Comparative American Studies An International Journal

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/ycas20

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To cite this article: Rachael McLennan (2021) Autobiography as Mediation and Mitigation: Elizabeth Wurtzel's *Prozac Nation* (1994) and Porochista Khakpour's *Sick* (2018), Comparative American Studies An International Journal, 18:2, 221-241, DOI: 10.1080/14775700.2021.1988293

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/14775700.2021.1988293

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Published online: 19 Oct 2021.

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COMPARATIVE AMERICAN STUDIES AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL
2021, VOL. 18, NO. 2, 221–241
https://doi.org/10.1080/14775700.2021.1988293

Autobiography as Mediation and Mitigation: Elizabeth Wurtzel's *Prozac Nation* (1994) and Porochista Khakpour's *Sick* (2018)

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ABSTRACT

This article argues that Elizabeth Wurtzel's work has been undeservedly neglected by autobiography studies. It explores how autobiography functions as mediation and mitigation as Wurtzel attempts to communicate her experience of depression in *Prozac Nation*, with rich yet problematic results, and argues that Wurtzel's refusal or difficulties with some key features of (American) autobiography mark her major contribution to the genre. The article also argues that the general understanding of Wurtzel as a 'rule-breaker' has merit but is only partly true, particularly as it extends to the frequent understanding of her as providing an empowering or feminist autobiographical example for women writers. Her complex influence is explored through a brief discussion of a contemporary autobiography of illness, Porochista Khakpour's *Sick*.

KEYWORDS

Autobiography; America; gender; illness

Following Elizabeth Wurtzel's death in January 2020, there was an outpouring of grief and praise on social and mainstream media, from writers and readers, mostly women, testifying to the impact of her autobiographical writing, particularly Prozac Nation (1994). Patricia Grisafi summarised much of this testimony when she claimed that Wurtzel 'made a generation of women feel as if their shitty lives might make a good book someday' (Grisafi 2020); Grisafi makes a number of other claims which capture the tenor of responses to Wurtzel's work both generally and following her death. She praises Wurtzel for daring to write honestly about depression in the face of negative attitudes about mental illness, positioning Wurtzel as a rule-breaker: 'Wurtzel said *fuck the stigma*'. She notes that Wurtzel suffered from sexism in reviews, so that she was judged, and found wanting, in relation to standards by which male memoirists were not measured.[1] Finally, Grisafi claims that Wurtzel 'created an entire subgenre of literature', inconsistently referred to in her article as the 'mental health narrative' and the 'feminist disability memoir'. She concludes by stating that contemporary women writers who work in this genre are in Wurtzel's debt, taking part in a 'mental health revolution' she inaugurated.

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Despite these claims of Wurtzel's impact and influence, in the twenty-first century Wurtzel has been largely absent from discussion of autobiography in scholarship and elsewhere. When she does appear, it is usually via brief mention, as an autobiographer the critic wishes to acknowledge but not explore in detail. Wurtzel's most famous and impactful work, *Prozac Nation*, has largely been relegated to history, with Wurtzel primarily read as a voice of Generation X, or cited as an important early example of the misery memoir.[2] This is exactly how she is referenced by Smith and Watson ([2001] 2020). While Tracey Emin and Dave Eggers's works are the central focus of their article, Wurtzel is included with Mary Karr, Kathryn Harrison, Michael Ryan and Lauren Slater as a number of 'Gen X writers' who 'frequently enmesh and deliberately confuse the boundaries of fiction and memoir, exploiting the terms of the "real"' (Smith and Watson 2001, 5). Smith and Watson claim that 'under siege in such literary memoirs are what an earlier generation of critics and readers regarded as the normative rules of autobiography' and that Wurtzel and her peers 'both depend on and undermine expectations of sincerity, authenticity, intimacy and completeness long hailed by both critics and readers as essential to the autobiographical pact' (5).

This article will consider *Prozac Nation* primarily in relation to Smith and Watson's claims that Wurtzel disturbs 'the normative rules of autobiography', via a focus on the preoccupation with 'rules' in her text, pertaining to rules Wurtzel sets out regarding her own autobiography, which also relate to her negotiation of social and cultural 'rules', particularly relating to gender and mental health. It argues that *Prozac Nation* constitutes a sophisticated text which refuses or ignores expectations about autobiography, especially American autobiography. It stands as a troubling meditation on gender, illness and autobiography. This troubling quality makes Wurtzel's text disruptive, in ways which probably explain the critical reluctance to engage with it closely. At the same time, though, lack of close engagement with Wurtzel's most famous work has been achieved precisely *because* of the way Wurtzel has been celebrated by Grisafi and others. Her resistance to stigma about depression (her act of making her struggles public) has been prioritised over the specific content of her writing. While it is fair to describe Wurtzel as a rule-breaker, a writer who wrote about experiences typically kept private, and who unapologetically disclosed her own flaws in a manner which made it easier for other women in particular to write about their lives, this ignores the complexity and significance of Wurtzel's voice and work, and her distinctive contribution to American autobiography.

My reading of *Prozac Nation* is then set alongside a brief reading of Porochista Khakpour's *Sick* (2018). Khakpour is among the contemporary women writers who Grisafi cites as taking part in the 'mental health revolution' Wurtzel is credited with inspiring, and Khakpour acknowledged Wurtzel's impact after her death. My reading of Khakpour's work challenges Grafi's claims about Wurtzel's influence on subsequent autobiographies about women and illness. Overall, this article attempts to counter the omission or forgetting of Wurtzel in autobiography studies and practice, both by offering a re-reading of her engagement with some features of American autobiography, and reframing understandings of her influence.

Re-contextualising Wurtzel

Smith and Watson's claim that Wurtzel is one of a number of writers who challenge 'what an earlier generation of critics and readers regarded as the normative rules' in autobiography is inaccurate and unhelpful. No definitive set of 'normative rules' for autobiography has ever existed. Smith and Watson are probably thinking of Philippe Lejeune's definition of autobiography as 'a retrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality' (Lejeune, in Eakin 1989, 4). Lejeune's presumption is that the autobiographical subject is a white, male, adult, sovereign self who tells a 'true' story (here, a true story might also be a linear one, given Lejeune's focus on 'retrospective'). But the history of autobiography has consistently produced texts which diverge from Lejeune's definition in every respect. As such, and as I have argued elsewhere, Lejeune's definition is cited most usually for the purposes of refusal and disavowal (McLennan 2013, 4). That is, the normative 'rules' of autobiography have always already been challenged. It is better to understand Lejeune's remarks as describing a privileged kind of autobiography, produced by a privileged autobiographical subject. The privilege is illustrated by the fact that these narratives are more likely to be written by subjects whose lives are highly valued, more easily read as 'autobiography' (partly because they are more likely to be read as 'truth').[3]

Smith and Watson argue that the works they focus on in their article are important for 'autobiography scholars who wish to interrogate [...] the limits of autobiography at a time when "the rule" is breaking the rule' (2). Their suggestion that the late twentieth century marks a notably 'rule-breaking' moment for autobiography is therefore also misleading, for the reasons already discussed. It is true that since the 1990s, autobiographies by non-privileged subjects (those who do not conform to the sovereign, white, middle-class male subject and its conventional narrative assumed in Lejeune's definition) have been published in greater number and have been more highly valued (although this is not to say that the privilege attaching to Lejeune's formulation is not still present). Leigh Gilmore notes that the 'memoir boom' of the 1990s and millennial culture (to which Wurtzel contributed, or even helped inaugurate) owes much to the social and political movements from the 1960s onwards, resulting in the greater visibility and attention given to the voices of writers who are not white and male, and whose texts do not follow the linear narrative of identity formation described by Lejeune (Gilmore 2001, 6). In her summary of the history of feminist life writing, Jennifer A. Cooke is correct to note Laura Marcus's argument that 'hybridity was central to women probing the boundaries demarking genres' (Cooke 2020, 8) in this period, and to acknowledge Gilmore's more recent work on autobiography, which is more explicit in noting that 'many of the most radical of these hybrid texts of the period were produced by women of colour' (8). The texts Smith and Watson examine, then, are indebted to these earlier movements and works. This is unacknowledged, meaning that Smith and Watson overstate the distinctiveness of the texts they examine.

