Border Crossings: Towards a New Typology in Contemporary Immigrant Writing

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Abstract: This paper reveals how contemporary immigrant authors challenge the conventions of autobiography as conceptualized by Philippe Lejeune in self-referential novels that blur the boundaries between fiction and reality, storytelling and truth-telling. We investigate the reality-fiction binary in the works of such authors as J.M. Coetzee, Salman Rushdie, W.G. Sebald, Aleksandar Hemon, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Junot Díaz, and Ocean Vuong, and show how their self-referential literary productions alter the way we perceive notions of truth and authenticity in contemporary literature. By combining a reader-oriented analysis with a postructuralist inquiry on writing and reading, we aim at providing a more comprehensive understanding of life writing in transnational immigrant narratives.

Keywords: immigrant literature, life writing, autobiography, self-referential writing, truth, authenticity, storytelling.

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Introduction

The blurring boundaries between fiction and reality, storytelling and truth-telling lie at the heart of a new typology in contemporary migrant (auto)fiction. Here, we want to point out that its seeds were already planted in the writing of migrant authors from previous generations, regardless of their nationalities, such as J.M. Coetzee, Salman Rushdie, and W. G. Sebald. Their works are in dialogue through their metafictional obsession with storytelling, its ethical implications, and the exploration of their subjects in global settings and traumatic historical contexts. In the following sections, we will mainly draw on the autobiographical and essayistic work of J. M. Coetzee, a South African Nobel-prize-winning author whose literature exemplifies how "life writing"[1] undermines the paradigms of authenticity and realism in immigrant literature. Partly autobiographical and partly fictional, his novel *Elisabeth Costello* (2003) canvases the problem of truth as strongly linked with the problem of the self and its corollary - the problem of self-expression and self-knowledge, thus the problem of identity. Therefore, Coetzee's writing is perceived as an *abstract model*[2] for this new typology in contemporary immigrant semi-biographical literature crossing the line between life and fiction.

Crossing National & Aesthetic Borders in Contemporary Immigrant Literature

Fictionalizing one's autobiography is a common writing technique in postcolonial/ immigrant literature.

1. Life writing is defined by Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson as a general term for any kind of writing that takes life as its subject. Such works can be biographical, novelistic, historical, or an explicit self-reference to the writer.
2. The term "abstract model" was coined and employed in *Graphs, Maps, and Trees – Abstract Models for a Literary History* by the Italian theorist Franco Morreti (London & New York: Verso, 2005), who sees the development of the novel as a genre that combines and recycles previous techniques.

Authors dealing with trauma and displacement often choose not to write about their personal experiences using the autobiographical "I." According to Benaouda Lebdai, such is the case of Salman Rushdie's *Joseph Anton* (2012): "This writing strategy proves a deeper trauma than he would admit. From my point of view, the deliberate absence of 'I' works surely as a healing process. *Joseph Anton* becomes a necessary fiction for Salman Rushdie who can at last look back into that past, thanks to this mirror in which Joseph Anton, his double, plays his part."[3]

The Bosnian-born author Aleksandar Hemon also draws upon personal elements in constructing a series of alter-ego characters. His prose protagonists: Joseph Pronek from *Nowhere Man* (2002), Brik from *The Lazarus Project* (2008), and the narrator from *Love and Obstacles* (2009), are Sarajevan writers migrating to Chicago. They all enact the author's experience of migration and arrival to the US at different stages. Here, we will mainly focus on *The Lazarus Project* (2008), which is a fictional account of a Bosnian-born American writer, Vladimir Brik, who journeys to Eastern Europe in the company of his childhood friend Ahmed Rora Halilbašić, a Muslim Sarajevan war photographer, to research the story of the historical figure Lazarus Averbuch, a Jewish immigrant to Chicago killed by a police officer at the beginning of the 20th century. Both Brik and Hemon are natives of Sarajevo and share a Ukrainian ancestry. Both are writers stranded in America at the outbreak of the Bosnian war and work as English teachers for international students. Also, they both write a column in a newspaper and live in Chicago, married to American women. Besides, in the novel, Brik receives a grant to support his book writing, while in real life, *The Lazarus Project* (2008) is Hemon's result of receiving the MacArthur fellowship (dubbed the "genius" grant). Fact, fiction, photofiction, and metafiction blend as the narrative also parallels Hemon's journey to Europe to research and write the "true" story of Lazarus's death in the company of his best friend, the photographer Velibor Božović. The two collaborated in producing the novel, which combines Hemon's narrative and Božović's photographs. Therefore, reading the novel through the lens of the author's biography reveals that the narrator bears a striking resemblance to the author not only for their mixed ethnic background and history of migration but also for the fictional enactment of the writer's actual journey to Europe.

