

PERIPERFORMATIVE LIFE NARRATIVE

Queer Collages

Anna Poletti

What does it mean to have a life, is it always to add up to something?

—Lauren Berlant, asking the question in conversation with life writing scholar Jay Prosser, “Life Writing and Intimate Publics: A Conversation with Lauren Berlant”

In asking this question, Lauren Berlant repositioned a set of concerns driving much of the recent scholarship on life narrative. The question points to the fault lines on which all acts of self-representation rest. In the last two decades, much of the scholarship on life narrative has worked from the parameters established by Judith Butler (1990, 1993a, 1993b, 2005) in her influential theorizing of the performative nature of the subject.¹ To be intelligible as both the author and the subject of an act of life writing, the writer must first meet the requirement of performing a coherent self who lives a life that is at least partly intelligible through existing discourses (Butler 1993a, 2005; Smith 1998). The performative construction of the subject changes the understanding of the role of the author of life narrative by shifting our understanding of life narration from an act that “expresses” and “documents” a subject and a life to one that creates that self and life through narration (Smith 1998). Yet, as Mimi Thi Nguyen (2012: 177–78) argues in relation to the importance of life writing in Riot Grrrl, an aesthetics of truth telling about lived experience must be understood as occurring in a context that “register[s] how neoliberalism and its emphases on the entrepreneurial subject shapes even progressive or feminist adjustments to the structural determinations that constitute the historical present, engendering an emotional style, and a rhetorical prac-

tice, that sometimes . . . misrecognize[s] how forces work through these idioms.” We must not forget that the aesthetics of self-representation and associated truth claims are inextricably tied up with dominant discourses and practices. For those of us who study such acts, this is precisely their interest, because this interrelation works both ways: self-representation can (and often must) reinscribe hegemonic discourses of the subject and what constitutes a life, yet in some instances it can be used to test the limits of those discourses (Gilmore 2001). However, the vexed question of the political or social work that aesthetics undertakes remains.

The critical project of accounting for life narration often involves thinking this tension between the hegemonic function of self-representation and its potential for empowerment and progressive social impact. In this essay I approach the issue not from the common critical stance that privileges the power of autobiographical discourse to give marginalized subjects access to authoritative speaking positions (Couser 2011; Smith and Watson 2010) but from a consideration of how the formal properties of a given autobiographical act, in this case a documentary, can be used to critique the performative power of life narrative while still seeking to make truth claims about the lived experience of its author. I do so by considering Eve Sedgwick’s (2003, 2011) extension of Butler’s influential theory of the performative nature of the subject through the concept of the periperformative and how it might allow us to account for the role of aesthetics in autobiographical acts that take a critical stance in regard to the discourses that authorize the subjectivity of the author and the act of self-representation itself.

Before I continue, however, a note on terminology. One recent challenge that life narrative scholarship has faced has been negotiating the capacious nature of its subject: while initially formed in the belly of literature departments by scholars interested in identifying and defending the unique literary aesthetics of the genre of autobiography (see, e.g., Olney 1972 and the overview in Smith and Watson 2010), the study of life narrative must now contend with the increasingly mediated nature of social life (as found in social media [Morrison 2014]); the increased popularity of cultural forms that purport, in one way or another, to tell “true” (as in nonfictional) stories about lived experience (such as the successful podcast *This American Life* [Tumarkin 2014]); the increased popularity of memoir in the publishing industry (Gilmore 2010; Rak 2013); and the continued reliance on narratives of individual experience to the work of social justice movements (Smith and Watson 2010). As Julie Rak (2015: 157–61) shows, this proliferation has resulted in a destabilizing of critical terminology: how do we refer to such a large array of practices, from the everyday act of writing a Facebook status update to the long-

form literary work that seeks to tell the story of a life or the creation of a feature-length documentary film? Rak and I argue elsewhere (Poletti and Rak 2014) that this challenge partly stems from the continued influence of literary studies on the field, where there remains slippage between referring to narrative as a practice and a narrative as a product. In the context of this discussion, I adopt Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson's (2010: 4) term *life narrative* "as a general term for acts of self-presentation of all kinds and in diverse media." My intention in this essay is partly to think across media: to consider how a life narrative in the medium of documentary film might be used to critique the privileging of another medium (the book and the associated life narrative discourse of memoir) in critical understandings of life narrative.

The centrality of the book and memoir to arguments about the work of life narrative often focuses on life narrative's unique ability to give socially and politically marginalized subjects access to the discourse of identity and the field of cultural and political recognition (Couser 2011; Smith and Watson 2010). In response to this tendency, this essay identifies a class of life narrative texts that critique its aesthetics and their cultural dominance as a site of performative utterances about the self and life. I examine how formal innovation in life narrative can be a way to critique the terms under which the truth claims of memoir are made while still insisting on the unique force of the nonfictional mode of life narrative to make claims about living. I use the 2003 homemade documentary *Tarnation*, directed by Jonathan Caouette, as a case study. The film tells a relational life narrative of Caouette and his mother. It examines the experience of growing up queer in Texas in a family affected by poverty and mental illness and documents Caouette's attempts to care for his mother now that he is an adult. The film is constructed using collage to produce a text characterized by juxtaposition, ventriloquism, and remediation. These methods destabilize the relationship between sign and signified by introducing multiple referents into the text through citation. As Group Mu (quoted in Ulmer [1983] 2002: 99), a collective of Belgian semioticians, suggests of collage:

Each cited element breaks the continuity or the linearity of the discourse and leads necessarily to a double reading: that of the fragment perceived in relation to its text of origin; that of the same fragment as incorporated into a new whole, a different totality. The trick of collage consists also of never entirely suppressing the alterity of these elements reunited in a temporary composition. Thus the art of collage proves to be one of the most effective strategies in putting into question all the illusions of representation.

