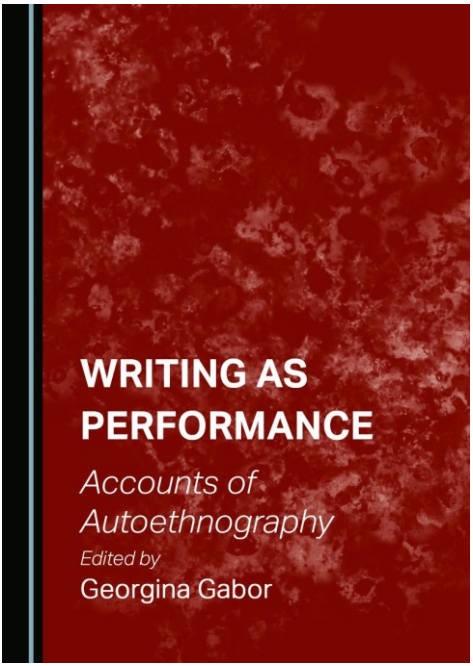
Writing as Performance*:*

Accounts of Autoethnography

Edited by

Georgina Gabor



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Writing as Performance: Accounts of Autoethnography

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THE LEGAL AND THE HUMAN: SPOTLIGHTING SOCIAL ISSUES THROUGH MEMOIRIST WRITING

LANE IGOUDIN

> A word sometimes is a turning point. But which word?
>
> How did Marianna communicate her growing acceptance of us as her parents, the dissolution of her bond with Señora Teresa? What cries did Gaby use to convey her joy or distress? What exactly did Jenna say at the visit? How did I respond?
>
> Memory keeps the overall content of what was said, the reactions it elicited, the actions it led to, though rarely holds the exact words. A general awareness lives on many years later, but not the baby steps that led up to the milestones. It helps that I kept a diary, saved the faxes, the emails, the paperwork – something more tangible than memories to rely on, if only to keep them locked up in the years that followed.
>
> My memories of those days are like faded frescos, slowly coming into focus, emerging in their full drama only to dissolve back into the discolored plaster, and phase out into a long dissonance. Some images are etched with the precision of three-dimensional grooves; others uncertain, the attribution of words or actions wavering. A dissonance that keeps me trawling the murky waters of time.
>
> An excerpt from my memoir *A Family, Maybe* (Igoudin 2022), deleted from the final draft

Ethnography, a scientific method of inquiry, is commonly understood as two-fold: "a descriptive study of a particular human society, or the process of making such a study" (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2020). An ethnographer attempts to uncover deeper meaning through the description of data obtained from research subjects, and through reflection interpreting it. In the study of language and literature, including creative writing, an

ethnographic inquiry describes some stable features of language practices, and the relationships between these features and their social context (Blommaert, 2015, 2).

According to the sociologist Jack Mezirow, however, ethnographic observations and conclusions are never neutral, but are conducted through the lens of the researcher's meaning perspectives: a set of distinctive principles, which vary according to the researcher's stages of moral, ethical, and ego development, as well as their capacity for reflective judgment (Mezirow, 1990, 2). Uncovering meaning perspectives can reveal biases, such as behaviorist, feminist, Freudian, Marxist, neo-conservative, or positivist, that influence how the ethnographer chooses to depict and interpret observed language practices.

Reflection, including self-reflection, becomes critical, when it allows us to "elaborate, further differentiate, and reinforce our long-established frames of reference or to create new meaning schemes" (Mezirow, 1990, 2). These frames and schemes through which we make sense of the world include values, ideals, feelings, moral decisions, and fundamental worldview concepts, e.g., autonomy, commitment, democracy, freedom, justice, love, and labor (Mezirow, 1990, 3).

In an autoethnographic study, an ethnographer utilizes self-reflection to observe their transformation through the act of the study of their own experience, including the transformation of their meaning perspectives.

The subject of this study is *A Family, Maybe: Two Dads, Two Babies, and the Court Cases That Brought Us Together* (Igoudin 2022) – a memoir written by the present researcher, who is a trained linguist and a writing instructor. The memoir itself is ethnographic, describing, qualitatively and reflectively, a specific sociocultural phenomenon – the formation of a gay adoptive family in the US in the early 2000s set against the sociopolitical context of the time. The present book chapter is autoethnographic in nature, attempting to reveal the writer's meaning perspectives as well as dialogic relationships between the writer as a participant in a social process (public adoption) and the process itself.

To add another layer of complexity to the study, *A Family, Maybe* is not simply a text narrating a personal experience but a literary work, striving to match Vivian Gornick's definition of a literary memoir as "a work of sustained narrative prose controlled by an idea of the self under obligation to lift from the raw material of life a tale that will shape experience,

transform event, deliver wisdom" (2001, 91). As such, it is affected by the demands and conventions of the genre in the expectations of structure, pathos, tension, and the overall aesthetic enjoyment.