However, as mentioned in another study[4], Hemon openly dismisses the traditional autobiographical label associated with his novel as he does not believe in the viability of this genre. The novel is purposefully written in an "antiautobiographical" manner to draw attention to the limitations of the genre due to its constructed nature[5]. Additionally, the author's deliberate rejection of autobiography is seen by Wendy Ward as a narrative strategy that deepens our understanding of the relation between arbitrary self-representation and the fictionalization of the self in writing about traumatic historical events[6].

At the same time, Hemon's nonfictional books[7] go beyond the boundaries of memoir as a genre, blurring the line between life and narrative. In the last pages of his most recent memoir *My Parents: An Introduction/ This Does Not Belong to You* (2019), he writes: "Take this thing you're reading. I could've assembled a different version of it from an alternative set of fragments; I could've been born of different parts; I could've assembled someone else."[8] So, the author invents stories by constantly inventing himself. He creates avatars for his experiences and fantasies, which is something he has in common with the other immigrant authors we discuss in this paper. In the spaces they create between life and fiction, there is a constant interplay between autobiography and regional history, between the authors' voices and the literary personas they invent.

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3. Benaouda Lebdai, "Salman Rushdie / Joseph Anton: Deconstruction of the Fatwa Mirror," in *Autobiography as a Writing Strategy in Postcolonial Literature*, ed. B. Lebdai (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015), 6.

4. Georgeta Movilă (Matei), "Centrality and Marginality in Contemporary American Immigrant Writing. Aleksandar Hemon: Reconfigurations of The Self in the Global Age," in *The Shades of Globalisation. Identity and Dialogue in an Intercultural World*, ed. Iulian Boldea (Târgu-Mureș: Arhipelag Press, 2021), 350–358.

5. Menachem Kaiser, "The Exchange: Aleksandar Hemon," *The New Yorker*, June 8th, 2009. https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/the-exchange-aleksandar-hemon.

6. Wendy Ward, "Does Autobiography Matter?: Fictions of the Self in Aleksandar Hemon's *The Lazarus Project*," *Brno Studies in English*, no. 2 (2011): 187–199.

7. *The Book of My Lives* (New York: Picador USA, 2013/2014) *and My Parents: An Introduction/ This Does Not Belong to You* (London: Pan McMillan, 2019) are Hemon's nonfictional books labeled as "memoirs."

8. Hemon, *My Parents*, 176.

The other selected authors' nonfictional works[9] also engage in what Smith and Watson specifically call "life narrative"[10]. The tension between fiction and reality demonstrates that neither genre can stand alone as an intact category, especially when dealing with trauma *life writing*. We will further employ this term instead of "autobiography" as we refer to various other types of self-referential writing, different from the authors' novels, including memoirs, personal essays (Hemon, Vuong, Díaz), and even TED talks (Adichie). Together with their literary texts, their nonfictional self-referential works create a comprehensive whole, providing readers with a better understanding of both their experience and aesthetics.

Junot Díaz's characters, for instance, often reflect aspects of his own life as a Dominican American author, navigating issues of identity, immigration, and cultural displacement. His Pulitzer Prize-awarded novel, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007) includes characters and settings that parallel his own upbringing and the history of his native country. Its main narrator, Yunior, the author's assumed alter ego, is also the narrator of his two short story collections *Drawn* (1996) and *This Is How You Lose Her* (2012). While not strictly autobiographical, Díaz's fiction resonates with authenticity due to its close connection to his cultural background and personal experience, both of which we learn from his personal essays and interviews. For instance, in 2018, Junot published an autobiographical essay titled "The Silence: The Legacy of Childhood Trauma,"[11] in which he writes about being sexually abused at the age of eight. This biographical detail sheds new light on how the author constructed his alter-ego character throughout his entire fiction based on this traumatic experience. In a conversation with Paula Moya[12], the author suggested that Yunior failed his romantic relationships due to rape trauma. None of the events depicted in his fiction lead to such understanding, so his essay written 11 years after the publication of *Oscar Wao* (2007) shows how the author continues to engage his readership in different interpretative paths, crossing once again the line between life and fiction.

Unfolding the author's own experience as a queer Vietnamese American writer, Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* (2019) also exemplifies how trauma life writing leads to the dissolution of the autobiographical genre as we know it, calling for alternative life writing practices. Written in epistolary form, the novel showcases a multitude of writing styles, from poetic to essayistic. At the same time, it unravels personal as well as collective traumas, thus introducing a collective subject. The novel is framed as a letter from a 28-year-old Vietnamese American writer named Little Dog to his illiterate mother, Rose. Through this letter, Little Dog delves into his family's history, including his grandmother's traumatic experiences during the Vietnam War, his mother's struggles as an immigrant in America, and his own experiences with identity, race, and sexuality. The novel intricately weaves themes of memory, trauma, and survival, offering a poignant exploration of the complexities of family bonds and the enduring effects of war and displacement on migrant communities.

