

**NEW FORMS OF SELF-NARRATION:
YOUNG WOMEN, LIFE WRITING AND HUMAN RIGHTS**

Ana Belén Martínez García
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ISABEL MARQUÉS LÓPEZ
Universidad Complutense de Madrid
isabmarq@ucm.es

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Throughout the last decade, a new consciousness has emerged as a result of the successive and contingent crises that affect us both on a local and a global scale. Producing an empathetic response that sets the ground for political action is a challenge worth taking in the pursuit of an ethics of solidarity and responsibility. In this context, a new generation of activist writers has emerged from the Global South, aiming to give an account of life under a regime of human rights violation. While this proliferation of non-hegemonic voices has contributed to creating a sense of global consciousness, it is relevant to look into the mechanisms and discourses that these authors employ to reach a Western audience, as well as into the ethical possibilities and risks of their assimilation into a dominant culture. As Gillian Whitlock has discussed, first-person accounts by non-hegemonic subjects, when circulating in the public sphere after having acquired a certain cultural capital, can sometimes be co-opted by paternalistic Eurocentric readings and interpretations (2006: 3). For this reason, critics should be attentive to how these narratives engage with and potentially contest discourses of survival that echo neoliberal narratives of success and heroism (Gilmore 2017: 86).

In her monograph, *New Forms of Self-Narration: Young Women, Life Writing and Human Rights* (2020), Ana Belén Martínez García explores the complexities of this narrative phenomenon through six cases of young women activists writing from the Global South. All these testimonies have managed to reach mainstream

audiences, mostly through the authors' command of digital and social media and an emerging discourse of human rights that aims to appeal directly to the audience's emotions, empathy, and ethical engagement. Each one of these testimonies is comprised of multiple texts, including memoirs, public speeches, TED talks, or tweets, circulating across what Leigh Gilmore has called "testimonial networks", which she defines as "circulatory systems that connect the discourses and sites through and across which persons and testimony flow" (2017: 3).

The monograph's circular structure is achieved through the parallelism between the opening and closing chapters, on Malala Yousufzai and Nadia Murad respectively. Martínez García reads the two women's testimonies of sexual or gender-based oppression, violence, migration, activism, and worldwide recognition, as parallel stories of survival mobilized both for the authors' empowerment and for the vindication of the rights of their communities. She analyzes the varying impact of each activist in relation to the communities from which they speak. On the one hand, Malala's testimonial project, which includes her memoir *I Am Malala* (2013), seeks to appeal to a global consciousness beyond the Arab world. The book argues that in responding to the contradictions involved in being a feminist woman raised in a Pashtun community, Malala manages to renegotiate her cultural identity. On the other hand, Murad's testimony, partly conveyed through her memoir *The Last Girl* (2017), emphasizes the specificity of her community, and in particular of the experience of sex trafficking by the Islamic State, speaking both for the survivors and the ones who died. In sum, this circular section invites us to balance the epistemic and ethical challenges of giving an account of the self as a survivor and advocate, against the bonds and legacies —sometimes compromised— with one's community and background, starting with those who will never be able to speak.

The book continues in the second and third chapters to explore the trope of the survivor as an exceptional, heroic individual standing for a community, dealing with the testimonies of two North Korean defectors and activists, Hyeonseo Lee and Yeonmi Park. Martínez García places particular emphasis on the way these writers developed a particularly popular "activist persona" through platforms like TED, where they first presented themselves to the West, and later social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. She is careful to notice the ethical problems that these close moves toward mainstream Western audiences convey. In the case of Lee, she looks at how she attempts to tell her own story through a memoir, *The Girl with Seven Names* (2015), that fits into a rags-to-riches narrative which, for all its formulaic patterns, reflects the psychological turmoil and struggle of a subject who has had to change her identity several times to survive. By contrast, Park's testimony, also delivered in her memoir *In Order to Live* (2016) constructs the "narrating 'I'" (Smith and Watson 2010: 73) based not only on her own experience but also on

those of her fellow North Koreans who have suffered or perished under the regime. As Martínez García observes, in contrast to Lee's autonomy in her account of how she "made herself" throughout multiple identities, Park's memoir taps into the ethical dimension of writing about a traumatic experience as a path towards awareness, self-recovery, and mutual connection. In sum, throughout these two chapters, the author seems to argue the inevitability of ethical dilemmas around the question of collective representation vs. self-(re)invention, particularly when speaking to a Western audience in a media-driven, neoliberal economy.

