

Interview

A Conversation with Anna Poletti

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Introduction

Anna Poletti is Associate Professor of English Literature and Culture at Utrecht University and recently published their monograph, *Stories of the Self: Life Writing after the Book*. As a scholar of autobiography, they consider forms of “self-life-inscription” (Poletti 8) outside of the book, and the importance of considering the materiality and transmediality of such autobiographical practices. *Stories of the Self* positions itself between life, matter and media in thinking about the stories we tell. Anna moves from Andy Warhol’s *Time Capsules* to cameras and dossiers to consider trans-medial forms of life writing. In this interview, our editors-in-chief Kelly van der Meulen and Kees Müller talk to Anna Poletti about their new book and go into depth about the changing role of the material book, about those who are not able to share their own lived experience, and the future of autobiography studies. Their conversation starts with a close examination of the title of Anna’s monograph.

Kelly:

I want to start not with the title of your book, but the subtitle: Life Writing after the Book. In your chapter “Crowdsourcing” you consider the project PostSecret, an online blog by Frank Warren that invited people to write secrets on postcards, of which scans were posted online. You mention that PostSecret’s success in part led to the publication of several books, and you stress that the physical book thus remains a cultural commodity that attaches capital to (online) art projects, for example. To begin with, can you say something about the changing role of the book as a cultural and material object in these new practices of life writing? And more broadly, what does that say about the future of the book in general?

Anna:

Oh, that’s a good opening question. It’s nice that you’ve asked me to start with life writing and then move out more broadly. So to say something about the role of the book as a cultural and material object in the practice of life writing: in *Stories of the Self* I assembled a group of case studies that were not book-based. However, as in the “Crowdsourcing” chapter, some of them have a relationship to the book as an object, or to print culture more broadly. I wanted *Stories of the Self* to critically examine the ideas that life writing scholars have about life writing that we’ve developed because we’ve largely studied book-bound life writing. I chose case studies that didn’t have the book as its centre or didn’t assume the logic of the book, and therefore didn’t work in its way of storytelling, in its mode of authorship or in its selection of materials or even topics for discussion. So, in that sense I was trying to demonstrate what your question is asserting, that the status of the book is changing both as an object and as a commodity. It has been relativized in contemporary society by the rise of other media, and that means of course that literature also has a different position, because literature is still seen as being held by the book.

At the same time, what we think of as life writing has vastly expanded beyond the book with the rise of social media. I am not trying to sideline the book or the literary entirely, although there is a kind of gag in my introduction about trying to encourage my colleagues to spend less time in bookstores. I'm certainly, to come to the second part of your question, not engaged with that now outdated idea that the book is dying, because it is clearly not. I was trying to point to the fact that artists *choose* the book, rather than the book being the obvious place to talk about their lives, and that when artists don't choose the book they're making all kinds of different choices that fundamentally shape the kinds of lived experiences they talk about and how they talk about them. I guess I was trying to illuminate what happens if you don't choose the book, what kinds of life stories and what kinds of encounters with lived experiences become possible then.

Kelly:

So, the book is being chosen to add symbolic capital to certain projects?

Anna:

Yes, certainly, at least in the chapter on crowdsourcing that is what I suggest. I do think the book as an object, particularly a well-designed book, is an attractive media object that people want to engage with and own. But its ease of distribution, and the fact that there are multiple existing sites for the book to be purchased, make it an attractive way for people to commodify projects that are using other forms of cultural production that are not as well established as commodities, such as the blog. So, both the book as an object and as an established commodity make it attractive for all kinds of, if you like, marginal or new forms of cultural production that are seeking an inroad into more established spaces of cultural production, consumption and recognition.

I think sometimes people are attracted to the book and they use the book—this is my argument about confessional entrepreneurs in the crowdsourcing chapter—because it’s the way to make money from a project and to give it symbolic and cultural capital that is more established. You cannot really make money yet by coming up with a great idea for a website where people submit fragments of their lived experience. You cannot monetize that in its own right, but you can monetize it if you bind it in a nicely designed book as *PostSecret* does. A *PostSecret* book can then go on the *New York Times* bestseller list and sit there for months and generate an enormous amount of money from it, but you can also consecrate that activity, you can give that activity a certain degree of cultural and symbolic capital precisely because the *New York Times* has a bestselling booklist that it can appear on. So, I do think that the book is also a vehicle for these kinds of intentions for people that are engaged in either innovative forms of cultural production that they need to consolidate in some way, and people that want to make money to support or expand their creative work.

At the same time, in the space where small publishing crosses over with artist book-making people actually want to explore the book, not as a mass-produced object that’s beautiful, but as a small print run or even handmade object that still has a kind of aura and an appeal to it because of its cultural dominance. This final use of the book is not really explored in my analysis, but it is an important element to remember when considering the status of the book in the contemporary media environment.

Kelly:

What I’m wondering is: does the book in that sense become more of a luxury object? We are talking about books that have been designed for a singular purpose that are obviously much more expensive to produce

than mass-produced paperbacks. What does that mean for the accessibility of these projects?

Anna:

That was one of the things I was interested in with chapter 3 on crowdsourcing, where I'm trying to theorize confessional entrepreneurship as a practice. On the one hand these projects begin by claiming to build a community online, by using online spaces that are free and have no or low cost to access. For example, they are not subscription based. These projects tap into the democratic fantasy of involvement and participation attached to the internet. But when they reach a degree of success, something happens: they commodify the project through the book, or through live ticketed performances. And if you have to buy a book or buy a ticket to access your online community, a financial barrier to participation emerges after people have already invested in the free online community. This is why, to me, the transmedial element of these projects is very interesting.

