090617-Session-2-Keynote-John-Zuern_Safra

Speaker Key:

MS: Max Saunders

MS: Monica Soeting

ID: Isabel Duran

JZ: John Zuern

F: Female

M: Female

H: Hannah

R: Rosanna

J: Julia

00:00:00

MS: Good morning ladies and gentlemen, if we can start this session please, welcome back for the last day of the conference and our final keynote talk. Before we move on to that I just want to invite Monica Soeting and Isabel Duran to say a little bit about the European Journal, so over to Monica.

MS: Right, thank you very much, Max. Actually just three things we want to talk about really briefly. Firstly, at the European Journal we're firefighting, we'd really like to invite you to send us articles based on your papers of this conference, so would you please think about that and contact me if you want to. Thank you very much for that. Now, Isabel's going to very shortly say something about her next conference.

ID: Good morning everyone, I said it on the first day but some of you were not here yet, so just we should announce that IABE 2019 will be hosted by the Complutense University of Madrid, the Department of English Studies where I teach and where I belong. And, well, you know, Madrid is a very nice place to visit, the university has a tube station right in the middle of the campus so it's approachable and reachable. The hotels are reasonably inexpensive, so it's, I think, a good place to have a conference. So I hope to see you all in 2019, it will probably be early June too, just like this conference, but we have not decided on the dates yet, thank you very much [applause].

MS: Okay, well, there's one last item. I would like to take this opportunity on behalf of the Steering Committee of IABE Europe and of course all of you I would presume to thank Max and Claire and all the other people who organised this conference for a wonderful conference. I'm getting all these great ideas, so we've brought you a tiny present, it's a

really little one, it's to help you regain the calories that you probably lost in organising all this. And you have to share with all the other people, with Alex especially, I'll just leave it here for you. But could I have you join me in thanking them very, very much for this wonderful conference [applause].

00:02:39

MS: Thank you very much, that's extremely kind of you, but it really is all of you who have made it such a wonderful conference, so thank you all. Okay. It gives me tremendous pleasure now to introduce our keynote speaker for today, John Zuern. In the information pack for the conference it says that John David Zuern is an associate professor of English at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa, but actually since then he's been promoted to full professor, so first of all, congratulations, John [applause]. But I can reassure you that everything else we say about him is still true. He's still a co-editor of Biography and Interdisciplinary Quarterly, his work on autobiography, electronic literature and visual art has appeared in the journals, life writing, Studia, Neophilologica, and Visible Language. And in the volumes, the Profile Handbook, Comparative Textual Media, transforming the humanities in the post print era, reading moving letters, digital literate and research and teaching, cultural critique and the global corporation and also the electronic literature collection.

In 2003, John edited a special issue of Biography as many of you know and has been cited much here during the conference, called Online Lives. And in 2015, he co-edited the follow-up issue Online Lives 2.0, with Laurie McNeill. And both issues really took stock of and helped to define that evolving domain of online life writing studies. So when we decided to hold this conference on the theme of life writing Europe and New Media. We very much wanted both John and Laurie to feature in it and we're absolutely delighted that they were both able to come and be our keynote speakers. John, as you can see, is going to be talking today on new algorithms of the soul, internet celebrity memoirs and the programme, Life. So please join me in giving a very warm welcome to John Zuern [applause].

JZ: Good morning. Can you hear me alright? So I want to start by thanking Max and Claire for this very kind introduction to give this talk as well as Alex Clayton and Vicky Bowman for helping me with the arrangements to get here, and Dorian for help with the tech this morning. I also have to thank my partner, Laura Lyons and my friend and co-editor, Laurie McNeill, both of whom kept me on my toes as I was putting this talk together. Laurie and I and our introduction to the Online Lives 2.0 issue with an appeal to listening, and in my talk today I'm going to try to take that advice. In her 2012 memoir, The Boy Kings, Katherine Losse looks back over her experience of working for Facebook in the early days of that company's existence. As the 51st employee hired on at Facebook, where she eventually served as Mark Zuckerberg's personal ghost writer, Losse had a front row seat of the creation of the social media environment we all live in today. And her memoir dwells on her misgivings about the world she saw emerging from Zuckerberg's vision. In a typical passage she writes: what happens to society when you promise

people they can have whatever they want: instant contact, hundreds of photographs of people you barely know, endless digital validation? Real life has its limits, but the internet, where everything seems to be free for the taking, has none. What will this do to our relationships, I wondered, or even more intimately, our souls?

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Losse became to believe that rather than strengthening people's connections with each other, Facebook was in fact degrading her capacity to form intimate relationships. She recalls one of her colleagues proudly announcing that he had written an algorithm to tell him whom among the people in his life he was closest to. Losse also worried that as Facebook users came to surrender so much of their personal information to the platform's algorithms, they were losing control of their life stories, which were essentially being programmed according to Facebook's specifications. Summing up the apprehension she felt at the launch of the company's news feed feature in 2006 she proclaims the automated literature of our lives had begun. Many of the presentations at this conference have taken a less sceptical view of the effects digital media are having on people's lives and life stories. Many of you are pointing to the ways these media have facilitated new modes of self-discovery and self-representation, and of community, commemoration, witnessing, testimony and political resistance.

However pessimistic or optimistic our outlook may be there's no doubt that the internet is transforming our lives in ways we can't yet fully comprehend and that those transformations will continue to present exciting challenges to other biography studies. Some of you will have recognised my [0:08:22] to Julia Kristeva's book, New Maladies of the Soul, her collection of essays pondering irrelevance of psychoanalysis at the end of the 20th century. The book came out in French in 1993, the same year that saw the release of Mosaic, the first graphical interface to the worldwide web. Its English translation appeared in 1995, the same year Sherry Turkle published Life on the Screen. Kristeva herself doesn't speculate about the social and psychological impact the fledgling internet is going to have. But the question she raises resonate with the questions the organisers of this conference have invited us to explore. Moreover, the arguments Kristeva makes on behalf of psychoanalysis run parallel to the arguments we are making now, often implicitly. On behalf of our own disciplines, capacity to take account of how the internet and digital technologies more generally are shaping our experience of the world of each other and of ourselves.

