



Youth Life Writing, Networked Media, Climate Change: The Challenge of Testimony to the Future

Anna Poletti

Utrecht University

Abstract

This article examines some of Greta Thunberg's life writing as an example of the creativity and ingenuity with which some young people engage with the identity category of 'youth' in their life writing. It argues that Thunberg's activism uses personal testimony in order to amplify expertise testimony as an epistemic source that demands action on climate change. This strategic use of life writing produces a paradoxical, but seemingly effective, form of life writing in which Thunberg provides personal testimony to the future. The article analyses how this paradoxical form of testimony is produced by situating Thunberg's life writing in the context of the social and political investment in youth as an identity genre central to understanding of the human life course, and to how political responsibility is figured in contemporary western democracies. Drawing on theories of new media as an affective site in which life unfolds, rather than being represented, the paper concludes by reflecting on how Wendy Chun's argument that networks involve the twinning of habituation and crisis mirrors Thunberg's argument that action on climate change demands that habitual ways of living and acting must be rethought in response to the climate crisis.

Keywords: life writing, youth, Greta Thunberg, testimony, networked media, climate change

‘In our struggle for responsibility, we fight against someone who is masked. The mask of the adult is called ‘experience.’ It is expressionless, impenetrable, and ever the same. The adult has always already experienced everything youth, ideals, hopes... It was all illusion.—Often we feel intimidated or embittered. Perhaps he is right. What can our retort be? We have not yet experienced anything. But let us attempt to raise the mask. What has this adult experienced? What does he wish to prove to us: This above all: he, too, was once young; he, too, wanted what we wanted; he, too, refused to believe his parents, but life has taught him that they were right. Saying this, he smiles in a superior fashion: this will also happen to us—in advance he devalues the years we will live, making them into a time of sweet youthful pranks, of childish rapture, before the long sobriety of serious life. ... We know other pedagogues whose bitterness will not even concede to us the brief years of youth; serious and grim, they want to push us directly into life’s drudgery. Both attitudes devalue and destroy our years. More and more we are assailed by the feeling: our youth is but a brief night (fill it with rapture!); it will be followed by grand “experience”, the years of compromise, impoverishment of ideas, and lack of energy. Such is life. That is what adults tell us, and that is what they experienced. Yes, this is their experience, this one thing, never anything different: the meaninglessness of life. Its brutality. Have they ever encouraged us to anything great or new or forward-looking? Oh, no, precisely because these are things one cannot experience. All meaning—the true, the good, the beautiful—is grounded within itself. What, then, does experience signify?—And herein lies the secret: because he never raises his eyes to the great and meaningful, the philistine has taken experience as his gospel.’

In 1913, when he was 21 years old, Walter Benjamin wrote a short essay for his youth group titled *Experience*. In the opening paragraph, cited above, Benjamin sketches in careful detail the problem the thinking young person has when they try to speak to or within the adult public sphere. The young person, Benjamin tells us, is not taken seriously by an adult philistine, because the young person lacks experience. What could a young person possibly know? The meagre number of years they have lived on the planet are viewed as an insurmountable deficit. The philistine may silence any young person who tries to engage in the institutions of civil society as an equal participant by pointing out their age and their deficit of experience. But this is just the beginning of the problem Benjamin seeks to diagnose in his essay. The real problem—for the young person, and the problem the philistine embodies—is that an appeal to

the authority of experience is a deadening force that kills all spirit, all hope, any belief in something larger than the individual.

Yet, as Joan Scott has argued, we cannot do away with appeals to ‘experience’ altogether (37). Experience ‘serves as a way of talking about what happened, of establishing difference and similarity, or claiming knowledge that is “unassailable”’ (37). Raymond Williams suggests this is but one of two uses of the term in English, and distinguishes between experience-present and experience-past:

experience (present) is offered as the necessary (immediate and authentic) ground for all (subsequent) reasoning and analysis... experience (past) is seen as the product of social conditions or of systems of belief or of fundamental systems of perception, and thus not as material for truths but as evidence of conditions or systems which by definition it cannot itself explain (128).