To return to your question: Is the book a luxury item? I think the work of people such as Jessica Pressman in her exploration of *bookishness* is interested precisely in this slip-page between the book as a mass-produced item, the book as a design object and as an object that communicates a range of other meanings such as cosiness, relaxation and a certain kind of luxury, right?¹ Like a luxury in time: "I have the time now to curl up with a good book". I think there are ways in which the book has become associated with a certain kind of relationship to time and money, which we also see in the rise of, for example, *Bookstagram*.

¹ In *Bookishness: Loving Books in a Digital Age*, Jessica Pressman explores how *bookishness* has become both an identity and an aesthetic strategy, by considering the meaning of books as objects in the contemporary age.

Kelly:

Your work is titled Stories of the Self, yet it largely focuses on performativity and media materialities, and less on storytelling per se. Without reading your book as an argument for leaving narratology behind, how do you see the role of narratology, or literary studies at large, within the various perspectives of performativity, media materialities and autobiography? Should autobiography studies as a discipline reinvent itself with an eye for materiality?

Anna:

In answer to your second question, should autobiography studies reinvent itself with an eye for materiality: my book says *yes: it should*. That's what I'm hoping to help usher in, in a more meaningful way in the study of autobiography. But in relation to your first question, I don't think—or at least I hope—the book doesn't read as though I'm saying we have to throw out narratology and attention to stories with it. In *Stories of the Self*, I deliberately take a polemic position and say, for example, in the introduction that I think we've been too focused on storytelling, and we haven't been adequately focused on the material conditions under which the storytelling occurs both as a creative act and also in how it's received. However, I don't think attending to materiality at the same time means abandoning narratology. I think we have to try to combine a narratological view and the broader strengths of literary studies in terms of its capacity to account for how narratives work.

To me, *Stories of the Self* is a book about methodology rather than theory. The aim was to include attention to the material conditions under which the story is produced. So, my hope is that what it proposes is more expansive than saying leave narratology behind, because I'm such a fan of close reading and what it can achieve that I would never want us to do that. I think we would lose so much in our ability to understand contemporary culture if we stopped attending to

narrative, but I also think we have to recognise that a strict training in traditional narratology and literary studies is not going to help us account for the objects of life writing that are being made today. We cannot account for what those texts are doing with the tools of narratology alone.

Kelly:

So far we have mentioned both the terms life writing and autobiography, so it is worthwhile to clarify the distinction between these terms. In your introduction you state: “By marking out autobiography as an act of self-life-inscription that seeks a public of potentially unknown people, I could be accused of returning to a ‘pre-theory’ version of life writing criticism that largely understood autobiography as an aesthetic (or more specifically literary) project in which the author gives their life coherence, shape, and unity in order to put it into the public record” (Poletti 14). Can you elaborate on the criticism surrounding “autobiography” and your reasons for returning to the term anyway?

Anna:

This is where my book is making a really specific intervention into a very specific debate inside a subfield of literary studies. So this is the part of my book where I wouldn't be surprised if a lot of people feel the same as a friend of mine who has a PhD in media studies who read the introduction and said: “I really don't care about those three pages,” to which I responded: “I don't blame you, because none of these things matter to you.” But it was important to me to speak directly to the field of autobiography studies because it is my home base. In the study of autobiography there has been a shift away from referring to any act of self-representation or life narration or anything else as “autobiographical” because of a very meaningful critique of the way autobiography was ushered into literary studies to begin with. Autobiography was seen as a minor genre by literary scholars, it was seen as a popular genre, until a group of critics did the

foundational work of doing classic narratological, aesthetic close readings of autobiographies by already famous writers or political figures to establish the aesthetic legitimacy of life writing. These early case studies were largely focussed on the writing by white men with an existing degree of symbolic capital, and the aim of the scholarship was to show that autobiography should be included in our understanding of “capital I” Literature.

What happened after that initial wave of scholarship was that feminists and postcolonial scholars critiqued both the case studies used to make this argument, but also the very impulse to domesticate autobiography inside the existing category of literature. This is why the field moved away from using autobiography as a term to the term “life writing.” My concern about this shift inside our subfield that is concerned with theorizing life writing is that the terms we use to identify what we study have become disconnected from the language used by the vast majority of the people in academia and in the cultural sector who are also interested in life writing. People outside of life writing studies still think of “autobiographical” as a completely commonsensical way to describe an artwork that draws on lived experience, or to refer to a variety of cultural practices where people are talking about themselves. I wanted to try to honour the critical developments in the field but not throw away “autobiography” as a term. So, I tried to build on the theoretical and definitional arguments of the field to redefine autobiography, because I still think that in my experience, when I say I’m working on autobiography, people understand what I mean. When I say I’m working on life writing, people squint. They’re patient, they’re like “ahh yeah I think I have a sense of what that could mean,” but when I say autobiography, they know what I mean. To me that capacity to communicate what we do outside of our own intellectual context is really important. Thus, I try to create a redefinition of

autobiography that allows us to consolidate the insights of that element of our intellectual history but actually keep a term that allows other people to be interested in what we do.

Kelly:

And then we get enough squinting as literary studies people anyway.

Anna:

Exactly! We get enough squinting anyway.

