

# Thomas Waugh and Brandon Arroyo, eds. *I Confess!*

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Confession is explosive; confession is pure; confession is dirty; confession is transient; confession begets permanence and truth. *I Confess!* (2019) is a chaotic and far-ranging anthology, which Thomas Waugh and Brandon Arroyo have ambitiously assembled in an effort to map the complex relationship between public and private queer life, art, pornography, and identity. Diverse lenses, styles, and methodologies unpack the ever-shifting uses of confession as a bodily and rhetorical device in an evolving media landscape. It is a volume both rewarding and frustrating: an exceedingly valuable tool for scholars seeking both old and new frameworks on sex, performance and selfhood, but also spliced through with contradictory interpretations of “confession” and a fascinating but disjointed mix of personal accounting and academic study. The editors tell us that “confession has become the last space for individual self-actualization, the enduring fantasy” (7) for queer existence outside neoliberal life and subjectivity. Often, however, the work in *I Confess!* leads us back to the sobering ways in which technologies and institutions capitalize on the aesthetics and affective affordances of confession in order to commodify (queer) identities and their performance. As a whole, the collection itself resists assigning “con-

fession” a stable definition or cultural function, recognizing its instability as an event, an act, and/or a tool.

The anthology is organized into two loosely defined halves: “scientia sexualis” and “ars erotica.” Foucault’s distinction between these approaches to sexual) confession is one of knowledge and power: “scientia sexualis” refers to a production of cultural truths around sex through the wresting of individual and everyday confessions—untaught, unschooled, and often deeply felt rather than examined. On the other hand, “ars erotica”—an approach more identified with non-Western constructions of sex, bodies, and desire - posits a master and a student, a passing-down of wisdom around the range and potential of human capacities for feeling. The former preoccupies itself with interrogating truths and falsehoods around sex *as* power, while the latter is concerned only with the nature of sex in and of itself: as discovery, sensation, connection, and so on. In short, these two frameworks are described in the introduction as “discourses of knowledge, sobriety, and empiricism [versus] those of aesthetics, affect, and desire” (15). The editors note a slippage between these two approaches to sensuality, sexuality, and pleasure, and that porousness is deeply felt throughout the volume. Although

the attempt to divide these pieces by this rubric is a brave and inspired one, certain chapters seem somewhat out of place (such as Jacob Evoy's personal reflections on the transformative potentials of a night out at a Lady Gaga concert, which seems more attuned with the vastly more intimate authorial confessions of the book's second half). Queer theory and cultural histories are difficult to corral and categorize, and memoirs even harder, especially when juxtaposed with the former; *I Confess!* imbricates all in a powerful editorial shift towards a futurism in sexual scholarship, and thus the occasional odd chord of a chapter remains in keeping with this mission.

Certainly the secondary organizing schema within these two broad categories leads us more successfully through coherent umbrellas of theory and method. "Scientia Sexualis" contains the sub-categories of "Activism" and "Author, Subject, and Audience," both of which contain chapters that deal with case studies of confession as cultural diffusion—from feminist blogging, to queer pornographic filmmaking, to YouTube coming-out stories, to the pitfalls and complexities of studying child sexuality in a new age of social media. These sections are distinguished, mostly, by their commitment to a sort of scholarly objectivity towards their subjects. Though many of the essays here are marked by a sense of playful transgression, this section begins the book powerfully with Tal Kastner's and Ummni Khan's dissection of conceptual artist Emma Sulkowicz's online installation "Ceci n'est pas un viol" ("this is not a rape"), a short film depicting an uncomfortable and occasionally violent non-consensual

sexual encounter in a dorm room. They effectively unfurl Sulkowicz's indictment of representation and polysemy itself as instruments of pain, violence, and oppression. Particularly, the authors concentrate on the screen as confessional, highlighting the artist's use of the virtual interface to enapture and even condemn the user—as well as its contribution to the instability of truths and facts within sexual experience. Andie Shabbar's chapter, "#Occupotty, Affect, and Confession as Activism" is useful not only for its framing of the selfie as an "assemblage," but also its explanation of social media campaigns around trans people in public bathrooms as a collective treatise on the "oppressive effects of both concealment and exposure" (56) and the politics of radical invisibility for bodies marked as gender-nonconforming.