The potential of collage puts assumptions about representation under pressure, making it a powerful technique for life writers who aim to produce life narrative while responding to the normative ideas about life that underpin the autobiographical speaking position. As a strategy for life narrative, collage opens up the practice of life narrative to ventriloquism and remediation that in turn draw our attention to the citational function of the discourse by speaking in a voice and from a subject position that is clearly not that of the author. This voice reminds us of the discourses that precede and exceed the subject who is created in a given life narrative (Butler 1993a: 17–18). Caouette's use of collage as a formal element suggests that the truth about the author's life may be spoken with more force or accuracy using the persona or voice of a fictional character or celebrity. In his use of collage Caouette also questions the terms of access to the performative power of life narrative as a mode through which claims about life and living can be made. This questioning suggests a critique of the politics of recognition that dominates the marketing, production, and consumption of memoir in English-language cultures (Rak 2013). Rather than read homemade documentary, such as Caouette's, as representative of the struggle of nontraditional authors of life narrative for whom, as Smith and Watson (2010: 34) suggest, "the authority to narrate is hard-won in a constant engagement with readers posited as skeptical, unbelieving, resistant, and even hostile," I suggest that the form of assembled documentary is taken up because it allows Caouette to occupy a *periperformative* relationship with the performative force of memoir as a privileged cultural and commercial form for the recognition of experience, particularly of marginalized subjects who live, to use Berlant's (2008: viii) phrase, "as an x," either "freely chosen" or "marked by traditional taxonomies."²

The term *periperformative*, coined by Sedgwick, describes a particular kind of utterance, one that seeks to respond to the normative claims and subject positions that are enabled by the performative utterance theorized by J. L. Austin. Extending the post-structuralist interest in performativity, Sedgwick (2003: 67–91) argues that in spatial proximity to Austin's performative statement—an elite class of statement that does not describe an action in the world but constitutes one—exists the *possibility* for another kind of statement, one that seeks to disentangle *its* speaker from the assumed consensus that emanates from the performative utterance and its speaker. Rather than pay attention to the speaker of the performative and the action he or she undertakes, Sedgwick draws our attention to the reliance of the performative on a consenting audience or witness. Sedgwick illustrates this with two examples, one seemingly innocuous—the performative utterance of "I dare you"—and the other the highly charged and ideological utterance "I do" in the marriage vow (ibid.: 67–91). In both cases, her focus is not on

the relationship between addressor and addressee but on the interpellating power these statements have on those who witness them being uttered. In the case of “I dare you,” Sedgwick demonstrates how the statement—made by an addressor and directed at an addressee—interpellates an audience of people in front of whom the statement is made. Thus, when I say to you “I dare you,” it interpellates an audience of people whom I hail to bear witness to both your having been dared and your reaction to that dare. These people are interpellated because the force of my statement implies that they side with me in being interested in your capacity to do whatever you have been dared to do, or be branded a “wuss” (ibid.: 69). Witnesses are presumed to share the value of defending one’s honor and the problem posed by the possibility of dishonor or wussiness. “Thus,” Sedgwick suggests, “‘I dare you’ invokes a presumption, but only the presumption, of a consensus between speaker and witness, and to some extent between all of them and the addressee” (ibid.: 69).

It is in *the assumption* of consensus—the speaker’s ability to assume that the audience agrees with the values that underpin the speaker’s utterance, and in doing so to interpellate audience members as subjects who hold those normative values—that the performative statement is normative. Eschewing negotiation or the possibility of disagreement about the value of wussiness or the privileged legal and social status of the married heterosexual couple, the performative utterance shores up the values it assumes are consensus through acting as though those values are a given. As Butler (1993a: 17–18) argues, it is in the act of citation and reiteration that discourse produces power. The periperformative utterance—or at least the idea of its possibility—responds to this assumption by attempting to describe how things might be otherwise. In drawing our attention to the interpellating power of the performative statement, Sedgwick highlights the problem one faces in disentangling oneself from the normative, consensus view presumed by it. There is no formulaic negative response to witnessing a performative (one cannot immediately chime in with “I undare you”): “To disinterpellate from a performative scene will usually require, not another explicit performance nor simply the negative of one, but the nonce, referential act of a periperformative” (Sedgwick 2003: 70). Periperformative statements, then, “are *about* performatives and, more properly, . . . cluster *around* performatives” and are attempts by individuals interpellated by being the witness of a performative utterance to destabilize the consensus values or ideologies that give the performative utterance its power to *do* something in the world and presume the witness’s agreement with the values that underpin the act (ibid.: 68).

Sedgwick herself wondered whether positing the concept of the periperfor-

mative could produce any critical insight. When she revisited the concept in *The Weather in Proust*, in a discussion of the poetry of C. P. Cavafy, she tells us: “I’ve long puzzled over the status of the idea of the periperformative utterance. Given that there logically has to be such a thing, as long as there is a class (however uncircumscribable) of explicit performative utterance—given that, does the new classification have any more than a nominal substance; is it of any *use*?” (Sedgwick 2011: 66). In what follows I apply the concept as a way to test it: what kinds of texts does it make visible, and what kinds of readings can it facilitate? In applying the concept of the periperformative in a field that already has a strong relationship to the performative, life-writing studies, we may see some answers to Sedgwick’s question.