Kees:

The next question builds on what you've just been talking about, because in my interpretation, the book is ultimately about the importance and significance of media materialities in the process of what you call "self-life-inscription" (Poletti 8). Much of your discussion is thus focused on bringing back thought of the self to the types of media and matter that help constitute our lives and identities. Now, I don't know if I'm right in this, but it felt like you were also trying to implicitly de-centre intelligence and rationality as categories that primarily constitute our idea of the self, and that have long defined Western understandings of "humanity." So, would you say your book additionally decentres our traditional understanding of what individual subjectivity is? And then a second question would be: What would be the merit of approaching rationality and intelligence from the material and transmedial perspectives that you employ in your book?

Anna:

That's an interesting question. I maybe haven't recognised that that was an implicit move in the book, but as I was listening to you characterise *Stories of the Self* that way I agree with you. Then the question is: why do I agree with you? I agree with you because, I think, as a feminist scholar, and as a scholar deeply influenced by poststructuralism and more recent work trying to extend beyond the limits of poststructuralism as a linguistically focused theoretical paradigm, I

take it for granted that we've rejected the Cartesian statement 'I think, therefore I am'. This model of subjectivity is not my starting point. Feminist philosophy has forcefully, and I think convincingly, established the limitations and violence implicit in thinking of the subject through the mind-body dualism. Approaching subjectivity as residing in the mind and understanding the body as just the meat vehicle for identity has been exposed as an inaccurate understanding of how we are, and as a core component of the logic that enabled a strict and violent hierarchy that delimited some subjects from the category of subjectivity by associating them with bodies, not minds, such as people of colour, women, children and the disabled. There is so much in our experience of the self that cannot be understood by an appeal to our capacity to reason, to our intelligence or to our cognitive experience of the world.

That said, I don't think we should abandon intelligence and rationality as a core component of our thinking about subjectivity. It's just that it's not the place I start from in thinking about subjectivity because of the feminist air in my intellectual lungs. However, my way of thinking about autobiography as something that always involves an initial choice regarding media holds a place for intelligence, right? I'm thinking about autobiography as something that someone makes for a stranger to read. I'm not thinking about autobiography as the way I talk to my friends and family. I'm thinking about autobiographies as the way we talk outside existing relationships of intimacy and community, and I hope that my emphasis on the fact that that always begins with a choice—what media is the right media for me to use to talk to strangers? —is a place where intelligence and rationality are important. Because I insist that that choice is partly a rational choice. It's not an accident; people don't accidentally write on Facebook the way some people would imply. Some people would imply that we unthink-

ingly, irrationally, use social media and I would take a very different position and say “no, I think that there is rational choice there.” It’s not purely rational because there are other factors at play, but I would insist that the choice of media always involves a component of rationality. That’s perhaps where, in the account of the self that I’m trying to develop here, there is place for that component.

Kees:

What follows responds to what you now gesture at from your feminist perspective. Part of the reason I asked you this question is because one focal point in your book is Giorgio Agamben’s distinction between bios and zoē as put forward in his Homo Sacer. One way of interpreting this distinction is that zoē strictly refers to “bare life,” or the life that is reducible to mere body as you put it. Bios, then, concerns those aspects of life itself that we attribute to cultural production, human relationality, and social interaction. However, throughout your discussion, you don’t seem to treat these two terms as necessarily separate, or as binary opposites for that matter. Rather, you see them as a dynamic, and as constitutive of the nexus of auto, bios and zoē. How do you approach this dynamic? Where, for (auto)biographical writing, do you say zoē ends and bios begins, or is such a transitional understanding inadequate for your treatment of these two terms?

Anna:

Yes, you are right, I am following Agamben initially, and his expansion of and disagreement with the formulation of biopolitics. Agamben argued that the distinction between zoē and bios no longer holds, and I agree. This is part of the legacy of Foucault’s excavation of biopolitics: a recognition that there isn’t a distinction between bare life and the life as it is acculturated, that the two processes are connected. And, indeed, one of the ways that power functions is by creating the appearance of these two distinct elements of life, that there is this kind of bare life animal existence and then there

is everything else. So I deliberately don't treat them as separate things. I follow Agamben's argument that in modernity, or postmodernity, or the neoliberal condition, or whatever we decide to call the time we are currently in, that distinction has collapsed. If it ever truly existed, it is collapsed. But I want to hold on to *zōē* and *bios* partly because of the way I'm trying, and this is a technical point, to redefine *auto-bio-graphy*. I want to get the *zōē* in, and the way in which I do this is by saying: *zōē* comes with *bio* now. We can't think *bio* as separate from *zōē*. If we stay with *auto-bio-graphy*, the *bio* brings the *zōē*. Therefore, when we're trying to read any act of *auto-bio-graphy* we need to be looking for the *bio* and the *zōē* and the way in which those things are entangled and connected now.

Kees:

Yes, that was precisely what I was getting at. It's interesting to see how you give yet another very important twist to this quite well-known distinction, because it helps us understand the status of, for example, those lives that you discuss in the conclusion of your book that are represented by the likes of Ai Weiwei, lives that we, following Agamben's critique, would treat as mere bare life.² This conception is evidently problematic, because these people come from cultures where they have very specific traditions, very specific belief systems and life trajectories that they are a part of. So thank you for that clarification.

² Poletti discusses numerous works by Chinese conceptual artist and activist Ai Weiwei in the conclusion to their monograph. Most notably, Poletti shows how Weiwei exposes the tensions between grievable lives and their status as representations in various media, as is the case in his widely discussed *Human Flow*, a documentary film in which he directly confronts the viewer with the material reality of refugee crises across more than twenty countries (178). This film makes painfully clear the performative dimension of self-representation and the way in which devices such as cameras, and interfaces such as social media, facilitate these representations. In their discussion, Poletti mainly draws on the connection between Weiwei's work and Judith Butler's understanding of "performativity" and "grievability".

