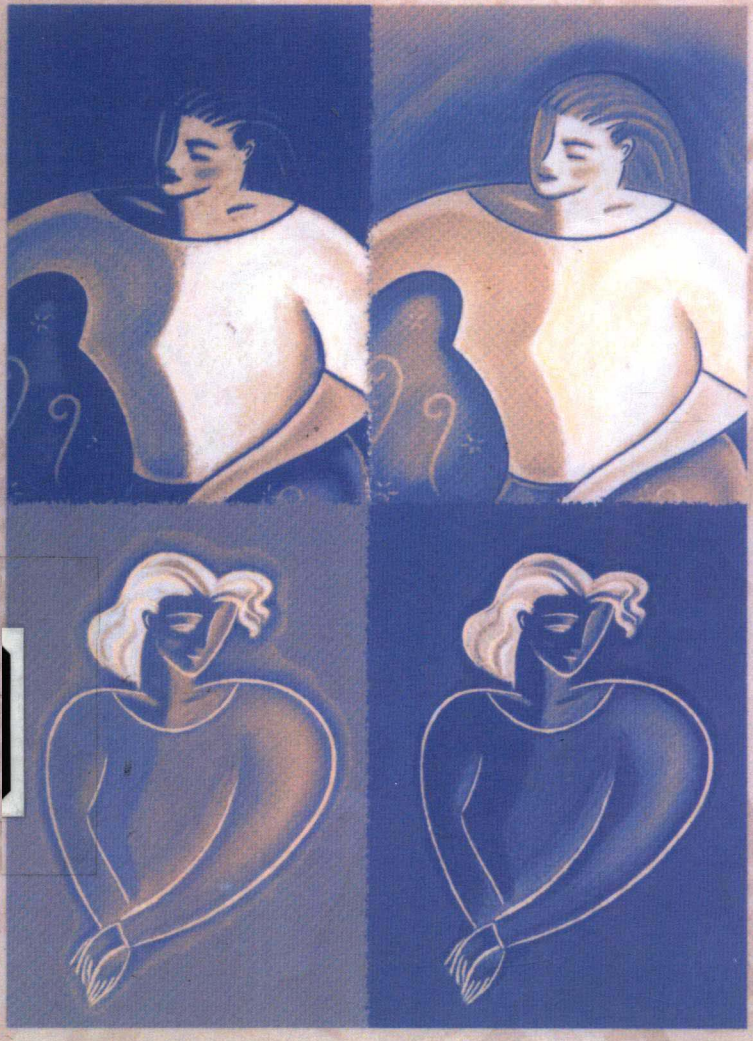
A Sounding of Women

AUTOBIOGRAPHIES FROM UNEXPECTED PLACES



MARTHA C. WARD

A Sounding of Women

Autobiographies from Unexpected Places

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This book is dedicated to the men who are so much
a vital, endearing, and enduring part of my own life story.
Here is "A Sounding of Men":

My dear brothers (alphabetically and in order of birth):
Hugh A. Coonfield ("Butch") and Ted Coonfield ("Teddy John")

Dr. Malcolm C. Webb, Chairman, Chairperson, and Chair
of the Department of Anthropology, University of New Orleans

My father, Hugh Arley Coonfield, once again with love.
And two grandfathers, Claude C. Biard and Hugh Albert Coonfield

Teachers who made a difference:
Joseph Vandiver, Marshall Durbin, Dan Hughes, and Jack Fischer

Siegfried de Rachewiltz, esteemed colleague

All former or aspiring "boyfriends" and one ex-husband

Friends Forever. Thank you all.

Introduction

All women have a story — the story of their lives. Generally, however, women's stories remain untold, unheard, and unrecorded. It is always remarkable, therefore, when we have the chance to hear each other's tales. So here is a collection of seven such stories, autobiographies from unexpected places, times, and cultures. I call them "soundings."

My dictionary defines the word *sounding*, first, as emitting or producing a sound, and then as the act of examining a body of water below its surface or the atmosphere above the reach of our eyes. A sounding may be the result of a test or measurement with a simple lead and line or may involve more sophisticated equipment. A whale plunging downward through ocean depths is sounding. When humans make tactful inquiries or indirect investigations, we are sounding out a situation.