In her novel *Americanah* (2013), Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie also challenges authoritative notions of unitary identity, essentialism, integrity, truth, and the canonical institutions of bildungsroman and autobiography by blurring the line between fiction, life writing, and journalism through her fictionalized alter-ego Ifemelu. Mirroring the author's experience, Ifemelu, a young Nigerian woman, becomes aware of being Black only after migrating to the United States, where she starts a blog[13] called "Raceteenth or

9. Díaz, Vuong, and Adichie have written essays for various publications such as *The New Yorker*, thematizing immigration, identity, and writing. While not strictly written nonfiction, they have also shared their views and experiences through interviews and public speaking engagements, providing insights into the similarities between their life and fiction. Some of them are further referenced in this paper.

10. As noted by Smith and Watson, life writing is complex as at least five dimensions constitute autobiographical subjectivity: memory, experience, identity, embodiment, and agency. More specifically, they define the concept of "life narrative" as "a historically situated practice of self-representation," rather than a genre. For further definitions and distinctions of the term check *Reading Autobiograph: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2001 [2010]), 1–14.

11. Junot Díaz, "The Silence: The Legacy of Childhood Trauma," *The New Yorker*, April 9, 2018. https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/04/16/the-silence-the-legacy-of-childhood-trauma.

12. Paula Moya, "The Search for Decolonial Love: An Interview with Junot Díaz," *Boston Review*, June 26, 2012. http://bostonreview.net/books-ideas/paula-ml-moya-decolonial-love-interview-junot-d%C3%ADaz.

13. Her blog entries are featured in the novel and can be read independently from the main narrative as they have a different tone, voice, and purpose.

Curious Observations by a Non-American Black on the Subject of Blackness in America".

As regards the problem of authenticity and autobiographical truth that we are going to explore further, Coetzee thinks that a writer should hope that his autobiographical project is not the story of himself, but a story about himself "a story that will not be the truth but will have some truth value, probably of a mixed kind - some historic truth, some poetic truth. A fiction of the truth in other words"[14]. The aim of this paper is not to discuss to what extent the novels of the selected authors are autobiographically true, but to what degree they are true to their readers, by tracing the limits of authenticity as being intimately connected to the limits of self-representation in postcolonial literature.

As Smith and Watson point out in *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*, postcolonial authors have reframed our understanding of autobiographical writing by providing alternatives to the individual self. Their life narratives introduce "collective, provisional, and mobile subjects'"[15] that subvert the canon of autobiography. By questioning the Western/ colonizer's norms of identity and experience, they often depersonalize the autobiographical genre.

New concepts of subjectivity arise as a result of acknowledging the hybridity of their lives in transcultural and transnational narratives that can no longer stand as "pure"—purely national or purely aesthetical. Besides this "intervention" in changing the contours of the autobiographical Western canon, Smith and Watson also put an emphasis on the poststructural and postmodern theorizing about the subject, underlying a paradigm shift from autobiographical *pacts* to autobiographical *acts. Autobiography* is seen as a performative act, as a "self-narration"[16] but also as an exchange of meaning between reader and writer. This pragmatic turn is aligned with a broader academic interest in the discursive and performative dimensions of language and experience that began in the late '70s. According to such views, the autobiographical truth no longer lies in a factual, referential truth but in the exchange between narrator and reader that negotiate and construct meaning as co-authors of the same act. Thus, in more recent theories on autobiographical writing proposed by Gasparini (2004), Smith and Watson (2010), Wagner Egelhaaf (2008), and Missine (2013), there is a strong emphasis on the role of the reader and "his/her expectations and prior knowledge as constitutive of the autobiographical genre."[17]

Self-referential storytelling that draws on the retelling of historical events in a subjective form is typical of postmodernism. In the *Politics of Postmodernism*, Linda Hutcheon uses the term "historiographic metafiction"[18]. She emphasizes the inevitability of distortion in such narratives where historical representation is "projectively reprocessed in terms of our own narrowly 'presentist' interests."[19] Regardless of the authors' "interests," such texts show us how identity is determined at the intersection of history and fiction. The implication of memory and archival materials such as photographs shifts the focus from the representation's truth value and accuracy to that of secondary witnessing and retelling of events. Immigrant writers merge history and fiction to the point that the problem of veracity is rendered irrelevant. As a secondary witness, the reader is challenged to take an active role in the reproduction of events, inventing their own version of history.

