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‘Confessions of a MILF (I chose being an artist over being a wife)’.

Love and relationships in Viv Albertine’s memoirs.

Abstract

The memoirs of (post-) punk musician Viv Albertine address the issue of choice or lack thereof in romantic and family relationships. They depict a world in which choice of romantic partners appears normal if often unsuccessful, whereas choice within family relationships is restricted. It is self-evident that one cannot choose one’s blood relatives. However, amplified by Albertine’s scepticism towards any social relationships, her two memoirs represent ‘negative choice’ (Eva Illouz) in heterosexual romantic relationships and the complex ways in which negative choice can change family dynamics. In her memoirs, Albertine presents loneliness as the opposite of love which aligns with her model of choice, as it is preferable to live a lonely life over being bound up in love relationships, romantic or familial, which are harmful to one’s wellbeing. This article demonstrates how the ethos of early punk is translated into an uncompromising process of life writing which presents itself as faithfulness towards the individual’s core need for self-realisation and self-expression against the backdrop of failing romantic and familial relationships, severe physical and mental health problems, a self-diagnosis of autism and a patriarchal society.

Introduction

In the song ‘Confessions of a MILF’ from her solo album *The Vermillion Border*, Viv Albertine sings about the lyrical self’s seemingly perfect but loveless middle-class home. According to the lyrics, romantic love is a scam. Its purpose is to subject women to endless domestic chores and to stifle their ambitions. Instead of serving her ‘man’ as a ‘maid’, the voice asserts alluding to Virginia Woolf: ‘Maid needs a muse and a room of her own.’ However, her choice to pursue her art means that she is threatened with loneliness: ‘I chose being an artist over being a wife, now I am going to lead a very lonely life.’ (Albertine 2012)

Albertine is best known for her contribution to the all-female punk band The Slits (1976 – 1982) which she joined in 1977, having been in the inner circle of London’s punk scene around The Clash and Sex Pistols already. She had started a band of her own, The Flowers of Romance with Sid Vicious, which practised extensively but never performed live or recorded any material. Having left The Slits, Albertine trained as a film and TV director. She worked for the BBC and BFI. She co-wrote and directed the 1991 short film *Coping with Cupid* which addresses romantic love and loneliness. It is described on the BFI’s YouTube channel as a ‘loopy’ film in which ‘[t]hree blonde extra-terrestrial investigators have just 48 hours to find love on Earth whilst trying to avoid the deadly “loneliness virus”’ (BFI 2012). After a period of (failed) IVF treatments, pregnancy, and ill health, Albertine returned to creative expression in the early 2000s as a potter and then as singer-songwriter performing at open-mic events. She had her first solo gigs in 2009 and released an EP entitled ‘Flesh’ in 2010.

Albertine published her first memoir in 2014. Its title *Clothes Clothes Clothes Music Music Music Boys Boys Boys* is inspired by Albertine’s mother chiding her teenage daughter. This book covers the author’s childhood, youth and punk years, which the title implies, but also her marriage, ill health and divorce. The second memoir, *To Throw Away Unopened*, was published in 2018. The title refers to a note Albertine’s mother left with a bag of personal papers. The book covers the last years and death of the author’s mother, Albertine’s reading of her parents’ divorce diaries, and her fraught relationship with her sister Pascale.

The first half of the first book stands in context of female punk and post-punk musicians’ biographies such as Tracey Thorn’s *Bedsit Disco Queen* (2013), Cosey Fanny Tutti’s *Art Sex Music* (2017) and Jordan Mooney’s *Defying Gravity* (2019). The second book addresses the death of Albertine’s mother, its traumatic circumstances, and the author’s reflection on awkward and broken family relationships in a shockingly direct way which owes credit to young Albertine’s formative years in punk but surpasses many other post-punk biographies by disclosing more intimate biographical detail pertaining to a longer time span.

Choosing from this rich material, this article addresses the issue of choice or lack thereof in romantic and family relationships as explored in Albertine’s memoirs. Broadly speaking, Albertine describes a world in which choice of romantic partners appears normal if often unsuccessful, whereas choice within family relationships is restricted. It is self-evident that one cannot choose

one's blood relatives. However, amplified by Albertine's uncompromising attitude, in particular her radically questioning stance towards any social relationships and her fierce opposition to some traditionally female role expectations, her two memoirs represent negative choice in heterosexual romantic relationships and the complex ways in which negative choice can change family dynamics. The memoirs develop a notion that Albertine's strength lies in the courage to choose nothingness, the unknown, if life presents her with a choice between a bad relationship and no relationship. This pertains to romantic partners and crucially also to family members. In a similar vein, Albertine presents loneliness as the opposite of love which aligns with her model of choice, as it is preferable to live a 'very lonely life' (Albertine 2012) over being bound up in love relationships, romantic or familial, which are harmful to one's wellbeing.