Anna:

Judith Butler's work on vulnerability and grievable lives has significantly shifted how we think about Agamben's interventions on bare life. In some ways it's a kind of unpopular concept now, although it is still around. I think Butler in particular has been very influential in pointing out precisely what you're saying, which is that actually the very generation of a category, bare life, is a kind of active violence. That is, if we apply it as an analytic framework without recognizing that that is a performative action. I'm much more influenced by Butler in the application than I am by Agamben.

Kees:

Building on your discussion of Judith Butler, I have a question that precisely addresses your remark about grievability. Another recurring theme throughout most of your chapters is Butler's conception of the grievability of lives, which is undeniably tied to the question of visibility. These binaries, primarily grievability / ungrievability and visibility / invisibility, can in my opinion also be related to the complex of dis / ability. Aside from the qualification of different lives that seems so central to your understanding of autobiography, what can we say about those individuals that are not strictly able, either physically or mentally, to partake in the processes of self-life-inscription in the ways that you describe and discuss?

Anna:

This question is present in one of the texts that I studied, but I don't address it explicitly in the discussion of that text. The documentary film *Tarnation* by Jonathan Caouette, which I've written on in other contexts as well, is a really interesting answer to this question, because that documentary is a work of auto/biography. It's the narrative of his relationship with his mother, and he gives himself the task of telling her story. One of the reasons he decides to do this is because her mental health conditions essentially prevent her from, in his

view, giving an account of herself. Thus, he takes it upon himself to tell her story, and part of the story he wants to tell about her is the way in which the interventions into her mental health conditions at a certain point in her life—the administration of electroshock therapy—made her conditions worse. Thus, *Tarnation* is partly a narrative about the kind of medicalization of specific mental health conditions, and the terrible outcomes that can occur for people.

It's quite a controversial documentary for the very reason that Caouette takes it upon himself to tell his mother's story, and some critics feel he "inserts" himself into his mother's story. But what I find very compelling about this documentary is precisely that it's an attempt to answer your question. We have to acknowledge that not everyone is capable or wants to tell their own story. If we think that life writing—and by this I mean stories of our own lived experience but also stories of our entanglement with the lived experience of others—matters, how do those stories become legible? Well, one option is by taking the ethical and creative risk that someone such as Jonathan Caouette took, which is to accept there is no kind of purely ethical, acceptable way to tell the story, but to tell it anyway. I think he does stand up to, but also makes himself vulnerable to, charges of speaking on her behalf, of appropriating her story and so on, but he also poses the question: what's the alternative? I don't think this is a rhetorical question.

As a scholar I am constantly asking that question in a genuine sense: what other alternatives are there? Since I finished this book, I've gone on to co-edit a book that's about to come out on graphic medicine, and it looks at the use of comics by people with a range of disabilities to talk about their experience, and comics by able-bodied people that talk about their experiences with others. In that collection we have comics artists and scholars who are interested in your question. And there are some really interesting discus-

sions in that book about, for example, comics artists who tell the story of members of their own family or people that they've come into contact with through friendship or employment relationships who have intellectual disabilities. I think that this question of "who speaks and how?" is really important for the medical humanities, but it's also important for the humanities generally. What I discovered working on that book was—and this is really obvious—that negotiating these issues is hard! Actually, it's *really* hard. This is why as a scholar I'm just grateful that any artist seeks to collaborate with people who cannot tell their story under their own steam and attempt to get those stories told, because it's so hard to do. Because it's obvious, both from what the artists themselves say, but also what the scholarship reveals, that the discourses, the power relations, the issues around intelligibility that you have to navigate that actually do that would lead a lot of people to think "I'm not going to try. I'm going to keep this story inside the existing intimate networks and not try and tell strangers about it." So yeah, in many ways I think the fact that I didn't deal with this explicitly in *Stories of the Self* is part of what led me on to the next project.

Kees:

Your observation that we should ask the question: "Is there an alternative to the unrepresentability of certain types of life?" seems of particular importance here. If there's such a fundamental and important focus on looking at the materiality and transmediality of the ways in which we articulate our lives, is there also a danger of reducing the self to that matter? Can we eventually even speak of a self that exists beyond artifice?

Anna:

I think there's always a risk of reductionism or oversimplification, but to be honest, this is where working on cultural products that claim to have a direct relationship to lived

experience as opposed to fiction actually makes it more difficult to become reductive, in my experience. There is something in the way these texts are produced, but also in the kind of position it forces you to take, that make certain kinds of slippages harder to make. I mean, people can still write bad scholarship about autobiographies, but my experience is that it's actually harder to fall into reductionism, because the text itself is constantly poking you in the eye in some way, asking you to be cognizant of the ethical relationship that you have with the object and the person that stands behind it. So, I think that the benefits of paying attention to materiality both as a component of narrative but also sometimes as a way out of narrative that can prevent this kind of reductionism rather than promote it. I'm being partisan now, but I need to be, because this interview is about my book.

Kees:

I figure that there is something fundamentally irreducible about the factual existence of the life that is being articulated, so there is no risk of being accused of fictionalising parts of that life if it represents the genuine experience of the process of self-life inscription. So, in that sense, the interplay between material life and text ventriloquizes the life itself, whereas textual reflection or study of the materials that compose that life would reduce our perception of that self to what we can do with it textually.

Anna:

Yeah, and also because the text itself is making certain kinds of claims, it forces you as a critic to make different ones, whereas I think when you are working on fiction sometimes the claims that you are seeking to make are ones that autobiographical or biographical texts themselves are making. Consequently, the question "what's the point of being a critic?" I think shifts in a fundamental way.

