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**Selbstzeugnisse in transkultureller Perspektive  
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The following will be divided into two parts: at first, I will outline a research project we are planning at the Free University in Berlin. Secondly, I shall draw on my own work on early modern autobiographical writings [1], in order to point out some of the aspects we intend to explore in this project on a more general and larger scale.

**I. Research project "Selbstzeugnisse in transkultureller Perspektive"**

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In the beginning phase there were several scholars at the Free University working on "Selbstzeugnisse" - Claudia Ulbrich and Gudrun Wedel, for example, to name just some fellow-historians, but there were far more. We discovered that there were scholars doing research on egodocuments in the classics department as well as in medieval, early modern and modern history, and even in japanology, Arabic studies and turkology.

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The other starting point was university politics. Two years ago, in the course of restructuring faculties and making them much larger than before, there were several different subjects lumped together into one large "faculty of historical and cultural studies" ("Fachbereich Geschichts- und Kulturwissenschaften"), and - more important - encouraged to work together ("encouraged" means that there is some money and organizational help involved). It was then that we had the first meetings and started to think about a joint project. A first presentation took place in a session organized by Claudia Ulbrich (Berlin) and Kaspar von Greyerz (Basel) at the Historikertag in Aachen in 2000. Contributors were Desanka Schwara (Leipzig), Gerhard Wedel (Berlin), and Natalie Zemon Davis (Toronto). [2]

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Some details on our group and organizational frame, as it has developed by now: The research will be conducted by ten scholars trained in different fields. The tasks of direction and organization are shared by professors of five different subjects: Arabic studies, history, studies of Islam, Japanology, studies of Turk languages and peoples. The heads of the project are Claudia Ulbrich (professor of history) and Barbara Kellner-Heinkele (professor of turkology). We are glad to co-operate with other scholars in the field on a national and international level, mainly in Japan (Irmela Hijiya-Kirschner), Turkey (Börte Sagaster), Switzerland (Kaspar von Greyerz), and the Netherlands (Rudolf Dekker). Among the researchers who

contribute to the project are Gudrun Wedel, Lotte van de Pol, Petra Buchholz, and the author, all of whom have already done larger research on egodocuments. There are also some younger colleagues involved who intend to write their doctoral dissertations.

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During our research and discussions it became clear that there is a large number and variety of egodocuments in all areas concerned and throughout the course of history. In Japan as well as in the Ottoman Empire or today's Turkey, in Arab as well as in European cultures autobiographical writing has been existing in various forms and literary traditions since well before modern times. On the other hand, autobiographies, narrowly defined, are rarely to be found anywhere before the eighteenth century. Hence, it does not make much sense for non-European and for all premodern historical studies to concentrate on autobiographies in a strict sense. Instead, it seems to be most rewarding to have a closer look at autobiographical writing in all its variety as it was and is being practiced in different areas and historical times. We therefore use the broad term "Selbstzeugnisse" to encompass writing about oneself, about one's own experiences and observations relating to oneself in all literary forms and traditions, including various genres such as travel writing, chronicles, family histories, biographical entries in reference works, diplomats' accounts, etc. Our starting points for this are Benigna von Krusenstjern's article "Was sind Selbstzeugnisse?" (1994) and the definition given in the series "Selbstzeugnisse der Neuzeit" (established in 1991). [3]

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In all fields concerned little or no work has been done so far collecting all the relevant texts and making the findings available to other scholars. Nevertheless, much is to be gained by exemplary studies organized as a common enterprise. Our unique combination of scholars covering various fields, different areas, and time spans and working with different methods - ranging from literary criticism and traditional philology to historical approaches - enables us to discuss texts written in at least eleven languages: Dutch, German, English, French, Latin, Arabic, Japanese, Ottoman, Turkish, Persian, and Tataric. This opens up tremendous opportunities for comparisons. The aim is, of course, not to mix sources indiscriminately. The idea is rather to contextualize them and to understand autobiographical writing as a special form of agency, practiced by autobiographical writers in their respective personal situations and cultural contexts. This way, the focus lies on the writing and producing of these texts, and egodocuments are seen as ways of communicating and acting in society. Consequently, we try to develop an understanding of egodocuments as a social and cultural practice.