This description of issues with Smith and Watson's discussion of autobiography has implications for their discussion of Wurtzel, who (like the other authors discussed by Smith and Watson) benefitted from many of the cultural changes Gilmore discusses above, which enabled greater visibility and receptiveness for her voice and text. Although

Wurtzel's work may be rule-breaking, her text did not emerge from nowhere, as popular discussions of her impact often imply. It is not even the first autobiography about depression.[4] Not only this, but Smith and Watson's inclusion of Wurtzel with writers who break the rules largely via engaging in postmodern strategies, or from a postmodern perspective, simply does not describe *Prozac Nation*. Wurtzel does not belong with the kind of autobiographical texts Smith and Watson focus on. Her text does 'enmesh and deliberately confuse the boundaries of fiction and memoir, exploiting the terms of the "real', but it does not do so from a committed, self-conscious, playful postmodern perspective; indeed, *Prozac Nation* frequently exhibits something which could be described as regret or nostalgia for grand narratives. While Gilmore and Cooke's work is useful in pointing out the inadequacies of Smith and Watson's understanding of Wurtzel, and enabling her to be more carefully contextualised in histories of autobiography, it should also be noted that my reading of *Prozac Nation* makes it clear that Wurtzel's writing cannot be easily claimed as feminist, meaning that she cannot be easily located within either Gilmore and Cooke's discussions of gender and autobiography, either. Wurtzel's ambivalent relation to feminism exists uncomfortably alongside any categorisation of her work as feminist, such as Grisafi's.

Smith and Watson's claim that Wurtzel is one who 'both depend[s] on and undermine[s] expectations of sincerity, authenticity, intimacy and completeness long hailed by both critics and readers as essential to the autobiographical pact' (5) is more accurate, although this claim exists in tension with their earlier claim that she challenges the 'normative rules of autobiography'. Their discussion of 'the autobiographical pact' also is drawn from Lejeune. For Lejeune the autobiographical 'pact' or contract' helps determine whether a text is autobiography; the author's name should refer to a real person, and the name of the author and the narrator should match (Lejeune, in Eakin 1989, 11, 19). However, as critics have shown, there are plenty of examples of autobiography which undercut this too.[5] While 'expectations of sincerity, authenticity, intimacy and completeness' are key to autobiography (these expectations speak to the vexed relationship between autobiography and truth), the legal connotations of 'pacts' or contracts' are less useful, suggesting clear, firm rules (and consequences for breaking them). I have argued that it might be more useful to think of autobiography as transactional rather than contractual (2013: 112), as this displaces a focus from a sense of rigorous and quasi-legal 'rules' in autobiography, in favour of claiming that one key feature of autobiography is that it negotiates the relationship between autobiographer and reader, who are both important in determining truth in any autobiography (though they may not, of course, agree).

Wurtzel's ambivalence (accommodation and resistance) towards conventions of autobiography is most clearly revealed in her 'Author's Note', the very existence of which confirms the expectations Smith and Watson associate with the autobiographical pact. The Author's Note takes the conventional form of disclaimer and assertion; Wurtzel notes that she has 'changed most names' (Wurtzel 1994), meaning that she uses fiction (the names) in an effort to ensure that she does not tell the whole truth (truth as verifiable, referential). Her insistence that the text constitutes 'the complete and total truth' is immediately followed by the qualifier 'But of course, it's my truth'. Wurtzel depends on and undermines expectations about sincerity, authenticity, intimacy and completeness for the purposes of acknowledging the importance of truth, describing how

she understands truth, and setting out limits on what she is prepared to disclose. It is, however, via her claim to truth as she defines it which means that her text most radically challenges 'the normative rules' of autobiography, and illustrates for what purpose Wurtzel is 'exploiting the terms of the "real"'. Wurtzel's 'truth' can ultimately only be verifiable, proven, assessed as accurate, by herself. To a greater extent than usual, even within the genre of autobiography and its focus on the self, Wurtzel makes herself the *sole* authority for her text's truth (her Author's Note is not concerned with a relationship with readers so much as with establishing this point). If autobiography is a transactional genre, then Wurtzel's transaction is only with herself (or with her representations of herself). Such a stance means that her autobiography both subscribes to the ideology of the sovereign self central to Lejeune's definition, but also tests it.

Despite her reputation for explicit disclosure, Wurtzel's specific aims in writing *Prozac Nation* are only made clear in the book's Afterword, written for a subsequent edition in 1995.[6] Wurtzel states that she wanted this book to be 'completely self-indulgent, unhesitant, and forthright in its telling of what clinical depression feels like: I wanted so very badly to write a book that felt as bad as it feels to feel *this* bad, to feel depressed. I wanted to be completely true to the experience of depression – to the thing itself, and not to the mitigations of translating it' (316). She indicates that this aim has implications for her writing style. Comparing her work to that of William Styron, of whom Wurtzel claims 'it was as if he was ashamed of what he experienced' and whose depression she characterises as 'something to hide, to keep inside' (319), she writes:

> But I just wanted to burst. I wanted to write like fever. I wanted to forget all the literary conventions and the hesitation and restraint and sane consideration that I'd always been taught were the hallmarks of good writing. I wanted to write like someone who has been stuck somewhere for so long that by the time she got unstuck none of the rules mattered anymore. I wanted to write like rock 'n' roll (319).

Wurtzel's objective, then, is to approximate or replicate as closely as possible the experience of being ill with depression (her truth). She believes that her commitment to the truth of her experience necessitates a rule-breaking way of writing, writing as if the rules don't matter (importantly, these may not mean the same thing). She does not state that she is challenging rules of autobiography, but of 'good writing', which she characterises in terms resonant of mental health ('sane consideration'), politeness and self-control ('hesitations and restraint')'. Wurtzel implies that her autobiography is not 'good writing', associated instead with illness ('fever') and good manners (adhering to social norms).