Kelly:

In relation to that, the changing role of the critic and the scholar, I want to talk about something that you say in your chapter on Andy Warhol's Time Capsules. You write about visiting The Warhol archives and you write that "you have to play them, in every sense of the word, for the autobiographical content to be discovered" (Poletti 39). I was struck by that and it made me wonder how you feel that the role of the critic and/or researcher has changed when you're faced with the enormity of something like the Time Capsules? Of course, this also amounts to other forms that you discuss as well, in your chapter on dossiers—to what extent does an artwork of that size demand you to become a player instead of a researcher, or perhaps in extension to being a researcher? And how does that influence your work?

Anna:

I'm very interested in cultural practices and texts that don't immediately respond to my training. This is partly just a personality quirk. I enjoy the challenge. But it's also an intellectual commitment in the sense that I feel as though in your undergraduate and graduate training you acquire all these theoretical and methodological skills and you can feel very powerful when you have all of these at your disposal. Personally, I think it's very important, and again I think this is a feminist position, that we don't become too enamoured of our own mastery, and that we do seek out intellectual encounters and research projects that humble us, that take us back to square one and force us to ask, "oh how do I do this?" But not just "how do I do this because I want to do something really complicated" or "because I need to prove to everyone that I'm the smartest," but rather "how does this object actually challenge everything I think I know about what my field does?" I think that's one of the ways, but not the only way, that knowledge about culture continues to expand, because if we only study the things we already know how to study we are self-selecting.

It was absolutely terrifying when those Microsoft Word documents started arriving describing the contents of the *Time Capsules* and I was about to get on a plane and fly to the other side of the planet, having five days to do my research.³ In the months leading up to that trip, the archivist from the Warhol Museum is just sending me these very cheery emails, sometimes with a little update on his cats, with enormous amounts of information, and there was nothing in my training that prepared me for that. So, what was I going to do was either say “OK, forget it, the *Time Capsules* is too hard,” or I was going to have to accept that this “text” was something that I had to learn how to engage with, and not assume that I knew how to engage with. This realization meant that I had to make my methodology up as I went along researching the *Time Capsules* in such a way that I felt as though I could still, at the end of the day or at some point along the line, tell people that what I was (and still am) doing is scholarship. I think that is a very tricky line to walk and it is one of the lines that is emerging in the humanities we are in now.

The following could be contentious, so if there will be letters to the editors of *FRAME* about this comment I will respond. But if we accept the suggestion that the moment of high theory in the humanities, or at least in literary studies, has passed, that we recognise that our job is no longer just to come up with more and more refined and beautiful theories about what culture is, but to actually study how culture is changing, then I think this question of how we do that is the kind of question that defines those disciplines more broadly now. That question has emerged in the last ten to

³ The documents mentioned are the finding aids composed by the team working in the Warhol archives, about which Poletti writes: “The finding aids are intended to make engaging with the *Time Capsules* easier for researchers, curators, and archivists, but the aids turn hundreds of thousands of objects into more than six thousand pages of text” (34).

fifteen years as the consequence of high theory, which I am nevertheless a fan of, has waned. It is no longer necessarily seen as a given that our job is to theorize, which leads us to the question “then what *is* our job”? I guess I am interested in trying to model that one of our possible jobs is turning up and learning how to respond to something, knowing that you have the skills and a whole range of theory. If you have the research capacity and the intellectual capacity to find what you need to know as it is revealed to you, then you do not need to approach the text already knowing that you will master it. Actually letting it unsettle you is the key to this approach. Did that answer the question?

Kelly:

I think so, yes. It does say something about not just your role in this project, but our roles as researchers or literary scholars in general, that they are changing in the face of things (i.e. cultural artifacts) that are getting more massive and expansive, such as Warhol’s Time Capsules.

Anna:

Yes, and in terms of what changes my relationship to my research output, I increasingly think of myself as a methods-person rather than a theory-person, and that’s a new development. Initially, what I was doing was conducting examinations of case studies that would help advance the theory of autobiography and I do not think I would do that anymore. I think I am a methods-person now.

Kelly:

Well, I for sure am glad that you did actually visit the Warhol Archive. It was definitely one of my favourite chapters. Then I want to come back to another one of my favourite chapters, which is the chapter entitled “Crowdsourcing”. You write about PostSecret and argue that the commercial success of that project lies in the intimate public that

was this inherent part of it; but at the same time, this dimension was ruined once it turned into an app. One reason you give for the project's failed digitalization is that the physical appearance of the postcards ensured a trusted environment in a way that art galleries do as well, an affordance that was beyond the app's digital environment. That made me wonder, does that mean you see no opportunities for any form of confessional entrepreneurship that is completely digital, removed from any kind of material or bodily experience? Or has that become a set requirement for any kind of autobiographical practice?

Anna:

I think that's a really good question. I guess one way to answer this—and here I was just saying that I'm not a theorist—[in an ironic tone] is: “The theory of the world” that my book is advancing, is that we live in a world that is both digital and analogue. Yes, we are living in what some people call the digital age, and it's clear that the digital is a prime site of change in all areas of human activity. But what I learned by giving myself the task of trying to account for materiality and mediation in life writing was that the digital and the analogue are not disconnected. Nothing is purely digital. Because even if something is online, it is still encountered through a device that we hold in our hand, or wear on our wrist. And this handedness, the fact that the digital still comes to us through devices, is, at minimum, the way in which the digital is also analogue. My hand and how it feels after I've had the phone in it for a couple of hours, is not an experience that is digital; that comes to me through digital media. It is an embodied, emplaced, analogue experience. So, in that sense I would say, in answer to your question: yes, I think still all cultural practices that are engaged in an attempt to create a conversation in public about what matters about our life, about what we value in our lived experience, are working at this intersection of the analogue and the digital, even if it's presented as purely digital.

