

Rethinking the Functions of Autobiographical Works: Elizabeth Nunez's *Not for Everyday Use* (2014)

自伝的作品にみる役割再考
—エリザベス・ヌニェス作『普段使いではなく』(2014)を中心に

Yuka IWASE

岩瀬 由佳

Imagination is memory.

— James Joyce

Dear Elizabeth,

*Thank you for joining with your brothers and
sisters to celebrate with us our Golden
Anniversary.*

*We trust you will always remain together as a
closeknit family caring for each other.*

May God bless you.

Mom & Dad

— *Not for Everyday Use*

The immigrant survives by forgetting....

— *Anna In-Between*

Autobiographical works have functioned as a special writing style for Caribbean writers. Elizabeth Nunez, who is an immigrant fiction writer from Trinidad and Tobago, has also relied on this type of works. In an interview with Amy Reyes, Nunez says, “I probably have been writing a memoir in all my novels, meaning that probably in all my novels I have been dealing with that sort of theme of the woman

who immigrates to the United States and what's lost, how she remains an outsider both in America and her homeland" (1). So far, she has published nine novels and a memoir. She also teaches at the City University of New York's Hunter College as a Distinguished Professor of English. Her works have won several awards.ⁱ This essay explores the functions of Elizabeth Nunez's autobiographical works with special attention being drawn to her latest memoir, *Not for Everyday Use* (2014).

1. Functions of Autobiographical Works

Lisa R. Brown notes: "In the corpus of Caribbean literature, autobiographical modes of writing serve a very important function. Prose narratives, travel narratives, fictional autobiographies, personal journals, diaries, slave narratives, community histories, biographies, autobiographical poems, memoirs, fictional biographies and one-man plays all represent points on the vast continuum of use through which Caribbean creative writers and 'real people' alike have made self-representation" (276). As Brown points out, autobiographical writing is considered to be a special tool of not only self-representation but also self-empowerment. This is particularly true for women who were suppressed under the colonialism and patriarchy of Caribbean societies, where the act of writing about their own lives was a type of creative resistance to the dominant powers. In line with this, Michelene Adams, quoting Allison Donnell's and Karen Sosnoski's arguments, also wrote that "both feminist and post-colonial thinkers see autobiography as a means of empowerment" (9) to "reconstruct the subject in an assertion of identity-based politics and theories of agency" (Donnell 125); to re-describe "their own experience instead of accepting the histories written by others" (9); and "to expand and to change a male privileged understanding of history, even a male privileged understanding of women's lived experiences" (Sosnoski 30-1). Furthermore, Adams states that "autobiography is also a means of recuperating history itself" (9). Through their life-writing, autobiographical writers can represent their individual unique histories and uncover the social conditions that influence their lives. Regarding this point, Drucilla Cornell, using Gayatri Spivak's argument, thoughtfully comments:

Representation is never simply passive. Either consciously or unconsciously, the writer is representing herself when she writes history, even when she describes herself as only recording the representations of the individuals or groups who have documented themselves such as workers cooperatives. Without this multilayered understanding of how representation operates in the attempt to write history, particularly of any group of women of a former colony, "the willed (auto)biography of the West still masquerades as

disinterested history, even when the critic presumes to touch its unconscious." (81)

Since the world she attempts to reveal through her autobiography/history simply mirrors her own experiences, it is necessary to carefully examine "how representation operates in the attempt to write history" (81). The assumption of the writer might distort the truth; however, the act of writing an autobiography is a process through which the writer seeks to represent herself and reveal the obstacles to her liberation and rights. This is not only a personal retrospection but also a strategic self-empowerment. In other words, an autobiography can serve as a creative space within which a writer can articulate their own subjectivity. In fact, unlike many women silenced in official histories, Caribbean female writers have attempted to demonstrate their subjectivity through their autobiographical writing by skillfully controlling their narrative and exploring decolonization and de-hegemonization.