But there are a number of important contradictions here. Wurtzel's remarks about being 'stuck' and 'unstuck' are puzzling. Does being 'unstuck' correlate with the position of tentative recovery, from which Wurtzel writes her autobiography? If so, then writing like rock n' roll is predicated on the liberation of not being depressed any more, not being in the throes of the experience Wurtzel wants to describe. Yet Wurtzel claims that writing like rock n' roll, as if rules don't matter, is required to capture the experience of her depression. This may be because Wurtzel has to break rules to write truthfully about her experience, to 'fuck the stigma' as Grisafi notes. But Wurtzel also believes the experience of depression is one of having come 'unstuck', when rules don't matter. She writes, '*Yes, there was a certain beautiful honesty to my depressed state – I miss it sometimes now. I miss*

having so little stake in maintaining the status quo that I could walk out of rooms in tears at times that other people would have deemed inappropriate. I liked that about myself. I liked that disregard for convention' (217). Wurtzel's remarks therefore indicate a tension between the desire to communicate depression, 'the thing itself', and simultaneously to convey how she is 'unstuck'; an indeterminate condition (is she ill or recovered? Depressed or jubilant?) that necessitates a performance ('rock n' roll'), which potentially constitutes one of the 'mitigations of translating' her experience.

Wurtzel's statements thus reveal contradictory attitudes towards autobiography and/or writing. Autobiography can 'mitigate' her experience of depression, either by rendering it less severe, and therefore for Wurtzel, less truthful, and/or by taking attention away from that experience, focusing instead on representation (its translation). But it also allows her to write as if the rules don't matter, to communicate what it is to be 'unstuck'. Both of these tendencies, which can be described as *autobiography as medium* or *autobiography as mitigation* in relation to Wurtzel's truth, are present in *Prozac Nation*.

Wurtzel uses her autobiographical project (as articulated in the Afterword) to articulate her own highly contradictory rules for its own existence: autobiography is medium for and mitigation of her truth, the experience of depression. Throughout *Prozac Nation*, she exploits the ambiguities and contradictions of these 'rules.' She overthrows and reinstalls them as it suits her. All this is enabled by establishing herself as the sole authority of the truth of her text (her ambiguities and contradictions reflect her truth; she does not need to untangle or resolve them). However, her articulation of her rules and their execution creates inconsistencies, contradictions and disorder which threatens to obscure her primary aim (telling her truth of depression). Relatedly, they make her self, that sole authority, difficult to categorise or locate in relation to its identifications and politics. This generates problems in interpreting Wurtzel's text, and for understanding *Prozac Nation* in relation to the history of American autobiography. Crucially, as my close reading of Wurtzel's statements in the Afterword has revealed, Wurtzel's use of autobiography as medium and mitigation of her experience entails blurring the boundaries regarding illness and health, present and past selves, and the self writing and the self written (what does she mean by 'unstuck'?). She therefore challenges the binaries upon which the notion of the sovereign self depends for its own constitution and value: critical, here, is the notion of the sovereign self as rational, with the capacity to differentiate or set bounds between past and present (selves, events) being itself an indicator of reason and mental health. Wurtzel's challenge does not take the form of a postmodernist deconstruction of those binaries, though (her 'unstuck' is too ambiguous for that). Rather, her claim to the sovereign self is predicated on a continuous redrawing of its composition and limits. This allows her to continually affirm, undo and stretch its bounds, effectively rendering them (via her self-representations) 'unstuck' and 'stuck' according to her aims (and in spite of them). This results in a remarkably rich and challenging autobiographical text.

Prozac Nation and perspective

It makes sense that it is only in the 1995 Afterword (in which Wurtzel is not trying to represent the experience of depression, and in which she speaks from a position of relative recovery) that she engages reflexively with the autobiographical writing process

itself. However, readers are not abandoned in terms of guidance about her objectives in writing *Prozac Nation* – she states early in the text that 'The particulars of what has driven this or that person to Zoloft, Paxil, or Prozac, or the reasons that some other person believes herself to be suffering from a major depression, seem less significant than the simple fact of it' (30). For Wurtzel, the 'fact' is the experience of depression, how it feels, 'the thing itself'. This supports her understanding of truth in her Author's Note. She places her body and mind as the source of her truth. This stance could be read as feminist, despite Wurtzel's ambivalence towards this label (which will be discussed later). It both underwrites and undermines the sovereign self so key to Western autobiography[7] – Wurtzel places high value on her autonomous self as the source of her truth, but her gender, Jewish ethnicity and her establishment of her subjective, embodied experience as the source of truth (encapsulated in her use of 'fact') indicates that she is undoing or expanding the terms of the sovereign self and who can lay claim to it.

Wurtzel is not saying that the 'particulars', the reasons for depression, have *no* significance. She may, though, be hinting that these too are a 'mitigation'; that a focus on why she is depressed is a distraction from her aim to relay how bad it feels (it would require her to reflect on her experience, when she primarily wishes to describe it). But it is an unavoidable one, similar to the way she must write like 'rock n' roll' despite its potential to distract from her commitment to describing her experience (another instance, then, of breaking her own rules). Her text does indeed focus on 'why.' Indeed, for much of Wurtzel's life as covered in the text, the lack of explanation for her depression exacerbates it. Her use of 'fact' is therefore complex and expansive, as her experience of depression is influenced by the absence of a reason for it. She suggests repeatedly that her depression is out of proportion to her experiences (44), that she cannot understand what right she has to be depressed (169), or why she is depressed (128). Wurtzel worries away at the 'why'. She says that 'I want so badly to have my life circumstances match the oppressiveness I feel internally' (44). Substantial portions of the text are given to discussing in detail various factors which might provide the 'why'; American culture at the moment of her birth (20); the breakdown of her parents' marriage in her early childhood and its impact (23), such as the stresses of their domestic situation and subsequent strained relations (58–59, 63); her relationship with her mother in particular (46–47, 80); her position as a member of a generation of children of divorced parents (66). Wurtzel's experience of depression takes in much more than her personal experience, extending to meditations on her family history and American culture. If this sounds some way from 'the thing itself', the experience of depression Wurtzel claims to have tried to capture in the Afterword, it is not: consider, for example, this description of depression: 'Slowly, over the years, the data will accumulate in your heart and mind, a computer program for total negativity will build into your system, making life feel more and more unbearable' (18). Wurtzel's project of conveying the experience of depression, then, entails describing the process by which negative data accumulates, necessitating her forensic and wide-ranging analysis of the factors listed above. It also ensures, of course, that what she discusses those wider factors,

they are important only to the extent they impact on or elucidate her experience, so that she stays faithful to her establishment of herself as the sole source of truth in the Author's note. Indeed, perhaps she has to.

Wurtzel never does come to a definitive conclusion regarding the 'why' of her depression. In the Epilogue she notes that there is no medical test which can definitively 'find a mental imbalance' and testifies to her belief that 'in the case of my own depression, I have gone from a thorough certainty that its origins are in bad biology to a more flexible belief that after an accumulation of life events made my head such an ugly thing to be stuck in, my brain's chemicals started to agree. There's no way to know any of this for sure right now' (306). She entertains, but never fully subscribes to or is satisfied by, a number of explanations. As such, her experience of depression is necessarily marked by inconsistencies and contradictions (in line with her remarks about her work in the Afterword). This may explain her commitment to the subjective truth of her experience of depression. Wurtzel lacks a clear narrative of its cause; she cannot explain it definitively with recourse to biology, medicine or culture. She *can* (only) write with confidence about how depression feels.

