

Celebrity Memoir:
From Ghostwriting to Gender Politics

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Back cover blurb

In this timely analysis of the economics of access that surround contemporary female celebrity, Hannah Yelin reveals a culture that requires women to be constantly 'baring all' in physical exposure and psychic confessions. As famous women tell their story, in their 'own words', constellations of ghostwriters, intermediaries and market forces undermine assertions of authorship and access to the 'real' woman behind the public image. Yelin's account of the presence of the ghostwriter offers a fascinating microcosm of the wider celebrity machine, with insights pertinent to all celebrity mediation.

Yelin surveys life-writing genres including fiction, photo-diary, comic-strip, and art anthology, as well as more 'traditional' autobiographical forms; covering a wide range of media platforms and celebrity contexts including reality TV, YouTube, pop stardom, and porn/glamour modelling. Despite this diversity, Yelin reveals seemingly inescapable conventions, as well as spaces for resistance.

Celebrity Memoir: from Ghostwriting to Gender Politics offers new insights on the curtailment of women's voices, with ramifications for literary studies of memoir, feminist media studies, celebrity studies, and work on the politics of production in the creative industries.

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Endorsements

'Thought-provoking and innovative, Yelin's work with ghost-writing explores the games of reconstruction, the play of presenting the "real". At its core, it is a study of gender and (public) subjectivity. In its blending of celebrity studies approaches and autobiography, it is building a new and relevant research direction.' P. David Marshall, Deakin University

'Yelin takes a deep-dive approach to unpack authenticity and the phenomenon of the constructed image. This compelling argument about agency and selfhood illuminates a complex and highly gendered process of continual negotiation. A noteworthy intervention.' Hannah Hamad, Cardiff University

Contents

Chapter 1. Introduction

Chapter 2. The ghostwritten memoirs of female celebrities: authorship, authenticity, agency and gendered access

Celebrity memoir as broadsheet hate object
Celebrity memoir as scholarly bad object
The 21st century memoir moment
Ghosted celebrity authorship
Agency and authorship
Memoirs and the misogyny of celebrity culture
Postfeminist celebrity memoirs
Celebrity authenticity
Celebrity artifice

Chapter 3. The economics of access: sex, trauma and constructedness in the porn star memoirs of Jenna Jameson, Katie Price and Pamela Anderson

Porn debates and textual fantasies
Sanitizing sexual trauma: The competing agendas of Pamela Anderson's Star
The 'glamour girl' memoir: narrative subject/corporeal object
Ghosting the 'glamour girl' memoir: between fact, fiction, constructedness and the 'real'
Jenna Jameson & Neil Strauss: a case study in the problematics of ghosting celebrity memoir
Nakedness vs. exposure: consent and the 'snatch'
Writing the 'glamour girl' body: 'Well hello! I admit that I'm fake.'
'Simplified and made visible': public privates and the performance of extreme femininity
The contradictory 'empowered' femininity of the 'glamour girl' memoir subject
Negotiating cultural value and creative agency
Constructing female sexuality: service and hyperbole

Chapter 4. 'White Trash' and the celebrity-as-assemblage: class, race, and authority in the Reality TV star memoirs of Jade Goody, Paris Hilton, and the Kardashians

Goody and Hilton: an unlikely pair of celebrity class anomalies
Goody and her ghost: negotiated agency in the celebrity assemblage
Hilton and her ghost: 'It's all about taking charge and branding yourself'
Goody as autobiographical subject: shame, confession and authority
Memoir as agency, celebrity as assemblage
Hilton as autobiographical subject: elliptic denial, camp play and supplementary, extratextual worlds
Talentless 'White Trash' celebrity: undeserving rich or poor
Celebritisation as class drag
'White trash' celebrity as lack of self-control
Whiteness as an unmarked category: comparing Hilton and the Kardashians
'White trash' as failure of femininity and wilful self-display

Chapter 5. The gendered authenticity contract: exposure without insulation in the YouTuber memoirs of Zoella, iJustine and JennxPenn