Experience-present is undeniable and may demand response. Experience-past is evidence of larger forces, a product that cannot be understood solely on its own terms. Benjamin appeals to both understandings of experience. The experience of being dismissed because one is young is an experience of the present—the immediate and authentic, shared reality of the young people Benjamin addresses. The appeal to this shared experience establishes the urgency and relevance of Benjamin’s decision to speak (and write). At the same time, the experience Benjamin invokes is the product of a system—perpetuated by the non-student adult philistine—that he seeks to characterize and rebut, and thus, ultimately, experience itself is a mechanism of the larger systems of the discourse of age and maturation, and empiricism, which denies the spirit and the values associated with it.

Benjamin succinctly describes key elements of how the discourse of age serves the distribution of power in a given historical context. The category of youth works in a variety of interlocking contexts to limit, or even disregard, young people’s claims to knowledge. In many late capitalist democratic societies, the compulsory education system, the disenfranchisement of young people from democratic processes, and their status as financial and legal dependents position young people as lacking the necessary cognitive, emotional, psychological and intellectual tools to produce knowledge. Youth is a discourse as well as a means of referring to a stage in the life course of individual people that involves specific plot points relating to the acquisition of knowledge, emotional maturation, sexual development and responsibility (Jones 1-3). And for this reason, the term is confusing. In this article, I use the term ‘young people’ to refer to members of the community who are situated by discourses of youth

as being not-yet-adult: who are yet to complete the journey of ‘youth’. What this journey means is dependent on social and cultural context because, like all grand narratives of identity—race, gender, sexuality, class, ethnicity, able-bodiedness, talent—‘youth’ takes its meaning in a given discursive and historical context, as well as being a discourse through which young people are legible as subjects within the social field. Youth is a set of power/knowledge practices that exceed the life of any individual (Butler). Thus, as Benjamin shows us, young people must contend with the symbolic investment in youth as a narrative of acquisition and maturation that pervades their specific social-historical context, as well as negotiating whatever processes and rituals their culture sees as mandatory for preparation for the adult life-to-come. For these reasons, building on my work with Kate Douglas (Douglas and Poletti), I suggest we think of youth as an identity genre. Such an approach combines insights from early cultural studies work on youth cultures with the recent turn to studying life narratives by girls in life writing studies (Maguire; Gilmore and Marshall; Martínez García, *New*) to consider how young people themselves engage with the variety of tropes, forms of address, media use and speaking positions that ‘youth’ entails in the early twenty first century. ‘Youth’ itself is a powerful part of the genre of the life course that young people themselves must contend with and negotiate.¹

To think about young people’s life writing is therefore to contend with multiple layers of genre, that is, to contend with it as a systemic strategy that mediates relationships between texts and readers, what John Frow refers to as ‘a shared convention with a social force’ (102-103), and as a communicative practice that structures the scene of social intelligibility (Butler; Miller). As Lauren Berlant has shown, we need and use genres to make sense of what is happening in the social world, but genres can also fail us, and we can fail in them (‘Big Man’). The idea of a life course that involves the stages of infancy, childhood, youth, adulthood, and old age is a powerful genre in both senses, and each of the ‘stages’ within it has socially and historically specific characteristics associated with it. ‘Youth’ is, in many ways, determined by its liminality: it is the transition period between childhood and adulthood.

To approach youth as an identity genre, via thinking about genres in linguistics and cultural studies, is to foreground its textual character, to recognize, as Benjamin and after him sociologists of youth have done, how central it is to our thinking, our plotment, of the life course itself. In modern times, in Anglo-European contexts, no account of a life feels complete without at least an acknowledgement that one was not always one’s adult-self. Indeed, being guided (or marched) through the experience of

youth is a defining characteristic of the social position young people are allocated, *and* an experience we all share and which feels central to our understanding of the life course. Young people develop independent and very complex aesthetics and forms to respond to and narrate this position as they undergo it. And while we may not use the term much anymore, Dick Hebdige's description of youth subcultures as the place where young people produce styles that 'crystallize, objectify and communicate group experience' (79) reminds us that young people are cultural producers whose work can tell us a lot about the shifting nature of the social and political investment in the identity of youth and the idea that 'a life' has a given trajectory with specific milestones. In this article, I am not going to follow Hebdige and focus on young people's subcultural production, but will instead focus on how a young person uses autobiographical discourse in the age of networked media to speak to adult audiences. My focus will be on how one prominent young person negotiates some elements of the identity genre of youth in order to engage in climate change activism. My case study is Greta Thunberg, but there are other examples of young people who are climate, education, gun control and gender activists who use life narrative in networked media in order to negotiate and strategically deploy the complex, and ultimately politically and epistemologically disempowered position, allocated to youth in contemporary society and politics.