The engagement with Albertine's memoirs in the article is in the first instance led by an inductive methodology utilized in Critical Love Studies, thus avoiding judgement against normative love theories (Gratzke 2017). It follows the notion that contemporary feminist life-writing has opened up spaces for 'ugly audacities', the disclosure of unpleasant and shocking events and behaviours not only endured by the female writing self but also perpetrated by her (Cooke 2020, 64-92).

Albertine's model of negative choice will also be discussed in the light of alleged demise of romantic love in the works of the sociologist Eva Illouz. The relationship between Albertine's autotheorising in her memoirs and Illouz' theorising in her scholarly work is to be seen as a dialogue between equals in which either position illuminates the other (Fournier 2021: 135). In her most recent book, *The End of Love*, Illouz argues that with the relative weakness of traditional religious and social bonds in the industrialised West caused by sexual liberation, feminism and consumer capitalism, the emotionally self-owned individual finds itself confronted with a bewildering number of choices which are amplified by psychological industries and more recently the very structure of electronic communication (Illouz 2019: 4-5). The absence of contractual logic in 21st century romantic love and its free markets create uncertainty. Women in particular are vulnerable to the ill effects of uncertainty because the criteria for attraction ('sexiness') are defined and controlled by patriarchy and its agents (16-17). Illouz further posits that in matters of love and relationships making negative choices (choosing against something) is as important as making positive choices. Unloving, the end of relationships, is in her view the most prominent feature of current love practice. It is to be understood as a function of the individual's self-realisation (19).

These arguments align well with Albertine's accounts, although the author of the memoirs also identifies proto-social mechanisms as the drivers for her un-choosing which are not present in Illouz' view. Where Illouz juxtaposes capitalist sexual markets and traditional family certainties, Albertine extends the virtues of un-loving and negative choice to family relationships in ways which cannot simply be attributed to neoliberal de-traditionalisation.

The following article is divided into sections on romantic relationships and family relationships as well as a conclusion. First, I will address the hippy boys and punks Albertine admired and fell in love with, when she was young, her marriage with an unnamed man whose moniker changes from 'biker' to 'hubby' and 'ex', and her remote affair with the actor Vincent Gallo. The theme is that there are iterative choices to be made between self-realisation and being in a love relationship with a man. Albertine understands gradually that she needs to unlearn her social conditioning, an irrational and limiting belief in romantic love.

The section on family relationships starts with Albertine's parents' divorce diaries. Albertine, as the narrator of the second book, reads her father's diary first. Under the influence of his account of the breakdown of his marriage, Albertine questions her personal narrative which is that she is the product of a succession of strong women: 'It took three generations of women to make me a punk.' (Albertine 2018: 26). She continues to see flaws in her mother's behaviour when she reads her diary. Albertine is concerned about what she now understands as her mother manipulating her into hating her father. She also believes that her mother played her two daughters against each other using their sibling rivalry from an early age. This rivalry for their mother's attention and affection plays a crucial role in Albertine's reflections on her assault on her sister Pascale at their mother's death bed. Sibling rivalry is linked with other proto-social and biological explanations which seek explanation in notions of programming and survival, as well as a potentially metaphorical self-diagnosis of autism which the author extends to her entire family in an attempt to explain the coldness and cruelty of family relationships.

Romantic love in Albertine's memoirs.

Music has a strong emotional effect on young Viv. The first time she listens to The Beatles at an older girl's house, the world changes for her (Albertine 2014: 16), as she feels she has discovered

the meaning of life (17). Pop music is Viv's promised land in which she identifies with the girlfriends of male pop stars (21). There is no notion that a girl from a working-class background in London could be a pop star in her own right. Her father ridicules Viv for entertaining the thought she could become one: 'You're not chic enough.' (20) The currency of star potential, chic, is a variation of the currency Illouz observes in the romantic market, sexiness. Although chic/sexiness is potentially democratic (Illouz 2019: 102) in the sense that it can be acquired (fashionable clothes, hair-dos and make-up), it is inaccessible to penniless girls from North London such as Viv.

A girl's self-realisation through the promises of pop music's lyrics and associated lifestyles is entirely dependent on validation by men. At school, being the girlfriend of a cool boy provides Viv with status (Albertine 2014: 31). Viv is also very impressed with the hippy boys she meets at the Woodcraft Folk, a working-class, left-wing alternative to the Scouts. They are beautiful and confident, thus have the attributes Viv feels she lacks (36-7). She becomes invested in peace marches and gigs mostly to look good and to meet boys (40). She feels that Mick Jagger (42), Mark Bolan (44) and David Bowie (46) are sexy in an androgynous and unthreatening way. Her favourite pop stars embody a romantic utopia or 'parallel universe' (18) which does not know poverty or quarrelling parents. Albertine describes her teenage self as obsessed with a naïve notion of romantic love.

