

Tomasz Basiuk

Exposures

American Gay Men's Life Writing
since Stonewall

GTS

Gdańsk Transatlantic Studies in British and North American Culture

Edited by Marek Wilczyński



PETER LANG
EDITION

The diversity of gay men's life writing since the Stonewall Inn riots is not limited to the coming-out story. Memoirs, personal essays, fictionalized autobiographies, and other forms of life writing witnessing to gay experience adopt many narrative paradigms and are profoundly self-reflexive about how they construct gay male identity. *Exposures* emphasizes both this critical perspective and the risk-taking, personal as much as artistic, assumed by gay male autobiographers. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's writings on shame, inspired by Silvan Tomkins's affect theory, are an important point of reference. So is the political thought of Jacques Rancière, whose concept of the distribution of the sensible is called upon to describe the politico-aesthetic work, performed by gay male life writing.

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...stigma involves not so much a set of concrete individuals who can be separated into two piles, the stigmatized and the normal, as a pervasive two-role social process in which every individual participates in both roles.

Erving Goffman, *Stigma* (138)

The self lives where it exposes itself and where it receives similar exposure from others.

Silvan Tomkins, *Shame and Its Sisters* (137)

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More recently, conferences, lectures and seminars sponsored by Antke Engel and Volker Woltersdorf at the Institute for Queer Theory and at the Institute for Critical Inquiry in Berlin have helped me think about this project, as have two The(e)ories symposia, organized in Dublin by Noreen Giffney, Michael O'Rourke and Anne Mulhall, which I have had the opportunity to attend.

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Preface

This book is intended to do two things at once. On the one hand, it offers a survey of gay male life writing in the post-Stonewall years: from the bestselling *The Best Little Boy in the World*, which Andrew Tobias published under the pen name John Reid in 1973, to Wayne Koestenbaum's *Humiliation*, published in 2011. It discusses autobiographies, essays, and some autobiographical fiction written by a dozen American authors, as well as one documentary video. In following the vagaries of gay male subjectivity and described experience in the post-Stonewall era, it reflects on the manner in which gay men have emerged from the homosexual closet to claim an unprecedented level of visibility. The order in which the works are discussed is not chronological because a historical account of the political and cultural process of coming out which gay male life writing traces has not been my goal. Instead, a provisional classification of life writing has been attempted to reflect the range of strategies these writers employ. This classification determines the book's division into chapters, each of which examines a different rhetorical strategy, or set of strategies, used in life writing.

My other goal has been to put forth an argument about the relationship between these writings' aesthetics and their express political intent. A political dimension of gay male life writing is thematized by most authors discussed herein, and it arguably plays a role also when it is not explicitly addressed. However, my intention is not to isolate these writers' politics from their work's aesthetic dimension but rather to treat the two *in tandem*. My method is thus influenced by the French political theorist Jacques Rancière, who insists on the co-extensiveness of the aesthetic and the political, and whose work has been a source of inspiration for this project. The notion that cultural production generally and life writing in particular have been crucial for gay male subjectivity's coming into its own in a process of acquiring political agency receives a specific theoretical grounding in Rancière's work. Rancière proposes that an efficacious claim for the recognition of one's rights must be accompanied by an adequate representation of the situation in which this claim is made, so that it may be noticed and understood (*Disagreement* 56). Coming into visibility is the moment in which political subjects are shaped because it conditions their eligibility for participation in public discourse, helping make their words legible as expression of rationality rather than of mere pain. Speaking against Plato's point that one cannot do more than one thing at a time (and against Plato's point that only those liberated from the necessity of earning a living can be political subjects), Rancière posits doing two things at once as a

prerequisite for political agency, and specifically recognizes that a reconfiguration of the aesthetic order is requisite for political change (*The Politics of Aesthetics* 13). In however a modest manner, the present study follows this recommendation by attempting to combine aesthetic analysis with reflection on the political implications of the particular aesthetic choices.

This project is deeply indebted to queer theory, which has produced a vast, and vastly varied, body of writing since the end of the 1980s. While I necessarily draw on only some of this work, these inspirations and direct sources are far too numerous, as well as different from one another, to make their succinct summary tenable at this preliminary point. It is nevertheless appropriate that I should first mention the work of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick—in particular her writings on shame and the performance of shame, and her popularizing of Silvan Tomkins’s theory of affects—as a major influence on my thinking about gay male life writing. Reflecting on Tomkins’s concept of shame as affect and on how it reverberates in Sedgwick’s critical analyses, including in queer contexts, has given specificity to the manner in which Rancière’s discussion of the aesthetic as intimately linked to the political may apply to gay male experience. Sedgwick’s notion of the queer performance of shame has provided key inspiration for this project, and my notion of witnessing to shame is an elaboration of her paradigm.

Michael Warner has eloquently argued that shame has an affective impact on gay people and that this in turn has profound political consequences.

Almost all children grow up in families that think of themselves and all their members as heterosexual, and for some children this produces a profound and nameless estrangement, a sense of inner secrets and hidden shame. No amount of adult “acceptance” or progress in civil rights is likely to eliminate this experience for many children and adolescents. Later in life, they will be told that they are “closeted,” as though they have been telling lies. They bear a special burden of disclosure. No wonder so much of gay culture seems marked by a primal encounter with shame, from the dramas of sadomasochism to the rhetoric of gay pride, or the newer “queer” politics. Ironically, plenty of moralists will then point to this theme of shame in gay life as though it were proof of something pathological in gay people. It seldom occurs to anyone that the dominant culture and its family environment should be held accountable for creating the inequalities of access and recognition that produce this sense of shame in the first place. (*The Trouble with Normal* 8)

Warner’s words deftly outline the connection between affect and politics. Sedgwick’s discussion of shame, including what she termed queer performance of shame, establish a no less persuasive connection between affect and aesthetics.

While Rancière holds that mere expression of pain is insufficient for making an effective rights claim because such expression would not be legible as

rational discourse, representations of shame, especially when shame is a consequence of stigmatization, are quite likely to help readers grasp the particular situation from which an argument about gay male subjectivity is made. This is so because shame, like stigma, is nearly everyone's experience, closely related as it is to communication and to the sense of well-being. While Sedgwick is probably right to suggest that "shame consciousness and shame creativity do cluster intimately around lesbian and gay worldly spaces" (*Touching Feeling* 63), shame is also experienced by everyone at one point or another, with greater or lesser intensity, and with at least some awareness.¹ In reading the life writings discussed herein, I have been deeply struck not only by how frequently shame experiences are in focus but also by the manner in which some gay male authors rely on their readers' presumed familiarity with shame (which might be brought about for whatever indeterminate reasons) to appeal for their sympathy for the shame stirred in these authors by the stigmatization of homosexuality. Textual displays of shame are among the most prevalent aesthetic strategies employed in gay male life writing and they are the single most prevalent strategy I discuss. One goal of this project is to argue that narratives about shame are no less central to gay male life writing published since the Stonewall Inn riots of 1969 than the coming out paradigm has been.

An emphasis on shame—its presentation and its often strategic deployment—has shaped my overall approach and it also helped determine my title. The word "exposure" has more than one meaning, and more than one sense of exposure is intended. With respect to the focus on shame in a number of the writings examined here, my title *Exposures* is meant to suggest the rhetorical gesture of disclosing not just an intimate, but a specifically shaming experience. To perform this gesture is also to take a risk: psychological and existential, to be sure, but also artistic. It is easy to see that the exposure of one's shame carries the risk of alienating readers by making the writer's account, and perhaps the writer himself, seem abject; for some, though probably not for all, this might even be an inevitable consequence of reading about shame. The word exposure connotes this risk. Despite the risk, however, exposure of one's shame is often used in gay male life writing, whether as a deliberate strategy to engage the reader or to indicate the authenticity of the writer's investment in his personal account. Used in the former sense, it is a bid for the reader's sympathy, grounded in the implied similarity between the writer's and the reader's experiences of shame. In the latter sense, the writer's self-exposure becomes an

1 For a useful general discussion of shame, see: Léon Wurmser, *The Mask of Shame*. For a recent discussion of queer approaches to shame, see: David M. Halperin and Valerie Traub, eds., *Gay Shame*.

interpellation to a witnessing because it serves to establish that, whatever he may be describing, he is giving an account whose candidness is not in question, and which therefore has the status of testimony, to which the reader's second-order witnessing is the ethically appropriate response. The reader's response is not only ethical, however. She or he may be drawn by the author's testimony to reactions of empathy and identification. Insofar as the writer's exposure is intended to provoke such affective reactions, it aims for an aesthetic effect and, by the same token, undertakes a specifically aesthetic risk of having that affective appeal ignored or rejected.

