

Working Groups at the BCDSS

Narrative Working Group II: [Life Writing, Slavery and Dependency](#)

The Working Group Life Writing aims at bringing together scholars working in different fields of dependency and slavery studies interested in questions pertaining to issues of life writing: in order to provide a generative interdisciplinary framework, the group proceeds from an expansive definition of life writing comprising a broad range of texts and media (autobiographies, letters, travel reports, testimonial records, diary entries, court documents, tomb inscriptions, archives, clothing as well as other textual, material practices involved in recording and navigating lives).

Life writing can function as an important avenue into the study of dependencies. While the slave narrative was a popular genre in the eighteenth and nineteenth century Atlantic world and has undergone intense scholarly scrutiny, forms of life writing produced in other historical, cultural, and geographical contexts of asymmetrical dependency have received much less attention. The Working Group wants to examine socio-political and economic contexts and challenges to the production of life writing, its respective cultural peculiarities, its potential transcultural patterns and modes of circulation, and the literary and aesthetic conventions informing life writing.

We also want to reflect on the methodological and epistemological challenges we encounter in the study of life writing produced in the context of dependency and slavery: Not only were people living in social relations of asymmetrical dependency often prevented from learning how to read and write, but archives of slavery and dependency usually privilege records of enslavers and those in power.

What we do

Sessions will introduce field-defining theories of life writing and individual projects by Cluster members, aiming at combining theory with primary material. We meet on a monthly basis to exchange ideas about different interdisciplinary approaches and to examine the use and applicability of life writing theories and methods to our research. Readings will be uploaded to the corresponding folder (via cloud server 'Sciebo') before meetings. Each session focuses on a specific case study in combination with potential methodological approaches and is organized by one or several of the Working Group members. Everyone can make suggestions for future sessions at any point.

When

1. Session February 21, 2022, 2-4 pm (sharp)
An Introduction to Life Writing: Reading the Basics

- Smith, Sidonie and Julia Watson. 2001. "Chapter 1. Life Narrative: Definitions and Distinctions." *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*. Minneapolis, MN: The University of Minnesota Press. Pages 1–14.
- Lejeune, Philippe. [1975] 2016. "The Autobiographical Pact." *The Routledge Auto|biography Studies Reader*. Eds. Ricia Anne Chansky and Emily Hipchen. Abingdon and New York: Routledge. Pages 34–48. [abbreviated version]

2. Session (March 2022)
The Slave Narrative: Agency and Dependency in Life Writing

- Prince, Mary. [1831] 2000. *The History of Mary Prince, a West Indian Slave. Related by Herself*. Ed. Sara Salih. London: Penguin. [Online version of The History available here: <https://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/prince/prince.html>]
- Allen, Jessica L. 2012. "Pringle's Pruning of Prince: The History of Mary Prince and the Question of Repetition." *Callaloo*, Vol. 35, No. 2, 509-519.
- Aljoe, Nicole N., "The Caribbean Slave Narrative," *The Oxford Handbook of the African American Slave Narrative*, ed. John Ernest, Oxford UP, 2014, pp. 362-370.

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