Kees:

Starting from the idea that all of the devices that we use to engage with different types of media, and the way in which these devices, in your words, might be said to be embodied in these practices rather than dissociated and disconnected from them, I couldn't help but notice that you use "prosthesis" as a metaphor twice in your book. I read your use of this term as a way of understanding media as an extension of our bodies, but also our minds, in a way similar to the contested extended mind thesis in philosophy of mind, which argues that many of the (digital) utilities that we outsource some of our cognitive functions to can also be said to be part of our minds, precisely because they fulfil the roles of those functions they replace.

However, while reading, I couldn't help but wonder about this notion of the prosthesis, because it dematerialises what we understand as a prosthetic limb, for example, from the context in which it serves as an aid for people that actually need it. This thought led me to wonder; is there a way of approaching the concept and the metaphorical import of "prosthesis" from a different viewpoint that still retains this meaning-making function, but doesn't risk dematerialising the actual role prosthetics have in the lives of people that are disabled? I'm not accusing you of misusing the word here, but some theories that I've read discuss that the dematerialization of prosthetics through the metaphorical conception of "prosthesis" does a disservice to people who actually use prosthetics materially.⁴

Anna:

What's the nature of the disservice? Can you remember?

Kees:

The nature of the disservice is that the disproportionate focus on the metaphorical function of prosthesis in a lot of theoretical thinking has somewhat shifted our understanding of prosthetics away from its very fundamental material substrate towards its exclusive metaphorical use.

⁴ See for example Vivian Sobchack's "A Leg to Stand On: Prosthetics, Metaphor, and Materiality" in *The Prosthetic Impulse: From a Posthuman Present to a Biocultural Future*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006, pp. 17-41.

Anna:

Okay, I don't know if I'm going to answer this question, but here's what I'm thinking. I don't know enough about the history of the development of the actual physical prosthesis to give an informed answer here, but I'm going to guess there are different kinds of physical prostheses, some of which are designed to actually replace, to some degree, the function of the missing physical element, to give people some degree of functionality. So, in that sense, it's a supplement. There are other forms of prostheses, which are purely aesthetic. Glass eyes, for example, and the breast reconstruction that women who have had mastectomy to stop breast cancer are offered. When women diagnosed with breast cancer are told that they're going to have to have mastectomy, either a single or double, they are immediately offered the option to have a breast reconstruction so that they don't lose the aesthetics of the female body. Audre Lorde has written very powerfully about this in *The Cancer Journals*. In this situation, the treatment for the cancer is folded into an aesthetic operation; the two operations often happen at the same time. This dual surgery is offered to women like a package deal: we're both going to treat this thing that might kill you and we're going to restore you to the aesthetic, physical approximation of femininity that you've spent your whole life inside of. What that two-sided offer produces in some women is an additional layer of stress and reflection about what it means to have a mastectomy, but also about what the assumed normative relationship is that the medical profession reinforces between breast and femaleness, or femininity, and one's identity—one's feeling of continuity about who they are. The breast reconstruction is a prosthetic of identity and legibility.

So perhaps what you question is: what kind of prosthesis am I talking about? Am I talking about an aesthetic prosthesis that allows people to stay in some kind of proximity

to normativity, for their own, say, psychological coherence, but also for their social integration? Or am I talking about a prosthesis that enhances or supplements functionality?

Kees:

I absolutely appreciate this nuanced approach because I think it further problematizes our understanding of what, say, a digital device might or might not do.

Anna:

Yes, yes.

Kees:

It also complicates the idea that there is a unified understanding of “prosthesis.” Therefore, as a concept, it plays a rather marginal role, at least in the way in which I have just addressed it. But I think it’s nevertheless interesting to ask ourselves to what extent, for example, a cell phone is a supplement to our lives and in what ways it is an indispensable social mediator. Additionally, I think this points at an interesting tension between these two conceptions that might need further exploration.

Anna:

My gut feeling is that it is clearly both. But I also think that what your proposition gives us is a different perspective on some of the most basic truisms that we adhere to in the study of culture, which is: what culture is. I think we do often think of culture as a prosthesis. Culture is a supplement to human existence that allows us to do certain things. It enhances our functionality. We can remember more stuff and transmit knowledge more effectively across generations through culture, but it also has this normativizing function while it’s doing that. So, I think that your question also makes possible a slightly different perspective on that truism about culture, and certainly this was one of the things I

was really interested in with autobiography generally. What ideas about a life get transmitted to other people through these practises of life writing?

Kees:

Thank you. At least it clarifies some of my own questions that arose while reading about these matters. Now I would like to bring our discussion back to the theme of our current issue, because I think we can elaborate on these views on the interaction between language and matter starting with your chapter “Dossiers.” In that chapter, one of your case studies is the heavily redacted FBI files of actor and musician Paul Robeson and the way in which the discourse and infrastructure of those files partly constitute, or constituted, the perception of his persona. In reaction to his dossier, you analyse Steve McQueen’s artwork End Credits, which displays Robeson’s FBI files in rapid succession and is overlaid with multiple voices that asynchronously narrate some aspects of the dossier.