By soul, Kristeva means the psyche, the psyche dimension of subjectivity, and that's what the word will mean throughout my talk today. For Kristeva, New Maladies of the Soul have arisen from the convergence of a particular western model of the individual human subject and the crushing demands and false promises of late capitalism. As she sees it, this convergence has found new forms of anxiety, depression and neurosis. While Kristeva acknowledges the advances in psychopharmacology can alleviate some of that suffering, she advocates with the continuing value of talk therapy, of listening to what people say about themselves as they try to come to terms with the way their lives have

been shaped, by the discourses in which they are embedded and embodied. In a chapter titled, in times like these who needs psychoanalysis, Kristeva asserts that psychoanalysis wagers to modify the prison of the soul, that the west has made into a means of survival and protection. Although this prison has recently been revealing our failings, this wager is therapeutic as well as ethical, and, incidentally, political.

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In turning to Kristeva's book I am not endorsing psychoanalysis as a critical framework. I am suggesting that now more than two decades later we in this room might modify Kristeva's question to ask in times like these when capitalism has joined forces with digital technologies to penetrate ever deeper into our social and psychic lives. And when we get books like Brian Christian and Tom Griffiths, Algorithms to Live By, who needs autobiography studies? What ethical and political wagers are scholars in this field making as they try to come to terms with the ways digital media are imprisoning and/or expanding our souls. Like psychoanalysis, the discipline of autobiography studies has found on the practice of paying close attention to life stories. And despite my reservations about psychoanalysis as such, what I still find admirable about Kristeva's work as an analyst as she represents it in her case studies. Is her remarkably fine grain attention to the smallest details of her clients' speech. In the words they choose and their turns of phrase she finds not only symptoms of their illnesses but also signs of a resistant, creative restlessness, that has the potential to catalyse a new understanding of their experiences and a new way of telling their stories.

And like all clever analysts, Kristeva remains attentive to the effects of the countertransference, of the ways her own desires and disavowals might inform and potentially distort her understanding of the stories her clients are trying to tell. Today I want to point to a set of texts that I think will reward that same kind of careful listening on the part of scholars of autobiography, even as they test our capacity to understand what they're telling us. I'm going to talk about the rapidly growing corpus of print memoirs by internet celebrities, most of them YouTube personalities, most of them quite young. While these books are by and large are not surprisingly celebrations of the creative, positive dimensions of social media, at least some of them also address the downsides of working as professional social media content creators, and are crafting marketable selves with digital tools. I'll start by describing these books to give you a sense of what they look like and of their authors' purported rationale for writing them. After that I'll offer what I think is a useful theoretical framework for analysing the kind of labour that defines these internet stars' cultural production. For that I'll be enlisting the concept of creative labour from the Italian autonomist critique of neoliberalism.

I'll then turn to some of these examples of these books to ask whether we can see in at least some of them, an effort to mobilise the rhetorical resources of longer form autobiographical narrative to reflect on and push back against the neoliberal programming that dictates the terms of their professional lives and their online self-presentations. I also want to ask how finding evidence of such pushback in these texts might encourage us to

push back against the boundaries of a conceptual framework, that despite its usefulness, might too readily tempt us to diagnose them, if not, dismiss them merely as symptoms of a malady of neoliberal capitalism.

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In October 2014 an imprint of Random House published Make Up: Your Life Guide to Beauty, Style and Success Online and Off by the well-known beauty blogger, Michelle Phan. And in the same month an imprint of Simon & Schuster published comedian and YouTube personality, Grace Helbig's Grace's Guide: The Art of Pretending to be a Grown-up. While they weren't explicitly labelled as memoirs, the publicity for both books promised they would give their readers exclusive insights into the personal lives of these stars. Make Up and Grace's Guide were forerunners in a rapidly growing trend of top publishers investing in books based on the lives of prominent internet personalities. In the same year, 2014, Simon & Schuster established the in print Keywords Press, devoted exclusively to books by internet celebrities, billing it as a new publishing home for a new kind of storytelling.

By the end of 2015, Keywords had published Shay and Gavin Butler's Fat Dad, Fat Kid, Shane Dawson's I Hate Myselfie, Justin Ezarik's iJustine, Connor Franta's A Work in Progress and Joey Graceffa's In Real Life. In the same year two other Simon & Schuster in prints have released Tyler Oakley's Binge and Issa Rae's Misadventures of an Awkward Black Girl. Other publishers jumped on-board with books like Felicia Day's You're Never Weird on the Internet (Almost). Jenn McAllister's Really Professional Internet Person and The Amazing Book is Not on Fire by the British duo Dan Howell and Phil Lester. A sampling of more recent publications includes Matthew Espinosa's More Than Me, GloZell Green's Is You Okay, Hannah Hart's Buffering, Ryan Higa's How to Write Good, Caspar Lee's Caspar Lee and Lilly Singh's How to be a Boss. Some of these writers have already put out a second book, for example, Connor Franta's Note to Self and Shane Dawson's It Gets Worse both in 2016. Altogether they add up to a pretty stall stack, so this is not a small [0:16:30], let me tell you.

