

NEW GENRES, NEW SUBJECTS: WOMEN, GENDER AND AUTOBIOGRAPHY AFTER 2000

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ABSTRACT

This essay presents three theoretical concepts —performativity, positionality, and relationality— for exploring how autobiographical acts and practices intersect with gendered positionalities and relations. It then applies these concepts to six domains of women's life narrative since 2000: Transnational Lives; Graphic Lives; Online Lives; Modernist Citizen Lives in the nation state; Vulnerable Lives; and Embodied and Material Lives. It concludes that, although feminism has become commodified in new ways under global capitalism, it can be energized and adaptively reoriented by acts of personal narration. As these domains of life story production intervene to theorize the contested grounds of experience and identity, they indicate how contemporary feminism, in Ella Shohat's words, continues to be "a polysemic site of contradictory positionalities" (1-2).

KEY WORDS: Life narrative, genres, gender, performativity, positionality, relationality.

RESUMEN

En este ensayo se proponen tres conceptos teóricos —performatividad, posicionalidad y relacionalidad— para explorar cómo los actos y las prácticas autobiográficas se entrecruzan con posicionalidades y relaciones de género. Estos conceptos se aplican a seis dominios de las narrativas de vida de mujeres desde el año 2000: vidas transnacionales; vidas gráficas; vidas en línea; vidas de ciudadanas modernistas en el estado nación; vidas vulnerables; y vidas personificadas y materiales. Concluye que, a pesar de que el feminismo se ha mercantilizado de diversas maneras bajo un capitalismo global, se puede revigorar y reorientar de modo flexible a través de actos de narración personal. Al intervenir en la teorización de los discutidos ámbitos de experiencia e identidad, estos dominios de la producción de historias personales indican cómo el feminismo contemporáneo, en palabras de Ella Shohat, continúa siendo "un lugar polisémico de posicionalidades contradictorias" (1-2)

PALABRAS CLAVE: narrativas de vida, géneros literarios, género, performatividad, posicionalidad, relacionalidad.



Our essay —“New Genres, New Subjects: Women, Gender and Autobiography after 2000”— gives us an opportunity to reflect, on the 10th anniversary of our edited collection, *Women, Autobiography, Theory*, on the field of women’s autobiographical writing in the last decade. We take our project as two-fold: first, to provide a very brief overview of the key terms in theorizing women’s autobiographical practices at this historical moment; and second, to survey six major sites of women’s autobiographical production in this time. We will foreground three theoretical concepts: performativity, positionality, and relationality. And we will focus on six domains of production: Transnational Lives; Graphic Lives; Online Lives; Modernist Citizen Lives in the nation state; Vulnerable Lives; and Embodied and Material Lives.

We begin by noting that the topic “women’s autobiography” now has a rather antiquated ring to it. It seems a decidedly second wave feminist project of the 1980s to assume the fixed position of woman and the fixed attributes of femininity. Many theoretical challenges have eroded the signifiers “woman” and “women”: the critique of the universalizing effect of woman and redirection of attention to the more relational, dynamic, and complex analytic of “gender.” A second intervention has involved the fracturing of the notion of a unified signifier woman through the project of intersectional analyses of differences and power asymmetries among women. And a third direction of confusion has been the contesting analyses of the relation of bodies, genders, and sexualities such that any certain argument for alignment is insufficient to account for the complexities and contradictions of people’s experiential histories, multiple positionalities, and desiring bodies. Moreover, in life writing studies the idea of “autobiography” as a fixed genre of reference has been challenged in the increasing attention paid to many popular genres of contemporary life narrative, including online forms and graphic memoir, testimonial writing and autoethnography, film and video, and installation art. Genres of the autobiographical have proliferated, just as gendered positionalities have.

In this context certain theoretical terms are particularly useful and illuminating.

