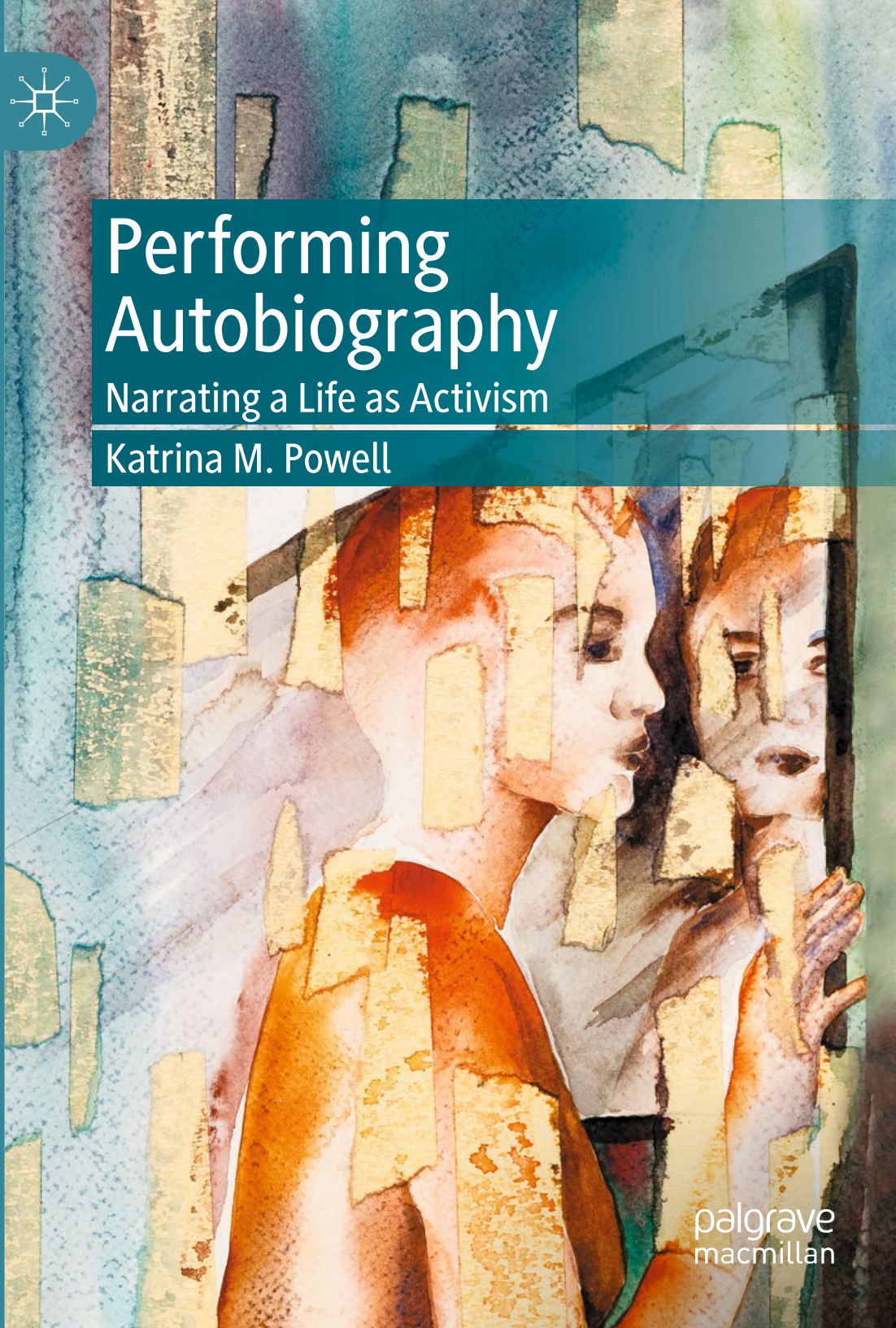
Performing
Autobiography
Narrating a Life as Activism
Katrina M. Powell
palgrave
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For Jean Arasanayagam, 1934–2019, with love

