

**Ben-Amos, Bashteva, and Dan Ben-Amos, editors. *The Diary: The Epic of Everyday Life*, Indiana UP. 2020, 492 pp.**

## **A MULTIETHNIC PERSPECTIVE ON DIARY WRITING: FROM THE SPIRITUAL DIARIES TO THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY**

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*The Diary: The Epic of Everyday Life* is a comprehensive collection that takes on the task of charting diary studies historically and theoretically, discussing the function of diaries in different societies from a global perspective throughout time. The editors, Batsheva Ben-Amos, professor of Comparative Literature at the University of Pennsylvania, and Dan Ben-Amos, Professor of Folklore and Comparative Literature at the same university, outline their ambition as “to bring together some of the best of this research and offer an account of the form in its social, historical, and cultural-literary contexts with its own distinctive features, poetics, and rhetoric” (2020, 2). While addressing personal diaries, the authors explore different diary categories—such as spiritual diaries, travel diaries, confessional diaries, and online diaries—and their inevitable intersections, meeting the context of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and the relationship between diaries, diarists and modern technologies, concurrently inquiring how these technologies have affected both the genre and research on the field. Standing out from previous anthologies, focused on diaries written in North America and Europe, the collection focuses on the diary as a multiethnic genre, and a practice mainly related to literacy, and not necessarily to the development of a modern Western idea of selfhood, as defended by scholars such as Peter Heehs (2013, 4). The collection is organized in seven thematic strands that reaffirm the interdisciplinarity of diary studies and approach the diary as a transcultural practice: “Diary theories”, “The Creation of a Diary Canon”, “The Transformation of the Manuscript”, “The Travel Diary”, “The Private Diary”, “The Diary in Political Conflict”, and “Online Diaries”.

Part one, the theoretical core of the anthology, is composed of three chapters that reflect on the nature of the diary. Translated into English for the first time, the opening chapter, by Catherine Bogaert and the renowned scholar of autobiography

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Philippe Lejeune, discusses modern diary writing in France. Thinking about the practice from a contemporary vantage point, the authors stress the role of literacy in the establishment of the genre—an argument reiterated by different scholars throughout the collection. Lejeune and Bogaert affirm that although it is exceedingly difficult to outline a common profile to all diarists, diaries are utterly linked to dailiness. In one of the strongest chapters of the collection, Kathryn Carter provides an overview of feminist scholarship on diary writing—notably the psychoanalytic and the historical materialistic schools—and, inviting race and class to the forefront, proposes an intersectional methodology for the study of women’s diaries. Last, starting from a discussion on Alison Bechdel’s *Fun Home*, Julie Rak follows Lejeune and Bogaert’s defense of the diary as a trace, and not a final product. From this point, Rak theorizes the diary as source material for other forms of life writing and evaluates the contributions of diary studies to autobiography studies more broadly.

From a historical angle, part two delineates the intersection of diaries and canon formation as well as the construction of diary canons in England, North America, French-speaking countries, and Brazil. Dan Doll deals with the establishment of a diary tradition in England. Dating back to the sixteenth century, with the spiritual diaries, Doll produces an overview of diary keeping practices. In a similar manner, Michel Braud narrates the emergence of the diary in France and French-speaking countries, where the tradition of the *journal intime* had become popular in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, but would only flourish in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with the publication of diaries kept by World War II soldiers and professional writers. Steven E. Kagle covers the construction of a diary canon in North America, from the spiritual diaries kept by members of religious communities to the 20<sup>th</sup> century diaries kept by literary authors and used to record their creative processes. Sergio Barcellos moves to lesser explored territory to delineate the history of diaries in Brazil, from Informational Literature to the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The author’s contribution is extremely relevant to the collection, as it is the only chapter discussing diaries in South America, as well as to diary studies in Brazil. This corroborates the fact that diaries are still relatively understudied in the country. Furthermore, the context of diaries in Brazil differs significantly from those of England, France, and the United States, especially due to the high illiteracy rates, which in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in 1920, reached astounding 65% in the population of 15 years or over (INEP 2021, 6).

