

Introduction to Voices of Life, Illness and Disabilities in Life Writing and Medical Narratives

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Thematic Issue: **Voices of Life, Illness and Disabilities in Life Writing and Medical Narratives.**
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Abstract: Life writing is a narrative and discourse on the self from social, psychological and biographical perspectives. This special issue includes eleven essays addressing recurrent themes in life writing such as migration, medical narratives and cultural memories. Through voices of life, illness, suffering, disabilities and death, the authors not only question a traditional sense of self but also provoke further debates on human values and facets of identity formation.

I-Chun WANG and Jonathan Locke HART

Introduction to Voices of Life, Illness and Disabilities in Life Writing and Medical Narratives

Life writing is a genre, a critical practice and a kind of narrative that recounts personal or collective experiences (Kadar 5-10). Life writing is a way to represent a life, to portray the self, and to decode an aesthetic of consciousness that involves personal or human values, addressing issues on memories, affect, and cultural aspects of identity formation. Moreover, life writing is a narrative and discourse on the self from social, psychological and biographical perspectives. Recurrent themes in life writing include migration, medical narratives and cultural memories, in which voices of life, illness, suffering, and disabilities not only question a traditional sense of self but also provoke further debates on human values and facets of identity formation. In the field of psychological sciences, life writing also serves as "scriptotherapy" (Henke xi) and "self-spatialization" (Green 50). Whereas the narratives of migration represent affective dimensions of place-making and historiographical contexts, medical narratives provide models for self-reflection, empathy and challenges as related to illness and psychological issues that individuals or communities have confronted. The healing power of self-narrative may help not just to foster self-awareness but also to help traumatized subjects and patients tackle the unspeakable past, interact with physical and emotional changes or modify their identities. Life writing can be accounts about notable figures, lived experiences of obscure individuals and memories of a collective past. Autobiographical works, letters, diaries and memoirs are all forms of self-expression, self-reflection, or self-discovery. Moments of pain, intensities of desire and suffering as well as the ways of living through times of crisis are motifs in literature. Life writing is a broad topic. For this thematic issue, the topics of the articles range from the voices of life, disability, illness, ageing, depression, healing, and recovery to issues such as displacement, fear, masculinity, cultural conflicts, and social construction of illness. Contributors to this issue discuss the voices of health in various genres and related fields in the context of comparative cultural studies.

Descriptions of illness in world history and literature are almost inexhaustible. One of the earliest examples of such a description is the account of the plague in Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War*, which killed nearly one third of the Athenian population (Garza 14). Epidemics such as the plague, tuberculosis and smallpox are used as background and major motifs in many narratives. Boccaccio's *Decameron*, Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, Joannes Leo Africanus's *Description of Africa* and Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year* combine medical and migration narratives in the form of diaries, travel writings and correspondence in different periods of literature. Queen Elizabeth had a severe attack of smallpox in 1562 and in a letter to George Talbot, Earl of Shrewsbury, dated 1572, she revealed the malady that her retinue had encountered: "there began to appear certain red spots in some part of our face, likely to prove the smallpox; but thanked be God, contrary to the expectation of our physicians and all others about us, the same so vanished away" (214). Mary Wortley Montagu (1689 - 1762) wrote about a technique of vaccination from Turkey, and George Washington (1732-1799) expressed his experience of being stricken by smallpox, while Marie Bashkirtseff (1858-1884) and Emily Shore (1819-1839) described their chronic illnesses caused by tuberculosis. Personal observations at hospitals also contribute to quite a few nineteenth century writings. Readers can discover the physical and mental sufferings represented by writers such as Gustave Flaubert (1821-1880), Émile Zola (1840-1902), and Franz Kafka (1883 - 1924). Mary Rowlandson (c. 1637 - 1711), Mary Jemison (1743 - 1833) and Sarah Wakefield (1828-1908), who provide in their captivity narratives significant accounts of cross-cultural experience in which Aboriginal people's perspectives toward life. Alice Thornton (1626-1707) and Elizabeth Drinker (1735-1807), from their experiences in the British Civil War and American War of Independence respectively, give valuable information about childbirth, illness and medical treatment in their autobiographies. Contemporary narratives of migration, disability and illness explore more cultural and personal dimensions in identity construction. Jean-Dominique Bauby's memoir, *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly*, for example, is a portrayal of disability as a part of his own identity and Pearl Buck's *A Child Who Never Grew: A Memoir*, represents her emotional experience in taking care of her mental retarded daughter as well as the cultural landscape for the disability.