Eva Illouz in *Consuming the Romantic Utopia* addresses the beginnings of leisure industries such as dance halls and the cinema and the role they played in transforming courtship rather than the surge of teenage culture and pop music from the 1950s onwards (Illouz 1997: 48-78). Illouz' argument that still and moving images became the most effective media in the propagation of romantic love and its concurrently consumerist and utopian promises (33-39, 81-83) does not fully bear out in the post-war period in which popular music played a crucial role in creating youth identity and setting goals for self-realisation. However, as we can see in Albertine's memoir, music, fashion and romance form a continuum which communicates co-ordinated messages through a mix of audio-visual and print media.

In art school Viv's focus shifts slightly from admiring pretty, cool boys to admiring confident, creative, hands-on girls (62), but again she admires characteristics she feels she lacks. Two positive seeds are sown at art school, though. Firstly, that is Viv's fashion rebellion, which is expressed in creating her own styles and, secondly, meeting Mick Jones who becomes her on-and-off boyfriend

(78, 83). While Mick is much more romantic than Viv (88), the overall attitude in the emerging punk scene is that people pretend not be bothered by anything emotional or are at least opposed to romantic and erotic bonds. Sex, where it occurs, is casual (114).

My insistence on Mick and I not merging into a couple is not just to do with being free to hang out with other guys, it's also about wanting to be seen as a separate entity, rather than 'Mick's girlfriend'. Mick can play guitar; he's been in loads of bands before. He's a bloke. He doesn't have to prove himself like I do. I'm trying to be a musician in front of all these new people, a very bold move as I can't play guitar and haven't written any songs. Sometimes I think I might as well say, 'I want to be an astronaut.' I don't even know if I can do it myself, why should anyone else have faith in me? Mick still believes in love and romance whereas I'm questioning all my old beliefs and habits. (95)

Viv forms a close friendship with Sid Vicious, but they do not become a couple. It is the American Johnny Thunders, who had previously been in the New York Dolls, who captures Viv's attention: '[...] he's bewitching: a beautiful, exotic alien from another world' (141) which is a continuation of pop's 'parallel universe' (18) or Illouz 'romantic utopia'. He does 'the most romantic thing' (143) Viv has ever experienced, which is to look straight into her eyes singing all the lyrics of an entire gig at her. There is 'chemistry' between them, but Johnny is also a heroin addict who cannot get erections and will ultimately choose drugs over love.

'The Shift' (150-1) occurs after Sid has kicked Viv out of her own band. Viv chooses to reinvent herself to show people what she can achieve. Encouraged by Chrissie Hynde of The Pretenders, Viv joins The Slits (153). As the band bonds emotionally, Viv proves her commitment by threatening a male junkie friend, who has stolen money from one of the band members, with a hammer. As a committed punk, she revels in the notion that she is seen as a 'nutter' (159) who does not conform to still prevalent ideals of demure and pleasant femininity.

Viv also courts trouble on tour with several bands as undercards to The Clash, when she starts a relationship with Rob Symmons of Subway Sect, although she is known to be Mick's girlfriend. Rob is intense, serious and romantic (179). Mick, on the other hand, is jealous and a confrontation leads to a mass brawl (182). Viv, too, is jealous and confronts Mick over a girl she finds in his bed (183).

A few years later, The Slits break up and band member Tessa takes an overdose. Viv realises that visiting Tessa in hospital is the only meaningful thing she has left to do:

The Slits have split up, Ari's already making music with new people, I have nothing. Twenty-seven years old and all I've ahead of me is living in a box room at my mum's. No band, no money, no job, no husband, no children. I'm finished, I tried to do something different and I failed. (247)

The list of things she does not have mix the non-romantic utopian moment of being in a ground-breaking band with the expectations of capitalism and heteronormativity. Viv even asks Mick, now a big success with The Clash, to rescue her (249). However, his failure fully to support her has less of an impact on Viv than the end of the band, because her identity is enmeshed with being in The Slits and not with being Mick's (former) girlfriend:

The pain I feel from the Slits splitting up is worse than splitting up with a boyfriend, my parents divorcing or being chucked out of the Flowers of Romance: this feels like the death of a huge part of myself, I've got nowhere to go, nothing to do; I'm cast back into the world like a sycamore seed spinning into the wind. I'm burnt out and my heart is broken. (250)

In the second part of the book, Viv craves 'love', has casual sex, and afterwards feels disgusted. In a conservative volte-face, she next chooses only to have sex with someone whose child she would want to bear because she thinks that procreation is the meaning of sex (226). This forecasts Viv's transformation into a chic urbanite which is at odds with her punk roots. When she gradually re-engages with life (257-9), she starts teaching aerobics, takes music lessons, and she builds a portfolio to get into film school. In other words, she builds her physical and cultural capital. During the 1980s, she is professionally successful as a director for TV and film, but she does not experience romantic love. Moving away from the romantic utopia of her youth, she chooses always to give any man who is interested in her several chances. This mirrors the rational and transactional understanding of romance, Illouz observes in women's magazines of the same period (Illouz 2017: 153-186).