The free-flowing exchange between two frequent collaborators in recent queer pornography, Naomi de Szegheo-Lang and N. Maxwell Lander, is refreshingly informed by Lander's frank appraisal of his own methods and aesthetics as well as the cultural studies/feminist histories/affect theory background of De Szegheo-Lang. Ela Przybylo and Veronika Novoselova's essay on the connections between second-wave feminist consciousness-raising and confessional blogging in the 2010s sketches a well-documented historiography, but falls somewhat short of extending those connections into the murky digital future. Silke Jandl's exploration of coming-out videos on YouTube is perhaps the least daring in this section, often frustratingly vague in defining the terms of this ultra-con-

temporary object of study. The analysis of Shane Dawson, as well as other satellite queer creators such as Connor Franta, misses a crucial comparison of the YouTuber to other types of celebrity; though Jandl describes the evolving transmediality of a YouTube persona, taking us through the connective confessional tissue of Dawson's book and short films, we miss the foundational knowledge of what constitutes identity, longevity, and fame in this particular sphere. This initial phase of chapters exemplifies *I Confess!*'s rocky, bold, and often cheeky struggle to coalesce around the Foucauldian notions of confession—open to interpretation and remolding as they are.

The next sub-section, "Author, Subject, and Audience," is distinguished by its coherence—perhaps not in rhetorical approaches, but in describing the relationship between two entities: confessor and receiver, author and audience, speaker and listener. Evoy considers his avowed, performative relationship to Lady Gaga through the influence of Ann Cvetkovich: through publicly exhibiting her own trauma, Gaga enables the audience to examine and "act up" their ways of working through a homophobic culture. Ingrid Olson's archival investigation of fan letters sent to porn star Nina Hartley is a brilliant standout in this section, peppering an exploration of truth-telling to an accepting, authenticating listener ("parrhesia") with numerous photographic examples of the letters and an attentive discursive and aesthetic analysis of their contents. Shohini Ghosh's chapter on Bengali filmmaker Rituparno Ghosh is personal in another way, tenderly considering, from the vantage point of a loved one,

the transformative possibilities of excess in confessional queer filmmaking. Nicholas de Villiers explores the ethics of filming, interviewing, and complicity between producers and performers in the context of the "gay-for-pay" documentary; his point that the format has a long and important history within queer communities, particularly those of sex workers, gives his analysis an added resonance. The anonymous collective "Intervals" closes the section with a meditation on the figure of the "masturbating boy" in popular culture and porn; though the prose here often veers into meandering reverie (to the detriment of didactic argument) their positioning of the academy in pursuits of the puerile is indeed interesting: "To be scholars of the masturbating boy, then, we must confess that we are masturbators" (Intervals, 196). The tension between scholarship and the topic of children and adolescents within the framework of confessional queer media is echoed in this volume many times over—as is the tension between poetics and declarative prose, a vexing conflict at the heart of writing persuasively on affect.

At this point, *I Confess!* switches gears to "Ars Erotica," which is considerably longer and more sprawling, and contains the sub-categories of "Pornographies," "Documentaries," and "Transmedia," which roughly correspond to investigations and histories of "arousal, sexual didacticism, and technological flux and innovation, respectively" (Waugh and Arroyo, 16). Connor Steele begins the first section with a very brief, alternately vulnerable and hilarious consideration of (dis)able-bodiedness and queerness in personal experiences of God. Eric

Falardeau (translated by Jordan Arsenault) deftly mobilizes Catherine Hakim's ideas on "erotic capital" to not only reconfigure the cam performer's confessional space as overmanaged and lucrative, but an affective-aesthetic construct: "Camming...transforms our way of perceiving the erotic and the pornographic. The space of the *mise-en-scène* is simultaneously real and virtual, private and public. We are in 'pornspace'" (256). Editor Brandon Arroyo contributes a chapter here, asserting an articulation of gay male identity, confession, and pornography by conceiving porn as a great illuminator: a total reveal of both inner and outer truth, often by de-emphasizing verbal communication in service of those undeniably authentic expressions of the body. Valentina Denzel's comparison of punk-porn writer Virginie Despentes with the proto-feminist sensibilities of the Marquis de Sade shares DNA with Justine McLellan's later chapter on Lars von Trier's *Nymphomaniac* and the death of the author in the wake of #MeToo; though Denzel valorizes the connection with de Sade, McLellan mourns the unfortunate demons which may lurk behind a powerful male figure's defense of feminine sexual confession and empowerment. Daniel Laurin provides a considered take on the quasi-documentary porn film "Fuck Yeah Levi Karter!" as "metatextual pornographic authentication" (319) of both performer and company brand. Shaka McGlotten's "Porn Fast," an irreverent reflection on the textual mechanics of pornography and the notion of "speed" as it plays into reception, returns us to a humorous confessional tone—"If you are currently abstaining from porn, this

essay is itself pornographic. For the rest of you, enjoy" (353). At the same time, McGlotten balances this tone with thoughtful, tantalizing towards possible technological and affective futures of pornographic engagement.