In the East, voices of life associated with migration and medical narratives are many. In the exile literature of the Tang and Sung Dynasties, epistolary and diaries, written by Yu Han (韓愈 768 - 824), Zong-yuan Liu (柳宗元 773 - 819) and Shi Su (蘇軾 1037 - 1101), reveal not merely distressed feelings and the experience of falling ill in the disease-ridden southern provinces of China, but also

represent discourses of nationalism in the barbarian states (Chang 41-42). The other witness accounts of illness and healing are found in travel literature to the eastern world, such as that of Francois Bernier (1620 – 1688), Lady Mary Wortley Montagu (1689 – 1762), and Lien-Teh Wu (伍連德 1879 – 1960). Bernier was a French physician who visited Mughal India, and served as a physician for the families of several courtiers. He documented the merits of the Indian medical practices and health system (Kundra 236-239). Lady Mary was a witness to the practice of prevention against smallpox as the wife of the British ambassador to Turkey, while Wu, a Malayan-born Chinese with a medical degree from the University of Cambridge, reveals his endeavor at Harbin, China, to suppress the spread of Manchurian pneumonic plague and to modernize China's medical education. One of the most notable west-bound narratives which includes descriptions of illness and cross-cultural experiences can be found in *Travels of Mirze Abu Tales Khan in Asia, Africa and Europe during the Years 1799 to 1803* (1793-1794). Furthermore, both William Hunter (1755–1812), a doctor on board and later medical officer at East India Company, and Joseph Emin (1726 – 1809), an Armenian participant of national liberation, recorded the illness of Asian sailors in London (Seed 39-45).

In the Japanese medieval period, roughly 1185-1600, travel literature and diary literature were among the most popular forms for self-representation. Lady Murasaki, in her diary *紫式部日記* (*The Diary of Lady Murasaki*), discloses her observance of gender and hierarchical relationships at the court as well as her own experience of sadness and anxiety. Yamashina Tokitsune (山科言経 1543-1611) was an aristocrat and physician in late sixteenth century of Japan. In his diary (*言経卿記*), he describes how he undertook his profession to treat patients in a self-governing community. The detailed accounts of various cases include miscarriages, stillbirths, infant mortality, prenatal care and the other ailments that represent Japanese early modern medical services and his meditation on ways of life through the perspective of a physician. Comparatively, the Japanese writer 紀貫之 (Ki no Tsurayuki 872–945) in this poetic diary *土佐日記* (*Tosa Nikki*) narrates his fifty-five-day homeward journey from court where he was a courtier. Traveling along the Inland Sea from Tosa to Kyoto, he narrates various kinds of thought and the experiences of the author himself, which include the difficulties of navigation, his separation from his friends, the loss of his daughter, beautiful scenery, storms, and the ways to avoid encounters with pirates. The narrator eventually arrives home but finds his house in ruins. *Tosa Nikki* employs historical and philosophical perspectives to represent the mutability of nature and the array of life and death in his microcosm. As Earl Miner notes, the most special aspect of the prose diary is that the author uses the narrative point of view of a woman to reveal freely his thought while keeping a way to distance sensitive motifs (9).

Voices of life, illness and disability that appear in life writing involve the concept of the self and a self-reflection on codes of culture. Self-representation and self-reflection become noticeable after the Renaissance. The genre of confessions reveals the thoughts of individual minds while plays stage various arguments about life and death. Comparing the residents as scapegoats, Jack London describes in his travel writing that the fear of leprosy leads to stigma and discrimination (London 5-6). However, even though Viktor V. Weizsäcker (1886 – 1957) tries to establish his philosophical theory to help people to understand that the value of the soul is powerful enough for people to encounter their illness and environment, Susan Sontag proposes in *Illness as Metaphor* that medical discourse often uses a cluster of tropes to associate with illness that which might result in hostility to the patients (34-40). As Emmanuel Levinas notes: "In the face the Other expresses his eminence, the dimension of height and divinity from which he descends" (262). As Sontag suggests, regarding the pain of others is the best way to understand the values of life.

The thematic issue, as we have noted, includes a range of topics. In "Illness, Disability, and Ethical Life Writing," G. Thomas Couser discusses illness and disability as related to ethical life writing. He says that since the issues came to his attention in the early 1990s, narratives of illness and disability have continued to proliferate in the US. Even as psychiatry moves away from narrative therapy toward drug therapy, as Couser argues, narrative competence is being emphasized in the treatment of non-mental illness. In "Shakespeare's *Henry VI* and Depression," Cindy Chopoidalo discusses Shakespeare's *Henry VI* plays as his first significant explorations of the tragic consequences of war and the price of ambition and as his first major treatment of a character who, in both fiction and reality, suffered from what has sometimes been described as severe clinical depression and what was known in Shakespeare's time as melancholy. Benaouda Lebdaï's "Albert Camus' Social, Cultural and Political Migrations" analyzes Albert Camus' posthumous autofiction *The First Man*. Found after Camus's fatal car accident, the manuscript adds a tragic dimension. Lebdaï demonstrates Camus's

capacity to migrate from one world to another, and the significance of this life account in the on-going debate about his political stands during the colonial period in Algeria.

