

Zeitschrift: SPELL : Swiss papers in English language and literature
Herausgeber: Swiss Association of University Teachers of English
Band: 42 (2023)

Artikel: Introduction : telling stories, writing lives
Autor: Austenfeld, Thomas / Zurbrügg, Aurélie
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-1046379>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

Download PDF: 06.08.2025

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

THOMAS AUSTENFELD & AURÉLIE ZURBRÜGG
UNIVERSITY OF FRIBOURG

Introduction: Telling Stories, Writing Lives

Telling Stories

Storytelling can be a matter of life and death. Joan Didion opens her 1979 essay “The White Album” with the line, “We tell ourselves stories in order to live” (11). Our orientation in time and space depends on our ability to narrate the temporal sequence of events and thus turn chronology into causality. This activity is necessarily selective and creative. Stories are integral to North American cultures. European-American writers perfected the short story genre into a preeminent American literary form, but storytelling is equally at the heart of North American Indigenous, African American, and Asian American literatures. A wide range of American non-fiction, from sermons to slave narratives and from essays to autobiographies and memoirs, is fashioned largely in story form. Public monuments claim to tell a certain story in a public place: that story is currently hotly contested. American storytelling is constitutive of American identity and, hence, a fraught activity.

American history—the story of its storytelling—is, among many other things, also a history of empire, suppression, oppression, and dispossession. Though much research and analysis has rendered speakable what formerly remained unspoken, to paraphrase Toni Morrison’s searing formulation (Morrison 176), stories of voices silenced, authorship coopted, and narratives erased still remain. Storytelling is never disinterested. It is intentional, subversive, political, and ideological. When the Puritans sought to re-enact and continue the story of Israel’s salvation, alternative interpretations of history were foreclosed. When Mary Rowlandson’s captivity narrative was shaped for theological purposes by Increase Mather, providence trumped pain. When the story of American progress is interrupted, what takes its place? When heteronormativity is no longer the only story, what potential opens up? How has digital communication changed our view of story and storytelling, as well as of authorship and authority? Does narrative form predispose narrative outcome? How do American novels thematize national moral outrage in the guise of person-

al moral quandaries and stories of conflict and growth—exemplified as much in Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* as in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*?

Participants in the Biennial Conference of the Swiss Association for North American Studies (SANAS), which took place at the University of Fribourg, Switzerland, in November 2022, were invited to ponder these questions, and they responded creatively, as the selection of essays in this volume indicates. The question “Who Tells Your Story?” is not sufficient, inasmuch as the ability to tell is closely related to living, dying, and being memorialized.

Writers who choose to tell a story will be questioned about their authority to do so. In a recent review of United States author Gayl Jones's 2021 novel *Palmares*, a fictionalized history of a refuge in Brazil for formerly enslaved persons who built their own community, known as a *marronage*, Larry Rother reminds us that there exists

a certain sense of proprietary self-esteem associated with *Palmares* that could make it risky for a foreigner to take up the story. How might Americans react if a Brazilian were to write a novel about the Underground Railroad? [...] To whom does a story belong, and who has the right to tell it? (Rother)

Rother raises the topical question of narrative authority. As a result of the relatively recent democratization of what is spoken, readers, scholars, and publishers have a fresh obligation to pay particular attention to the identity of the speakers whose voices they promote. The controversy that followed the publication of Jeanine Cummins's *American Dirt* (2019) illustrates how a formerly silenced community's reaction to a novel can influence its global reception. In the wake of Myriam Gurba's incendiary review of *American Dirt*, the rejection of Cummins's novel went beyond the Latinx community. In her review, Gurba questions Cummins' right to write about—and profit from—the experience of Mexican immigrants. She accuses the white American author of “deciding that her incompetent voice merited amplification” and asks Cummins “Why do you want to tell this story?” (Gurba). Readers and critics are still working out the manner in which such discussions are conducted. Not every story belongs to every writer. Narrative authority remains contested terrain.

Narratology and discourse theory can unlock the question of authority in storytelling in the wide range of works that tell and reflect upon their own telling. The nine essays in this volume engage the questions of narratorial power and narratorial ethics head-on. Chimamanda Ngozi Adich-

ie's claim that "[p]ower is the ability not just to tell the story of another person, but to make it the definitive story of that person" could serve as epigraph for the essays in this volume that discuss how the study of narrative voice is indivisible from that of power. In a time of national reckoning with the history of suppressed voices in the United States, these essays continue the conversations, begun at the conference, about rethinking narrative, authorship, presumed and coopted authority, voice, point of view, persuasion, political discourse, and the general human need to make sense, in the shape of a story, of the seemingly random events that occur every day.