One key way in which Wurtzel characterises how bad depression 'feels', as a result of the accumulation of 'negative data', is revealed in her lament that 'Years of depression have robbed me of that – well, that *give*, that elasticity everyone else calls perspective' (258). She bemoans that 'Nothing in my life ever seemed to fade away or take its rightful place among the pantheon of experiences that constituted my eighteen years' (120). Although Wurtzel does not say so, this 'lack of perspective' is potentially fatal for her autobiographical project (how to tell a story about your life if nothing fades away, if experiences cannot be put in their 'rightful place'?). With no perspective and no 'why' to explain her depression, it is extremely difficult for Wurtzel to imbue her personal story with purpose (to put things in 'their rightful place,' whatever that means), let alone wider relevance for others, as autobiographers often do; she cannot use her story to present a coherent critique of aspects of American culture, for example, or offer advice based on her recovery. In her Afterword she describes hostile questions from those who ponder why she has written a book '*about her own life and nothing more*' (315). Wurtzel's confusing remarks regarding her desire to deprioritise the act of representing her depression ('the mitigations of translating' her experience) in favour of communicating the experience itself now sound less like an active choice but a position she is forced into. If she can only write about how bad depression feels, she cannot confront or examine the fact that her autobiography is a mediated experience, or attend to traditions of autobiographical writing and her text's relationship to it. And If she only *chooses* to write about how depression feels, then she does not have to engage with these elements.

And yet, at the time of writing, Wurtzel is no longer seriously depressed. She is not 'cured' in any permanent sense, but a combination of therapy and medication has allowed her to manage her condition and make a considerable recovery (307). She is, perhaps, no longer burdened with the 'lack of perspective' she appears to understand as a cumulative feature of depression itself (indeed, perhaps this makes her writing possible). But she must still contend with the absence of a 'why', a narrative which explains her depression and might enable her to place her story in a wider context. At the time of writing, it is clear that Wurtzel is able to do many things simultaneously.

She can depict a distressing lack of perspective as an important feature of the experience of depression. She illustrates that perspective has been gained at the time of writing (she is in possession of 'elasticity' or 'give'). Most complex of all, she pushes and stretches that 'elasticity' in more radical ways, paradoxically for the purpose of turning that distressing 'lack of perspective' into a productive representational strategy. That is, she represents her depression (translates it) in ways which nonetheless enable her to maintain that commitment to her own experience in her Author's Note (illustrated best by her use of the word 'unstuck' in the Afterword). In engaging with this final strategy in particular, it is apparent that Wurtzel engages with the history of American autobiography after all, and makes some distinctive interventions in it. Her 'lack of perspective' (as symptom or result of depression, turned into representational strategy) accounts for the vivid and all-encompassing preoccupation of her focus on herself; it explains why she is able to describe other experiences only insofar as they elucidate hers. One could think of her many problematic discussions of other identities in the text (39, 44, 47, 108).

Wurtzel's autobiography, then, is notable for the way it converts the features of her illness which might jeopardise her autobiographical project into key aspects of its representation. This movement between 'lack of perspective' in the three senses above is vital to her efforts to convey the interrelated 'fact' and 'why' of her depression in *Prozac Nation*. It has implications for the form and content of her text, and the ways in which autobiography serves as medium or mitigation for her experience. That movement allows Wurtzel to write an autobiography about her depression, but one that is not always intelligible, largely because of her confusion or uncertainty regarding 'the rightful place' of events and her reflections on them.

Formally, Wurtzel structures her autobiography in terms of numerous italicised sections within its chapters. As these sections initially seem to comprise closely detailed recountings of important memories (1–3, 25–27), it is tempting to think that they focus more closely on the 'fact' of depression (how it feels). But this might imply that the unitalicised text is more concerned with the 'why.' This seems unlikely, given that the bulk of the text is unitalicised, that Wurtzel has claimed the 'why' is less important than the 'fact', and further undermined by the previous discussion of how the 'why' and the 'fact' of depression are interlinked for Wurtzel in any case. While the italicised sections listed above attempt to give the impression of an unmediated memory, Wurtzel also reflects on memories in italicised sections (41), while others reflect more broadly still on cultural phenomena such as divorce (66). Close to the text's conclusion, there are sections from the position of being tentatively recovered (215, 217). It is difficult to determine why a section is in italics (or not), and what this stylistic choice is supposed to achieve. To the extent that readers may struggle to determine their logic and purpose, the italicised sections may indicate an instance where the act of representing Wurtzel's experience in writing threatens to mitigate it (focus is on Wurtzel's stylistic choices, not the experience of depression). The difficulty in determining a rationale for these italicised sections might also indicate that Wurtzel's use may be largely cosmetic, her movement between sections constituting attempts to enforce perspective (rules, putting events in their 'rightful place') at the time of writing, even as such perspective does not exist for her during the experiences described.

However, the italicised sections ultimately testify to Wurtzel's truth; her lack of perspective (employed as representational strategy) illustrates how she struggles to contain or manage her record of her experience. Nonetheless, the lack of clear rationale for the distinction between the sections illustrates that while Wurtzel often exploits her own refusal to stick to the 'rules' she makes for herself, sometimes this refusal risks failure, jeopardising her autobiographical project. Wurtzel's desire to write 'like someone who has been stuck somewhere for so long that by the time she got unstuck none of the rules mattered anymore' *could* express exhaustion, defeat, fatalism or nihilism. The puzzling, possibly unconvincing strategy of italicised sections risks suggesting that Wurtzel's desire to write like 'rock n' roll' is largely superficial, primarily a performance or posture which prioritises spectacle and a desire to shock (think of her pleasure in leaving rooms at the inappropriate moment). Or it shows that her commitment to conveying the truth of her experience of depression risks the implosion of her autobiographical project: 'I just wanted to burst' reads more alarmingly now.

Despite the questionable use of italicised sections, there are indications that by the time of writing, Wurtzel believes she has gained a sense of perspective, and that this is attendant on her tentative recovery; a corollary of her association of lack of perspective with depression (being unwell). Despite her problematic attempts to convey their relation, she does in fact differentiate between the 'fact' and 'why' of depression, for example, and attributes to them a sense of 'rightful place' – the former is more important than the latter. Considering her receipt of an invitation to go on Oprah, Wurtzel thinks

> It was too much the sort of thing I would do: Take a sad private matter, give the facts in technicolour detail to perfect strangers, and thus relieve myself of my life. And then later, I would feel cheap and empty, deeply dissatisfied, like a verbal slut, the girl who'd give it all away to just any old anybody. So maybe I wanted to reclaim my life, make it private, make it mine. Maybe, just maybe, if I lost the urge to tell all to all, maybe that would be behaviour befitting a happy person and maybe then I could be happy. (149–50)

While Wurtzel decides against going on Oprah (a decision made before she begins taking Prozac and inhabiting the more recovered position from which she writes her autobiography), she hypothesises that 'losing the urge to tell all' will increase happiness. She considers whether she can mitigate or cure her own depression by removing that urge 'to tell all to all'. Her meditation raises the question of why going on Oprah is not advisable, but writing autobiography is. Crucially, *Prozac Nation* evidences that perspective is gained; Wurtzel does *not* 'tell all to all' as her Author's Note shows; she fictionalises names and does not divulge who, in her opinion, is 'innocent' and 'guilty'. In the end, though, resisting the urge to 'tell all to all' is neither the cause nor illustration of a cure, and no claims are made about the relationship of autobiography to recovery. Wurtzel decides against going on the show while still deeply depressed, and this decision does not prompt recovery, which is in the end provisional.

