiction with the contingencies of time and history: “Thus the biographer must go ahead of the rest of us, like the miner’s canary, testing the atmosphere, detecting falsity, unreality, and the presence of obsolete conventions. His sense of truth must be alive and on tiptoe” (195). She goes on to situate the biographer within the industrially modern period: “Then again, since we live in an age when a thousand cameras are pointed, by newspapers, letters, and diaries, at every character from every angle, he must be prepared to admit contradictory versions of the same face. Biography will enlarge its scope by hanging up looking glasses at odd corners. And yet from all this diversity it will bring out, not a riot of confusion, but a richer unity” (195). Laura Marcus notes that in this passage, “Woolf’s allusion to the pointing cameras is a reminder that the ‘new biography’ developed alongside the new media of the early twentieth century,” including film, journalism, and publicity (215).

The contributors to this special issue of *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies* focus on developments alongside new media today—though of course what constitutes “new” has changed dramatically as we think of the Internet and other electronic and digital technologies like Twitter, TiVo, and the iPhone. The articles that make up this issue suggest that the two greatest changes notable in biography arise both from technologies that allow for radical new ways of producing, disseminating, and theorizing the genre and from an expansion of the definition of what constitutes biographical expression so that when we think of biography we mean not only written but also (tele-)visual, graphic, digital, and performed lives, for instance. Woolf concludes that “Biography thus is only at the beginning of its career; it has a

long and active life before it, we may be sure—a life full of difficulty, danger, and hard work” (“Art” 195). These terms resonate with the scholarly titles mentioned earlier (*adventurous, troubled, seductive*, etc.) and indicate that well into its “career”—some 100 years “new”—biography continues to gain in experience and maturity as it goes about its ever-increasingly complex business.

In 1750, Dr Samuel Johnson offered his now-famous celebration of the genre in his *Rambler* number 60 piece “On Biography”: “No species of writing seems more worthy of cultivation than biography, since none can be more delightful or more useful, none can more certainly enchain the heart by irresistible interest, or more widely diffuse instruction to every diversity of condition” (qtd. in Holmes, “Proper” 10). Tracing the genre’s progress as a literary practice from the eighteenth century, Richard Holmes notes in “The Proper Study?” that the genre flourished so much that by the beginning of the nineteenth century, “the cultural significance of biography’s growing popularity was broadly recognized” (11). In the Introduction to *Mapping Lives: The Uses of Biography*, Peter France and William St. Clair account for some of the reasons biography generated and continues to generate such mass-appeal among readers and practitioners: it “gives *pleasure* by satisfying curiosity and by telling good stories”; by “providing inspiring examples to be imitated, celebrating the great men and women of a nation, exalting the self-image of a profession, showing how an individual life takes a meaningful shape, illuminating the true meaning of poetry, laying bare an existential project, [and] allowing a new understanding of gender roles in society” (3). It is easy to understand why, then, contemporary biography has been called a “vitaly important cultural phenomenon” (3).

Writing in the mid-1980s, Stephen B. Oates affirms: “Biography is currently enjoying immense popularity in the United States. The number of biographical titles published each year has virtually doubled since the 1960s, and for good reason. Biography may now be the preferred form of reading in America” (Prologue ix). And in the aptly titled “Examined Lives: The Biography Boom,” Robert Fulford observes in the late 1990s that biography, “among the world’s most compelling forms of writing,” has “become so popular, and absorbed so much authorial energy, that American and British critics have often called this era the Age of Biography.” Nigel Hamilton opens his recent primer, *How to Do Biography*, accordingly: “We live—at least in the Western world—in a golden age for biography” (1). And in his *Brief History* of the genre, he emphasizes that as of the year 2000, biography occupied a place “in almost every field of human inquiry, of communications, and of academic study” and that “as the third millennium got under way it was clear to all but the most myopic

that biography had become the most popular, and in many ways the most controversial and contested, area of nonfiction broadcasting and publishing in the Western world” (279). His enthusiastic observations echo those by Michael Holroyd who wrote in 1998 that “[t]he last forty years have been full of such experiment and may be seen as a golden age of biography—a second golden age”—the first being marked by Johnson’s *Life of Savage* (30).

