Text and Image in Women's Life Writing: Picturing the Female Self presents a rich collection of essays exploring the multifarious relationships between the visual and the textual in a diverse range of British and American women's life writing from the end of the nineteenth to the start of the twenty-first century, from feminist perspectives. The chosen works arose from a 2018 international conference convened on the book's topic. The five editors are from French universities. Valérie Baisnée-Keay wrote the introductory chapter, while three of the editors also contributed chapters. The other authors hail from France (five), Poland (two), the United States (two), and Spain (one). Following the introductory first chapter, the book is divided into four sections, which examine “four notions at the heart of life-writing narratives ... challenged by the confrontation/juxtaposition of text and images,” namely, identity, memory, referentiality, and embodiment (p. 4). All chapters in this intellectually sophisticated book, together, or separately according to subject/s of interest, will reward close reading.

After the scholarly introduction in chapter 1 that maps the theoretical terrain for the book's structure, the first section, titled “Imagining Identity,” contains four essays on the life writing of five North American women: Julie Chen, Faith Ringgold, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, Janet Mock, and Georgia O’Keeffe. These chapters encompass the varied ways women's self-representations communicate personal identity using image and text. Chapter 2, by Hertha D. Sweet Wong, shows how hybrid autobiographies, in the form of artists' books by Chen and story quilts by Ringgold, complicate, contest, and rework personal identities. In her “architectures of cognition,” Wong shows how Chen subverts and challenges sociocultural and historical frameworks by emphasizing the interiority and mindfulness of identity, with central themes of time and loss for both artist and reader (p. 25). Ringgold, on the other hand, looks outward to contest and rework racialized and gendered identities in history and culture through the power of the visual. The work of Cha, as argued in chapter 3 by Marie-Agnès Gay, renegotiates and blurs similarly racialized and gendered autobiographical terrain through the “loose mode of interconnection between text and image” and with very different outcomes to Ringgold (p. 46). Her “self-chronicling oeuvre” paradoxically generates...
self-effacement, emphasizing that personal identity is always incomplete and intersubjectively generated (p. 52). Shifting gears somewhat, chapter 4 by Aurélia Mouzet, canvasses the inter-connected use of offline memoir and online media platforms by trans woman, writer, and activist, Mock. Mouzet argues that through her intersectionality and multimedia approaches, Mock reinvents both notions of womanhood and life writing itself, moving beyond “the straightjacket of the written text” (p. 73, emphasis added). Finally, in this section on identity, Edyta Frelik examines the textual production (letters and autobiographical essay) of iconic American visual artist O’Keeffe. In her letters, O’Keeffe contested the widely accepted view that her paintings were “full of utterly embedded femininity,” and in her autobiography, through the image/text matrix, O’Keeffe explained the process behind her artistic production but little about her personal life (p. 79). In the end, O’Keeffe regarded her explanation of her own identity as an artist as just another (partial) perspective, “but with an authority no one else could claim or pretend” (p. 95).

The second part of *Text and Image in Women’s Life Writing* concerns the problematics of memory, a central issue for auto/biographers. In chapter 6, Héloïse Thomas shows how Alison Bechdel’s graphic memoirs use hybrid forms (image and text) and disjointed nonlinear chronologies and memories to create the “queer/ed house of memory.” In this archival space, Bechdel is able “to map out the connections between her personal subjectivity and collective consciousness, and address (and hopefully work to repair) deeply-rooted traumas” (p. 110). This idea of exploring the relationship of the self to a broader community through memory work in text and image continues in Nicoleta Alexoe-Zagni’s comparative essay on Shirley Geok-lin Lim’s self-writing in her immigrant memoir, *Among the White Moon Faces* (1996), and in her Facebook posts. This chapter demonstrates how complexity photographs stand in relation to the memory of the autobiographical subject. Photographs can attest (even if not shown) to written remembered aspects that are both within and beyond the photograph’s frame, as in the case of Lim’s father, or they can exemplify a family visually that is called into question textually. In Lim’s memoir, the photographic “evidence” of self and family, presented usually as part of the “autobiographical pact,” is tested in her memoir with ambivalent and problematic results (p. 125). As memory aids, “photos alone cannot tell the realities of the self” or of belonging (p. 127). On the other hand, photographs in Lim’s Facebook posts stand in the place of words and can generate a sense of belonging that transcends temporal and geographic boundaries. In the last essay in the section on memory, Corinne Bigot convincingly uses Pierre Nora’s influential idea of *lieux de mémoire* to describe the memory work in two ethnic culinary cookbooks where photographic images and texts (recipes and stories) create archives against loss of family and cultural history and belonging.