Introduction: The Death of the Ghostwriter

Theorising YouTube celebrity

'Broadcast Yourself': the multiplicity of YouTube celebrity as unruly, networked, collaborative autobiography

Analogue memoirs of digital subjectivity

'As I started talking to the camera more, my channel grew': the gendered authenticity contract and the literalism of YouTube's economics of access

'My fans bought me these eggs': celebrity agency and YouTube as the gig-economy celebrity of millennial precarity

Trolling is a feminist issue: 'There were absolutely gross and inappropriate and lewd comments, too - I mean, this was the internet'

Parasocial misogyny and exposure without insulation: 'I stopped feeling safe in my own home'

The business and safety logic of pacifying abusers

Conclusion: the ghostwriter as imposter in a teen girl's bedroom

Chapter 6. Accessing stars through autobiographical images: resistance, containment, consent and creative agency in the pop-star, visual memoirs of M.I.A and Lady Gaga

Introduction: autobiographical images in an economics of access

Visual autobiography, art school framing, and claims to creative agency

The ontology of celebrity memoir and the workings of images

Ghosted authenticity and access: consent, boundaries, and what is in (and out of) the frame

Pop persona and M.I.A.'s performance of difference

M.I.A.'s hybridity and ambivalence: invoking and rejecting stereotype

M.I.A.'s autobiographical instrumentalism

Gaga's liberatory gospel?

The containment of Gaga's resistant femininity

Chapter 7. Conclusion: the gender politics of ghostwritten memoir

Bibliography

For Arvo

Chapter 1. Introduction

The memoirs of female celebrities reveal battlefields of self-determination. In them, famous women tell us their story, in their 'own words'. It is an open secret, however, that constellations of ghostwriters, management and market forces orbit these texts, undermining assertions of authorship or unfettered access to the 'real' woman behind the public image. As a result, the ghost-written memoir inhabits a complex grey area between biography, autobiography, fact, and fiction.

A thorough interrogation of the memoirs of contemporary, female celebrities is long overdue. There is a historical, representational lack when it comes to the recording of the lives of women.¹ Women's erasure is a product of continuing patriarchal gatekeeping of official histories. Feminist philosopher Simone De Beauvoir charts the difficulty for women to define themselves in their own terms from ancient mythology to when she was writing in the mid twentieth century.² More recently, in her stage show *Nannette*, comedian Hannah Gadsby laments of a long list of alleged and convicted sexual predators, including Harvey Weinstein, Bill Cosby, Woody Allen, and Roman Polanski, 'these men control our stories' and they 'don't give a fuck about women'.³

As a successful publishing phenomenon centred upon books sold as 'true' female experiences, celebrity memoir, therefore, demands attention. Their enormous popularity, commercial success, and resultant cultural impact are grounds for investigation in their own right. Moreover, given the historical incursions upon women's self-representational agency, it is crucial that we attend to the fact that some of the most widely read texts authored by women are not necessarily (or at least not solely) authored by women.

The celebrity author in need of a ghostwriter is often a figure of derision. This is not a straightforward exercise in rehabilitation of the genre per se. Indeed, at points my analysis of these texts, and the gendered power dynamics they represent, is deeply critical. However, celebrity memoir is a productive and complex cultural artefact, deserving critical attention. Far from being a reason for ridicule, ghostwriting is a fascinating microcosm of the celebrity machine. The ghosts within must be made visible if we are to understand the ways in which women in the public eye are often coaxed or curtailed when giving an account of themselves. The project of this book, then, is to reveal these oft-ignored intermediaries and the power dynamics of their presence.

Ghostwriters trigger intense cultural anxieties about both the power afforded to those who exist in the spotlight, and the risk of this power falling into the wrong hands. The ghostwriter for Donald Trump's memoir fears that the myth he created of 'a charmer with an unfailing knack for business' changed history for the worse by helping Trump get elected as the President of the United

¹ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (London: Routledge, 1990).

² Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. H.M. Parshley (London: Penguin Books, 1997).