Performativity, in postmodern theory, designates autobiographical occasions as dynamic sites for the performance of identities that are constitutive of subjectivity. In this view, identities are not fixed or essential attributes of autobiographical subjects. Rather they are enacted and reiterated through cultural norms and discourses, and remain provisional and unstable. Much contemporary discussion of life narrative as performative is informed by Judith Butler’s deconstruction of a binary gender system and her assertion that gender is performative. For Butler, performativity “must be understood not as a singular or deliberate ‘act,’ but, rather, as the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names” (*Bodies* 20). Responding to Butler’s assertion that “the ‘I’ neither precedes nor follows the process of... gendering, but emerges only within and as the matrix of gender relations themselves,” Sidonie Smith notes that “the interiority or self that is said to be prior to the autobiographical expression or reflection is an “effect” of autobiographical storytelling” (18). In theories of performativity, then, critics of life narrative have found a vocabulary for describing the complex relationship of regulatory discourses of identity to material bodies, as well as autobiographical agency.



The concept of *positionality* has become increasingly important in narrative studies to designate how subjects are situated at particular axes through the social relations of differential power. Foucault's analysis of "technologies of the self" as imperatives for constituting the "disciplined" self through multiple confessional practices established a vocabulary for specifying subject positions as discursive locations. Leigh Gilmore, in reading the "autographics" of women's life writing, attends to the subject positions that narrators negotiate within the constraints of discursive regimes as they present themselves within genres that both prompt and prohibit that speaking. Issues of positionality and the geographics of identity are especially complex in narratives of de/colonization, immigration, displacement, and exile, encouraging theorists to employ multiple terms for describing autobiographical subjects in process, among them *hybrid*, *border*, *diasporic*, *nomadic*, *migratory*, *cosmopolitan*, *glocal*, *transnational*.

Relationality is a third term of reference in life narrative that has been useful for gender studies. Recent retheorizing of the concept of relationality argues that autobiographical narrative is not a solitary but a relational story, that it offers, according to P. John Eakin, not only "the autobiography of the self but the biography and the autobiography of the other" (58; see also Miller, "Representing"). The narrator's story is often refracted through the stories of others, as in the autoethnographic constitution of the community of identification, or in the confessional dramas of familiarity and familiarity.

Relationality is narratively incorporated through what Bakhtin terms heteroglossic dialogism, that is, the multiplicity of "tongues" or the polyvocality through which subjectivity is enunciated.¹ This concept of polyvocality enables us to think about the subject as always a subject of the other, of social discourses. That is, the very words through which the story is "said" or written are the language of the other, social discourses through which autobiographical subjects imagine and reflect upon themselves. Rhetorically, relationality is implicated in the addressee(s) posited by the narrator, those others to whom the narrative is directed and through whom it is imagined and circulated. Relationality, then, points to the ways in which the subject is always in process and in relation, never autonomous.

Relationality is also an aspect of the subject's vulnerability and the ethics of self-narration. More recently, Butler has elaborated on the self's opacity to itself (*Giving* 19), arguing that the self is founded in the vulnerability inherent in its embeddedness in social conditions, its engagement with others, and its recourse to cultural norms of narration in telling the story of itself. "The 'I' who begins to tell its story," writes Butler, "can tell it only according to recognizable norms of life narration... to the extent that the 'I' agrees, from the start, to narrate itself through those norms, it agrees to circuit its narration through an externality, and so to

¹ Françoise Lionnet turns to Edouard Glissant's concept of creolization to propose a theory of autobiographical textuality as a "métissage" or braiding of disparate voices in subjects whose cultural origins and allegiances are multiple and conflicting.

disorient itself in the telling through modes of speech that have an impersonal nature” (52). Autobiographical subjects are thus multiply vulnerable, to their own opacity, to their relationality to others, and to the norms through which they externalize themselves. It is this vulnerability, according to Butler, that informs the ethics of giving an account. Agency derives from our willingness to narrate our opacity, our fragmentation, our limits of knowability, to narrate, that is, “the way in which we are constituted in relationality: implicated, beholden, derived, sustained by a social world that is beyond us and before us” (*Giving* 64). Butler here shifts the idea of agency from the subject’s exercise of control over its interpretation of its life to the subject’s openness to its opacity and vulnerability and to its ethical obligation to the other.