"Who Lives, Who Dies, Who Tells Your Story?"

The three questions that shape Lin-Manuel Miranda's revolutionary musical, *Hamilton*, help structure this essay collection (Miranda 120). They are uttered twice: once in Act One, when George Washington reminds Alexander Hamilton of how little control one has over one's own destiny—"You have no control. / Who lives, who dies, who tells your story" (120)—and a second time in the finale, when Eliza Hamilton echoes Washington's concerns after her husband's death (281). Miranda describes this line as "the key to the whole musical. [...] It's the fundamental truth all our characters (and all of us) share" (120). Because of their respective positions in the musical, the questions establish a frame within which the historical characters tell their individual stories and the story of the beginning of the United States. The tripartite quality of the interrogation postulates a correlation between the inevitability of life and death, the characters' need for their stories to be passed on, and the difficulty in controlling how their story will be transmitted. By combining these questions, Miranda seems to invite us to challenge the apparent separation between life as lived and life as narrated. The fictionalized historical characters' wish for their stories to become History is so strong that it guides their actions. When Eliza Hamilton asks, "Have I done enough? Will they tell my story?" (281), she suggests that only some lives will be turned into stories, and she also raises the question of who will tell them. Eliza's grammatical shift from the first-person pronoun "I" to an anonymous third-person plural pronoun "they" indicates her loss of authority over her own story. However much she does, she cannot control her story.

If, as Miranda asserts, “[h]istory is entirely created by the person who tells the story” (33), then the discussion of what entitles one to tell a story can become just as important as the discussion of the narrative itself. Today, the analysis of the power structures that influence the production of a story has become an integral part of the study of discourse. This focus on agency and context implies the ethical question of whose voices deserve to be heard. As James Phelan and Peter Rabinowitz put it in their introduction to *A Companion to Narrative Theory*, “[n]arrative theory, over the years, has become increasingly concerned with historical, political, and ethical questions” (2). In current studies of discourse and narrative, then, scholars are as interested in the contextual structures that define the purpose of stories as they are in the content of the narratives. In other words, recent publications—this volume included—concentrate on *who* gets to tell stories, *how* these stories are told, and *why* they are told.

As a result of this approach to literature through discourse, as the essays in this collection illustrate, the diversity of voices that are granted readerly and scholarly attention reflect the prolific heterogeneity of the American literary scene. This democratic engagement with narrative analysis is also an invitation to tell, or retell, the stories of those who have been silenced for centuries. In *Memorial Drive*, Natasha Trethewey points out how subjective the differentiation can be between “what is remembered [...] and what is not” (10). In a manner that somewhat answers Eliza Hamilton’s fictional question—“Will they tell my story?”—writers like Trethewey remember those who have traditionally been forgotten and redefine which stories ought to be told and how they should be told.

The Essays

The structure of the collection is inspired by the threefold question that is at the heart of *Hamilton*: “Who lives, who dies, who tells your story?” (Miranda 120). In Section One, the essays revolve around those who live. These essays offer invaluable insight into the theoretical approach to the study of the subjects whose lives are at hand. The section opens with Philipp Schweighauser’s “A Self-Made Slave: Cultural Techniques in Olaudah Equiano’s *Interesting Narrative*.” Schweighauser challenges the traditional debate about fiction and reality in Equiano’s text by studying instead the role of ‘cultural techniques’ in Equiano’s life and writings. Next, in “Talk-story and Storytelling between China and America in Maxine Hong Kingston’s *Family Memoirs*,” Francesca de Lucia considers the

Chinese form of storytelling called ‘talk-story.’ Kingston combines ‘talk-story’ with American story-telling traditions to create a unique form of Chinese American literature. In “California Chaos and a Crisis of Storytelling in America,” Sofia Baliño examines Joan Didion’s and Eve Babitz’s fiction. Baliño shows how the two writers contributed to the creation of what Baliño calls ‘inter-state’ literature, a form of fiction that oscillates between order and chaos and that is distinctly connected with the state of California.