Like all attempts to comment on the contemporary, this article must draw a limit on its material even through the continued emergence of new material changes the very nature of the event it analyses. Most of the evidence I will cite is from the life writing of Greta Thunberg before and up to late 2019, and I treat Thunberg as providing testimony to her present, even though that present is becoming the past. Indeed, as I will argue below, Thunberg's use of testimony attempts a unique temporal logic, functioning at one and the same time as a catalysing action of the present that makes claims about the future while also—because of its impact—becoming 'historical' in the sense that it is likely to be remembered as an important moment of youth empowerment in the struggles humanity faced in accepting and responding to the realities of climate catastrophe. I am unable to contend to all three forms of temporality here, and will focus on Thunberg's use of life narrative to cultivate a sense of the present and the future. Her use of networked media is testimonial in the sense that it makes both affective and epistemological claims on her audiences, positioning them as witnesses.

Theorists of networked media have clearly established that it is an affective network in which individual utterances are only part—perhaps only a very small part—of what is being communicated and how (Chun; Dean; Lovink). But we must

also acknowledge that to describe something as affective is not to dismiss or diminish its power to influence what and how we know. In developing ways to respond to the impact of digital technologies on life writing, scholars in the field are currently wrestling with what Philippe Lejeune describes as the discovery that ‘distinctions that we thought were set in stone...were projections of short-lived communications tools’ (248). Laurie McNeill and John David Zuern further this observation and clearly articulate what is at stake when we think about life writing online:

As means to auto/biographical ends, these technologies undoubtedly present us with different affordances and constraints than those of print, photography, film, and live performance, but have we ourselves, as subjects of auto/ biographical acts, undergone a significant transformation? Has the digital turn in our society made an appreciable—and from the standpoint of scholarship, an identifiable, measurable, citable—difference in the experience of being in the world, of being embodied, to some degree empowered, and to some degree vulnerable as a self in the midst of other selves? This is a question the field of auto/biography studies is in a particularly good position to tackle, not only because the artifacts it engages are closely tied to the lived experience of their makers, but also because it so often anchors that engagement in philosophical reflections on the problem of human subjectivity (vii).

I am thinking about Thunberg’s use of networked media for testimony in the larger context of thinking about networked media as a technology of autobiography that some young people use to reflect on youth as a particular vector in the formation, communication and development of human subjectivity. As Kate Douglas and I have argued, autobiographical discourse is a primary means for young people to critically engage, and consciously deploy, a social category with deep symbolic investment. By leveraging the power of autobiographical storytelling as a cultural practice grounded in the authority of experience, some young people speak to adult audiences in ways that exploit or critique the symbolic investment in youth as:

- representatives of hope for the future
- early adopters or representatives of the aesthetic avant-garde
- threats to the social order, or
- vulnerable subjects in need of rescue

In these instances, individual writers utilize life writing and the discourse of identity as a means of claiming space within mainstream debates and fields of cultural production dominated by adults, and the conceptualization of identity and citizenship

based on an idea of the life course and the primacy of adulthood. A compelling example of this is Greta Thunberg's strategic, and very powerful, use of life writing in her TEDx talk about the School Strike for climate justice:

When I was about eight years old, I first heard about something called climate change or global warming. Apparently, that was something humans had created by our way of living. I was told to turn off the lights to save energy and to recycle paper to save resources. I remember thinking that it was very strange that humans, who are an animal species among others, could be capable of changing the Earth's climate. Because if we were, and if it was really happening, we wouldn't be talking about anything else. As soon as you'd turn on the TV, everything would be about that. Headlines, radio, newspapers, you would never read or hear about anything else, as if there was a world war going on. But no one ever talked about it. If burning fossil fuels was so bad that it threatened our very existence, how could we just continue like before? Why were there no restrictions? Why wasn't it made illegal? To me, that did not add up. It was too unreal. So when I was 11, I became ill. I fell into depression, I stopped talking, and I stopped eating. In two months, I lost about 10 kilos of weight. Later on, I was diagnosed with Asperger syndrome, OCD and selective mutism. That basically means I only speak when I think it's necessary - now is one of those moments.

