Academic Autobiography and Women of Color Feminisms: Narrating a Critical Practice

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Academic autobiography, a life writing text that combines in superlative ways the private and the public, has received increasing critical attention in the last couple of decades. The intersection between one’s personal life and professional commitment has become fertile ground for theoretical exploration as we examine the ways autobiographical and professional writing function together, ask if we can read autobiographical writing from professional perspectives or, alternatively, study to what extent scholarship grows from personal experiences. This project transforms the scholar’s existential involvement into an analytical tool capable of documenting and demonstrating theory, and it has now become “both possible and necessary to thematize the link between the history that one makes and the history that makes us” (Passerini and Geppert 7). This intersectional approach to autobiography and scholarship, led by feminist scholars such as Nancy Miller, Jill Ker Conway, Shirley Geok-lin Lim, Alice Kaplan, Jane Tompkins, and Marianna De Marco Torgovnick, among others, uses life stories to illuminate academic arguments, connecting the personal to forms of
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This essay examines autobiographies by academics in the United States and Canada who have spearheaded reexaminations of women of color feminism in North America: Shirley Geok-lin Lim, Leila Ahmed, and Vijay Agnew. A comparative reading of academic autobiographies and scholarly work confirms, as Paul Valery states, “that there is no theory that is not in fact a carefully concealed part of the theorist’s own life story” (qtd. in Klinkowitz 118). These women demonstrate a critical consciousness of the connections between personal life and academic commitment and enact the ways experience has modified theory. Their autobiographies reflect each woman’s negotiation with intellectual issues in her own life to the point where all three describe how their own experiences became the basis for their scholarly theories. Helen Buss posits the particular usefulness of the academic memoir for women academics who “want a form that allows the story of their professional lives to be informed by the conditions of their personal lives” (170). According to Buss these women’s academic memoirs are “attempts to bring the intellectual process of critical thinking to bear on their own various self-identities and to hold these in balance without oppressing any aspect of what or who has made them,” specifically because these texts are enacted in contexts where diverse forms of privilege—gender, class, race—have historically marginalized them (169-70).

1 For critical discussions on the form and possibilities of academic autobiography, see, among others, Cynthia Franklin’s Academic Lives (2009) as well as “Academic Autobiography and/in the Discourses of History” (special issue of Rethinking History, 2009, co-edited by Rocío G. Davis and Jaume Aurell) and “Reading Academic Autobiography” (special issue of Prose Studies, 2009, edited by Rocío G. Davis).