This issue of *Feminist Studies* includes a cluster of essays that demonstrates new approaches to life writing, with special attention to unconventional women’s autobiographies. Lara Vapnek describes the historical inhibitions that shaped the self-presentation of pioneering American labor activist Elizabeth Gurley Flynn in the early twentieth century such that she omitted her sexual relationships with both women and men from her autobiographical writings. Overlapping with Vapnek’s historical focus, Nora Doyle’s essay takes a new look at Gertrude Stein’s best-known and most accessible work, *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, seeing it as Stein’s clever reworking of the women’s genre of domestic fiction in its pairing of a domesticated wife with a “genius” husband. In her examination of Kamala Das’s *Balyakala Smaranakal* (Memories of childhood), Sharmila Sreekumar discusses how the memoir’s depiction of self-deferral rather than self-realization unsettles autobiographical conventions through its troubling of the relationship between “self,” “life,” and “writing” that is constitutive of the genre. In Olga Zilberbourg’s short story, two women are baffled as they contemplate a friend’s suicide: what does it say about their own accomplishments and losses? Attention to the visual aspects of women’s lives and to their embodiment is highlighted in Estelle Carol’s memoir about her time spent as a member of the Graphic Collective of the Chicago Women’s Liberation Union in the 1970s. Corey Hickner-Johnson’s lyrical essay describes the first-person *I* of the poem as pushing herself to a physical extreme. Her autobiographical crisis-moment, depicted in acutely visceral and visual terms, wills into relief life’s underlying colors against a backdrop of otherwise drab monotony and disappointment. Feminist graphic artwork is discussed in Hillary Chute’s review essay on the newly popular genre of graphic novels by women. Alexandra Ketchum’s “‘The Place We’ve Always Wanted to Go But Never Could Find’: Finding Woman Space in Feminist Restaurants and Cafés in Ontario 1974–1982” and Samantha Pergadia’s “Geologies of
Sex and Gender: Excavating the Materialism of Gayle Rubin and Judith Butler” shift our attention away from individual life trajectories to broader sweeps of space and time. Ketchum’s history of feminist restaurants and cafes in Ontario, Canada, in the mid 1970s to early 1980s encourages us to consider the importance of space to the formation of feminist solidarities and political organizing, while Pergadia’s analysis of the geological understandings that undergird the work of both Gayle Rubin and Judith Butler invites us to rethink the temporalities through which gendered and sexed subjects, as well as academic disciplines, are formed. In closing, Ashwini Tambe reflects on the #MeToo movement and how we might fashion a more responsive public reckoning with sexual coercion.

The issue leads off with Vapnek’s essay, “The Rebel Girl Revisited: Rereading Elizabeth Gurley Flynn’s Life Story.” As Vapnek details, Flynn, an activist in the Industrial Workers of the World, chronicled her life only as far as 1926. Although she envisioned women’s emancipation as an integral component of the socialist revolution, her self-censorship reveals “how communism as well as anticommunism has limited our knowledge of the feminist past.” Flynn remained committed to socialism and women’s rights and continued to agitate for social change, but her efforts to narrate her later life were stymied by internal inhibitions and external forces. For a decade she lived with another woman at a time when leftists were not open about same-sex relationships. Nor did she wish to reveal her sexual relationships with a number of men or the psychological breakdown she suffered in 1926. Joining the US Communist Party in 1936 re-energized her career as a labor organizer and resulted in her being sent to prison from 1955 to 1957 during the period of the Red Scare in the United States. By her middle age, she had experienced not only nonconventional personal relationships but also a dramatic change in her appearance: rather than the slim girl pictured on the cover of songs designed to encourage the labor movement, she was a stout, matronly woman. Inhibited from revising her autobiography to account for her later life, she instead revealed her “potent emotions and subversive behaviors” through poetry and in a memoir about her prison experience, The Alderson Story: My Life as a Political Prisoner (1963).