In terms of their content, virtually all of these texts participate in the genre of the [0:16:41]. They relate their [0:16:43] development from the very first forays into social media to their present stardom and they almost always include a story about leaving home and moving to Los Angeles or London to launch their careers. In this regard the author richly detailed history with convergence of social media and the entertainment industry, and of the rise of social media content creation as a real, all be it, risky career path. As promised these books routinely reveal aspects of the stars' private lives that they've either withheld or only hinted at in their online performances. These include details of family and romantic relationships, tributes to influential people in their lives and almost always accounts of personal problems such as depression, body dysmorphia, eating disorders, self-harming, bullying, domestic abuse and in the case of Caspar Lee, Tourette syndrome. Many of them, like Phan's Make Up and Helbig Grace's Guide, combine the genres of the memoir

and the self-help manual. Lilly Singh offers tips on self-empowerment, for example, while Shay and Gavin Butler promote physical fitness and healthy eating.

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Even when they're not explicitly dispensing life advice, all of them seek to inspire, they recount their own triumphs over adversity to encourage their readers to become their best selves, to embrace their passion and to follow their dreams. In terms of their physical formats, a few of these books are conventional chapter by chapter prose, narratives, illustrated with photographs. And apart from their focus on social media they look no different from memoirs by other celebrities like Carrie Fisher or Alec Baldwin. The majority of them, however, remediate the print memoir in the image of YouTube and Instagram, they are intensely visual, often devoting full page spreads to pictures. They adapt some of the standard subgenres of a YouTube video, for example, the genre of the Frequently Asked Questions from fans, such as in Matthew Espinosa's More Than Me. And the genre of the challenge as in Ricky Dillon's Follow Me, a memoir in challenges. Some invite interaction by including worksheets for readers to fill out, this one is from Lilly Singh's How to be a Boss. And many incorporate artwork by fans as does this spread from Howell and Lester's The Amazing Books is Not on Fire.

Outliers in terms of form are Caspar Lee's book which presents itself as a biography written by Lee's mother, Emily Riordan Lee, with Lee's annotations. And Ryan Higa's How to Write Good, which is a graphic memoir dramatizing Higa's relationship with the ghost writer, his publisher, Little, Brown assigned to him. The chapters in these books are usually quite short, but their sequenced in ways that build up a retrospective, and in some cases, prospective narrative of their author's lives. A number of them incorporate the familiar life writing genre of a letter to my past self, and sometimes a letter to my future self. This use of extended self-reflective narrative is what most conspicuously sets these books apart from their author's typical online performances of selfhood, and I'll be coming back to that point later. I'm not sure we can find better examples of the manufacturing of memoir for the popular market that Julie Rak so thoroughly analyses in Boom. These books are obviously extensions of the star's self-branding and self-marketing initiatives. They take their place among the other merchandise that supplements their revenues from advertising, like t-shirts, coffee mugs or in the case of Connor Franta, blank journals emblazoned with his channel's logo.

Moreover, some of them were essentially market tested before they were even written. The content of a number of the Keyword Press books was crowd sourced from fans who told the publisher what they most wanted to know about the stars' lives. And of course the question of who actually wrote some of these books remains open. These memoirs are transparently commercial ventures and they themselves unabashedly celebrate the spirit of entrepreneurialism. The vast majority of them tell stories of overcoming the odds of finding success, if not, redemption in the social media marketplace. For these reasons it's easy to read them as examples of what Leigh Gilmore, most recently her book Tainted Witness has called neoliberal life narratives. Like the text Gilmore discusses, these books

promulgate a particular model of self-actualisation and recovery that shuts out any number of other less commercially viable life stories. A striking number of the authors represent themselves as gay or bisexual but as I'll discuss later, critics have pointed out that their stories of sexual self-discovery and the life lessons they pass on to their audiences typically adhere to a homonormative template.

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And even though this scoop of authors looks fairly diverse in terms of race and ethnicity, readers looking for anything like a structural analysis of how the politics of race have shaped their lives and careers, will for the most part, be disappointed, that's in general not what these books are for. While all that is certainly true, I want to suggest that these texts engage the tension between the creative and destructive effects of social media in ways that deserve our consideration. And that unpacking that tension might lead us to qualify and add nuance to the obvious and also necessary critique of the neoliberal evangelism. As a point of departure for such a reading we might look at a feature a large number of these texts have in common, very often the authors begin their books by explicitly representing the print memoir as a mode of self-representation distinct from, and in many cases, preferable to the online modes of self-representation that have made them famous. In various ways these authors claim they can do something in the analogue medium of the book that they couldn't do in their tried and true digital formats. The subtitle of Justine Ezarik's book, An Analogue Memoir, sums it up.

I want to point here to a passage in Emma Maguire's astute analysis of Jenna Mourey's self-branding as the YouTube personality, Jenna Marbles. Maguire draws on Sidney Smith and Julie Watson's concept of automediality to describe how Mourey's audience relates to her online persona as Jenna Marbles. Because the components of that persona are distributed across various channels like Facebook, Instagram and Twitter, Maguire notes that consumers of Mourey's automedial self cannot hold a single cohesive version of Mourey's story in their hands as readers can with a memoir. Maguire's article appeared in Biography in 2015 right at the moment when many of these YouTube stars were trying to close the gap, Maguire identifies. They were giving their audiences something to hold in their hands and promising them more cohesive, more intimate and more authentic versions of themselves than they had been giving them up to that point. These memoirs essentially double down on their online self-exposure, and at the same time they at least claim to find [0:24:23] with the fragmentation and inauthenticity of their online selves.

The opening paragraph of Matthew Espinosa's More Than Me illustrates a typical opening gambit in this corpus of text, after the standard YouTube greeting, "Hey, it's Matthew", Espinosa tells us "I've got a lot to share, much more than I could ever put in a six second [0:24:51], an Instagram caption, a quick YouTube video or a tweet of a 140 characters or less. And none of the above tells you much about who I really am as a person." So when Espinosa faced the question, "What's the best way to give my fans a real deep intimate picture of myself," he decided a book seemed like a good choice. Some openings emphasise the difference between the author's online and offline personalities. Shane

Dawson's I Hate Myselfie gives us an especially dark version of this claim. In this book you'll get to see the real me, not the me you see on YouTube, you will get to know what's really in my head, and I'm warning you, it's not pretty. It's a twisted land of self-hatred, sadness and lots of repressed anger toward every person who's ever hurt me. Enjoy.