2. Elizabeth Nunez's Autobiographical Works

Elizabeth Nunez's autobiographical works can be viewed as a strategic tool to make self-representation. In *Not for Everyday Use*, she states: "I think to some extent all novels are camouflaged autobiography. The facts may be inaccurate, even false, but the emotions and ideas resonate from the writer's experience, something he or she feels passionate about, ideas the writer is anxious to explore" (253). Certainly, many of Nunez's works are autobiographical; for example, *Beyond the Limbo Silence* (1998) is based on her college life in the United States, and a series of her novels, such as *Anna In-Between* (2009) and *Boundaries* (2011), are also based on her relationship with her parents.ⁱⁱ When Erika Dreifus asked her why she had written the first memoir, she responded: "I had not thought of writing memoir, but my previous two novels, *Anna In-Between* and *Boundaries*, both explored characters who were inspired by my parents and my relationship with them, and there were lingering questions about the tensions between the fictive Anna and her parents. My mother's death propelled me to confront those questions head-on. I wanted to know the demons/challenges my mother faced that caused her to be so restrained with her demonstrations of love for her children" (2).

The memoir starts with a scene where she receives a call informing her that mother is in a critical condition and ends with her mother's funeral and her father's death. The memoir tells part of her family's story, and she admits that she tried to be fair and truthful in her portrayals of her parents and siblings (Dreifus 2). Her true motivation for writing the memoir was her mother's death, which forced her to face the quiet lingering tension that had existed between them. For a long time, she had wondered whether her mother loved her, and her writing allowed her to explore her mother's life, rethink their

difficult relationship, and attempt to find a clearer understanding of who she is. Consequently, Anne McClintock also notes that “female autobiographies typically present the self as identity through relation. This relation is not one of dependency or mastery but rather of recognition, whereby disclosure of the self emerges through identification with some other, who may be a person, family or community” (314). In addition, Nunez seems to find her identity by putting a lens to her relationships with her mother and her family. In other words, for Nunez, without exploring her mother’s life and her family history in the memoir, she could have not found the path to her true identity. In an interview with Amy Reyes, she said: “While my mother was alive, it was very difficult for me to confront that tension directly. It was easier for me to conclude every one of my novels with a sort of hope and romantic version for that subject, seeing the daughter I portrayed in the novel as me. But once my mother was no longer here, I dared to face it. So I think I could only face my life directly when my mother was no longer on earth” (1). The act of writing the memoir helps her to both re-find herself through her family’s history and explore the elegiacal and healing functions of the memoir.

However, some might criticize autobiographical works because writers sell away their privacy to curious readers. According to Nunez, when she published her memoir, her sibling claimed that she could not be trusted with the family’s secrets (112). Nevertheless, she says that “I am a writer. My business is to tell everything” (112), adding that “I think it takes no little courage to open oneself to the world, to suffer the slings and arrows, so to speak, in the quest of knowing and being one’s true self” (113).ⁱⁱⁱ In a sense, she is privileged to be able to tell her story as a writer. Instead of masking her personal feelings as “the legacy of Victorian mores” (113), which the Caribbean historically mimicked, she strongly attempts to represent her subjectivity in her memoir.

In an interview with Nunez via e-mail in June 2018, she wrote to me as follows:

I doubt I’ll write another memoir. Some of my friends feel cheated that in the memoir, I left out experiences and events in my life that they were curious about. A memoir gives only a slice of life. In my memoir, my focus was mainly on my relationship with my parents, particularly with my mother. Still there is much I did not say about that relationship. I feel freer to explore sides of myself under the veil of fiction. It is in fiction, in the creation of characters that I have imagined, that I am most honest because I feel less exposed and vulnerable. Killens’s advice is not to be taken literally, of course. He was speaking about the need for the writer to be honest, to the truth.

I think all writers mine experiences from their lives to create their fiction. I point to some of our most esteemed writers, such as Philip Roth, V.S Naipaul, Alice Munro. Fiction

allows us a safe place to explore areas in our lives that we would rather not confront directly. Fiction allows us to search for the truth.

