

ER&M 327/MME 311/WGSS 327: Constructing Self: Autobiography  
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By submitting this essay, I attest that it is my own work, completed in accordance with University regulations. –Cathy Shen

*Chronicles of My Life: A Minority Reading of the Dominant Narrative*

by Cathy Shen

Donald Keene's *Chronicles of My Life* may easily be read as a close adherent to Gusdorf's vision of a supremely self-conscious, dramatic rendering of individualized self-recognition in text. This view of Keene as a "canonical" autobiographer in the tradition of Augustine and Rousseau is verifiably supported by both Keene's self-professed academic pedigree, and by his measured yet acute connection to the cultural mythology and consciousness of his time. Keene's text, then, may well be considered a "dominant male narrative" through its conformity with all the nuances of Gusdorf's genre-pioneering definition. However, this compatibility of text and interpretation excludes neither the possibility of an alternative, minority-oriented reading of Keene, nor the plausibility of critiquing Gusdorf's definition as representative of the "dominant narrative." In short, the following analysis hopes to posit an equally coherent reading of Keene using the devices of minority voices, alongside the recognition that *Chronicles* retains all the trappings of a "dominant male narrative." Consequently, a look at the holistic character of the text given these juxtaposed features should reveal significant implications about both the nature of Keene's autobiography and the very genre-defining schemes used to reach this conclusion.

First we must establish what it means to fit the mold of the "dominant male narrative," and how precisely Keene's text does so. A loose working definition of this category label draws up associations with dusty, dead white men waxing poetic about their exaggerated achievements.

But to do justice to Gusdorf, it is essential we realize that his genre-founding definition specified something far more particular than “great [and not-so-great] men... devot[ing] the leisure time of their old age to editing ‘Memoirs.’” (Rak, 490) Instead, Gusdorf’s qualifications for literary quality (as opposed to “personal vanity”) began with “the existence of self-consciousness in a culture” of individuality. (Rak, 490) The act of autobiography, as process, must involve “the awareness of time, cultural mythology, and individual consciousness.” (Rak, 490) Gusdorf critically tied this necessity for a culturally-inculcated individuality to a European male tradition beginning with the Copernican Revolution, and it is from this crucial connection that his criterion comes to be the measure for a “dominant male narrative.”

How then, specifically, is *Chronicles of My Life* categorized as a “dominant narrative”? Certainly the author-as-subject fits the loose social definition previously discussed – Keene is a white, middle-class American male educated in some of the foremost academic institutions of the world half a century ago. His text is also replete with the supposedly requisite parading of scholarly achievements. But to follow Gusdorf’s definition closely, it becomes apparent that *Chronicles* also satisfies each of three stated criteria: the awareness of time, cultural mythology, and individual consciousness.

Nothing Keene writes invokes a presence in cultural and historical time quite like the coming of the war. Describing his slow foray into Japanese language and literature studies, Keene cites his student years at Columbia under the tutelage of Tsunoda, a time when he also befriended Lee and Inomata, two figures who represent the gradual coming of “Japan” as an entity in his life. (Keene, 20-21, 24, 28) But this leisurely exposure dims in comparison to the war: in a scene dramatizing the news of Pearl Harbor, Keene recalls returning from a secluded hiking trip with Inomata right on the eve of American entrance to the Pacific. (Keene, 30-31)

What the reader perceives is an indelible impression of a massive social-historical – and hence personal – sea-change, the influence of which greatly overshadows the purely individual academic pursuits that preceded it. If Keene is said to have been somehow predetermined to encounter Japan, it is war and not his professors or friends that so destined him. This awareness of time acting on the individual, as well as the individual's presence in time, is more than a factual situation of memory in historical events; Keene, as prescribed by Gusdorf, offers a sense of immersion, of destiny and the authorial being as swept up in a continual passage of historical *zeitgeists* that reinforce the formation of his individuality.<sup>1</sup>