Book Abstract

Performing Auto/biography analyzes the rhetorical strategies employed in five authors' auto/biographical texts, examining their representations of identities and the public implications of writing individual identity. Exploring the ways race, class, culture, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality might affect the form(s) in which writers choose to write (e.g., memoir, fictional autobiography, and poetry), *Performing Auto/biography* questions how autobiographers challenge notions of genre, truth, and representation. Specifically, this book argues that constructing identity is a performance, one that can simultaneously use and subvert traditional notions of rhetoric. By examining the auto/biographical texts of Zora Neale Hurston, Audre Lorde, Dorothy Allison, Joyce Johnson, and Shirley Geok-lin Lim together, this book theorizes self-representation as a rhetorical performance, one where discourses of power come in contact with discourses of identity. As a result, their texts can be seen as "performative auto/biography"—transgressive archives where readers are asked to consider their own identities and act accordingly. In doing so, this book contributes to feminist rhetorics and auto/biography studies, arguing that these performative genres advocate for life narratives as political and social activism.

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To my friend, the artist Anoma Wijewardene, thank you for permission for using the likeness of your painting, "Is it a trick of the light" and thank you to the owner, Sheyana La Brooy, for permission as well. Anoma, your art inspires introspection and responsibility.

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Powell, Katrina M. "'How Can I Prove that I am Not Who I am?': Layered Identities and Genres in the Work of Shirley Geok-Lin Lim." *Asiatic: IIUM Journal of English Language and Literature* 8.1 (2014): 25–39.

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Contents

CHAPTER 1

Introduction: Intersections of Genre, Gender, Performance, and Rhetoric

In *Among the White Moon Faces* (1996), Shirley Geok-lin Lim writes in her memoir about navigating the academy as a scholar, poet, and professor, asking, "Do wild feminists live in universities? Can they?" (226). As she describes her search for a place where she can find a "society of scholars, an abundance of talk, an antagonism of ideas, bracing hostile seriousness, and above all a community of women" (227), Lim's version of a wild feminist seems to me to be one of mentorship, where women are encouraged by each other to stand up and speak their minds. After teaching and writing about women's autobiography for nearly thirty years, I see wild feminism as boldly resisting when someone says you do not fit in. Wild feminism recognizes that fitting into a sexist, racist, homophobic system is not actually desirable; indeed, women writers and feminist scholars have made significant contributions to critical thought around the literary and rhetorical genre of auto/biography by *not* fitting in.

Informed by the works of the authors discussed in this book, Zora Neale Hurston, Audre Lorde, Dorothy Allison, Joyce Johnson, and Shirley Geok-lin Lim, among other women auto/biographers, I also define wild

In this book I follow Nguyễn and Pendleton's discussion, citing Temple University's Dr. Lori L. Tharps's *New York Times* op-ed, in capitalizing both Black and White as a way to signify an antiracist approach. Where quoted material uses lower case for either term, I have left the author's text unchanged.

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feminism as taking no bullshit, being caring and outspoken at the same time, and not being beaten down by the people or policies that mean to keep us in our "place." If that is what Lim meant, then I am a wild feminist who exists because the women writers in this book exist, because the other writers who I teach in my courses exist, and because my students and colleagues exist. In every class period and committee meeting, we talk back, challenge, change policy, and promote other wild feminists.