The Dual Performative Function of Life Narrative

Current theorizing about life narrative commonly situates the act of presenting a narrative about one’s life as the performative utterance through which having a self and a life, and its value, is produced (Smith and Watson 2010: 16).³ Life narrative is performative in the sense that it is through the utterance of narration that the subjectivity, and the life, are brought into being. The power of the performative utterance of life narrative lies in the kinds of truth claims it makes (claims about an individual’s experience), its status as a nonfictional genre that makes claims about reality, and its proximity to discourses of recognition such as human rights and testimony. This formulation has been particularly important for analyzing the use of life narrative by marginalized subjects to speak about their experiences. Much critical activity in life-writing studies examines the techniques and strategies used by memoirists to claim the authority to speak about the world, to convince their readers of the truthfulness of their story, and the influence of these performative statements on understandings of, for example, childhood, Western understandings of life in the Middle East in the era of the “war on terror,” experiences of trauma, and addiction.⁴

But life-writing scholarship is also intensely interested in the complex ethical dynamics that the performative utterance of life narrative produces. Like Sedgwick, theorists of life narrative identify the role of the audience in the performative utterance of life narrative as consenting to the *general* ideas about subjectivity and living that the individual performative utterance of *a* life narrative assumes. An example of this is Leigh Gilmore’s (2010: 661) recent argument that the potential for memoir to influence popular understandings of marginalization through its depiction of the structural, symbolic, legal, and social contexts in which individu-

als struggle to live and tell their stories of living is under threat from the “neo-confessional” style of commercial memoir (such as *A Million Little Pieces* or *Eat, Pray, Love*). Through assuming that audiences value the possibility of individual redemption and the politics of “compassion for similar others,” commercial memoirs confirm a consensus that denies the relationships between the experiences of an individual and the structures that shape and give meaning to those experiences. G. Thomas Couser, too, is deeply committed to thinking about memoir as a genre that is inherently political: uniquely democratic and important to democracy, because, in narrating their lives “previously marginalized or oppressed populations: gays and lesbians, people with various stigmatized illnesses and disabilities, and so on” claim “their rights” (Couser 2011: 178). For Couser, “their speech is significant work” because “the work has a performative dimension. It acts out its message: I am here and I can speak for myself” (ibid.).

The terms under which people “speak for themselves” and in speaking create lives and selves are, in current scholarship on life narrative, figured as formal questions that intersect with social structures of value.⁵ In purporting to speak a truth about the self and about life, authors make a pact with the reader that they are speaking about their lived experience “in a spirit of truth” (Miller 2007: 538). How this pact is initiated, sealed, and maintained is a question of formal techniques in both the text and the social field: the ability of the author to be perceived as a believable subject by reading publics. In the case of formal techniques, the “autobiographical pact” is formed through a combination of literary techniques and the author’s and reader’s awareness of preexisting genre expectations (Lejeune 1989: 3–30).⁶ Common techniques associated with the pact in prose include the name of the author corresponding with the name of the narrator, and the use of voice to constitute both the authorial subject (the narrating “I”) and the subject of the narrative (the narrated “I”).⁷ While individual authors make use of other techniques to present evidence, memory, and the role of others in their lives, these autobiographical techniques are the minimum formal requirements for life narrative to be recognized as a nonfictional genre and are fundamental to its performative power.⁸

While factual errors that can be cross-checked may ground the autobiographical pact (and are the basis for life writing’s status as nonfiction), the discourses that construct a “trustworthy” subject are not equally accessible to all would-be authors. Gilmore (2001: 3) argues that this relationship between the formal characteristics of the genre and their shaping by larger contexts suggests that autobiography is better thought of as a discourse, or “rhetorical setting,” not as a specific genre, drawing attention to the juridical function of genre. Rak (2004), on

the other hand, argues that the continuing tensions around terminology in criticism on life writing, where “memoir” has functioned as a Derridean supplement to “autobiography,” suggests that a recognition of genre as a social practice is needed. In both cases life narrative theory has attempted to draw out the intersection between genre as a process that shapes legibility and life narrative as a path for accessing privileged forms of identity and visibility. Smith and Watson (2010: 77) draw our attention to this component of life narratives by theorizing the ideological “I” that is a component of all life narrative: “The ideological ‘I’ is at once everywhere and nowhere in autobiographical acts, in the sense that the notions of personhood and the ideologies of identity constitutive of it are so internalized (personally and culturally) that they seem ‘natural’ and ‘universal’ characteristics of persons.” Thus life narrative is a performative utterance that brings into being both a life and a self, and a performative reiteration of dominant discourses and ideologies that constitute both personhood and the intelligibility of what meaning may be found in “life” itself. It is this second performative function of life narrative that opens it up to the possibility of periperformative responses. Indeed, it is this normative component of life narrative that has been the focus of extensive criticism, most recently in the special issue of *Biography* (Whitlock and Couser 2012) on the subject of (post)human lives. This rich vein of critical work stems from a critique of autobiography as the master genre of life narrative rooted in the autonomous self inaugurated by the Enlightenment and extends to a consideration of the role of autobiography, and life narrative studies, in the circulation and validation of that discourse (Smith and Watson 2010: 3–5).⁹ The critical focus, to date, has been on the interplay between life narrative—as a practice that incorporates a range of specific genres which share a nonfictional status—and discourses of subjectivity and identity.¹⁰

However, the underlying problem of the relationship between life narrative and the circulation of normative concepts of “a life” remains a tension in contemporary life narrative theory and scholarship. As Berlant observes after her attendance at the largest biennial academic conference dedicated to life narrative: “To my ear, the genre of the ‘life’ is a most destructive conventionalized form of normativity: when norms feel like laws, they constitute a social pedagogy of the rules for belonging and intelligibility whose narrowness threatens people’s capacity to invent ways to attach to the world” (Berlant and Prosser 2011: 182).¹¹ “Get a life!” is perhaps the most easily recognizable phrase that articulates the structuring power of the genre of the “life” Berlant evokes.¹² This powerful phrase passes judgment not on the subject but on the subject’s actions, orientations, investments, and attachments. “A life” in this sense—indeed, as evoked by early modes of auto-

biography and biography—is an achievement, not of subjectivity, but of action. While agency may be the necessary condition for action, it is the *doing* that counts in *having* “a life.” As a significant thread in recent queer theory argues—Sara Ahmed’s (2010) critique of happiness, Berlant’s (2008, 2011) theorizing of intimate publics and cruel optimism, Judith Halberstam’s (2011) rethinking of failure, and Lee Edelman’s (2004) critique of hopeful futurism—what we attach to and pursue as the things that give life meaning are fundamental to how we find a place in the social field, and what opportunities for survival and thriving are open to us.¹³ Given this other way of thinking about a life—not as a subject made visible or precarious through the citation of discourses of identity but as an ongoing process of being made up of activities, fantasies, attachments, and orientations—how might we think again about the performative function of memoir and what it assumes is consensus about having a “life”?