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Connor Franta goes one step further to claim that his second memoir, Note to Self in his words, "Not as self-edited as a working progress was." And in a passage reproduced on the back of a book, he calls Note to Self an open diary that gives my insides a voice through visuals and poetry, this is me spilled out on paper. Scholars of Autobiography know better than to be taken in by memoirs' assertions of authenticity. And in the intensely mercantile context in which these celebrities are making these claims, our suspicions are more than warranted. But even if we can't take these writers entirely at their word when they promise to deliver their genuine, unfiltered, uncomodified selves. I want to ask if we can nonetheless apply our skills as readers to find evidence in their texts of something like a genuine restlessness within the confines of the social media marketplace, even if we don't find outright resistance. If we undertake that kind of reading, it seems important to me to have a clear concept of the conditions against which some of these writers appear to be pushing back.

As I said, I find the concept of creative labour as elaborated by writers like [0:27:05] and Isabel [0:27:08] to be a particularly apt designation of the kind of cultural production these internet celebrities are involved in. As a representative of this line of thinking I want to invoke Franco Berardi whose worked well within the ways contemporary capitalism accelerated by digital technologies has converted every dimension of our subjectivity into an exploitable resource, and all of our time into time at work. According to Berardi, what he calls semiocapitalism now captures and extracts value, not only from the hours of our days and the exertion of our bodies as in the old model of the factory, but also from our language, our thoughts, our emotions and our creativity. In addition, and perhaps most insidiously, as an extension of neoliberalism, semiocapitalism exploits our belief that when we enter into precarious working conditions we do so freely, that we're following our passions and taking charge of our destinies. And I want to remind you here that these internet stars routinely advise their readers to follow their passions.

I'm going to quote from Berardi's 2008 book, The Soul at Work in part because this title chimes in so nicely with Kristeva's, but namely because he offers a [0:28:32] formulation of the kind of work and the kind of life young people are signing up for when they set out to realise their dreams of internet stardom. Berardi writes that within the logic of semiocapitalism, our desiring energy is trapped in the trick of self-enterprise, our libidinal investments are regulated according to economic rules, our attention is captured in the precariousness of virtual networks: every fragment of mental activity must be transformed into capital. If we view them from Berardi's perspective, the lines of professional social media content creators, especially those whose everyday activities are the primary content of their videos. We can see that they have done, in a strong sense, programmed,

when they register with a YouTube partner programme which allows them to monetise their popularity through advertisements on their channels. Bloggers indenture themselves to the computational algorithms of Google's AdSense programme, which calculates the value of every page visit and pays them a fraction of the revenues.

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When they promote their advertisers' products and their own merchandise they are conscripted into the economic algorithms of market capitalism. Their online personas are themselves essentially programmed and compliant with their audience's demands. In his Memoir Binge for example, Tyler openly describes having to exaggerate his interest in the boy band, One Direction to live up to the expectations of an audience composed largely of teenage girls. To come back to my question of how we might read these books I want to ask, if, as we read them, we can at once acknowledge how neoliberalism and semiocapitalism have tightly constrained their authors' self-representations while at the same time picking up signs of a restlessness inside those constraints. In other words, I am asking if we can find evidence that some of these authors are marshalling the old algorithms of the soul. The rhetorical structures of longer form autobiographical narrative to distance themselves from, and to reflect on the new algorithms of the soul that are programming our lives according to the specifications of digitally enhanced capitalism.

I'd like to think that if we find such evidence we'll be less inclined to dismiss these texts out of hand as at best mere merchandise, and at worst, as nothing more than neoliberal propaganda. I'd like us to look at Hannah Hart's Buffering, Unshared Tales of a Life Fully Loaded. Because I think Hart goes a long way toward achieving this kind of distancing and reflecting by mining the resources of autobiographical discourse. Hart became famous on YouTube for posting comedic cooking videos on her channel, My Drunk Kitchen. And had already published a cookbook by that name when Buffering appeared in 2016. Her memoir [0:31:48] unusually frank criticism of the social media industry into an account of growing up with a mother with schizophrenia who resisted treatment. And a father who was a staunch Jehovah Witness and from whom she became estranged after coming out as a lesbian. She chronicles her struggle to come to terms with her sexuality, a struggle that included doubts of self-harming and she describes her ongoing effort to cope with the posttraumatic stress brought on by the unstable and often frightening conditions she lived in as a child.

Like the writers I quoted earlier, Hart opens Buffering with an explanation of why she's writing a memoir. And as is often the case, her explanation emphasises the advantages of the analogue medium. She tells us that although she is, and these are her words, a proud social media titan operating in the age of the overseer. She has withheld a number of details about her private life from her online performances because she needed more time to process them. She borrows the technical term, Buffering, to develop a metaphor for this processing of her life experiences. As she explains, buffering is that time you spend waiting for the pixels of your life to crystallise into a clearer picture. It's a time of reflection, a time of pause, a time for regaining a composure or readjusting your course.

We all have a limited amount of mental and emotional bandwidth and some of life's episodes take a long time to fully load. Throughout Hart's book, this image of a familiar loading animation serves as a section divider, visually reinforcing her metaphor of buffering. I can't confirm that this detail is actually Hart's idea and not the book designer's. But I do want to point out that it's remediation of the clean edged digital image as messy smudges of paint is very much in line with Hart's deployment of analogue media to negotiate her relationship with her online modes of self-representation.