In "The Voices of Life and Death in Shakespeare's Narrative Poems," Jonathan Locke Hart uses Shakespeare's dedications and *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece* to discuss art and life, death and life, life writing and death writing. He asserts that the relation between life and art, often framed in terms of mimesis, is fraught with difficulties thereby making the connection between ethics and aesthetics complex. Hart examines the theoretical debate on mimesis then explores Shakespeare's narrative poems to discuss life and death, health and illness. Wu Shang's "Hardship and Healing through the Lens of Cultural Translation in Peter Hessler's *Travel Memoir River Town*" analyzes the autobiographical dimension of Hessler's account of his two-year stay as a Peace Corps teacher in Fuling, China. Employing two senses of cultural translation, the first in anthropology and the second in cultural studies, Wu illustrates Hessler's hardship and his strategies for healing. In "The Colonized Masculinity and Cultural Politics of *Seediq Bale*", Chin-ju Lin explores the cultural representations in the Taiwanese film *Seediq Bale*, seeing it as a postcolonial historiography and a form of life writing that represents the last Indigenous insurrection against Japanese colonialism. For instance, in the film, Lin argues, fighting back as colonized men for pride and dignity is a way to restore masculine identity.

David Andrew Porter, in "Reminiscing about Latin: Cases of Life-writing and the Classical Tradition," looks at the life of Latin and life writing in Latin and other languages, asserts that post-classical Latin writing is important to many modern writers and challenges post-Romantic conceptions of literature. Porter discusses how Latin literary traditions affect writers and calls attention to the humor, irony and conflict in lived experiences and writing. In "More Migrants with Nowhere to Go?," Mary Theis discusses the stories of the Tai Dam and examines this group who migrated from Vietnam and Laos to Thailand and then to Iowa in 1975. Theis bases her article on interviews with some of the 1,200 Tai Dam who were invited by Governor Robert Ray to resettle in Iowa and contextualizes these stories with research on U.S. policies on immigration. Hiu-Wai Wong's "Disability, Victorian Biopolitics and Oscar Wilde's *Dorian Gray*" explores *The Picture of Dorian Gray* as Oscar Wilde's life writing of androgynous beauty. Wong argues that androgynous beauty can be a strategy of bodily practice that overthrows Victorian biopolitics and rigid gender roles. Furthermore, Wong looks at Susan Sontag's idea of camp and Judith Butler's theory of performance to explain the strategy of bodily practice that *Dorian Gray* demonstrates.

In "Age Troubles, Emotional Labor, and Roz Chast's Can't We Talk about Something More Pleasant?," Shu-li Chang examines comics, which Chast uses to express the emotional labor involved in caregiving. Shu-li Chang reads closely the Introduction of Chast's memoir then engages with Chast's innovative use of comics to critique the discourse of positive aging. Moreover, Shu-li Chang examines the double movement of the emotional labor of caregiving and proposes an affective mode of reading. The final article in the thematic issue, I-Chun Wang's "Landscapes of Illness, Politics of Segregation and Discourse of Empathy in the 19th Century Leprosy Narratives of Hawaii" examines the leper colonies as described in the life writings of leprosy sufferers, which represent the politics of segregation as well as fear and pain. By exploring the life writings of leprosy sufferers, Wang also looks at the landscapes of illness, the politics of segregation and the discourse of empathy in late nineteenth-century cultural memories of Hawaii.

Life writing is an important field that has been gathering strength over the past few decades. For instance, The Oxford Centre for Life-Writing (OCLW) at Wolfson College was founded in 2011 by the then President of Wolfson College, the biographer Dame Hermione Lee" ("Oxford"). The Oxford website defines life-writing and stresses its importance:

Life-writing involves, and goes beyond, biography. It encompasses everything from the complete life to the day-in-the-life, from the fictional to the factual.

It embraces the lives of objects and institutions as well as the lives of individuals, families and groups.

Life-writing includes autobiography, memoirs, letters, diaries, journals (written and documentary), anthropological data, oral testimony, and eye-witness accounts. It is not only a literary or historical specialism, but is relevant across the arts and sciences, and can involve philosophers, psychologists, sociologists, ethnographers and anthropologists. ("Oxford")

Our thematic issue often combines life writing with health and medicine, life and death. Life writing is interdisciplinary, and it goes beyond the boundaries of comparative literature and comparative cultural studies. Moreover, life writing is cross-cultural and global (see Couser *Body Language*, and his *Recovering Bodies*; Jolly; Epstein; Boldrini and Novak).

This special issue stands out in its emphasis on East and West, and the range of periods it covers, as well as the interaction of health and life writing. By comparing literatures and cultures and crossing disciplinary boundaries, the contributors have helped to advance the debate on writing about life in different texts and contexts. The voices of life, illness and disabilities in life writing and medical narratives provide an exploration of issues that matter in life and writing.

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