³ Hannah Gadsby, *Nannette* (Netflix, 2018).

States.⁴ The writer who helped Instagrammer Caroline Calloway pen social media posts and a book proposal exposed her identity to a global media furor, with quality news titles around the world engrossed in the dispute, despite the fact that the memoir was never actually written and the advance on the \$500,000 book deal had to be returned.⁵ The punitively gendered construction of authenticity surrounding women's autobiographical acts are writ large in the discourses of betrayal which circulated through and around this story, and the gleeful *schadenfreude* at Calloway's setbacks (albeit setbacks which she was able to parlay into a deal for a new, forthcoming book titled *Scammer*).⁶

The celebrity memoir occupies a nexus of promises of 'access' and 'authenticity'. It combines the 'intimate' revelations that are central to celebrity coverage with autobiography's promise of self-disclosure. Such promises must be interrogated in relation to the fact that these texts are so visibly mediated. Moreover, the assumption that we are capable of revealing our essential selves is based upon problematic Enlightenment ideas of personal sovereignty.⁷

How, then, can we understand the collaborative construction of these texts and its implications for both agency and 'authorship'? The process of attributing meaning to the celebrity life story can be understood as a negotiation, not only between the (various) agents involved in the text's construction, but in terms of how the meaning of these texts is shaped by their wider relationship with extratextual material – that is, the wealth of information we 'know' about a celebrity's life from other sources.

The production of a memoir, collaborative or otherwise, is an act that claims certain forms of agency in self-representation. Yet, in responding to external criticism such as from tabloids, gossip blogs, or twitterstorms, these memoirs then implicitly contain the regulatory narratives levelled at the authors in other media. This model of what I will call the *celebrity-as-assemblage* applies not only to the complex mediations of collaboratively authored memoir, but to celebrity as a whole: the performance of the celebrity self is always in dialogue with, and so constituted of, its paratexts and surrounding materials in a web of conflicting mediation. Thus, celebrity agency in self-representation can be seen to be multiple and negotiated, taking many forms.

Just as the demands of narrative in life-writing must impose linear order upon the disorder of lived experience, these texts attempt to impose a singular reading upon the multiplicity of narratives that surround a celebrity. Within the boundaries of these texts a star identity can be carefully controlled and, as such, they create an opportunity for intervention in a public image that must be constantly reclaimed, rebranded or redressed. However, because the assemblage is non-

⁴ Jane Mayer, 'Donald Trump's Ghostwriter tells all', *The New Yorker*, 18th July 2016.

⁵ Natalie Beach, 'I Was Caroline Calloway. Seven years after I met the infamous Instagram star, I'm ready to tell my side of the story'. *The Cut*, 10th September 2019.

⁶ Stephanie McNeal, Caroline Calloway Says She Is Releasing A Book Called "Scammer", *BuzzFeed News*, 15th January 2020.

⁷ Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, *Reading Autobiography* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), p.6.

hierarchical, they can never replace or obscure the other narratives that circulate around the celebrity. This book is in part a response to calls for a better understanding of the industrial production of celebrity.⁸ I offer a framework for reading these texts which accounts for both their collaborative authorship and the industrial conditions of their construction without dismissing them as solely the cynical manufacture of corporate merchandise.

Ghost-written memoir offers a 'moment' of interaction between celebrity and audience in which the concerns of celebrity culture (privacy, authenticity, myth-making, marketing, agency, subjectivity) uniquely coalesce in an interaction between slow, old media and instantaneous, new media. The reader of celebrity memoir is addressed individually in the celebrity's first-person, confessional voice in a performance of constructed intimacy that is experienced as a one-on-one address and sustained for the duration of 300 pages. As such, celebrity memoirs offer a uniquely rich opportunity to interrogate celebrity culture's promise of access to the 'private', 'intimate' self. Celebrity memoirs are constructed around this feeling of intense privacy and yet, simultaneously, are transparent exercises in public image management. Thus, the genre has much to reveal as a way of explicitly reading the bridge between publicity and privacy that is at the heart of celebrity culture.⁹