Biography’s luster has been tarnished, however, by the critical brush applied by Kathryn Hughes in her 2008 *Guardian* obituary for the genre entitled “The Death of Life Writing.” Here, she takes aim at Hamilton’s “golden age” assertions—“Really, he should know better”—contending that, “[t]o anyone who reads, reviews or writes on the subject, such confidence is baffling.” Her prognosis is not good: “[s]een close up, and with an eye to proper detail, biography appears in rather a bad way. ‘Crisis’ would probably be putting it too strongly, not least because it suggests a certain convulsive energy. ‘Sclerosis’ might be nearer.” Initial signs of illness are market driven: “Sales, it’s true, are still good, though showing signs of softening. According to Nielsen BookScan, literary biography reached an all-time high in 2005, but has since started to fall. General arts biographies are also down.” The greater concern for the generic invalid is due to aesthetic weakness: “it is when you look at the quality of work produced rather than the number of books sold that you start to fear for the health of a genre” because, specifically, “the general standard, the mean, the middling, seems to have sunk to a listless low.” Hughes’s complaint is in part that biographers either return in an act of desperation to the same old “big lives” over and over again, or, eager for new ones, they dredge up minor figures not necessarily deserving of full-scale biographical treatment. Moreover, she blames certain biographers for devaluing the genre by engaging in cheap promotional tactics, citing as an example Amanda Foreman who posed nude (save for a pile of books) in an author’s photo to sell her study of the eighteenth-century Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire. Hughes also accuses publishers of detracting from a text’s value by their increased focus on sensational aspects of biographers’ own lives (in those ubiquitous bio blurbs) and for commissioning hastily penned, poorly researched, and “crowd-pleasing” books in order to reap immediate sales.

And yet, there is still some life stirring, some hint of a recovery, in the genre. Hughes notes that although Holroyd has conceded that “popular history and misery memoirs have temporarily knocked biography off its top spot in the non-fiction hierarchy,” “it’s probably a question of waiting out the cycle.” In fact, the period of waiting may be ending: like publisher Arabella Pike, who according to Hughes is “enthusiastic about the mutation of biography into new, hybrid

forms,” Hughes concludes: “All one can hope, really, is that a small but growing band of writers are financially and intellectually brave enough to strip biography back to its first principle—the recording of lived experience—and consider that brief in the widest possible terms.” Even before the so-called “question of waiting out the cycle,” Holroyd was certain that “[b]iography will continue to change, will become more personal, more idiosyncratic, imaginative, experimental, more hybrid, and will move further from the comprehensive ‘Life and Letters’ structure” (30)—a description whose veracity is borne out by the topics addressed in the articles in this special issue. In examining diverse and experimental forms and uses of biography, the contributors here signal an active generic pulse.

As the discussion above indicates, the contested status of biography is intricately tied to its relationships with the market and the academy, typically opposing forces. The question of the practitioner’s credentials, an issue touched on by Hughes, is further examined by Holroyd, for instance, when he puts his tongue in cheek to make fun of the criticisms leveled against biographers today, whom he divides into three categories. The first are the so-called “Grub Street biographers,” those “jumped-up journalists” who write about the famous and who are in it only for the “tainted money.” The second are the “contemporary historical biographers, the political biographers of some last-but-one prime minister” who are “easily recognized hybrids with one foot in a university, the other in Downing Street.” These biographers are the “ambitious” professors who are no different from the first kind, for “[a]re they not trying to get the sales of the Grub Street merchants without their street vulgarity—the one jumped-up, the other dumbed-down?” The third are the literary or artistic biographers, but they too lack dignity, for they are regarded as “parasites” or “Fifth Column agents within the ranks of literature, intent on reducing all that is imaginative, all that is creative in literature, to pedestrian autobiography. They are the slaves of their absurd and meager theories. They feed off literature; they attempt to replace it” (4–6). Holroyd of course is not having any of it, and he uses his text to defend—or show how biographers defend—their art. And yet the fact is that biographers remain awkwardly poised between the market and the academy; between economic and intellectual mandates and rewards; and between public, personal, and institutional dismissal and acceptance.