If memoir is conceived as performative then, following Sedgwick, we may begin to attend to the periperformative life narratives that cluster around it and attempt to respond to the consensus assumed by its forms and ideologies. With her theorization of the periperformative, Sedgwick makes possible an alternative view of the relationship between marginalized subjects and the practice of life narrative, which repositions our understanding of the citational power of the performative.¹⁴ While current theories of life writing focus on how producing life narrative is a way for marginalized subjects to lay claim to the authority of a trustworthy subject who is able to make true statements about his or her experience of the world and therefore “be heard,” the concept of the periperformative draws the critic’s attention to those artists and life writers who may wish to critique the terms under which an “I” is constituted, considered trustworthy, and can speak. To recognize the possibility that such texts might exist, and to go in search of them, we must first acknowledge the “high threshold of initiative” required by the periperformative and think differently about the role of formalist criticism in furthering our understanding of why and how making nonfictional claims about selves and lives matters (Sedgwick 2003: 70).

There is some urgency for this intervention, to my mind, given the kinds of conclusions that can be produced by the correlation between the privileged role of memoir in making visible trustworthy subjects and the use of specific formal techniques. One example of this is Couser’s (2011: 178) proposition that, in thinking about how memoir makes previously unheard voices legible, “we,” as readers, do not need to read for meaning. The straightforwardness associated with the performative, the agreement that we all know what underpins both the authority of the speaker and our consensus with the values their utterance implies, leads Couser

to suggest that interpretation is not what “we” do when we read “memoir.” Instead, he suggests, we must ask, “what is its purpose?” This suggestion that we no longer need to read for meaning, but only for purpose, is central to Couser’s theories about the distinction between memoir and fiction: memoir has a more specific, and limited, function in order to exert “leverage on reality” (ibid.: 170). As a performative, it must therefore be less ambiguous. In what follows I propose that the periperformative is a way to expand our critical purview to attend to life-writing texts that seek to tell other kinds of truths about living—ones more aligned with current theories of life circulating in queer theory and ones that wish to comment on consensus views about lives and living that are assumed by the performative utterance of memoir.

Homemade life narrative texts by queer subjects that use collage present a compelling counterexample to the prioritizing of intelligibility and recognition promised by the citation of the discourse of memoir. These texts, instead, attempt a periperformative response to the normative formal techniques associated with memoir and its power to bring into being a self and life that reiterate normative values associated with living and identity. In the example I explore below, the use of collage produces a text characterized by ventriloquism, remediation, split screen, and montage in order to speak back to the power of life narrative to exert leverage on reality. By speaking as and with figures from popular culture, Caouette tells the story of trying to figure out what having a life might mean, a story of hope, identification, possibility, and experimentation. He, like numerous authors of personal zines, blogs, and tumblrs, tells a story of “the emergence of the first person, of the singular, of the active, and of the indicative” that insists that such positions “are all questions rather than presumptions for queer performativity” (Sedgwick 2003: 71). We risk a great deal if we believe, as Couser seems to, that the struggle to find the appropriate aesthetic for speaking about one’s life is a secondary question for all artists who produce life narrative. We risk assuming that life itself has no aesthetic qualities and ignoring that the *aesthetics* of living may, in some cases, be part of the truth a life writer seeks to tell. Perhaps ironically, in light of the emphasis apportioned the work that memoir does in communicating powerful truths to its audience, we risk underestimating how aesthetic experiences can become resources for living, arguably a shared interest of both queer and life-writing theory.

***Tarnation*: Assembling a Way to Live**

In *Tarnation*, Caouette uses the associative logic of collage to tell a number of interconnected stories. One narrative follows the story of Caouette's family, his mother's severe and ongoing mental health problems, the inadequate care and treatment she received, and his family's poverty. Another prominent narrative in the film details Caouette's childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood in this context, and is a relational narrative that explores the influence of his mother, grandmother, and grandfather on his early life. The third narrative, as I argue elsewhere (Poletti 2012), is a narrative about Caouette's relationship with popular culture as a resource for living and making sense of his family environment. The film is a mix of home movie footage taken from Caouette's family archive (most of it shot by Caouette when he was an adolescent); material shot on a digital video camera explicitly for inclusion in the documentary, including observational footage, interviews with family members, and reenactments; and numerous clips from television and cinema. While *Tarnation* exposes the impact of his mother's illness on Caouette's life, the film also shows the variety of ways he found to hope, dream, and live in and around his changing family situation. *Tarnation* is stitched together as a collage through the use of split screen, intertitles, and montage to both mimic his mother's dissociative cognition and proffer ways of living alongside it. As I have argued previously (Poletti 2012) and discuss in further detail below, these formal techniques for assembling the film from various materials mirror the strategies for living that Jonathan developed in his childhood and which are also the subject of the film.¹⁵ One example of how montage and intertitles are used for periperformative ends is a sequence titled "Recurring Dream" that describes the fantasies of the fourteen-year-old Jonathan. The narration is placed as subtitles below a montage of short audiovisual clips from television and film that mimic the quick movement across content achieved by channel surfing. The text reads:

At 14, Jonathan began having this recurring dream. / The dream was about a tall blonde boy. / Who resembled a grown-up version of "The Little Prince" / Jonathan also began to have a fantasy / of being in rock musicals like "Hair." / Jonathan thought that if one day / He met producer Roger Stigwood / They could collaborate / on a rock opera about Jonathan's life / Zero Mostel could play Adolph / Louise Lasser could play Rosemary / Robbie Benson could play Jonathan / Joni Mitchell could play Renee / Mavis Staples could play the social worker / Nina Hagen and Klaus Nomi could play the foster parents / and the cast of "Zoom" could serve as a chorus / of troubled kids in foster care. / There would be nothing like it.