One conclusion you draw about the dossier, at least conceptually, based on End Credits is that “[the dossier] is a kind of fetish object that stands in for the autonomous agential body of the man,” in this case Robeson, “the state wishes to control” (Poletti 156). Obviously, we can problematize the word man here and extend its meaning to every type of body that is under surveillance. Thus, in the context of our issue, your discussion of McQueen’s work raised questions about the social ontology of the medical dossier. Although it is not strictly autobiographical, at least in principle, the medical dossier often inadequately defines the parameters within which an ostensibly “unhealthy” life can be made intelligible. In what ways do you think the medical dossier, which is drawn up by medical experts and is thus not strictly autobiographical, can be understood according to the workings of the dossier as you describe them?

Anna:

The “Dossiers” chapter is the place in the book where the idea of the autobiography as the self-writing of a life is bro-

ken, because what I'm looking at there is institutional biography. I wanted to include these kinds of practices because the impetus of the book is partly to try and think about contemporary digital surveillance, and why it is that we haven't seen a mass abandonment of online technologies in the face of the revelations produced by Edward Snowden and others. And surveillance is, if nothing else, a story of ourselves assembled by somebody else. One of the most pressing questions in the contemporary moment is: what power do these "data doubles," to use Mark Poster's phrase, have? What's our relationship to these other versions of ourselves that are out there written in different media by different organisations?

The medical dossier is a perfect example and a long-standing one at that. Like the physical FBI dossier, it's a kind of pre-digital example of the way in which a material file on someone can become an object that has enormous ramifications for their lived experience. And this can be seen in both positive and negative ways. One of the questions about the medical dossier is: how complete is it? If there's stuff missing from it, does that actually jeopardise someone's treatment? If I'm seeing multiple specialists, are all of my specialists feeding into the one dossier so that my posttraumatic stress can be taken into account by my oncologist? Or is it actually this kind of diffracted, partial thing that's spread out across six different computers, and therefore puts an additional burden on me as the patient to be filling in the gaps of the specific dossier that each specialist has. In this instance, one might conclude: "A more complete dossier would be a blessing here" for people with complex conditions who write about this from their own experience in illness memoirs and graphic medicine. Patient advocates point out just how much additional work an incomplete file puts on patients, their family members and their loved ones, to continually solve this informational gap every time they're dealing with the medical profession.

Of course, the other side is, and this is what I was interested in in researching dossiers and case studies, that when a dossier arrives in a scene before you do, you have already been written, and the outcomes of the scene, or the outcomes of that event, have already been partially determined before your arrival. And this, again as many patients tell us, but also many people of colour, and queers, and women, and children, can compound forms of social discrimination. So, the dossier arrives before you do and someone has already decided that you're, for example, a trans man, who's been taking testosterone a certain amount of time, and the people in the room have already come to some form of opinion about how that will impact, for example, the dentistry you're about to experience. It might inform their decision about how much pain medication to give you. This ability for a version of you to arrive before you arrive is also the worrying question about the dossier. Medical dossiers are a perfect example both of the burden that a lack of information or only partial information can place on individuals, but also the dangers of assuming that the dossier means that the work can begin before the person arrives.

Kees:

Kelly, maybe you want to follow up on this, because I think this is a good example of one of the issues that we discuss in the foreword to our current issue, namely the role of the DSM-5 in shaping identities, setting the parameters of some medical lives, and the very real material effects that document has on certain individuals.⁵ We do not necessarily have a question about this, but Kelly is more familiar with the document than I am, so maybe she wants to explain why we chose to discuss it in the foreword, because I think it neatly ties in with what Anna has been saying so far.

⁵ *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM)* is a book composed by the American Psychiatric Association that labels all known mental disorders and simultaneously provides the tools to diagnose them. It is the dominant text on mental disorders. The *DSM-5* is the most recent version of the book and is also dominant in allocating care in the Netherlands, for example.

Kelly:

Yeah, precisely because the DSM has this measurable tangible effect on people's lives, because it both provides tools for diagnosis and labels mental illness, you have this incredible overview of all existing mental disorders in one text, which is of course questionable in itself. However, aside from the information it provides, it also has a diagnostic function. It says what the disorder is and what the requirements for diagnosis are. At the same time this book, for example in Dutch insurance systems, in some instances determines what is considered to be proper treatment and to what extent the insurance can cover it. Thus, this one text has an incredible tangible effect on, as far as I know, much of the Global North. This fact also harks back to the medical dossiers we were talking about. Have you ever looked at your medical dossier?⁶ Have you requested it? [Anna shakes no] You should. It is really weird. I have.

My former explanation led me to think about including the DSM, because in the copy of my dossier I received, my 'top' diagnoses were listed in bold at the top of the page—which is a really alienating thing to look at. I would, in light of everything you have just said, nevertheless think that you would find it incredibly interesting to explore because for me, the first visible things were my current, semi-permanent diagnoses. Those people working in healthcare that I have directly or indirectly given permission to look at my patient dossier in the Netherlands can freely access it, as long as this permission is given upfront⁷. This protocol is good in cases of emergency, as we have just discussed, but it also means that indeed if I enter the dentist they already have access to it. According to the file I received, they do not even need to scroll to the specific element of my dossier. It is right there at the top, impossible

⁶ In the Netherlands, any individual has the right to request their medical dossier without specifying a reason. At times, you can access your dossier from one healthcare provider through an online portal, but this is not always the case. The dossier Kelly mentions is the dossier from her general practitioner, which includes reports from visits there but also has summarized accounts from any hospital visits, for example.