It bears emphasizing that I do *not* intend my use of exposure to suggest that either gay male life writing itself or my reading of it reveals a hidden truth, especially not some hidden truth about sexuality in general or male homosexuality specifically. In volume one of his *History of Sexuality*, Michel Foucault has argued that for more than a century sexuality and knowledge have been yoked together in the epistemological assumption that sexuality is a privileged site through which to understand human diversity and social institutions. In her *Epistemology of the Closet*, Sedgwick has also posited that the homosexual closet is a nexus for epistemological procedures based on gestures of simultaneous disclosure and covering up. Her subsequent work criticizes readings oriented toward exposure in the sense that they promise to uncover, or claim to have uncovered, something that would otherwise remain hidden and whose discovery gives the reader exceptional explanatory powers (*Touching Feeling* 138-43).² Exposure in the sense in which I use this word is specifically *not* meant to imply a claim about the discovery of a first principle or of an underlying mechanism whose elucidation would result in unconstrained

2 Sedgwick discusses exposure in "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is About You" (*Touching Feeling*, 123-151). This essay's earlier version appeared as Introduction to *Novel Gazing: Queer Readings in Fiction*. Sedgwick has proposed that non-oedipal psychoanalysis offers an alternative to what she calls paranoid readings; her championing of non-oedipal psychoanalysis includes most prominently her work on shame, based on Tomkins' affect theory. See "Shame in the Cybernetic Fold: Reading Silvan Tomkins," written with Adam Frank (*Touching Feeling*, 93-121) and *Shame and Its Sisters. The Silvan Tomkins Reader*, co-edited by Sedgwick and Frank. Sedgwick's critique of knowledge as paranoia is also made evident by her interest in Melanie Klein's notion of the schizoid/paranoid and the depressive/reparative positions, which Sedgwick draws upon to postulate reparative reading—an "unhurried, undefensive, galvanized practice of close reading," comparable to Tomkins' "weak theory" (that is, distinctly non-paranoid)—as she puts it in her introduction to *Novel Gazing* (23). See also: Sedgwick, "Melanie Klein and the Difference Affect Makes."

production of knowledge. Instead, it purports to describe how making something visible can obscure some aspects of that thing.

Sedgwick's criticism seems related to her understanding of the relationship between consciousness and the unconscious in terms proposed by Tomkins rather than in the more orthodox terms of repression: in affect theory, the conscious is that which is in focus, implying that keeping one thing in focus means that some other thing is necessarily not in view. What is in focus may shift over time but there is no way in which the entire psychic content can be put forth in an instance of time. This mechanism applies to a discussion of reading and of writing as engaging in simultaneous and complementary gestures of putting forth and keeping from view.

The contemporary technical sense of exposure as this term is used in photography provides a handy metaphoric illustration. Exposure is the usually very brief moment in which an image is produced on light-sensitive film or plate. Exposure thus connotes snapshot, an efficiently produced representation of reality that, while it may be subjected to technical and aesthetic analysis, unabashedly puts itself forth as ready-made and also as *prêt-à-porter*, its most cogent feature being that it has been obtained in an instance of time and that in another instance of time it can be copied, and thus disseminated. These connotations suggest that exposure is readily available for the work of representation, even fairly automatic representation. However, as Barthes argues through his category *punctum*, photographs may surprise us, or prick us, in arresting our gaze and drawing attention to unexpected details (*Camera Lucida* 27). Exposure can thus connote photographs' capacity for being interpreted in unexpected ways because the potential for such alternative readings is already lurking in the seemingly straightforward images they put forth. The *punctum* may not have been intended by the photographer, but it is *there* in the photograph, already exposed in the material image. If in photography exposure means the technical, though always somewhat mysterious, process through which the image is literally produced in the time which elapses from the moment the shutter opens until it closes again, then this material and yet ineffable process, capable of producing the prickly *punctum* alongside the straightforward reflection of what is there in front of the lens, points to the obverse meaning of exposure, one that contradicts—while it paradoxically complements—the connotation, resonant in “snapshot,” of direct and immediate representation.

In pointing out that the photographic sense of exposure may exemplify the deconstructionist logic of the supplement, according to which opposites are co-dependent and constitutive of one another, I mean to suggest that gay American men's life writing often lends itself to an analogous double reading: on the one

hand, in terms of an entirely predictable narrative model, such as that of the coming out story, which seems to offer a template for its own multiplication in the work of others, and to be an effect of such meme-like replication; and on the other, in terms of fairly complex self-reflexivity, as when a textual *mis-en-abîme* indicates a profound awareness of the rhetorical strategies that have been put in motion or, more simply, when the text suggests an alternative reading whose surprising resonance is not presupposed, or accounted for, by the allegedly dominant paradigm. In short, I find it imperative to resist the haste with which some readers of gay men's life writing have circumscribed it within a limited number of well-rehearsed and occasionally disappointing interpretive choices. It is not so much that these choices are not in evidence as that their actual range is bigger than is often assumed, and that gay male life writing is less uniform, and less conformist, aesthetically and politically, than it is sometimes made out to be.

An attempt to extend the range of interpretive choices obviously risks imposing another classificatory ossification. I try to forestall this outcome by refusing to adopt a single organizing logic. The categories which define my chapters are not on a par and were not meant to be: my goal has been to indicate life writing's diversity by putting forth different ways in which that diversity is realized. There is no one key with which to unlock the different texts, as there is not a single theoretical position, or critical motivation, behind every one of these chapters. They are linked instead in a chain-like, metonymic fashion that corresponds to Wittgenstein's notion of family resemblance, especially that some points inevitably crop up in more than one place. (For example, the concept of the middle voice, given some prominence in the discussion of Daniel Mendelsohn's work, reappears in a later chapter in the context of a discussion of witnessing.) Some of the chapters are openly polemical, others are intended to illustrate specific points about gay male life writing that struck me as characteristic. To some extent, my choice of texts has been dictated by a wish to discuss writers' reactions to historical events. This is especially true with regard to the AIDS epidemic, which provoked both elegiac writing and an intensification of confrontational discourse, the latter also manifest in the antisocial turn taken by some proponents of queer theory. (Clearly, however, an openly confrontational stance was found in gay life writing also before the onset of AIDS.) And I conclude with a discussion of a gay humorist's life writing in recognition of the manner that recent amplification of gay male visibility in cultural texts may have led to a post-coming out moment, characterized by a new set of concerns and strategies.

The choice of the term life writing over autobiography is likewise a reflection of a paradigm shift. The term life writing, which encompasses both biography and

autobiography, as well as memoirs, personal journals, some blogs, and so on, reflects the growing field of textual production which may no longer be contained within those more established, and considerably more specific, designations. While autobiography and the less official memoir are the prototypical genres for my use of the term life writing, I include, under this relatively new designation, argumentative essay combined with personal account (as exemplified by some of Samuel R. Delany's work) and writing that, while ostensibly based on the author's life, has in some way crossed the line into fiction, whether due to alterations and embellishments that would seem impermissible under the stricter definition of autobiography (as may be the case with David Sedaris's work) or, conversely, due to work being published as fiction but subsequently characterized as autobiographic (as has happened with some of Edmund White's work, some of which has recently been described as autofiction and as autobiographical novel).³ While none of the works discussed herein is straightforward fiction, reading gay men's accounts of their personal experience has inevitably meant questioning the definition of nonfiction. I consider such generic questions for reasons of methodological precision, first in the Introduction and in Chapter One, and return to them in the final chapter. But these questions do not ultimately define my project or account for my interest in these texts. Quite simply, autobiography seems too narrow a term to contain the variegated phenomenon of gay men writing about their experience in a range of literary styles and relying on a differential set of assumptions about what it means to describe one's life. I thus welcome the designation life writing as *less* invested in distinguishing between fiction and nonfiction than the term autobiography. Ultimately, the distinction is neither central to the argument nor possible to make with the degree of precision it would seem to demand. Moreover, most writers I discuss do not use the word autobiography to describe their work.