Women who write auto/biography are often criticized for being self-indulgent. For a long time, women's writing generally and auto/biographical writing in particular were not regarded as worthy of study because the women themselves were not "exemplary." The position that women's experience is "anecdotal" is a way to keep people who identify as women hidden from each other. In her memoir/essay collection, *The Cancer Journals*, Lorde says that if she had agreed to a prosthesis after her mastectomy, then she would have become invisible to other women who had also suffered from breast cancer. With the political climate some 40 years since her memoir was published, we remain invisible to each other. By discounting one's experience as anecdotal, as an anomaly, as not counting toward the big data, we free institutional structures from providing resources to address issues—like adequate resources toward breast cancer research or adequate resources to process backlogged rape kits. One woman's tale of her evidence sitting idly in her local police station's storage area, together with the thousands of other stories of women's rape kits going unprocessed for years and years, becomes the data needed to move forward. What if we listened to and believed the first woman to begin with? Maybe then evidence would not have been backlogged to our legal system's shame.

Women who write auto/biographically, whether in memoir, diary, letters, lists, tweets, or some other life narratives, sometimes do so to redress existing narratives that do not adequately tell their stories. Because the act of writing such narratives involves genre, gender, performance, and rhetoric, I situate the analyses of this book within the broader fields of both auto/biography studies and rhetorical studies. I outline the interdisciplinary intersections between and among them and provide a sketch of the ways I see these disciplinary conversations overlapping, while also highlighting the ways that each informs the other in interesting and productive ways. Scholars such as Sidonie Smith, Julia Watson, Leigh Gilmore, Johnnie Stover, Nedra Reynolds, Wendy Hesford, Hildy Miller, and Lillian Bridwell-Bowles, to name a few, have paved the way for these conversations, and this book extends these conversations by highlighting the rhetorical dimensions of identity and the rhetorical performances of these five writers as they engage in multiple genres to delineate their identities. The

common interests of both fields make for productive analyses of the texts discussed in this volume. As autobiography scholar Sidonie Smith states, "Whatever the occasion or that audience, the autobiographical speaker becomes the performative subject" (Smith "Performativity" 17). In her seminal article discussing the ways that narrating a "self as identity derives paradoxically from the loss of consciousness of fragments of experiential history" (18), Smith focuses on audience and the ways that writers of life narratives create their texts with particular audiences in mind. Like many interdisciplinary scholars, Smith's bringing together theories from philosophy (Butler, de Certeau), gender (de Lauretis, Mouffe, Russo), history (Chakrabarty), political science (Anderson, Schueller), literature (Armstrong, Emberley), sociology (Goffman), psychology (Bruner), and autobiography (Gilmore, Nussbaum, Eakin, Lejeune) makes for a powerful moment where the complexity of narrative, particularly narrating identity(s), challenges any sense that a self is unified or static. Indeed, identities change (Egan and Helms), and the ethical, performative, national implications for changing identities make for fruitful conversation about self and representation. Smith's early focus on occasion (or rhetorical situation) and audience is a rhetorical approach, with an emphasis on conventions of identity, narrative, and autobiography. More recently, and heavily influenced by Smith's theories of autobiography, performativity, and the body, Anshu Malhotra and Siobhan Lambert-Hurley explore "how notions of 'performance' and 'performativity' might be especially useful in opening up the autobiographical genre. For a genre that is inherently confessional—an artifice insofar as it is about self-fashioning—the idea of performance teases out the choices made in terms of forms and narrative strategies employed, and the audiences addressed. In other words, if we look at autobiographical practice as a 'self in performance,' we begin to appreciate the historical, social, and cultural milieu in which the self was imbricated, and what enabled gendered subjectivity and speech" (1). The notions of self, identity, embodiment, and performativity explored by Malhotra and Lambert-Hurley are also key concepts in feminist rhetorics and rhetorical genre studies (Fishman, et al., Hesford, Jarratt, Reiff and Bawarshi). Creating a theoretical frame based on these related yet different fields presents an opportunity to examine issues of conventions, convention disruption, and the ways that identity, performativity, and embodiment are part of genre transgressions in auto/biography.