So in a way, this chapter is a memoir of a memoir. It will first provide an overview of the story at the center of *A Family, Maybe*, then recount manuscript development and analyze the writer's meaning perspectives as well as the formation of critical dialogical relationships that emerge during the writing process between the writer and the social context of the events depicted in the memoir.

Summary of the factual events

My memoir tells the story of a double adoption from the Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) foster care system – a three-year process undertaken by my partner Jonathan and me in 2005–2008. Our intention was to become parents, but rather than have children of our own through surrogacy, we wanted to take in a couple of children from the community where we live who needed a home. Fostering to adopt was a way to gain access to a large pool of children in the DCFS system.

We took in to foster the one-year-old Marianna, and later Gabriella, her newborn half-sister, who shared the same mother, Jenna (not her real name). The reason the process took so long, and was fraught with enough courtroom drama to fill *A Family, Maybe*'s 300-plus pages, is that Jenna and the father of one of the children tried to reclaim their kids and were assisted in their reunification efforts by a somewhat lenient judge. In the end, neither birth parent was able to comply with the reunification plans set forth by the Children's Court, and we were able to proceed with the kids' adoption event.

Structuring the memoir: Challenges and complexities

As mentioned in the deleted excerpt that opens this paper, I preserved a mass of materials documenting our topsy-turvy fostering and adoption process. But I could not bring myself to write about it. It felt too raw, so close in time as to still hurt emotionally.

I cautiously began to jot down the first sketches of the memoir in the summer of 2012, almost four years after the ending of the adoption process.

Teaching full time and raising two kids, I could focus on writing *A Family, Maybe* only during the summer and winter breaks of 2012–2016.

A number of important questions emerged early on in developing the memoir structure:

- Who is this story about? Bookended by Marianna's placement and the kids' adoptions, the story revolves around the court process involving the birth parents and the children, not Jon and me. This is our story, and yet we are largely absent from most of its formative events.

- A lot happened to us as a family during the three-year span of the process besides the adoption itself – for example, my career change. What should and should not be included?

- How does the reader learn what brought us into the process itself, or to use Jonathan's words, a recurrent theme throughout the book, "How did we end up here?" And, from a larger perspective, how does the reader learn about our widely different racial, cultural, and religious backgrounds that contributed to us becoming parents?

- A successful memoir is a work of literature, not a diary. It has to be entertaining enough to keep the reader engaged. How can the story line be structured in a way that makes it a truly engaging read?

- How can seemingly uneventful, mundane details of raising children and of their deepening relationship with us be brought into the memoir without making it boring or overly sentimental?

- The formation of our family was the product of a specific time and place: possible in California, yet impossible in many other US states, and even in California itself just a few years earlier. How does our adoption saga relate to the larger political context within which it was unfolding – the fight for equal civil rights for the gay community and gay families?

- Never a passive observer in the process, I questioned and critically assessed the very institutions we, gay adoptive parents, were so eager to access. In what ways, then, can my memoir be transformed from an account of a personal journey into an exploration of larger social issues?

- Responding to the issues outlined above, several chronological story lines emerged while I was drafting and organizing parts of the story:
    - our foster/adoption process timeline
    - a history and explanation of foster/adoption policies in the US
    - the timeline of political events shaping the context of our family formation
    - Jonathan and my backgrounds, and how they led us to parenting

What event could crystallize our story's complexity, explain our predicament, I wondered? Eventually, I settled on the social worker's delivery of the newborn Gaby to our house as the starting point for the story. Titled "Curbside Delivery," the opening chapter is about one third of the way into the story timeline, providing an opportunity both to continue chronologically forward, but also to recount the placement of Gaby's sister in our home nine months earlier, as well as offering glimpses of our backgrounds to answer the "How did we end up here?" question.

By mid-2016, I had stitched together a cohesive suite of chapters, chronicling our journey, opening with "Curbside Delivery," and reaching roughly 115,000 words, not counting the bibliography.

After cutting out or minimizing less important sidelines and contemplative, uneventful parts, like the epigraph to this paper, while keeping the timeline unchanged, the manuscript eventually shrank to the current 77,000 words, including bibliography. New parts suggested by external reviewers were also added in 2019–2022, such as a historical overview of child welfare policies in the US with a specific focus on adoptive and gay families, the extension of the story's end through our legal marriage in 2008, and an epilogue that summarizes the 2009–2022 political developments concerning gay rights and gay families, in some of which we participated directly.

The memoir was bought by a press in the fall of 2019 and received two positive reviews from professional reviewers, as well as enthusiastic recommendations from the head of the Family Equality Council – the nation's primary advocacy organization for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) families – and a DCFS administrator.

