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Dissident Self-Narratives: Radical and Queer Life Writing

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Introduction: Dissident Lives, Queer texts, Political Is.

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"some untamed ferocity perpetually at war with the accepted order of things"
Virginia Woolf, on Charlotte Brontë.

"La littérature. . .compose, de crâne en crâne, l'entrelacs infinis de résistances possibles." ["Literature. . .weaves, from mind to mind, the infinite interlacing of possible forms of resistance"].
Nicolas Mathieu, on Annie Ernaux.

Yeah, queer can be a rough word but it is also a sly and ironic weapon we can steal from the homophobe's hands and use against him.
The Queer Nation Manifesto.

A "dissident ethos"

Under certain historical circumstances, it can hardly be questioned that staging, narrating, portraying oneself, in other words publicly producing an *I*, is a radical act in itself, a counter-discursive affirmation of oneself meant to reclaim stigmatised identities and tear the hegemonic fabric of social representations. In the context of the most homophobic years of the AIDS epidemics in the Western world, when personal and collective tragedies caused by the disease were aggravated by social stigma, institutional neglect and media misrepresentation, saying *I* as an HIV positive queer man was inherently subversive and political insofar as it transgressed the construction of gay PWA as shameful, tabooed or scapegoated others. Queer activist, film-maker and autobiographer Derek Jarman made this point clear in his experimental life-narrative *At Your Own Risk: A Saint's Testament*, where he presents his own life-development from 1942 to 1991. Against the violently repressive backdrop of middle-class England, Jarman juxtaposes dissonant

fragments from public and personal archives of institutional homophobia—press reports of trials, recollections of school authorities' discourse on same-sex love, quotes from medical publications—with memories recaptured in his own singular voice, in turn lyrical, humorous, sexually provocative and enraged. Queer counterculture needed more than the implicit third person of film-making; it was the artist's duty to counteract the absence of the first person in public discourse, especially in the liberal call for a 'public,' produced as 'normal,' to tolerate and pity a supposedly separate minority to whom no politician's or journalist's *I* would dare confer the actual concrete existence of a first-person perspective. In other words, to him as to other queer AIDS activists who chose to narrate their personal stories, the direct literary expression of gay subjectivities was both an artistic project and a political act, as explicitly stated in the following vignette-chapter:

> WHEN I WAS YOUNG THE ABSENCE OF THE PAST
>
> WAS A TERROR
>
> That's why I wrote autobiography. . .It was very important to find the 'I': *I* feel this, this happened to *m*e, *I* did this. I wanted to read that. My obsession with biography is to find these 'I's. The subtext of my films has been the books, putting myself back into the picture. (30)

From its title to the author's address to the coercive and disciplinary system of power he calls "Heterosoc," *At Your Own Risk* reverses the liberal humanist logic of tolerance, namely the smooth integration of harmless, desexualised, depoliticised minority identities into an existing society whose *status quo* would remain unchallenged. Not only does the authorial voice enlighten its implied audience, but also unsettles their sense of embodying safely separate sexual, gender and moral norms by laying bare the multiplicity of desires and the porosity between the queer *us* and the normal *you*: "Understand that sexuality is as wide as the sea. . .Understand that we are you" (6).

Paul B. Preciado's recent *Je suis un monstre qui vous parle. Rapport pour une académie de psychanalystes* [*I Am a Monster Who Speaks to You. Report for an Academy of Psychoanalysts*][1] is another autobiographical text where literary self-presentation is both a social risk for a subject forfeiting their privileged position, and a challenge to existing paradigms of truth. As in the case of Derek Jarman, Preciado's radicality is manifested both in the

autobiographical disclosure of a queer transgender identity that confronts transphobic prejudice and exposes more liberal frames of recognition still relying on the obsolete norm of gender binarism, as well as in the perlocutionary form this text adopts. which, Instead of seeking to rescue a disqualified identity by normalising it and eschewing conflict, a similar "dissident ethos"[2] which strives to alter dominant symbolic representations, animates Paul B. Preciado's address that takes off "from an unexpected and impossible discursive position—that of a gender-dysphoric monster speaking to the Academy of Psychoanalysts" (63-4).[3] *Je suis un monstre qui vous parle*, a sequel to *Testo Junkie*, his experimental autotheory,[4] further enacts the queer radical potential of first-person self-narrative; resisting the presumed *telos* of FTM gender transitions, that is, the ability to blend into male privilege, it displays Paul B. Preciado's pleasure in foregoing the male/female binary. Paving the way for the constitution of a "dissident knowledge" (56), Preciado forges a politicised identity made of a myriad of gender and sexual experiences that cannot be pinned down by the "conservative, slow, sticky" ["conservatrice, lente et visqueuse"] epistemology (71) of the so-called symbolic order.