Feminist rhetorical approaches to women's writing have focused on the ways that the rhetorical tradition is incomplete without the inclusion of women's texts, whether autobiographical, social, political, literary, theoretical, or philosophical (Ritchie and Ronald, Glenn and Lunsford,

Miller and Bridwell-Bowles). Indeed, as Miller and Bridwell-Bowles's collection suggests, the rhetorical tradition remains in flux due to the "pivotal" rhetorical activity of women rhetors examined by feminist rhetorical scholars (10). *Performing Auto/biography*, therefore, suggests a continued "remapping" of the history of rhetoric (Glenn), by examining the rhetorical genre practices of women autobiographers through "rhetorical assaying," a methodology emphasizing rhetorical action (Royster and Kirsch 16).

While this book addresses women's rhetorical practices, *Performing Auto/biography* is at its heart a study of autobiography and the rhetorical dimensions of representing a self within such a genre. Therefore, in addition to addressing so-called rhetorical traditions, this book engages theories of auto/biography scholars, adhering to notions of fluid identities and extending our understanding of rhetorical constructions of self. Working from the assumption that "Autobiographical acts are inescapably material and embodied" (Smith and Watson, 11), I examine the specific material contexts of these writers' lives and the ways that their autobiographical acts intersect with their additional writing projects (such as essays, novels, poems). Scholars such as Smith and Watson, Smith, Stover, and Gilmore view autobiography as having the potential to disrupt, where the representation of self can dismantle dominant perceptions of a particular kind of identity. Much of autobiography scholarship is concerned with the ways that these disruptive narratives are constructed. This focus on "identity construction" has been productive for the field, and the notion of performativity in relation to identity construction has challenged the essentialized ways that writers of autobiography, particularly women writers of autobiography, might embody a particular identity.

In *Performing Auto/biography*, therefore, I extend this productive conversation on identity construction and representation by using Anne Carson's notion of "Decreation" to resist any sense of a stable or unified sense of self (or form). Indeed, the authors examined in this book perform "decreation," dismantling a sense of self in order to make a "loved version" of the self. In this way, I combine theories of genre and identity to create a methodology to understand the transgressive ways that these writers archive their lives in innovative, political, and activist ways. The chapters in this book also question what we mean by activism and the act of writing a life as an activist act. The writers engaged in this book are not only making public their personal lives through life narrative but also performing genre by performing their narrative identity(s) in such a way as to draw attention to the social structures limiting those identities or genres.

The authors in this book maintain an interiority and reflexivity that are key to performing the genre and therefore highlight the transgressive archiving of lives typically ignored, unseen, or dismissed.

"Transgressive archives," as I discuss in Chap. 8, are those which challenge and disrupt and make us rethink how work is catalogued, saved, and layered for future work and interpretation. This book takes the stance that it is ethically responsible to question what gets privileged in our archiving practices. Archives are value laden, but if we demand an engagement with identity, assume every text is mediated, and that archiving is a relational, living process, then we can recognize the subversive act of anyone archiving against the grain. The writers in this book speak back to archives of power and their work represents "living texts" or "witness narratives" (Rak), distinguishing between creating transgressive archives and being placed in the confines of one that is inaccurate, inadequate, or damaging.

The interdisciplinary approach to Hurston, Lorde, Allison, Johnson, and Lim expands current conversations on identity by examining the rhetorical nature of their autobiographical works together with the ways the rhetorical construction of the text itself serves to dismantle notions of identity. The choice of the five authors for this discussion is deliberate. Each writes in multiple genres, addressing moments of identity formation and life events multiple times in different ways. Therefore, their rhetorical strategies can be examined across the genres in which they engage. The rhetorical strategies these texts use simultaneously tell stories that have cross-cultural/historical appeal *and* challenge the norms and traditions normally upheld by the very audiences they address. As performative texts, their works assume interaction with the audience and are constructed in ways to reveal that assumption. However, their performativity moves beyond the traditionally understood notion of identity as a construction, as delineated by Judith Butler. Each author also addresses the embodiment of their identity, simultaneously challenging the notion of performativity and highlighting the corporeal realities of their bodily identifications. In doing so, to varying degrees, these texts ask audiences to consider their own political positionality and invite readers to action in some form. From Johnson's more subtle castigation of the treatment of Beat women by their male counterparts, to the more blunt, unapologetic call to activism by Lorde, these texts represent the ways that diverse uses of language work to call attention to existing power structures and inequities, thereby subverting them. Each author's agenda involves a more personal coming to know the self while also translating that self to a public sphere to address

broader literary, historical, political, sociological, and psychological issues. Just as the literal embodiment of identity matters, the writing of that identity, in order to be considered performative, pushes boundaries of genre. The self-conscious approach to subvert generic form underscores both the limits and the affordances of that form.