In this montage sequence, Caouette stages an encounter between his audience and an important strategy he used as a child and adolescent to maintain belief in a future that might be different from the present. Importantly, this strategy involves turning the experience of life into a text, but the genre to which the child turns to represent his experience is associated not with life narrative but with the melodramatic hybrid genre of the rock opera. This strategy involves the performance, close reading, and reenactment of popular culture in a way commonly associated with camp, a practice defined by “prizing the form away from its content” and valuing style, and the “playing” of various roles (Dyer 1999: 113).¹⁶ In presenting the audience with an example of his belief in the transformative potential of the style of the rock opera using the technique of montage, Caouette presents his childhood coping strategies *as* his life narrative, rather than as the subject of a confession that would confirm the causal relationship between poverty, parental mental illness, and unhappiness, and establish his identity as a survivor. In his recurring dream, the child resists the paranoid position that sees in the future only a confirmation of his paranoid fantasies (in this case, the determining and monolithic power of mental illness and poverty). He also refuses to believe that these material conditions determine what his life is or what it means. Caouette narrates the dream itself as a technique to distance his autobiographical storytelling from the normative conditions of memoir and “its almost legalistic definition of truth telling, its anxiety about invention, and its preference for the literal and the verifiable” (Gilmore 2001: 3). The dream *is* the reality Caouette wishes to present with fidelity, rather than the *need* for the dream being the focus of his narrative. Jonathan’s passionate attachment to the rock opera form and its various figures critiques the powerful association between testimony (as a form of speaking about one’s life) and the trustworthy subject that is constructed by the performative utterance of the memoir of traumatic childhood that rose to prominence in the 1990s and 2000s.¹⁷ By representing his use of melodramatic forms and subjects from popular culture to make sense of his experience, Caouette uses life narrative to tell the story of his life that disrupts the relationship of the narrating “I” and the narrated “I,” which is foundational to the performative utterance of memoir.

Sedgwick (2011: 66) speculates on the relationship between the periperformative and camp when she revisits the periperformative in *The Weather in Proust*. After wondering about the usefulness of the concept, she notes:

My particular range of reading being what it is—or indeed probably for a more substantive reason—such moments of art have seemed to me to cluster around recognizably queer authors and cultural values. Queer, I

might even say, verging on camp. But that's supposing we managed to think of camp, as I believe we need to, not in terms of parody or even wit, but with more of an eye of its visceral, operatic power: the startling outcrops of overinvested erudition; the prodigal production of alternative histories; the "over"-attachment to fragmentary, marginal, waste, lost, or leftover cultural products; the richness of affective variety; and the irrepressible, cathartic fascination with ventriloquist forms of relation.

It is the "cathartic fascination with ventriloquist forms of relation" that Sedgwick suggests characterizes camp and that Caouette uses in the sequence described above to critique the dominance of memoir and its citation of the discourses of identity through the autobiographical pact. The genre of the rock opera, the fourteen-year-old Jonathan feels, is a far more effective way to seek recognition of his experiences. The rock opera, with its visceral embodied power of physical performance, sidesteps the rhetorical requirements for narration in "a spirit of truth" in favor of a melodramatic transmission of truthful feeling. Caouette furthers his use of camp to critique the formal requirement of the autobiographical pact, and the use of voice to constitute both the authorial subject (the narrating "I") and the subject of the narrative (the narrated "I") as constitutive of the memoir's performative power, in the sequence that follows the "Recurring Dream."

In the next sequence, Caouette replaces the montage with the split screen; first three screens, then four, are visible. Each screen cycles through a collage of home video footage showing Jonathan, his mother, and grandparents; films (such as *The Little Prince* [1974], *Come Back to the 5 & Dime Jimmy Dean*, *Jimmy Dean* [1982], and *Rosemary's Baby* [1968]); and television programs (such as the 1970s children's program *Zoom!*). The soundtrack is also a collage: the sequence is accompanied by Shelley Plimpton singing the song "Frank Mills" from *Hair*, with the audio from the other screens audible, and intelligible, in the mix. Recurring footage in the right-hand bottom corner shows a headshot of Jonathan as a teenager, miming the song "Frank Mills" in sync with the soundtrack.

We see in this sequence that, for the young Jonathan, camp performance is a way to create and sustain a reparative position in relation to the *possibility* of his life that draws on the power of the performer's agency in popular culture. Jonathan's youthful performances are perhaps a precursor to recent reworkings of camp and drag studied by Aymar Jean Christian (2010: 352), where lip-synching camp performers on YouTube are "infusing sincerity, emotion and deeper meanings of selfhood in 'camp,'" heralding a shift away from previous uses of camp for ironic

distancing. Caouette uses this technique in order to deliberately set aside the primacy of the autobiographical pact that secures the relationship between subject, narrator, and author, by speaking as Plimpton and the character Crissy, the fictional narrator of “Frank Mills.” However, this is not impetuous rule breaking for the sake of it. This technique is adopted in an attempt to communicate something vitally important to Caouette’s life and way of living, his experience of growing up queer in Texas in a family shaped by his mother’s mental illness. Rather than adopt the established techniques of truth telling that insist on an indexical relationship between author, narrator, and subject—unified by voice—Caouette deploys ventriloquism. He uses ventriloquism’s association with camp and postmodernism to avoid the aesthetic requirements of life narrative traditionally seen to secure its status as a performative utterance that brings a subject and a life into being.