In this period, Viv meets the masculine 'biker' who soon becomes her husband. In line with her neo-traditionalist lifestyle, Viv's focus shifts to conception. A first miscarriage occurs in 1991. Albertine reflects: 'I think my body collapsed as soon as it knew that it was loved.' (279) Viv is

frail at her wedding, but Albertine describes it in a rather conventional way as the happiest day of her life (282). After another miscarriage (284), Viv's mental health turns very poor, but her new husband is supportive. Albertine attributes her single-minded focus on having a baby to biology without giving any thought to the possibility of patriarchal scripts and myths extending from the romantic utopia of pop music. Manifesting this significant cultural shift, she sells her punk memorabilia to finance further IVF treatment (287). The couple buy a house and finally Viv gives birth to a baby girl (289). Viv has succeeded in rebuilding her life from the end of *The Slits* following conventional patterns. Having abandoned her punk past, she has, on the surface, successfully bargained with patriarchy (Kandiyoti 1988).

Three months after giving birth, following an episode of severe bleeding, it is discovered that Viv has cervical cancer (292). From now on, there is a new focus in her life, which is dealing with cancer so that she can stay with her child. She is claustrophobic but with trademark determination trains herself to tolerate confined spaces, so that she can have an MRI (294). The support network in this period is predominantly female including her mother and sister but also her baby daughter (299).

Later, the family move to Hastings into an open-plan house by the sea (301) which appears to represent the great dividend from bargaining with patriarchy. Having recovered from her illness, Viv returns to expressing herself creatively by taking a ceramics class. However, cracks appear in the middle-class façade of this life by the sea. The husband is unhappy at Viv taking up pottery (302-3). He also criticises that she spends money on grooming. He responds to his wife's wish for more self-realisation by attempting to withhold the financial means which would allow her to reinstate what Catherine Hakim describes as 'erotic capital' (Hakim 2010: 499-518).

Breaking confidentiality, her doctor tells Viv that the husband does not love her (308). At this stage, a shift occurs, as Viv feels that it was only her illness which turned her into a full-time wife and mother, that she was born to be a rebel (308). Following a surprise letter from American actor Vincent Gallo (Albertine 2014: 313), Viv forms a low-key relationship with him over the telephone because she feels spoken to as a woman, a girl, an artist (318-21). Knowing that she is being emotionally unfaithful, Viv tells her husband that she will give up on Gallo. He reacts badly by ridiculing her notion that Gallo could be sexually attracted to her citing their age difference: 'Not unless he wants to fuck his mother, and with that climbs into bed.' (323). The insult cuts deeply,

as the husband is even younger than Gallo, and has thus revealed that he considers sex with his wife a repugnant oedipal transgression. It is evident that Albertine's memoir does not give room to speculations over the husband's intentions or emotional state. The doctor's revelation is taken as proof by Viv as the character and Albertine as the biographer in this unashamedly partisan autobiographical text. In my view, this partiality is justified in the context of the 'ugly audacities' of contemporary feminist life-writing. Notions of balance, judgement and a life well-lived are predicated on a pre-modern, self-assured subjectivity which can only be afforded and performed by an author self which is in a socially dominant position.

In an attempt to reconnect with her roots in punk, Viv accepts an invitation to attend a gig of The New Slits in New York City (326), where she meets Gallo in person. His behaviour towards her is awkward, and Viv understands that he is yet another melancholic loner who will not save her. At this moment, Patti Smith, who was instrumental in the 1970s in encouraging women to make punk rock their own, walks into the restaurant. Viv takes this as a sign that she needs to return to her true self which she discovered as a young woman in punk (334). The New Slits' gig inspires Viv to practice playing the guitar again (335). Viv also realises that her long-distance affair with Gallo was a 'crutch'. The underlying truth is that her marriage has run its course regardless: 'The truth is, Vincent is not my princet [sic]. And nor should or could he be. That's a ridiculous thing to ask of anyone – god I'm such a slow learner, I bore myself.' (336)

Back in England, Viv suffers from pneumonia and is nearly hospitalised for being dangerously underweight. She wills herself to eat in order not to be admitted to hospital and makes the guitar – again – her number one focus; 'I play to survive. I've got to express myself to stop imploding into depression, so I write songs.' (340) Her single-minded focus gives way to depression and anxiety, but she also accepts support from her male musician friends (341) and praise from her daughter (342): 'Mummy, you were *born* to play the guitar. That phrase, and the way she says it, sustains me for years.' Viv plays solo gigs and one with The New Slits, but Ari hates her playing and shouts at her to stop:

On the way back to London that night I look out of the car window at the motorway flashing past and decide I'm not going to play any more shows with the New Slits: I want to do my own thing. My little girl is curled up asleep with her head on my lap, I stroke her hair, I feel so much love for her. I remember back to my love of the Slits twenty-five years ago,

how devastated I was when it ended. I was liked a dumped lover, I grieved for years but eventually I healed and hardened – not without scarring – because I had to. (354)

Her husband issues an ultimatum for Viv to choose between music and marriage which to her is like choosing between life and death (355). Viv is faced with the need to make two negative choices by not joining the New Slits and by leaving her husband:

I've noticed a pattern forming in my life, it happens every time something does not work out – a friendship, the New Slits, my marriage – I have the courage to walk away from it rather than stay and cling on for fear of the unknown future, it seems to take from four to six months at the very most for something even better to manifest in front of me. I think of it as saying Yes to Nothing. If your choice is either the wrong thing or nothing, however frightened you are. You've got to take nothing. Haven't you? Hasn't everyone?

No husband, no lover, no band, no money, no confidence.

Here goes nothing. (357)

The penultimate sentence in this quote echoes an earlier summary: 'No band, no money, no job, no children. I'm finished.' (247) The difference is that the 'nothing' is a choice and carries the opportunity for re-invention which the 'I'm finished' decades earlier did not evoke due to a lack of experience. The first book ends with a personal balance sheet in which Albertine summarises her life in the winter of 2013: Her true character is coming to the fore: as an introvert she can find self-realisation within the self rather than from relationships. Still, she has a good relationship with her daughter, a home, loyal friends and freedom to create. Viv also still believes in love (410-1).

Early on in the second book, Albertine states the intention to liberate herself from a male-centric view of the world:

For sixty years I've been shaped by men's point of view on every aspect of my life, from history, politics, music and art to my mind and my body – and centuries more male-centric history before that. I'm saturated with their opinions. I can think and see like a straight, white, man. I can look at a woman and objectify her, see her how a man sees her. I can think like a male criminal. To stay safe, you have to anticipate their thoughts and actions. I can think like a rapist for fuck's sake. (Albertine 2018: 34)

This relates back to a chapter towards the end of the first book, where the ‘beautiful psycho’, who has a great sense of humour and discerning taste in music, brutally attacks Viv and nearly kills her (Albertine 2014: 378-385).

Another man with whom Albertine attempts to have a romantic relationship is Eryk-the-builder (Albertine 2018: 44). He turns out to be very shy about his sexuality (89). His insecurities mean that he has a tendency to belittle Viv which makes her break up by throwing drinks over him in a pub (92). She feels that her anger has eventually saved her, as she is slow to undo decades of social programming disguised as popular culture (227). This quote illustrates the proximity of Albertine’s and Illouz’ stance on romance, consumerism and popular culture:

Those songs streaming out of the radio every day were constructed to hook young female brains and hormones, to lure us into pursuing impossible goals and then covert our empty longings into money (records, clothes, make-up, magazines). Such an effective way to keep girls and women down and render us ineffective. (224)

After her mother’s death, Viv meets Eryk again and they get back together, because she craves human connection. Albertine has keen awareness of the imbalance in their relationship. She lists in great detail all the things she does in preparation of a weekend away with Eryk which includes a lot of personal grooming and considerable levels of anxiety: ‘Are you still with me? I am barely with myself. I don’t know how I can think of myself as a rebel, after doing all that for a date, but I do.’ (246) She brings sexy mesh underwear which she puts on for Eryk but in spite of all her efforts he remains ‘listless’ (247) Viv cannot be bothered anymore to prepare for a date, and ‘let[s] go of Eryk.’ (251) This turn of phrase echoes the language of work – and redundancy. It also resonates with a therapeutical approach to relationships which speaks of making them ‘work’. This has been ridiculed by the philosopher Laura Kipnis in her polemic *Against Love*: ‘[...] we have been well tutored in the catechism of labor-intensive intimacy. Work, work, work: given all the heavy lifting required, what’s the difference between work and “after work” again?’ (Kipnis 2003: 18)

Illouz argues that the therapy and sexiness industries have been filling the gaps left by the delegitimation of religion, family, and the weakening of cultural norms of courting and matrimony in the West (Illouz 2019: 51). With the decoupling of sex, emotion and courtship, new normative scripts are slow to develop thus leaving uncertainties which are addressed by

psychotherapy (57). She concludes from the interviews she has conducted that heterosexual men and women appear to follow different scripts. Men seem to cope better with compartmentalised sex and courtship, whereas women feel they never know whether a man is only hinting at a future relationship to obtain sex (120). Albertine's narratives of failed romance fit well into Illouz', and broadly into Kipnis', views with the significant exception that most of the men she has dated have not wanted to exchange the promise of a relationship for sex because they have not been keen on sex in the first place.