Theorizing performativity contests the notion that autobiography is a site of authentic or pre-discursive identity. Theorizing positionality, with an eye to situatedness, contests the normative notion of a universal and transcendent autobiographical subject, autonomous and free of history. And theorizing relationality contests the notion that self-narration is a monologic utterance of a solitary, introspective subject that is knowable to itself. Critics have deployed these terms to decenter the notion of the unified, stable, autonomous individual that has often been assumed by readers to be a masculine subject of privilege. They speak of a subject that is in process, a subject in context (historical, social, geographical), a subject whose self-knowing is always implicated, discursively and dialogically, in “the forms of ideological environment” (Wong 169). As we consider the complex ways in which new genres and new subjects may now be energizing one another, these concepts enable more flexible reading practices and more inclusive approaches to the field of life narrative.

TRANSNATIONAL LIFE WRITING

New genres of the autobiographical have emerged as a result of transnational collaborations across national, class and religious differences. Transnationality refers to acts and practices that are enabled or constrained by the changing logics of nation states and of globalization in late capitalism (Ong 1-26). Of course, much has been written about the everyday life of globalization: flows of money, goods, people and ideas across national boundaries and regions; time-space compression via new technologies; the emergence of new identities, often multiple and overlapping; the hybrid sites of inhabitation such as global cities and borderzones; and new forms of organization and activism. Feminist scholars have explored processes of globalization: the production and circulation of heterogeneous masculinities and femininities; the gendered configuration of new labor markets; gendered patterns of migration from one global location to another; women’s rights in the nation and as global citizens; and the intersections of patriarchy and globalized formations such as neoliberalism and religious fundamentalisms. And feminist activists around the globe have responded to the post-1995 agenda put forth in the Platform for action at the United Nations’ Fourth World conference on Women in Beijing, China, in



1995.² The platform for action targets the increasing poverty of women; inequalities in access to health care and education; unequal power-sharing and decision-making between men and women that prevent women's advancement; the harm of violence against women domestically and in armed conflict, as well as against refugees and migrants; the continued stereotyping of women in media and their limited access to communication systems; and continuing discrimination against girl-children.³

New forms, forums and projects bring women into conversation across their differences, prompting new understandings of the heterogeneity of feminisms and the power dynamics of activism.⁴ Attending to the fractured agendas of women working for change around the world, transnational feminism recognizes the radical differences of women's conditions of living, the disjunctures (Appadurai 5-6) of flows, modernities, inequalities, discourses, and changing conditions on the ground. It also complicates analyses of gendered processes and identities by thinking about they are related to the hierarchies established in categories of race, economic class, sexuality, and ethnicity, since gender, in isolation from other axes of signification, is an inadequate analytic. Thinking transnationally calls for a *relational approach*, attendant at once to contexts within the nation-state, and to those between and beyond the nation-state framework. This relational approach illuminates the connections among nations, patriarchies, colonialisms, racisms and feminisms. An integral aspect of transnational feminism involves self-reflexive practices designed to engage women's positions of privilege along these axes of signification. In this way women are asked to examine and account for their own locations and assumptions "as part of a permeable interwoven relationality" (Shohat, "Area" 68).⁵

² The forces of globalization have also brought new forms and arenas of agency and independence and energize new forms of collective action and analysis, what Arjun Appadurai has described as "globalization from below" through "creative forms of social life that are localized transit points for mobile global forms of civic and civil life" (6-7). NGOs working on women's human rights and women's issues transnationally are part of this civic and civil life.