In reconstructing history and the self through storytelling, immigrant authors also reconstitute categories of reality, truth, authenticity, and accuracy. Here, we assert W. G. Sebald's influence and role as a precursor for Hemon's use of photographs in his fiction. His novels, *The Emigrants* (1992), *The Rings of Saturn* (1995), and *Austerlitz* (2001) combine words with photographs and fact with fiction in the mode of memoir and travel writing. Sebald is mainly known for thematizing and documenting war and post-Holocaust trauma in photo-fiction "assemblages" that make his writing difficult to categorize. One of the positions he wrote from was that of immigration, which conferred him the status of a second-hand witness and storyteller of past atrocities and collective traumatic events. His circumspect approach to historical knowledge and memory highlights the interchange between the two in postmodern writing. Hemon also explores the mechanisms of visually representing historical

14. J.M. Coetzee, "A Fiction of the Truth," *Sydney Morning Herald*, November 27, 1999.
15. Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography*, 135.
16. Ibid, 18.
17. Lut Missine, "2.3 Autobiographical Pact," in *Handbook of Autobiography/Autofiction*, Volume I: Theory and Concepts, edited by Martina Wagner-Egelhaaf (Berlin & Boston: Walter de Gruyter GmbH, 2019), 226.
18. Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 2002).
19. Hutcheon, 55.

trauma in texts that destabilize the truth value and narrative reliability of images. Their photo fiction complicates the problem of truth in postmodern autofiction at two levels. First, they incorporate both archival and personal photos into their texts in an arbitrary fashion, and by doing this, they sabotage the value of photographs as reliable historical evidence. Second, we are aware that the narrators are fictionalized versions of the authors, which casts doubt on the mediation of historical truth, and, at a larger scale, on historiography itself as a process of archivization and transmission of human knowledge.

In *The Lazarus Project* (2008), Hemon uses a series of photographs to delimitate each "history" of migration. The influence of W.G. Sebald is evident here and well-acknowledged by the Bosnian American author. In an interview with Deborah Baker[20], the writer stated that he learned from Sebald to confront writing with photographs. The novel includes archival photos of Lazarus but also uncaptioned home interiors, urban landscapes, and other photographs taken along the journey to Eastern Europe by Velibor Božović. Photographs are also verbally evoked to meditate on the nature of telling stories and composing one's identity through disparate but also arbitrarily selected fragments of lived experience, some of them which are captured on film[21].

In a way, the use of visuals leads to the confrontation between fiction and reality. They create a reality effect together with the memoir mode of narrating the story. "The question then becomes whether the story in my book becomes authentic because of the presence of photos or the photos become inauthentic because of the presence of the story," says Hemon.[22] The border between what is real and what is imagined is blurred and, from the viewpoint of our reading experience, rendered irrelevant. Hemon challenges his readers to question what is factually real in fiction by acknowledging the role of imagination in exploring different lives and experiences through the act of reading. He believes that literature can give us access to a kind of human knowledge that is otherwise impossible to explore. "What literature does is it employs imagination and language to allow us to extend ourselves into other human beings."[23]

The Lazarus Project (2008) is especially relevant for our discussion as it exemplifies four common features these new immigrant authors share in crossing national and aesthetic boundaries in their literature. First, they reveal a transnational spatial awareness and sensibility marked by processes of dislocation, migration, and return movements that challenge binary thinking (local vs. global[24], home country vs. host country), as well as the way we perceive the international literary space. They belong to a new generation of "minority" writers that reconsider the narrative of migration. Rather than striving to settle in the place of arrival, they tell the immigrant's story beyond it, spanning multiple geographies and cross-cultural identity reconfigurations. They are concerned with the place of the minority person (the marginal, the immigrant, the racialized, the queer) in relation to the hegemonic culture and language. The construction of a homeland-like space in the place of arrival, beyond the narrowly circumscribed notions of nationalism (Hemon), race (Díaz, Adichie), or gender (Vuong), is one of the key features of their spatial aesthetics[25].

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20. Deborah Baker, "Aleksandar Hemon by Deborah Baker," *Bomb Magazine*, August 20, 2008. https://bombmagazine.org/articles/aleksandar-hemon-1/.

21. Hemon, *The Lazarus Project* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2009), 68: "When I look at my old pictures, all I can see is what I used to be but am no longer. I think: What I can see is what I am not," says Brik in one of his conversations with his photographer friend.

22. Baker, "Aleksandar Hemon."

23. Irina Reyn, "Exile on Any Street," Guernica, February 1, 2010. https://www.guernicamag.com/not_melted_into_the_pot/.

24. In "Crossing Borders: From (Ex-)Yugoslavia to the Whole World," published in *Metacritic Journal for Comparative Studies and Theory* 6, no. 1 (2020): 44–62, Snejana Ung analyses the internal geography of some of Hemon's works and shows how his imagination transcends the duality between home culture and host culture. Hemon's latest novel, *The World and All That It Holds* (2023), continues to incite his readers with a new transnational narrative that defies categorization, moving across genres and borders. The story crosses great distances, from Sarajevo to Shanghai, and alternates multiple timeframes. As far as the author's spatial awareness goes, he introduces the world as a governing notion from the very beginning. Consequently, the characters are constructed beyond a particular nation-state's cultural and linguistic space. Multiple spaces and languages overlap in a complex, multilayered narrative.

