

# Foucault, Feminism and Critical Autobiographical Documentary: Self-Reinvention as Resistance in Jonathan Caouette's *Tarnation*

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## ABSTRACT

The feminist goal of social equality requires agency for the human subject to enact change within the power relations that structure our lives. A Foucauldian model of power offers multiple traversals and infinite points where struggle, resistance and liberation of the subject are possible. Through vigilant awareness, Foucauldian feminists can both upset the notion of a static and passive position as subject and actively engage in the formation of “reverse” discourses where decentered and moving identity formations emerge. I use Michel Foucault’s notion of power to show how the fragmented subject affords one with a sense of agency as one realizes the power relations that help constitute identity. I further apply these principles of Foucauldian feminist theory to explore the genre of critical autobiographical documentary film as a means for engaging within this self-reflective analysis. I look closely at one such film, Jonathan Caouette’s *Tarnation* (2003), to illustrate how one’s critical self-analysis becomes a political form of self-representation, one with great potential for social change.

## INTRODUCTION

Feminism is a political movement, one which seeks to change the power relations in the sociopolitical and personal aspects of our lives. Many feminist critiques of power share this common goal. Inequality is often understood in terms of an “us” against “them” framework, that is, with a binary model of power. While this approach may prove useful in instances of overt domination of one group over another or to raise initial awareness of inequality, it also leads to an oversimplification of the situation, a polarization of sides, an essentialism that disregards difference and a lack of methodological resources for enacting change. Michel Foucault’s notion of power challenges the binary model of power. In the Foucauldian model, power is a productive force rather than a repressive one because it passes through all people instead of being held by only a few. There is no general binary opposition between those who dominate and those who are dominated; instead, all are embedded in multiple, complex power relations. Power in this reciprocal sense is not merely a limitation but rather a means of resistance and a tool for change within a feminist agenda. Jonathan Caouette’s critical autobiographical documentary *Tarnation* (2003) explores such resistance. Using the confessional act both to deny the truths of normalizing discourses and to seek subversive identity formations, Caouette shows how power both produces and enforces self-identity and how the human subject can find within the exercise of power a site of resistance. *Tarnation* exemplifies how critical autobiography can be used to interpret and reinvent one’s identity within dynamics of ever present power relations.

### *Foucauldian Power and Identity*

Power is often understood as something people have and use to repress others. For instance, the concept of patriarchy would, in this model, view men as the holders of power at the expense of women’s. While this type of power exists in certain instances of extreme domination of one group over another, Foucault is interested in the multiple ways that power produces effects rather than represses them. In *The History of Sexuality*, he describes power as a multiplicity of processes more than a product; as a productive force rather than repressive one; as located on a level playing field rather than in a hierarchy; as something that is invented with a purpose, but lacking any clear evidence of the inventor; as a force that “passes through” institutions, practices and people; and as something coextensive with resistance, meaning it shares the same site, scope and boundaries as resistance (94-7). This definition of power increases the ways one can study, speak about and engage with the social relations that organize communal life. Although power circulates in normalizing discourses which subsequently shape one’s identity, it can also allow for one’s liberation through resistant practices. It liberates the subject from passive positions, where

strictly oppressive forces can dictate one's existence; instead of being reduced to a victim of power, one can locate a source of control from one's participatory position, whether through submission or resistance to it.

Because power's reproduction is located in particular institutional practices, there are multiple ways to engage it; every moment of participation with the world is a moment where power is being played out. In this way, one has numerous choices from which to act and resist. Because resistance is mutually located within the domain of power, there are numerous ways to disrupt its hold; the grid cannot control everything—there are too many locations to monitor. Thus power is not a grand theory, but rather multiple traversals and infinite points where struggle, resistance and liberation of the subject are possible. In *Foucault Live*, a collection of interviews, Foucault describes his analysis of power as a way to reveal the “reality of possible struggles...to produce some effects of truth which might be used for a possible battle, to be waged by those who wish to wage it, in forms yet to be found and in organizations yet to be defined” (189-91). In this way, the Foucauldian model of power offers promise for feminists seeking sociopolitical change.

The feminist philosopher Jana Sawicki believes the fragmented subject has positive implications for feminism. In *Disciplining Foucault*, she argues that if we give up our attachment to a stable sense of self and core identity, then we can engage multiple points of resistance within the acknowledgement of the discursive affects that help to constitute us (65). In other words, the Foucauldian feminist subject is able to account for the ideas and practices of the self that are contradictory to one's liberation, which in turn opens up numerous locations and tools for one to overcome those contradictions. For example, instead of claiming identity practices such as feminine forms of physical embodiment (how one must walk, talk, dress) or the dominant discourse of how a mother, wife or girlfriend are supposed to behave and participate within the institution of the family, marriage or relationship as authentic to the self, Sawicki finds the decentered subject useful in negotiating how one's identity is formed. As she sees it, a Foucauldian feminist will “stress the sheer variety of ways in which effects of male domination are produced and gendered identities constituted” (63), which leads to one's liberation from the dominating discourses that dictate one's identity. In this way, although one's identity is influenced by discourses, one is also afforded a sense of agency in realizing the power relations that constitute the subject, which leads to one's ability to understand the self, enact change within that self and resist the dictates of self-truth that discourses impose upon it.