³ Focusing, above all, on the girl-child as the victim of many kinds of economic and sexual exploitation, the Declaration asserts that "discrimination against women begins at the earliest stages of life and must therefore be addressed from then onwards" and calls for recognizing "the dignity and worth of the girl-child" (UN Documents Cooperation Circle). Yet the report points to evidence that the rights of the girl-child are endangered in many ways, from prenatal sex selection and female infanticide to genital mutilation, child marriage, incest, forced prostitution, and unequal access to nutrition, health care, and education. Thus the concern with gender must begin by addressing the many inequities in which girl-children continue to be raised, and their access to universal human rights asserted and protected.

⁴ Confronting the differences among women across global circuits, "transnational" feminism focuses on the asymmetries of access and power among women and between men and women in global circuits, institutions, and processes, specifically the two related processes of the feminization of labor markets and female proletarianization (Valentine M. Moghadam). It attends to the geopolitics of women's relations, the politics oscillating across national borders as well as the economic, social and cultural borders of class, religious affiliation, and ethnicity within nations and diasporas.

⁵ The transnational subject does not identify with a single nation-state because her or his national identity is located at the site of global social and economic flows.





We point to two kinds of life writing projects that emerge out of this project of transnational women's activism.

The first is the Global Feminisms project at the Institute for Research on Women and Gender at the University of Michigan. A multi-year, multi-site project, Global Feminisms assembled a collection of oral histories of feminist activists in Poland, China, India, and the United States. Putting in play feminist praxis, the Global Feminisms project involved layers of collaboration. Teams on the ground in each country decided on the ten feminist activists to be interviewed about their personal histories, their feminist visions, and the contexts and agendas of their activism. The local teams also determined the questions for and format of the interviews. The local teams met together twice "to review each other's materials and to discuss the disparate ideas about the body, the public-private divide, the state, law & jurisprudence, and publishing that have emerged from the interviews" (IRWG website). The production and transcription of the oral histories involved the collaboration of subjects, interviewers, videographers, and transcribers across global locations. Finally, the opportunities such an archive offers to students and scholars imagines a larger collaborative project, one that will transform understandings of the diversity of feminisms from which people organize and interpret both their life stories and their actions. This larger collaborative effort is made possible because the oral histories have been made available in transcript form in English and in their original languages and as videotaped interviews on DVD. This archive is mounted on the Global Feminisms website at the University of Michigan and available to students, activists, and researchers.

The project's generative location was dispersed and multi-nodal, its projection of feminism glocal, that is, always contingent on the conjunction of the local and global. The multinational archive in effect produces at once a collective of voices from around the world *and* a kaleidoscope of differences among activist women as subjects of different "national histories and women's movement histories" (IRWG website). Further, the set of site interviews project differences among women within each country. In effect, the project staged an intervention in the common discourses about the "globalization" and the "internationalization" of feminism, the first of which projects a suspiciously unified subject of feminism and the second of which projects a suspiciously unidirectional flow of feminist ideas and ideals.⁶ The Global Feminisms project thus houses an archive documenting heterogeneous feminist subjects in conversation with their pasts, their national locations and imaginaries, and their counterparts elsewhere in the world.

⁶ The website reads: By documenting individual life stories of activists and scholars, and considering them in their particular historical and cultural contexts, the project records important differences in women's activism in specific local sites, and questions constructions of 'global' feminism that assume a common (Western) set of issues as universal to all women. In addition, the project questions conventional notions of global feminism as the "internationalization of the women's movement," which often assumes a transfer eastward of western feminist ideals (Global Feminisms).

The individual stories present rich oral narratives that complicate the notion of “feminism.” This is the case with the narrative of Li Huijing, a Professor of Sociology and Assistant Director of the Women Research Center of the Central Party School. Li is a nationally recognized leader within the Communist Party who has developed gender studies in cadre schools and advocated for women’s rights. Li’s narrative presents a coming-of-age story, as she organizes the story of her life in three parts: her childhood during the “genderless age” of Red Guard Maoism; young adulthood and her dawning consciousness of gender inequality in the late 1970s; and her subsequent embrace of feminism with Chinese characteristics as a way of living and a mission to change society.