A condensed section, “The Transformation of the Manuscript” comprises two chapters that deal exclusively with the materiality of manuscripts and archives, and the methodologies of diary publication, reaching the very recent discussion of digitized archives. In chapter “The complicated Publication History of the Diary of Anne Frank”, Suzanne L. Bunkers reflects about the processes of edition and selection that take place between the manuscripts and the published editions. Drawing the attention to the physicality of the manuscripts, the author stresses that in conditions such as those Anne Frank endured, the material contingencies shaping the writing of the diary should also be considered by critics and readers. In

her inspiring chapter “Digitized Diary Archives”, Desirée Henderson explores the potentials and limitations of the paradigmatic change in diaries studies caused by the digitization of archives. Digitization not only makes documents more accessible to a broader readership, it also allows readers to access some of the diaries’ material features. Henderson lists as shortcomings for the archives of digitized diary manuscripts the difficulty in finding these manuscripts via search engines. She, however, also offers methodological solutions, including the need for collaboration around the production of digitized diaries.

Inaugurating a shift from theoretical discussions to analyses of different categories of diaries, the fourth part of the collection concentrates on the investigation of travel diaries, considering their literary and historical contributions. In “British and North American Travel Writing and the Diary”, Tim Youngs considers the influence of travel diaries in retrospective travel narratives, asserting that the sense of immediacy ascribed to the diary invests the narrative with a sense of authenticity. While Youngs covers travel diaries from missionaries, scientists and adventurers, Agnieszka Sobocinska’s interests lie on tourists’ travels. On her analysis of diaries kept by Australians of European descent on overseas journeys predominantly over the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Sobocinska presents an overall picture of how the travel diaries were used to articulate the negotiation of Australian identity in relation to the country’s colonial ties to England. Differently from the previous chapters in the section, which deal almost exclusively with diaries from travels abroad, James M. Haggert, in “Travel Diaries from Imperial China” examines travel diaries kept by government officials, on their bureaucratic journeys, and travel writers. These records were essentially public and took place between the 9<sup>th</sup> and the 20<sup>th</sup> century, mostly inside Chinese territory.

In Part Five the authors elaborate on diaries that, although not necessarily intended for publication, were eventually made public, and those kept by diarists who had an audience in mind, but even so recorded personal events from private life. Françoise Simonet-Tenant’s study surveys the reception of diaries in France. Narrating the diary’s return to favor after World War II, Simonet-Tenant highlights the potentials of the genre in terms of aesthetical innovation and addresses the emergence of diaries as subject of study in the fields of history, sociology, and literature. Bringing the discussion to the context of Palestine, Kimberly Katz explores the diary as a narrative of the self and as a narrative of historical interest. She analyzes the diaries of two young Palestinian men who lived the two World Wars, to enable a historical gaze from the vantage point of those voices that have been silenced by official discourses. Dealing with an audience of close friends and family, Marilyn Motz explores how diaries of nineteenth-century US American and Canadian diarists worked as a tool to develop intimacy among family members and couples. Elizabeth Podnieks’ chapter changes the focus to professional writers in Britain, Canada and the US who were recognized diarists, such as Virginia Woolf, Alice Dunbar-Nelson and Anaïs Nin. Negotiating the public and private spheres, these diarists shared intimate feelings and personal life in their entries, as well as used them to keep track of work and to experiment with literature.