Such insights have ramifications for literary studies of memoir, feminist media studies work on representational politics, work on the creative industries examining the politics of production and its relationship to the framing of the 'real' and 'true', and celebrity studies' understandings of 'authenticity', 'artifice' and the gender dynamics of celebrity culture. As such, this is not solely a book about celebrity memoir. Rather, it is a demonstration that celebrity memoirs are the exemplary texts through which one can understand wider celebrity culture. Such an interrogation necessitates new terms, concepts and tools to interrogate celebrity culture, namely here, the *celebrity-as-semblage*, the *gendered authenticity contract*, and the *economics of access*.

As 'official' celebrity narratives, memoirs react to their media environment, modelling the ways in which celebrities are always in interaction with the multiplicity of coverage, judgments and readings that circulate around them, and affording a model for understanding the *celebrity-as-semblage*. The explicit coexistence of industrial brand-building and the revelation of a 'real' self behind the image make ghost-written memoirs the ideal celebrity texts for consideration of the questions of celebrity authenticity, which have concerned the field.¹⁰ Whilst celebrity texts of all

⁸ Graeme Turner, 'Approaching celebrity studies', *Celebrity Studies*, 1 (2010), 11-20. Graeme Turner, Frances Bonner, and P. David Marshall, *Fame Games: The Production of Celebrity in Australia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

⁹ Leo Braudy, *The Frenzy of Renown: Fame and its History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986); Richard de Cordova, *Picture Personalities: The Emergence of the Star System in America* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, [2001] 1990). Milly Williamson, 'Celebrity, Gossip, Privacy, and Scandal', *The Routledge Companion to Media and Gender*, ed. Cynthia Carter, Linda Steiner, and Lisa McLaughlin. (New York: Routledge, 2014).

¹⁰ Richard Dyer, *Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1986), p.10; Sean Redmond, 'Pieces of Me: Celebrity Confessional Carnality', *Social Semiotics*, 18.2 (2008) 149-61; Su Holmes, 'Off-guard, Unkempt, Unready?': Deconstructing Contemporary Celebrity in heat Magazine, *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies*, 19.1 (2005) 21-38.

kinds tend to engage with these competing discourses, it is rare to find examples so entirely defined by both visible manipulation and apparent access to essential subjectivity and inner thoughts. This I theorise as a *gendered authenticity contract*: an expectation of impossible access to a 'real' woman behind a public image, which causes anger when this inevitably cannot be delivered. This allows analysis of what I will term the celebrity's *economics of access*: where (the appearance of) access and exposure is traded as vital celebrity currency.

Through the memoirs examined here we see the space available for female self-representation in public, and the incursions upon it. We see the weight of recurring conventions, despite the diversity of the celebrities and the autobiographical forms they deploy. At the same time, we will see that, whilst many of these gendered conventions appear inescapable, there is space for resistance and the possibility for alternative models of femininity. By offering an understanding of celebrity memoir - as ghost-written, as an agentic intervention, as a negotiated terrain which makes its negotiations exceptionally visible on the page, and as a microcosmic cultural artefact with much to tell us about celebrity culture at large – I aim to provide new ways of approaching the mediated, collaboratively constructed nature of all celebrity. Only by approaching celebrity thus, and through the diversity of autobiographical forms examined here, can we understand the weight of narrative convention and how very gendered these conventions are.