Analyzing these five writers together allows us to examine the ways that race, class, gender, and location inform the ways that writers engage with performances of identity. Focusing on the twentieth century in the United States, these writers variously engage in auto/biography. I begin with Hurston to show how she wrote as an activist, breaking down the racial implications not only of anthropological work but of African American literature as well. By moving then to Audre Lorde's critical examination of the racial implications of the feminist movement, and her place in it, I situate the autobiographical form as an explicit activist act—as she says, "I'm here doing my work, are you doing yours?" (*Cancer Journals*). Like Lorde, Allison's work is explicitly activist, not only in the way she lives but also in the way she writes. From there I turn to the ways Johnson constructs her narrative to create an alternative Beat narrative. Finally, Shirley Geok-lin Lim challenges the "American" narrative with an immigrant context.

Like Gilmore's *Tainted Witness*, Meg Jensen's more recent *The Art and Science of Trauma and the Autobiographical: Negotiated Truth* and Frederik Byrn Kohlert's *Serial Selves: Identity and Representation in Autobiographical Comics*, *Performing Auto/biography* focus on a particular notion within autobiography studies and highlight the ways that rhetorical methodologies can provide insights into that historical development. Most of the scholarship relevant to this book occurs in autobiography studies; however, rhetorical genre studies (see Chap. 2) provides important ways of examining auto/biography as genre and the ways that transgressing genre convention is performative. Nan Johnson's *Gender and Rhetorical Space in American Life, 1866–1910* and Krista Ratcliffe's *Anglo-American Feminist Challenges to the Rhetorical Tradition: Virginia Woolf, Mary Daly, and Adrienne Rich* also examine the multi-layered ways that women's writing contributes to and subverts the rhetorical tradition. However, *Performing Auto/biography* focuses on writers' gendered performances, highlighting the ways that their texts "[tend] to *subject* the reader to the writer's reflexivity, drawing their respective subject-selves reciprocally and simultaneously into critical 'intimacy.' This process is performative precisely to the extent to which it defines the subject-self in/as the effect of a contingent, corporeal, shifting, situated relation" (Pollock 86).

What counts as "activist" writing is connected to this notion of a performative genre. Indeed, much of the publication of autobiography, both as a primary source of one's life and as an academic study, are focused on persons with public, political, or activist lives. For example, Angela Davis, Assata Shakur (a.k.a. JoAnne Chesimard), and Elaine Brown are the only women activists of the Black Power movement who have published book-length autobiographies. Margo V. Perkins's book *Autobiography as Activism: Three Black Women of the Sixties* is an important discussion of Davis, Shakur, and Brown's autobiographies as testimony of their work during this turbulent time. In bearing witness to that era, these newsmakers wrote in part to educate and to mobilize their anticipated readers and their autobiographies are extensions of the writers' political activism during the 1960s.