To appreciate its dense, ramified textuality, one must read *Je suis un monstre qui vous parle* as a *literary* autobiography, as a work which goes beyond an oppositional performance-*cum*-manifesto buttressed by strategic storytelling. Poised between ephemeral oral speech and written text, it borrows its words and the perlocutionary stage it constructs from a short story by Franz Kafka. In "A Report to an Academy" (1917), a former ape whose only "way out" (253) of its animal cage was to enter another cage, that of the male European subjectivity, performs the impossible task of giving an account of his previous life as an ape in human terms. This extended dialogue with Franz Kafka's tale of European anthropocentric blindness and colonial, ecocidal depredation, with its disruptive use of an unthinkable first-person enunciation, enhances the radical edge of a text meant to subvert existing models of gender recognition, but also to confront other oppressive frames of knowledge. This address involves the processes of acknowledging and potentially undermining the epistemological discourses that either secure or refuse the frames of recognisability that can render subaltern forms of existence invisible and illegible; it exemplifies what Judith Butler highlights as key to "giving an account of oneself" in her homonymous text. Drawing

from Michel Foucault and Adriana Cavarero, what may lie at the core of self-narratives, Butler suggests, is not the classic solipsistic philosophical question 'Who am I?' that tries to secure one's self-identity, but rather a double acknowledgment of the dispossession of the self by the exteriority of the cultural and linguistic norms that the individual "I" has no control over, and its interruption by an "'order of being'" (24) that determines the conditions of human recognisability and thus the confines of autobiographical truth. The encounter with an addressee constitutes the inescapable frame or "structure" (26) of any autobiographical account:

> Adriana Cavarero argues that the question to ask is not "what" we are, as if the task were simply to fill in the content of our personhood. The question is not primarily a reflexive one, as it is for Foucault, when he asks, "what can I become?". . .If I have lost the conditions of address, if I have no "you" to address, then I have lost "myself." In her [Cavarero's] view, one can only tell an autobiography, one can only reference an "I" in relation to a "you": without the "you," my own story becomes impossible. (24)

The Kafkaian intertext enhances the literary (in the sense of what Roland Barthes calls *scriptible* or writerly) dimension of Preciado's text whose unstable, hybrid form—written text *and* speech, original testimony *and* palimpsest—duplicates its author's plural, multi-layered identities. Preciado's trans, non-binary, 'monstrous' being—that is, inarticulable within existing paradigms of knowledge—acquires a textual formulation that exceeds the authority of its author and calls for readers not to "give it a (more or less justified, more or less free) meaning, but on the contrary to appreciate what *plural* constitutes it" (Barthes, S/Z, 5).

I started this introduction to "Dissident Self-Narratives: Radical and Queer Life-Writing" with two examples of what life-writing can achieve and the radical impact it can have from within the field of LGBTQ+ studies. They are both future-oriented and express the possibility of a sexual and gender revolution; they displace the ethical space of life-writing from a mystifying reflective quest for self-knowledge and coherent identity to the perlocutionary act of an address that destabilises frames of knowledge and fixed identities. Ultimately, they demonstrate how one's sense of oneself and the meaning of one's life are enmeshed in dominant networks of significations that only certain literary or aesthetic attempts to interrogate language and turn it against itself may, if not disentangle and de-ideologise, at least confront, disrupt and interrupt the dominant discourses.