We can better appreciate Caouette’s film as an example of a periperformative life narrative by considering Couser’s (2011: 165) discussion of the (im)possibility of postmodern memoir. In his discussion of contemporary American memoir in *Memoir: An Introduction*, Couser acknowledges that the “memoir boom more or less coincided with the advent of literary postmodernism,” a contentious claim—in literary historical terms—given that the paradigmatic text of postmodernism he cites, John Barth’s *Lost in the Funhouse* (1968), was published at least twenty years prior to the beginning of the memoir boom, usually dated as beginning in the 1990s.¹⁸ Quibbling about dates aside, Couser’s list of traits that characterize postmodernism overlaps with the techniques I am suggesting could characterize periperformative life narrative: “the mixing of high and low culture, the open appropriation of elements of previous creative works, a parodic impulse, and the trope of the world as labyrinth” (ibid.: 165). After suggesting that only two memoirs from the boom qualify as “postmodern,” Couser explains that the reason for this is that postmodern techniques fundamentally risk the performative power of memoir: “There is a danger to the memoir in flaunting this notion [of the work as a construction] as postmodernism does: the more the creator insists on its artificiality, the less force the narrative may have, the weaker its ‘purchase’ on the world . . . to flaunt the artificiality of memoir is to go against the grain; to contradict its essence” (ibid.: 168). Couser’s concern allows us to return to Sedgwick’s idea that periperformative statements are attempts by individuals (in this case, Caouette) interpellated by being the witness of a performative utterance (memoir) to destabilize the consensus values or ideologies (the formal techniques for narrating a life that construct a trustworthy subject) that give the performative utterance its power to *do* something in the world, what Couser refers to as “the work of memoir”

and its “essence” (Couser 2011: 179). His belief in the essential value and function of memoir returns us to the dominance of the critical view among life-writing scholars that the memoir’s power resides in its role as a discourse that is cited to gain access to culturally dominant modes of subjectivity and the recognition that flows from them. In dismissing the validity of postmodern techniques for the practice of memoir, Couser misrecognizes the nature of the challenge presented by those techniques by ignoring the possibility that aesthetic techniques can be used to challenge ideologies. He dismisses aesthetic techniques *because* they risk the ideological function of memoir as a genre through which marginalized subjects can access recognition of their experiences.

What distinguishes periperformative life narrative from postmodern memoir, however, is that periperformative life narrative does not take up the postmodern critique of the impossibility of truth or a relationship between text and reality. Periperformative life narrative, rather, *wants* to make truth claims about the author’s life experiences, but critiques the terms under which those claims can be made and the consensus views about what makes a life meaningful that they assume, what Berlant (Berlant and Prosser 2011: 181) refers to as “the presumed self-evident value of the bionarrative” and the idea of “the good life.” When Sedgwick (2011: 58) revisited the concept of periperformativity in her discussion of Cavafy’s poetry, she further clarified the terms under which periperformatives respond to performatives by emphasizing that “the periperformative . . . is the grammar in which affect and subjectivity can be explicitly brought into relation with issues of performative force.” Caouette gives us one indication of how a periperformative response to memoir might formulate this relation in his use of home video footage of his childhood self lip-synching to Plimpton’s rendition of “Frank Mills.” To consider Caouette’s use of Plimpton’s voice as a way to narrate his life and put the performative force of memoir into a relation with affect and subjectivity, we must contend with Jonathan’s use of Plimpton’s performative agency.

In his article contributing to a special issue of *Camera Obscura* on the diva, Edward O’Neill (2007: 15) argues that what is overlooked in feminist and psychoanalytic approaches to cinema and Christian Metz’s theory of identification is “the possibility of identifying with the agency of performers themselves.” O’Neill argues that “identification with the *performative agency* itself, the very power to perform” is central to camp (ibid.: 16), not as an ironic form of distancing or paranoid lens, but as a reparative position that responds to the experience of being interpellated as straight by mainstream culture. In identifying with the power of the diva to bring *her* style to the character and the camera, “the very moment of stylization within the text becomes a point of identification as labor and as style and taste . . .

and it is this *process*—not a static image, not an object for a subject—that beckons” (ibid.: 15; emphasis added).

In other words, it is pathos in the style and mastery of the labor in Plimpton’s performance that the teenage Jonathan seeks to marshal as a resource for not only surviving but seeking to thrive, in a family environment characterized by disassociation, disruption, and poverty—a context represented in the archival footage of his family. In remediating the child’s use of Plimpton into the split-screen sequence in *Tarnation*, Caouette demonstrates the importance of performative agency to his experience of affect. Jonathan speaks in the voice of Plimpton about loss and longing (*I met a boy called Frank Mills on December 12 right here . . . but unfortunately I lost his address*), and more complex feelings of ambivalence (*I love him, but it embarrasses me to walk down the street with him*). The first sequence that precedes this, discussed above, uses channel surfing to structure the narration of Jonathan’s fantasies of turning his life into a rock opera. In this sequence the everyday practice of media consumption and Jonathan’s strong relationship with popular culture are presented as a resource for giving his experience of family dysfunction greater meaning (“There would be nothing like it”). As a document of his childhood strategies for staying attached to a belief in a better life, the inclusion of the footage *is* the story of *Tarnation*. Accessing the style and labor of Plimpton’s performance, by identifying with her performative agency, was a strategy Jonathan used to stay attached to life in the face of family dysfunction, poverty, and his own mental health problems.

Couser (2011: 138) explicitly addresses ventriloquism as a technique that challenges that performative force of memoir when he considers Gertrude Stein’s *Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* as an example of American memoir. Of Stein’s appropriation of Toklas’s voice, he says:

Stein’s taking the initiative to write her partner’s life single-handedly was an act of enormous chutzpah. The presumption would make the act inconceivable in most relationships. It was probably in part the queerness of the relationship that authorized it. The form [of ventriloquism] itself suggests the intimacy of the relationship and even hints confessionally at its emotional and sexual dimensions. In the end, Stein’s use of Toklas’s viewpoint does not lead to caricature or condescension, rather, her compassionate portrayal of her loyal partner, her approximation of Alice’s voice in the narrative, and the frequent use of the first-person plural pronoun emphasize the interdependence of the two women and the intermingling of their consciousnesses. This unorthodox narrative can stand, finally, as a loving recognition and reenactment of their partnership. (ibid.)