Holroyd notes that “American biographers are academics; in Britain, with the shining exceptions of Hermione Lee and Roy Foster, they are a maverick crew of self-employed amateurs” (28–29). Robert Skidelsky, however, suggests that while the practice in Britain “used to be a mixture of hobby and hack-work” carried out by journalists

or “professional” biographers, today things have changed such that biographers are now more likely to be trained scholars. And yet despite academic affiliation, they remain sidelined, and “[b]iography is still not taken entirely seriously as literature, as history, or as a cogent intellectual enterprise” (1–2). As he describes, though biography has been “boosted as a serious activity” of late, “there’s something inescapably second-rate that seems to cling to biography and its practitioners: ‘gossip-writers and voyeurs calling themselves scholars’ was how W. H. Auden described them” (1). Skidelsky continues, “[c]ertainly their scholarly reputation has never matched their sales. Scholars are far from convinced that biography has any important light to throw on art or history. And by the general public biographies are read chiefly for their gossip” (1).

In like manner, Mary Rhiel and David Suchoff contend that although contemporary biography is compelling, allowing “for multiple pleasures in the postmodern mode that mixes genres and strikes ironic poses,” it continues to be deprived of “legitimacy in the worlds of contemporary critical theory, social historiography, and even highbrow journalism” (Introduction 1). Susan Tridgell concurs, stating that within the academy “biography remains surrounded by controversy” over epistemological, ethical, and aesthetic issues including the impossibility of capturing a life entire or a selfhood fully known to itself; invasion of privacy; fact vs. fiction; and the absence of a critical vocabulary and theoretical framework by which to judge the texts. As such, the genre has been neglected by the academy, a point articulated as far back as 1916 by Waldo Dunn in his *English Biography* and reiterated by biographical critics throughout the century (11). Concluding that “[b]iography seems to be in a good deal of trouble” because it is not taken seriously as an art form, Tridgell laments that “even if its artistic status is granted, it is accused of being a particularly pernicious art form” (14).

Hamilton thus speaks for many when he wonders in his chapter “Biography Today” how the term “biography” has continued to be “so limited in its definition, and the history of biography as a basic feature of Western civilization remain so neglected and marginalized at most universities in the world?” (*Brief History* 280). He asks further, “In an age in which individual human identity has become the focus of so much discussion, and reality TV and blogging so dominate Western culture, how is it possible to go on ignoring biography’s long history and its current *significance* in the West?” (280). Hamilton diffuses some of his own frustrations as he gives evidence that the genre is not entirely ignored. Though he laments that there is “no school of biography, and only a single major university department in the entire world (Hawaii) devoted to the history, theory, and praxis

of the subject, with its own interdisciplinary journal” (280)—facts alone that underscore an academic entry point—he acknowledges in an endnote that scholarly life writing journals “have mushroomed” since the late 1970s including the aforementioned University of Hawaii journal, *Biography*, as well as *Auto/Biography*, *Life Writing*, and our *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies*,¹ and that “French, German, and other language periodicals are also proliferating, with international conferences convening across the globe.” The first such gathering, an international symposium “devoted exclusively to biography,” took place in 1979 at the Center for Biographical Research at the University of Hawaii. Writing about this groundbreaking event in the Foreword to *New Directions in Biography* (the collected symposium papers), Anthony Friedson observed nearly forty years ago that “anyone who reads, and who does not have a dogmatic aversion to biographical writing, would have to admit that there has been an almost promiscuous increase in the field recently” (vii). Friedson also drew attention to two conferences on biography held that same year, one at the Smithsonian Institute and one at Ontario’s Wilfrid Laurier University (xii).