A reason for this may lie in Albertine's taste in partners, as her overall life as a rebel and a creative person has not been representative for the female urbanite or the sub-urban housewife whose roles she inhabited in the 1980s and 1990s. The men represented in Albertine's memoirs are largely unable to form lasting romantic relationships. Stepping away from Illouz' notion that an abundance of choices undermines people's capacity to commit, Albertine summarises towards the end of the second book that there is a shortage of eligible men and most of them are incapable of 'even basic kindness' (Albertine 2018: 252). This may reflect the fact that for heterosexual women the pool of eligible partners diminishes rapidly when they are in their fifties or sixties.

I never came across that everlasting, romantic, mythic love with a man that I read and dreamt about as a young woman. I get the same lurching thrill now when I'm about to sit down to an egg mayonnaise sandwich and a packet of plain crisps as I used to get when I fancied someone. I've had plenty of adventures – bit fed up with adventures, to be honest, knackered – and two great loves: my mother and my daughter. (273)

Her loneliness is a choice with which she has come to terms. Rather than hoping to be with a man, she sees herself in a succession of strong, solitary women, and has reserved a space in the crematorium's memorial book below her grandmother and mother (277).

Close reading of Albertine's experiences with romantic love exposes systemic sexism, bargaining with patriarchy and her individual battle to establish the freedom to make her own life choices. The outstanding characteristic of Albertine's biographies is her determination paired with a single-minded focus on one particular goal in each period of her life. This determination facilitates the choices she makes which can lead to choosing something such as playing the electric guitar in a band or wanting to conceive against overwhelming physical odds. These choices can also be about deciding to disengage from relationships which have become harmful. These choices are what

Illouz calls negative choices of unloving. The cost of making them is considerable, and the two books do not offer any grandiose fantasy of happiness or even closure. With regards to romantic love, the main obstacle to overcome is what Albertine comes to see as her naïve belief in romantic love implanted in her psyche early on in life, when popular music was her main escape from the broken-down marriage of her parents. Freeing herself from love myths goes for Albertine hand in hand with shedding the male-centric view of the world.

Undoing family relationships.

The main strands of narration in the second book are the events around her mother's death which are presented as short paragraphs in bold print and longer chapters, each with a title, in which Albertine addresses her life after divorce. There are analepses covering some of the ground from the previous book, but the focus is on family, the relationships with daughter Vida, mother Kathleen and sister Pascale. Her father Lucien features as well.

When her father dies, Viv deals with his estate (Albertine 2014: 365-9). The good thing about his death is that he has left enough money to Viv to pay for a divorce lawyer, thus freeing her from another poor relationship with a man (97). In his belongings, Viv finds the Opinel knives typical for French men, letters to Kathleen and the children and a divorce diary (Albertine 2018: 101-2). The letters confirm that he wished to build a relationship with his children (144). Viv remembers that her mother showed them to the children offering the illusion of free will in a situation Albertine now interprets as manipulated by her mother. Albertine knows that her father's divorce diary is skewed in its perspective, as it aims to paint him in a good light, but she remembers every incident described (146). Kathleen turned the family's apparent poverty into a weapon in the divorce battle blaming Lucien for being a bad provider. She made Lucien eat separately from the rest of the family, so that she could make out that he ate better food than the rest of them (150). Kathleen succeeded in turning the daughters against the father. Especially Pascale, but Viv, too, thought of him as the 'bullying, out-of-touch and embarrassingly weird looking father I was lumbered with' (157), an 'ogre in our midst' (157). On occasion, Viv showed some affection for her father out of pity and in search for reward in the form of sweets. Her behaviour was interpreted as sitting on the fence and drew Kathleen's anger (160).

Albertine feels sick and dazed having finished reading the diaries, as her view of the past is challenged (175):

The two biggest shocks from my father's diary were that Mum wasn't the heroine she always made herself out to be, and that she didn't seem to like me very much. I only became the favourite through circumstance, because I was all she had left, not because I was a lovely person and a good daughter. Is that why I thought up *The Favourite Theory* after she died? Did my unconscious remember things that I didn't? (176)

'*The Favourite Theory*' is the overarching autotheoretical rationalisation Albertine offers in her second book to explain the level of anger (47-9) she has felt towards her sister. It is based on the notion of sibling rivalry and an understanding that their mother stoked the flames to ensure that she would always have at least one attentive carer. Sibling rivalry is a well-established but not fully explored concept in psychoanalysis (Isaacs 2016, Maciejewska 2018, Mitchell 2006). Retaining a daughter or other unmarried female relative as a companion and unpaid carer is a motif well known in Victorian literature which had its roots in social practice (Liggins 2014, Hill 2001: 76, 80). Current research further shows that informal care disproportionately falls towards women in their fifties but regardless of their relationship status (Verbakel et al. 2017).