For these soundings, I selected "self-steering stories." That means women tell the tales of their lives in their own words. They may have received help from translators, anthropologists, anthropologists' wives, publishers, interpreters, or others. But the story line belongs uniquely to them. I looked for stories of women who grew up and experienced adulthood, because girlhood or coming-of-age stories are another type of autobiography.

None of the women in this book "represents" anything. Each is special if only because she exists in print. None is just a voice, because that implies stories are only a body part.

Each story is embedded in many complex and even contradictory cultural settings. Each story is filtered somehow by the teller, again by the recorder, and again by the listener. We cannot look for factual truth; inevitably there are gaps, forgetfulness, suppression, repression, and probably some deliberate distortions. All these women have constructed or built their lives from their own blueprints. Frequently, they did not work under conditions of their own choosing.

Writing Women's Lives

Why are autobiographies or personal narratives so important? Why should women bother to tell their stories? Why would anyone bother to collect them? Anthropologist Marjorie Shostak, who collaborated with a !Kung Bushwoman named Nisa to write her life history, offers, these answers:

> No more elegant tool exists to describe the human condition than the personal narrative. Ordinary people living ordinary and not-so-ordinary lives weave from their memories and experiences the meaning life has for them. These stories are complex, telling of worlds sometimes foreign to us, worlds that no longer exist. They express modes of thought and culture often different from our own, a challenge to easy understanding. Yet, these stories are also familiar. It is just this tension — the identifiable in endless transformation — that is the currency of personal narratives, as they reveal the complexities and paradoxes of human life. As we cast our net ever wider, searching for those close as well as those far away, the spectrum of voices from otherwise obscure individuals helps us learn tolerance for differences as well as for similarities. What better place to begin our dialogue about human nature and the nature of human possibilities?[1]

Anthropologists have a long and special tradition of ethnographic autobiographies or person-centered ethnographies. These books are as well known and often cited in anthropology as the autobiographies and biographies of writers and diarists are to literary scholars. You will find a number of examples included or cited in this book.

For anthropologists, life history methods are part and parcel of doing fieldwork — whether or not we publish our research as autobiography. Describing the lives of ordinary people within their cultural settings has produced sensitive ethnographies and moving accounts of the endlessly varied ways of life on the planet. As two anthropologists who promoted the life history method most eloquently say,

> There continue to be hundreds of biographies of and autobiographies by all kinds of people and about all kinds of people published each year. We seem never to lose our curiosity about each other and our desire to know the myriad details, occasional disasters, and constant turnings that combine together in different contexts to make up what we perceive as our "lives."[2]

Scholars in history, literature, and other disciplines also look to biography, autobiography, and stories for understanding about how we live within ourselves

and with each other. Here is another example: a group of women headed by anthropologist Riv-Ellen Prell and historian Susan Geiger gathered like-minded women around them and began to study women's life histories in other societies. They affiliated with the Center for Advanced Feminist Studies at the University of Minnesota. After a long series of collective efforts and individual struggles — the kind that seem to characterize women's work — they held a conference. It was cross-disciplinary, cross-cultural, and collective. These are humane and meaningful criteria. When they published the results of their work, they alphabetized their names and published under a group title, the Personal Narratives Group.

These scholars uncovered four features that characterize women's autobiographies, wherever and whenever they appear. I find their analyses extremely helpful.

First, narratives exist in a specific time and in a specific place. Particular social, cultural, and historical contexts are crucial to understanding a person's life. We are not talking about a stylized, idealized "EveryWoman."

Second, narratives are not just brute facts about dates of birth or what happened in such and such a year. Instead they are special ways of talking to each other about what matters to us. They encode abstract concepts about the meaning of life for human beings as well as the why of a particular person's existence in a certain time and place. Moreover, they demonstrate the many varied but firm ideas we have about how a good story should be told.

Third, no narrative is pure — whatever that might mean. It is the product of complex negotiations between a narrator and the interpreters, and within the individual speakers themselves. Power relations always surround the production and publication of a life history, biography, or autobiography. These hidden hands include, but are not limited to, gender, class, colonialism, ethnicity, religion, politics, economics, and sexuality. In reading or producing such a work, ethics, identities, and ownership come into play in both obvious and subtle ways.