The contributors to this special issue engage queer, feminist, and postcolonial critical theory to highlight the disruptive power of textual self-representations that straddle the literary and socio-political fields. They also attend to the linguistic singularity of each text by exploring the author's formal and (trans)generic strategies or rather the text's modalities and tonalities of writing. Most essays explore self-narratives where sexual or gender differences tend to assume the dissident radicality expressed in *The Queer Nation Manifesto*;[5] queer visibility and respect for queer lives are not explored on the ground of a shared humanity presupposed to transcend the social and the political spheres, but via the ways they disturb, revolutionise perhaps, the cultural norms of recognition. Same-sex love (Roland Barthes, Maggie Nelson), transgender bodies (Paul B. Preciado, Maggie Nelson's partner Harry Dodge), intersectional subaltern positions (Myriam Gurba's vulnerability as a queer Chicana and Ceyenne Doroshow's abjection as a Black transgender sex-worker) set the written lives that are examined in this special issue apart from the normative, dominant, straight, cis, white male lives, on a scale of invisibility and vulnerability ranging from being perceived as marginal-alternative, that is, being more or less tolerated within a liberal frame of social intelligibility, to being subjected to violation and abjection.

Like these marginal queer positions, colonial and postcolonial lives—the lives of "all those who must survive (and write) in the interval between different cultures and languages" (Lionnet 1)—are often hosted in experimental modes of writing that deviate from the hegemonic biographical patterns. Adam Spanos explores such dissident narratives in his essay on C.L.R. James's and Edward Said's stylistic "errancy." Social and political contexts of racial and colonial oppression trigger a "problematic sense of audience" (Lionnet 130); [6] postcolonial writers set out on a literary quest for "alternative solutions" to avoid being "suffocat[ed]" by the coloniser's "overpowering and authoritative voice" (Lionnet 1), which threatens to stifle the colonised subject's idiolect, traditions and history. Such subaltern colonial positions generate complex textual answers in terms of linguistic choices and narrative structures to avoid one's life being co-opted and appropriated by the dominant Western moral and philosophical frameworks, or, in Adam Spanos's words, by the individual models of moral achievement that refused to be assessed according to the imperialist and capitalist terms of completeness and integration. Spanos demonstrates how Edward Said and C.L.R James's

autobiographical narratives convey the colonial subjects' experiences of dispossession, fragmentation and alienation and unveil the reality of colonial rule, its gaps, silences, and contradictions. Their textual openness to future possibilities is not sacrificed in the name of narrative coherence, self-identity, and reflective hindsight, which represent the three features that are most highly valued in classic Western autobiographical studies. On the contrary, Spanos contends, in the name of the expressions of the limitation, heteronomy and dislocation of personal and collective lives that are subjected but not silenced by the imperialist power, experimental aesthetic choices such as ellipses, fragmentation and montage are to be textually embraced.

The essays gathered in this special issue foreground the power of art and language to break free from the constraints of traditional form in order to strategically shift meaning, transgress generic boundaries, destabilise reified ideological constructions and undermine hegemonic codes of knowledge. Against the grain of a mostly diachronic Barthesian criticism, Roland Barthes's textual art of counterpoint, straddling mysticism and dialectic materialism, sensuality and the intellect, love and revolutionary politics, is brought to light by Andy Stafford's bold critical conflation of a Marxist "early" Barthes, through an analysis of his 1940s correspondence with his lover, with the presumedly apolitical, proto-postmodern "late" Barthes who wrote *A Lover's Discourse*. This dialectical art of subverting binaries is celebrated and emulated by Eric Daffron in his autobiographical essay, "The Pianist's Fingers," a nonchalant, digressive itinerary and discontinuous, interrupted self-portrait as an "*amateur"* pianist (Barthes, *RB*, 52). Daffron follows in the literary, musical and erotic footsteps of Roland Barthes, undoing binary oppositions such as art/eroticism, autobiography/biography, success/failure, sensuality/intellect, scholar/creative writer, self/other. Writing simultaneously about himself and about Roland Barthes, Daffron is faithful to his "muse's" (auto)biographic ethos of thwarting the creation of "a single enormous network which would be the structure of the book, its meaning" and to his formal attempts "to halt, to deflect, to divide th[e] descent of discourse toward a destiny of the subject" (*RB*, 148). He also puts into practice Barthes's deep pleasure of the text, through an idiosyncratic intertextuality that leads to an actual "*coexistence*" (Barthes, *Sade, Fourier, Loyola* 7).