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By means of a transcultural perspective, we especially want to find out about a person's own life as a topic of writing in different cultures, in different periods and in different geographical areas. We are interested in questions such as: How, why and in what literary forms and traditions did people write about themselves? What strategies of authentication and authorization did they develop? In what ways did they construct their selves? How did they adapt to different contexts and situations of writing? As to the answers, we are not focusing on single writers, but on the constellations and configurations they are embedded in as well as the concepts they

make use of in perceiving themselves. Thereby, it will be possible to see culture(s) not as unified entities, closed in themselves. This will enable us to ask, for example, about cross-cultural networks or common characteristics of certain social groups such as nobles or scholars and in how far these might be lasting over time.

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All these questions and methodological approaches are intended to deal with one of the central topics of traditional scholarship on autobiographical writing: "individuality". This label is especially relevant for studying premodern and non-European egodocuments. It is conventional wisdom that the development of individuality and autobiographical writing are closely related and that this is a typical European model. Accordingly, Martin Danahay states in the recent "Encyclopedia of Life Writing": "The histories of life writing and individualism in Western culture have moved in parallel."

[4] Research on non-European egodocuments continues to take this as a starting point and a standard according to which the sources are to be measured. Applied that way as a general paradigm, "individualism" obstructs seeing the respective cultures in their own history. At the same time it leads to confining discussions to shortcomings and delayed developments. The problem is not to use egodocuments at all for exploring individuality. Of course, they are relevant sources. The problem arises in two respects: (1) from focusing on individuality and thereby excluding other concepts of persons found in these sources, and (2) from using only egodocuments and no other types of sources for exploring forms and contexts of individuality. With our research project, we hope to open up ways of perceiving the various possibilities of describing the self in European as well as in non-European egodocuments and thus contribute to a non-Eurocentric and non-modernist understanding of cultures.

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To achieve this, we decided to take four different thematic approaches. Several projects will analyze autobiographical writing as a cultural practice, mainly concerned with the process of writing and questions of genre (directed by Irmela Hijiya-Kirschner). In addition, there will be three historically orientated fields exploring configurations we assume to be important for constituting and articulating selves. These are (i) situations of extreme pressure, for example in the case of Japanese prisoners of war made to write down their lives by their Chinese imprisoners (directed by Angelika Schaser); (ii) breaks and ruptures, experienced for example by medieval Arab biographers in the process of colonization, by a modern Turkish scholar in the process of Westernization, or by the first Japanese industrialists in the process of industrialization (directed by Barbara Kellner-Heinkele); (iii) ritualized ways of life, practiced for example in early modern European and Osmanic societies, at European courts, by Osmanic and European diplomats, and in the context of hospitality (directed by Claudia Ulbrich).

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We have split up these four larger fields into ten single projects, [5] and there will be no common frame as to time or nationality. Our intention thereby is to question unifying concepts and absolute categories such as race, class, gender, nation. Instead, we want to focus on the interrelation between the agency of individual persons and the cultural repertoires they can make use of, as Natalie Zemon Davis has described it, for example, in her study "Women on the Margins" [6].

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This has been a rather abstract statement so far. In the second part, I will discuss early modern egodocuments and show what early modern history can contribute to the questions asked in the outlined research project.

## II. Autobiography as Social Practice in the 15th and 16th Centuries in German Speaking Areas [7]

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When Nicolaus Cusanus visited his place of birth, the small town of Kues on the river Mosel, in 1449, he decided to produce a very short autobiography, written in Latin (consisting of half a page of printed text). At that time, he was 48 years old and a doctor in canon law; he had made a career in service of the papal church and was about to be appointed cardinal. Besides, he was a distinguished mathematician, philosopher, and theologian as well as a prolific writer in a number of genres. In his autobiography which he ordered to be written ("iussit scribi") he speaks about himself in the third-person form - "he" and "Nicolaus de Cusa". He is rather sketchy about his life and concentrates on a small number of facts: his parents' names and his father's profession, his graduation in Padua (without mentioning his subject, canon law) -, and his services for Pope Eugene IV and in turn his nomination for cardinal. He sums up with the following words: "And in order that all should know that the Holy Roman Church regards neither the place nor the family of birth but is instead a very liberal donor of rewards for virtues he, the same cardinal, here ordered this story to be written to the praise of God [...]".

