Foreword

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Life/lines: the metaphor is ambiguous and invites us to ponder its relation to the subtitle. Lifelines, ropes thrown to ships or persons floundering in deep waters nearby; lifelines, ropes that link the deep-sea diver to the mother-ship; lifelines, more metaphorically, essential routes of communication between mutually dependent communities; but again, and differently, lifelines, those lines in the palm of the hand that in palmistry, dictionaries tell us, supposedly reveal facts about a person's life to the person who can decode the meaning.

Used here in relation to women's autobiographies, *Life/Lines* is more than a metaphor; it defines a critical space or scene and suggests a purpose. In the passage from life to writing, what strategies have women who "writ [their] own lives" adopted, when confronting their world, to free themselves from the images of role personae and desire encoded in the language? How have they moved beyond silence to speech, engendering through writing alternative motives and myths? And reached that authenticity in the weaving of a text which puts its mark on "literary" writing?

How can a collection of theoretical essays on a specifically designated topic "women's autobiography" justify the polyvalent metaphor? Academic women in Western countries are quite obviously an elite, but an elite just as prone as others to remain bound by its own cultural paradigms even as it challenges them. What all the definitions of lifelines have in common is the emphasis on interdependence and communication, a common code, that is, the lifeline available or, in the case of the palmist, the need to probe into the future (I am not, of course, putting forth a plea for palmistry). Of late, all our academic disciplines have been reexamining the theoretical assumptions on which their activities

rest. Not least among these disciplines are the “social sciences” or, covering a broader range, what we sometimes call the “human sciences” or, indeed, the humanities. It so happened that the vigorous, irresistible expansion of women’s studies coincided in chronological time with that reassessment, was at its very crux, and sometimes spoke unknowingly in two languages: the language of the social sciences, of “scientific,” “objective” research based on factual data, questionnaires, and statistics; and the languages of linguistic analysis and psychoanalysis, sometimes conjoined, sometimes at odds, which raised questions concerning the inscription of the subject in speech and writing. Autobiographies, newly prominent as “texts,” became central in wide-ranging critical and theoretical debate on the status of self, the nature of self-representation, of language. The serenely “male” approach to those questions has by now been disrupted by the careful attention with which autobiographies by women are being approached, the same methods yielding more complex perspectives.

Though those engaged in the social sciences became increasingly aware of the limitations of their methodology, and those in the humanities, of the complex interplay of social structure and social content in the multiple network of relations through which the “I” must compose a “self,” a sometimes acrimonious polemic divided the two modes of investigation. It was, and sometimes still is, particularly articulate among feminist scholars. Essentially concerning women and more dramatically than in regard to men, the text defining the social status of women and the more elusive text of individual women in which language, desire, and situation play their games seemed irreconcilable. In the first “modern” form of this text, Western feminists understandably thought in terms of duality, of confrontation and exclusivities: male versus female; heterosexual versus homosexual; independence versus the constraints of family; passive acquiescence to society’s dictates versus revolt and militant activism.

In the meantime, so complex and wide-ranging has become our apprehension of the feminine presence and action in the world, past and present, that we are no longer as prone to think in absolutes. At the outset it was, no doubt, essential in our Western world to speak in terms of pure “gender”—her/story, his/story—but as became clear, doing so boxed Western women into the basic habits of thought of a culture in which they did not entirely share. It closed the way—difficult to be sure—to their recognition and elaboration of a language absent from the normative male language, yet operative within the social group through which women could speak their difference and sameness as individuals within shifting cultural configurations. In this context, approaches to

the specific question of the feminine subject would of necessity be vitiated if they did not take into account the radical change toward language that informs all fields of inquiry today, without some sense of which "consciousness-raising" initiatives, necessary as they are, can only be strictly limited. Thence came the explosion of abstract theorization, inspired in part by European philosophies, to which more directly committed feminist activists so strenuously objected. Here again, a critical reappraisal has been taking place.

This anthology proposes to reexamine in a careful assemblage of texts some of the assumptions of feminist theory concerning women's autobiographies, clarifying and questioning extant systems of valuation of the autobiographical text. The provenance of the texts differs widely in time, geographical location, and social positioning. The contributors and the editors who selected the texts they present are all among those who have given women's studies academic credibility. They bring together the two main trends in an effort to open up a rich perspective where "difference" and plurality do not erupt in the either/or dichotomies of uncritical argumentation and common logic.

We are more fully aware today of the difficult dialectic and imbalance between the descriptive and the conceptualized which define the dynamics of the mind, and the realm of writing itself. And it is writing that provides a space within which the "self" may best appear in its complexity, conscious and unconscious of its "difference" and similarities with respect to the characteristics of a given culture. The texts examined in *Life/Lines* are rich in the wide diversity of routes by which women, in vastly different circumstances, have asserted their place as active subjects challenging the oppressive representation and actions of powerful hierarchies, not only in regard to their individual situation but in terms of a social group. True, there are the limitations and self-delusions, the inevitable strategies and complicities out of which particular individuals make their way to open up that culture which has bent their language and mental perspectives to new shapes.

Life/Lines addresses these issues at a moment of particular significance for women's studies, which, like comparative studies to which they are closely bound, oscillate between the lure of infinite dilution and the temptation of rigorous compartmentalization. The issue, as conceived by its two editors, is to explore the many "lines" women have devised to speak of themselves for themselves and for their readers, going beyond the constraints of traditional boundaries. It eschews the temptation to elude questions of the specificity of the self, of its "presence" in the writing, its informing strategies. These are inseparable from our further understanding of the genre and its creative potential. Theories then

become modes of clarification open to revision, dynamic elements in shaping our awareness of the significance and richness of the genre.