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Buffering incorporates scans and transcriptions of Hart's early handwritten journals as well as excerpts from the journals she later kept on her computer. These interpolations allow her to build up a richly layered retrospective narrative in which she reflects on the influence of her past experiences on her present day life and career choices. Recalling her self-doubt about the quality of the content she was creating for her channel she writes: Professional life aside, I was still processing personal life as well, trying to shake off the last of my latent homophobic tensions. By constantly returning to the past to take stock of the present, Hart engages a master [0:34:44] of autobiographical discourse, retrospection, to push back against, to buffer and to buffer herself from the relentless demands of her life as a professional social media content creator. At one point frustrated by the now or never pressure from a business advisor to expand her brand she tells us, all I wanted was time and space, a private learning curve to make mistakes and process them, however, it didn't feel as though that was an option.

Drawing on the terminology of [0:35:19] for its guiding metaphor, Hart's memoir represents neither an unreflective embrace, nor a disingenuous rejection of the algorithm shaping her life as a social media star. But rather an attempt to inhabit a space between the digital and the analogue, to use all the media at her disposal to create what she calls in one of her inset journal entries, tools for presence in life. Hart's Buffering exemplifies another common feature of internet celebrity memoirs, many of which describe the author's effort to leverage their fame to advance social causes. A significant number of these stars are involved in LGBT activism and for many of them, uploading their own coming out videos on their channels inaugurated their advocacy work. Hannah Hart posted her coming out video in November of 2012, and stars like Connor Franta, Joey Graceffa, Ingrid Nilson and [0:36:27] followed suit.

As gay celebrities, enlisting their success stories to encourage their fans to embrace their sexuality, despite whatever odds they face, these bloggers follow the model of the online video campaign, It Gets Better founded by Dan Savage in 2010 in response to an increase in suicide among gay teenagers in the United States. The It Gets Better campaign has drawn fire from critics like Jaz [0:36:54] and Dan Meyer for reinforcing homonormative and neoliberal values. And Michael Lovelock has recently levelled the same charges against the coming out videos of YouTubers Connor Franta and Ingrid Nilson.

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I'll be coming back to Lovelock's argument in a minute but I want to pause here and turn to Roberto Simanowski's book, Facebook Society, which appeared in German in 2016 and is due out in English from Columbia later this year. And some of us were at Roberto's presentation yesterday. Taking Facebook as a paradigm of the whole of our network society, Simanowski begins his book with the claim that by constantly documenting, logging and updating every experience of our lives in social media. We have lost our capacity to step back and reflect on those experiences and incorporate them into a robust critical understanding of our personal and collective histories. Simanowski appears to be echoing Katherine Losse's concerns about the automated literature of our lives when he states as one of the central claims in his book that Facebook more or less automatically prior to narrative reflection, generates an episodic autobiography whose actual narrator is the network and the algorithms. In the first part of his book, Simanowski seems to be privileging self-reflective narrative over the more fragmented and automated forms of self-representation in social media. And that position would line up neatly with the claims internet celebrities often make at the start of their memoirs.

Unlike, Katherine Losse, however, Simanowski ultimately and provocatively takes the side of algorithmic episodic autobiography. Drawing Laurie McNeill's exploration of the post human subjectivity that may be emerging from Facebook's algorithms as well as the philosopher, [0:38:49] sees utopian vision of erratically pluralist society. Simanowski suggests that the fragmentary episodic autobiographies social media generate might in fact enable new and potentially better forms of self-fashioning and community formation. They might do so, he argues, by suspending the restrictive, exclusionary, and even reactionary modes of identification and affiliation that self-reflective narrative can sometimes consolidate. Regressive nationalism would be one example of those chauvinistic modes of being and belonging, homonormativity would be another.

I want to look at Michael Lovelock's critique of Connor Franta's work as an example of how the self-reflective narrative of the coming out story might well be accused of reinforcing regressive and exclusionary models of successful selfhood. At the same time I want to show how elements of Franta's self-reflective rhetoric might complicate that accusation. Lovelock intends that Franta's coming out video in 2014 and his ongoing LGBT advocacy work are underwritten by the homonormative agenda. However, because so many of Franta's fans are minors who can't yet lay claim to the political rights and economic privileges associated with homonormativity, Lovelock proposes that it's more fitting to describe Franta's efforts as proto homonormative. In his view Franta is deploying his own story of personal fulfilment and financial success to indoctrinate his audience in advance into the neoliberal homonormative mind-set they will go on to actualise in their adult lives. As Lovelock puts it, in terms of the particular iteration of proto homonormativity enacted by lesbian gay YouTube celebrities, a successful or ideal gay adult life is defined through the neoliberal ideas of self-sufficiency, entrepreneurialism and individual enterprise encapsulated in the phenomenon of YouTube celebrity itself.

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Lovelock mentions but doesn't say at an time of Franta's first memoir, A Work in Progress. And to be fair to him his essay came out before Franta's second book, Note to Self was published. Lovelock's neglect of that source prompted me to go back to Franta's memoirs in the hope of finding something that would complicate Lovelock's somewhat ferocious critique. As it turned out the thematic content of Franta's stories about the events leading up to and following his coming out video provided more than enough evidence to support Lovelock's analysis, that is to say what Franta talks about is pretty homonormative. But I did notice a distinctive element in Franta's rhetoric, that is how he talks about what he talks about. And in my opinion this particular turn of phrase should encourage a more nuanced perspective on Lovelock's condemning interpretation, even though it doesn't contradict it. Early in Note to Self, in his letter to my past self, Franta tells his past self, believe in yourself, what a cliché, but it's a phrase that packs a sucker punch of sincerity. Concluding the letter he advises his former self to consider this wild idea, do what you want to do, insane concept, I know.