And last, narratives are about respect — the kind that forms between people who work together — as well as about truths. Here is what the Personal Narratives Group concluded:

> We were not talking about *a* truth or *the* truth. We had developed a healthy disdain for reductionist approaches that would have us determine the "truth" of a woman's words solely in terms of their exact factual accuracy, the representativeness of her social circumstances, or the reliability of her memory when it was tested against "objective" sources. We were talking about *truths*, a decidedly plural concept meant to encompass the multiplicity of ways in which a woman's life story reveals and reflects important features of her conscious experience and social landscape, creating from both her essential reality.

> As feminists we wanted to hear these truths and to understand them. We wanted them to inform our own realities, and to learn what we could from the experiences of other women. These truths were necessary to our work, and to our lives.[3]

There is a growing interest in, even hunger for, knowledge about women's lives. Over the last quarter of the twentieth century an explosion of scholarship in women's studies has provided us new ways of looking at our lives. We have reflexive, multicultural, and postmodern ways for women's life-writing. Marilyn Yalom, who is editing a book series called Women's Life Writings from Around the World, says that "I" stories have long been part of human culture and women's culture around the world. Just now are we finding them, seeing them, hearing them, and gathering them for each other to read.

> Once the stepsister of both literature and history, autobiography was considered too close to reality to be the former and too fanciful to be the latter. Today, literary works called "memoirs," "autobiographies," or "personal narratives" are widely appreciated for a variety of reasons, including their psychological revelations and their documentary value. In our largely impersonal, often overgrown, and frequently uncomfortable world, the first-person story offers reassurance to countless readers eager to discover how someone else has found a way through the hazards of life.[4]

A Sounding of Women came into being as I was writing a longer book called *A World Full of Women.*[5] I wanted to use short quotes from women's autobiographies to illustrate certain points such as the surreptitious use of birth control. But I learned very quickly that women allowed to talk about their lives weave long and complex stories. It proved impossible to find "sound bites" or short takes. Our critics are correct, women are very good at talking; most of us like to tell stories.

Then I thought about the trajectory of women's lives for a long time and concluded that somehow they are different from men's. So I started a search for women's autobiographies. This was not as easy as it may sound. No central listing or bibliography of women's autobiographies exists. Many autobiographies are not routinely available to American readers. Sometimes they are too long, out-of-print, or published outside the United States. Even the information highway has few if any signs leading to women's life stories.

Life history narratives about women are not as numerous as those about men. Women's lives are often presented only in reference to men's lives, as the "other side," or even as a kind of deviancy. As a token woman, one is enough to represent "women's lives" in Culture X. In many accounts or representations, men have the "real" lives. Women are exceptions that prove the rule.

Women often have no experience in examining their personal lives, no vocabulary for personal experience. As most writers acknowledge, women emphasize personal matters, small objects, fragments of a conversation remembered, or the emotional content of historical experiences, places, or people. Women's stories are anecdotal rather than analytic (a fact for which I am routinely grateful). Indeed, women have discrete and recognizable traditions of storytelling.

> The truths of personal narratives are the truths revealed from real positions in the world, through lived experience in social relationships, in the context of passionate beliefs and partisan stands. They recount efforts to grapple with the world in all of its confusion and complexity and with the normal lack of omniscience that characterizes the human condition. It is precisely because of their subjectivity — their rootedness in time, place, and personal experience, and their perspective-ridden character — that we value them."[6]

Reading Women's Lives

All the accounts in this book were published in English in the twentieth century. Some readers, particularly young ones, may interpret the events of these women's lives as old-fashioned, or unlikely to be of relevance in our "modern" times. So I issue a gentle reminder that history is another unexpected place — just a different country — and women may share common destinies beneath the mottled surfaces of our cultural lives.

We enhance a precious or semiprecious stone when we place it in a gold setting to wear or to give to someone we love. So I have placed each woman's story in its appropriate social and cultural setting. The fact that we have women's autobiographies often seems to be random, an accident of circumstances. So how and why an account comes to exist is also part of its story.