This book examines how female celebrities are represented in their memoirs, and how these representations relate to the wider gender (as well as class and racial) politics of contemporary celebrity. These memoirs are both a perpetuation of, and an intervention into, harshly gendered celebrity cultures that coax particular subjectivities or models of personhood from women. Surrounding factors that shape, enable, or inhibit the ways in which the self can be represented are as important to examine as those resulting representations. For example, social conventions of gender, race and class, sources of authority, cultural hierarchies, currencies of authenticity, intimacy, likability and sexual appeal, audience appetites, and market forces all place pressure on the subject positions available to the celebrity author-subject. Likewise, the specificities of the individual celebrity's existing 'star image',¹¹ the celebrity's domain or field of work, and the form of memoir adopted, all contribute to or curtail the types of life stories that can be told. This is why you will find in this book texts that span a range of autobiographical modes, such as autobiographical fiction and photo-diary, as well as more 'traditional' memoir forms. These examples show the weight of generic convention at play – conventions of both autobiography and celebrity construction. However, it would be problematic to assume – as the popular press often does - that celebrity memoir is

¹¹ Richard Dyer, *Stars* (London: British Film Institute, 1979).

formulaic: the sample included here reveals that celebrity memoir as a genre is far from homogenous in terms of its textual address or mediation of gender politics.

The memoirs of female celebrities variously function to reinscribe and/or counter patriarchal narratives, depending on the particular construction of the memoir in hand. This book, therefore, focuses exclusively on the memoirs of *female* celebrities. In the coming case studies, we shall see many examples of the gendered nature of fame. It is hard to imagine, for example, the male equivalent of Anderson's claim, made in a promotional interview for her fictionalised memoir, *Star*, 'my breasts have a career. I'm just tagging along'.¹² Whilst a study of the memoirs of male or non-binary celebrities would reveal its own gendered conventions and their ramifications, this book fills the gap in the study of memoir and mediation in the specific context of patriarchal histories of curtailing, coaxing and commodifying women's subjectivities in ways that require their own distinct theorisation from celebrities of other genders.

Chapters are organised around the different 'fields' from which the celebrities' fame originates: reality TV stars Jade Goody, Paris Hilton, and the Kardashians; YouTubers Zoella, iJustine, and JennxPenn; pop-stars Lady Gaga and M.I.A.; and Katie Price, Pamela Anderson, and Jenna Jameson under the heading 'glamour' girls (a British euphemism that valorises topless modelling). The nature of multi-platform celebrity performance means that these categories cross-fertilise and blur. They nevertheless prove illuminating because of the ways in which hierarchies of cultural value and perceived associations of 'talent' (or lack thereof) shape the subject positions available to a celebrity author.

In terms of scope I confine my analysis to female celebrities with memoirs published in the 21st century, with a high profile or 'cross-over' success in the celebrity fields of reality TV, YouTube, pop-stardom, or porn/glamour modelling. However, within this sample, patterns emerge pointing to wider conventions of female celebrity. In terms of age, at 19, YouTuber McAllister was the youngest of the celebrities examined here at the time of the release of her memoir, the oldest being porn star Jenna Jameson, who released her memoir aged 30. In a postfeminist celebrity culture, the commodified subjectivity, feelings, and experiences of specifically young, famous women is both norm and ideal.¹³ Memoirs by older female celebrities such as Grace Jones, Sharon Osbourne and Toyah Wilcox were released in the period; however, as scholars of aging celebrity observe,¹⁴ the responses to older famous women, from erasure to hypervisibility, from disgust to celebration of freedom, are distinct and need their own analysis. There is a significant variation in class backgrounds (as discussed in chapter 4 through the classed identities of Jade Goody and Paris Hilton). Notably,

¹² Mike Sager, 'What I've Learned: Pamela Anderson,' *Esquire Magazine*, 31 December 2004.

¹³ *Interrogating Postfeminism*, ed. Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra (Durham: Duke University Press 2007).

¹⁴ Deborah Jermyn, "'Get a life, ladies. Your old one is not coming back': ageing, ageism and the lifespan of female celebrity." *Celebrity studies* 3.1 (2012), 1-12.

the three 'glamour girl' author-subjects relate their working-class origins, while both pop-stars were educated at prestigious universities and endeavour not to be received as middle-class. There is less variation in terms of race. Except for M.I.A. and Kim Kardashian, the authors of the books examined here are all white. Racism in porn consumption, YouTube comments, and reality TV has been well documented, and is likely to have contributed to the fact that the 'cross-over' stars who get book deals are predominantly white.¹⁵ Pop-stardom was the only field in which there was a broad choice of stars with memoirs from different ethnic and racial backgrounds. Further, there is virtually no variation in terms of professed sexual orientation. Whilst Lady Gaga has come out as bisexual and campaigns for LGBT rights, explicit heterosexuality runs throughout the texts and images analysed here, including her photo-memoir.