I was happy to discover that there is a name for the rhetorical structure Franta is employing here, it's called procatalepsis. It's a strategy for getting out ahead of an anticipated challenge to one's argument by acknowledging one's vulnerability to a counterargument. I know it's a cliché, but procatalepsis is a recurring feature of Franta's rhetoric. One of the last chapters in Note to Self is titled Avoiding a Cliché has Proven Difficult Here. So let's look at a passage in a chapter in which Franta in typical It Gets Better fashion is looking back to his own experience of coming out to encourage his readers to do the same. Now, are you ready for me to drop this large cliché bomb? Okay, here goes, once out of the closet it gets better, boom, whoosh, cliché dropped, but really it's true. Of course, acknowledging that the phrase, it gets better has become a cliché by no means absolves Franta for this complicity in the homonormative project. But I want to suggest that the figure of procatalepsis marks a brief interval of self-consciousness in regard to the conventions of homonormative discourse. Or that self-consciousness never rises to the level of an outright critique by signalling some discontent with the terms available to him.

Franta momentarily interrupts what would otherwise be the smooth operation of his homonormative proselytising. We know from theorists like Kristeva and Judith Butler who look back to one of Freud's basic premises that no norm totally encapsulates the subject who is subjected to it. For many, if not most of us, the comfortable stability and consistency of living inside a norm is tempered by some measure of inconsistency and discontent. The ideological programmes of selfhood, the algorithms we live by are buggy, and though I know will sound like wishful thinking I want to see that little blip of self-distancing in Franta's rhetoric as a bug in his memoirs, homonormative programming. Alongside the large scale narrative retrospection of the kind we see in Hart's Buffering and very small scale [0:44:43] like Franta's procatalepsis, the figure of irony offer some of these memoirists a means of distancing themselves from and reflecting on the less appealing aspects of their professional lives. In these texts, irony usually appears in the form of comedic self-deprecation.

00:45:06

In Shane Dawson's work, in both his YouTube videos and his personal essays is a prime example of this ironic self-presentation. Dawson came out as bisexual in 2015 and the title of his second memoir, It Gets Worse is his own commentary on the It Gets Better campaign. I could point to any number of examples of Dawson's irony in print but instead I'm going to play a very short clip of a video he uploaded to his channel in November of 2015. It's about life in the social media industry and I'm playing it because it sets up the last point I want to make, so bear with me for a second while I do this, okay, so brace yourselves.

Okay, thanks. I'd very much like to take on-board Simanowski's invitation to think more radically and imaginatively about the kinds of fragmented episodic forms of self-representation that are now emerging in social media. I'd also like to affirm the innovative ways YouTubers and other social media stars are immobilising fans around political issues and fostering deeply satisfying social connections. But in doing so I don't want to lose sight of a particular confluence of capitalism and creativity within which all that is happening. In the clip, when Shane Dawson advises his students to make lots of money selling literally everything, because one day there'll be nothing. He's signalling the precariousness of the creative labour Franco Berardi ad his fellow travellers are describing. Internet celebrities like Dawson are the winners in a game many people now have no choice but to play.

They have survived, at least for the time being, what Isabel [0:48:00] and others have termed the self-mercerisation of workers in the so-called creative economy who take on freelance jobs and other forms of temporary employment. That allow them to do the kind of work they love despite the lack of long term security and benefits. More and more these are the only jobs on offer. A study from last year indicates that in the United States between 2005 and 2015 the period spanning the life of YouTube, the overall growth in employment, that is new jobs added to the economy was made up entirely of forms of contingent labour. Bleak as the outlook is I find some comfort in the conclusion of the soul at work, where Berardi indulges for a moment in some optimism and observes that semiocapitalism, the production exchange of semiotic matters has always exploited the soul as productive force and marketplace. But the soul is much more unpredictable than the muscular workforce which was at work in the assembly line.

The books I've been discussing richly reward the diagnostic analysis, their approach is then symptomatic of the neoliberal self-fashioning, self-branding and self-percarisation. Such analyses are essential because they keep us vigilant to the seductive fusion of passion and risk that defines the lives of so many creative ambitious young people making their way in today's economy. But I want to conclude with a suggestion that it might be good to take a page from Franta's Note to Self and cultivate a procataleptic stance in our critical work to try to get out ahead of our own arguments, serviceable though they may be. And to dwell for a moment on the logic of I know, but, doing so might make us even

more attuned to signs of the productive, creative restlessness and unpredictability of subjectivity of the psyche, of the soul. Within the discursive and economic structures that maintain simultaneously, its coherence, its identity and its captivity.

00:50:18

As we go forward the more we cultivate our skills as attentive and imaginative listeners the more we'll nurture the same kind of faith in our practice that Kristeva has in hers. We'll go on believing that the creation and study of autobiography in all its forms will in the future be one of the few remaining endeavours that will allow change and surprise, that is that will allow life. I'll close by coming back to the image from my title screen. This is one of the many selfies Connor Franta includes in his Note to Self, it's an old school selfie, he's shooting his reflection in a glass door, carefully composed, strategically filtered and redundantly labelled. This picture is easy to interpret as yet another example of the stage spontaneity, the calculated authenticity we see in so many internet stars' performances of selfhood. But Franta's selfie contains a message I take as a challenge to that kind of interpretation and by extension, to the critical investments that inform our interpretations of all the autobiographical documents, verbal and visual, digital and analogue that are emerging from our densely networked world. That sign on the door is telling us to push, thank you [applause].

MS: Thank you so much, John, for a superb talk, wonderfully wide ranging and subtle and thought provoking and I imagine, question provoking as well. So, John is happy to field some questions from the audience. Who'd like to start? Yes, thank you.

F: So [0:52:29] metaphor of Buffering because I found it very … like I liked it, or more accurately, I like the meaning of it, this notion of waiting for the pieces to come together. And what you said in the beginning that the age [0:52:50] is really challenging our capacity as human beings to [0:52:57] everything together. And however, there is also something about us reflecting while waiting for this picture to emerge. And I find that that's actually [0:53:09], I think the way our private lives are shaped today, spend much more time just waiting for those pictures to emerge, but mostly it doesn't.