Like Perkins, I am interested in the ways that writers document their lives as an activist act, though the writers' "activist acts" in this book are different from the public activities that Davis, Shakur, and Brown participated in—activities that are easily recognized as "activism" because of the movement's efforts. Expanding activism to include writing one's life experience to redress history, racism, sexism, homophobia, and other misrepresentations, *Performing Auto/biography* sees performative auto/biography as a way to set the record straight by calling attention to its conventions as a form. Julie Fiandt's discussion of autobiographical activism is useful here, as she sees the work of Aurora Levins Morales and Linda Hogan as texts that, "share the common aim of narrating potential methods of personal and cultural healing amid racism, sexism, post colonialism, mind/body splits, and other global/cultural ruptures" (Fiandt 567). Participating in feminist activism and citizenship is an act of political dissidence and an "ethics of courage" that is part of democracy and that benefits from collaboration with allies (Sparks 76). In this book, I focus less on recognizable acts of activism and argue instead for writing and mentoring as activism as well. I argue that archiving one's life is a form of deliberation, a kind of participation in the public sphere by calling others to action as well. By writing about one's interior and everyday life, the writer's act is transgressive, shifting the archives of what counts for particular identities. Demonstrating the courage to write a life and to take a stand is to expose oneself physically and emotionally (Sparks 95). If we do not, "the weight of that silence will choke us" (Lorde, *Cancer Journals,* 23).

In *Restoried Selves: Autobiographies of Queer Asian/Pacific American Activists*, Kevin Kumashiro examines narratives that work against

stereotypes, shattering misconceptions of activism and what communities do to stand up for their rights. Like Perkin's volume, Kumashiro's focus is on the lives of the activists themselves—their lives *as* activists. *Performing Auto/biography*, however, focuses less on the action of the life and more on the act of writing the autobiographical text, in relation to their other texts, to highlight the performative act of writing and hence the activist and transgressive act of writing. In so doing, the writers *undo* the self (Carson), modeling for others how to do the same and in this, I argue, extend a call to action to readers to share their lives to bring communities together. This book examines these particular writers in part because of the ways I encountered them as a rhetoric and autobiography scholar early in my career, and as I have continued to encounter them as I teach their texts in rhetoric courses on autobiography.

Reading the Chapters

With interdisciplinary contexts of genre, performance, and identity for writing auto/biography in mind, the chapters in this book provide further detail about the methods and theoretical frames used for reading autobiographical texts by Hurston, Lorde, Allison, Johnson, and Lim. Chapter 2, "Theorizing Rhetorics of Identity to Create Rhetorical Performativity as an Analytic," creates a theoretical frame using genre, performance, and rhetorical theories to examine autobiographical texts. I provide an overview of the concept of identity in feminist and gender studies. Examining theories of self-representation and the body of such auto/biography theorists as Leigh Gilmore, Sidonie Smith, Barbara Smith, and Johnnie Stover, I establish a theoretical basis for exploring the rhetorical strategies of autobiography. Since this project seeks to extend the significant relationship between rhetoric and critical autobiography studies and to situate this study in both, I more explicitly address the rhetorical strategies involved in identity construction and the ways that fragments of identity become a recognizable narrative. Finally, using Anne Carson's response to the fragmented poetry of Sappho and Eve Ewing's layered archival approach to historical events, I highlight the ways that identity construction through genre becomes recognizable, even if the form is experimental or "fragmented." Using feminist rhetorical methodologies (Royster and Kirsch, Rawson), I highlight the ways that writers challenge traditional form and suggest the multiple ways that form and content become political acts not only about identity but also about genre.

I begin in Chap. 3, "Zora Neale Hurston's Craft and a Griot's Refusal to Conform," by discussing the ways that Hurston challenged the conventions of several forms. While she defied expectation through narrative voice in her fiction and nonfiction, she also defied expectation in writing her autobiography, *Dust Tracks on the Road*. Initially ignored because of its "lackluster" feel compared to her novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, a closer look at Hurston's memoir, in light of her tendency to experiment and not conform to genre convention, reveals a deeply layered text that challenges what it means to write a life. I discuss how Hurston's autobiographical text is not only experimental but also performative. Compared to the ways she challenged the anthropological community, her performative auto/biography suggests that Hurston's commitment to writing Black language and culture was a refusal to both White and Black readers' expectations of the Black esthetic of the Harlem Renaissance.