Let us begin by recognizing that the opening of Thunberg's speech is an act of testimony. She recounts her lived experience to us. In this recounting, undertaken when she is sixteen years old, Thunberg demonstrates she is already an accomplished autobiographer. The confusion of her eight-year old self and the sickness of her eleven-year old self are plot points that lead to Thunberg standing before an audience as a climate activist who has initiated a global form of youth activism using civil disobedience (refusing to go to school on Fridays). Thunberg calls forth the authority of her lived experience as a child as the basis for her political action. The innocence of the eight-year old Greta—who does not understand why the pending climate disaster is not disrupting business as usual in the adult culture—is used to personalize Thunberg as a speaker, and to establish her authority *through* an appeal to the *innocence* associated with the figure of the Child.² As Gloria Wekker and Lauren Berlant (*The Queen*) have argued, the figure of the Child is powerfully associated with innocence in formulations of citizenship as a White category in the Netherlands and the United States. This is an important context for the international response to Thunberg's campaign that I will discuss further below. In the global response to

Thunberg's narrative, the White Child becomes an oracle; she sees the impending disaster and has the appropriate moral response: outrage and despair. No longer a child, but not yet an adult, in her TedTalk Thunberg crafts a narrative that turns the outrage and despair of the oracle child into a social and political good: the motivation to act. Thunberg claims her right to full citizenship, despite her legal status as a minor, through her use of what Benjamin would call *spirit*. Thus, in beginning her TedTalk with an autobiographical vignette, Thunberg shakes off the impotence of childhood—watching, questioning, feeling—and moves into the realm of youth, a realm of action. Crucially, Thunberg's disclosure of a developmental disorder (Asperger's) and psychological conditions (selective mutism and obsessive compulsive disorder) are used to strengthen her authority as a speaker (Martínez García, 9). The disclosure of these diagnoses frame the decision to act and speak about climate change. The story Thunberg tells is a story of overcoming significant personal obstacles regarding the act of speech itself; her condition 'basically means I only speak when I think it's necessary - now is one of those moments.' As an activist, Thunberg demands we incorporate the knowledge of her childhood despair, mutism and her youthful courage, into our knowledge about the need for action on climate change.

But what role does networked media play in Thunberg's activism, and does it shape the conditions of her testimony?

There are two important elements of Thunberg's use of testimony in networked media that I would like to discuss that lead away from the fundamental connection between the study of life writing and the philosophy of human subjectivity articulated by McNeill and Zuern, and the historically situated practices of care of the self Lejeune discusses in his consideration of autobiography and new communications tools. In framing Thunberg's life writing as testimony, I seek to align it with the other important use of life writing when it takes the form of testimony, which is as an epistemological resource, as a source of belief about the world that people offer to others, and that people take from the utterances of others (Lackey, 1-2). While life writing is undoubtedly a source of information about subjectivity, it is also a source of information about the world, and this is the frame Thunberg explicitly offers when she speaks about her lived experience in the context of her climate activism. In order to explore Thunberg's use of testimony, I will first outline the inherently relational and complex nature of testimonial discourse as a form of life writing which sits at the intersection of collective epistemology, forms of justice, and interpersonal communication. I will give this brief overview of testimony in order to establish my main argument: that what is most compelling about Thunberg as an activist is her

ability to use established forms of speaking autobiographically to do the seemingly illogical: provide testimony to the future.