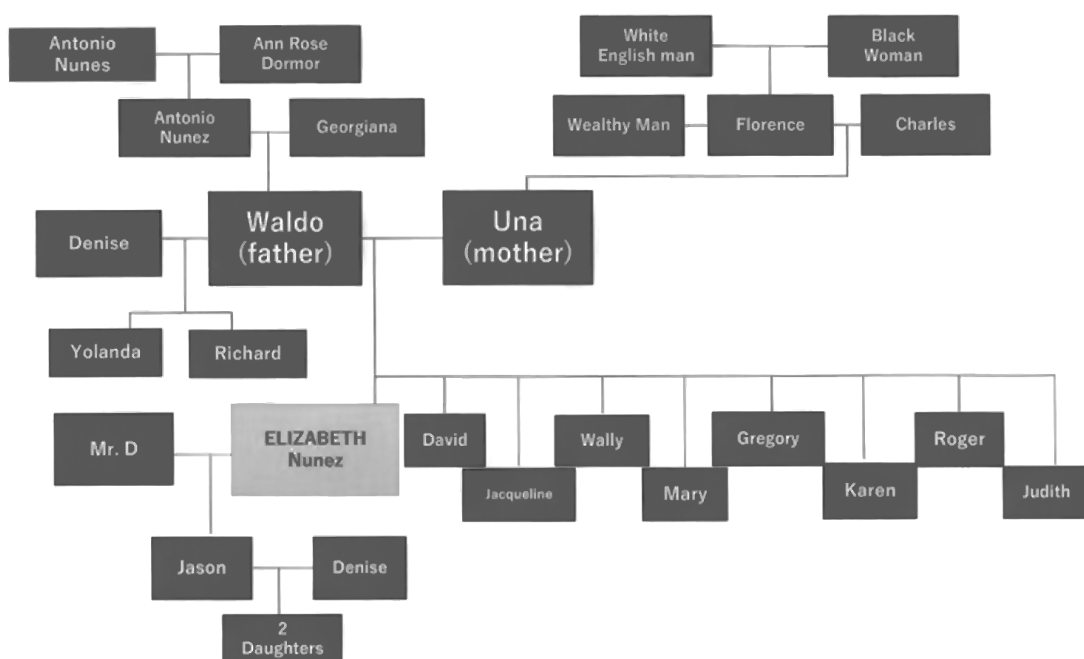
(An interview with Nunez, on 28th June 2018)

As Nunez says, writing her memoir was challenging and difficult because she had to face her “real” life directly in order to explore the truth. Although it describes only a slice of her life, she feels hurt. On the other hand, writing a fiction allows her a safe space to explore some parts of her life freely. It is very interesting that she recognizes the difference between her memoir and fiction, even though they are based on her life experiences.

3. The Nunez Family Tree

While discussing her family history in her memoir, Nunez mainly focuses on three subjects – a mother’s love, class and race – all of which were closely related to the complexities of her identity politics as a Caribbean immigrant from an ex-British colony. Weaving these subjects into her family portrait, she voices her objections to colonialism, racism and patriarchy. Sandra Pouchet Paquet argues that “Autobiography constructs multiple spaces where the private and the personal collapse into projections of a public self, where the individual is represented within the context of mutuality and commonality” (45). If I use Paquet’s argument here, it is considered that Nunez’s personal experiences, as presented in her autobiographical works, are also projected into a public self, where her family’s lives are represented within the context of mutuality and commonality.

To understand her family relationships, it is necessary to clarify the Nunez family tree [Fig 1], which I have simplified. Elizabeth Nunez’s parents are Waldo and Una. They were married for sixty-five years, until her mother’s demise at ninety years of age (in 2008); her father passed on seven months later. Their pictures are on the cover of Nunez’s memoir: as young parents in bathing suits and old parents kissing on their sixtieth wedding anniversary. Together, they raised eleven children. Finally, they belonged to the upper-middle-class of the colonial society, after rising up “the ladder of Trinidad’s high society” (77). Her father was in fact an exceptional success despite his dark skin. He was a commissioner of labor in the early 40s and occupied a managerial position with Shell Oil Company in a colonial society that “placed inordinate value on skin color” (257). As Nunez says, in the colonial society, “color was valuable currency in the colonies; it could help make you rich or poor, working class or upper class” (172). “Colorism” suggested that “shades of color rather than racial differences were more important” (Reyes 2), and was linked to the class system in the Caribbean colonies. To improve their



The Nunez Family Tree (Fig 1)

social status, people either needed light skin or higher education.