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Let us stop here to look at what Cusanus is doing. The image he was drawing of himself does not consist of a full and richly detailed picture of his life, giving instead few facts, reducing his life to a mere skeleton and omitting many things we would like to know. He mentioned a very small range of topics - seemingly well chosen - among which his career, Pope Eugene IV, and the relationship between the pope and the new cardinal play a dominant role, but he left out so many other topics. Rather than displaying a mere inability to express himself, the otherwise so well-articulated clergyman had a precise view of what he wanted as he let his readers know explicitly in the sentence quoted above: "And in order that all should know [...]". He addressed an audience which he called "cuncti", "all"; but since his text is in Latin he must have meant scholars, most likely educated clergymen like himself. What he was doing, then, was communicating his self, that is, certain features of it, to other people, envisioning his career and himself in a single important relationship. Thus, his autobiography is a social practice that has an audience in mind, the action itself occurring at a certain time, in a certain personal situation and being part of a certain social context.

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We could go on now and explore this individual autobiography as an individual practice in further detail. But let us first take a step into a more general direction and look at the other autobiographical writings of the period, considering what can be said about autobiographical writing as a social practice. In order to do this, it is adequate to first regard contexts, then languages and audiences, and finally ways of acting in

relationships. Beforehand, I will make some remarks on the texts which form the basis for what I am going to say.

## II.1 Texts

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The texts I have collected are 234 autobiographical writings by 179 persons; several authors wrote more than one autobiographical text. All the texts have already been printed; so we have those which were given to a printing public - by the authors themselves or by some later editors who deemed the respective document worth reading by a wider audience. These texts are covering their authors' lives in part or more fully, and the authors wrote them on their own, in some cases being asked or urged, but never so strongly as if to be forced to do so. In most cases the authors wrote about themselves in the first-person form. Some chose the third-person form, as Cusanus did, all of them male scholars who might have known examples from antiquity. Still others chose the "we"-form, for example abbesses and soldiers, mostly mixed with the "I"-form.

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The texts cover a wide range of topics, either in brief form as mentioned with Cusanus or described in detail. Two topics are especially striking: (1) education in so far as it is received away from home, at schools and universities, in businesses, at courts, and in monasteries, and (2) adult dealings in professional functions, in business, church, and politics. Besides strictly autobiographical topics there are very often others among which religion, family, business, and politics are most important. However, there are always some topics missing, very often childhood; others are included which we do not feel to be autobiographical in a strict sense. It can be concluded now that the writers must have been less than competent to produce an autobiographical text proper, but it seems much more fruitful to ask instead what the authors had in mind when they included one topic and omitted another.

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In the wide field of self-testimonies, this sample obviously contains more than the narrowly defined autobiographies. But out of the self-testimonies as classified by Benigna von Krusenstjern they constitute just the autobiographical part, that is, the writer's person appears as a subject being described, not just as narrator or commentator. The texts vary considerably in length, style, and genre, and they are often mixtures of various sorts. All of them have been written between 1400 and 1620 (most of them in the 16th century). I took the time of writing but not the time span described as relevant for assembling my sources. Thus, from the beginning, these texts have been collected as sources for the situation of writing and communicating.

## II.2 Contexts

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All these autobiographical writings originate from German-speaking areas, including Switzerland, the Habsburg lands and Bohemia. In total, some two thirds of the authors belonged to a special secular or religious estate. Of the eight female authors, three were abbesses and four nobles. By far most of the authors, male and female alike, have to be counted among the social elites of the Christian majority; a third of them were clergy. The only Jewish writer, Josel of Rosheim, was a merchant, community leader, and at the same time the most important Jewish political representative of the 16th century in the Roman Empire.

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The autobiographical writings are leading us into quite different social contexts, and the writers set out to articulate a variety of autobiographical perspectives, according to their religious and gender affiliation, their social position, occupation, and status, and not least according to their motivations, abilities, and intentions. In fact, the authors' perspectives often stood in opposition to others and could also be fiercely contested - polemical and self-defensive texts are no exceptions. Certain social milieus and occupations are strongly represented, foremost those of male scholars and clergy. Cusanus belongs to this group, and he also shows some typical traces of the writers of this social group: in his statements on professional success, upward social mobility, and an important social relationship with a male superior. What he offers in his autobiography is the perspective of a successful high ranking Roman Catholic cleric stressing his own qualifications and their recognition by the long-term employer of his services. Even if he did not know about other clerics and scholars also writing autobiographical texts he in fact shared values, experiences, and behaviour with so many of this social group, and like a growing number of others he chose to communicate them through an autobiographical text.