Similarly, the author-subject's recognition of and participation in cultural mythology can be demonstrated with a single motif from childhood. In the opening chapter of *Chronicles*, Keene uses baseball to refer wholesale to an entire portrait of male adolescence in American society of the Depression and post-Depression era.<sup>2</sup> (Keene, 5, 8) This symbolic gesture is never explicated but functions as a sign for which the referent is a collective cultural memory, or mythology. It is only because the readership can conceive of America in this period – and the author assumes exactly as much – that this implicit signing works at all. Method and process are thus proof of the author-subject's knowledge of, as well as participation in, a cultural mythology deemed by Gusdorf as conducive to autobiography.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Individuality, then, produces the achievements necessarily linked to this historically-present singular. In the case of Keene, his connection to and eventual works on Japan can be traced to historical presence – the war, and how it opened up Japan to him. In Gusdorf's scheme, this doesn't negate or contradict Keene's authorial individuality but rather reinforces it because the 'passage of *zeitgeists*' are based in a history-culture of Western post-Enlightenment individualism. The author is at once swept up and becoming "individualized" as a result.

<sup>2</sup> For the purposes of this discussion, the "factual" centrality of baseball to Keene's childhood is less relevant. Perhaps he really was so largely unhappy exactly because he was bad at sports. More likely, this symbol of wholesome American boyhood, linked to ideas of family and cinema and social belongingness (Keene, 4), evokes a whole host of objectively unrelated painful memories and is being used symbolically in *that* way. But the discussion at hand only concerns the communication between author-subject and the readership as it reveals a cultural mythology.

<sup>3</sup> In the same way, the readership also comprehends and participates in this cultural mythology, and the author-subject's assumption of this truth is part of his knowledge of such.

Applying Gusdorf's final criterion for traditional autobiography requires an examination of the scene that narratively begins Keene's relationship with Japan. While still a young student, Keene comes across the *Tale of Genji* and develops a complex attraction to the text that the retrospective author-subject casts as a precursor to his eventual involvement with Japanese literature. (Keene, 24) Interestingly, Keene later discusses at length the influences of war, of his friends, and of the growing cultural popularity of Japan on his academic direction. (Keene, 99) Yet note that this early encounter with *Genji* remains the first "source" to which Keene attributes his life's work. What can be inferred, therefore, is the crucial importance of Keene's interaction with this text as an individualized, specific experience, of which he reminisces in layer fashion, attempting to parse the multiple facets of his own initial attraction. This is exactly Gusdorf's required "individual consciousness."

As can be seen, Keene sufficiently conforms to both colloquial and academically-sound definitions of a "dominant male narrative." But how does he equally break this mold? Perhaps the most strikingly evident contradiction lies in the non-sequential arrangement of Keene's narrative. Linear chronology coinciding with a resume of achievements is a hallmark of "traditional" autobiographies; as demonstrated, *Chronicles* certainly does not lack the latter. But for all the name-dropping of awards received and books published, Keene's text is decidedly non-linear. True, its narrative is congruous with a large-scale chronology following Keene from his childhood, through his student years, to his scholarly work in Japan. Yet the character of the text (i.e. its style and the author-subject so constructed) depends unquestionably on frequent use of vignettes, anachronistic entrances and exits of people in Keene's life, and a general affinity for thoughts that loop back to mimic a man's process of recollection more than a strict timeline of his life. A notable example of the latter two characteristics is seen in Tsunoda-sensei, Arthur

Waley, and Mark van Doren, who reappear without difficulty at various points in the narrative; these figures are associated with particular thought-themes of the author-subject, and invoking them effectively evokes those respective themes in the narrative without necessarily implicating a literal presence at that point in Keene's life.<sup>4</sup> Though non-linearity can – and does – take many forms both within the genre and Keene's text, this kind of chronology is emphatically non-dominant, non-traditional. In fact, the heavy usage of vignettes in *Chronicles* almost calls to mind bell hooks's "hope chest" method of constructing memory (Smith & Watson, 431) – a reading strongly designated non-masculine and non-mainstream.