In philosophy and the study of culture, testimony is conceptualized as means of transmitting knowledge across a gap in experience between speaker and addressee (Derrida; Coady; Felman and Laub; Lackey). It is commonly called for when there is a dispute over the facts of an event (whether and how it happened) or its meaning. In legal and cultural contexts, the community or court seek testimony because they have an unanswered question: what happened? The eyewitness is called for to help answer this question, and can provide testimony because they were physically present when we, the audience, were not. The eyewitness has a privileged status because they mediate between the past and the present (Derrida, 38-41). In legal settings, experts can also be called to give evidence, to contextualise technical elements of a case for the judge or jury. Theories of testimony as a cultural practice have centred on eyewitness testimony rather than legal testimony, reflecting, perhaps, a broad scholarly agreement with C.A.J Coady's suggestion that the legal use of testimony is an extension and formalization of its everyday use (2-3). However, the climate crisis has laid bare a shift in the reliance on expert and eyewitness testimony as forms of knowledge and resources of reasoned belief in contemporary culture, with expert testimony from bodies such as the International Panel on Climate Change facing significant barriers to acceptance as knowledge that might ground action in policy. This crisis in expert testimony as an accepted epistemic source has led activists such as Thunberg to turn to personal eyewitness testimony in an attempt to reframe climate change as a shared human emergency (Milman and Smith).

Thunberg's use of personal testimony is entirely consistent with its other common use. As epistemologist Jennifer Lackey argues, while testimony can be called for, it can also be offered regardless of the needs of an intended audience (6). In such cases—such as the publication of slave narratives in support of the abolitionist cause in pre-civil war America, and the #MeToo movement—testimony to the present is asserted in order to generate dispute—to shake up the consensus, the status quo, or the norm, in the name of justice (Gilmore).

In both forms of testimony—when it is called for or offered as a disruption—the role of the audience is central. As theorists of testimony, trauma, and epistemologists have shown, for testimony to function as a means of producing knowledge, those of us who were not present at the event, who did not share or witness the experience, must bear witness to the witness. Testimony is dependent on being heard.

Networked media is central to current movements to provide testimony in order to disrupt the status quo because it is a primary example of how our lives—the very flow

of living—co-emerge with media (Kember and Zylinksa; Poletti). Not everything that happens on networked media is real, or true—indeed networked media is an impressive archive of our desires, feelings, dreams, fears and fantasies (Chun, 127; Dean, 96). But the forms of immediacy, sociality, responsiveness, publicness, and indexicality enabled by the affordances of networked media platforms mean that mediation is part of the flow of life, rather than a static, conscious, separate moment of life writing (Chun; Dean; Kember and Zylinksa). Facebook, Twitter, Instagram are platforms of immediacy and flow that promise direct access (at least in theory) to a public who will bear witness to the unfolding of life (Lovink, 55). Networked media, like Benjamin's essay, occasion a convergence of experience-present and experience-past through technical means of immediacy, and the shifting cultural conventions that has seen a rapid increase in, and diversity of, cultural and aesthetic practices for speaking about the present.

In a post on her Facebook page on 2 February 2019, Thunberg narrated this form of mediated living when she says:

On the 20 of August I sat down outside the Swedish Parliament. I handed out fliers with a long list of facts about the climate crisis and explanations on why I was striking. The first thing I did was to post on Twitter and Instagram what I was doing...

As a lone activist in Sweden, Thunberg needs people to bear witness for her actions to matter. The members of the Swedish Parliament, and members of the public walking by, are the immediate audience for her activism. But when she posts on social media, her activism becomes intertwined with life writing—it becomes a form of testimony—in which she hopes to amplify the impact of her actions by placing her lived experience—her decision to strike—before a wider public. As with the childhood narrative she will later offer in her TedTalk, when she posts on social media the first day she strikes, Thunberg offers testimony that she hopes will make action on climate change a contested issue by placing herself into the mediated space of networked media in an attempt to bind her anger about lack of action on climate change into the affective circuits of networked media (Dean, 95).

In such cases where testimony is offered in order to produce dispute, it faces a much more complex set of challenges in its reception. Leigh Gilmore has argued, for example, that women's testimony to gendered violence and discrimination lacks 'adequate witness' because of the long association in patriarchal cultures between female bodies, femininity and unreliability. Like many women and young people

before her, Thunberg faces this challenge. But unlike other young people who have become campaigners for social justice—such as Malala, or the students from Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland Florida—Thunberg does not, ultimately, speak about an event, or series of experiences, that constitute experience-past or experience-present. Thunberg presents herself as motivated to act, and provides testimony to, the future. Her critics target her gender, age, and the conditions she has disclosed as reasons not to provide her adequate witness. Yet these responses are a cover for the deeper challenge that Thunberg’s activism and her uses of the testimonial form produces, and which she constantly tells us (amplifying expert testimony) is the primary barrier to meaningful action on climate change: that we must act now to prevent a future disaster. By claiming and strategically breaking the genre of youthful identity, Thunberg claims knowledge of the future.