The next essay, Nora Doyle’s “Gertrude Stein and the Domestication of Genius in The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas,” takes new approaches to a famous biography/autobiography which experimental modernist Gertrude Stein wrote and published under the guise of Alice B. Toklas,
her partner. Doyle argues that “the joke at the heart of Stein’s text is her parodic appropriation of the form, content, and style of the domestic memoir, a specifically feminine form of autobiography” in which a wife celebrates her husband as a “genius.” Here Stein plays complicated games with gender, resisting the usual linearity of a famous man’s individual progress from anonymity to acclaim in favor of a presentation of the women’s lives together through a series of apparently domestic anecdotes. Stein manipulates the conventions of American domestic fiction of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, in particular the pairing of the supportive domestic woman at home with her husband, the genius, who is active in the public sphere. In this case, of course, Alice is the wife, and Stein casts herself as the genius. Doyle reports how Stein describes the female pair’s “shared labors and mutual intellectual engagement” in ways that make the idea of genius “inherently collaborative.” “By parodying gendered tropes within both the form and content of her text,” Doyle argues, “Stein offers a humorous undoing of the autonomous male genius in favor of a conception of genius as female, shared, and domesticated.”

Sharmila Sreekumar’s essay, “‘I too call myself I’: Madhavikutty-Kamala Das and the Intransitive Autobiography,” is an analysis of Balyakala Smaranakal (Memories of childhood) by Kamala Das (also known as Kamala Surayya and as Madhavikutty) in which Sreekumar underscores the ways in which Kamala Das takes up and unsettles autobiographical conventions. Sreekumar argues that Kamala Das’s memoir is a work framed “not to reveal the self but to side-step it, to postpone it and to hide this deferral in plain sight.” After providing some background on Kamala Das, including her importance to feminist literary debates in India, the breadth and scope of her works, her continuous self-fashioning and reinvention, and the centrality of life-writing and autobiography to her oeuvre, Sreekumar briefly sketches out the main elements of the book. This sets the stage for Sreekumar’s argument that Kamala Das’s memoir does not merely expand the possibilities of autobiography, but “sets itself up with the generic trappings of autobiography precisely in order to rewrite this genre,” which it does by troubling the relationships between the constituent nodes of autobiography: auto/self, bio/life, and graphy/writing. Recognizing this is key to understanding the main intervention of Kamala Das’s work: that it does not set itself the task of “rescuing women’s lives, selves, and writings from invisibility” as a great
deal of compelling feminist scholarship in India has sought to do, but to “use the autobiography to conscientiously stage the nonemergence of her self” and its attendant conditions of socio-historical (im)possibility.

A short story in this issue, “Helen More’s Suicide,” by Olga Zilberbourg, seeks to understand a woman’s life, as a biography might do, but here through the form of a fiction in which a midlife woman scholar attempts to assess the mystery of an older woman’s suicide. Helen More, a professor of English, is known as a militant feminist who was forced into retirement. In the story, her suicide cannot be attributed to an obvious cause such as a fatal disease or a major disappointment. Her younger colleague discusses the case with another older woman, a disabled pianist friend of the deceased. The story encourages us to ponder what makes life worth living and what we can expect from other people. Do we agree with the pianist that ultimately “nobody gives a hoot about you,” or do the friendships of these women in and of themselves indicate a more hopeful view?

Yet another approach to self-writing appears in Estelle Carol’s memoir, “The Chicago Women’s Graphics Collective: A Memoir,” which describes Carol’s time in the Chicago Women’s Liberation Union, a socialist feminist organization of many workgroups, one of which was the Graphics Collective of women artists who created posters dedicated to advancing the women’s movement of the 1970s. Carol provides information about herself and her artwork, including the smelly and dangerous chemicals the women used in creating their silk-screened posters. They believed their organization resisted the “egotism and the cult of the individual — the great-men-of-art syndrome” that they opposed, instead becoming a democratic collective. The group created visually striking images that were widely publicized, including the famous flower declaring “Sisterhood Is Blooming” and the little bird proclaiming that “Women Are Not Chicks.” However, the group suffered the same troubles as many other components of the women’s movement of that time, as members became suspicious of all leaders, and the collective dissolved after several years of successful collaboration.

