

Brazier, Jana Evans. 2009. *Caribbean Genesis: Jamaica Kincaid and the Writing of New Worlds*. Albany: SUNY Press. 237 pp.

Life-writing studies-criticism devoted to texts that record personal memories and experiences, such as autobiographies and memoirs-is a continuously growing field. In May 2009, the major conference “The Work of Life-Writing,” co-organized by King’s College in London and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, attracted many of the most prominent scholars in the field and participants expressed a great deal of enthusiasm about the future of life-writing studies. A new study which contributes significantly to this field is Jana Evans Brazier’s *Caribbean Genesis*. In this study, Brazier employs the term “alterbiography” to theorize “alternative, destabilizing antiforms of life writing” (8). Through a study of Antiguan-American writer Jamaica Kincaid, whom Brazier positions in a Caribbean and postcolonial context, Brazier develops the concept of alterbiography to account for texts that “alter the traditional conceptualizations of [life-writing’s] constitutive elements—*bios*, *graphie*—creatively and relationally refiguring both elements” (8). The term both describes and is defined by Kincaid’s texts. Brazier argues that Kincaid “challenges the presumed insularity and discreteness of the autobiographical form, opening it to representations of alterity: through *alterbiography*, Kincaid powerfully writes other into self, biography into autobiography, annihilation into creation, and death into life” (3). Thus, in Brazier’s definition, alterbiography is a critical tool for altering our understanding of the genre of autobiography, and for showing how genealogy, genesis, and genocide affect Kincaid’s use of genre.

The study consists of six analytical chapters, each centering on a full-length text or short story by Jamaica Kincaid. Brazier’s work can thus be seen as a solid contribution to Kincaid scholarship. This contribution is somewhat uneven, however. Although the promotion of the book promises an exploration of Kincaid’s entire oeuvre, several texts are largely absent from the discussion, such as *A Small Place* (1988) and *My Garden (book)*: (1999), whereas two long chapters are devoted to a short story each, which makes the study feel somewhat imbalanced in scope. The chapters also deal with topics that vary quite significantly. For example, in chapter one, Brazier argues that Kincaid’s short story “Blackness” contests the negative Western connotations of

blackness, while in the last chapter, she insightfully discusses how the fictionalized biography *Mr Potter* functions as Kincaid's autobiography, and thus blurs the boundary between biography and autobiography. In addition, Braziel's study sometimes conflates the challenges Kincaid's alterbiographic texts pose to the genre of autobiography and those they pose more generally to Western norms and conceptions. Kincaid's radical treatment of history, family relations, and race, for example, are well documented themes in her work, but how these themes affect genre is not always clearly elucidated.

Still, the concept of alterbiography has great potential. Most terms launched to describe alternative and contesting forms of classic autobiography have been constructed through the substitution of one of its three constitute elements—autos, bios, or graphe—for another word that emphasizes an aspect central in that particular writing, such as the term “autogynography,” which emphasizes women's shared experience and expression of their life story. When Braziel examines existing terms and aims to show how alterbiography differs from these, she focuses on, and critiques, the elision of constitutive elements of the word autobiography in these terms. For example, while Braziel pays some homage to the term “autoethnography,” she resists it because of its elision of the element bios. While she herself replaces auto with alter, Braziel assures her readers that *she* in no way intends an elision of the autos, the self. This slightly paradoxical reasoning unfortunately obscures some of alterbiography's usefulness and its demarcation from other terms. That said, I think that alterbiography has a very interesting potential for scholars of life-writing and postcolonial literature, as it describes destabilizing literary practices, especially autobiographical practices, without essentializing the experience and life-writing. It avoids the pitfalls of other terms such as autogynography, which risks implying that there is only one type of life-writing through which women express themselves. Alterbiography thus signifies a text which challenges the norms of classic autobiography, without attempting to firmly fix a label on what the author of alterbiography does instead. Curiously, Braziel's “neological[]” term alterbiography (14) is, in fact, not a neologism at all—the term was used by Eugene L. Stelzig in *Herman Hesse's Fiction of the Self* (1988), where he proposes that a text which “misrepresents” a life might be called alterbiography (including texts where the autobiographer distorts his/her life narrative unconsciously). Stelzig's

discussion was briefly referred to in *Touching the World: Reference in Autobiography* (1992) by Paul John Eakin, one of the most prominent scholars of autobiography. While it is not a very well-known reference, it is thus not a completely obscure one either. Regardless, I think that Braziel's definition of the term has more potential in contemporary criticism than Stelzig's, as the mere possibility of accurate representation in autobiography is now routinely contested. Braziel's ideas doubtlessly have potential, and it will be very exciting to see how other critics—those interested in life-writing, in postcolonial literature, and in Jamaica Kincaid—will develop them, especially the intriguing concept of alterbiography.

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