If I live to be 100, I will be alive in the year 2103. When you think about the future today, you don’t think beyond the year 2050. By then, I will, in the best case, not even have lived half of my life.

What happens next? The year 2078, I will celebrate my 75th birthday. If I have children or grandchildren, maybe they will spend that day with me. Maybe they will ask me about you, the people who were around, back in 2018. Maybe they will ask why you didn't do anything while there still was time to act. What we do or don't do right now will affect my entire life and the lives of my children and grandchildren. What we do or don’t do right now, me and my generation can’t undo in the future.

Thunberg the activist evokes the moral judgement of future generations when agitating for justice. To return to genre and identity for a moment, her explicit use of her youthfulness in her activism—demanding action on climate change by refusing the business as usual life course of a young person— positions her as a mediator between the present and the future. Its effectiveness partly comes from its simple, strategic and powerful violation of the everyday workings of youthful life, its place in the life course, and her exploitation of youth as a symbol of hope for the future. She is fully aware of the effectiveness of her campaign as a symbolic action that violates the assumed progress narrative that is core to the genre of youthful identity and its importance in the larger narrative of a life course that it serves. As she says in a modified version of her TedTalk, delivered to the UN Climate Convention, ‘and if a few children can get headlines all over the world by not going to school, then imagine what we could all do together if we really wanted to.’

The narrative of the life course Thunberg disrupts, and her use of the figure of the Child, are both two genres organised by the temporal logics of reproductive heterosexuality. The future is one imagined by and through reproduction and the institution of the family, what Lee Edelman has diagnosed as the political ideology of ‘reproductive futurism’ (2-3) and Jack Halberstam conceptualizes as ‘straight time’ (4-5). Along with Berlant and Wekker, Edelman and Halberstam have carefully delineated the political utility of the figure of the Child and of youth (respectively) in defining the very sphere of the politics and the social world. In Edelman’s words, ‘the fantasy subtending the image of the Child invariably shapes the logic within which the political itself must be thought’ (2). Climate change activists such as Thunberg who explicitly deploy their age and youthful subjectivity strategically challenge the ideological investment in the Child by speaking as children about the very thing the Child represents in contemporary democratic discourse (the future). In this sense, they are asking adult political culture and institutions to make good on its investment in the figure of the Child as the reason for political action, and in so doing, expose the limits of that discourse. Thunberg is particularly well-placed to play this role, as her race excludes her from the risk of dehumanization faced by children of colour (see for example, Goff, Jackson et al). The figure of the Child that delimits the terrain of the political and whose future must be protected is, in the Global North and parts of the colonized Global South (such as Australia), more often than not, the White Child. This was made blatantly clear when Ugandan climate activist Vanessa Nakate held a joint press conference with fellow young women who are prominent climate activists (all white) at Davos alongside the World Economic Forum meeting in January 2020, and was subsequently cropped from a group picture that was widely distributed by news organizations (Evelyn).

While it is Thunberg’s youthful whiteness that underscores her ability to bring the figure of the White Child into the very institutions of politics that claim to act in its protection, she risks being excluded from this position because of her position as a child diagnosed with Asperger’s and other health problems. I have indicated above that Thunberg strategically discloses these conditions within her TedTalk in order to bolster the urgency of her cause. As Ana Belén Martínez García has argued of Thunberg’s life writing more broadly, ‘[h]ighlighting the distance between “we autistic” and “they” – the non-autistic – the activist narrator constructs a discourse where the usual person at a disadvantage – the autistic – is reversed, so that the Other is this time the disinformed, that is all those other people who, though seemingly ‘normal,’ do not act on behalf of humankind and the planet’ (9). However, this strategy can be turned against Thunberg by commentators who are committed to climate

change denial, where her identity markers of gender, age, and seemingly compromised cognition are cited as the reason that she cannot be a source of reliable information about climate change.³ One of her most vocal and disrespectful critics rails against Thunberg's testimony to the future by labelling her a 'prophet' and 'guru' who is received as a Messiah.⁴

While this columnist's use of the language of superstition and religion is an attempt to discredit Thunberg, his vitriol is also a clear response to the audacity of Thunberg's strategy of amplifying expert testimony through personal testimony. Thunberg, and other climate activists, are attempting to bend the genre of testimony as an epistemic source to the task of responding to climate change. Networked media is the appropriate, indeed, necessary, communications technology for this unprecedented use of testimony because, as Wendy Chun has argued, networked media is a media of habituation and crisis (171).