In each selection, women use words from different languages. I left these phrases in the text and, where necessary, added a translation or note in brackets for clarification. They add spice. Consider each chapter a gourmet recipe with unexpected flavors and seasonings added to the dish. In that same spirit, I have left the British spellings: *flavour* for *flavor, colour* for *color, moulding* for *molding, odour* for *odor.* Read right through them.

Colleagues in the Personal Narratives Group were particularly struck by how women in each autobiography they read seem to move back and forth between many different cultures. No one seemed to see herself as marginal to a dominant culture or even as being in any marked categories. Real cultures are very slippery,

shambling creatures. They are not just in our heads. So where they come from is crucial to understanding women's lives. Autobiography, like life as we know it, is not one size fits all.

Something else impressed me about these autobiographies. All of these women could recount conversations with a mother, father, husband, or child as though it happened yesterday. Moreover, every woman I read about skipped key parts of her life! Just when I want to know more, there's a blank — sometimes a very big blank. And there seems to be no way I will ever know why or what is there.

Please note that you will not agree with some of the things these women say or the feelings they have. You may not approve of actions the women quoted here have taken or their reasons they give for what they did. But the beauty of autobiography — when we relax and give in to the reality of other people's lived experiences — is that we don't have to predict their actions or be responsible for them. We can't tell them what to do.

Some years ago a friend of mine was dying of cancer. In the nearly two years it took, her friends spent time with her and, as these things work, with each other. With no malice or planning, we each assumed that our dying friend would complete certain tasks, handle certain obvious problems, and tie up the loose ends before she left. Shouldn't she write a letter to each of her children, one friend asked. What about that huge closet with unfinished craft projects? A prayer circle is surely better than a bridge group! Why on earth is she redecorating the living room? And so on.

But our lists of what she needed to do, of course, differed from person to person and, most certainly, from her own lists. Finally, I guess, most of us understood that she got to choose how to die. It was her life and it was her death.

This viewpoint, painfully achieved, underlies each of the autobiographies here. I suggest that you watch very closely for how each woman handles and names her feelings. Today many of us share a belief that feelings are natural — that we will all have the same response to the same event, or that any given event will predictably have the same effect on us. But feelings are not prescribed. For example, a husband dies; a wife is secretly relieved. A husband dies; a wife finds her life torn asunder. Autobiographies are not the truths of objectivity, facts, or science; they are the truths of lived experience, of shared stories. There is no right way or wrong way to be a woman — or to tell a woman's story.

Much as I would dearly love to question each of these women about what really happened, what they really felt, or why they did what they did, I cannot. They have chosen what to say and what to leave out. What they decided to say is all we have.

It is common these days to hear about "speaking out," "voices," or "tongues," and so forth. If we talk about recapturing our voices, then we must talk about reclaiming our ears. The listener counts too. Listening is one of the most profound contributions we can make to each other. The people who helped produce these autobiographies offer us a special space to listen and to hear. To assist you I have added some provocative questions at the end of each chapter. Several women suggested this strategy to me; they thought such questions would help them read, listen, and hear better.

I would also like to acknowledge here those women who reviewed the manuscript and provided insightful comments: Barbara Miller, George Washington University; Rita Ross, San Jose State University; and Mary Jo Schneider, University of Arkansas.

I hope these stories inspire you to write your own lives, to recognize the lives of others, and to collect autobiographies or life histories — just because. When I share these selections with friends, relatives, and students, they react strongly. They seem to bond with the characters; later they quote from them. They say these stories have an immediacy, freshness, and an application to their own lives. I agree. They claim that if these women can make their lives sound so compelling, so can we. I certainly hope so.

Books and Lives

Human lives — the personal and the self — are the yeast that causes the bread of ethnography, literature, theory, or history to rise. Many wonderful books have grown out of the fermentation of the women's movement and feminist scholarship of the last quarter century. Many wonderful books come to us through time-honored ethnographic techniques and fieldwork traditions in the discipline of anthropology. Other wonderful stories just rise up.

Here at the end of the introduction, as at the end of each chapter, I offer some suggestions about autobiographies that relate to or follow the main one of the chapter. Some are classics; others are, of course, unexpected. Some of these books really do have the power to change people's lives.