"Intertextual praxis," in the form of ubiquitous borrowings and citations, is also at the core of two experiments in autotheory examined by

Alex Brostoff in Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts* and Paul B. Preciado's *Testo Junkie*. Brostoff explores how citation opens a space for queer feminist textual kinship and relationality which neutralises the 'auto' in autotheory in order to represent both corporeal and textual bodies as deeply relational, instead of autonomous and self-reliant. According to Brostoff, the citation's ambivalent position between "authority and control" and its "illimitable potential for deviation and difference" when applied to new contexts, such as self-experimental corporeal transformations, may release a subversive and, even, revolutionising energy. Although Maggie Nelson refuses to take a radical position, she engages the Barthesian "paradoxical practice" of "skirt[ing], … avoid[ing], dodg[ing], . . . values" (Barthes, *RB* 140) to resignify gender and family, while the self-experimental, monstrous corporeal textuality of *Testo Junkie*, reinforced by its rhetoric of hyperboles and neologisms, "is recruiting readers—becoming-kin in the revolution to come."

Artistic '*coexistence*' of quotes and intertextuality is again what infuses the vintage photographic self-performances of Emma Bee Bernstein. Daniele Pomilio shows how Bernstein's autobiographical art combines casual and intimate self-portraits that transgress the codes that sexualise the representation of women's bodies; Bernstein invests them with an aesthetic of vintage travesty that conjures Francesca Woodman's blurred self-images in the seventies, set in derelict interiors, to lyrically and theatrically protest the sexist commodification of women. Pomilio points to the disturbing impact of the young New York photographer's self-representations, poised as they are between personal affect and artificiality; he also explores Emma Bee Bernstein's vicarious reclaiming of her artistic and kin foremothers' feminist commitment and her testimony to her own and her friends' experience of dispersed apolitical selfhood.

Cooking in Heels, the memoir of Black transgender activist Ceyenne Doroshow, revisits the author's trajectory as an abjected trans child and sex-worker rescued from shame and inarticulability by a combination of "alternative kinship networks," as Kelsey Davies argues. Davies focuses on the tactical resignifications of gender-coded places like the kitchen, and examines the metaphoric and thematic blending of textuality and corporeality allowing the trans subject to "articulate itself" and "turn processes of abjection inside-out." While bonds of kindness and sympathy as well as a desire for visibility and legibility inform Ceyenne Doroshow's self-narrative, Myriam Gurba's

memoir *Mean*, Gabrielle Adjerad argues, challenges such traditional empathetic "models of transmission of feeling mediated by art" to embrace "a radical, amoral edge." By drawing on her complex identity as a queer woman of Mexican origin and evoking the trauma of being sexually assaulted, Gurba, uses her disturbing and excessive forms of representation to expose the male spectator's voyeuristic demand for "details" while making herself "unreadable" at the same time. Via dissonance and the reversal of expected polarities, Gurba's self-account politically resists such "techniques of power" as the male "epistemological privilege of unknowing" (Sedgwick), the commodification of survivor discourse and the essentialising of rape victims through a universal, therapeutic, moralising "discourse of trauma" detached from actual social, racial and gender differences.

"Poor, probable, uninteresting human life"

In his comparative analysis of Oscar Wilde's and André Gide's respective transgressions of heteronormative structures of power, cultural materialist critic Jonathan Dollimore pits two models of writing about sexual non-conformity, and more generally about minority dissidence, against each other. According to Dollimore, André Gide's autobiographical texts celebrate homosexuality by simply appropriating culturally and morally dominant values that promote the subject's submission to a socially sanctioned heterosexuality. Gide's writing promotes truth, depth, naturalness, and moral authenticity over a counterfeit consciousness; if dissident same-sex love can be proclaimed to be worthy, it is because the autobiographer discovers the existence of this desire when probing his own "subjective depth" (15, 16, 68). By contrast, Oscar Wilde's more radical transgression, Dollimore claims, consists in constantly undermining the very linguistic oppositions between depth and surface, truth and lies, nature and artifice, which underpin the Western ideology of the subject. The introspective, self-analytical subject discovering their true sexual nature is thus yet another culturally produced reality which Wilde's art of paradoxical inversions can disintegrate and disassociate from its illusory ontological foundations.

In a different context, that of a reflection about what historical discourse and narrative produce as meaningful facts and categories, gender historian Joan W. Scott posits a similar opposition between historical narratives that recognise the yet invisible (racial, sexual, gender) minorities

assumed to be naturally different from the norm, and a Foucauldian genealogic approach which examines the linguistic and social production of such "categories of representation" (400). Analysing the former, she warns against using the "authoritative (because seen or felt) evidence" (401) of subjective experience to rescue minority lives from oblivion. Otherwise, these minority lives' complex and contradictory social and political positions may be misrepresented as empty of their agentic potentiality and capacity for individual or group resistance that can propel a variety of intersectional and broader political struggles.