In the same spirit as Hamilton, Steve Weinberg begins his wonderfully evocative “Biography, the Bastard Child of Academe” with the now-familiar premise that “[b]iography is rarely studied as a literary genre, despite its practice going back thousands of years, despite its prevalence on library shelves, despite its obvious fascination for readers.” But after acknowledging that “[w]e can theorize why biography has failed to gain traction in academe”—think New Criticism, intentional fallacy, the death of the author, and deconstructionism—he turns to the point of his article: “whatever the reasons, it is time to anoint biography—both its history and its composition—as a genre just as worthy of university courses as are novels, short stories, poetry, and essays.” His foray into the topic finds that there are “at most, a handful of American campuses” offering courses on biography so that he concludes, in support of Hamilton’s argument: “It appears that only one, the University of Hawaii, has made the craft of biography a major part of the curriculum.” Like Hamilton, though, Weinberg closes on an optimistic note, outlining how biographer-scholars like Hamilton and Carl Rollyson have been successful in bridging the gap between popular and academic cultures and underscoring the relevance and value of biography to both. Weinberg also notes that in 2008 the Graduate Center of CUNY launched The Leon Levy Center for Biography, which, as its website tells us, “aims to identify and support innovation and excellence in biography and seeks to encourage dialogue between university-affiliated and independent biographers

working in print, film, visual arts, and other media, through fellowships and a variety of public programs" ("Fellowships").

The Levy Center hosted its "First Annual Conference on Biography" in March, 2009,² and it is only one of the most recent offerings by the numerous associations in the field around the world. In 1991, the MLA instituted the Division of Autobiography, Biography, and Life Writing; the International Auto/Biography Association, founded in 1999, hosts an biennial meeting; and the joint Popular Culture Association and American Culture Association launched its "Biographies" division in 2000. Examples such as these are advertised on the Center for Biographical Research, "Life Writing Resources and Links" page: <http://www.hawaii.edu/biograph/cbrlinks.html>. "Centers, Programs, and Degrees" include the Centre for Life History and Life Writing Research at the University of Sussex; The Ludwig Boltzmann Institute for the History and Theory of Biography in Vienna; the MA in Biography at the University of Buckingham; MA in Creative and Life Writing at Goldsmith's College, London; the MA in Life Writing at East Anglia University-Norwich; the Prosopography Centre at the University of Oxford; and the MA in Biography at Monash University and the Unit for Studies in Biography and Autobiography at La Trobe University, in Australia.

Further, this vital website provides links to Research and Bibliography Resources; Information and Discussion Lists; Conference and Publication Opportunities; Recent and Forthcoming Books of Interest; Biographical Dictionaries, Encyclopedias, and Specialty Reference Sources; Related Journals, Journal Databases, Index Sources; and Cultural Resources. In the Encyclopedias section, for instance, the scholar and lay reader alike find thousands of biographical materials accessible via the Internet, such as the following: The Biographical Dictionary Online; Chinese Biographical Database; Dictionary of Canadian Biography Online; Links to Native North American Biography Sites; Lives: The Biography Resource; New Dictionary of National Biography; A&E's Official Biography Home Page Site; Women's Legal History Biography Project at Stanford; and so on.

Academic and popular interest has been complemented by communal attention to the profession: in 2007 *The Biographer's Craft*, an online "monthly newsletter for writers & readers of biography" was launched "as a way to connect the community of biographers, publishers, editors, and, of course, readers" (Morris). And in March 2009, the Biographers International Organization (BIO) was established with a mission "to promote the art and craft of biography and to seek to further the professional interests of its practitioners" ("Welcome"). Finally, the convergence of the practical and scholarly is manifested by Hamilton—"a writer, teacher, bookseller, publisher,

and filmmaker”—in *How To Do Biography: A Primer*, noted earlier, in which he realizes that despite the popularity of the genre “there is still, to [his] knowledge, no book or primer to guide the would-be biographer in tackling the record and interpretation of a human individual, past or present” (1). And so, in his “readable, informative, instructive” text, he draws on a range of examples of well-known, literary, and scholarly biographies, while appealing to the broadest possible audience who will find “a raft of pleasures and fulfillments” in the genre (3).