JZ: You mean … what doesn't, what doesn't emerge?

F: Our capacity to put the pages together and it's really limited, like I see this much more negative.

JZ: So you're really seeing that kind of fragmentation, that loss of the capacity to reflect?

F: Yes.

0 0:53:47

JZ: [0:53:47].

F: Yeah. And in a more general fashion I don't think that we've kind of spent our lives missing the real stories while waiting for something to happen, like it is there but in the background. And this might almost … be almost infinite possibilities that aren't there.

JZ: That's partly what I find so compelling.

M: John, move to your left.

JZ: Thanks, sorry, thank you [0:54:15]. That's partly what I find so compelling about Hannah Hart's. I mean Hannah Hart's memoir is really an outlier with a lot of these things, and she's much more self-reflective. But what's interesting is even that metaphor, I mean even that sort of visual detail of the smudged paint on the sort of digital icon that we've all seen, there's a kind of complication there. She's not entirely, you know, she's not entirely sort of embracing the sort of algorithmic life and she's also not entirely subject to it. She's not entirely taken up by it and the memoir does give her a chance to mobilise all these different media for the documentation of her life against. I mean she's not so critical of that sort of fragmentation and the sort of loss of coherence that other people are. She's more upset about the way her own creative production is being hurried along, but nevertheless, she's finding a way to use, you know, a sort of multi collective media to achieve some kind of reflection. I wouldn't disagree with you that there is an element of a loss of reflecting, I mean when we're waiting for a video to download, you know, we're not exactly reflecting on why we're doing it. Hannah. Am I calling the people? Hannah.

H: Thanks, John, that was great. I have a question about precarity and create like, I really … I thought [0:55:51] and the paper was really interesting. But I was wondering if you would be willing to comment a little bit on the kind of longer history of the [0:56:01] of the young person who wants to make it. And I'm going to [0:56:07], singing in the rain, and we've got a dance sequence. [0:56:14] kind of, you know, representations, the inherent precarity of creative drives, that predates the digital experience. And at least in many ways [0:56:27] identities, [0:56:28] analysis of young people [0:56:33].

JZ: Absolutely, yeah. So two things to say about that, one, I mean I think that .. this is [0:56:40], but one of my frustrations with what I otherwise see as an incredibly powerful way of thinking about what's happening to labour now. And especially the kind of labour that our students are going to go out into the world to do is that one, it tends to turn people into [0:56:58]. Like they're being kind of … they're like the puppets of neoliberalism, there's a way in which in the sort of very powerful critique, their agency is getting [0:57:09]. And their creativity is sort of not being acknowledged as potentially … I mean this is only true for some of them. There's a very exciting dimension that sees the kind of

general creativity, general intellect has had the capacity to sort of overturn these structures. But what people like Isabel Mourey will argue is that there's always been this model of the young person, usually young person saying, "Okay, screw it, I'm going to do what I want to do, I'm going to go to Paris and to hell with it, I'll sleep in the [0:57:41] and, you know, eat macro and cheese and it'll be great." And that now according to this group of critics has become the model, that's no longer a choice that people make, that's the only choice they have. So it's become the paradigm, you know, of working, freelancing, pulling things together, so I think that's one way of addressing that. Rosanna.

00:58:12

R: I just wanted to call up quickly as your choice specifically in creative, your choice specifically in creative industries or [0:58:20]?

JZ: Well, I think part of the argument is that with digital technologies, a lot of what people are doing now is moving signs around, so not creative necessarily in terms of works of art creative. But working with information, writing, working with communication, even things like customer service, effective labour, having to sort of perform in the service of a particular kind of goal. That I think, creative is being used in a fairly extended way, it's not the artist, except that the starving artist has become the paradigm, does that make, does that?

R: Yeah.

MS: There's a question at the back, in the middle, okay, you go first.

M: Yeah, I just want to say thanks for the talk. I want to put in my own words what I'd like to say because listening to your talk was [0:59:25]. And so [0:59:27] have a comment and the question is going to be what you think.

JZ: Thanks for the warning.

M: So my observation [0:59:36] by your talk was that what you were doing is kind of offering us on your [0:59:41] biography [0:59:46] to perform a kind of a public mapping of the [0:59:47] map of the world years ago. But the point being that the world has become … the creatives of the world have become unseeable and so cognitive mapping is what we need to do. What I thought you were doing is that now there's even a kind of unseeability is with the self itself [1:00:11].

JZ: I think that I agree with you. I'm not sure, that's a new way of thinking about it for me so I have to adjust. I hope this is a way in but one of the things that for me in reading through

all these books, there's a difference. There is a kind of internet celebrity memoir that really does seems to resist any attempt to find restlessness. They do seem completely caught up in self-branding, they are completely celebratory, they are what their publishers want them to be, which is a product. There is no mapping going on. But with some of them through irony, through the kind of self-conscious retrospection and critique that somebody like Hannah Hart is involved in. There's both a mapping of one's own positioning within the industry but also a mapping of I think, and this is where the important dimension of memoir comes in, mapping the trajectory from a kind of childhood, and being a kind of child to being a kind of professional. Because a lot of them tell this [1:01:28] story, and they're looking back and figuring out how did I get here. And in many cases it's nothing but of everybody was supportive, everybody wanted me to follow my dreams, it was great. Others have a rockier road to follow and so in mapping, using the discourse in memoir to map that. I think if you read carefully you get a kind of mapping from about maybe 2002 forward, of what the world has started to look like, what the opportunities for young people have started to be. So there is a kind of cognitive mapping you can pull out of these of the moment that we're living in about 12/15 years back.