Within the scope of the selection, these patterns say much about the potency of the conventions that govern upon whom the light of fame is shone - who gets offered a book deal in a structurally racist, ageist, heteropatriarchal society; whose book gets well promoted once released - and accords with what scholars of celebrity have noted about female celebrity: she is presumed to be young, white and overtly, avaiably heterosexual.¹⁶

Chapter 2 situates the contemporary memoirs of female celebrities in their cultural and historical contexts. It shows how celebrity memoir is a hate object in both popular media and academe, yet both overlook the genre's valuable insights about celebrity culture, female subjectivity and agency. This chapter demonstrates that, whilst selling gendered access to the commodified celebrity private life is nothing new, these books are very much a product of a cultural moment at the turn of the 21st century. Key themes in this chapter include: authenticity, artifice, agency, gender, authorship, hierarchies of cultural value, and access.

Chapter 3 examines the tensions that arise when life-writing – an act of subjectification – is undertaken by an individual with a professional investment in their own objectification. The illustration is especially stark in the examples chosen (Katie Price, Pamela Anderson, Jenna Jameson), as they are sexually inflected through the celebrity author-subjects' career origins in soft-core pornographic modelling or hard-core pornographic films. Despite the predominantly female target audience of celebrity autobiography, women made famous by male-targeted pornography have

¹⁵ Mark P. Orbe, "Representations of race in reality TV: Watch and discuss", *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 25.4 (2008), 345-352; Xavier Landes and Morten Nielsen, "Racial dodging in the porn industry: a case with no silver bullet", *Porn Studies* 5.2 (2018), 115-130; Sabina Perrino, "Recontextualizing racialized stories on YouTube", *Narrative Inquiry*, 27.2 (2017), 261-285.

¹⁶ Sean Redmond, 'The Whiteness of Stars: Looking at Kate Winslet's Unruly White Body,' in *Stardom and Celebrity: A Reader*, ed. Su Holmes and Sean Redmond (London: Sage, 2007); *In the Limelight and under the Microscope: Forms and Functions of Female Celebrity*, ed. by Su Holmes and Diane Negra (New York: New York: Continuum, 2011).

'authored' some of the most commercially successful and widely read contemporary texts in the genre. This chapter demonstrates that the ghosting relationship is charged with complex, gendered power dynamics. Given the aforementioned historic representational lack, these books are rare examples giving voice to women's subjectivity, to women's sexual autobiography, and to women in the sex industry specifically. It is significant, therefore, that these texts are often co-authored by men. Examination of the power dynamics of ghosting is especially necessary when these texts narrate (and make palatable) stories of trauma, abuse and sexual violence. I argue that a thematic and formal preoccupation with constructedness interacts with (and potentially undermines) testimonies of trauma survival that make claim to truth status. Key themes in this chapter include the commodification of female experience, constructedness, writing the body, postfeminist sexual empowerment, ghost-writing and trauma.