## II.3 Languages and audiences

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That Cusanus wrote his autobiography in Latin seems to be self-evident and not in need of further exploration: after all, he was a scholar and a Roman Catholic cleric, so he was trained in Latin and used to it as a common language on many occasions. It can be added that up to the Reformation all of his fellow scholars and clerics also wrote their autobiographical texts in Latin, with one exception: Johann of Soest (1448-1506) who was a physician at the time of writing his autobiography, but had been a professional court singer before and still was a poet writing in German; he chose that language and the form of his poetry for his autobiography, too.

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As for the whole time span covered here, these two men exemplify the two possibilities existing for the educated among the writers. Roughly half of them turned to the Latin, the other half to the German language when writing their autobiographical texts, mixtures of both also occurring very often. That way they related to their social surroundings, expressing the culture they belonged to and at the same time shaping it themselves. In both respects the language chosen played a

part: writing in Latin (which is the case for one third of all texts), authors related to other Latin-educated scholars as the social group they belonged to as well as the audience they addressed. In fact these were mostly relationships between men, representing a special type of male bonding, with ritualized forms of behaviour. These relationships among scholars were practiced to the exclusion of the uneducated as well as of those populations and their scholars using another learned language than Latin. Male bonding has been analyzed by modern scholars for 16th-century artisans (for example by Merry Wiesner), but was a strong feature also of learned cultures, giving participants a distinguished status. All the women writing autobiographical texts wrote in German or another vernacular, even if they were able to write in Latin and did so in other cases, like the Nuremberg abbess Charitas Pirckheimer. When addressing her fellow-nuns German was the adequate language for her, also being the language of her dealings with political and clerical authorities.

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Writing in Latin or in German - or, for that matter, some other vernacular like French, Dutch, or Italian -, did not simply distinguish scholars from non-scholars with a clear dividing line. In reality, scholars themselves were following different ways in this respect. And to complicate matters further some German writing scholars expressly addressed a scholarly audience, as did Daniel Greiser, a Lutheran clergyman and superintendent at the Saxon residence of Dresden (1504-1591, writing in 1587). His words are especially illuminating. In his introduction to his printed German autobiography he declares that he does not intend in the least to address an uneducated public but mainly his clerical subordinates, the pastors in and around Dresden. This was not only apparent by the Latin phrases he mixed into his German text but also, so he argues, by the contents of his writing: in describing his own life he proposed to be useful as a model for his professional colleagues and subordinates but not for common people. If he had wished to be of use for the uneducated he would have made religious doctrine his topic, so he tells his readers.

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What we can see here is that even a printed text written in the vernacular may clearly be aimed at a limited, elite social group as audience. So we not just have to look at the language of an autobiographical text but also at the writer himself or herself, at his or her knowledge of languages, and at their more or less explicit references to the audience they intended to address or they expected to read their texts. Most autobiographical writers indeed had an audience in mind (8 out of 9), and most of these specified which audience. For all social groups of writers, family and descendants ranged foremost - in this respect neither Cusanus nor Daniel Greiser are typical. It should be added that writing for family and descendants did not mean to address a strictly private and exclusive audience. In contrast, kinship and other networks generally seem to have been part of this type of public. Most writers went to reach their audience by manuscript (three quarters of those writing with an audience in mind), and this appears as an efficient way of publication - given the specified and personally close audiences they had in mind in so many cases. Those authors who got their autobiographical writings printed, on the other hand, not necessarily intended a general public but also some limited and specified group as audience, as Daniel Greiser shows in a typical way.

## II.4 Conclusion: Acting in relationships

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Autobiographical texts as presented so far strongly suggest that authors were acting socially when writing them. This is most evident when we are looking at languages and audiences. Furthermore, it clearly emerges that autobiographical writers were social beings, belonging to certain social, professional, religious, and gender groups, moving in certain social contexts and relationships. This is, additionally, what they themselves described in their autobiographical writings. Let us have a look now at what they were doing exactly when writing autobiographical texts. I will concentrate on two points.