3 In Chapter One, I call on Sarah Shun-Lien Bynum, who describes Edmund White's *A Boy's Own Story* as "autobiographical novel" and "autofiction" in her essay on the novel in Greil Marcus and Werner Sollors's *A New Literary History of America* (1997, 1998). The French coinage *autofiction* is attributed to writer and theorist Serge Doubrovsky, who used it with reference to his 1977 novel *Fils*. The word has become common and is found in contemporary French language dictionaries. See also: Isabelle Grell, "Pourquoi Serge Doubrovsky n'a pu éviter le terme d'*autofiction*." The general term life writing is used, for example, in the newfound journal *European Journal of Life Writing* (ejlw.eu). It includes fictionalized life writing, as the range of articles published in its first volume suggests; see: Julia Lajta-Novak, "Father and Daughter across Europe: The Journeys of Clara Wieck Schumann and Artemisia Gentileschi in Fictionalised Biographies." I use the term life writing but refer to my authors as autobiographers (rather than "life writers") to avoid awkwardness. The relationship between autobiography and fiction is discussed further in my Introduction by calling on Rita Felski's work on women's autobiographies, and I return to the distinction in chapters one and six.

Some have used the term “memoir,” which suggests a more intimate account than autobiography. In some cases—notably in Martin Duberman’s *Cures*—there is a happy convergence of the more intimate memoir and the more official autobiographic account focused on Duberman’s career as writer and distinguished academic. With one exception, none of the works discussed here is an intimate journal, although Duberman draws on his journals in *Cures* and occasionally quotes from them, and parts of John Rechy’s *The Sexual Outlaw* are composed like a journal.⁴ However, Rechy’s use of third person narration in these passages suggests that the diary-like structure is a literary device, and that the anecdotes which this structure contains are a condensation, rather than a direct rendition, of the author’s personal experience, thus emphasizing, again, the difficulty of distinguishing between nonfictional and fictionalized life writing.

While the survey of life writing discussed here is inevitably idiosyncratic, some basic principles of selection have been followed. One is that the project is defined by the specific historical caesura of the Stonewall Inn riots, which took place in New York City at the end of June 1969.⁵ The reason for this timeframe

4 In my discussion of Ross Chambers’s deployment of the categories witnessing and haunting survivorhood in *Facing It. AIDS Diaries and the Death of the Author*, in Chapter Four, I comment on Tom Joslin’s and Peter Friedman’s documentary *Silverlake Life. A View from Here*, which has been shot and edited as a video diary.

5 The events of the Stonewall Inn riots, which took place in New York City in the course of a summer weekend at the end of June 1969, have been described in the excellent histories written by Martin Duberman and by David Carter. The 1969 rioting was not the first. Susan Stryker and Victor Silverman’s 2005 *Screaming Queens. The Riot at Compton’s Cafeteria* documents an analogous earlier event in San Francisco’s Tenderloin district in 1966 that has not become a turning point for activism or been commemorated in the celebratory and highly public manner of the Stonewall Inn riots. The 1969 riots became a historical caesura because they sparked the transition from a relatively tame and much marginal homophile movement of the postwar decades to a more radically minded gay rights movement, with new organizations like the Gay Liberation Front and the Gay Activists Alliance emerging within just months of the rioting and swiftly spreading to the West Coast and across the Atlantic to Britain. The word “gay,” previously argot for an effeminate homosexual man that may have been derived from the now archaic epithet applied to women peddling sexual services, was re-appropriated as an expression of pride, emphasizing the importance of openly declaring one’s homosexuality (Delany, *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue*, 184). “Out of the closet and into the streets!” was among the rejuvenated movement’s most recognizable rallying cries, taunting the straight society with an in-your-face attitude and calling for greater public visibility of lesbians and gay men. The 1973 decision by the American Psychiatric Association to remove homosexuality from its *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* became an early success of the newly radicalized activism, heralding social and cultural change.

is the obvious one that gay rights activism was transformed in the wake of the riots, when it assumed a much more politicized form that ultimately accelerated the process of coming out understood as giving visibility to gay subjectivity and experience. The earliest example of life writing examined here, Andrew Tobias's *The Best Little Boy in the World*, published under a pen name in 1973, was the first gay memoir ever to become a bestseller.

Another principle has been that only published work is included in this study and, moreover, that the authors must not be amateurs with just the one book in print. This principle has been followed in the literal sense although, unlike the other writers whose work is examined here, and who are unequivocally men of letters, Tobias is best known for his books of advice on financial investment rather than for his life writing or any other literary endeavor (a sequel to his early autobiography is not discussed here). Also *Silverlake Life*, the documentary film I examine, is authored by Peter Friedman and Tom Joslin, established cinematographers. Whenever possible, I tried to focus on one book by each author with the intent of broadening the number of authors at the expense of a more detailed discussion of anyone's work. But in a number of cases I thought it necessary to include two or more works by the same author. I include both the AIDS memoirs and the coming-out memoirs written by Paul Monette and by Mark Doty because including their early AIDS memoirs alongside their later narratives about growing up gay allows me to take some steam away from the critical engine which—somewhat unduly, to my mind—has privileged the coming out paradigm over other literary models that these authors adopt. In some other cases, I mention several memoirs and personal essays to illustrate a particular point or to indicate some continuities or ruptures in a writer's position. This occurs most extensively in my discussions of White and of Delany. In White's case, I am interested in the way in which he describes certain aspects of his personal experience in both fictionalized and non-fictionalized accounts. In Delany's case, there is relatively little overlap from one text to the next, so that focusing on only one seemed excessively reductive.

Chapter by chapter summary

In the Introduction, I briefly address my decision to focus on gay men's life writing by pointing to its broad thematic scope and by arguing that recent focus on intersectionality does not invalidate work by white middle-class gay men, while an exclusively intersectional focus may be limiting (as I argue further in Chapter Two). By calling on Jacques Rancière's *The Politics of Aesthetics. Distribution of the Sensible*, I posit a way of reading gay men's life writing in

simultaneously aesthetic and political terms. This reading is related to the question of autobiography's generic definition, which I address via Paul de Man's criticism of Philippe Lejeune's notion of the autobiographical pact and Rita Felski's discussion of women's autobiography as representative of the typical rather than the individual female experience. I also call on Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's interest in affect theory, formulated by Silvan Tomkins, whose ideas I briefly summarize before focusing on Sedgwick's category of performance of shame, which she posits as a manner of foregrounding one's shame with a view to forestalling its oppressiveness and curbing its unchecked power over the self. I reference Sedgwick's term *peripformative*, which I relate to Rancière's notion of doing more than one thing at once.