Paradoxically, it is precisely in being able to use 'lack of perspective' as a representational strategy, that Wurtzel's sense of perspective gained is most fully, if not necessarily successfully, illustrated. *Prozac Nation* is the result of decisions about what, in Wurtzel's view, is the 'rightful place' for the events she represents. However, this deployment of lack of perspective as representational strategy does not mean that Wurtzel is radical in her self-representation, or that her representation is coherent.

This further clarifies Wurtzel's description of writing like 'rock n' roll'. It seems that she believes writing about depression to be revolutionary because *depression* is revolutionary, associated with disturbing norms of politeness and what should be written (depression is preferably not discussed; see Grisafi's 'fuck the stigma'). While such a stance explains Wurtzel's association in the popular imagination with rule breaking (in the sense of transgression, controversy, provocation), many of the attitudes she expresses are far from revolutionary. Often it is clear that rules, in the sense of the status quo, of dominant views, matter to Wurtzel very much (it is tempting, albeit problematic, to speculate that this too might be explained by the fact she suffers from a serious mental illness for which she cannot find an explanation, a cause). She argues that the sense of living in a world without rules is key to her generational identity and may have contributed to her depression. Following a miscarriage, she explains that it does not feel possible to tell anyone that she may have wanted a baby, and notes that people assume that she will have an abortion (171). Wurtzel considers abortion and divorce as both 'better' (in relation to individual freedoms), yet she writes

> Sometimes I wish there were a way to let people know that just because I live in a world without rules, and in a life that is lawless, doesn't mean it doesn't hurt so bad the morning after. Sometimes I think that I was forced to withdraw into depression because it was the only rightful protest I could throw in the face of a world that said it was all right for people to come and go as they please, that there were simply no real obligations left' (171–172).

Wurtzel's remarks about depression as 'protest' are controversial, as they suggest that depression is volitional. Characterising depression as 'rightful' protest serves as a caution that Wurtzel's decisions regarding the 'the rightful place' of her life's events, as achieved by a sense of perspective, should be subject to scrutiny. In her epilogue, she considers whether the prevalence of depression in her generation is explained because she and her peers live in a world where 'randomness does rule', and 'this lack of order is a debilitating, destabilising thing' (301). She ponders whether 'what has come to be placed in the category of depression is really a guardedness, a nervousness, a suspicion about intimacy, any of many perfectly natural reactions to a world that seems to be perilously lacking in the guarantees that our parents expected' (302); as examples of those 'guarantees' she references an enduring marriage, secure employment, and risk-free sex (302). Her reflections here go as far as questioning the existence of depression. They also express a resistance to postmodernism, both in terms of her desire for grand narrative (here, she wishes for a system of rules that people abide by), and in relation to her resistance to truth as relative, plural, provisional. In this discussion at least, Wurtzel wants clear, unequivocal rules to live by. But they are also *specific* rules, for a specific kind of life: a heterocentric, middle-class life narrative approximating that encompassed by Lejeune's privileged narrative (Smith and Watson's 'normative rules'). These rules come with attendant ideologies (regarding gender, race, sexuality and more) which Wurtzel does not inspect, though is she is ultimately ambivalent about whether she wants this life for herself.

Here and elsewhere, Wurtzel's disclosure of positions which may be intended to be provocative and contrarian (she desires rules and obligations) ultimately are extremely conservative (above, she evinces some regret about the fact that divorce and abortion are choices available to people). She is nostalgic and regretful about the breakdown of

the two-parent, heterosexual family, which she attributes to changes in the 1960s and the rising incidence of divorce (this is, of course, testifies to the impact of her parents' divorce upon her). Grisafi's claim that Wurtzel is applauded because she is a *woman* speaking out about depression exists awkwardly alongside the fact that Wurtzel's opinions can be particularly conservative in relation to gender (consider her depiction of the person who 'tells all to all' as a 'verbal slut'). In her Afterword she implicitly makes a connection between families headed by a single mother and the large numbers of young people prescribed Prozac for depression (317). Wurtzel is conflicted and confused about discussing gendered identity throughout *Prozac Nation*. She describes the tension she experiences between wishing to engage in a carefree manner in sexual encounters, but being unable to (141). She does not extensively describe or critique sexism in American culture. She seems unwilling or unable to recognise that she was the victim of sexual assault when she was twelve (51–52). Her sparse references to feminism are often made for the purposes of ironic self-mockery (168, 198), and suggest that she is unsure to what extent she wishes to align herself with it. By a significant margin, the writers and musicians she reveres and who constitute the epigraphs to her various chapters are male, and Wurtzel not infrequently uses the generic 'he' (such as 17, 19, 311). In the misery of her depression, Wurtzel continually turns to men for support – her oft-stated desire for 'salvation' (186) (relief from depression) seems equated with love, and is primarily figured in the form of a romantic connection (104, 186, 207).

Given her inconsistent discussions of her gendered experience, it is unsurprising that Wurtzel does not interrogate gender and sexism in relation to her own autobiographical project and its reception. Her ambivalence to claiming a feminist position also makes it difficult to read her decision to try and represent the experience of having depression as faithfully as she can as a feminist act. For example, she notes in the Afterword that after she answers questions about why she has written the book, 'the next question would almost always be, *What on earth makes a woman in her mid-twenties, thus far of no particularly outstanding accomplishment, have the audacity to write a three-hundred-page volume about her own life and nothing more, as if anyone else would actually give a shit?*' (315). Wurtzel dislikes this question because it makes her feel 'presumptuous' and she hates being accused of pride (315), but at no point does she note that these questions and accusations have much to do with her gender. Despite the pronouns above, it seems that Wurtzel thinks the issue is that she is an unremarkable and fairly privileged person who considers her life story important or interesting, not that the 'audacity' of making her story public is compounded because she is a woman. These examples suggest that she has internalised a number of sexist assumptions herself, which make for some troubling connections between gender, autobiography and depression: not being able to deploy a sense of perspective is associated with illness (because lack of perspective is a feature of depression) and with devalued female sexual behaviour (the verbal slut). This further implies that meaningful autobiographical expression is more difficult to achieve (or be recognised as such) for women, or that such expression must be achieved at the cost of delimiting agency and desire (the verbal slut must restrain her impulses). Or, given that the verbal slut expresses the most artless kind of autobiographical representation, the skill required to refrain from telling all to all is perhaps implicitly coded masculine.