“The Diary in Political Conflict” is among the strongest sections in the book, and explores the diary’s political dimension, for in the contexts of war and conflict analyzed throughout the section, keeping a diary was sometimes a tactic for surviving. Discussing narrative and experience in World War I, Leonard V. Smith analyzes the diaries of three French soldiers who also wrote in other genres. Meeting the context of American Civil war, Kimberly Harrison’s chapter explores diaries kept by Confederate Southern women. Most surviving diaries from this period come from elite women precisely because they were literate. They used their entries for coping with harsh situations, negotiating the roles of Confederate patriots and Southern ladies, and justifying the institution of slavery. Literacy enables a reverse gaze in the diary of the Nama leader Hendrik Witbooi, as presented by Elizabeth R. Baer. The revolutionary leader used his diary and letters—which compose the archive analyzed by Baer in her chapter—to register his struggle against the yoke of German Colonization. Still on the issue of diaries and subjectivity, Jochen Hellbeck’s chapter discusses the topic in the context of the Stalin era. Contrary to scholars’ belief, diaries were rather popular during the period, regardless of the risks. The chapters by Leena Kurvet-Käosaar and Batsheva Ben-Amos form a dialogue with Hellbeck’s text. Kurvet-Käosaar examines the deportation diary of Erna Nagel, an Estonian woman sent to Siberia during the first wave of Soviet mass deportation. Nagel risked her life by keeping a diary, but at the same time, it gave her a space to cope with deportation, helping her to retain her sanity and humanity. Also stressing the testimonial value of diaries, Ben-Amos highlights the specificity of those written by Holocaust victims and defends a methodological approach centered on the personal aspects of these texts and their emotional undertones, establishing a relation between language and recurring themes.

The last part of the collection concentrates on the more recent developments in the field of diary studies: the transformations brought about by the internet. Online diaries and their shifting borders problematize the private and intimate features of the genre, including a broader audience who may even actively participate. Kylie Cardell’s “From Puritans to Fitbit” compare John Beadle’s 17<sup>th</sup> century guide on how to keep a spiritual diary to contemporary how-to diaries. Cardell notes a relation of continuity to the extent that from puritan diaries to technological devices, such as Fitbit, that keep track of one’s personal information day by day, there is an underlying narrative toward self-improvement. The influence of diaries in digital devices extends to webpages and apps as well, and the remaining chapters deal exclusively with online diaries. Jill Walker Rettberg’s report on the early history of online diaries point to the initial opposition between online diaries and blogs, which by the early 2000s became blurred. Rettberg explores how technology shaped online diaries, whether through page’s templates and limited numbers of characters per text or by systems based on metrics and engagement. Lena Buford discusses methodological difficulties in dealing with online diaries, such as their quantification and categorization, especially in face of their ephemerality. Lastly, James Baker study of Geocities, a community-oriented web hosting service from the 1990s, raises important questions concerning methodology and ethics in online diaries’ research: before web 2.0 and the development of search

engines, it was easier to maintain privacy and anonymity online, which puts to question the indiscriminate use of online diaries as public documents.

The book's broad purpose is assuredly met, and the chapters illustrate the contributions of diary studies' scholarship to the auto/biography studies and in a larger scale to the humanities, as remarked on by Desirée Henderson in chapter nine. Furthermore, the work gains a new importance in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, as the widespread consciousness of living a historical moment has led to the multiplication of pandemic diaries<sup>1</sup> and archives gathering those diaries<sup>2</sup> worldwide. Considering the work's multiethnic approach to the genre, the caveat is perhaps the still comparatively larger number of chapters centered on European and North American diaries. Notwithstanding, the editors found an interesting balance among more explored grounds and relatively unmapped territories, such as the discussions involving the digitization of diary manuscripts and the question of the digital diaries. Proposing new readings and pointing to new possibilities of addressing this complex and shifting genre, the collection is extremely relevant for both experienced scholars in the field of diary studies, and students interested in the area.

#### Notes

1. See: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/30/style/coronavirus-diaries-social-history.html>; <https://bookriot.com/the-importance-of-pandemic-diaries/>; <https://www.wired.com/story/archiving-covid-19-blm-protest-history/>; and <https://www.blogdacompanhia.com.br/conteudos/visualizar/Diarios-do-isolamento-1-Jesse-Andarilho>.
2. Such as: <https://www.covid-stories.com/>; <http://www.massobs.org.uk/about/what-s-on/205-covid19>; and <https://www.2020livinghistory.com/>.

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