In that spirit, here are some books you might want to know about. These recommendations may be useful when you need sources of good scholarship, analysis, or critiques about the making of autobiographies.

The following are general works of interpretation and theory about autobiographies and life histories. Some are collections of scholarly articles on specific

subjects. These books are the most frequently cited in professional writings on the topic.

L. L. Langness and Gelya Frank, *Lives: An Anthropological Approach to Biography* (Novato, CA: Chandler and Sharp, 1981).

Personal Narratives Group, *Interpreting Women's Lives: Feminist Theory and Personal Narratives* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989).

Carolyn Heilbrun, *Writing a Woman's Life* (New York: Ballantine, 1989).

Ruthellen Josselson and Amia Lieblich, eds., *The Narrative Study of Lives,* vol. I (Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1993).

Amia Lieblich and Ruthellen Josselson, eds., *Exploring Identity and Gender: The Narrative Study of Lives,* vol. II (Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1994).

Carol Ramelb, ed., *Biography East and West: Selected Conference Papers* (Honolulu: East-West Center, 1989).

You may be more interested in one cultural, historical, or geographical area, so included here are some excellent informative sources.

David H. Brumale, *American Indian Autobiography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).

Arnold Krupat, ed., *Native American Autobiography: An Anthology* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1994).

Farzaneh Milani, *Veils and Words: The Emerging Voices of Iranian Women Writers* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1992).

Afsaneh Najmabadi, ed., *Women's Biographies and Autobiographies in Iran* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991).

Patricia K. Addis, *Through a Woman's I: An Annotated Bibliography of American Women's Autobiographical Writings 1946–1976* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1983).

Helen M. Buss, *Mapping Our Selves: Canadian Women's Autobiographies* (Toronto: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1993).

Estelle C. Jelinek, *The Tradition of Women's Autobiography: From Antiquity to the Present* (Boston: Twayne Women's Studies Publishers, 1986).

Here is a list of the autobiographies excerpted in *A Sounding of Women*:

Chapter 1: "The Autobiography of a Fox Indian Woman," *40th Annual Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian, 1925).

Chapter 2: Etsu Inagaki Sugimoto, *A Daughter of the Samurai* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Doran and Co., 1934).

Chapter 3: Mary de Rachewiltz, *Ezra Pound, Father and Teacher: Discretions* (New York: New Directions Press, 1971).

Chapter 4: Mary F. Smith, *Baba of Karo: A Woman of the Muslim Hausa,* with introduction and notes by M. G. Smith) (London: Faber and Faber, 1954).

Chapter 5: Oscar Lewis, Ruth M. Lewis, and Susan Rigdon, *Four Women Living the Revolution: An Oral History of Contemporary Cuba* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1977).

Chapter 6: Amiria Manutahi Stirling as told to Anne Salmond, *Amiria: The Life Story of a Maori Woman* (Auckland: A. H. & A. W. Reed, 1976).

Chapter 7: Nawal el Saadawi, *The Hidden Face of Eve: Women in the Arab World* (London: Zed Press, 1982).

Nawal el Saadawi, *Memoirs from a Women's Prison* (London: The Women's Press, 1983).

Endnotes to the Introduction

1. This quote is from an essay called "What the wind won't take away," The genesis of *Nisa — The Life and Words of a !Kung Woman.* In Personal Narratives Group, *Interpreting Women's Lives: Feminist Theory and Personal Narratives* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), 239.

2. In the introduction to L. L. Langness and Gelya Frank, *Lives: An Anthropological Approach to Biography* (Novato, CA: Chandler and Sharp, 1981), 18.

3. From the introduction to Personal Narratives Group, *Interpreting Women's Lives: Feminist Theory and Personal Narratives,* 14.

4. This quote is from the introduction to Marilyn Yalom, ed., *Efronia: An Armenian Love Story* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1993), ix.