25. The complex relation between nation, narrative, and identity in new immigrant writing is extensively treated in "Nation and Narration": Writing Alternative Histories In Contemporary Immigrant Literature, in *Means And Meanings Of Communication. Contexts And Interdisciplinarity* (Târgu-Mureș, Arhipelag XXI Press, 2022, 171-181, where I show how these writers challenge the boundaries of the American nation, selfhood, and literature through a transcultural, postnationalist perspective on self-formation and narration.

Second, the novels analysed here reveal the dynamic of reality and illusion as they mix genres, traditions, cultures, and languages. Such crossings are most vividly depicted in Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007), who draws on speculative genres to address the suppressed stories of marginalized individuals, the theme of forbidden knowledge, and the role of imagination in constructing alternative narratives. Hemon's novel exhibits a hybrid structure as narratives, timeframes, and mediums overlap. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* (2014) is also a hybrid as it takes the shape of bildungsroman, romance, and ethnic migrant novel while constituting a political commentary on issues of colonial history, migration, and racism. Ultimately, Ocean Vuong draws on Japanese narratology in his novel to subvert the literary tradition of Asian-American immigrant writing, moving beyond US-centric representations of conflict and trauma.

Third, they approach migration not just in terms of themes and actual stories that might or might not be historically true, but also through linguistic alterity. The writers we focus on construct their identities through language. As Sonia Weiner (2018) argues, they "discursively create the self"[26]. They rethink cultural hybridity and redefine the diasporic imagination by using the English language in innovative ways (their texts are infused with cultural and linguistic references to their homeland which contributes to a sense of authenticity). As they draw on their experience as immigrants, their writing "translates" a constant movement between languages and cultural backgrounds, resulting in self-translation with fundamental implications in cross-cultural identity reconfiguration, on the one hand, and intercultural dialogue on the other. The use of multiple languages impacts the reading experience and leaves room for further negotiation between author and reader.

The fourth feature common to the immigrant writers' aesthetics discussed in this paper is their metafictional preoccupation with storytelling, which will be dealt with in the following section of this paper.

Breaking the *Autobiographical Pact*: Life Writing & the Limits of Authenticity in Migrant Literature

According to the French academic Philippe Lejeune, "we call autobiography the retrospective narrative in prose that someone makes of his own existence when he puts the principal accent upon his life, especially upon the story of his own personality"[27]. In his renowned essay "Le Pact Autobiographique," he defines the relationship between author and reader as a pact/ contract. Thus, the reader supposes that there is an identity of name between the author, the narrator, and the protagonist of the story. The concept of the "pact" has faded away in recent theories because of the hybridity and complexity of autobiographical and autofictional texts. Contemporary immigrant life writing par excellence challenges Philippe Lejeune's understanding of autobiography from the point of view of both its form and reception. Coetzee, for instance, believes that pacts can be renegotiated, which is also true in terms of meaning:

> "An autobiographer is not only a man who once upon a time lived a life in which he loved, fought, suffered, strove, was misunderstood, and of which he tells the story; he is also a man engaged in writing a story. That story is written within the limits of a pact, the pact of autobiography, one of the many pacts negotiated over the years between writers and readers (and always open to renegotiation) for each of the genres and sub-genres, pacts which cover, among other things, what demands may be made of each genre and what may not, what questions may be asked and what may not, what one may see and what one must be blind to."[28]

As regards the novels of the immigrant writers we focus on, many of the scholars referenced in this paper broke "the autobiographical pact" (as defined by Lejeune) for the sake of interpretation and highlighted the similarities between their lives and their fiction in the absence of the mandatory identification between author, narrator, and protagonist. However, both formally and functionally, their writing implies the enactment of a transaction between the text and the reader that does not exclude truth-telling. According to Smith and Watson, "If we approach self-referential writing as an intersubjective process that occurs within the writer/reader pact, rather than as a true-or-false story, the emphasis of reading shifts from assessing and verifying knowledge to observing processes of communicative exchange and understanding."[29] Autobiographical narration is thus intersubjective and can be redefined beyond the truth-falsehood binary.

26. Sonia Weiner, *American Migrant Fictions: Space, Narrative, Identity* (Leiden: Brill & Rodopi, 2018), 200.
27. Philippe Lejeune, cited in Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography*, 1.
28. J.M. Coetzee, *Truth in Autobiography* (Cape Town: University of Cape Town, 1984), 5.
29. Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography*, 13.

By crossing this aesthetical boundary, they first subvert the conventions of autobiography as a narrative centred on a confessional "I." The first impression in the act of reading is not that of dealing with autobiographical writing, and in some cases, not even with a novel (Vuong). In *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* (2019), the author blends the bildungsroman, historical, autobiographical, and epistolary styles in a poetic prose that crosses multiple aesthetic borders to construct a complex, imaginative, and experimental life narrative. The novel begins as a letter, but essayistic passages and poetry lines interrupt the epistolary style. Sharp informational fragments problematize the opioid crisis in post-9/11 America. Trevor, the American white boy Little Dog falls in love with, dies of an overdose of heroin combined with fentanyl. Like many other young people in the US, he became an addict due to a prescribed drug meant to alleviate bodily pain called OxyContin.