Through her retrospective narrative, Li interprets her coming-to-gender consciousness narrative through the contemporary discourse of a hybrid feminism that combines concepts from western feminism with the historically contextualized concepts of Chinese “feminism” applied to the specific characteristics of Chinese society and culture, in order to craft glocal interpretive frameworks and theories adequate to analyzing the conditions on the ground in China. What is fascinating about her narrative is the way in which the values and characteristics of the Maoist period, when she came of age as a Red Guard girl, are sustained, providing continuity to her representation of herself in both the past and the present in what is a narrative of transformation; and conversely the way in which the feminist vision of her narrating subject position extends through her interpretation of the past. As she tells her personal story and discusses her work of educating and training the cadre students in issues of gender studies, she continuously defines what “feminism” is, often by clarifying what “feminism” is not and by distinguishing between “Western feminism” and “Chinese feminism.” Indeed, she positions Western feminism as the “other” to Chinese feminism. While she often invokes, implicitly and explicitly, important concepts of Western feminism (“agency,” “the gendered division of labor”), she emphasizes their “Chinese characteristics.” But her oppositions are also specific to her Chinese context: she positions herself as a child of the “genderless age” of Maoist China who continues to value the ideals of that period, thus distinguishing herself from women coming of age in the 1980s and 1990s whose concept of feminism is routed through the discourse of difference, of the feminine-ism that had been suppressed during the Cultural Revolution. These are the new modern women exploited by and in the expanding market economy. Discourses of “individual rights” and “personal space” are invoked to explain her dissatisfaction with gender inequality in the late 1970s and 1980s, discourses translated into Chinese and circulating among Chinese intellectuals during the decade of the 1980s as people reinterpreted the Cultural Revolution as a pariah past.

Narratives such as Li’s reveal the national locations of the narrating “I” and the complex global crossings of feminist discourses with other discourses through which subjects interpret their life stories and perform lives in feminism (IRWG website). Collectively, the oral histories archived in the Global Feminisms Project constitute a transnational feminist community of individuals unknown to one another, individuals attached to their specific local and national contexts and circum-



stances, yet connected transnationally through discursive meshworks and the virtual, digitized library now available for searching.

Another exciting project to emerge from transnational collaboration is the 2006 book entitled *Playing with Fire*. It is the result of an autoethnographic project of the Sangtin Writers, a collective of Indian women who, assisted by a group leader and Richa Nagar, an Indian feminist scholar teaching in the United States, produced a collaborative life narrative that became the basis for community action. Their project, translated and available in book form (first published in Hindi in New Delhi in 2004, and later translated into English and published by the University of Minnesota Press), turned a collective reflective lens on the asymmetries of power and influence within a local Indian NGO. Since NGOs have become the dominant organization unit for advancing women's human rights and for connecting elite women with marginalized and relatively voiceless women, *Playing with Fire* joins women in their differences into a force for retheorization and reformation at the center of feminist praxis.

Playing with Fire narrates the group's "journey" (*yatra*) of understanding their lives through extensive memory work, writing, discussion-based revision, and theoretical analysis. By situating their personal life histories collectively, the nine women in Sitapur, Uttar Pradesh, India, attempted to address the forms of domination of an NGO that, in their view, spoke as the voice of Indian women in the region, yet effaced their experience and in some cases the complexities of their caste positions. The women understood their project as experience-based collective action to raise consciousness about Indian women's lives through a collective method that would not, as ethnographic projects typically did, leave them vulnerable to overwriting or appropriation as voiceless subalterns. Throughout, the group's personal journals and the postscript written by Richa Nagar reflect on the problematics of who can produce knowledge in a postcolonial context and what methods enable this process.