In Chapter One, I discuss Edmund White's life writing as a project of chronicling the ways in which the discourses available to White have portrayed gay male experience. I focus on the memoir *City Boy*, the personal essay "My First European" (included in the autobiographical *My Lives*), and on two autobiographical novels: *A Boy's Own Story* and *The Farewell Symphony*. My reading of *A Boy's Own Story* is partly structured as a polemic with Robert McRuer, who compares White's positionality as a white gay man to Audre Lorde's positionality as an African American lesbian in her autobiographical *Zami. A New Spelling of My Name*. Without questioning the rationale for the comparison itself, or challenging the major point that Lorde's subjectivity is relationally defined compared to White's more individualistic sense of himself, I criticize some of McRuer's assertions, especially those pertaining to White's alleged blindness to questions of class and race. In McRuer's view, White's racial blindness in particular has provoked an ill-advised tendency to present his experience as the universal gay male experience. McRuer's claim is unfortunately based on a number of specific misreadings of White's text, which I point out. Informed by a biracial model according to which race is first defined in terms of black and white, McRuer ignores the finer distinctions in White, such as his mentions of people who are othered due to their East European ethnic background, rather than to being overtly racialized. My general argument is that while White's work has been read as exemplifying an allegedly retrograde tendency of affirming gay male identity defined in essentializing terms—as opposed to the more queer positions adopted by Lorde as an African American lesbian and by McRuer as queer theorist—this distinction is based on an essentializing assumption about White as a white gay man. In my polemic, I elucidate that White comments on his positionality in ways which McRuer fails to note.

The argument is not directed against queer theory per se, but it may be read as directed against a certain moralizing tendency characterizing some of its articulations. Illustrating White's distance from such tendency, I discuss the

closing episode of *A Boy's Own Story*, reiterated in *City Boy*, in terms of exposure. In the novel, White relates a troubling anecdote, whose truthfulness he subsequently confirms in his memoir, of having denounced a teacher with whom he had just had sex. The anecdote disrupts a possible reading of *A Boy's Own Story* in terms of a coming out narrative and it constitutes a moment of exposure that is especially characteristic of life writing because it dramatizes the contradiction between, on the one hand, an event whose inclusion in the narrative is motivated by the sense of its importance to the subject of life writing and, on the other, that subject's inability to explain the event or to give it a clearly determined place in the account's narrative logic. I also discuss an episode from White's *The Farewell Symphony*, whose echoes are found in *City Boy*, which describes the narrator's sexual shame being cured by his lover's act of interested witnessing. This scene provides one of the major paradigms for subsequent discussion of witnessing of shame in the chapters that follow. A reading of "My First European" (republished as a chapter in *My Lives*) shows that White employs the figure of *mis-en-abîme* to reflect on his own ambivalent attitude toward the coming out story and the manner in which it affirms gay male identity. Ultimately, I read White as a chronicler of the various rhetorical strategies found in gay men's life writing but focus on the work of witnessing, and specifically witnessing to shame, including sexual shame.

Chapter Two is devoted to gay male life writing which formally combines argumentative essay and personal account, and it emphasizes the way in which Rancière's challenge to do two things at once is carried out without recourse to a simple affirmation of the category identity. The chapter opens with a discussion of Delany's life writing, focused on three texts. One of these is "Coming / Out," a personal essay commissioned for a volume of coming out narratives, in which Delany talks about growing up gay while questioning the category "coming out." Delany is critical of the coming out story for misleadingly suggesting that reading about someone's coming out is tantamount to obtaining knowledge of that person's sexuality, just as witnessing someone's coming out is often received as mere confirmation of the witness's preexisting sense of what it means to be gay. He also provides a historical comment on how the term "coming out" has changed its meaning around the time of Stonewall from one's first same-sex sexual experience to a rhetorical affirmation of one's gay self-identification. Delany's book-length autobiography *The Motion of Light in Water* is analyzed with a view to three main tropes: its representation of race and discussion of racialization, which are scant in Delany's life writing; the notion of gay male visibility as it arose in semipublic spaces such as gay baths and cruising areas in New York City and elsewhere, which is analyzed in relation to the kind of visibility characteristic of race; and the notion of passivity,

dramatized in Delany's barefoot ramble through the city, through which he questions the self-assertiveness implied in the category identity. Delany's "...Three, Two, One: Contact. Times Square Red," an essay about gentrification's impact on interclass contact, generously illustrated with anecdotes from Delany's experience, offers a way in which to discuss material infrastructure determining human relations as an alternative to the discourse of identity.

My reading of Daniel Mendelsohn's *The Elusive Embrace. Desire and the Riddle of Identity* focuses on the manner in which his narrative about growing up extends beyond a personal perspective by including a deliberation on identity that encompasses history and storytelling and that juxtaposes geography and history. Mendelsohn describes his own youth alongside his family's history and the myths of antiquity. He also suggests that contemporary gay life may be better understood in spatial rather than temporal terms by describing the modern-day colonization of urban space by gay men and by giving testimony about his own life divided between his Chelsea apartment and his female friend's suburban home, where Mendelsohn is a surrogate father for the woman's baby. *The Elusive Embrace* is specifically *not* a coming out narrative, even though it describes Mendelsohn's growing up gay. While it is a meditation on "the riddle of identity," the category identity is discussed in terms of performativity rather than essentialized.

Wayne Koestenbaum's *Humiliation*, the most recent instance of life writing I examine, is a combination of argument and of anecdote drawn from the author's personal experience and from media representations of celebrity lives. Koestenbaum's discussion of humiliation is directly indebted to Sedgwick's work on shame and Tomkins's theory of affects, although it also puts forth a more specific concept of humiliation as involving a tripartite drama enacted by oppressor, victim, and witness. Male homosexuality figures in this discussion as one of many examples, a strategy that seems characteristic of the post-coming out moment discussed further in Chapter Six, and one that ostensibly parts ways with the discourse of identity. Commenting on *Humiliation* allows me to put forth some of Sedgwick's and Tomkins's arguments that are pertinent to my own strategy as reader of gay male life writing, and it introduces the category witnessing, which I invoke in subsequent chapters. It also occasions a discussion of Didier Eribon's and of Mark D. Halperin's writings on abjection, which seem to be an unnamed context for Koestenbaum's book and which provide further insights for this and for the later chapters. The context for Eribon's and for Halperin's position, which partly corresponds to Koestenbaum's argument, is their reading of Jean Genet as enabling an aesthetically motivated transfiguration of the humiliated self into a self seen as elevated and sublime.

In summary, these exemplary works combining personal account and argumentative essay to illustrate the situation from which an argument about gay subjectivity and experience is made do not rely on the category identity, and much less on identity understood in essentializing terms. Instead, they use exposure both in the sense of providing personal details to support their argument and in the sense of questioning the prevailing argument based on essentializing identity, to which they provide alternatives by offering other intellectual contexts in which gay subjectivity and experience may be grasped.

Chapter Three is largely a polemical engagement with Paul Robinson's thesis in *Gay Lives* that contemporary American men's autobiography relies on the coming out story as its most prominent narrative model, which Robinson sees as derived from the conversion narrative. I acknowledge this claim but find it too narrow, and hence seek to complement, and thereby to complicate, his reading by scouting for alternative patterns in the three contemporary American autobiographies Robinson examines and in another memoir ostensibly based on the coming out format. These are Duberman's *Cures. A Gay Man's Odyssey*, Tobias's *The Best Little Boy in the World*, Monette's *Becoming a Man. Half a Life Story*, and Doty's *Firebird*. (Doty's memoir was published simultaneously with *Gay Lives* and is unmentioned by Robinson.) While I credit Robinson's claim that the three autobiographies discussed in *Gay Lives* are readable as coming out stories, as may also be Doty's *Firebird*, I show that Robinson's interpretation may be limiting because these authors use also other narrative patterns to organize their material, and in doing so they question or contradict the coming out model.

Duberman's *Cures* focuses on both his public career as writer and intellectual and his many years' experience of therapy, at first intended to "convert" him to heterosexuality. Duberman's repeated, and often ironic, use of the word conversion provokes me to a discussion of the coming out story as analogous to the conversion narrative, while his focus on therapy prompts me to consider ways in which his account is patterned on therapeutic work. Duberman's experience of therapy provides a template for his subsequent political involvement, so that his "conversion" from therapy, which he leaves, to political activism, which he undertakes, is itself legible in the ironic terms which his discussion of therapy and of conversion invites. Duberman is aware of this irony, as he criticizes some of the early gay activism in which he took part, but he does finally suggest a life-transforming change that his coming out of therapy and into activism has made. My reading thus goes partly against the grain of his apparent authorial intention. It does not question Duberman's political engagement but merely suggests continuities with the previous period of his life,

as he describes it, as some of his therapy-inspired ways have not disappeared but rather morphed into activism.