One of the ways that self-truth is produced is through the confessional act. While we tell our secrets to the other, usually an authority figure such as a priest, doctor, teacher or parent, we believe that in freeing our desires, we liberate ourselves. Foucault believes that one's role within this procedure of power leads to a “knowledge of the subject, a knowledge not so much of his form, but of that which divides him, determines him perhaps, but above all causes him to be ignorant of himself” (*The History of Sexuality*, 70). We are encouraged to speak our truth, but this truth in turn is capable of producing effects on us; in hopes of liberation we acknowledge certain ideas of ourselves, and as the act of revelation between confessor and judge determines these ideas as true, we begin to identify with them as our truth. Self-truth gained through the confessional act is not entirely submissive because we share a mutual relationship within this procedure of power. Because power is always coextensive with resistance, we have multiple ways to participate in the production of self-knowledge as well as in the practices, attitudes and identities that it informs; we are endlessly engaged in a grid of power in the daily moments of our lives, in the habitual practices that define our work, in the personal activities that make up our sense of self. As our participation is increased, struggle may be seen as a positive force, one that makes, as Foucault says, “everything dangerous” giving us infinite possibilities for resistance. The focus then shifts, from changing the other, the outside, the patriarchy “out there” to changing the self, the inside, the patriarchy “in here.” Critical awareness enables such transformation.

### *Reinventing the Self in Theory and Practice*

Foucault's analysis of power in relation to the feminist subject reveals the urgent need for critical self-awareness so that the practices of our lives can become processes by which we reinvent ourselves. We are neither entirely free of the forces of power and the discourses they function through, nor are our lives totally subjugated by them, and it is in this recognition that we can locate processes of liberation. In *Yearning: race, gender, and cultural politics*, bell hooks describes this need:

Yearning is the word that best describes a common psychological state shared by many of us, cutting across boundaries of race, class, gender, and sexual practice. Specifically, in relation to the postmodernist deconstruction of “master” narratives, the yearning that wells in the hearts and minds of those whom such narratives have silenced is the longing for critical voice (27).

The critical investigation of how power and knowledge function in master narratives to silence, oppress, and shape individuals leads to a liberating position, where freedom lies in the ability to speak, to resist, to reshape, or as

John Rajchman in *Michel Foucault: The Freedom of Philosophy* puts it, to make “a constant attempt at self-disengagement and self-invention” (38). There is evidence that Foucault also views critical thought as necessary for the political liberation of the individual. In a 1981 interview, Foucault acknowledges the possibility for personal transformation in criticism:

Criticism is a matter of flushing out...thought and trying to change it: to show that things are not as self-evident as one believed, to see that what is accepted as self-evident will no longer be accepted as such. Practicing criticism is a matter of making facile gesture difficult. In these circumstances, criticism (and radical criticism) is absolutely indispensable for any transformation...as soon as one can no longer think things as one formerly thought them, transformation becomes both very urgent, very difficult, and quite possible (*Politics, Philosophy, Culture*, 155).

To hold onto the idea that one is autonomous and authentic in one's self-identity is to live in self-delusion and play the role that power marks for one. Yet to completely give up a sense of self-determination leaves one in a state of anxiety and apathy. This tension and unease catapults one into a process of reinventing both the self and its relationship to the other. One is the product of the discourses that shape one as a subject, but the awareness of one's docile state is precisely why one is able to resist complete submission to the external power forces that mark one's interiority. In this recognition, one is able to act, to move, to pass through the discourses that shape one's identity as one resists definitions and their static positions while engaged in active creation of one's self and world. Ultimately then, recognition and liberation are simultaneous with one another.

