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Review Of "Women's Untold Lives: Breaking Silence, Talking Back, Voicing Complexity" Edited By M. Romero And A. J. Stewart And "Telling Women's Lives: Subject/Narrator/Reader/Text" By J. Long

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Women's Untold Lives: Breaking Silence, Talking Back, Voicing Complexity. Edited by Mary Romero and Abigail J. Stewart. New York: Routledge, 1999.

Telling Women's Lives: Subject/Narrator/Reader/Text. By Judy Long. New York: New York University Press, 1999.

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For the editors of *Women's Untold Lives*, telling personal stories is a means of uncovering and speaking against structures of power. Personal stories can challenge master narratives that “subsume differences and constrictions and restrict and contain people, by supporting a power structure in which gender, class, race/ethnicity, sexuality and ability all define who matters and how” (xiii). Thus, in the editors’ eyes, such stories are “crucial work of social transformation” (xiii).

Despite the imposition of a single framework, the collection runs the epistemological gamut. Many authors take their subjects’ stories to be realist representations—that is, straightforward accounts of what “really” happened. Others move ahead to problematize those stories by peering down the rifts among event, experience, and narration. Some take “master narrative” to mean little more than “stereotype,” while others embrace the richer and more complex Foucauldian rendering of the term. Most of the authors “disappear” themselves from their texts, but a few (such as P. J. McGann) offer a nuanced consideration of how their own sympathies and interests intertwine with those of their subjects to give shape to the account. Some authors seem to presume that they and their subjects (but not their readers) float free of the spell of master narratives; others acknowledge that they do not. (For instance, Marixsa Alicea and Jennifer Friedman note that Millie, a heroin-addicted mother, devises a self-portrait that refuses the cultural derogation of “drug-addicted mothers,” yet she remains enmeshed within the class-bound ideology of a good mother.) A few authors note that feminist scholarship has come to have its own master narratives. (Consider the overworked notion of feminine care and connection, as totalizing as it is tedious.) All the authors are careful to accord agency to the women about whom they write. (Another feminist master narrative?) A few authors go further to acknowledge that a women’s agency extends to deciding what she will divulge to a researcher. (Amy Schulz, Paye Knoki, and Ursula Knoki-Wilson break down the researcher-subject distinction by collaborating on Faye’s story.)

Women's Untold Lives could be used as a supplementary text for an introductory women's studies class. Most of the stories are written without theoretical flourishes or disciplinary terminology, so they are suitable for beginning undergraduates. The collection highlights the variety and complexity of the lives of women in the United States. Moreover, the stories forcefully demonstrate that prevailing views of social life cover up many aspects of women's experience. Making women visible alters our understanding of history, social life, and ourselves as social actors.

In their introduction, Mary Romero and Abigail Stewart describe the process by which the collection was born. The contributors met initially as participants in a colloquy on life history research and then reconvened on two more occasions to continue the conversations that led to the volume. I wish that Romero and Stewart had described the substance of these meetings as well as the process. What collective ideas about methods of life history research emerged? Did the group grapple with issues of representation, such as how to avoid making their subjects into exotic spectacles or rendering them as exemplars of their "kind?" Did they debate the merits of approaching their interview material as data (i.e., givens) rather than as narrative? Did they collectively consider and set aside the panoply of current interpretive theories and methods (e.g., psychodynamic theory, narratology, Bakhtinian theory, discursive psychology, or phenomenological analysis)?

Judy Long's discussion of women's life narratives takes up where *Women's Untold Lives* leaves off. Long, a professor emerita of sociology at Syracuse University, developed *Telling Women's Lives* in the course of teaching a graduate seminar, and it is a fine contribution to advanced feminist pedagogy in the social sciences. Long opens her book with an examination of the multiple social shapings of women's autobiography. What conventions of autobiographical storytelling do women adopt, whether by compulsion or choice? What positionings are available to women writers? What are the dynamics of the social production of obscurity—that is, the processes that have so often rendered women's lives and women's writing invisible, unintelligible, or insignificant?

Long brings forward the life stories of many different women (especially women from working-class and impoverished backgrounds). Thus we hear about Boxcar Bertha (a hobo of the 1930s), alta (a poet and a welfare mother), Carolina de Jesus (a Brazilian *favela* dweller), as well as Margaret Cavendish, Anaïs Nin, and Barbara McClintock. Long balances her account of women's diversity against a view of all women as similarly positioned in the gender hierarchy. For Long, women share "deep commonalities" (7) that cut across history, geography, social class, and culture. Long reads women's autobiographies as sharing distinctively feminine

hallmarks of dailiness, connection, emotion work, and relationship work. Women writers, she asserts, all face conflicts between self-display and feminine modesty and decorum, between the pleasure of self-expression and the penalties for self-assertion.

Long's nuanced efforts to recognize both sameness and difference among women stand in stark contrast to her rather blunt account of women's difference from men. For Long, the gender divide involves profound separateness and incommensurability. She argues that women's experiences are so alien that men cannot understand their stories. Women, she says, cannot tell their lives in male language. Instead, they discourse in a language foreign to men, writing in codes that only women readers can decipher. Whether critics, writers, readers, or social researchers, men seem unable to comprehend women and are uninterested in doing so. Long seldom tempers her generalizations about men with an acknowledgment of individual differences: men are just men. Blanket generalizations about men are not uncommon in feminist scholarship, but are they warranted? And do all women necessarily understand and sympathize with one another, even across lines of difference demarcated by ethnicity, nation, generation, and class?

The second part of Long's book turns to life-telling by social scientists. Rereading three classic life histories of women, she unearths the gendered dimensions of the researchers' understanding of their female subjects' lives, as well as conflicts over authority and authorship. Long calls for a feminist reconfiguration of the social researcher. Noting that social science writing requires researchers to "disappear" themselves, she recasts the researcher as a narrator who figures in the text as a visible and active presence. Long also challenges standards of objectivity that demand distance, detachment, impersonality, and "value-freedom." Instead, she calls for researcher-subject relationships that involve empathic connection, parity, collaboration, and the researcher's imaginative immersion in the subject's world. By juxtaposing social science life-telling and autobiographical writing, Long puts scientific accounts on a parallel with other kinds of stories. Social science thus becomes one of many meaning-making activities in the culture, not a privileged form of truth telling that stands apart from culture.

This slender volume traverses a broad swath of feminist scholarship of the 1970s and 1980s, with an occasional nod to the 1990s. At times, the perspectives of this scholarship seem a bit dated. Nonetheless, with several hundred citations, *Telling Women's Lives* identifies veins of feminist work too rich to be left behind. It is a pleasure to revisit this work, particularly when it is interpreted by a scholar who is both a fine thinker and an elegant writer. I