At the care home, with their mother about to pass away, Viv feels first irritation with her sister almost immediately (Albertine 2018: 90). Pascale behaves unreasonably by not allowing care home staff, her sister or her niece easy access to her mother to make her more comfortable (104, 109). She becomes abusive and swears at them (129, 131). The situation escalates when Viv assaults Pascale physically. Albertine's language to describe the incident is distanced. It appears to deflect from Viv's responsibility. Her legs move involuntarily towards the bed; time slows and down and speeds up again: 'Teeth crunched, body lunged, hands grabbed ... and I found myself trying to tear every last strand of Pascale's hair out of her head.' (139) An alternative reading of this scene is not to emphasise the apparent deflection from Viv's responsibility but to understand the distanced language as a means of showcasing the ugliness of the events without judgement. The narrative about the sisters' care-home fight attempts to explain Viv's motivation in autotheoretical terms which abstain from fully taking Viv's side or condemning her behaviour. This leaves readers in an ethical dilemma in which they are encouraged to examine their moral

compass in relation to their understanding of the biographer's reliability as a narrator. As with Viv's husband, there is no room given to speculation about Pascale's emotions.

Viv knows that the scene is distressing for Vida but believes to be driven by a 'base instinct' (149) and a need to set a marker for 'the future' (158). Pascale starts to retaliate by biting Viv's thumb. This scene is set up as a 'primal' fight, as their parents turned them into rivals early on (165). Viv fails to dislodge her sister from their mother's side, but she still wants to 'wound' and 'mark' her (179) which she succeeds in doing by throwing a glass. Bleeding from the face, Pascale leaves the room, onto which a spiritual glow descends (199). This over-the-top assertion may provoke readers into re-examining their attitude towards the narrated self and their narrator. While Pascale arranges on the phone to return to Canada (207), Viv stays despite the injury to her thumb. Her mother is unable to speak but holding hands with her older daughter tickles her palm which Viv takes as a sign of approval (214). This assertion remains unquestioned in the text. It may very well be that the mother's fingers moved, but potentially they moved involuntarily. The hand-holding between the dying mother and future autobiographer offers a powerful metaphor for the ultimate conundrum of life-writing. Hypothetically, there may be ways of verifying whether the hand holding occurred by obtaining statements from the granddaughter or carer present in the room. Whether the tickling occurred and whether it meant approval of Viv's actions is a matter for the reader who may or may not feel that the 'autobiographical pact' with Albertine has remained unbroken (Lejeune 1973) or may have shifted in its referentialities (Allamand 2018).

Sibling rivalry is according to Albertine 'perfectly normal' (141). It is connected to violence in the animal kingdom. The sisters fall out with each other every time they meet and spend months if not years not talking to each other. Viv sees in this a 'cycle of abuse' for which she apportions more blame to Pascale than to herself (124-5). When Pascale leaves to live in Canada, Kathleen 'grooms' Viv to become her carer (142). Some years later, having coaxed her sister to visit more, Viv feels jealous of Pascale commanding their mother's attention and physically not leaving her side (112). Viv comes to realise that she is not the favourite child and confidante but a stand-in and a jester who tries to distract from the dysfunctionality of the family by telling anecdotes. As an act of rebellion, sitting with her mother and her sister, Viv ceases all efforts to make conversation. The other two women are unable to fill the void (122).

In this memoir, Kathleen is both blamed for manipulating her daughter's rivalry for her benefit and praised for providing Viv with the 'training' which allows her to make the ultimate negative choice of rejecting her role in the family dynamic. Her fight is for self-realisation and she uses any means necessary:

Mum programmed me to fight, not to be walked over, never to give in. But even with all her years of training I couldn't have been as savage and unrelenting as I was with Pascale that night if I hadn't practised being the bad one in Mum's kitchen during the past month. (154)

Dealing with her mother's estate, Viv finds in a bag marked with the instruction which would later become the title of the second book (185). Reading her mother's divorce diary, Viv is reassured of her memory that her father hit her with a belt and was violent towards her on several occasions (214-6). She also realises that her mother only moved into her bedroom, because Lucien had shown a sexual interest in his daughter (228-30). Lucien was coercive towards his wife and raped her (201). According to her diary, Kathleen once fought back of which Viv is proud (204).