Networks are made out of time: the chronic time of habits (memory) and the punctuating time of crisis. Unfolding in real time, habitual repetition grounds ties; crises break and create new ones. Crises—turning points, events that demand decisions—ensure that networks differ from graphs; it makes them alive and volatile. Crises undo habituation and undermine autonomy: they turn habits into addictions (69).

Chun's theorization of the network as a twinning of habituation and crisis is strikingly similar to the arguments Thunberg presents about the climate crisis—that the habits of living known in the Global North and parts of the Global South must be broken if we are to have any hope of preventing catastrophic climate change. That the very media through which her activism and its strategic use of personal testimony is developed and circulated enact the tension between habit and crisis is key to her success. It is also what makes her vulnerable to being dismissed and critiqued. Thunberg's activism demonstrates the centrality of life writing—a practice of going public with the personal—to networked media, as Chun's work constantly acknowledges but never names.⁵ Thunberg galvanises public attention by providing testimony to the future highlighting that existing relationships to time and knowledge are put under pressure by climate change. Innovations in the genre of youth as an identity category and testimony as an epistemic source are two important elements of this success, although it remains to be seen whether the attention she has so-far garnered results in the action she demands.

Works Cited

- Benjamin, Walter, 'Experience (1913)', in: *The New Inquiry*, October 29, 2009, <https://thenewinquiry.com/walter-benjamin-experience-1913/#:~:text=In%20our%20struggle%20for%20responsibility,%2C%20ideals%2C%20hopes%2C%20woman.>
- Berlant, Lauren, 'Big Man,' in: *Social Text*, 19 January 2017, <https://socialtextjournal.org/big-man/>
- Berlant, Lauren, *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1997.
- Bolt, Andrew, 'Time To Doubt Greta's Dogma', in: *Herald Sun*, 1 August 2019, <https://www.pressreader.com/australia/herald-sun/20190801/282849372593072>
- Butler, Judith, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, New York: Fordham University Press, 2005.
- Coady, C.A.J., *Testimony: A Philosophical Study*. Print publication date, 1994, Oxford Scholarship Online, 2003. DOI: 10.1093/0198235518.001.0001
- Chun, Wendy Hui Kyong, *Updating to Remain the Same: Habitual New Media*, Cambridge MA and London: The MIT Press, 2016.
- Dean, Jodi, *Blog Theory: Feedback and Capture in the Circuits of Drive*, Cambridge and Malden MA: Polity, 2010.
- Derrida, Jacques, *Demeure: Fiction and Testimony*. Translation Elizabeth Rottenberg, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000.
- Douglas, Kate and Anna Poletti, *Life Narratives and Youth Culture: Representation, Agency and Participation*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.
- Edelman, Lee, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2004.
- Evelyn, Kenya, "'Like I wasn't there": climate activist Vanessa Nakate on being erased from a movement', in: *The Guardian*, 29 January 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jan/29/vanessa-nakate-interview-climate-activism-cropped-photo-davos>
- Felman, Shoshana and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, New York and London: Routledge, 1992.
- Frow, John, *Genre*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2005.
- Gilmore, Leigh, *Tainted Witness: Why We Doubt What Women Say About Their Lives*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2017.
- Gilmore, Leigh and Elizabeth Marshall, *Witnessing Girlhood: Toward an Intersectional Tradition of Life Writing*, New York: Fordham University Press, 2019.