These critical spaces of theory and practice in everyday life are sites of constant struggle and agitation because self-reinvention is not an end product as much as a continual engagement within the processes of liberation. John Rajchman's comments that Foucault's freedom is “not liberation, a process with an end. It is not liberty, a possession of each individual person. It is the motor and principle of his skepticism: the endless questioning of constituted experience” (*Michel Foucault: The Freedom of Philosophy*, 7). After Foucault, the work of this endless questioning or self-reinvention is an ongoing process. Power relations, the discourses they function through, and the truths they produce must be recognized as both omnipresent and coextensive with resistance. Through vigilant awareness, Foucauldian feminists can both upset the notion of a static and passive position as subject and actively engage in the formation of “reverse” discourses where decentered and moving identity formations emerge. It is within these fluctuating versions of identities that one both secures a sense of self worthy of respect and recognition and opens up an understanding of that self not as contained and independent, but rather in constant relation with others within the eternally fluctuating and impermanent reality that makes up the world. With these principles of Foucauldian feminist theory in mind, it is useful to consider an actual method one might employ them in. I believe that critical autobiographical documentary is one of these methods.

#### *Jonathan Caouette's Tarnation as a Project of Resistance*

As a genre, critical autobiographical documentary film searches for “truth”—for an understanding of the self that is both resistant to any singular, stable or unified essence, yet whole in its “ceaselessly modified function.” It denies any notion of an autonomous sense of self at the same time that it establishes one's significance as a whole person. Its text is a tool for self-reflexive analysis and agency as it critically investigates the many perspectives and circumstances that lead to one's understanding of self. This self-criticism consists of telling and listening to stories as well as giving and recording testimonies, which lends itself to active participation in determining what constitutes one's self-truth. This search is not so much about discovering the true story (although it may start out this way) as it is about pursuing numerous angles, revealing the many gaps, and, ultimately, locating liberation in a reinvention of the self within fluctuating reverse discourses that simultaneously disrupt existing notions of dominant and normalizing ones. Jonathan Caouette's *Tarnation* (2003) is an example of this work. As Caouette disengages from self-evident truths, pursues a critical investigation of how power constitutes his identity and engages in processes of self-analysis, he pursues self-reinvention as a project of resistance. In *Feminisms and the Self; The Web of Identity*, Morwenna Griffiths argues that critical autobiography “makes use of individual experience, theory, and a process of reflection and re-thinking, which includes attention to politically situated perspectives” (70). Through this process, traditional ways of subject-centered knowing are denied validity as power relations are acknowledged in the production of truth, and, at the same time, the subject is shown to participate in one's identity formation through the critical analysis of the many ways one is constituted.

The work of *Tarnation* began well before Caouette developed his idea for the film. From the time he was eleven, Caouette used a camera to record both the events of his life and his performances of fictitious ones. Growing up within tumultuous and uncertain circumstances including not knowing his father, having a mentally

disabled mother, living in abusive foster homes, and subsequently struggling with psychological and emotional disorders, he learned to both protect and invent himself from behind the camera lens. *Tarnation* is a critical collage that draws on decades of this home-video footage to tell the story of Caouette's tortured life as well as his mother's devastating experiences in the mental health system. His editing techniques, which suggest a struggle to understand as well as resistance to any one understanding, are an example of how the film challenges dominant identity discourses. The use of frantic cross-cutting, rapid repetitions, progressive multiplications of photographs and distorted layers of audio recordings produce an over-stimulating representation of his life experiences.

Juxtaposed to the forcefulness of these layered sights and sounds, a simple written narrative flashes calmly across the screen. These printed messages tell the usual story, "Once upon a time in a small Texas town in the early 1950s a good woman met a good man. Rosemary and Adolph got married. They had a beautiful daughter, Renee. Everything in their lives was bright, happy and promising." These distinct devices, written text and multi-layered collage, situate viewers within the hold of a distorted and deferred discourse on the one hand and a conventional and straightforward narrative on the other. Viewers perhaps believe the written word will direct them towards the truth, but the accompanying images and sounds will not allow for any respite to gather it.

These methods visually embody the struggle necessary for one to interpret and reinvent identity within the dynamics of Foucauldian power relations—it is not a straightforward and complete sort of project in the same way that his collage technique is not linear or total in its narrative. Instead, there is an ongoing effort to interpret and analyze the multiple and overlapping conditions that constitute one's sense of self. His editing techniques also embody a form of resistance to any one self-representation, which is also an act of resistance to power's constraining effect of self-truth. In these ways, his use of collage reflects the role of power relations in identity formation and provides another way to look at life in terms of this model—one can begin to understand how power produces effects on one if one considers the self as a collage of fragmented, multiple and incomplete processes.