An overcoming of the coming out story is evident in Tobias's foregrounding of shame, rather than of erotic feelings, occasioned by the earliest intimation of his homosexuality, although Tobias narrates the incident of his shame *after* offering an account of his budding homoeroticism, which occurred later. Tobias foregrounds shame also in other ways with the apparent intention of winning the reader's sympathy. Monette and Doty both foreground shame in their memoirs, though in ways that are different from one another and from Tobias' treatment of shame. Monette's adherence to the coming out model may be strongest, implying that the shame attaching to being gay should have been overcome. However, Monette describes his shame as persisting in his memories. He also posits a moment of innocence before gay-related shame is induced by social conditioning, which he illustrates with a short-lived sexual adventure with another pre-adolescent boy. However, my reading shows that the affair included a component of shame from the first exchange of seductive words and glances to the final discovery of their liaison by the author's mother. Monette gives ample evidence for the way that shame feelings shaped the adventure without explicitly commenting on them. Doty puts forth as the centerpiece of his memoir the childhood memory of a dance class in which he felt his shame being lifted as he was spontaneously performing before classmates in a manner that was potentially embarrassing. The lifting of shame occurs as much because of Doty's decision to dance, as because his classmates' reaction is sympathetic.

All four authors depart from the coming out model, whether by putting forth a shame-related experience in the center of the narrative (in lieu of a description of budding homoerotic feelings), by suggesting the persistence of shame on the adult author's gay selfhood, by attempting to draw the reader into a reaction of sympathy based on the author's exposure of his shame, or by relying on a narrative logic determined by an attachment to a therapeutic procedure whose original intent was opposed to coming out. The coming out paradigm, which Robinson's reading posits as the dominant narrative model for contemporary American gay men's autobiography, is shown to be one among several strategies used.

Chapter Four is focused on life writing occasioned by the AIDS epidemic. It opens with a discussion of Chambers's *Facing It*, whose central categories are witnessing and haunting survivorhood. His position is informed by two main authorities: Roland Barthes's argument about the death of the author and Walter Benjamin's proposition in "The Storyteller" that narrative authority derives from death. I extend this argument by calling also on Barthes's essay on the middle voice, especially as read by Hayden White, and on Benjamin's "The Task of the

Translator,” discussed by Paul de Man and subsequently by Shoshana Felman in her commentary on de Man, all of whom problematize the notion of giving testimony. I further call on William Haver’s comments on the notion of truth in witnessing, which I read in the context of Michel Foucault’s discussion of *parrhesia*. My argument consists partly in comments on *Silverlake Life*, a video documentary which is one of Chambers’s primary sources. In particular, I discuss the film’s camera work by calling on de Man’s discussion of autobiography as an instance of prosopopeia, and on Jonathan Flatley’s discussion of prosopopeia’s connection to identity in his remarks on Andy Warhol. Besides *Silverlake Life*, my primary sources in the chapter are Monette’s *Borrowed Time* and Doty’s *Heaven’s Coast*. I also begin my discussion (continued in the following chapter) of David Wojnarowicz’s *Close to the Knives. A Memoir of Disintegration* by focusing on its final part, which takes the form of an attempted prose elegy commemorating a queer friend. While this friend’s death was not caused by AIDS, the epidemic is repeatedly mentioned in Wojnarowicz’s memoir and forms a crucial context for the commemoration, which the deceased man’s parents have partly obstructed with legal means.

These texts are analyzed in terms of their testimonial function and also in terms of the distinction between mourning and melancholia, as it is posited by Sigmund Freud, by Nicholas Abraham and Maria Torok, by Judith Butler, and by Douglas Crimp. Melancholia understood as blockage preventing the work of mourning reflects, in the life writings at hand, the culture’s negligence of and sometimes outright hostility to Persons Living with AIDS and the commemoration of those who perished in the epidemic. The work of Monette, Doty, and Wojnarowicz, like that of the makers of *Silverlake Life*, dramatizes their stance vis-à-vis their expectation of the rejection of their queer mourning. The resulting melancholy is transformed into testimony to the difficulty of mourning in the face of homophobic blockage and, by the same token, their testimony constitutes a call to witnessing posited as a counter to this blockage. While AIDS must not be seen as the sole cause of homophobic disavowal of queer mourning, especially that homophobia obviously preexisted the onset of AIDS, these writers and filmmakers make it abundantly clear that the AIDS epidemic has intensified homophobia by raising the stakes for gay visibility and for anti-gay prejudice alike.

Chapter Five opens with a discussion of those chapters in Wojnarowicz’s *Close to the Knives* not dedicated to mourning his dead friend but concerned with an exposition of openly confrontational discourse voicing dissent from the mainstream and heteronormative society, by contrast to the more integrative stance characterizing attempted work of mourning. Wojnarowicz’s

confrontational discourse takes the form of a compensatory fantasy in which a violent reaction is imagined in response to the possibility of the law's homophobic interruption of the author's sexual encounter with another man. Wojnarowicz thus suggests that homo-sex is to kill for, not because of some quality inherent in the homosexual but because the legal and social ban on same-sex activity is a profoundly dehumanizing interference which must be resisted if one's integrity is to be preserved. A similar sentiment is expressed in Rechy's *The Sexual Outlaw*, which posits outlaw public sex as a form of activism manifesting dissent. An argument is offered about Rechy's positioning of semipublic same-sex activity as a manner of visibility by way of comparison with Delany's partly analogous argument in *The Motion of Light in Water* (presented in Chapter Two). Rechy's narrative is also examined for the numerous depressive moments it includes, which are interpreted with reference to melancholia and to shame. Scott O'Hara's *Autopornography. A Memoir of Life in the Lust Lane* documents the life of a man once best known for his roles in a number of pornographic films and remembered today also for his intelligent writings on male homosexuality and promiscuity. A discussion of his confrontational stance, including his decision to have HIV+ tattooed on his bicep, is made with reference to Haver's reading of O'Hara's life writing and activism in terms of a particular notion of courage, which Haver renders with the term "queer's honour." O'Hara is also discussed in the context of barebacking (unprotected penetrative sex between men), for which he is often seen as a symbolic founding figure. I call on Tim Dean's commentary on pornographic films, which he reads as documentary, to suggest some ways in which O'Hara's legacy persists. The overall theoretical context for this chapter is a discussion of the anti-relational thesis, as it was originated by Leo Bersani in "Is the Rectum a Grave?" and in *Homos*, and of the so-called antisocial turn whose best known expression may be Lee Edelman's *No Future. Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (2004). (Further discussion of some implications of the antisocial turn continues in the Conclusion.)

Chapter Six is a reading of selected life writing by the openly gay best-selling humorist David Sedaris. His work is first placed in a contemporary cultural context which Walters calls post-coming out, as Sedaris refrains from describing his coming out but offers instead an epic-like portrayal of himself and of the people in his life, including his boyfriend, members of his family, his friends, and a number of others. This portrayal unfolds in a number of personal essays, published in magazines or read on the radio, and collected in several volumes. The status of Sedaris's life writing as nonfiction has been challenged in a mainstream periodical, and I examine the challenge by way of returning to the question how the category life writing is to be understood. In addition to

referencing Felski's argument about women's autobiographies as representative of group rather than just individual experience, I offer another argument connecting Sedaris's humor to his use of hyperbole and other alleged alterations and embellishments. The humor pervading Sedaris's narratives is directed at himself as much as at others, and it is focused on all manner of embarrassing occasions likely to provoke, as much as dispel, feelings of shame. I therefore discuss the humor in terms of the aesthetic bonus which serves to lift the inhibition barring the path to fantasy, as posited by Freud in "Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming." I further draw on Peter Brooks's discussion of Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* and on Jean-Luc Nancy's discussion of Freud's *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* and of *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* to suggest humor's proximity to both orgasm and aesthetic process. Humor is thus discussed in a manner analogous to de Man's deconstructionist reading of autobiography as prosopopeia, or of the fiction of voice produced with linguistic tropes.