Playing with Fire represents a significant new transnational moment precisely because it inverts the framework of ethnography in several ways. It takes the self-study of women's lives as an originary point for a collective assessment of class position and the dynamics of power in a community. It maps multiple stages of the process by which individual reflection — "memory work" — and the writing or telling of personal narrative might not only contribute to individual transformation but become a basis for collectivized self-understanding with potential for intervention in a repressive public sphere. It thinks about the project of life writing as sharable and a stage in the formation of group consciousness through incorporating and revising personal stories. While the collaborative work in *Playing with Fire* cannot escape the effects of social inequalities and hierarchies — only two of the nine women wrote out the stories told by the seven others — the project is arguably not an ethnography in which the more cosmopolitan members served as interviewers of local informants, but a genuinely relational and intersubjective autoethnographic narrative that achieves a collectivized voice.

By incorporating multiple group conversations on the drafted narratives of life stages generated by each member of the group, *Playing with Fire* locates critical



moments of the life cycle for this group of Indian women who, despite their differences of caste, class, religious affiliation, and sexual desire, are united by gender-specific concerns that become a basis for their collective ethics and action. In assessing the stages of their project, the initially hostile reception to it within India, and its potential as a model for gathering life narratives of indigenous women whose status has often been considered “subaltern,” this autoethnography becomes a viable model of producing collaborative life narrative with potential for social transformation in the developing world.

GRAPHIC LIVES

Graphic memoir, now called in Gillian Whitlock’s term, “autographics,” is a rich site of self-representation and one that is reimagining gender relations. While cartoon books and the “funny pages” of newspapers have been available for at least a century, since 1972 there has been a revolution in the focus, and the uses, of autographics (Gardner 787-806). In France, Canada, the United States, South Africa, and elsewhere, the telling of autobiographical stories through cartoon books has produced new kinds of stories with potential to intervene directly in social and political debates, not least because they link the cartooning form of popular culture to the narrative practices and theoretically informed positions of contemporary literature. Graphic memoirs have become a site for telling complex stories of gender, sexuality, family, and nation that reach millions of readers and have the potential to circulate worldwide as they “open up new and troubled spaces,” in Gillian Whitlock’s terms (“Autographics” 976).⁷ Subject positions are differently negotiated in cartoons, as the drawn portraits of cartoonists function as avatars that “engage with the conventions of comics” (Whitlock, “Autographics” 71). Scott McCloud has suggested, because the cartoon is a “vacuum into which our identity and awareness are pulled,” we do not just observe the cartoon, “we become it” (36). That is, readers are differently addressed, as we identify in reading them and imaginatively “complete the narrative” (Gardner 800) that the cartoon’s segmented boxes and gutters initiate and interrupt.

Two recent autographics by women suggest the potential of this form to address potent issues of gender, sexuality, and nation, and to circulate widely, new multimodal stories of gendered processes and perceptions.

Marjane Satrapi’s two books of autographics about revolutionary Iran, *Persepolis I and II* (translated from the French), link the coming-of-age story of this only child in a Marxist-leaning, multi-generational bourgeois family descended from

⁷ Autographics are not simply translations of written memoirs; rather, Hillary Chute and Marianne DeKoven argue that “the medium of comics is cross-discursive because it is composed of verbal and visual narratives that... remain distinct” (769).





the kings of Persia to events in Iran between the late 1970s and the early 1990s. In the embedded multi-temporality of *Persepolis*, Satrapi interweaves the long history of Iran in the twentieth century from the ascension of the Shah to his overthrow, to the ascendance of an Islamic fundamentalist regime which took power after months of factional struggle and the assassination of dissidents; then the long war with Iraq which led to brigades of teenage martyrs and the cultural revolution. This last introduced rigid gender separation, which has had severe consequences for the rights of women and girls: it imposed laws that required women and girls to be veiled, forbade unmarried women to associate publicly with men, and restricted girls' and women's education and ability to engage in public debate. In this memoir, the family's history is entwined with the history of the nation. (Satrapi's graphic memoir in two parts was also revised for a 2007 film that is circulating internationally.)⁸ Through the stark abstraction of bold black-and-white cartooning, Satrapi visualizes the psychic life of her childhood and early adulthood selves, the communal struggle of the family against and in the midst of the Iranian revolutionary masses, and the complexities of Iran's national struggle to forge an Islamic national imaginary.