The question that obtains from discussing the status of biography today within scholarly and popular contexts is this: has the attention being paid to biography of late been enough to redeem its long and embarrassing neglect, or does biography continue to be the “bastard child,” as Weinberg so suggestively put it? Holmes asserts that “the essential spirit of biography—of English biography at least—has been a maverick and unacademic one,” and that “for some three hundred years . . . its most exciting and innovative work has been done outside” the academy, thereby allowing it to retain “an uncloistered and anarchic spirit” (“Proper” 7). Elsewhere, Holmes states that biography “is essentially, and by its very origins, disreputable. Its genius, and indeed its very genealogy, is impure. It was relished and attacked during its first popular flowering in the eighteenth-century, just as it is relished and attacked today” (“Biography” 15). It is precisely because biography “has always had the doubtful status of a maverick or mongrel art” that the genre “remains so alive, so adaptable, so dangerous for all concerned writers, subjects, readers, and most of all critics who want it to behave” (15). In this light, we can think of biography today as occupying both the cloistered and uncloistered positions that the increasing fusion between scholarly and popular culture allows—as evidenced by, for instance, the profusion of new media tools noted above for accessing the genre. The articles in this special issue reveal, celebrate, and theorize some of the ways the genre “remains so alive, so adaptable” from one generation to the next, and from one “new” direction to another, as we will see below.

The opening up of the genre from strictly text-based narratives to performative spaces is explored in the first two pieces. In “‘To Be Said to Have Done It is Everything’: The Theatrical Oscar Wilde and Possibilities for the (Re)Construction of Biography,” Lindsay Adamson Livingston showcases how biodrama contributes to expanding the field of biography to include theatrical form and expression. Using the (re)construction of Oscar Wilde in three late-twentieth century plays—Moisés Kaufman’s *Gross Indecency: The Three Trials of Oscar Wilde* (1997), David Hare’s *The Judas Kiss* (1998), and Tom Stoppard’s *The Invention of Love* (1997)—as illustration of the

ways that biodrama affords a challenge to traditional, linear, textual biography, Livingston spotlights how new kinds of embodied, “multivalent subjectivities” emerge out of these post-modern dramas in which history, fact, and identity are troubled and deconstructed.

In “Filming the Ineffable: Biopics of the British Royal Family,” Giselle Bastin attends to the fairly recent phenomenon of depicting the living sovereign in theatrical or cinematic form, specifically in the body of contemporary films about the Windsor family. She offers close readings of texts ranging from TV-movies about Charles and Diana to Stephen Frears’s feature film *The Queen*, contextualizing them within a tradition of royal biography as well as that of bourgeois realism. Bastin’s analysis probes the dialogic relationships between filmmakers who seek to capture or recreate the ineffable or un-filmable magic, mystery, and aura of the Royals, especially the sovereign self, on screen; the monarch-subjects who both resist and contribute to the infiltration of their private lives by the media; and the audience’s desires to see dramatized the “real” or “authentic” royal figures of their personal fantasies and national mythologies.

Focusing on a broader spectrum of pop culture “royalty,” I argue in “Celebrity Bio Blogs: Hagiography, Pathography, and Perez Hilton” that the blog *Perezhilton.com* is a new kind of celebrity biography formed at the intersections of journalism, gossip, technology, fan culture, and life writing performance. Contextualizing it within a tradition of both hagiography and pathography, I show how the blog is a postmodern mingling of textual, graphic, aural, and oral narratives interactively produced by Hilton, Hilton’s fans, and the celebrities who are featured on the blog. *Perezhilton.com* reflects our culture’s obsession with celebrities as well as our intrinsically human penchant for gossiping. I suggest that the blog is ultimately a collective biography deserving of our attention for the relevant and subversive ways it both reinforces and diminishes the myths of celebrity culture.

Further analyzing the impact of the Internet on biography, in “Digital Biography: Capturing Lives Online,” Paul Arthur introduces us to what he calls “an emerging field that has no accepted name or boundaries but is described here as ‘digital biography.’” Tracing the explosion of online life writings from the mid-1990s to the present, he argues, as I do with *Perezhilton*, that the specific genre of online biography has generated only scant scholarly attention to date. Showcasing sites and services such as the “Companions” project, the Digital Biographer™, mydigitalbiography.com, biowriters.NET, Ancestry.com, as well as the digitizing of print-based reference texts such as the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Arthur contributes to the identifying and theorizing of these new forms. Examining the

construction of identity afforded by technology and identity management services, he shows how online lives and the data recording and preserving these lives, inspire, shape, and challenge the theory and practice of digital biography, both in our present and our future.