Another way Caouette resists a passively constituted identity within power relations is through his use of performance, especially those instances where he presents himself in a variety of characters who testify or confess to the camera who they are or what they have done. This is a direct link back to the idea of power. Recall Foucault's critique of the confessional act as a means through which power produces and enforces self-truth. Because one freely confesses to another, an authority figure who as expert judges and deems the worth of those truths, the confessional act works to situate one in a submissive and subjugated position at the same time that it enforces the idea of an authentic subject that possesses self-truth. Foucault claims that what began with the Christian practice of penance spread into more and more areas of life, including relationships within families, medicine and education. He also notes that autobiography is an extension of this power (*The History of Sexuality*, 63). If the confessional act and its method of autobiography are means of power in the production of "truth," then Caouette's work can be seen as merely another instance where one is deceived into believing that one is capable of creating the self. However, *Tarnation* challenges both the idea of a cohesive self with unique self-truths as well as the significance of the confessional act to reveal these self-truths by manipulating the very tools that subjugate him, showing how power is indeed coextensive with resistance. Caouette's confessional performances are scattered throughout the film. At age eleven he plays the character Hillary Chapman Laura Low, a woman who kills the man who is physically abusing her; in another testimony he plays the role of Cheryl, a recovered addict; in a third testimony he plays a man who needs to make some resolutions about his life. While his story unfolds, he consistently marks its autobiographical elements with performances that complicate any complete revelation of self-truth. One's traditional view of autobiography holds that it should reveal the truth about the person; however, Caouette's use of performance suggests that his interest lies more in resisting self-truth than establishing it. In using multiple performances, characters and masked representations of his identity, he demonstrates how the subjugating practice that works to produce identity can be manipulated to resist that identity.

While Caouette's editing and use of performance suggest that he is not interested in pinning down any fixed and certain understanding of his identity, he also does not disregard the need for a sense of self that is whole. After he exposes the fragmented condition of his self-knowledge through his confessional performances, in the final scene he confesses his own hopes, fears and how he feels about his mother. This evolution from performance confessionals to an authentic one shows how in Jonathan's resistance to a fixed identity, he is able to claim one. Because his final confession is self-representative, Caouette demonstrates that in disengaging from one's fixed interpretations of identity, one gains the agency to reinvent the self. In a different way, but with the same consequences, Caouette acknowledges the need for self-determination and truth in one's life in his choice to frame the narrative with a type of normative ethics that Renee reads in both the opening and closing sequences of the film. These voiceovers echo Max Ehrmann's "Desiderata" (1952), and their ideals establish a sense of self that is whole and unified in its ethical standard. In the first sequence, following a frame of Renee singing "this little light of mine, I'm going to let it shine," in voiceover she tells us, "Speak your truth quietly and clearly; and listen to others, even the dull and

ignorant, they too have their story....Be yourself.” Mirroring this opening sequence, Caouette ends the film with a continuation of these ethical guidelines. Once again Renee tells us:

You are a child of the universe, no less than the trees and the stars; you have a right to be here. And whether or not it is clear to you, no doubt the universe is unfolding as it should. Therefore, be at peace with God, whatever you conceive him to be, and whatever your labors and aspirations, in the noisy confusion of life keep peace with your soul. With all its sham, drudgery and broken dreams, it is still a beautiful world.

Caouette takes his fragmented representation of identity and places it on a moving foundation of self-truth. In other words, the basis for his self-understanding may shift and evolve, but there is a foundation from which he determines his sense of self and course of action in the world. While he is critical of how power relations affect identity discourses, he also reclaims a sense of identity as a means of resistance within those same power relations. This is also evident in his intimate and passionate portrayal of his family. It is clear that he regards every one of them as special and significant people who deserve to be heard because they have an important story to tell and a self-truth to share. Through his analytical investigation of his family’s circumstances, practices and roles, he disengages from power relations, interprets their role in his self-identity and reinvents his subjectivity through his understanding of and participation within those relations.

## CONCLUSION

In taking a close look at *Tarnation*, the method of critical autobiography proves useful for the application of Foucauldian feminist principles. It suggests that if one is critically engaged within the power relations that shape one’s identity, then it is possible for one to disengage and reinvent the self within one’s resistance to those power relations. In other words, awareness and liberation are simultaneous. This model of self-reinvention is one way to approach the feminist goal of changing power relations—because power is behind every door and in every moment, there are more instances and possibilities to effect change, and because power produces one’s sense of self-truth, the possibility for resistance lies within the subject. However, it is not a pretty picture or finished project that one should expect. *Tarnation*’s techniques of editing and confessional performances suggest the need for different and multiple perspectives on life in order to resist one’s subjugation into a fixed identity. That is, collage more closely represents how power and knowledge form our understanding of the self and suggests a new way to look at life in terms of power. Fragmented, multiple, incomplete and everywhere, the role of power in the making of knowledge ruptures our sense of interiority, but we are whole in our self-analysis of this process. In making self-identity and the life that informs it a continual project of resistance, one can claim one’s identity as a site of freedom where, as Foucault says, “the work of deep transformation can be carried out in a free atmosphere, one constantly agitated by permanent criticism” (*Politics, Philosophy, Culture*, 155). In this way, critical self-analysis becomes a political form of self-representation, one with great potential for social change.

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