Such comments and implications perhaps also explain contemporary critical reluctance to engage with Wurtzel's work. Despite Cooke's identification of 'audacity' as a key quality of some contemporary feminist life writing, for example, Wurtzel is not mentioned in her discussion of possible antecedents for the contemporary writers she examines. The confounding 'elasticity' of Wurtzel's lack of perspective as representational strategy (the dubious 'rightful place' she accords to gender and other politics in her work) explains why she does not fit comfortably with the authors and frameworks Smith and Watson use to consider her, and attempting to locate her within categories like 'feminist' or 'Generation X' seem doomed to failure. This makes Wurtzel's writing fascinating, but may explain her critical neglect. It is not easy to tell a story about what kind of a writer she is, what her position or values are. What *can* be said is that the provocative, nonconformist rock n' roll image that Wurtzel wants to claim for herself, and which has been further understood by many readers as an example of female empowerment, tells a story about her work which is partial at best.

The 'rightful place' of *Prozac Nation* in relation to traditions of American autobiography is no less difficult to quantify. Wurtzel's commitment to telling her own truth, her experience of depression '*and nothing more*' (315) explains her lack of interest in making a move familiar in many American autobiographies, that of setting herself up as a representative American, arguing that her story is applicable to others. Her autobiography's title may suggest that she does, but it was suggested by an agent,[8] and it is only in the Afterword that she considers at length how rising incidences of depression and use of Prozac might be indicative of generational or national malaise. She is arguably more keen to stress that she is exceptional (an early user of Prozac who must additionally take lithium, a 'real sicko' (303)). Wurtzel appears similarly uninterested in offering her narrative as a narrative or template of self-improvement (though in the Afterword she claims that if the book 'has any particular purpose' it is to show that 'clinical depression is a real problem' (315), to demonstrate the severity of depression and its impact on many lives (315), and that she has written the book especially for young people, so that 'somewhere along the way this dour story might give some people some hope for a better future' (319)). It is tempting to treat such remarks with caution, given claims Wurtzel makes earlier in her autobiography. For example, she reflects on the absence of '*some insight*', some uplifting wisdom such as '*the truth will set me free, and all that*' on her return flight to America after an ill-fated trip to England:

> *That's the problem with reality, that's the fallacy of therapy: It assumes that you will have a series of revelations, or even just one little one, and that these various truths will come to you and will change your life completely.* (277)

Wurtzel continues

> *But the truth is, it doesn't work that way. [. . .] But in all likelihood, you're going to keep on doing the same old things. You'll still be the same person. You'll still cling to your destructive, debilitating habits because your emotional tie to them is so strong – so much stronger than any dime-store insight you might come up with – that the stupid things you do are really the only things you've got that keep you centred and connected. They are the only things about you that make you* you' (277–278).

These remarks are contradictory, primarily because Wurtzel's claim about the difficulty of assuming reality or therapy will offer up truths is nonetheless presented as insight borne of her own experience: 'the truth is'. It is a truth arguably relevant to others, no less: 'you'. Her rejection of the notion of acquiring truths about the self through therapy or self-exploration suggests that she is not offering a conventional 'recovery' narrative, or testifying to an autobiography of/as self-improvement.[9] This is despite her text's conclusion, immediately prior to the Epilogue, with a discussion of a childhood game in which her mother would '*tell me to think of pretty things*' (293). Wurtzel concludes her discussion with itemisation of some pretty things, and then a commentary: '*Nothing that extraordinary, but when you're four years old, it's cats and dogs that make life worth living. And I kind of think it's maybe not so different now*' (294). It is tempting to think that this discussion, as with Wurtzel's claims about the 'purpose' of her text in the Afterword, are offered partly because the privileged narrative of autobiography may require them, and because otherwise, how else would Wurtzel conclude her text? After all, Wurtzel's experience justifies her claims that powerful insight has little transformative value – it is not therapy, epiphany or her commitment to live life differently which helps her recover from depression, but Prozac. The comfort Wurtzel takes in the childhood game does not represent an insight marking a crucial stage in her recovery, although it is presented, close to the close of her narrative, in the place where one might expect to find such a moment in a recovery narrative. Rather, her discussion of its value for her adult life is only made possible because she is tentatively recovered. She implicitly rejects the notion of autobiography as a vehicle via which truths of the self are discovered, for writer or reader (though of course, she presents this as a truth, *in* autobiography). It seems that she primarily understands autobiography as the medium for relaying her self and her experience, and she is less interested in examining how autobiography assists in producing both.

In *Prozac Nation*, then, Wurtzel is forced to negotiate the difficulties of telling the truth of her depression in a genre she feels sceptical towards, one whose dominant narrative may make demands (such as for an optimistic tale of self-development and recovery) that she cannot satisfy. Her refusal to make definitive statements (about her depression, about her stance in relation to various cultural debates) lends a particular charge to her identification with her father: 'He's like me, always compromising, always throwing up his hands, never quite certain of the righteousness of his cause' (66).[10] Often, Wurtzel turns this drive to compromise to effective use in her autobiography. It allows her to convey and manage the confusion and uncertainty that attends her attempts to understand her depression, and it allows her to assume and relinquish positions and stances as it suits her, to entertain contradictory attitudes. But it should be noted that she reads this drive to compromise as ultimately destructive. Her list of the qualities she shares with her father follows a description of her parents fighting over her like the women claiming ownership of a baby in 'the King Solomon story in the bible'. Wurtzel notes that her mother would sacrifice everything to keep the child [Wurtzel] intact, but she is less sure of her father: 'It would have been just like him to tiredly exclaim, *Tear the child apart*, which is what was happening anyway' (66). Wurtzel's lack of commitment to her own rules does risk breaking her own text apart. Her contradictory, undeveloped or unscrutinised attitudes illustrate how autobiography can mitigate her experience in problematic ways, and risks making her text's lack of coherence frustrating for readers

and challenging to analyse. Nonetheless, Wurtzel's relentless commitment to communicating her truth of depression necessitates drawing and redrawing of the bounds of the sovereign self as she documents her struggle in – and with – autobiography. The result, *Prozac Nation*, is a major contribution to the genre which deserves more scholarly attention.

'The skeleton of the story line': Wurtzel and Khakpour

In one of her contrarian moments, Wurtzel takes issue with Tolstoy's claim that '*all happy families are the same, but unhappy families are all unhappy in different ways*' (223). She insists that Tolstoy has the situation back-to-front: '*In any fucked-up family, whether the problem is that the mother drinks or the father beats the children or the parents want to kill each other, the skeleton of the story line is always the same. The description of what causes the pathology is the same. It's always something about not being loved enough as a child, or being neglected at some other point. Listen to any unhappy person tell his tale of woe, and it sounds like every other tale of woe*' (223). This does not, of course, prevent Wurtzel from telling her own 'tale of woe'; one additionally far from wedded to the idea that her depression has its root cause in family unhappiness. But it is true that there are, broadly speaking, a number of elements the 'skeleton' of Wurtzel's autobiography shares with Khakpour's *Sick* despite the nearly three decades that separate them. Both authors document difficulties in their childhoods and strained family relationships. New York is important in their lives. Both look primarily to men, often via romantic relationships, for support and on occasion, rescue from their circumstances and suffering, ultimately testifying perhaps to Wurtzel's claim about unhappiness stemming from a lack of love. Yet for both, their mother's acknowledgement that they are ill is a major relief and validation. Both write about their experiences with drugs. Both suffer sexual assault. Both contemplate suicide. Both write from a position of tentative recovery and are both resistant to, yet tempted by, the triumphal or optimistic 'recovery' narrative. For both, writing is vital to their sense of self.