The narrator also employs an evocative, essayistic style to write about monarch butterflies, buffalos, and other animals. Repeatedly mentioned in the novel, monarch butterflies symbolize memory, migration, and transgenerational legacy. Like the monarchs, Little Dog has his family's traumas inscribed into his genes and behaviour. From this perspective, self-harm impulses, depression, and addiction issues are perceived as effects of distressing childhood experiences. In one of his interviews, Vuong mentioned that he wanted to write a novel that would faithfully enact his generation's disintegration. As a result, failure and epigenetic trauma are significant themes in his prose, which at times "breaks into poetry"[30].

As already mentioned, writing disguised autobiographies as novels or other forms of literary writing is a pattern already identified in postcolonial literature in the work of authors such as Rushdie and Coetzee. In *Elisabeth Costello,* for example, Coetzee attributed part of his actual lectures to a fictional Australian author that stands as his female alter-ego. However, despite the reader's knowledge of their fictionalized autobiographical writing, the second impression that emerges through reading is that of authenticity as the authors choose narrative techniques that create the illusion of direct communication between author and reader, a relation mediated by the author-figures that are extraordinary storytellers. As Weiner noted in *American Migrant Fictions* (2018)[31], Junot Díaz and Aleksandar Hemon share a common obsession with the process of writing and creating narrators that double as storytellers. Their narrators grapple with the challenges of expressing themselves in a foreign culture, and their narratives become inclusive of different linguistic and cultural elements. Hemon's narrator in *The Lazarus Project* (2008) is preoccupied with becoming an acclaimed American writer to prove his value to his beloved wife and her American family but he ends up in his native country, questioning his choices and true identity. For Díaz's Oscar Wao (whose Spanish inflicted-nickname is a direct reference to Oscar Wilde), writing was a coping mechanism and self-discovery instrument that could have made him a Latino "Tolkien" if his life would not have ended abruptly and tragically upon his last return to Dominican Republic. Vuong's alter-ego narrator writes a letter to his mother in English, a language she does not comprehend, and fulfils his destiny as a writer by acknowledging his Asian cultural inheritance. Adichie's protagonist in *Americanah* (2013) becomes a successful blogger and public speaker exploring what it means for a displaced subject to live and write in a "borrowed tongue[32]".

As regards telling the truth, J. M. Coetzee shows how questionable this category is in contemporary writing. Phenomenologically, truth is umbilically connected to notions of authenticity and belief, aspects that the above-mentioned authors also self-referentially exploit throughout their fiction. As Jane Poynter puts it, "That Coetzee is concerned with 'how to tell the truth in autobiography' therefore does not mean he is concerned with truth per se, but with its telling. In other words, Coetzee is less interested in the truth value of narrative than in the mechanism truth always a category to be questioned in Coetzee—is brought to light".[33]

In "Truth in Autobiography," his inaugural lecture given as a Professor at the University of Cape Town in 1984, the author discusses the confessional rhetoric in Rousseau's autobiography and raises an essential issue: if we replace all questions of truthfulness with questions of sincerity, how can we tell the author was sincere? "There are truths - he says - that it may cost too much to tell. It is not insincere,

30. The words belong to Vuong. In a conversation with Toby Ashraf (2020: min. 19:30), he explains that his novel is like a carefully orchestrated explosion, an elongation of his poetry.

31. Sonia Weiner, *American Migrant Fictions*, 27.

32. In *Borrowed Tongues: Life Writing, Migration, and Translation* (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2012), Eva C. Karpinski coined the term "borrowed tongue" in reference to writing in a second language or one perceived as not one's own.

33. Jane Poyner, *J.M. Coetzee and the Paradox of Postcolonial Authorship* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2009), 168.

or not merely insincere, to fail to come out with these truths."[34] The question of truth in terms of sincerity is also pursued by Coetzee in his fiction, the second chapter of Elizabeth Costello being emblematic of the elusiveness of this matter and the impossibility of discerning between what things are and what they seem to be. In analyzing Costello's and Egudu's lectures, Stephan Mulhall explores the dialectics of appearance and reality, exploiting the relation between truth, sincerity, and belief:

> "It is not that either of them is insincere, as if offering what they know to be false as true: it is both, in their different ways, operating in a domain where the distinction between rhetoric and substance, appearance and reality, no longer has a grip. It is the very idea of truth as independent of our beliefs that creates the logical space for a phenomenon of belief that is entirely independent of truth—a domain in which belief is no longer inherently truth-oriented but is ultimately reducible to a matter of energy or mere utility."[35]