Another compelling argument for *Chronicles* as a non-dominant text arises from its command of concealment, evasion, understatement – the essential *non-dit*. The editors of *Just Between Us*, speaking of Indian women writers, observe that "concealment is a strategy women use often." (Joseph et al., 22) This type of concealment often merges with evasion or disguise, whereby female authors "negotiate the silences and the boundaries, external and self-imposed" in an attempt to express what is true in a manner socially and culturally realistic to the speaker-subject. (Joseph et al., 25) These writers identify with racial<sup>5</sup> and gender minorities to which Keene obviously does not belong, yet we find just such devices of concealment and evasion to be a foundational part of Keene's style. Understatement and implication are sure to appear whenever the narrative approaches Keene's personal life, or even the private lives of those around him.<sup>6</sup> Judicious concealment also features prominently in all Keene's retellings of his professional relationships. Each rendez-vous with a Japanese author or a New York publisher is

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<sup>4</sup> I.e. Tsunoda-sensei is associated with Keene's early interest in Japanese literature, as well as with a certain style of academic rigor and cultural awareness (Keene's low-key description of Tsunoda's near-internment during the war, linked to his quiet recognition of all the Japanese American bilinguals uncounted by the government during war years.) (Keene, 30-31) Waley often serves as an aspirational sign for Keene's aesthetic taste in his work. (71-72) Van Doren, on the other hand, is usually a reference to Keene's approach to teaching.

<sup>5</sup> And ethnic minority, depending on whether their work is viewed from an international or national setting

<sup>6</sup> Descriptions of his dysfunctional childhood home (Keene, 4), of Mishima's intense disappointment with his reception in New York (108), and of his grief at his mother's death (121-122)

carefully constructed to only say what succinctly conveys the flavor of that interaction, and nothing at all revelatory about the participant opposite Keene. This kind of literary behavior speaks to a prudence and self-restraint generally thought to be employed only by minority authors as protective mechanisms.

Finally, Keene himself provides the most non-traditional analysis of his autobiography by rendering his narrative a “chain of linking experiences” consisting of a “cast of characters” as its distinguishing characteristic. (Keene, 181) This explanation reads remarkably close to interpretations of female lives – and thus female autobiographical texts – as inherently relative. (Miller, Heilbrun) Bypassing the discussion of whether relationship-based life narratives are essential to or detrimental for women, a working identification of relational living and writing as *female* allows us to juxtapose this assumption next to clear instances of Keene, a male academic, doing the same. As Keene himself professes, relational retelling is arguably the key conceit of *Chronicles* – Keene set out to write the narrative of his “essentially happy life” by picking a frame (his academic and personal encounter of Japan) and realizing this context largely through his relationships to “chains” of connected people<sup>7</sup>. (Keene, 183) That is, Keene has practiced and recognized a method of autobiographical narrative that he, as a designated “dominant male author,” theoretically has no access to.

The dual analysis of Keene’s *Chronicles of My Life* as dominant and minority narratives has significant implications for both the work itself and the genre-defining schemes used to carry out this analysis. Namely, we have demonstrated that Keene’s autobiography may well adhere to the criteria for a traditional “dominant male narrative” and simultaneously exhibit traits associated with marginalized voices. Taken, then, as a representative sample, *Chronicles of My Life* may serve to begin necessary conversations on the erroneous restrictions imposed by these

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<sup>7</sup> E.g. his landlady in Kyoto, Mishima, Kawabata, Nagai, Yoshida, Abe, his various professors, his war-time friends

schemes, particularly by the “dominant male narrative.” Essentially, the presence of minority-narrative characteristics in a “dominant narrative” befitting Gusdorf’s specification is the most effective challenge to the traditional definition of “dominant narrative” itself.

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