With these similarities in mind, it is a little surprising that Wurtzel is not among a number of writers acknowledged in Khakpour's Afterword, although upon hearing of her death Khakpour tweeted 'oh god i loved her so much. Goodbye Elizabeth Wurtzel and thank you for always being you' (Jan 7 2020). Khakpour's 'thank you for being you' captures Wurtzel's fidelity to representing her self, her experiences, her truth, and carries the added implication that Wurtzel is unique; there is nobody like her. Khakpour's tribute to Wurtzel illustrates her most important legacy for subsequent autobiographers: Wurtzel's commitment to communicating (only) her own experience (her truth) gives others permission to commit exclusively to the singularity of theirs, in ways which both affirm and resist the bounds of the sovereign self privileged in Western autobiography, with ambivalent, contradictory and complex results. This commitment *can* be feminist as employed by other writers, although it cannot be clearly understood as such in Wurtzel's case.

In Khakpour's case, Wurtzel's influence may also be detected in the tolerance of irresolution, of an absence of 'why' for Khakpour's illness. Yet for Khakpour, autobiography is less something to be grappled with, resisted, or to be treated with scepticism (as it is for Wurtzel) and more a means of solace, as it is via writing her experience that

Khakpour is able to exert a limited degree of control over it. Khakpour's claim that her book is her 'personal story' does not constitute an explicit statement of its 'autobiographical occasion'; indeed, arguably there is no such statement in the text at all, which tasks readers to decide her motivations for writing. As in Wurtzel's text, this implicit claim that Khakpour's 'personal story' is important in its own right constitutes a challenge to the sovereign self privileged throughout the history of autobiography, and its truths (Khakpour is a woman of colour, an immigrant, and she identifies as queer), but Khakpour's insistence on the 'personal' nature of her text may also be due to necessity. Whereas there is relative consensus among medical professionals that Wurtzel has depression, and she writes at a time when the efficacy of Prozac has been established as a treatment, for much of her life Khakpour's documented experience of illness is compounded by the absence of a diagnosis. At the time of writing Khakpour has received a diagnosis of Lyme disease. However, she recounts a long period of suffering without knowing what is wrong, when medical professionals are dismissive of her symptoms or undecided about whether she is suffering from physical or mental illness, and during which the absence of a diagnosis contributes to her mental anguish and makes her vulnerable to individuals proffering dubious, expensive treatments. For Khakpour there is no equivalent of Prozac, no cure for Lyme disease.

Sick contains an additional Author's Note in which Khakpour says she must get 'the few certainties out of the way, the closest one can come to "facts"' (1). Khakpour's experience of illness, then, is distressing because she cannot tell an authoritative story about it. Her remark above implies that the remainder of her autobiography belongs to a category other than 'facts'. Similar to Wurtzel's prioriting of how depression feels, 'facts' are not central to Khakpour's text. Khakpour notes that for her, storytelling is 'a way to survive things'; (27); for Khakpour writing is associated with endurance, even healing, in ways which seem less attainable for, or accepted by, Wurtzel. Throughout *Sick*, the absence of a 'skeleton' (structure, certainties), for her story of illness, is something Khakpour learns to accept; at the same time, though, she embraces the possibilities of 'skeleton' that autobiography offers, the ways she can experiment with and exert control over telling her story, together with its comforts (writing autobiography cannot cure her, but it does yield pleasures and rewards).

Khakpour's statement that her text comprises her 'personal story' is contained within a brief disclaimer which contains motives similar to those in Wurtzel's Author's Note. Khakpour's disclaimer stresses that readers should not construe her text as relaying medical advice; it concludes by recommending that readers consult medical professionals before undertaking any programme or treatment. Both paratexts seem designed to foreclose legal action, with Wurtzel concerned with charges of defamation, and Khakpour concerned that she might be perceived as claiming medical authority and therefore could influence others. These opening statements establish a major difference in orientation between these texts. While Wurtzel's Author's Note establishes her primary commitment to herself (it is self-protective), Khakpour's disclaimer acknowledges an ethical relationship to her readers. Indeed, Khakpour's self-representation is much more relational (the only other person extensively realised in Wurtzel's text is her mother, to whom *Prozac Nation* is dedicated). Much of *Sick* is dedicated to exploring the multiple 'marginal identifiers' (239) Khakpour feels (that is, the elements of her identity which mark her as belonging to various groups). Khakpour's writing is informed

by understanding and engagement with concepts such as intersectionality and structural critique, while Wurtzel's is not. But Khakpour's orientation towards others and the relational is only partially explained by the different era in which she writes. Khakpour's narrative makes it clear that she suspects that her 'marginal identifiers' (239) have a key role in affecting her health and her treatment, a message that (like the permission Wurtzel gives individuals to focus on their own story) might be an encouragement to others to consider whether such a situation applies to their own lives.

Central to Khakpour's self-representation is her claim is that she has never felt comfortable in her body (5). She notes that as a child 'I thought of myself as a ghost, an essence at best who'd entered some incorrect form' and notes that as she grew older she understood this sense of estrangement from her body as '"otherness", a feature of Americanness even' (5). That Khakpour has never felt 'at home' (6) in her body raises the possibility that she has never been well; that her illness predates the symptoms that are eventually diagnosed as Lyme disease. It also, however, makes clear that Khakpour suspects her 'marginal identifiers' are linked to her illness; she relates how she may have acquired PTSD from a traumatic emigration to America from Iran aged two years old (27–28).

The absence of a clear origin narrative for her illness leads Khakpour to resist a linear narrative; it may be, too, that she recognises this as an 'incorrect form' (skeleton, perhaps) for her story of not being at home in her body. Unlike Wurtzel's problematic strategy of presenting a linear narrative disrupted by italicised sections, Khakpour's story is more radically and coherently structured according to setting, with chapters largely corresponding to important locations in Khakpour's life. This emphasis on setting nonetheless indicates that like Wurtzel, Khakpour worries away at the 'why' of her illness; she puzzles over where she received the tick bite which causes Lyme disease. Of a childhood hiking trip with her parents, she recalls their conversation about a sign warning of Lyme disease and her parents' use of the Farsi word *kaneh*, a word depicting a pest but also an insult, 'someone more than possessed by a bite, someone who has lost it' (37). Khakpour reflects that 'Of all the things that could do damage – revolution, war, poverty in a new land – why would anyone think of a *kaneh*?' (37). Of her time at university, she states that despite receiving lots of insect bites, 'what did bites mean in a time of hickeys, and even more so at a time of my friends' track marks, when the only thing it seemed possible to die of was a drug overdose, with suicide a close second? I did not think about bugs during that phase' (56). Discussing a relationship which entailed spending time in the Hamptons, another area of 'Lyme country' (59), she reflects on the strains in their relationship and (of) the affluent world it opens for her: 'why on earth could I have been thinking about a tick in all that?' (61) These reflections register a sense of contradictory bafflement: how could she have failed to heed the signs (literally, as she recalls numerous signs warning about tick bites) – and how was she supposed to know they were important? These reflections, blending self-justification and self-recrimination, make the point that had Khakpour not been suffering from the PTSD occasioned by moving from Iran with her parents, or the subsequent difficulties of adjusting to life in America, or navigating strains in her existence which have much to do with her sense of not being at 'home' in relation to her body (in terms of gender, race or class), then she might have been more troubled by the possibility of catching Lyme.