The Conclusion attempts an elaboration of my project's use of queer theory, which I see as a diversified discursive field characterized by tensions that bespeak the contradictory positions occupied by their proponents. I propose a distinction, which is ultimately grounded in my reading of Rancière rather than in queer theory itself, between positions invested in utopian orientation toward the future and those adopting an emancipatory stance based in dissent, including a refusal to put forth any model of a good life. I argue that the emancipatory position is intellectually more agreeable and that it correlates more closely with the life writings I examine, also when it comes to shame and the possibility of its overcoming.

Credits

Early drafts of parts of this book have been presented at conferences and published in proceedings. None of those essays is reprinted here verbatim.

A preliminary argument about gay male life writing was offered in “From *The Best Little Boy in the World* to *Autopornography*. The Critical Edge of the Gay Memoir,” which appeared in *American Portraits and Self-Portraits*, edited by Jerzy Durczak (Lublin: Wydawnictwa Uniwersytetu im. Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej, 2002). An early version of the book project was put forth as “Exposures: American Gay Men’s Autobiography and Edmund White’s Work” in *Artists and Intellectuals and the Challenge of Political Commitment*, edited by Christa Buschendorf (Frankfurt am Main: ZENAF, 2005); a revised version of the paper read at the ZENAF seminar in Frankfurt was presented at the CLAGS Colloquium at The CUNY Graduate Center in New York in November 2004. The thematic of shame in the ostensible coming out story was taken up in “Assent, Dissent, and Shame in Mark Doty’s *Firebird*,” contained in *Conformity and Resistance in America*, edited by Jacek Gutorow and Tomasz Lebiecki (Nottingham: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007), and in “Performance of Shame in Paul Monette’s *Becoming a Man: Half a Life Story*,” in *America: The Natural and the Artificial*, edited by Magdalena Zapędowska and Paweł Stachura (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Naukowe UAM, 2010). Obstacles to queer mourning in the context of AIDS were the topic of „Obnażeni(a). Strategie retoryczne, seks i żałoba w dobie AIDS,” in *Ucieleśnienia II*, edited by Joanna Bator and Anna Wieczorkiewicz (Warszawa: Instytut Filozofii i Socjologii PAN, 2008) and of “A Logic of Interruption: Experience and Witnessing in David Wojnarowicz’s *Close to the Knives*,” published in *The American Experience – The Experience of America*, edited by Andrzej Ceynowa and Marek Wilczyński and published as Volume 2 of the present series.

An essay on Edmund White’s *City Boy* “Theory in Life Writing, Life Writing in Theory,” which contains some of the argument elaborated in Chapter One, is forthcoming in the proceedings of the “Theory That Matters” conference at the University of Łódź in April 2010. A discussion of Scott O’Hara’s *Autopornography* that partly anticipates the remarks in Chapter Five is forthcoming as “*Autopornografia: o naśladowaniu Scotta O’Hary*” in the proceedings of a conference titled “Obnażyć pornografię” at the University of Silesia in November-December 2011.

Conference papers were partly incorporated into this book in revised form but have not been submitted elsewhere: “Samuel R. Delaney’s Challenge to Identity Politics” was presented at the EAAS 2008 conference in Oslo, and “The

Arrows of Time in Samuel R. Delany's Life Writing" at *Queer Futurities, Today: Utopias and Beyond in Queer Theory* conference in Berlin in 2009. "Queer Humor in the Post-Coming Out Age. David Sedaris and the Neurotics' Family Saga" was presented at the PAAS 2010 Conference in Łódź. "Witnessing as Narrative Strategy in *Silverlake Life*, *Borrowed Time*, and *À l'ami qui ne m'a pas sauvé la vie*" was presented at the EAAS 2012 conference in Izmir.

Introduction

The relatively recent historical process of sexual minorities' coming into visibility and making rights claims has not begun with New York City's Stonewall Inn riots of 1969 but these riots are typically seen as the caesura marking the start of the gay movement's rapid growth and its newfound focus on explicitly political activism. Gay men have been chronologically and quantitatively privileged in this process, as they were among the earliest subjects to be represented and their representations probably outnumber those of the other LGBT groups. Given this circumstance, writing on gay men may seem like an outdated project, and perhaps one smacking of cultural conservatism. This is reinforced by the sense that many, though certainly not all, representations of American gay men have focused on white members of the middle class. Insofar as being white and middle class remain implicit cultural standards—even though both categories may be waning in their numerical import—gay male subjectivity is often seen as invested in assimilation to the social and the cultural mainstream. To some extent, this critique applies also to many lesbian representations whose difference from the prototypical gay male couple is defined by gender only. In the case of both groups, the current demand for gay marriage, or at least registered partnership, and the increasingly common model of a gay family constituted as a same-sex couple with children, whether biological or adoptive, may be seen as evidence of an unprecedented degree of assimilation and as pointing to the economic and symbolic privilege enjoyed by lesbians and gay men living as couples, a privilege which is less likely to be within the reach of other, more intensely stigmatized groups, such as the transgendered, for whom regulations concerning their gender identity may be a more pressing issue. The widespread concern with marriage and registered partnership among white middle-class lesbians and gay men appears also to leave behind queers of color and working-class or impoverished queers, for whom setting up a household composed of an officially recognized couple and, possibly, children, is difficult for cultural as much as economic reasons. (It is nonetheless the case that marriage, or another form of legal recognition, may be beneficial to less affluent couples, giving them access to spousal benefits and making it easier to inherit rights obtained by the deceased partner.)

These limitations of mainstream LGBT activism are often expressed with recourse to the concept intersectionality, proposed by Kimberlé Crenshaw. The primary concern in this respect is that a narrow focus on sexual difference only, such as on being a gay man or a lesbian woman, which puts forth that difference as the reason behind a discriminatory restriction of rights, implicitly assumes

that the individual so discriminated against is not, simultaneously, suffering discrimination for other reasons, compounding any detrimental effects. One may be discriminated against on the basis of gender, sexuality, race, class, disability, and age simultaneously. According to this logic, mainstream LGBT activism appears to ignore such intersecting identity categories and forms of discrimination, e.g., when focusing on the right to marry, perhaps out of conviction that political efficacy demands such goal setting. However, narrowing one's political focus may be seen as complicit with the privatizing logic of neoliberalism, as Lisa Duggan has argued in *The Twilight of Equality*?

In light of these legitimate concerns about the limitations of an assimilationist politics, the mere fact that gay men are prototypically seen as white, middle-class, and often living as couples, might seem to make them, as a group, a less interesting object of study than those minorities defined in terms of intersecting axes of identity categories and forms of discrimination. However, some arguments may be summoned to defend my choice of looking at gay men. The first, simple point is that not all gay male autobiographers are white and middle-class, much less raised in middle-class homes. (Neither are all monogamously coupled.) Further, gay men have produced a relatively large and varied body of writings about themselves, including life writing, and this body of text contains a wealth of argument and critical reflection on the mechanisms of oppression and on the working of privilege, on the uses as well as the dangers of assimilation, and on strategies of resistance. Dismissing those writings for the reason that they represent gay male experience, even when that also means the experience of being white and middle-class, would be a mistake, a pointless profligacy amounting to throwing the baby out with the bathwater. Finally, there are important lessons to be learned from investigating sites of relative privilege. Just as there have been calls summoning sexuality scholars to focus on the study of heterosexuality—calls modeled on analogous voices within feminism that have been announcing the need for masculinity studies—it may be useful to critically reexamine the self-representations of white middle class gay men.⁶ Such examination may reveal not only these writers' blind spots when it comes to matter of race, class, or gender—a critical project that is in fact already underway, carried out by others (such as Robert McRuer, whose critical reading of Edmund White's *A Boy's Own Story* I discuss in Chapter One)—but also expose strategies that might prove strategically useful for other groups because they reveal subtle negotiations between being in a position of some privilege and, simultaneously, being affected by forms of cultural and legal oppression.

