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Liz Stanley, ed. *Documents of Life Revisited: Narrative and Biographical Methodology for a 21st Century Critical Humanism*. Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2013. 238 pp. ISBN 978-1-4094-4289-9.

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Academic inquiry is always full of twists and turns, but it seems that the pathways of scholarship have become more winding of late. Or perhaps scholars are simply more intent on labeling all the zigs and zags. Cultural turn, linguistic turn, imperial turn, environmental turn—these are just a few of the designations used to plot recent trajectories of research in the humanities and social sciences. *Documents of Life Revisited*, edited by sociologist Liz Stanley, tackles the narrative turn—the recent focus on stories and storytelling as lynchpins of human experience. This collection of 14 essays is an inspired response to sociologist Kenneth Plummer’s *Documents of Life* (Plummer 1983, 2001), which calls for a kind of intellectual rapprochement between the humanities and social sciences. Plummer urges social scientists to give more scholarly weight to individual biographies and stories and to draw on the interpretive apparatus of literary scholars, linguists, and philosophers in order to understand how narratives are constructed. Conversely, Plummer appeals to scholars from humanistic disciplines to be more attentive to the social structures, contexts, and consequences of stories by incorporating methods from sociology, history, anthropology, and social geography. For such a marriage to be achieved, Plummer contends, scholars from all of these disciplines must become “critical humanists,” a role he outlines through a set of methodological and ethical recommendations. These include acknowledging individual subjects’ embeddedness (socially, spatially, and temporally) but also their agency to narrate and create their own lives. Moreover, scholars must listen and be sympathetic to their subjects rather than to essentialize, flatten, or dehumanize them through all-encompassing theories.

More than a decade has past since Plummer articulated these ideas in the expanded 2001 edition of *Documents of Life*, and although his ideas now seem familiar—even commonsensical—it is debatable as to how many and how well scholars have incorporated such interdisciplinarity into their own work. The contributors to *Documents of Life Revisited* set out to practice critical humanism explicitly. Many of them participated in a seminar series in narrative studies funded by the UK’s Economic and Social Research Council, and at times their essays read like a roundtable discussion between themselves and Plummer. The authors include specialists in sociology, literature, social justice, and computer science among other fields. As such, the volume successfully brings a wide variety of theoretical schools, genres, world regions, and disciplinary specialties to bear on common themes. The dialogic feel of the collection creates strong linkages between essays. It also means that the volume

does not culminate in any specific conclusions or even in a definitive model of critical humanism. The volume is aimed at compiling and showcasing a range of approaches rather than distilling them or lobbying for one over another. For example, each essay opens with a dialogue box of bullet points defining what critical humanism means for that particular author. The definitions do overlap and are often insightful, self-reflexive, and even humorous. However, they offer multiplicity where some readers may want unity and coherence. Each essay includes not only a theoretical section and an empirical section but also annotated suggestions for additional reading, which further marks this project as a starting point for future investigation rather than as an intellectual terminus.

Some of the 14 essays—too many to summarize here—are stronger theoretically, others empirically. Highlights for this reviewer include Clair Morrow's essay on lies, Claire Lynch's response to Plummer's criticisms of literary scholarship, Sally Fincher's study of diaries, Ulla-Maija Salo's analysis of children's letters to the Finnish president, and Sue Wise's study of postmortem photographs. Depending on taste and interest, readers will be enticed by particular essays. All have insights to offer. *Documents of Life Revisited* also includes personal and creative essays (by Mona Livholts and Shivaun Woolfson) and is bookended by a compelling introduction from the editor Liz Stanley and a tour-de-force manifesto by Kenneth Plummer. One wonders if Plummer's piece should not come at the beginning of the collection, for it is an intellectual call to arms, one which the contributors clearly have heeded.

The rich array of essays in this volume will make it useful and appealing to a wide range of researchers. The drawback of having so many contributions, however, is that these essays are brief. Most average 10 pages, excluding references and appendices. Readers are forced to switch gears rapidly. Some may long for more detail and depth or find the moments when the authors condense and simplify their case studies or theoretical apparatus—ostensibly for the sake of brevity—a bit frustrating. The volume can feel a bit fragmented, and, at times, I longed for the contributors to be more forceful, more definitive in their claims. But such moves would, admittedly, detract from the ethos of critical humanism. The essays beautifully exhibit a cross-pollination of methods and questions among humanists and social scientists who are committed to a critical humanist approach. They bring together scientific detachment and aesthetic appreciation. They apply social theory without removing agency from the storytellers. And they combine respect for the storyteller's interpretive power with a more humble scholarly gaze. This volume does not offer a definitive definition of critical humanism. Instead, it performs it and to great effect.

REFERENCES

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