Khakpour therefore converts the absence of an origin for her illness into a generative representational strategy, as Wurtzel does with her 'lack of perspective'; in her case, one which enables scrutiny and critique of social inequalities in America. Indeed, whereas Wurtzel worries that she cannot place events 'in their rightful place', Khakpour appears more empowered by this. To a much greater extent than Wurtzel, Khakpour is explicitly reflective about, and at ease with, the task of 'translating' her experience in writing. Khakpour gains agency from the experimentation afforded by the absence of a 'the rightful place' for her life's events, via entertaining her own speculations about her illness and finding pleasure in the thematic and symbolic possibilities of her life events and her interpretations of them. The decision to eschew a linear narrative in favour of a focus on place draws attention to Khakpour's decisions in organising her autobiography. Such a structure enables Khakpour to consider the implications of acquiring Lyme under one set of circumstances or another: considering that she might have got it in upstate New York after 9/11, with a boyfriend she envies for his affluent family and whose stepmother herself has Lyme, Khakpour notes that 'It's almost too poetic, the narrative that Lyme had come to me then – perhaps the writer in me believes that it did because so many loose ends of events would be neatly tied there amid the tangles of character and plot' (59). Even then, though, she puzzles over how to interpret events: whether such an origin story appeals to her because it is aesthetically neat, because it allows her to allocate blame, because it makes her feel less alone, or because she is simply running out of explanations (59). Her story is devoid of certainties regarding her illness's cause or cure, but Khakpour can attend to its dominant themes and their impact on her life – those 'marginal identifiers' and the ways they exacerbate some of her mental illness, detract from her abilities to identify threats to her physical health, and affect the quality of the treatment she receives. She discusses how women are more likely to be treated as suffering from mental than physical illness (166), and her terror of racist treatment in hospital (128). In the face of this, one of the few sources of certainty and solace in her life is writing itself: recounting her childhood she claims that 'The only place I fit in was not quite home but what was within our home: it was the desk, the chair, the pen and paper. It was the only place I felt well' (30).

The autobiographical occasion may also be absent from Khakpour's text because the 'personal story' presented in *Sick* is not one she envisioned writing. Her epilogue refers to The Book I Sold, 'a story of triumph, of how a woman dove into the depths of addiction and illness and got well. She got herself better. She made it. The Book I Sold might even imply you can do it too. Or anyone can. Who knows.' (245). But Khakpour notes this book never came into existence because she fell ill in winter 2016. She describes her thoughts in hospital:

> I imagined myself writing, reading, fingertips at a keyboard, eyes glued to a page, dazing off within the folds of a story, remembering the lines of a poem, purple pen to pages and pages of edits. And I imagined myself further holding a book, This Book that was not The Book I Sold, holding it against my chest, if only to feel my heart beat against it. The story didn't end as I imagined so many times; in the end I would make it (250).

Sick, then, is not the optimistic recovery narrative Khakpour anticipates and is contracted to write. Her autobiography's conclusion indicates that the 'triumph' is not the process of having 'got well' or having 'got herself better'; it is the completion of 'This Book', which stands as testimony to the fragile, improved condition which enabled Khakpour to create

it. 'I made it' means both that Khakpour recovered from that particular period of illness, and that she made the book itself, transforming it from an imagined source of comfort while she lies in a hospital bed, to reality. This ending also, however, may be intended to compensate for the triumphal recovery story, one more closely aligned with Lejeune's privileged autobiographical narrative, and one that Khakpour, like Wurtzel, may feel pressure to provide. Indeed, Wurtzel's insertion of solace found in memory of a childhood game listing 'all the pretty things' may be designed to provide such a optimistic moment, functioning similarly to Khakpour's passage above.

The Book I Sold occupies a ghostlike status in relation to *Sick*. It is likely that Khakpour's *Sick*, as well as many other contemporary American autobiographies by women, is more complexly haunted by *Prozac Nation*, an autobiography in which Wurtzel resolutely writes her own (and only her own) story of illness, refusing some of the demands of autobiography (to tell a coherent, other-directed, optimistic story of self-improvement) even as her commitment to her own story implicitly mediates on behalf of others, suggesting that they can redraw the bounds of the sovereign self in committing to theirs.

Notes

1. Grisafi cites reviews of *Prozac Nation* in *Newsweek* (1994),*Publishers Weekly*, and devotes most attention to Ken Tucker's (1994) review in the *New York Times*.
2. See, for example, *Rolling Stone's* obituary of Wurtzel, which claimed that she 'is widely credited with ushering in the explosion of the first-person essay and memoir genre that marked the early years of the internet' (Dickson 2020), while in 2012 an episode of the BBC Radio 4 series One to One, with Wurtzel, advertises her as 'author of "misery memoir" *Prozac Nation*'. In her 2017 Afterword for a new edition of *Prozac Nation*, Wurtzel comes close to claiming that she invented the contemporary memoir, which she says was 'not a category' when she wrote her book (Wurtzel 2017, 330).
3. The gender politics of truth telling has been discussed at length by Gilmore (1994, 2001), but for a more general study of truth in autobiography, see Adams (1990).
4. Wurtzel herself acknowledges William Styron's autobiography about depression, *Darkness Visible* (1990) as an important precursor to her text. Styron's text was published only four years before *Prozac Nation*, although Styron was male, much older than Wurtzel, and writes about depression very differently. Abigail Cheever (2000) offers a (not entirely convincing) analysis of how depression has been represented across some twentieth century American autobiographies.
5. Gilmore's *Autobiographics* (1994) examines how emphasising the importance of the 'proper name' may further legitimise or privilege male autobiographers (81-82); however, Lejeune's claims are also problematised by writers such as Philip Roth, who gives his name to a character in his novel *Operation Shylock* (1993).
6. I am very grateful to the librarian at the Library of Congress who assisted my queries about various editions of *Prozac Nation*.
7. See Smith and Watson ([2001] 2010) for a useful discussion of the ways in which the emergence of the genre in Western culture coincided with the development of the centrality of the Enlightenment sovereign self (white, male, rational).
8. In a 1994 interview with Vice, Wurtzel describes how she originally intended the book's title to be 'I Hate Myself and Want to Die', but her agent suggested that the epilogue's title, 'Prozac Nation,' would be better.
9. Notably, Wurtzel's next autobiography, *More, Now, Again* (2004), relies much more heavily on the recovery narrative structure and the insights of therapy in its depiction of her efforts to manage drug addiction. While this book too deserves reconsideration, the fact that

Wurtzel's literary reputation still primarily rests upon *Prozac Nation* suggests that it is her struggle with, rather than acceptance of, the recovery narrative which has resulted in the more complex and valuable contribution to American autobiography.

10. In 2018 Wurtzel published an article in *The Cut* in which she reflected on her discovery in 2016 that her biological father was another man, Bob Adelman. Her article discusses Donald Wurtzel in terms closely corresponding to his depiction in *Prozac Nation*. In this article Wurtzel does not quote from or challenge anything she wrote in that text; perhaps this discovery did not change her account of her history.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributor

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