Section Two shifts the focus to those who die and whose stories live on. The essays assembled there engage with the contemporary discursive shift by emphasizing the objects of stories rather than their subjects. They exemplify how destructive power structures can be, and how the redefinition of authority can lead to novel results in literary studies. In “Tautological Revisions: Colson Whitehead’s *The Nickel Boys* and the Construction of Black Life,” Matthew Scully employs and expands the trope of tautology to demonstrate how a rhetorical tool can blur the line between those who live and those who die. Studying Whitehead’s use of tautology in *The Nickel Boys*, Scully shows how ‘counter-tautology’ can offer an escape from the structures that generate anti-Black racism. Next, in “White Masculinity and the Performance of Authorial Failure in Mark Z. Danielewski’s *House of Leaves*,” Andrin Albrecht examines the evolution of stereotypes of white masculinity in *House of Leaves*. Danielewski’s narrative rejects the classic conception of heroism as defined by a refusal of failure and instead adopts a new model of masculinity that relies on the acceptance of failure. Corin Kraft investigates how the South can literally kill, and how dead bodies can become the wellspring of discourse nonetheless. In Jesmyn Ward’s memoir, *Men We Reaped*, dead bodies tell the story of what it means to be Black in the U.S. South. Ward’s memoir articulates the racist body politics that is responsible for the five men’s deaths.

Section Three looks to the future of narrative and discourse studies. It is centered around those voices that are no longer silenced and who can now tell their stories. This section begins with “*What Judges Your Story? Moral Deixis and Readerly Orientation*” by Deborah Madsen, Aïcha Bouchelaghem, Kimberly Frohreich, and Caroline Martin. In their collaborative essay, the authors explore how deictic markers may provide readers with moral and ethical direction through four case studies: Alice Walker’s “Am I Blue?” (Madsen), Harriet Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (Bouchelaghem), Octavia Butler’s *Lilith’s Brood* (Frohreich), and Mary Wilkins Freeman’s “Louisa” (Martin) each shape their respect-

ive readers' ethical expectations and channel their responses through deictic markers that transport implicit value judgments. In her essay "Elizabeth Bishop's 'The Riverman': A Story of Appropriation and of Vocation," Anindita Sempere challenges Bishop's knowledge of the Amazon and the poet's right to tell the story of Satiro, the speaker of "The Riverman." In conclusion, E. Nastacia Schmoll's "Indigiqueer Reimaginings of Science Fiction" looks at ways in which to imagine the future of Indigiqueer fiction. Schmoll examines how Indigiqueer authors, including Kai Minosh Pyle (Métis/Baawiting Nishnaane) and Gabriel Castilloux Calderon (Mi'kmaq/Algonquin) both use and challenge the genre of science fiction.

The story of storytelling will continue as long as human beings speak. For the editors, working on this volume has brought home, once again, the recognition that our field of study, conventionally considered a part of "The Humanities," really is all about human interaction and human exchange, even as artificial intelligence begins to encroach upon us. Storytelling makes us what we are. Aurélie Zurbrügg and Thomas Austenfeld would like to thank the knowledgeable peer reviewers who assisted in the choice of essays for inclusion (you know who you are!) and would like to express their particular appreciation to Tammy Imboden, copy-editor for this volume, and to Ina Habermann, SPELL's General Editor, for their professionalism and their collegial support.

References

- Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi. “The Danger of a Single Story.” *TED*, Jul. 2009. [ted.com/talks/chimamanda_ngozi_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story?language=en](https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_ngozi_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story?language=en). Accessed 15 Jun. 2023.
- Didion, Joan. “The White Album.” *The White Album*. Simon & Schuster, 1979.
- Gurba, Myriam. “Pendeja, You Ain’t Steinbeck: My Bronca with Fake-Ass Social Justice Literature.” *Tropics of Meta: Historiography for the Masses*, 12 Dec. 2019, tropicsofmeta.com/2019/12/12/pendeja-you-aint-steinbeck-my-bronca-with-fake-ass-social-justice-literature/. Accessed 24 Nov. 2020.
- Miranda, Lin-Manuel and Jeremy McCarter. *Hamilton: The Revolution*. Grand Central Publishing, 2016.
- Morrison, Toni. “Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature.” *The Source of Self-Regard: Selected Essays, Speeches, and Meditations*. Alfred A. Knopf, 2019, pp. 161–97.
- Phelan, James and Peter J. Rabinowitz, editors. *A Companion to Narrative Theory*. Blackwell Publishing, 2005.
- Rother, Larry. “An Eternal Symbol of Black Resistance.” *The New York Review of Books*, 23 Jun. 2022, [nybooks.com/articles/2022/06/23/an-eternal-symbol-of-black-resistance-gayl-jones/](https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2022/06/23/an-eternal-symbol-of-black-resistance-gayl-jones/). Accessed 4 Jul. 2023.
- Trethewey, Natasha. *Memorial Drive: A Daughter’s Memoir*. Bloomsbury Publishing, 2020.