Originally, Nunez's paternal great-grandfather, Antonio Nunes, was Portuguese, and had been brought over by his father from the Madeiras to Trinidad when he was ten. He was a member of the Portuguese group "seeking their fortunes in the British West Indian colonies" (45). According to Nunez's older brother Richard, "Antonio Nunes belonged to a family of Jewish mathematicians who lived on the islands of Ibiza, which in the time of the Christian Inquisition, were a sanctuary for Jews fleeing persecution and torture" (45). His wife, Ann Rose Dormor, was an African woman and a daughter of a freed slave. Her father drove her to school by horse and buggy to give her a better education. Antonio and Ann had two clever sons: one was a successful dentist in Harlem and the other was Nunez's grandfather, Antonio Nunes/Nunez, who was a school headmaster and a forest warden in the middle of Trinidad. He changed his original name to Nunez. He was known as a promising man, who later on married to a daughter of an English man, Georgina. His marriage and higher education allowed his children to improve their social status. Georgina, Elizabeth Nunez's grandmother, was a well-cultured woman who owned a salon to entertain artists and intellectuals at her home. Nunez respects her grandmother who gave her chances to meet many intellectuals, such as Beryl McBurnie, Jan Carew, Sylvia Wynter, and Audrey Layne Jeffers.^{iv} She thinks that the experience influenced her decision to be a writer. Under the influence of their cultural family background, Nunez's father, Waldo, and "all his sisters

and brothers had graduated from the most established private secondary schools on the island" (156). Waldo's eldest brother, George, and the youngest one, Mervyn, were pilots in the Royal Air Force in England; his brother "Wilson was a famous evangelical minister in Canada, passing as a white man" (156); his sister Louis, who inherited pale skin from her English mother, "was married to the mayor of Lancashire in England" (156); his brothers, Euan and John, were civil servants; his sister, Pearl, "was married to the celebrated opera singer, composer, and actor Edric Connor" (158). He was "the first black actor to perform with the Royal Shakespeare Company in Stratford-upon-Avon" (158), and Pearl was "the first agency for artists of color in London" (158). After Edric died, she was married to Joseph Magotsi, a South African activist. The Nunezes were, as the above family tree shows, "one of the island's most distinguished families" (156).

However, Nunez's father, who was the darkest of all his siblings, was often humiliated at school and in the colonial society because of his skin color. He had overcome such color discrimination by the "sterner stuff" handed down from his ancestors. Nunez is very proud of her successful family, as she states, "But surely we have been successful. We are doctors, business executives, actuaries; one of us is a lawyer, another an entrepreneur, another a midwife. I am a professor and a writer. Surely it has served us well to be made of sterner stuff" (134). In addition, three of her brothers, David, Gregory, and Roger are physicians and her brother and sister, Richard and Judith, are actuaries. Her three sisters, Jacqueline, Mary, and Karen (a lawyer), have MBA degrees. Her eldest sister, Yolande is a nurse (a midwife). They have higher education and good careers.

The credit for her family's success should go to both her father and mother, Una, who was his second wife. His first wife, Denise, a white French Creole, passed on while giving birth to Richard, Elizabeth was the first child for her mother, Una. Her mother was a pious believer of the Roman Catholic Church and consequently became pregnant fourteen times (including almost three fatal miscarriages). According to Nunez, her mother's family background was inferior to that of her father's. Her maternal grandmother, Florence, had been very famous for her beauty; however, she married Charles, an alcoholic, after being deserted by a wealthy lover. Nunez speculates that the reason her parents had been enthusiastic about their children's education and encouraged them to study abroad was her "mother was driven to prove to the Nunezes that she could produce brilliant and successful children. Her father was driven to prove to his family that even a dark-skinned Nunez could produce brilliant and successful children" (170). Although she thinks that her parents "did what they thought was best" (138) for their children, she wondered if she was merely a trophy that they could show; just like Anna, the protagonist in *Anna In-Between*. Nunez does not know why her mother did not openly show her affection for her children. The formative experiences of Nunez's early childhood caused her to feel resentment against her mother and deepened the tensions between them. Actually, Nunez felt that she

had been abandoned twice by her mother: First was when her mother left her young six children on the island to live with her husband while he was training in London, and second was when she sent Nunez away to the United States when she was still a child.