In Chap. 4, "Audre Lorde's Intellectual Body: Scripting an Embodied Activism," I discuss the ways that Lorde repeatedly declares her multiple subjectivities as a "black lesbian feminist warrior poet." In writing *Zami* and *The Cancer Journals*, Lorde (re)writes herself by creating a fantasy self based on the myths of her matriarchal culture and the reality of her own life where her love of women is natural and "normal." Read together, Lorde's autobiographical texts work to form a cultural critique that moves beyond mere resistance—they demand critical consciousness and activism from her readers. Lorde's "activist poetics" (Carr) in these two works, particularly of her intellectual body, resist cultural inscriptions of the body and also challenge the traditional (patriarchal) genre of autobiography. As a black lesbian feminist warrior poet, Audre Lorde was used to contending with culturally constructed identity as she examined her multi-layered marginalization. But when she was diagnosed with breast cancer, Lorde became conscious of her body in yet another way. Lorde addresses difference and otherness in *Zami*, yet it is in *The Cancer Journals*, written simultaneously with *Zami*, where she writes as a means to reconstruct herself as a warrior against the disease and to resist the view of women with mastectomies as victims. I argue that the "intellectual body," while present in *Zami*, becomes active in *The Cancer Journals* as it resists cultural inscription by refusing the prosthesis that doctors, nurses, and other breast cancer patients encouraged her to wear.

In Chap. 5, "Self-representation, Genre, and Performativity: Dorothy Allison's Performances Across Genres," I discuss the ways that Dorothy Allison moves in and out of memory narratives and traditional

storytelling. In her memoir, *Two or Three Things I Know for Sure*, she constructs an innovative form that challenges not only Southern stereotypes about "white trash" and lesbian identity but also narrative structures. As she "performs" traditional narrative, she also subverts that narrative by inserting explicit commentary on the constructed nature of "story." Similarly, Allison performs motherhood. As she explores her relationship with her mother and her own potential to be a mother, she resists the definition of motherhood constructed for her by dominant culture. I argue that for Allison, motherhood is a performance, one that she can "get right" in the same way that she can get the stories right. Her performance, therefore, acts as a rhetorical device to resist hegemonic discourses of motherhood. In the performing of mother—the representation of motherhood in her prose—Allison can construct the story that tells the "loved version" of her life and avoid "becom[ing] them" (38), the women who so profoundly defined her. In creating this narrative, she creates an explicit dialogue with the audience, telling readers about her performative intentions within her texts.

Chapter 6, "Joyce Johnson's Alternative Beat Narrative: Women Outside the Frame," examines how Johnson uses audience expectation of a love story to redress the history of a male-dominated literary scene. She simultaneously embraces Kerouac and the Beats and subtly indicts them for their misogynistic behavior toward the women around them. She represents herself as love-struck for Kerouac yet at the same time as an independent Bohemian writer. Her representation of multiple identities within her "traditional" memoir that is seemingly focused on Kerouac, serves to illuminate her underlying purpose—to situate the women writers who were "minor" characters within the male-dominated scene of the Beat Generation as central to this literary movement. Using her memoir, interviews, novels, and a collection of correspondence with Kerouac, I analyze her use of praise and her deference toward Jack, though sincere, as performative acts.

In Chap. 7, "Shirley Geok-lin Lim's Embodied Memories: Academic Autobiography, Genre, and Mentorship," I highlight Lim's resistance to cultural definitions prescribed for her, creating a definition of immigrant woman that is multi-layered and complex. In her essays she merges academic scholarship and personal writing to dispel the notion that the two are mutually exclusive. In addition, she encourages women writers to "write out of turn" (MLA's *Profession* 1999), resisting the colonizing forces that seek to define her. Throughout the memoir, Lim poses

questions to the audience about the strictures of colonialism, higher education institutions, and definitions of immigrants and women. She uses the example of her life to illustrate the "tensions within her identity" to construct a self-conscious and interactive performance space, encouraging readers to experience her reflexivity about herself and about education. Lim's narrative construction is self-consciously interactive and engages readers' senses of civic, academic, and intellectual justice, while simultaneously interrogating traditional education and reflecting on her identity.