Here, Couser manages to incorporate a canonical work of memoir into his account of its performative function *despite* its violation of the requirement for an indexical relationship between author and narrator. He achieves this by aligning Stein's text with confession—the speaking of the “truth” about the self and about one's desires—a primary technique for the production of identity in Christian cultures (Foucault [1976] 1998). Given that memoir functions as a performative utterance about identity and the self anchored by the formal technique of an indexical relationship between the author and the narrator, Couser (2011: 138) is led to suggest that *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* is “of course, an act of ventriloquism, and under other circumstances it might constitute a hoax.” Yet he suggests that “another way to look at it is as an act of transpersonal life writing in which the intimacy of the relationship and its homosexuality allowed a transgression of the usual boundaries of the genre” (ibid.: 138). Such a reading permits Stein's violation of the formal requirements of the genre because it can be seen to confirm the performative function of memoir, to make visible and intelligible the lesbian identity of its author. Stein's text can be read as rule breaking that confirms the rule.

In following Sedgwick's suggestion and going in search of periperformative responses to the performative utterance of memoir, I have found my way to queer life narratives produced largely outside the commercial cultural industry. Like Sedgwick's seemingly inevitable return to queer texts, this probably says more about my reading and viewing habits than it does about the concept I have been exploring. In using such texts as cases it is not my intention to imply that only works created in the spirit of DIY culture, or that use collage as a primary technique, are *the* exemplars of periperformative life writing. There are no doubt other methods and other responses to the performative utterance of memoir.¹⁹ *Tarnation* is undeniably a documentary that is in conversation with the complex histories of film, television, and documentary, yet in reading a documentary as a response to memoir's performative power and cultural force, I have indicated the potential of the periperformative to illuminate the formal qualities of life narrative across mediums (Poletti 2012). This links Sedgwick's theory to N. Katherine Hayles's (2004: 69) call for a “medium-specific analysis” that derives its power as an interpretive approach from “holding a term constant across media . . . and then varying the media to explore how medium-specific constraints and possibilities shape texts.” In this case, I have held the genre of memoir as a performative act constant and looked across media for periperformative responses to it.

It is worth remembering too Sedgwick's (2003: 90n2) warning that there is nothing “inherently antinormative about the highlighting of periperformative utterances.” For *Tarnation*, the periperformative makes possible a way to classify

and read the film's use of collage and ventriloquism that recognizes these material strategies are "in complex dynamic interplay with content, coming into focus or fading into the background, depending on what performances the work enacts" (Hayles 2004: 71). Caouette's life narrative is, I have argued, *about* collage as a practice—about cobbling together ways to attach to the world that cannot be subsumed into an identity or bionarrative—as much as it is the product of collage (the film itself). The concept of the periperformative opens up the possibility of reading Caouette's film as a situated, spatialized response to the memoir boom and its focus on "giving voice" to marginalized identities.

Notes

1. The other influential line of scholarship has expanded arguments from neuropsychology that narrative is a fundamental cognitive function of humans and that telling stories is how we understand ourselves (see Eakin 2008).
2. On life writing and marginalized subjects, see Smith and Watson 2010: 34. For an explication of the use of memoir for the representation of marginalized experiences, see Couser 2011: 169–82.
3. For variations on this formulation, see Miller 2002, 2007; and Couser 2011.
4. See Douglas 2010; Gilmore 2001, 2010; *Life Writing* 2008; and Whitlock 2007.
5. This is also the case in documentary studies; see Holmlund and Fuchs 1997.
6. See also Miller 2007 and Couser 2011.
7. These examples of a textual "I" are distinct from the historical "I," the "real life" author who remains unknowable but facts about whom are verifiable (Smith and Watson 2010: 72).
8. The recent development of graphic memoir is fostering similar formal analysis to discern how autobiographical comics produce distinct formal possibilities for the performative utterance of life and self; see, e.g., Chute 2010.
9. See also Whitlock 2012.
10. See, e.g., Royster 2011.
11. Her remarks came at "Life Writing and Intimate Publics," a panel for the Seventh International Auto/biography Association Conference, held at the University of Sussex, June 28–July 1, 2010.
12. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (1996: 1–24) sketch this territory in their introduction to the collection *Getting a Life: Everyday Uses of Autobiography*.
13. See also Melissa Gregg's (2013) review, "Stepping off the Conveyor Belt," of Ahmed's *Promise of Happiness*, Berlant's *Cruel Optimism*, and Ann Cvetkovich's *Depression*.
14. See Butler 1993a: 17–18.
15. For a close reading of a scene in which drag is used, see Poletti 2012.

16. Richard Dyer's (1999) distinction between camp as an action ("camping about") and camp as a sensibility is being invoked here, but it is also challenged by a film like *Tarnation*, where the sensibility is manifested through the production of text.
17. For an analysis of the rise of the memoir of traumatic childhood in the 1990s and 2000s, see Douglas 2010.
18. For an account of the memoir boom as a cultural phenomenon defined by the increased production and sales of nonfiction in English-language book markets, see Rak 2013. It is possible that Couser is using the term *memoir boom* to refer to both the development of the field of scholarship on life writing (which was rejuvenated in the 1970s by a burst of activity that continues today) and the commercial success of memoir. (I thank Julie Rak for this observation.)
19. For example, the texts published under Semiotext(e)'s Native Agents series, including Chris Kraus's novels *I Love Dick* (1997), *Torpor* (2015), and *Aliens and Anorexia* (2000).