The final section looks more closely into the trope of childhood as an asset in the contemporary affective economy (Ahmed 2004: 119), in the context of the refugee crisis in Syria, through the testimonies of Bana Alabed and Nujeen Mustafa, respectively addressed in the fourth and fifth chapters. In her discussion of these cases, Martínez García is particularly attentive to the capitalization of childhood as both the epitome of vulnerability and innocence and an intersectional site for selfhood and identity. The case of Alabed, a seven-year-old Syrian child whose Twitter-based serial testimony agitated Western audiences, is interesting for the author in the way it articulates individual and collective notions of ethnic identity and geopolitical vulnerability. Her testimony is carefully situated at a particular time and place from which she claims international involvement and collaboration. Similarly, Mustafa's testimony exemplifies a negotiation between the (Western) universal meanings of childhood and her situated identity as a disabled, Kurdish-Syrian teenager forced to flee her country with the help of her older sister. The intersectional nature of Mustafa's character, in her two-fold vindication of the rights of refugees and disabled people, as well as the deployment of humor and young-adult-styled political critique, is for Martínez García key in the construction of a complex, authentic and expansive 'I'. As the author suggests, these activists have managed to repoliticize themselves in their narratives by staying open to intersecting voices and experiences through their search for an authentic and collective voice and skillful use of multiple media.

This book constitutes an ambitious, pioneering project not only in its subject of study but also in its interdisciplinary framework and its interest in assessing the political potential of multi-platform expression in life-writing. Its theoretical framework articulates a well-developed synthesis of canonical texts on the (geo)politics of life-writing with an updated selection of texts on (digital) media studies and political theory. Further, the book's multi-genre corpus not only makes it methodologically richer, but also more accurate as to the realities of contemporary political culture, and the logic of narrative circulation across diverse media platforms. Martínez García is insightful in her analysis and pays close attention to all the possible continuities across the chapters. Her interest in the active tensions between the individualizing effect of

the Western discourse and the will for honesty and inclusivity in the representation of the ethnic, defector, migrant, and/or refugee experience, reverberates throughout the volume, along with her reluctance to conclude on which one eventually “wins”, or—even less—to propose ultimate answers.

Martínez García seems to actively seek these important dialogues between the authors and their audiences across multiple power lines, even when they are destined to be flawed or partially co-opted by the economies of mainstream media. As Butler has suggested, there is an ethics of self-narration that involves recognizing one’s vulnerability to others and to the power structures that organize one’s identity and subjectivity, this way acknowledging “the way in which we are constituted in relationality: implicated, beholden, derived, sustained by a social world that is beyond us and before us” (2005: 64). I consider that the book would have benefitted from an exploration into the politics of vulnerability throughout these texts, to look into how the writers express their consciousness of themselves as existing in a network of personal, geopolitical, and cultural relations. Looking at the ways these young women activists reflect on their condition as disempowered and vulnerable subjects, particularly in relation to their Western audiences, could have enhanced the author’s argument on the need for testimonial networks to remain open to as many discourses and experiences as possible in a time of intersectional conflicts. In sum, the monograph serves as a useful introduction to the emerging panorama of life-writing in the context of human rights advocacy and new media. Although it could benefit from a greater engagement with an intersectional reading of the relations between vulnerability, bodies, and political institutions, the book vindicates a dialectic approach to the life writing projects by these young women that ethically recognizes their causes and experiences.

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