Una's Catholic faith and Victorian middle-class values forced her to continue having children and to stay at home in the "woman's place" (137), as a wife and a mother. She had worked for the colonial government until she got pregnant with her second child and was fired following "a rule in the colonial government that married women should not be permitted to work, particularly married women with children" (118). For Nunez who "wanted to be more than a mother and a wife" (102) and sees herself as "an independent thinker, a liberal, a feminist" (143), she could not accept her mother's way of life, though she really envied her parents' long, happy marriage life.^v

Her years in the United States widened the rift between Nunez and her mother. In addition, they made her an alien in her homeland as well as in the United States. She graduated from college and began working as a caseworker with the Department of Social Service in the late 1960s. She was a legal immigrant with a green card; however, she often suffered from racial profiling. She describes the representation of immigrants in the United States as follows:

I sometimes think immigrants serve to reinforce the sense Americans – both black and white – have of their country's superiority over other nations. Immigrants, after all, are the tired, the poor, the huddled masses, the wretched refuse – stereotypes etched in the collective consciousness of Americans from words engraved on the gift from the French. Americans seem to lap up stories that perpetuate the stereotype: needy immigrants, poor immigrants, down trodden immigrants, uneducated immigrants. (152-3)

Nunez is a successful novelist and a professor living in New York; however, she has felt sorrows of an immigrant's life. Her mother might have hoped that "her children would have a chance to make their own histories, to stretch their wings, to soar" (153) overseas; however, the harsh reality of racism in the United States was beyond her mother's understanding. For Nunez, the most shocking incident took place in 1976 when her new born baby was nearly taken away from her because of the hospital's racial prejudice. They had misunderstood that she had given her baby drugs. She recollects the incident as follows: "I was a college professor at the time I had my son, but my profession, my class, counted for nothing when that young, inexperienced white doctor, carrying with him years of American history, deep-rooted prejudices that define a black man or woman as less than a white man or woman, walked into my hospital room. He didn't have to ask who I was, what I did. He simply looked at me and assumed" (203). This horrible experience mirrors the seriousness of American racism and social

position of immigrants. Nunez states that "No matter how high we may climb up the professional ladder, we will always be judged as inferior" (205). In the United States, her skin color, "butterscotch brown, deep butterscotch brown" (155), was just a stigma of inferiority that her mother in the island's upper-middle class could not understand.

The quiet tensions between Nunez and her mother were always present when her mother was still alive; however, a day before her mother was buried, Nunez suddenly had an epiphany when she found her mother's treasured collections in a glass cabinet that had only been used on special occasions. At this moment, she realized that "Like her special china, they (*I love you*) were words to be used on special occasions, not for everyday use" (244). Her mother had not directly shown her affection to her children; however, she really loved them. In her memoir, Nunez wrote the following: "Her heart was her china cabinet, it was her credenza, where she stored her love for us" (245). Nunez's family policy, "Emotions can be dangerous; they can derail you" (20), has remained in their emotional reserve.

Writing the memoir gave Nunez a special space to understand her mother, forgive her, and heal the pain caused by the tensions between them. The memoir is full of personal and inner stories that are narrated under the shadows of colonialism and the reality that immigrants face. By reconstructing her life and her family history retrospectively, she attempts to explore her identity and articulate how colonialism and racism really affected her. Writing the memoir made her face real life directly, which was sometimes painful for her; however, her private experiences projected into a public self through her memoir, evoke readers' sympathy and arguments. In this sense, her autobiographical work serves both social and interactive functions.

Notes

ⁱ For example, *Beyond the Limbo Silence* won the 1999 Independent Publishers Book Award, *Bruised Hibiscus* won the 2001 American Book Award, and *Anna In-Between* won the 2010 PEN Oakland/Josephine Miles Award.

ⁱⁱ In the memoir, she notes that "Mr. and Mrs. Sinclair, the main characters in the novel (*Anna In-Between*), are too much like my parents..." (13).

ⁱⁱⁱ She is influenced by advice from her mentor, an African American writer, John Oliver Killens: "You will not be a writer, Elizabeth, until you are willing to take off your clothes at high noon in the middle of the town square" (117).

^{iv} Beryl McBurnie was awarded the Order of the British Empire for the playhouse she founded. Audrey Layne Jeffers founded the Coterie of Social Workers, and established homes for the elderly, for the blind, for suffering women, and nurseries for babies (102-3). Jan Carew was a Guyanese novelist, and his Cuban-born wife, Sylvia Wynter, was a writer and literary critic (158).

^v Elizabeth Nunez was divorced from her husband, which caused her a great deal of distress because of her religious beliefs.