What remains, then, one may ask, of the potentialities of autobiographical texts that foreground the empowering role of self-discovery, self-affirmation, and community support in the reclaiming of stigmatised and abjected identities? While André Gide's sense of sexual liberation appears to rely on some illusory pre-social personal authenticity, Dollimore's Oscar Wilde is quoted as dismissing "personal experience" as "a most vicious and limited circle" (Wilde, 311, in Dollimore, 9-10) and indicting "poor, probable, uninteresting human life" (Wilde, 305, 307, in Dollimore, 10). Not only is Wilde's joyful embrace of textual, moral and epistemological disorientation and textual dispersion of bourgeois selfhood compared to Roland Barthes's experience of *jouissance* (Dollimore, 73), but it also seems to herald Barthes's espousal of elusive, pluralised sexual identities:

> [T]he confrontations and paradigms must be dissolved, both the meanings and the sexes be pluralized: meaning will tend toward its multiplication, its dispersion (in the theory of the Text), and sex will be taken into no typology (there will be, for example, only *homosexualities,* whose plural will baffle any constituted, centered discourse, to the point where it seems to him virtually pointless to talk about it). (Barthes, *RB*, 69)

Dollimore's Wilde, with his proto-poststructuralist and deconstructionist paradoxical reversals, his destabilisation of the Victorian bourgeois subject and his intersectional intuition of the common ideological grounds of class, colonial and sexual oppressions, expresses a more radical sexual and generally social dissidence. Instead, Gide's ethos of self-discovery and *aveu sexuel* is enmeshed, even participates in Foucault's disciplinary network of power-knowledge, buttressed by the cultural authority of Christian and secular forms of confession that are meant to produce modern Western individuated subjectivities and sexual categories.[7] Dollimore goes beyond this Wilde/Gide

dichotomy and operates a dialectical reversal. For all its entanglement in Christian bourgeois ideology, Gide's ethics of self-scrutiny and public revelation for the sake of his dissident sexual nature—his "radical essentialism" (72), more so than Wilde's subtle virtuoso paradoxes, can empower other sexually deviant individuals to resist legal, social and cultural oppression by identifying with fellow sexual deviants, elaborating counter-discursive strategies and organising into sexual liberation movements (71-72). This dialectical movement constitutes a strategic site for post-Foucauldian life-writing criticism, and opens interstices for radical dissident autobiographical *praxis*.

"The intimate and the social in the same movement"

The blind spots of life-writing, its false classical premises of self-transparency and self-knowledge, and its ideological involvement in the constitution and naturalisation of a normative model of Western liberal humanist selfhood, have been extensively exposed by Foucault, Pierre Bourdieu, feminist and post-colonial criticism,[8] as well as by literary critics defending a sublime, tragic, aporetic, and depersonalising conception of literature.[9] Foucault has shown Western modernity's ubiquitous encouragement of Christian and secularised confessions to be disciplinary techniques meant to produce the very subjectivities which such injunctions to self-knowledge were supposed to uncover.[10] Bourdieu has shown how a biographical method in sociological inquiries can produce distorted and misleading results, due to the illusory premise that the tacit, common-sense belief that life is a "story," a "historical narrative," oriented by an "original project," organised logically, is meant to reveal its "meaning" (81-82). For Bourdieu, self-narrative like one's given name ("*le nom propre*") is an "institution of totalisation and unification of the self" (84) that may juxtapose one's actual empirical experience of the discontinuity of reality; from Shakespeare's *Macbeth* to the modernist novel and the *anti-roman*, the literary text has profoundly questioned life's alleged linearity and narratability by foregrounding the incoherence and chaos of actual existence, thus operating as an "anti-history" (83). What sociologists should be looking for, Bourdieu adds, is not this deceiving production of oneself as a self-identical and self-sufficient subject engaged in a meaningful linear progression, but the *positions* successively occupied by a social agent or a social group inside a network of shifting, constantly evolving social fields.