5. See Martha Ward, *A World Full of Women* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1996).

6. From Personal Narratives Group, *Interpreting Women's Lives: Feminist Theory and Personal Narratives,* 263.

No picture or drawing of a woman named Anonymous exists. In fact, few images of women from these places or these times are available at all. Here is a drawing of Gä-hah-no, a young Seneca woman wearing a costume of the Iroquois nation. The Iroquois, the Seneca, and the Fox (Mesquakie) are also called the Eastern Woodlands peoples.

Caption and art from Lewis Henry Morgan, League of the Ho-De-No-Sau-Nee or Iroquois. *Volume II. Human Relations Area Files (New Haven, CT, 1954), frontispiece.*

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CHAPTER 1

Anonymous

"You Must Dance Vigorously"

In 1918 an ethnographer named Truman Michelson asked a Fox Indian woman to tell him her life story. She agreed to talk with the anthropologist and his two Fox field assistants on the condition that her real name not be used. They honored her request. Michelson was, in fact, only looking for a text of the Fox language for linguistic analysis. Collecting an autobiography was simply his way to insure a long sample of ordinary language.

In 1925 Michelson published the autobiography in the Annual Reports of the Bureau of American Ethnology, one part of the giant Smithsonian museum system in Washington, D.C.[1] Ironically, the Fox text matters now only to a few specialists, but the by-product, a woman's story, endures.

Translations from one language to another and from one culture to another are fraught with problems. For starters, the name "Fox" seems to be a misunderstanding. Apparently a French trading party happened upon a group of Native American men, asked their identity, and were told a clan name, "we're members of the [Renard] Clan." This was translated into English as "Fox." But the members of the group called themselves Mesquakie or "Red Earth People." When we add the difficulties of translating and interpreting between men and women, we may well wonder about the worth and validity of any autobiography acquired under such circumstances.

Reading Anonymous's story today, we have questions with no clues to answer them. What motivated her to tell her story? Why did she ask to remain forever unnamed? Anonymous is speaking at a time of great anguish for Native American peoples. The Fox or Mesquakie, along with similar Native American

groups, had farmed the prairie regions in what we now call the Midwest. They had apparently relocated there after European colonization of lands to the east created pressures to keep moving. In the decade after 1833 the U.S. government forced the agricultural Indians of Michigan, Indiana, Illinois, and Wisconsin to remove themselves west of the Mississippi river. The surviving bands of Fox moved westward to Iowa, Kansas, and finally, to Oklahoma. The reservation system, the Dawes Act of 1887, the massacre at Wounded Knee, and many harsh and punitive acts by federal bureaucracies contributed to widespread deaths, diseases, dislocation, and starvation. Alcoholism, suicide, and despair were rampant. Clans were useless to care for their members as they once had done. These were times of terrible traumas and tragedies.

Yet Anonymous utters not one word about the social or political contexts in which her life is set. She is careful to conceal not only her name, but the names of her relatives and husbands.

Instead, Anonymous talks about her first period, her first love, a baby's birth, and how she still feels about a bad husband and a husband's death. She recounts entire conversations with her long-dead mother and her mother's brother. Anonymous gives us one of the fullest and frankest stories about the start of menstruation we have in anthropology. She is secluded in a distant hut to prevent her new powers from harming anyone. Special food and water and other taboos safeguard her from her own power. Older women give her new clothes and advice she must heed. Later in the narrative, she casually mentions the indigenous forms of birth control she used. At that time European-Americans did not understand that Native American women knew how to make and use plant recipes to prevent pregnancies and regulate their menstrual cycles. They systematically regarded such practices as primitive superstitions.

By this point, however, the story sounds entirely authentic to contemporary readers. It seems to transcend the translation and the cultural circumstances of collecting it. It might well be EveryWoman's story. We have had or heard of similar experiences.

Anonymous begins her story with the importance of play in molding adult skills. She makes clothing for her dolls and puts them to work in miniature houses called *wickiups,* a bark-covered, loaf-shaped traditional house. She tends her crops in child-sized fields and gathers firewood with miniature burden straps and hatchets. Throughout her narrative, clan grandmothers, aunts, and uncles appear and give her instructions. In fact, throughout the narrative, she talks to them, argues with them, and remembers their advice as turning points in her life.

The anthropologist and the Fox men who assisted him did not question her or guide this narrative. It appears to be "self-steering." Michelson writes,