- Goff, Philip Atiba et al., 'The Essence of Innocence: Consequences of Dehumanizing Black Children', in: *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 106:4 (2014) 526–545, DOI: 10.1037/a0035663
- Kember, Sarah and Joanna Zylinska, *Life after New Media: Mediation as a Vital Process*, Cambridge MA and London: The MIT Press, 2012.
- Halberstam, Jack, *In A Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*, New York: New York University Press, 2005.
- Hebdige, Dick, *Subculture and the Meaning of Style*, London and New York: Routledge, 1988.
- Jones, Gill, *Youth*, Cambridge and Malden MA: Polity, 2009.
- Lackey, Jennifer, *Learning From Words: Testimony as a Source of Knowledge*, Oxford Scholarship Online, 2008, DOI: 10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199219162.001.0001
- Lejeune, Philippe, 'Autobiography and New Communication Tools', in: *Identity Technologies: Constructing the Self Online*, edited by Anna Poletti and Julie Rak, Madison and London: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2014.
- Lovink, Geert, *Sad By Design: On Platform Nihilism*, London: Pluto Press, 2019.
- Maguire, Emma, *Girls, Autobiography, Media: Gender and Self-Mediation in Digital Economies*, Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018.
- Martínez García, Ana Belén, 'Constructing an activist self: Greta Thunberg's climate activism as life writing', in: *Prose Studies*, August 2020, DOI: 10.1080/01440357.2020.1808923
- Martínez García, Ana Belén, *New Forms of Self-Narration: Young Women, Life Writing and Human Rights*, Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020.
- McNeill, Laurie and John David Zuern, 'Online Lives 2.0: Introduction', in: *Biography: an InterDisciplinary Quarterly* 38:2 (Spring 2015) v-xlvi.
- Miller, Carolyn R., 'Genre as Social Action', in: *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 70 (1984) 151–167.
- Milman, Oliver and David Smith, "'Listen to the Scientists": Greta Thunberg urges Congress to take action', in: *The Guardian*, 19 September 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2019/sep/18/greta-thunberg-testimony-congress-climate-change-action>
- Poletti, Anna, *Stories of the Self: Life Writing After the Book*, New York: New York University Press, 2020.
- Rourke, Alison, 'Greta Thunberg Responds to Asperger's Critics: "It's a Superpower"', in: *The Guardian*, 2 September 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/sep/02/greta-thunberg-responds-to-aspergers-critics-its-a-superpower>

- Scott, Joan W., 'Experience', in: *Feminists Theorize the Political*, edited by Judith Butler and Joan W. Scott, London and New York: Routledge, 1992, 22-40.
- Spencer, Grace and Marion Doull, 'Examining Concepts of Power and Agency in Research with Young People', in: *Journal of Youth Studies* 18:7 (2015) 900-913, DOI: 10.1080/13676261.2014.1001827
- Thunberg, Greta, 'The Disarming Case to Act Right Now on Climate Change', TedTalk Sweden, November 2018, https://www.ted.com/talks/greta_thunberg_the_disarming_case_to_act_right_now_on_climate_change
- Wekker, Gloria, *White Innocence: Paradoxes of Colonialism and Race*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2016.
- Williams, Raymond, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, London: Fontana Press, 1976.

About the author

Anna Poletti is an associate professor of English Literature at Utrecht University. With Kate Douglas and John Zuern they co-edit the monograph series *New Directions in Life Narrative* for Bloomsbury Academic. Their latest book is *Stories of the Self: Life Writing After the Book* (NYU Press, 2020).

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4997-7819>

Notes

¹ See Spencer and Doull for a useful discussion of how thinking about young people's engagement with power must more carefully delineate between agency and power when considering examples of how this negotiation is undertaken, particularly their distinction between power as effect and affect.

² See Martínez García for a different interpretation of this utterance which focuses on it as a recounting of personal trauma and an act of personal empowerment (6-7).

³ See for example 'Time to Doubt Greta's Dogma' (*The Herald Sun*, August 1 2019) and other articles by syndicated Australian columnist Andrew Bolt.

⁴ The Australian Press Council deemed the comments by Andrew Bolt in his article 'Time to Doubt Greta's Dogma' as an attempt to undermine Thunberg's credibility on the basis of her disabilities: 'The Council considered there was a public interest in the public being informed about Ms Thunberg's disabilities but that there was no public interest in the undermining the credibility of a person, her opinions or her supporters on the basis of her disabilities in circumstances where many people without disabilities share and express similar opinions.' See the full adjudication here: <https://www.presscouncil.org.au/document-search/adj-1775/>

⁵ See for example, Chun, 129-165.