In the fall of 2020, in the midst of the pandemic, *A Family, Maybe* was dropped from the publication list for reasons beyond my control. At present, it is under consideration with another press.

Lane in dialogue with Lane

> Each time I revisited my work and revised, I found that I could look at the world about which I was writing a little bit differently, and found myself digging more deeply into myself, and often discovering ideas and insights I had not previously considered – or maybe, in fact, dared to consider – in previous drafts. (Gutkind, 2020, 42)

Emotional distance is a challenge in writing a memoir. I felt the need to write a narrative that would be both a personal journey and a piece of social criticism exactly because everything about our personal experience of making a family was a social experience situated fully within a public adoption system, and consequently watched, shaped, and controlled by it. But first I had to separate myself from the experience in order to be able to narrate it and evaluate it, and it took time to develop the detachment necessary to do so; as Vivian Gornick writes, "without detachment, there can be no story; description and response, yes, but no story" (2001, 12).

One marked change in the manuscript edits and revisions has been the transformation of the tone of the narrative itself. The further away from the actual events I got, the more the tone changed from emotionally raw and immediate to more analytical and emotionally anesthetized.

Anger, resentment, pain, hope, elation, or exuberance faded (though not entirely) to bring into a sharper relief the story line events, engaging the reader with the characters' emotions indirectly, as in "show, do not tell." In the meantime, the amount of research needed to explain the events, stances, and actions in the story – relevant sources from social studies scholarship and local, state, and federal government publications – grew, also tilting the balance from the subjective to the objective.

Through every rewrite, the Lane writing and narrating the memoir has been moving further away from the Lane who lived through the process. What I felt about the story events and participants in, say, 2018 was often not what I felt in 2008. As an example, my attitude toward Jenna changed drastically from anger and resentment for the pain and trauma I felt she was inflicting on her children and me by insisting on claiming them, to a deeper understanding of her parental attachment to her children – even more so as

I was developing my own in the years of raising them – and a deepening of my compassion toward her over her own traumas and losses. I cut, reduced, or rewrote many passages in the earlier drafts which contained my comments on Jenna's behavior, or attempts to explain it.

Memoir as a spotlight on larger social issues

I wrote *A Family, Maybe* with two purposes in mind. First, I wanted to document a specific social phenomenon set in a particular place and time – the formation of an intersectional, multiracial gay adoptive family during the rise of the first wave of gay families in the US in the early 2000s. Our family saga depicted in the memoir was inextricably tied to the fight for LGBT rights, during which gay families were moving out of the underground and into the national spotlight, and ultimately, toward social acceptance.

Much has changed since then. Building an adoptive gay family today may still be fraught with the same emotional uncertainties we experienced fifteen years ago, but it is much less of a political act. To put it in perspective, during our entire fostering and adoption process, my partner and I were denied legal marriage. In the eyes of both federal and state law, we were two unmarried adults raising two related children. Moreover, as gay men, we were expressly prohibited from adopting children by many US states, and had we done so elsewhere, we would have been in danger of having our parental rights removed or abridged upon crossing a state line.

The book's secondary purpose was to offer a glimpse into the world of child welfare – in particular, into the workings of juvenile dependency courts. Not much is written about this for general audiences, in part, because these courts are generally closed to public, yet they make crucial decisions, shaping the lives of hundreds of thousands of children in the United States and their families – natural and adoptive.

Besides the Children's Court system itself, *A Family, Maybe* also sought to spotlight the inner processes within the single largest foster care system in the country – run by Los Angeles County DCFS – and the many conflictual agendas that affect children in its care.

Pursuing this second goal, I went beyond simply documenting our adoption saga, engaging in a dialogical, critical relationship with the policies and institutions that govern the child welfare system. I did it from the meaning perspective of an altruistic adoptive parent, but also of a gay

man, traditionally an outsider to the child welfare system. The system was, after all, designed to serve the needs of heterosexual families. Gay men only began to appear in this public space as prospective parents at about the time we entered the process. Thus, I questioned the public adoption system, attempting to construct and possibly reform its meaning, from markedly liberal, progressive, and queer perspectives.

A drama of class and ideologies

As I discovered through my research, many American child welfare policies stem from the very first adoption statute introduced in 1851 in Massachusetts. It established several legal views governing the policies concerning parentless children to this day.

First, it set the precedent for treating child adoptions as a state rather than a federal prerogative. Secondly, it left the decision-making – fair, objective, impartial, or otherwise – to the court system rather than social services or other institutions. Finally, in the court, the child is essentially treated as a type of property that can be detained, disposed of, reunified with its legitimate owner – the birth parents who claim it – or passed on to an adoptive home should those efforts fail (Adam Pertman, 2000).

In my memoir, I contrasted these lofty visions with the reality of foster/adoptive parenting.