Truly sociological autobiography cannot be individual, but is inherently relational, as it never separates a personal trajectory from the various social spaces it is engaged in, together with other "social agents" facing similar "fields of possibilities" (89).

Three generations of French autobiographers are strongly indebted to Pierre Bourdieu's insight: their texts, which foreground limited social spaces of possibilities and undermine prevailing patterns of individual success validating personal merit, are scathing indictments of class violence and patriarchal structures of domination. In *La place* and *La honte*, through meticulous ethnological or "auto-socio-biographic" (Ernaux, *L'écriture*, 23) drawings of the social spaces occupied by her parents, precariously hovering somewhere between rurality, the working-class and the lowest class of independent workers, Annie Ernaux's "exploration. . .of the intimate and the social in the same movement" (36, my translation), recaptures the objective reality of social subjection and its somatic and emotional correlate, shame. Her bare, "clinical" writing, which she compares to a "knife" (36), strives to eschew art and fiction, and thus avoid "complicity with cultivated readers" (34). Didier Eribon follows in the footsteps of Annie Ernaux; from a similar uneasy standpoint as a class renegade, after probing homosexual shame through theorising and historising gay lives, he shifts from this theoretical "transfiguration" of his experience (Eribon, 22) to an autobiographical, or perhaps autotheoretical work, *Retour à Reims*, where he probes "the naked violence of exploitation" (85) and implacable logic of social exclusion which determined his parents' and his brothers' social destinies. Édouard Louis's autobiographical work in progress, starting with *En finir avec Eddy Bellegueule* [*The End of Eddy*], dedicated to Eribon, unwaveringly returns to his own transclass experience, as well as to how his parents were dispossessed of any possibilities for economic and cultural improvement, in other words, how they were defined not by what they did, but by what they were socially prevented from being and doing by coercive gender and class norms—what he calls a "negative ontology" (Louis, "Cinq questions," vii).

Their texts express the guilt of bourgeois betrayal and an intense rage towards structures of domination, underpinned by an acute awareness that they are written "in the enemy's language" (Ernaux, 33, quoting Jean Genet). "No poetry of memories, no jubilating derision. Flat writing is what naturally comes to me," writes Annie Ernaux in *La place* (24, my translation).[11] Such

unflinching autobiographical returns reverse their successful trajectories; animated by a desire to write against literature itself, they eschew style, pathos and affect. Instead, "something hard, heavy, violent" (*L'écriture*, 34), close to the "material language" of Ernaux's childhood (74), "contribute[s] to the subversion of dominant worldviews" (49) and can tentatively atone for this wound of class betrayal.

Ernaux, Eribon and Louis are acutely sensitive to the fact that their personal transclass upward trajectories risk reinforcing the prevailing mythology of individual worth and merit and become co-opted by the very disciplinary techniques of subjectivation and the structures of domination their texts expose. In order to interrupt this mythology, Eribon interweaves his own success and upward mobility with his brothers' heavily determined and limited social destinies, while drawing on Black American author John Edgar Wideman's accounts of his escape from the poverty of Pittsburgh's black ghetto to the white middle-class world of academia. In his memoir *Brothers and Keepers* and his novel *Fanon*, Wideman contrasts his own exceptional destiny with a statistical truth, that of the outrageously disproportionate number of imprisoned Black men, including his own younger brother—the effect of what he perceives as a war waged against Black Americans. This long parallel (113-124) enables Eribon, empowers him perhaps, to evoke his own estrangement and uneasy feeling of being "miraculously saved" ("un miraculé," 119) and politicise this unease by transposing Wideman's "Black rage" (Wideman, *Brothers*, 187; Eribon, 121) into the context of the "implacable war" (122) waged by the French bourgeois classes against popular classes (121-122). Ernaux's literary closeness to Jean Genet (quoted in *La place*'s epigraph), Eribon's similar debt to Genet's uncompromising oppositional ethos (102), as well as to Ernaux's [12] and Wideman's writings, and Édouard Louis's thorough personal and political identification with and literary emulation of Didier Eribon [13] create an intertextual network of autobiographical influence which points to the political and textual power of life-writing, namely to enable other subaltern lives to be spoken in their own terms and thus to outmanoeuvre prevailing social narratives—in Eribon's words, "to escape the implacable logic of what goes without saying" (51, my translation): «Only through an epistemological disruption of the way individuals spontaneously perceive themselves can we describe. . .the

mechanisms allowing the social order to reproduce itself» (52, my translation).[14]