Corey Hickner-Johnson’s short lyrical essay “The Color Run” provides a counterpoint and punctum to the autobiographical genre. Rather than narrating the authorial self, the first person I of the piece, through a life history or a series of recollections, Hickner-Johnson pictures the self through a particular crisis-moment in and of the body. Through
vivid description of pushing her body to an extreme—a punishing run "pounding 400s on the hills"—Hickner-Johnson attempts to wrest back her body "to feel [her] own sovereignty, if that is even a thing left in this world.” The immediacy, as well as the visceral and visual quality of Hickner-Johnson’s description, wills into relief “colors beneath my surface” against an otherwise "gray dream" of life’s monotony and disappointments.

The difficult history of feminist attempts to achieve collectivity also figures in Alexandra Ketchum’s article “‘The Place We’ve Always Wanted to Go But Never Could Find’: Finding Woman Space in Feminist Restaurants and Cafés in Ontario 1974–1982.” Ketchum focuses our attention on the movement to establish feminist restaurants in Ontario, Canada, from the mid-1970s to the early 1980s. She discusses how changing understandings of these spaces—marked by shifts between what Ketchum categorizes as “women’s spaces,” “women-centered spaces,” and “women-friendly” spaces—index broader issues of language difference, nationalism, economics, government policy, and mobility that women’s and lesbian activist movements were grappling with at the time. Ketchum argues that these shifts, coupled with gendered local government policies and capitalist relations, ultimately led to the disappearance of these spaces. Though they did not continue to operate, Ketchum argues that the relationships, forms of political organizing, and sense of community that were forged through these venues are a testament to their lasting importance.

Moving from past decades to the present, women’s artwork also features prominently in Hillary Chute’s review essay, “Feminist Graphic Art,” which introduces four graphic novels by women and two scholarly works on graphic art published in 2016 and 2017. Many of the texts that Chute describes are also examples of life writing or autobiography. These books display a range of subject matter more diverse than earlier women’s life writing. They feature “black women in sequence,” “new mutant” female superheroes, lesbian heroes, and women dealing with trauma and other forms of mental distress. Chute argues that in the last decade, there has been a blossoming of comics scholarship that is part of a “vital, exciting field of contemporary literature.” In contrast to purely verbal literary forms, Chute claims that new experimental forms of graphic texts emphasize the “embodiment inherent to comics in its processes of production—in which the hand-drawn mark indexes the body of the maker—[and so] helps to instantiate the form... as one that
is deeply embodied” in the comics form. She continues, “One can note the body or bodies on the page, and also in the page, in the traces of its own production.” This graphic embodiment lends itself to the recognition of racial and sexual diversity and ambiguity, from the black characters of 1930s comics to the present. Furthermore, the comic female characters in these new forms provide “new models for affiliation and public life” and “took up the discourse of differences, not only as oppression but also as critique and a rich site for ideation and for expanding grammars of the possible for self-actualization and collective formation.”

The final essay of this issue, Samantha Pergadia’s “Geologies of Sex and Gender: Excavating the Materialism of Gayle Rubin and Judith Butler,” shifts our attention away from the temporalities of individual life trajectories toward the overarching temporalities through which gendered and sexed subjects are formed as well as the disciplines that examine these issues. In Pergadia’s analysis of the works of Gayle Rubin and Judith Butler, she demonstrates how they both use geology as “both a method and metaphor that calibrates our understanding of emergence, time, and the state of our bodies.” Refuting scholars who either “demanded a narrative of nascency, separatism, and ideological rupture” for queer theory, or who regard queer theory as being animated by a dynamic of simultaneous emergence and expiration, a “paradoxical drive toward preservation and extinction,” Pergadia instead calls for a geologic examination of the relationship between feminist and queer theories. Through close attention to Rubin and Butler’s “shared sense of temporal organization that stems from the geologic,” as indexed by their respective use of fossil and rock tropes, Pergadia’s article further underscores queer theory’s competing understandings of matter and its constitution as a field, as well as its unresolved tensions that crosscut ongoing debates among new materialist feminists.

We close the issue with Ashwini Tambe’s News and Views piece, which reckons with the #MeToo movement of the past six months. Tambe explores how the issues publicized by this historic upheaval might be both sharpened and expanded by drawing on academic feminist thought, particularly on matters related to race, sex, and power.

Attiya Ahmad and Judith Gardiner,
for the editorial collective