Turning to another new and increasingly explosive medium—graphic narrative—Mary Louise Penaz looks through a kaleidoscopic lens of comics, history, and life writing theory in “Drawing History: Interpretation in the Illustrated version of the 9/11 Commission Report and Art Spiegelman’s *In The Shadow of No Towers* as Historical Biography.” Viewing the two graphic texts—the *9/11 Report* by Sid Jacobson and Ernie Colón, and Spiegelman’s *In The Shadow of No Towers*—as historical biography, which is composed of history, fiction, and autobiography, she queries what becomes of the historical subject when it is represented not in textual but in visual, or graphic, form. Working with the notion, inspired by Derrida, that historical biography is a contaminated genre and that, according to Epstein, the discursive practice of biography abducts and defiles the subject, Penaz analyzes how the two texts seek to clarify and to complicate, respectively, the Bush Administration’s “official” 9/11 narrative.

Shifting from history to sociology, in “Biographical Sociology: Struggles Over an Emergent Sociological Practice,” Jeffrey Shantz examines new directions in biographical sociology or sociological biography. Sociological life writing practices conflate biography, autobiography, and autoethnography, linking the personal to the cultural by “situating the researching subject within specific social contexts.” Such an emergent practice is contested and resisted within the social sciences because it critiques previously accepted, standard, “realist” assumptions about the content, validity, reliability, and objectivity of research. However, drawing on examples from a plethora of sociological theorists and practitioners, Shantz illuminates the ways that biographical sociology problematizes issues of identity, belonging, voice, knowledge, and power, providing researchers with new methodological tools by which to analyze self/other interactions.

Finally, turning to archival studies, in “Biographical Desire and the Archives of Living Authors,” Robert McGill examines the contemporary phenomenon of writers who shape and control their archives while still living, and therefore complicate biographical theory and practice. Focusing on scholar JoAnn McCaig’s *Reading in: Alice Munro’s Archives*, he illuminates the ethical, aesthetic, legal, and psychological tensions that obtain between the biographer and both the author-subject and Foucault’s “author function”—that is, the author as construct. McGill shows how the biographical quest is “ambivalently desirous” as the scholar uses the archive to gain intimacy with the living author while hoping that the author remains

silent and does not affect use of the deposited material. Drawing on his own attempts to “find” Munro, he emphasizes that archival study reveals the biographer’s autobiographical needs to be approved of and or rejected by the subject.

These articles meet each other at the intersections of significant contemporary developments in the practice and theorizing of biography in the humanities and social sciences. They address, and overlap in their concerns with, issues such as the inevitable relationships formed between the subject and the biographer, and the inseparability of one’s auto from another’s bio; how the subject and biographer, respectively, maintain or blur the boundaries between the subject’s public and private self and life; the biographer’s practical, ethical, and aesthetic uses of fact, truth, fiction, gossip, and myth in fashioning the subject; a post-modern awareness and legitimizing of generic experimentation that affords the biographer innovative textual, (tele-) visual, and or performative re-conceptions of and apprehensions of the subject; the impact of electronic technologies on the representations of self and consequent biographical project; the increasing fusion of academic and popular mandates, apparatus, and approaches to the life; and the ways that audience interest in and desire for the subject drive the biographer and influence the marketplace and the commodification of the life as well as the genre of biography itself. Reflecting on and expanding what constitutes the “new” biography of the early twentieth century, our contributors argue for, as much as they enact, the challenges and rewards of biographical scholarship at this present moment.

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Notes

1. Note that he gets the title wrong, calling it “*Auto/Biography Studies: a/b*, a New York quarterly published since 1985” (313n5).
2. The conference topic of “New Forms: Biography for the 21st Century” echoes the themes and topics explored by contributors to this special issue of *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies*.

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