Using the memoir of Jade Goody, chapter 4 opens with a consideration of the various capitals the celebrity and ghostwriter bring to the exchange of collaborative authorship. This chapter then contrasts Goody with Paris Hilton, to show that their class origins shape the ways in which they are able/required to represent themselves in their memoirs. Where Goody adopts a model of abjection, seeking exoneration from the audience in return for a thorough confession, Hilton can adopt a strategy of camp play and heightened artifice, refusing to give much away and deliberately undermining the little she does reveal. Chapter 4 ends with an analysis of the similarities between both women's reception as 'white trash'. The invisibility of whiteness within racist celebrity culture is examined in the contrast between Hilton and the Kardashians' ethnic self-representation. That 'white trash' is a class-based insult would suggest that it is Goody's and Hilton's class identities that render them vulnerable to criticism, but their socioeconomic backgrounds are diametrically opposed. The nature of reality TV celebrity, with its subjects' lives on continual display, provides a basis for the gendered classing of its female stars as 'trash', a status deriving from the failure to demonstrate acceptably feminine restraint rather than relating to socioeconomic status. This analysis reveals that, whilst celebrity culture and its supporting gossip media have been viewed as a 'low' field with tabloid sensibilities, its value system is punitively middle-class, policing the appropriateness of its players and shaming those who fall short. Key issues in this section include class, race and 'white-trash' celebrity, shame and display, confession and evasion, respectability, camp play and the 'undeserving' rich.

Chapter 5 examines the memoirs of YouTube celebrities Zoella, iJustine, and JennXPenn and how these texts relate the abuse and sexual harassment their celebrity author-subjects receive for sharing their lives online. The combination of what I term YouTube's *economics of access* and cultural sexism, which constructs women's sexuality as available for male pleasure, result in a *gendered authenticity contract* which the male audience angrily believes has been reneged upon when the (often sexualised) access they feel entitled to is not granted. I demonstrate how the risk of inspiring further

abuse forces these women to normalise online harassment, as they soothe and assuage their audiences whenever mentioning the sexist trolling they experience. The economic need to build audience loyalty to maintain one's status as a YouTuber demands interaction with the audience's comments to stay on the right side of the algorithms that determine their success. While YouTubers may make and upload their own videos, it does not necessarily follow that they have full control of their narratives or are any less embroiled in constellations of 'ghost'-like intermediaries than the celebrities discussed in previous chapters. And yet, digitally-enabled, lone-working, and insecurely entrepreneurial, theirs is a kind of celebrity of the gig economy. Chapter 5 argues for an understanding of YouTube celebrity through the concept of millennial precarity and questions the consequences of exposure without insulation. Key themes in this chapter are: trolling, cultures of online sharing, digital identity and networked self-representation, gig-economy celebrity, millennial precarity, and the risks of exposure without insulation.

At first look, the visual memoirs of M.I.A. and Lady Gaga, the focus of chapter 6, appear to be quite different texts that break the conventions outlined in the previous chapters. M.I.A.'s anthology of graphic art and Gaga's photographic diary of life on the road appear to be setting themselves up as postmodern masquerades: playful bricolages with performed identities which direct attention to the surface in a genre that is usually concerned with finding 'hidden depths'. Rather than written confessional narratives like those of Katie Price and Jade Goody, which draw upon 19th century realist modes, M.I.A. and Gaga's texts appear to be constructing a self-conscious performance of 'doing' pop-stardom.¹⁷ In a culture determined to know its female celebrities, where celebrity exists in an *economics of access* that coaxes stars to share as much as possible, this focus on the surface image could be read as a resistant move against interpretation, negotiating against these demands. Whilst these books do demonstrate meaningful differences that show that the genre is not homogenous, they ultimately still trade in the same currencies as the texts in previous chapters: for example, authenticity and access. Rather than being exceptions, these texts demonstrate the extreme persistence of certain conventions of female celebrity (self)-representation. Although they do not offer the written confessions that are the norm, a form of confession can be extracted, nonetheless. Chapter 6 demonstrates the rare moments when the status of the celebrity author-subject in relation to their ghost can be discerned in the text and how these power relations also shape the meaning of the resultant co-authored work. Key issues in this section include the celebrity photograph, hierarchies of cultural value, claims to artistry and creative agency, directing attention to the surface as a resistant strategy against interpretation, the wider agents of mediation as 'ghosts', the ghost as employee, and the containment of disruptive femininity, consent, and sexual assault.

¹⁷ Hannah Yelin, "'I am the centre of fame': doing celebrity, performing fame and navigating cultural hierarchies in Grace Jones' I'll Never Write my Memoirs." *Celebrity Studies* (2019).