6 See, for example, the historian Jonathan Ned Katz's *The Invention of Heterosexuality*.

It is the relative privilege of those writers—and many of those I read are recognized men of letters, university professors, or other professionals—that allows them to be candid about their experience. The fact that gay men as a group have produced a substantial quantity of self-representations both reflects the cultural and social capital of some of those men and makes a difference for how they write to the extent that they may feel freer to engage in variegated and even critical self-expression than writers speaking on behalf of less conspicuous identities, who may feel burdened with the responsibility to portray their groups in positive light because of the relative scarcity of such representations. Those other, more subaltern writers may be more cautious in their expression because they expect, more so than gay men, to be read as typifying the group with which they identify. This concern is arguably lesser for the contemporary gay male authors. The historical context in which gay male subjectivity is still emerging but has already reached a point at which internal differentiation within the collective body of its life writing is possible seems to me to be a prerequisite for what I discuss under the term exposure. I intend the term to mean a coming into visibility of gay male subjectivity, specifically through the kind of self-presentation characteristic of autobiography; simultaneously, I intend exposure to mean a level of risk-taking on the part of the authors of these writings: a putting forth of not just formulaic claims about being gay men but of ways in which being a gay man is negotiated and also invented in their personal experience and their rhetorical strategies. In undertaking this project, I have always expected these writers to reveal much more than the fairly straightforward fact that they are gay men, and perhaps even to challenge some of the by-now familiar meanings attaching to this identity claim. This more intense exposure—the exposure of exposure itself, which may take the form of a questioning of the declarative coming out, for example—seems to me necessary for the sense of authenticity which the bringing of gay men into visibility requires today.

The category exposure is meant to extend the notion of declarative coming out, and perhaps to circumvent it, rather than simply refute it. Just as Jeffrey Weeks discusses coming out as a historical process of gays' emergence into visibility (*Coming Out*), I propose to discuss exposure as the process of making gay male experience palpable through an aesthetic reconfiguration of the sensorium, a reconfiguration that is both intellectual and affective in its impact on the reader. This process, which depends on a discursive shift taking place in a field defined by a certain number of texts that present gay subjectivity and experience, ends up both complementing and moving beyond what is usually called coming out, that is, a straightforward assertion of one's gay identity. In supplying rhetorical alternatives to coming out, the process I call exposure may

in some ways be making declarative coming out more entrenched by virtue of providing it with what the sociologist Clifford Geertz calls thick description.

Jacques Rancière's theory of the aesthetic as political has been an important source of inspiration for my thinking about exposure and coming out. To Rancière, politics is necessarily linked to aesthetics because only an aesthetic intervention can turn someone whose voice has not been heard into a recognized political subject. Rancière's general term for this linkage is the distribution of the sensible, or partition of the perceptible (*partition du sensible*), the underlying divide between what is presentable and what must remain hidden, or obscene. Aesthetics is the machine producing this divide—which is reconfigured over time—and hence determining the distribution of what is seen and who is heard. Such sensory legibility is a preliminary condition for recognition and sovereignty, and so aesthetic and political representation are bound together. One cannot become a political subject without relying on some aesthetic means that can make one heard. Rancière makes this point in a number of essays, including in his “Ten Theses on Politics”:

I call “distribution of the sensible” a generally implicit law that defines the forms of partaking by first defining the modes of perception in which they are inscribed. The partition of the sensible is the dividing up of the world (*de monde*) and of people (*du monde*), the *nemeîn* upon which the *nomoi* of the community are founded. This partition should be understood in the double sense of the word: on the one hand, as that which separates and excludes; on the other, as that which allows participation. A partition of the sensible refers to the manner in which a relation between a shared common (*un commun partagé*) and the distribution of exclusive parts is determined in sensory experience. This latter form of distribution, which, by its sensory self-evidence, anticipates the distribution of part [sic.] and shares (*parties*), itself presupposes a distribution of what is visible and what not, of what can be heard and what cannot. (*Dissensus* 36)

Under the model of aesthetic and political dispensation called distribution of the sensible (or, partition of the perceptible), the political is understood as the coming into visibility of a new political subject, which entails a reconfiguration of the aesthetic scene (i.e., that which is seen) as much as of the political scene. Rancière's model of the public sphere and his conception of what constitutes politics may seem all the more distinctive when compared to the approach taken by a more classically-minded political theorist, such as Jürgen Habermas. For Habermas, although the public debate may not reflect explicitly adopted and shared values, it is pre-determined by a communicative protocol. However, there is no particular performative moment in which the frames of the debate are determined. This means that those already participating can bring up points for debate but those without political agency are left out of the picture altogether. In

Situating the Self, Habermas's former student Seyla Behnabib points up this limitation, especially with regard to gender. Rancière's approach is rather different in that he sees the properly political turn as that performative moment in which the very terms of the debate, including who gets to speak and about what, are reconfigured. Rancière has argued—outside the context of sexual rights—that in order to make a rights claim successfully one must combine the rational argument for the claim with a metaphor that will render legible the situation from which one is speaking (*Disagreement* 56). The conjunction of politics and aesthetics which he postulates as a theoretical condition and a strategic model for arguing on one's own behalf has led me to think about representations promoting gay visibility and about the gay rights movement as conjoined projects. I use the term exposure, rather than limit myself to the more standard term coming out, because exposure communicates the need for aesthetic reconfiguration which Rancière postulates more suggestively than the by-now familiar term coming out, whose discursive parameters seem quite rigidly defined. (I discuss the rhetorics of coming out in some detail in Chapter Three.)

The challenge which this book sets itself is to survey a range of life writing by American gay men since the Stonewall Inn riots while situating these writings in the context of methodological and political debates known as queer theory. On some counts, the insights offered by queer theorists are disputed, and my calling on Rancière's work is partly motivated by an attempt to intervene in some aspects of queer theory's debates.⁷ Similar in this respect to other areas of critical theory, queer theory is less a coherent position than a discursive field—to borrow a term from Michel Foucault's "What Is an Author?"—which is to say that it is constituted as a continuing debate in search of its own axioms, consisting of refutations and alterations of a range of previously stated positions. It is not my ambition to give an integral account of the queer debates, which now extend, under this name, for over two decades, and much less of the political and intellectual argument on LGBT rights and recognition since Stonewall, on which queer theory has expanded. However, I do wish to include strains of the queer argument in my analysis of gay men's life writing because I see these

7 These include the methodological dispute about whether the study of shame and affect theory as such can be reconciled with the psychoanalytic perspective emphasizing drives; this point is taken up most directly in chapters five and six, and in the Conclusion. Another debate, more tangential to my topic, concerns the viability of the intersectional perspective as an alternative to the category identity, especially as compared to a materialist perspective adopted by Samuel R. Delany; this point is taken up in chapters one and two. Finally, I question the concept of queer utopia, especially as it has arisen in response to the so-called antisocial turn; this is taken up in chapters one and five, and in the Conclusion.

autobiographical and para-autobiographical texts on the one hand and the intellectual project known as queer theory on the other as engaged in dialogue. Queer theory is an extended commentary on the experience of being sexually different, as is the life writing I examine. Simultaneously, gay men's life writing attempts a rhetorical solution to the problem of being labeled and of labeling oneself as different (*gay*, *queer*), while queer theory analyzes the rhetorical effects of such labeling and suggests ways of adopting a stance vis-à-vis that circumstance. Those two projects of writing—of presenting an argument and of rendering visible—are thus complementary in ways that I pinpoint in my readings.