> A child's life can never be put on hold. While our kids' legal process drags on in the court month after month, and the children spend two to four out of 168 hours a week with their biological parents, they are growing up, transforming, and maturing – without them. The reunification model is predicated on the vision of a future family, of biological parents – at least, one of them – with their biological children. It is a grand, lofty, logical vision, but ultimately it is just that – a vision. The caretaking and the child's growth occur in the unstoppable present. In legal terms, Jonathan and I do not exist. But in real life, we are Marianna and Gaby's lifeline to the world. We are the ones accountable for them twenty-four seven, without the rights, but with all the responsibilities.

In my observation, this last, property-based assumption set the basis for the supremacy of family preservation over the child's best interests which could in real life lead to contradictory policies towards the birth parents.

> Jenna is protected by two sets of legal rights. As a birth mother, she is given the opportunity to reunite with her daughter – that is, to complete the ABCs ordered by the court – and to assume her parental responsibilities.
>
> But as a foster child herself, Jenna has to be assisted in her reunification efforts by DCFS and her foster parents. "My staff," as she calls them – as in "you can arrange the next visit with my staff" – is obligated to schedule and deliver this underage parent to all her appointments. If she does not get along with her foster family and has to be moved, DCFS must restart all these efforts from zero.
>
> How can the same person be viewed as a potentially competent, responsible parent, and, simultaneously, as a dependent, under the care of adults, who support all her actions?

I began to see how child welfare policies in California represent multiple social ideologies, at times in conflict – for example, a progressive, compassionate belief in the reunification of a biological family, benefiting, rather than penalizing, the birth parents unable to take care of their children vs. another progressive belief that gay men deserve the right to raise children, and thus to adopt. In our case, both ideologies advanced competing claims of ownership over the children under our care.

I repeatedly noted the downsides for the preference for birth family preservation over adoption, its impact on overburdened, cash-strapped social services and the emotional and developmental toll on the children themselves.

Central to the problem with the child welfare system and the foster-adoptive process was also the ambivalence about the exact place and status of foster-adoptive parents – what I called "the tension between the legal and the human."

> Are we foster, or are we adoptive? Are we here simply to serve the birth parents' needs and take care of the children as state-paid nannies, or are we in it to grow our own family?
>
> How attached should we be to the kids we raise? Were we expected to love Marianna less while she was under reunification and more now that she is available for adoption? Conversely, are we supposed to be less attached to Gaby, still under reunification with her birth parents, but be ready to crank it up a notch if it falls through?

> This whole premise is nonsense. We love Marianna and Gaby the same way we always have and always will. The parent's heart does not change simply because a kid's legal status is amended in a courtroom twenty miles away.

Soon the salient role of class began to reveal itself in various situations. Entering the process, I noticed a particular friendliness extended to us by social workers at adoption fairs, where the county brings out sibling sets that are hard to place. There, "Jon and I felt valued, a hot commodity – a double-income-no-kids (yet) gay couple with a large house and an approved home study."

Immediately after Gaby's birth, DCFS, aware of Jenna's unstable behavior, called a meeting with Jenna, her foster mother, and us, where it imposed on Jenna its plan to improve her visit access to Gaby, while continuing to keep her separate from the child. Silent throughout the meeting, I could not help noticing the glaring class differential between Jenna and the adults around the table, judging what was best for Jenna.

> In this windowless office, the middle class, who have worked hard to rise in this harsh society, is staring down at *les misérables*, the dispossessed. Our needs have brought us into this otherwise unlikely contact. They have something that we don't – that is, the children – and, in this case, it is something they cannot have.

Further on in the book I expand on this theme, connecting Jenna's lack of agency to her low socioeconomic status.

> Whatever happens to Jenna and her children, the decisions about what is best for them are made and will be made by the professionals – the Children's Court judge, the court-appointed attorneys, and her caretaker, the DCFS. Jenna is powerless because she is too poor. The state – Jenna's legal parent – protects her from slipping into the underworld, getting hooked on drugs, possibly dying, contracts professional staff to serve her needs, yet in return, limits her life choices, including where and how to parent her child.

Conclusions

Interweaving personal testimony and social observation, a memoir can provide the space for both ethnographic and autoethnographic inquiries. In my adoptive parent memoir *A Family Maybe*, I acted out multiple roles as a narrator, a social critic, an activist, an ethnographer, and so on. The resulting manuscript became an attempt to document the formation of a new type of

a family, and also to expose larger social issues, such as systemic dysfunctions in the US foster care and juvenile dependency court systems.

Analyzing the memoir and the memoir development experience from a secondary, autoethnographic standpoint in this chapter brought to light multiple meaning perspectives (liberal, queer, social reformist, and so on) affecting the narrator's participation in the story events. It also exposed critical dialogical relationships forming between a narrated personal experience and its social context, relationships that can further the study of class, gender roles, and social policies in a society at large.

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