Works Cited

Adams, Michelene. "Jamaica Kincaid's *The Autobiography of My Mother*: Allegory and Self-Writing as Counter Discourse." *A Caribbean Studies Journal*, 4. 1 (2006). 10 Aug.2009. <http://anthurium.Miami.edu/volu,e_4/

issue_1/adamsjamaica.html)

- Brown, Lisa R. "Caribbean Life-Writing and Performative Liberation." *The Routledge Companion to Anglophone Caribbean Literature*. Ed. Michael A. Bucknor and Alison Donnell. London and New York: Routledge, 2011. 278-284.
- Cornell, Drucilla. *Between Women and Generations: Legacies of Dignity*. London, New York and Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2005.
- Donnell, Allison. "When Writing the Other is Being True to the Self: Jamaica Kincaid's the Autobiography of My Mother." *Women's Lives Into Print: The theory, Practice and Writing of Feminist Autobiography*. New York: St. Martin's, 199. 123-36.
- Dreifus, Erika. "An Interview with Elizabeth Nunez." 15 June 2018. <<http://www.erikadreifus.com/resources/interviews/an-interview-with-Elizabeth-nunez/>>
- Iwase, Yuka. "Talkative Daughters and Dominant Mothers in Female Autobiographies: The Cases of Drucilla Cornell and Jamaica Kincaid." *The Bulletin of the Faculty of Sociology*. Toyo University, 51. 1 (2014) 109-122.
- McClintock, Anne. *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Context*. New York and London: Routledge, 1995.
- Nunez, Elizabeth. *Anna In-Between*. New York: Akashic Books, 2009.
- . *Boundaries*. New York: Akashic Books, 2011.
- . *Not for Everyday Use*. New York: Akashic Books, 2014.
- . Interview by author. By e-mail. 28 June 2018.
- Paquet, Sandra Pouchet. *Caribbean Autobiography: Cultural and Self-Representation*. London: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2002.
- Reyes, Amy. "Interview: Elizabeth Nunez, author of 'Not for Everyday Use.'" 15 June 2018. <<http://www.miamiherald.com/entertainment/article3988956.html>>
- Sosnoski, Karen. "Autobiography." *Encyclopedia of Feminist Literary Theory*. Ed. Elizabeth Kowalesk-Wallace. New York: Garland, 1997. 30-31.

* The early version of this paper was presented at the 42th Annual Conference of Society for Caribbean Studies at Institute of Advanced Legal Studies, University of London, on 6th July 2018.

* This essay was supported by Grant-in-Aid for Scientific Research (16K02509).

【Abstract】

自伝的作品にみる役割再考
—エリザベス・ヌニェス作『普段使いではなく』(2014)を中心に

岩瀬 由佳

本稿では、旧イギリス植民地、トリニダード＝トバゴ出身のアフリカ系カリビアン作家、Elizabeth Nunez による自叙伝、『普段使いではなく』(*Not for Everyday Use* 2014)に着目し、彼女の自伝的作品に内在する文学的カウンターアプローチの戦略的手法を読み解いた。

はじめに Lisa Brown の「カリブ海地域の文学において自伝形式の作品が非常に重要な働きを担い、カリブ海地域出身の作家たちが自伝という文学様式を通じて自己表現を行ってきた」という指摘から論を発し、Micheline Adams や Drucilla Cornell らの論を援用しながら、特に、長らく植民地主義と家父長制に抑圧されてきたカリブ海地域出身の女性らにとって、自伝という表現形式がいかに自らのエンパワーメントを主張する上で有効な手段であり得てきたのかについて論じた。

次に、「ある程度、すべての小説はカモフラージュされた自伝である」と述べる Elizabeth Nunez 作品における「家族」、特に「母親」との関係性について、Amy Reyes らとの Nunez 自身のインタビュー記事をもとに、自叙伝を執筆するに至る経緯、また本作と彼女の自伝的小説との差異、また作家のプライバシー問題等に関しても論を展開した。

最後に、劇的な社会的地位上昇を遂げた Nunez 家のファミリーヒストリーをたどりながら、そこから表出されるイギリス植民地における「カラーカースト」と階級意識の問題、女性の社会的抑圧、教育と社会的地位の相関性、さらには Nunez 自身がアメリカで体験した人種差別と移民が直面する現実など、個人的で内的な語りであるはずの自伝という表現形式が、公共的かつ共感性をもって読者に投影され、触発的な相互関係を生み出しえる可能性を提示した。