The same questions can be raised in terms of perception with respect to Coetzee's narrative itself. Can we believe what we are told? If so, what is the basis of the reader's trust? Like Costello, we know that "things can be true even if one does not believe in them, and conversely. Belief may be no more, in the end, than a source of energy, like a battery which one clips into an idea to make it run."[36] As Smith and Watson suggest in *Reading Autobiography*, we need to adjust our expectations of the truth in life narratives as the autobiographical truth is an "intersubjective exchange between narrator and reader aimed at producing a shared understanding of the meaning of a life."[37]

Next, I will take a closer look at what Coetzee does in *Elizabeth Costello* as an abstract model/ pattern that we can identify in other postcolonial/ migrant self-referential writing. Constructed as a collection of "lectures", the writer achieves a much more complex narrative than what we might understand by "lesson"—"the proper form of a lecture is something direct and nonfictional—instructional, expository, or essayistic using fictions to illustrate a point, perhaps, but in a wider framework of straight-talking"[38]. He creates what we can call *texistence*[39], a construct in which reality and fiction, text and existence collide and become one.

A more comprehensive reading would illustrate another aspect that can be argued in terms of form and function—the fact that both the text and self-identity are created as performance. Most of the lessons are told from the perspective of Costello herself, while others are told from the point of view of her son, John. There are, though, other author-figures, indeed, not taking the role of the narrator, that contribute to the idea of this novel as a performative discourse, such as the "exotic" character Emmanuel Egudu. Costello's first impression of this character as a "poseur" is meaningful with respect to the double nature of the textual lectures and of the metatextual narrative (the reality-fiction binary). Both the author and his alter-egos are susceptible of imposture because of the auto-plagiaristic dimension of their discourses. As Coetzee retells his lectures by inventing Costello, who herself is an author-figure known for rewriting fundamental narratives, Egudu's lectures are nothing but repetitions as he makes a living out of a lecture circuit on cruise ships. "But a poseur, she now wonders: what is that? Someone who seems to be what he is not? Which of us is what he seems to be, she seems to be?"[40]

What derives from everything stated so far is that the issue of authenticity can be perceived as independent from truth and sincerity. While at a textual level, the reader can be persuaded to believe in the created realm and genuinely empathise with the truths of the characters, metatextually, authenticity is subverted by the reader's awareness of the discrepancy between what these life narratives are (the authors' actual experience) and what they are made to be (fiction). Moreover, authenticity is both epistemologically and anthropologically undermined by the reader's awareness of a deconstructive playful force behind the narrative, typical to the cultural and aesthetic framework the text belongs to responsible for the relativization of all truths. "This open acknowledgment of the fictionality of all

34. Coetzee, "Truth in Autobiography," 5.
35. Stephen Mulhall, *The Wounded Animal: J.M. Coetzee and the Difficulty of Reality in Literature and Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).
36. Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello*, 39.
37. Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography,* 13.
38. James Meffan, J.M. Coetzee "Elisabeth Costello (2003)," in *A Companion to the Works of J. M. Coetzee*, edited by Tim Mehigan (Rochester NY: Camden House, 2011), 175.
39. The lecture Coetzee held in when he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature, is also suggestive of perceiving his existence as texistence because of the inadequacy to call his lectures nonfictional as they are stories in nature.
40. Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello*, 36.

'knowledge', says Pat Morris, the insistence that reality amounts to cultural stories and interpretations that we impose upon existence to create meaning for ourselves and of ourselves is the most typical characteristic of postmodern writing"[41]. So, the postmodern cultural matrix, among others, represents one of the limits of authenticity in contemporary migrant and postcolonial literature. For this reason, we believe that the truth behind the narrative is, in fact, a multiplicity of truths belonging to the reader, each reader activating or acknowledging his or her own truth. From a reader-oriented point of view, the text-reader dynamic interrelationship is far more complex as there are many variables implied.

This relation, implying not only the limits of authenticity already discussed but also limits of representation of the real, is skilfully examined by Wolfgang Iser in his essay "The Play of the Text"[42], arguing that "authors play games, and the text is the playground," [43] and so "whatever is repeated in the text is not meant to denote the world, but merely a world enacted. This may well repeat—he continues—an identifiable reality, but it contains one all-important inherent in the real world referred to"[44]. The critic also claims that there are various levels of difference between the fictional world and its possibly 'realist' referent, differences that occur simultaneously within the text. If we interrogate the first extratextual relation pointed out by Iser - "between author and the world in which he or she intervenes"[45] -, with regard to *Elizabeth Costello*, Coetzee's writing represents, from an Aristotelian perspective on literary representation, a copy of a copy, a copy of an already fictionalized reality as Costello's lectures have a ground in Coetzee's actual lectures or academic papers. For instance, an earlier version of Lesson 1, *Realism*, appeared under the title "What is Realism?" in 1997, and an earlier version of Lesson 2 appeared as "The Novel in Africa," Occasional Paper no. 17 of the Townsend Center for the Humanities, at the University of California at Berkely, in 1999. "The Novel in Africa" is even more illustrative of how reality abides in the realm of fiction, as Coetzee inserts actual references. By naming and quoting actual writers (Cheik Hamidou Kane and Paul Zumthor), he crosses, once again and even more disturbingly, the boundaries between the real and the fictional. From perceiving the text as a playground to perceiving it as a playground of differences, in a Derridean sense, is only a small step because by disclosing the truth of the fictionality, as well as the fictionality of the truth, Coetzee is one of the authors that contribute to the undoing of realism in contemporary writing. Thus, *Elizabeth Costello* is representative of the disintegration of the paradigm that dominated the novel as a genre for more than a century. Due to this new paradigm of paradoxes and relativism that emerged in arts and literature in the second half of the 20th century, the reader can perceive a correspondence and a difference between fact and fictional truth in self-referential novels.