By self-consciously constructing interactive texts that engage readers' senses of civic, academic, and intellectual justice, the authors call readers to action. In Chap. 8, "Performative Auto/biography as Transgressive Archives," I discuss the ways that the "outlaw" genres (Kaplan), like those of Hurston, Lorde, Allison, Johnson, and Lim, are archival acts, assigning significance to an individual life through highly stylized and subversive performative writing. By examining what each text *does* as much as what it *says*, the analyses in this book highlight the ways writers "write out of turn" and dismantle the power structures that serve to reify dominant narratives of self, women, and autobiography. For the analyses of this book, rhetorical performativity as an analytic provides insights into the rhetorical strategies of authors' writing across genres and provides contexts for creating transgressive archives in life writing.

The writers in this volume are significant in the moment they were writing. Hurston's work moves us from early to mid-twentieth-century genres, challenging multiple disciplinary communities including anthropology and literature. At the time, autobiography studies had a narrow view of the genre. As Lorde, Allison, Johnson, and Lim were writing in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, the field of autobiography studies was also expanding, building the theories of life writing, subjectivity, identity, and form as writers challenged tradition. Writers like Cherríe Moraga, Gloria Anzaldúa, Hertha Sweet Wong, and others, like the writers discussed here, were also challenging these forms, making it clear that traditional definitions of autobiography were not adequate to account for the complexity of their lives. In the next chapter, I address the theoretical implications of these developments that are important to the methodology of analysis in this book. Chapter 8 also discusses the ways that new and emerging writers are building on the works of these writers, further challenging what it means to write autobiographically. Writers such as Maggie Nelson, Zadie Smith, Suzanne Scanlon, and Eve Ewing are among many contemporary writers performing innovative auto/biographical writing

right now. Additional writers like Marjane Satrapi, Linda Barry, and Allison Bechdel, among others, in their use of the visual, comix, and the digital are challenging our notions of what counts as auto/biography and the ways that the "self" can be performed. In *Performing Auto/biography*, I hope to highlight the ways that Hurston, Lorde, Johnson, Allison, and Lim helped set the stage for what has come in the early part of the twenty-first century. As contemporary authors use the technology and genres available to them, they are building on the historically significant work of the authors in this book.

As the authors written about in this book point out, it is by highlighting one's lived experience within contexts of oppression that make us visible to each other, so that collectively we might stand against that oppression. The women here encourage joining forces and becoming allies. The "nuanced space" (Smith and Watson 33) I've tried to create in this book highlights the ways that women writers have served as my mentors and in turn have helped me look for ways to support my colleagues and students as they face challenges as academics, as writers, and as women.

The self-conscious construction of interactive auto/biographical texts that engage readers' senses of civic, academic, and intellectual justice, reveal what Hurston, Lorde, Allison, Johnson, and Lim add to performative autobiography: a call to action. Long accepted by feminists, the notion of the personal as political is extended here where the act of documenting a life, whether through memoir, fiction, poetry, or film, is an archival act, where the personal is general (Berlant), and where various publics are drawn together in solidarity and social change.

The authors discussed in this book explicitly state that writing their lives is a political and social act, meant to challenge readers in their own lives. They advocate for supporting other women and underrepresented groups through the narrating of their lives and calling others to action, and in these ways their life narratives function as mentorship. Each of these writers challenges readers through direct address to consider their personal lives as having public impact not only on the literary tradition of autobiography but also on women in the academy more generally. Each life narrative offers, whether implicitly or explicitly, instruction on how to survive processes of marginalization and use that survival to assist others with similar struggles.

Finally, *Performing Auto/biography: Narrating a Life as Activism* analyzes the rhetorical strategies employed in these five writers' autobiographical texts, examining their representations of identities and the