Feminist and postcolonial critics have emphasised the role of classical autobiographies in reinforcing prevailing cultural models of Western male identity, through operations of devaluing women by associating them with earthly nature and bodily life—material things and desires to be erased, abjected and transcended into spiritual achievements (Lionnet 56-7, 66). Through their performative "recitation of identity" (Smith, 20) classical autobiographies reproduce, in a circular, quasi-tautological movement, the discursive norms regulating the intelligible and the liveable by excluding "unruly heterogeneity within the individual and within the body social and politic" (Smith, 19). But the same critics have shown that experimental autobiographical texts disrupt, exceed, and undo the norms they perform. From Gertrude Stein's "camp" reiteration of the "recitation" of heterosexuality, laying bare its fictional status (28-29), to Cherríe Moraga's "dis/identifications" from models of whiteness and heterosexuality through her narratives of "passing" (as white and straight) and self-assertion as a Chicana lesbian—as a body and desire which are "an excess" in the system" (30)—, life-writing allows silenced, inferiorised gender, sexual and racial identities, in other words "culturally unintelligible subjects," to fail in their "recitation of citations" and thus perform culturally impossible *I*s, against the prevailing social order (31).

One could go further and argue, like Philippe Lejeune, that even the most institutionally constrained and coerced forms of confessions, that is, the medicolegal "case studies" he uncovers in his search for nineteenth-century homosexual proto-autobiographies, have managed to outmanoeuvre the repressive power structures that were producing them. Reaching unexpected audiences that misread these texts and identified with the 'perverts' and 'criminals' instead of being deterred and silenced, some readers were inspired to send their own autobiographical testimonies to the psychiatric authorities:

> Such narratives, written in collaboration [with medicolegal power], stem from a compromise—if in order to make their voices heard individuals must accept to submit to a discourse condemning them, the institution risks provoking a testimony which outdoes its expectation or escapes its control.[15]

While its open textuality and uncontrollable reception works as a matrix for unpredictable identifications and resistance, as a literary act autobiography

participates in literature's effort to turn reified forms of language against themselves and generate strong effects of disidentification from what Philippe Forest exposes as "the fictions of reality." If autobiography can live up to Forest's definition of literature as "an utterance which, by uttering itself, protests against all the languages we have been taught" (*Le roman*, 11, my translation),[16] then it follows that literature's anti-mimetic, anti-discursive power to subvert the spurious, ideological 'reality' of reality, the unity of the *I* and the transparency of representations opens infinite possibilities of dissidence from normative fictions of the self.

The literary genre of life-writing may still operate from the margins of modern Western conceptions of great literature, defined as it still seems to be through a liberal humanist preference for what transcends particularities and politics. The narrator of young queer Vietnamese-American author Ocean Vuong's semi-fictionalised autobiographical account *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, an intersectional poetic outcry against the social and racial blind spots of mainstream America, testifies to how being a political *I* may forfeit a budding writer's position in the literary field:

> They will tell you that to be political is to be *merely* angry, and therefore artless, depthless, "raw," and empty. They will speak of the political with embarrassment, as if speaking of Santa Klaus or the Easter Bunny.
>
> They will tell you that great writing "breaks free" from the political, thereby transcending the barriers of difference, uniting people toward universal truths. (186)

A century earlier, Charlotte Brontë had also infused into her fictional works a political rage drawn from her personal experience of class and gender limitations. Her place in the literary canon was interrogated in Virginial Woolf's ardent, yet ambivalent tribute to a writer whose ubiquitous *I*, "poverty and exaltation" and "untamed ferocity perpetually at war with the accepted order of things" (158), had made her a powerful prose poet. Charlotte Brontë's thoroughly idiosyncratic style, shaped after her unique, distinctive mind, may be judged "awkward and unyielding" by Woolf, but she concedes it has "a beauty, a power, a swiftness of its own"(158). Still, in Woolf's terms, it is precisely the power and compelling intensity of Charlotte's *I* that may have prevented her novels from accessing universality—that of her sister Emily's "more general conception" (159). Because of the same dominant literary norms extolling universalism and impersonality inherited from liberal

humanist modernism, experimental, literary life-writing, especially texts with a political edge, while generating strong critical responses, always seem to gravitate slightly off-centre. It is from these very margins, through their uncomfortable excess in meaning, openness to reception and failures of performativity, within the ceaseless dialectical movement between selfhood and its dispersion, that queer radical life-writing *praxis* and critical studies, as exemplified by the contributions to this special number, continue to deploy their dissident ethos.