References

- Ahmed, Sara. 2010. *The Promise of Happiness*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Barth, John. 1968. *Lost in the Funhouse*. New York: Doubleday.
- Berlant, Lauren. 2008. *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- . 2011. *Cruel Optimism*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Berlant, Lauren, and Jay Prosser. 2011. "Life Writing and Intimate Publics: A Conversation with Lauren Berlant." *Biography: An Interdisciplinary Quarterly* 34, no. 1: 180–87.
- Butler, Judith. 1990. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge.
- . 1993a. "Critically Queer." *GLQ* 1: 17–18.
- . 1993b. *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex."* New York: Routledge.
- . 2005. *Giving an Account of Oneself*. New York: Fordham University Press.
- Chute, Hillary. 2010. *Graphic Women: Life Narrative and Contemporary Comics*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Couser, G. Thomas. 2011. *Memoir: An Introduction*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Christian, Aymar Jean. 2010. "Camp 2.0: A Queer Performance of the Personal." *Communication, Culture and Critique* 3: 352–76.
- Come Back to the 5 & Dime, Jimmy Dean, Jimmy Dean*. 1982. Directed by Robert Altman. Los Angeles: Sandcastle 5 Productions.
- Douglas, Kate. 2010. *Contesting Childhood: Autobiography, Trauma, and Memory*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

- Dyer, Richard. 1999. "It's Being So Camp as Keeps Us Going." In *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject: A Reader*, edited by Fabio Cleto. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Eakin, Paul John. 2008. *Living Autobiographically: How We Create Identity in Narrative*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Edelman, Lee. 2004. *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Foucault, Michel. [1976] 1998. *The Will to Knowledge*. Vol. 1 of *The History of Sexuality*. London: Penguin Books.
- Gilmore, Leigh. 2001. *The Limits of Autobiography: Trauma and Testimony*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- . 2010. "American Neoconfessional: Memoir, Self-Help, and Redemption on Oprah's Couch." *Biography: An Interdisciplinary Quarterly* 33, no. 4: 657–79.
- Gregg, Melissa. 2013. "Stepping off the Conveyor Belt." Academia.edu. www.academia.edu/3317120/Stepping_off_the_conveyor_belt (accessed April 17, 2013).
- Halberstam, Judith. 2011. *The Queer Art of Failure*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Hayles, N. Katherine. 2004. "Print Is Flat, Code Is Deep: The Importance of Media-Specific Analysis." *Poetics Today* 25, no. 1: 67–90.
- Holmlund, Chris, and Cynthia Fuchs. 1997. "Introduction." In *Between the Sheets, in the Streets: Queer, Lesbian, Gay Documentary*, 1–12. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Lejeune, Philippe. 1989. "The Autobiographical Pact." Translated by Katherine Leary. In *On Autobiography*, edited by Paul John Eakin, 3–30. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Life Writing*. 2008. "Trauma in the Twenty-First Century." Special issue, 5, no. 2.
- The Little Prince*. 1974. Directed by Stanley Donen. Los Angeles: Paramount Pictures.
- Miller, Nancy K. 2002. *But Enough about Me: Why We Read Other People's Lives*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- . 2007. "The Entangled Self: Genre Bondage in the Age of Memoir." *PMLA* 132, no. 2: 537–48.
- Morrison, Aimée. 2014. "Facebook and Coaxed Affordances." In *Identity Technologies: Constructing the Self Online*, edited by Anna Poletti and Julie Rak, 112–31. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Nguyen, Mimi Thi. 2012. "Riot Grrrl, Race, and Revival." *Women & Performance: a journal of feminist theory* 22, nos. 2–3: 173–96.
- Olney, James. 1972. *Metaphors of Self: The Meaning of Autobiography*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- O'Neill, Edward. 2007. "The M-m-mama of Us All: Divas and the Cultural Logic of Late Ca(m)pitalism." *Camera Obscura* 65, no. 22: 11–37.
- Poletti, Anna. 2012. "Reading for Excess: Relational Autobiography, Affect, and Popular Culture in *Tarnation*." *Life Writing* 9, no. 2: 157–72.

- Poletti, Anna, and Julie Rak. 2014. "Introduction: Digital Dialogues." In *Identity Technologies: Constructing the Self Online*, edited by Anna Poletti and Julie Rak, 3–24. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Rak, Julie. 2004. "Are Memoirs Autobiography? A Consideration of Genre and Public Identity." *Genre* 36: 305–26.
- . 2013. *Boom! Manufacturing Memoir for the Popular Market*. Ontario, Canada: Wilfred Laurier.
- . 2015. "Life Writing versus Automedia: The Sims 3 Game as a Life Lab." *Biography: An Interdisciplinary Quarterly* 38, no. 2: 155–80.
- Rosemary's Baby*. 1968. Directed by Roman Polanski. Los Angeles: William Castle Productions.
- Royster, Francesca T. 2011. "Introductory Notes: Performing Queer Lives." *Biography: An Interdisciplinary Quarterly* 34, no. 3: v–xii.
- Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. 2003. "Around the Performative: Periperformative Vicinities in Nineteenth-Century Narrative." In *Touching Feeling: Affect Pedagogy, Performativity*, 69–91. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- . 2011. "Cavafy, Proust, and the Queer Little Gods." In *The Weather in Proust*, edited by Jonathan Goldberg, 42–68. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Smith, Sidonie. 1998. "Performativity, Autobiographical Practice, Resistance." In *Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader*, edited by Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, 108–15. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Smith, Sidonie, and Julia Watson. 1996. "Introduction." In *Getting a Life: Everyday Uses of Autobiography*, edited by Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, 1–24. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- . 2010. *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*. 2nd ed. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Tarnation*. 2004. DVD. Directed by Jonathan Caouette. Eagle Farm, Australia: Magna Pacific DVD.
- Tumarkin, Maria. 2014. "This Narrated Life." *Griffith Review* 44. griffithreview.com/articles/this-narrated-life/ (accessed January 2, 2015).
- Ulmer, Gregory L. [1983] 2002. "The Object of Post-Criticism." In *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, edited by Hal Foster, 93–125. New York: New Press.
- Whitlock, Gillian. 2007. *Soft Weapons: Autobiography in Transit*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.
- . 2012. "Post-ing Lives." *Biography: An Interdisciplinary Quarterly* 35, no. 1: v–xvi.
- Whitlock, Gillian, and Thomas G. Couser, eds. 2012. "(Post)Human Lives." *Biography: An Interdisciplinary Quarterly* 35, no. 1.