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(1) All those who were writing for their family and descendants did so from a position of authority: they were heads of a family household constituted by marriage, and they wanted to communicate useful information as well as an exemplary life to the next generation, mostly making their didactic intentions quite explicit. In so far as the writers were male - and nearly all of them were - their information as well as their example could be used most directly by their male descendants. In that way writers strengthened their social position as heads of households and at the same time stressed their professional social roles. Scholars and clergymen seem to have been most active. All those writing as the heads of other types of households - convents and monasteries, bishops' and princely courts - should be included here. Nearly all female writers were heads of some sort of household at the time of writing, either as widows or as abbesses.

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(2) Not only do male Christian scholars and clergymen emerge as the numerically dominant group of autobiographical writers. There crystallizes one type of relationship as the most prominent among them: patronage. And it is here that Cusanus again is quite typical: what he describes most sketchily but distinctly is his relationship to the main patron of his life and career, Pope Eugene IV. Since the Council of Basle when Cusanus had changed sides from his former patron, the count of Manderscheid, and his former support of the Council, towards supporting a papal church Pope Eugene IV had acted as his patron and Cusanus in turn as Eugene's client. What Cusanus does by writing his short autobiography is demonstrating this patronage relationship and, furthermore, honoring his patron, the pope. His audience, "cuncti", "all", is also part of the action insofar as honoring a patron needs others to stand by and appreciate it. His audience, too, has to understand without further explanation about the character of this relationship as well as about adequate ways of behaviour. So Cusanus is not just describing patronage but also acting his part as a client, and his autobiography is his way of acting here, implying that the relevant social knowledge on all sides could be taken for granted.

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As in this case, autobiographical texts were often used as a way of acting directly within specific relationships. Autobiographical writing as a social practice has many facets several of which centre around the world of scholars and their patronage relationships, and this continues into the 16th century and the Protestant surroundings. In this respect, Cusanus was no old-fashioned writer, and the



Reformation was no watershed stopping or limiting such practices. On the contrary, the Reformation seems to have been furthering these instead. But this would be another story.

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With my very last remark I turn back to the project we are planning in Berlin. As a way of acting directly within specific social relationships, early modern egodocuments are widening our view on ways of constructing one's self decisively. There is much reason to assume that combining studies on early modern European with studies on non-European egodocuments can open up even further perspectives. Furthermore, a closer knowledge of non-European autobiographical writing might also enable us in the future to see those aspects of our own tradition much clearer which have been neglected hitherto.

### **Annotations**

- \* This essay is based on a lecture given at the meeting of the "Werkgroep (Auto)biografie" (Erasmus Universiteit Rotterdam), organized by Rudolf M. Dekker on September 13, 2002.
- 1 Gabriele Jancke: *Autobiographie als soziale Praxis. Beziehungskonzepte in Selbstzeugnissen des 15. und 16. Jahrhunderts im deutschsprachigen Raum.* (Selbstzeugnisse der Neuzeit 10), Köln / Weimar / Wien 2002.
- 2 Claudia Ulbrich / Kaspar von Greyerz: *Selbstzeugnisse in transkultureller Perspektive*, in: Max Kerner (Hg.): *Eine Welt ? Eine Geschichte?* 43. Deutscher Historikertag in Aachen, 26. bis 29. September 2000. *Berichtsband*, München 2001, 48-55.
- 3 Benigna von Krusenstjern: *Was sind Selbstzeugnisse? Begriffskritische und quellenkundliche Überlegungen anhand von Beispielen aus dem 17. Jahrhundert*, in: *Historische Anthropologie* 2 (1994), 462-471; Series 'Selbstzeugnisse der Neuzeit', Berlin 1991-1996, Köln / Weimar / Wien 1999ff.
- 4 Martin Danahay: *Individualism and Life Writing*, in: *Encyclopedia of Life Writing. Autobiographical and Biographical Forms*, edited by Margaretta Jolly, 2 vols., London / Chicago 2001, 466-467, here 466.
- 5 More details can be found on our homepage ([www.Selbstzeugnisse-in-transkultureller-Perspektive.de](http://www.Selbstzeugnisse-in-transkultureller-Perspektive.de); in preparation).
- 6 Natalie Zemon Davies: *Women on the Margins. Three Seventeenth-Century Lives*, Cambridge, Mass. / London 1995.
- 7 For details and references cf. Jancke: *Autobiographie als soziale Praxis*.

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[http://www.fu-berlin.de/fmi/dozenten/NS\\_Information\\_Jancke\\_Gabriele.html](http://www.fu-berlin.de/fmi/dozenten/NS_Information_Jancke_Gabriele.html)

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