We then move into "Documentaries," which gathers scholarship under this loose umbrella and is marked by an increased attention to *mise-en-scène* and editing as they intersect with the purpose and efficacy of sexual confession. Rebecca Sullivan's "I Was the Girl in the Shadows" begins the section on an odd biographical note, which feels indulgent where other personal interventions in this volume are more vital and urgent. The chapter intersperses personal recollections of feeling marginal as a young adult with a celebration of prosaic queer married life and a muted rallying call to recognize the revolutionaries of second-wave queer radicalism. Editor Thomas Waugh follows with a vast, ranging history of auto porn, which provides a groundwork for subsequent contributor Susanna Paasonen's chapter on filmmaker Jan Soldat's body of work—particularly *The Incomplete*, a casual, deliberately banal look at a man who avows the identity of "slave" and forgoes the spectacle of confession and outing for the mundanity of everyday living. Sarah E. S. Sinwell brings in the unique texts of small-screen-based documentary web series, discussing the spatial and operational affordances of viewing queerness online through the portable device. Damon R. Young concludes the section by exploring the double-sidedness of Jonathan Caouette's *Tarnation* (2003), which he claims straddles the paradigms of older cinematic forms and

the benignly narcissistic world of social media and self-documentation.

The final sub-section, “Trans-media,” deals with perhaps some of the most daring, uncomfortable, and methodologically unorthodox scholarship in this volume. It begins with the provocative chapter, “Looking, Stroking, and Speaking: A Queer Ethics of [Minor-Attracted Person] Desire” by an anonymous author, which is not only among the longest pieces here but also the most defensive in terms of its content (including a long exploration of the moral and legal dimensions of viewing public media of teen boys not intended for adult sexual consumption). Gears shift rapidly with Stephen Charbonneau’s chapter on gaming; he describes the process of playing through the confessional games *dys4ia* and *Her Story* through the schema of affective maps, couching game play as a mapping of self onto the experience of another. Both Milan Pribisic and Ron S. Judy undertake textual analysis of films and multimedia works, with their respective analyses of Derek Jarman and Ming Wong’s “i-narrator” queer/trans films, and perversion and social subversion in the “hentai” film *Moonlight Whispers* by Akihiko Shiota. Eleanor Ty’s essay on Marie Calloway’s detached, voyeuristic, hauntingly affect-less writings is among the standout pieces in this section, particularly in terms of Ty’s clever comparison of Calloway’s style to the resistant, dull bounds of “influencer”-style imagery post-2010s. Annamaria Pinaka provides a reflective framework of “pornographing” to describe her own praxis as a visual artist; she points out that artists such as herself and others, who jump off their

own sexual lives to create work, are continually reshaping personal and cultural trappings of “dirtiness.” Tom Roach closes the section with a strongly persuasive argument for the generative, politically resistant presence of ridiculous and satirical communication within the world of queer dating and sex apps, arguing that poking fun at the technologies, bots, and corporations which commodify confessional behaviors may unlock audience potential to transcend a trapped neoliberal subject position.

Both the arrangement and tone of *I Confess!*—its tumultuous flow, its emotional extremes between joy, numbness, paranoia, despair, and raucousness—seem to point jointly to the shift in public and private queer life brought on by the introduction of the internet. Waugh and Arroyo state in their introduction that the volume deals directly with this “cataclysmic paradigm shift” marked by “ominous implications of surveillance and control,” as well as “utopian glimmers of community and liberation” (5). It would seem that *I Confess!* cannot quite settle on a cohesive thesis of queer sexual confession that knits this alternately brilliant and foreboding mediated landscape; the anthology’s strength lies in its pulsing spirit of futurism, tied to a tender and loving veneration of gay, trans, queer, and gender-non-conforming histories past. The editors’ decision to include anonymous authors is discussed at length throughout; though the anonymous scholarship all shares a somewhat troubled and troubling perspective on adult-child sexual attraction as a discrete sexual identity, the authors’ point that queer studies must attend to this problematized

aspect of study is well-taken. These chapters may well be generative to future scholars who attend to the subjects treated within academia as most taboo—indeed, porn studies gains a huge foothold in this anthology, not least because *I Confess!* demonstrates how much the fields of celebrity studies, audience studies, ethnography,

and more owe to the study of pornography, its consumers, and its secretive and proudly public confessors.

### References

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