Reassured in her siding with her mother, Viv tries to gain better understanding of her mother's past. Kathleen's diary talks about her meeting an older man named Gerry in 1937 and giving birth to a boy called David two years later. This relationship ended soon. The next man in her life, Lucien, made her choose between the boy and himself (197). David suffered poor mental health, whilst Kathleen self-harmed and attempted suicide (210). Viv remembers meeting David, whom Kathleen treated coldly using him to make his father Gerry look bad (213) in the same way she used her daughters to get at Lucien. At the time Viv felt ashamed for her mother's behaviour, but now she sees her not as a bad mother but a victim of patriarchy (198) and a survivor as well:

Mum's most valuable bequest was all those years of unerring faith in me. She taught me survival skills. Not how to whittle a stick, make a shelter in the woods, catch and skin a rabbit or spear a fish. Not to run like the wind or outwit a spy. Not even to cook, clean or love. But somehow, without me noticing it happening, I became someone who after every failure, rejection and mistake can pick myself up, dust myself off and start all over again. (254)

Albertine also tries to rationalise the coldness of her family environment from a psychological angle. She reflects that many of her character traits and obsessions, such as clothes, music and boys, may be consistent with being on the autistic spectrum (106-8). As a child, Viv was put on barbiturates to deal with violent outbreaks (167). Hers is not an 'autism biography' as such and it is not known whether Albertine has been formally diagnosed. However, research into autism biographies indicates that individuals tend to feel relief at being diagnosed, as their general awkwardness in life is given a clear reason (Brown 2010: 207-8). The following passage indicates that a 'clear reason' may be closer to the point Albertine is trying to make than a verifiable medical diagnosis. Although discussion of autism amongst clinicians goes back to the 1930 and 1940s (Vicedo, Ilerbaig 2021), in the 1960s 'autistic' wasn't a common way of understanding the self:

There were no allowances made for people who were a bit different in the 1960s, especially children. We didn't know or use terms like 'autistic spectrum', 'Asperger's' or 'Attention Deficit Disorder'. Even being 'artistic' was considered a defect. Teachers, parents, classmates and the medical profession thought children who didn't conform were just difficult, annoying misfits. Girls were considered even more of an aberration than boys. (Albertine 2018: 107)

The terms imposed on children in the 1960s, as compiled by Albertine, all begin with the letter A like her surname. Their connection is causal, but the causation lies in the intolerance towards difference or otherness rather than in a shared psychopathology. Albertine concludes that she was not as previously imagined the normal one in the family, and that the entire family may have been on the (metaphorical) autism spectrum (Albertine 2018: 169). The book ends with an assertion that the incident at the care home was nobody's fault but was caused by all the circumstances of their lives (281). This resembles claims which were made in the 1950s and 1960s that autism was caused by family environments which lacked warmth. These claims stemmed from anxieties around working 'refrigerator mothers' and parents who were too focussed on their careers and social lives (Silberman 2015: 201-239). The common theme between Albertine's literary representation and these outdated theories is coldness.

However, Albertine at the end of the second memoir feels love for Pascale, experiences a re-birth (283), and has a sense-rousing taste experience eating a scone (284). The last remark contrasts her earlier quip that romantic love felt no better than eating an egg mayonnaise sandwich.

Conclusion:

My close reading of Albertine's two memoirs, their contextualisation with the help of research into the romantic utopia, bargaining with patriarchy and the tropes of spinsters-as-carers, sibling rivalry as well as a metaphorical take on autism confirm the initial hypothesis that Albertine as an autobiographer reaches clarity regarding her life's trajectory by connecting the three main pillars of her personal belief system:

Firstly, the ability to make negative choices in romantic and familial relationships is key to any self-realisation. Secondly, self-realisation is not a simple expression of an individual's will, as it is tied up with social conditioning. Thirdly, social conditioning falls into two categories which can be identified as cultural and proto-social. The high profile of romantic love in popular culture marketed to girls and young women falls into the first category. This goes hand in hand with male dominance in society which forces a male-centred view of the world onto everyone regardless of their gender.

The proto-social elements of social conditioning are expressed in Albertine's belief that her mother did not teach her how to love but 'programmed' her to fight for survival putting her into a matrilinear genealogy of independently minded, solitary women. This mentality predates punk as a cultural occurrence but explains in Albertine's rationale why her rebelliousness was well placed in the short time span of early punk: 'It took three generations of women to make me a punk.' (Albertine 2018: 26). She returns to being a self-declared rebel, when she asserts her right to self-expression and self-realisation against her failing marriage (308).

Viv's physical assault on her sister at their mother's death bed represents the nodal point of Kathleen's 'programming' for survival, her utilisation of sibling rivalry, and Viv's negative choice to step away from her designated role as carer to her mother and entertainer to her mother and sister. It is significant that she made this choice, while her mother was still alive. She liberates herself rather than being delivered by her mother's passing. This liberation is thoroughly ugly in the sense of Cooke's observation that contemporary feminist life-writing has produced 'ugly audacities' (Cooke 2020, 64-92). Albertine's return to her punk attitudes from the 1970s in the 2010s was, therefore, timely and indicative of a wider trend of woman writers staking claims not

only in terms of self-expression but also expressing taboo, provocative and shocking aspects of themselves whilst fighting stigmatisation and male supremacy.

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