⁷ In the Netherlands, your healthcare provider needs your permission to access your dossier, although they can access it if you're not able to provide permission when it is necessary for your care. Permission can be assumed if a therapeutic alliance has been formed. A therapeutic alliance starts when a person asks a medical professional for help with things concerning their health. You can provide permission upfront to different healthcare providers, such as emergency rooms, but not every individual has considered this beforehand.

to ignore. First come my name, date of birth and any current diagnoses, then everything else. I am referring back to your example of the dentist precisely because I have been confronted with these questions at the dental office, where they ask questions because “it is important for them to know.” When I asked why, however, they did not have much of an answer. All of this is not a question to you actually, but just goes to show that there is much to be improved here.

Anna:

This is a perfect example of this question of where data collection and surveillance are proposed to you as a good but are also creating situations in which this is not necessarily the case. If your dossier arrives before you do, you need to know what they know, and you need to be, perhaps, vigilant and attentive in trying to sense when the dossier might be influencing the situation. Because, especially in relation to specific kinds of health conditions, there is stigma inside the medical institution. We see this for example with long COVID, where people who have long COVID have been told for months that their heart palpitations are anxiety and not real palpitations. However, the medical profession actually does not yet know what long COVID has done to people’s bodies. There is a tendency to psychologise the physical symptoms in order to move people on. This creates a situation where people are seeking care but also need to be vigilant for how larger social discourses are structuring their ability to access care. So, I think it’s great that you accessed your dossier!

Kelly:

Especially because you cannot choose. You can either grant or refuse people permission to enter your dossier, at least here in the Netherlands, but you cannot choose which elements are withheld from access.

Anna:

That's amazing.

Kelly:

I think they are required by law to look at the required elements only, but especially if there is information listed at the top, they are going to see that. Also, the question is, how many people are actually restricting themselves in that matter? And to what extent can you hold them accountable for it if they do not?⁸ If you scroll through something on a screen in search of what you need, then obviously you are going to see other things.

Anna:

This is where media materiality is super important, because part of what concerns you is the various affordances of scrolling, and I think you're right. But when we think about it, once you slow down, you can immediately start to think: "Will there be a way to send that dossier that didn't involve the scroll?" Could there be a way to present it as a series of tabs for example, so that someone could more easily go "I need to click on that tab and then that tab" and it's just a blank screen with tabs.

Kelly:

Yeah.

Anna:

But you're right. If it comes in a media format where it's all this information organised by subheadings that you have to scroll through, then yes, of course, people are by the very form that the information is coming in encouraged to read beyond the boundaries of their legal right to the information.

⁸ When and by whom your dossier is accessed is recorded in the Netherlands.

Kelly:

The copy I received was ordered chronologically. So, there you go, then there would be no way to go around it.

Anna:

Yes, so that would be an argument for going to the health department and saying, “This is a media materiality problem here; you need to redesign the way these things come to people, so that you’re enabling the reader of the dossier to act within the legal conditions you’ve put on them.” Because scrolling... We all read what we scroll. We can’t help it, but you have to, to find the thing you’re looking for.

Kelly:

Yeah, and in healthcare you also have to look at other things. It is not limited to the things that are in your dossier. Even if you go to the ER and present them with symptoms, there is this really hard dimension, because you also need information that patients will not readily tell you, either because they do not know or because they think it is related to something else. But it is time to move to the last question. We have already briefly touched upon how scholars can have a measurable effect on their disciplines. On this note, we were wondering the following, just to round this off...

Your book argues that autobiography studies should increasingly take into account the materiality of today’s forms of self-inscription; the interconnection between life, matter and media. At the same time, you also demonstrate that the corpus involved has become so enormous. We’ve just talked about the dossier, so I think that speaks for itself. We also talked about data doubles that consist of all this data available about us online, and how you were inspired by the privacy paradox, which is a concept that originates from law and information studies. Continuing on from this interdisciplinary approach, how do you see the future of autobiography studies as a discipline and how does it fit into the humanities at large?

Anna:

I think that's what's interesting about life writing studies. Its relevance to the humanities at large is rapidly and continually expanding, and that brings excellent things for the study of life writing, but also for the humanities more broadly. It also brings certain challenges with it, because I think that scholars who are working on questions that are really life writing questions, who have no understanding of life writing as a practice, are coming to life writing without necessarily having access to the range of tools and ways of thinking and theories that have been developed in the field that could help them answer their questions. And that is absolutely true of things such as information law, but also with new media studies, because media studies has only recently had to come to grips with nonfictional accounts of the self.

So—and again I'm kind of being biased here—I think life writing studies has a lot to offer to a range of disciplines in the humanities, but also that extend beyond the humanities, that are trying to account for the intersection between communications, media and lived experience. But life writing studies can't account for the complexity of that intersection on its own. It's not that I think all humanities scholars should become life writing scholars, because I think—and this is why I had to go to information law and to a range of other disciplines including art history in my own research to try and account for what I was seeing—the complexity of that intersection between lived experience and communications media requires a kind of interdisciplinary, cross-disciplinary humanities and social sciences response.

Working on this book reminded me of the need for interdisciplinary work, and that an individual scholar can only really draw one tiny little square inside the mosaic. All I can say is: "Here's my contribution to our shared attempt to grapple with the contemporary moment." What I've learned is that the future of autobiography studies as a discipline

is to continue to develop its specific insights, but also take seriously the requirement to be communicating those insights in such a way that other scholars can pick them up and make use of them in their own work and apply some of those insights in relation to their own research questions.

Kees:

So would you say that the future of autobiography studies is transdisciplinary?

Anna:

I think the future of the humanities is intrinsically transdisciplinary, and autobiography studies has a place in that. Autobiography studies is one of the areas of expertise that can contribute to this larger project, and I think the larger question increasingly is: “How do the humanities and the social sciences collaborate?”

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Biography

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