Part 3, titled “Elusive Textual/Visual Referentiality,” begins with Elisabeth Bouzonviller’s discussion of Zelda Fitzgerald’s portraiture in two works, one by Zelda’s daughter, Scottie Fitzgerald Smith, and the other by her granddaughter, Eleanor Lanahan. In a kind of “postmemory,” Smith’s presentation of her family’s photographs and Lanahan’s consideration of Zelda’s art works give visibility and voice to Zelda’s personal and creative life (p. 175). The next chapter about nineteenth-century explorer and travel writer Isabella Bird Bishop considers anew the 106 photographs of China in 1897 included in Bishop’s published travel narrative. Floriane Reviron-Piégay shows how the photographs, acting as both narrative evidence and personal legitimation for Bishop as woman traveler/explorer, “participate in the text’s ambiguous relationship to truth-telling” (p. 195). On the other hand, in chapter 11 by Nathalie Saudo-Welby, the images generated by war artist Elizabeth Butler (1846–1933) stand ambiguously in relation to the truth of their subject matter. Butler observed in her autobiography “that truth is relat-
ive, and that historical truth is constructed even by those who lived through the historical moments” (p. 211). Equipped with a “man’s education,” a remarkable talent for drawing and painting yet suffering at one point from imposter syndrome, Butler achieved her goal to become a celebrated war artist without ever having been to war. Lastly in this section, Stephanie Genty discusses how Marilyn French’s tribute to her mother not only reflects the slippage between autobiography and biography but also powerfully conveys the questionable referentiality of family and historical photography, “ultimately contesting the hegemony of familial and patriarchal modes of representation, particularly as they concern women” (p. 217). Ultimately Genty asserts that French, “a writer with a message,” affirms the primacy of the textual over the visual (p. 237).

On the other hand, the privileging of the visual over the textual is explored by Marta Fernández-Morales, examining Lynn Kohlman’s cancer auto/biography, which forms the first essay in the fourth and final section, titled “Visual/Textual Embodiment.” Kohlman was a fashion model who took up photography and used familiar fashion tropes around beauty to challenge and explore her experience of living with breast cancer. Interestingly Fernández-Morales historicizes Kohlman’s feminist self-representation as the Warrior Woman, “the vulnerable empowered woman ... prevalent in twenty-first-century narratives of illness” (p. 248). The final chapter of the book, by Justyna Wierzchowska, offers a possible reading of Mary Kelly’s installation, Post-Partum Document (1973–79), wherein the artist uses her specific maternal autobiography in objects/pictures and texts to illustrate universal themes of vulnerable mothering. Wierzchowska proposes that Kelly’s Post-Partum Document provides an early formulation of feminist theorist Bracha Ettinger’s concept of the “matrixial borderspace” as the basic human capacity for relational co-becoming. This thoughtful analysis of image/text interfaces provides a resonant philosophical note on which to end the collection.

At the theoretical level, despite the diversity of approaches, methodologies, media, and subjects across the chapters, almost all authors in this collection converse with, and amplify, the works on text and image by noted scholars across interdisciplinary fields. For example, those of W. T. J. Mitchell, of Susan Sontag, and to a much greater extent, of Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson are mobilized effectively throughout. Wong, however, proffers a challenge to their taxonomies on the possible text and image relationships. She extends Mitchell’s three relationships of image and text (image-text, image/text, imagetext) and Smith and Watson’s four “interfaces” between image and text (relational, contextual, spatial, and temporal) by arguing for “multiple, simultaneous sets of image-text relations as a matrix or a network or a crystal, with many surfaces and axes of interaction” (p. 24).

The editors are to be congratulated on the text of the book, which has been carefully prepared and includes a useful index. Surprisingly though, for a collection about the relationship between text and image, seven of the chapters have no images at all, and in total, there are sixteen images spread across the other seven chapters. This points to one of the main difficulties in publishing on visual topics in life writing, and anywhere else for that matter: the strict, onerous, and often very expensive copyright arrangements around the reproduction of images that can prevent even the most innocent analysis being shown with a corresponding image. Certainly, moving beyond the material book into ebooks with hyperlinks is one way around this stricture. Indeed here, for readers of the ebook version, there are hyperlinks that contribute greatly to the value of the text, especially where hyperlinked art works are discussed. One minor quibble is that some websites could not be found, and for another on Mock, the description given no longer correlated with the site. Further,
many chapters give no dates of access for websites, a basic way to address this inevitable eventuality given the mutability of the internet. This also leads me to another quibble about the cover image and aimed more at the publishers. In a book with such sophisticated analyses of text-image interfaces, the cover collage, consisting of a camera, a strip of film, a few scattered unrecognizable photographs (one with a shot of what looks like a uniformed man’s lower torso), plus an open book, although artfully done, is surprisingly literal and does not suggest the focus on women central to this work.

Aside from these minor matters, *Text and Image in Women’s Life Writing* is an impressive collection that admirably achieves its purpose “to contribute to the ongoing conversation on text, image, and gender” (p. 16). It will be of special interest to H-Biography network members and others, not only because of the many fascinating accounts of women’s life writing it canvasses but also because of the relational aspects of text and image across multiple self-representations by women, especially here those operating within visual and literary studies, it presents. For those of us involved in the practice of women’s biography, this volume grapples with and provides insights about four highly pertinent areas, namely, identity, memory, referentiality, and embodiment. It opens up new and exciting ways to think about, write about, and illustrate auto/biographical subjects’ lives that would seek to accommodate the fluidity, diversity, and simultaneity of women’s identities, and the various media available to portray them. It should also make us think more rigorously about the use of images in relation to the texts we produce.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at https://networks.h-net.org/h-biography

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