Gay men's life writing reflects, sometimes in a very conscious way, the prevailing idiom used to refer to gay experience. Paul Robinson's 1999 *Gay Lives*, a comparative study of American, British, and French gay male autobiography, usefully elaborates this point. Robinson calls upon three post-Stonewall American memoirs to illustrate the tendency to follow the narrative model of the coming-out story, suggesting that American gay men have eagerly embraced being gay as a form of identity soon after Stonewall (the earliest of his three examples dates from 1973). Robinson concludes that their strong investment in identifying as gay men distinguishes those contemporary American authors from their French and British counterparts, as well as from earlier American authors whom Robinson discusses. One of my objectives in this project has been to reexamine this claim by looking at the three post-Stonewall memoirs read by Robinson. My readings suggest a less unequivocal adherence to gay identity and, especially, to the coming out story, than I see Robinson asserting. This partly results from the inclusion, in the present study, of AIDS memoirs, which Robinson omits from his close readings although one of his authors (Paul Monette) published an AIDS memoir some years before writing the coming out memoir analyzed by Robinson. (I discuss Monette alongside Mark Doty, who followed a similar route.) In the 1980s and the 1990s in particular, the body of cultural production, including published life writing as part of the historical process of gay men's coming out as a socially visible group, has been thematically linked to the AIDS epidemic, and has relied on the coming out story only secondarily. The AIDS-themed work focuses on mourning, and on the cultural, homophobically inflected obstacles to mourning. The latter often result in a melancholic blockage, which may in turn motivate overtly political gestures. Under this logic, a certain way of politicizing melancholia may serve as an underlying explicatory model also for other types of cultural production geared to building gay visibility and to other, more specific ends.

More recent life writing in particular does not always follow the coming out model, apparently because by the turn of the century being homosexual was acknowledged to the point where it no longer required the explicit affirmation afforded by the coming out story. Instead, the autobiographical self could concentrate on daily interactions with others, presenting being gay as one of the self's dimensions. By the late 1990s, coming out narratives were no longer the principal narrative strategy and, when still used, were often combined with other modes, such as argumentative essay. This change reflects a shift from the project of building the gay minority's visibility to the more overtly political project of demanding the specific recognition that would yield access to rights, or demand some material intervention: it is no longer a matter of letting everyone know that there are gay people out there and of explaining what it is like to be one, but of having gay subjectivity join in a rational debate, transforming gay subjects into political agents. Rancière's work on aesthetics and politics, particularly his recommendation to use both argument and metaphor when making a rights claim, assists my discussion of these rhetorical strategies.

Early post-Stonewall memoirs such as Andrew Tobias' bestselling *The Best Little Boy in the World* (published under the pen name John Reid in 1973), which serves as one of Robinson's main examples, are more comfortably described as coming out narratives although they do not adhere very strictly to the coming out format. The coming out story is based on two interrelated models. One is the novel of education, the Bildungsroman, which traditionally presents a developmental trajectory oriented toward a mature and publicly presentable self; the compositional logic of this model is thus cumulative. The other model is the conversion narrative, whose prototypical examples include confessions of faith uttered by the Puritans, and which has been used to describe other conversions and awakenings, including political ones. (For example, feminist consciousness-raising narratives may employ this particular model.) The logic of a conversion narrative may be cumulative but it is likely to also include a flash of recognition and a subsequent declarative confession that one sees oneself as joining, or as belonging to, the group in question: whether as a Puritan, a feminist, or a gay man. The Bildung and the conversion models may be combined, as when the rendering of a life story leads up to a decisive moment of coming into self-awareness. In the case of gay life writing, such self-awareness is usually assumed to be connected to romantic or sexual feelings, or both, because the basis for one's identity as a gay person is understood to be one's primary affective attachments to, and erotic preference for, one's own gender. However, my readings suggest that while all these elements are found in the life writings which ostensibly follow the coming out story, other elements are no less important for these narratives, and no less ubiquitous. Particularly

prominent are instances of shame-humiliation that accompany the experience of being singled out as sexually different, or even just contemplating the possibility of being so labeled. These are moments in which the subjects are discursively interpellated to an admission of their homosexuality, even when this interpellation has the intended effect of preventing a declarative coming out by pushing the subject more deeply into the closet. Instances of shame-humiliation proliferate in gay men's life writing, often presenting as extreme self-consciousness. The rhetorical representation of shame demands attention as much as does the expressions of romantic and sexual feelings that seem more naturally to belong to the gay coming out genre. I will come back to the inflections of shame in gay life writing. For the time being, let me reiterate that gay men's life writings are often profoundly self-reflective about the rhetorical strategies they employ and can be quite critical of the very categories within whose parameters they operate. Both *conversion* and *identity* are given critical attention that clearly challenges these categories' seemingly self-evident status. Life writing may be considered a form of theory insofar as it is aware of its modes of operation.

To press onto life writing some functions associated with theoretical discourse is already to push against the generic boundaries delimiting those types of discourse. I use the term life writing as a broad category, occasionally substituting its synonyms and near-synonyms: autobiography, memoir, and personal essay, as well as autobiographical novel and autofiction. Philippe Lejeune theorized the distinction between fiction and nonfiction (which goes back to Aristotle's *Poetics* and his distinction between history and poetry) with reference to autobiography under the rubric of the autobiographical pact, whereby the author, in publishing her or his work as autobiography (i.e., as nonfictional life writing) guarantees the veracity of the account. Lejeune's definition is thus formulated in terms of speech act theory. To speak (or write) autobiographically is to perform a linguistic act similar to taking a vow: one must mean what one says and also meet other criteria, analogous to what John Austin called the conditions of felicity that are required of a functional performative. Misrepresenting fiction as nonfiction would violate the conditions of felicity and would be roughly equivalent to saying one's wedding vows in jest, in flagrant disregard of the need for the correct intention, whose absence would render one's marriage null and void (wedding vows are Austin's most favorite example). However, this describes a hypothetical situation only. It is easy to see that under familiar social and legal regimes the consequences of such an undisciplined act as saying one's wedding vows in jest would likely be dire and yet might include neither a simple continuation of one's ill-conceived marital state nor an automatic annulment of the wrongful marital bond, and

much less a simple continuation of one's premarital status. In short, the consequences of such an act might be beyond the subject's control. Consequently, there is good reason to question speech act theory's tacit assumption that because the conditions of felicity must be met by the speaker, it is also the speaker who has agency over her or his performative acts, that is, has the power to control what Austin calls the illocutionary effects of such utterances.

In "Signature Event Context," Jacques Derrida offers a critique of speech act theory along similar lines by using the concept iterability to suggest that agency in language lies first of all in the repetition of speech acts, i.e., that speakers exercise agency because they repeat certain statements, previously uttered by others. Speakers usurp language's illocutionary power by identifying as subjects of those special utterances Austin calls functional performatives but it is language that speaks through its subjects and not the other way round. In *Bodies That Matter*, Judith Butler voices an analogous critique using the word citationality, which she applies to the determination of gender roles. In Derrida and in Butler, the individuated subject is constituted by being identified with particular grammatical categories, such as person and gender.⁸

A poststructuralist reading of autobiography's definition offered in the terms of speech act theory questions whether the author, whom Lejeune sees as the key figure guaranteeing the truthfulness of the account, has the agency necessary to make the guarantee viable. In an essay titled "Autobiography as De-Facement," Paul de Man criticizes Lejeune's "autobiographical pact" for confusing, as he puts it, "proper name" with "signature" (71). De Man puts forth the figure prosopopeia as the central trope of autobiography. Prosopopeia, in de Man's definition, is "the fiction of an apostrophe to an absent, deceased, or voiceless entity, which posits the possibility of the latter's reply and confers upon it the power of speech" (75-76). This rhetorical figure, commonly used on tombstones and in elegiac writing, produces the illusion of a voice speaking from behind the grave and, by extension, the illusion of a face. The conferring of a face is implied in the term's etymology: prosopopeia derives from the words "*prosopon poien*, to confer a mask or face (*prosopon*)," an etymology which—according to de Man—implies a signifying chain linking voice to mouth to eye

8 This view of language is implicitly shared by Louis Althusser in "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," in his explanation of how ideology is reproduced by institutions such as school and the family. The operational term here is interpellation, as the subject is called upon and becomes constituted through a response to that call. The subject is thus endowed with a name, gender, age, occupation, social role—in short, with an identity, or at least, a positionality, by occupying a specific, discursively determined position.