01:02:15

M: So this question is also kind of [1:02:17]. I thought it was really interesting that you talked about the continuing purchase or otherwise of psychoanalysis. And I was interested when these books talk about [1:02:27], or about sexuality, today [1:02:30] models or are these metaphors [1:02:34]?

JZ: Can you see? The renowned psychotherapist Carl Jung once said, this is Connor Franta, just to remind you, this is about as far as it goes, you know, sort of random reading, you know, things that sort of connect. There is a kind of commonplace book effect to a lot of this stuff, things like what's inspired me. Franta's a really complex figure, I mean it's easy to read him as just kind of nothing but a, you know, product. But there's all this stuff happening in his books that I think is much more complicated, and that's one of them.

M: Do these sort of sit side by side with these kind of [1:03:15] metaphors, [1:03:16]?

JZ: The real kind of conscious creative development of metaphor, this doesn't happen as much as the collaging of things like Twitter feeds into the actual graphic, text. And what I was talking about with the sort of formal adaptation, you know, of print, so that seemed to go off topic, but I mean Hart really is kind of unusual in that she is literary. She's so, in our traditional terms of being literary, she's really mobilising rhetoric, although the others are doing things in ways that are much harder to read, you know, but I think need to be read.

MS: Okay, can we get a microphone to [1:04:04] in the centre there?

01:04:07

M: I think I was wondering [1:04:09] question [1:04:10] in order to get rid of the religious connotation also. But I wondered why just suddenly it comes up?

JZ: Yeah, I did have that line in the beginning saying what [1:04:38] mean in talk is psyche. And I'm using it really, it's not meant to be an entire throwaway but it's not … it's Freud, not [1:04:48]. So we're not talking about the Christian soul, sorry that wasn't clear. I'm just using it because it was a handy way to hook on all of this stuff I wanted to talk about. I really admire Kristeva's book, I think it's interesting to situate that set of discussions in the context of the emergence of the internet. So I'm not going to stand by soul, like I have no investment in keeping on using the soul, I know and so no, psyche [1:05:15].

MS: Let's take two more questions, one from Julia and [1:05:18].

J: John, thanks for the terrific and really provocative talk, I'm going to continue with the reference to the peculiarity itself, you talk a lot about the [1:05:29] put online, which of course [1:05:33] celebrity forms that aren't particularly of sort of old rock stars, I'm going to now get great numbers writing narratives, [1:05:43]. But what I was reminded of in a way in this, that you didn't mention and I wonder whether your thoughts on this was in some ways that you want to see the favour the notion of a kind of conversation memoir. But it's this sense of counter conversion because it's to nothing that can be identified as some sort of new police system, safe etc. But random from accepted forms and I wonder if that's even fair when it's just, you know, to say counter converted [1:06:17] of say semiocapitalism etc.?

JZ: So there are kind of two moments in many of these. And there's a very exciting kind of conversion narrative that happens which is when I first picked up a camera, when I was a lonely, confused, you know, boy/girl, you know, when I found … I started making movies and YouTube suddenly was there and I uploaded my videos and I made a community. There was that sense of a real change, you know, a real change and a real, I think, don't want to get too sentimental here but a kind of celebration of the potential of technology, you know, to make legs, to sort of give people a way of thinking about themselves. The other conversion is when it became popular enough to monetise their production. And so I think there's a really distinctive shift you see, you know, between that early story, usually in the adolescence of high school, of finding a way, you know, to use technology to cope with what's going on. And then, you know, the other conversion, you know, to monetise, to become a professional, to become a star. And that's also I think, part of the [1:07:24].

MS: Okay, there was someone on the back row but if you want to ask a quick question, certainly do while it's there, okay.

F: Sorry.

01:07:38

MS: Yeah, no, it's fine, it's fine.

F: My question is [1:07:43].

JZ: Sorry, can you speak up a little bit?

F: Sorry. The sort of an essential [1:07:51] a certain surf. And I ask that because you see that we lived by a new way of [1:08:00] in the world and new technologies. And I think this might be a bit pessimistic because also in relation to [1:08:11] I don't see the celebrity, I don't really see [1:08:18]. In the 18th century people [1:08:31] to get an idea about what is the individual, what is essential for being an individual. So maybe this new technology is [1:08:43] to kind of [1:08:46]. And the example you show us, the ironic example of how to become a star, but also see a critical side. And I don't actually see that there's so much pessimistic [1:09:04], but maybe I'm wrong.

JZ: Did you think I was suggesting … was I offering a pessimistic perspective on this, is that what you're hearing?

F: [1:09:10].

JZ: Well, I didn't do such a good job because I don't like that position and what I'm trying to suggest is that the skills that this group has, we don't have to buy into it. But I think there are ways of seeing, it's a very complex, really interesting and really relevant set of questions about how people do engage [1:09:33] today. These books are massively popular, they're top, top sellers. So they are getting out, people are reading them in the way they read [1:09:43], not the same way but in the 18th century. So these are big phenomena, thank you for that.

MS: Okay, we'll have to make this the last question, so if we could quickly get the microphone down there. Thank you.

F: Thank. Thank you [1:09:59]. I just wanted to ask if because of the way in which [1:10:05] popular, the kind of [1:10:08] to the rigour that you can see in these pages you put up. I wonder if you could say something about the creative thing of what you did, [1:10:24] engaged in these texts?

JZ: Yeah. And in fact when the folks following this autonomous line do look at YouTube, do look at social media, they're mainly talking about the fans labour, you know, and I think that stuff is definitely something. I think the other thing I would say is that what I need to

do is get more acquainted with fan studies and celebrity studies, because I've been focusing on production, you know. In some ways they're more interesting, you know, dimension is consumption, like how are these things being consumed? Are they being read, are they just being [1:10:55] owned, you know, I think that's a whole set of questions that's really important to pursue, but yeah, definitely.

01:11:03

MS: Thank you very much for all those wonderful questions [applause].