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[1] The title of the English translation of the book is different from my literal translation: *Can the Monster Speak?*, trans. Frank Wynne, *Semiotext(e)/Intervention series*, MIT Press, 2021.

[2] Guillaume Marche defines this "dissident ethos" in the context of the chasm among the North American LGBT community in the 1990s, between a desire for desexualised, depoliticised respectability and a radical urge to embrace counter-discursive strategies of reclaiming stigmatised identities: "The dissident ethos urges one to find dignity not outside what constitutes social shame, but at the very heart of disqualified identities, and to make a sexualized LGBT culture the cornerstone of a dissenting, anti-establishment political message." (112, my translation). ["L'éthos dissident appelle à rechercher la dignité, non pas en dehors de ce qui est facteur de honte sociale, mais au cœur même de l'identité disqualifiée et à faire d'une culture LGBT sexualisée la base d'un message politique contestataire et conflictuel"].

[3] My translation; the line in French is as follows: "depuis une position discursive aussi inattendue qu'impossible, celle du monstre dysphorique de genre qui s'adresse à l'Académie des psychanalystes."

[4] See Alex Brostoff's essay in this issue.

[5] Queer Nation was a direct-action organisation, created in 1990 by radical ACT-UP New York activists. As ACT-UP militant and historian Sarah Schulman notes, "their name and emergence made an empowered version of the word *queer* more common" (370).

[6] Lionnet's close analysis of Maya Angelou's autobiography *I Know Why the Caged Birds Sing* brings to light the complex textual layers allowing her to superimpose white literary tradition and Southern Black vernacular, and the recurring motif of embedded self-reflective scenes showing how Blacks can handle duplicitous uses of language which tactically address two audiences—a dominant white one and one united by strong communal bonds : "It is in this differentiation between the 'unaware' interlocutor and the 'aware' that we can begin to understand Angelou's conception of 'autobiographical' narration and the double audience she addresses in her writings: an audience split along racial and gender lines but also—and this is the important point here—split between those interlocutors, on the one hand, who share with the narrator an unquestioned sense of community and those, on the other hand, who have a relationship of power over that narrator" (131).

[7] See in particular, Foucault, *Histoire de la Sexualité*, 78-80 and *Herméneutique*, 346.

[8] See Smith and Lionnet.

[9] See Philip Forest's polemical argument against mimetic, narcissistic, psychological "ego-literature" and his defence of an experimental "I-fiction" ["Roman-du-je"] (*Le Roman, le Je*, 16-17), where ghostly, uncertain, lyrical, torn subjectivities inherited from 1920s avant-garde literature question reality and explore the dangerous limits of experience (24-27).
[10] See Foucault, "Du gouvernement des vivants."
[11] ["Aucune poésie du souvenir, pas de dérision jubilante. L'écriture plate me vient naturellement"]
[12] "I recognized exactly what I went through at the time [his alienation, as a Parisian intellectual, from his provincial working-class family] on reading the books Annie Ernaux had devoted to her parents and to the "class distance" that separated her from them." (28, my translation) ["J'ai reconnu très précisément ce que j'ai vécu à ce moment-là en lisant les livres qu'Annie Ernaux a consacrés à ses parents et à la distance de classe qui la séparait d'eux."]
[13] See Louis, *Changer*, chapt II : "Didier," in particular 169-179.
[14] ["Seule une rupture épistémologique avec la manière dont les individus se pensent eux-mêmes spontanément permet de décrire. . .les mécanismes par lesquels l'ordre social se reproduit."]
[15] ["Ces récits, écrits en quelque sorte 'en collaboration,' sont le fruit d'un compromis : si l'individu doit accepter, pour pouvoir faire entendre sa voix, de se soumettre à un discours qui le condamne, l'institution prend, elle, le risque de provoquer un témoignage qui déborde son attente ou échappe à son contrôle."]
[16] ["une parole qui, se parlant elle-même, proteste contre tous les langages appris"]

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