Conclusions

By offering new perspectives on selfhood and self-referential writing, immigrant authors such as Aleksandar Hemon, Junot Díaz, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, and Ocean Vuong cross both national and aesthetic borders, contributing to the emergence of what we call a transnational immigrant life writing typology. The protagonists of their fiction reach maturity in different cultural, linguistic, racial, and ethnic contexts, yet their works have much in common in themes, techniques, language use, and narrative structures.

A common feature of the texts we referenced in this study resides in the authors' metatextual preoccupation with self-referential storytelling. By creating narrators that double as writers often reflecting on their own writing process, they establish parallels between their lives and those of their narrators, presenting different stages in the process of their identity formation and re-formation across borders. Their works complicate the discussion around the tension between truth and fiction in semi-biographical writing as they break both the "autobiographical contract" (Lejeune, 1989) and "fictive dream" (Gardner, 1991).

Moreover, they continue their narratives outside the borders of their fiction. Hemon has created websites

41. Pat Morris, "The Poststructural Critique of Realism," in *Realism* (London, & New York: Routledge, 2003), 30.
42. Originally published in S. Budick and W. Iser, eds., *Languages of the Unsayable* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), 325–39, the essay was reprinted in Lilian R. Furst, ed., *Realism* (London: Longman, 1992), 206–217.
43. Wolfgang Iser, "The Play of the Text," in *Realism*, ed. by Lilian R Furst (New York: Routledge, 2003), 207.
44. Ibid., 208.
45. Ibid.

for his novels[46]. Adichie's official website hosts a section entitled Ifemelu's Blog[47], and Díaz has annotated his narrator's footnotes from his novel on an open access platform dedicated to rap lyrics[48]. More recently, Vuong gives readers and followers new insights into his fiction through a photographic project for Cultured Magazine[49] showing pictures with his mother and her salon, both fictionalized in his semi-biographical novel. The article reminds us of Velibor Božović's own "Lazarus project" posted on his website.[50]

By self-reflecting on the process of interpretation, we want to highlight that, as readers and global citizens, we are all interconnected in and outside academia and national literatures, fighting the "increasingly fortified world"[51] we live in. While we are not co-authors of these writers' life narratives, we are co-authors of their truth as we are invited to participate into a collective contestation of grand narratives, including the grand myth of fiction.

Ultimately, what matters most is the outcome of the intersubjective and dynamic interplay between authors' and readers' intentions that we call reading. Concerning the authors' self-referential writing, be it fictional or real, autobiographical or essayistic, the actual result of interpretation as a process transforming the reader is the Otherness we make sense of. The most important thing about fiction is not so much making sense of other lives but making sense of ourselves through them. Once again, life writing is not so much about factual truth but about potential truths we make sense of through criticism.

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46. These are no longer accessible on the author's website but you can check the webpage for Hemon's first collection of short stories in English, *The Question of Bruno* (2000) - http://aleksandarhemon.com/bruno/bruno/index2.html.

47. Ifemelu's blog entries on Adichie's website differ from the ones in the novel in terms of style and purpose. They postdate the action in the book and offer a glimpse into the life of the main characters as returnees to their native country. Also, they have little literary value. See https://www.chimamanda.com/ifemelus-blog/, accessed July 7, 2024.

48. Díaz's profile and annotations can be seen by accessing https://genius.com/artists/Junot-Díaz, accessed July 7, 2024.

49. See Ocean Vuong, "Writer Ocean Vuong's Debut Photography Series Memorializes the Nail Salons and Family Trips of His Youth," June 27, 2024, https://www.culturedmag.com/article/2024/06/27/writer-ocean-vuong-debut-photography

50.Fragments from Hemon's novel accompany each image on Božović's online project, recontextualizing the narrator's words outside the borders of its pages. See Velibor Božović, "The Lazarus Project," https://veliborbozovic.com/the-lazarus-project/, accessed July 7, 2024.

51. The words belong to Jacqueline Rose, from *Mothers: An Essay on Love and Cruelty* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2019).

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