The artist-in-exile in France creates an autobiographical avatar "Marji," the child protagonist who tells, in stark black-and-white cartooning, how the family's lives changed under these conditions, and recounts her own increasing rebellion, which motivated her parents to send her into exile in Vienna in 1984. As a teenager there she critiques the construction of Iranians by Europeans as Arabic fanatics and uncivilized "others." On her return to Iran, the complexity of growing up female is dramatized in a society where socializing between young women and men is strictly policed by groups of women tied to the regime; yet parties and flirtations abound, sexual education proceeds by whispers, and she enters into an unfortunate marriage to avoid trouble with the regime. Throughout, *Persepolis* reflects particularly on how the subject positions of young women, their mothers, and grandmothers are undermined by a repressive regime that, paradoxically, also stimulates resistance from within Iran and cannot prevent the circulation of Western cultural values. In its charm, wry humor, and insistence on educating the West to the struggles in Iran over the last three decades, *Persepolis* asserts the vigor of feminist critique and the power of cartoons to persuade by engaging viewers both intellectually and emotionally.

For Satrapi, graphic narration, with its invitation to the reader to co-construct the coming-of-age narrative, offers a transnational communicative circuit through which Western readers are invited to adjust their understanding of Iranian history and culture and to correct their misperception that Iranians speak Arabic

⁸ The translation of the graphic narrative to filmic version involved reordering the narrative sequence, reconceiving the memoir's chronology, and shifting from the frame-by-frame representation in graphic memoir of boxes on the page to an unsegmented visual style of cartooning with voices dubbed in French by several actors.

and that Iranian women “either have no place in our society or that they are hysterical black crows,” in Satrapi’s ironic phrase.⁹

Different possibilities of autographics are mobilized in Alison Bechdel’s *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* (2006). A provocative exploration of sexuality, gendered relations in the American family, and Modernist versions of what Bechdel calls “erotic truth,” *Fun Home* is a memoir deeply invested in imaging and imagining memory and those intricate, intersubjective acts of storytelling that bind and rend families. Specifically the story concerns a family in 1960s rural Pennsylvania whose father is by profession an English teacher and funeral home director, by temperament an interior decorator and fanatic landscaper, and, by desire and perhaps family legacy, a repressed homosexual who has liaisons with the family’s babysitters and his students. This last implies he practiced what heteronormative American society would call “perversion”; and it may suggest why he seems to have committed suicide—unless his being run over by a truck was an accident—when Alison was 20 and he 44. *Fun Home* is also a memoir of both coming-of-age and coming-out for “Alison,” the avatar of Bechdel, a lesbian artist, who has for over two decades published a biweekly comic strip “Dykes to Watch Out For.”

This autographic entwines the story of being formed as feminine by her repressed father to the discovery of her own transgressive desire, and routes both his and her stories through references and images of several kinds of print texts: Modernist literature, above all Proust’s *Remembrance of Things Past* and Joyce’s *Ulysses* and *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*; lesbian feminist manifestos, from *Word Is Out* (Adair and Adair) to *Lesbian Nation* (Jill Johnston) and including Colette’s *Earthly Paradise*; letters between her parents during their courtship and her teenage years; newspapers pages that announce not only personal events, such as her father’s death, but the Watergate hearings occupying the nation during the 1970s under the Nixon presidency; and her own childhood diaries which she began keeping at the age of 10. The autographic here becomes a space of collage and counterpoint, nowhere more than in her careful drawing of family photographs. In studying those images and inviting readers to see her and her family differently through the sexual tensions and reversals of gendered positions she uncovers in it, Bechdel creates a new kind of family album—one that is both an homage to her dead father and a charting of shifts in the theory and the practice of gendered relations in later-twentieth-century America. Moreover, in her autographic of her father’s biography,

⁹ “I wanted to put a few things straight,” explains the narrating Marjane from her studio at Place des Vosges, one of the oldest districts of Paris. “When I arrived in France, I met many people who expected me to speak Arabic. So many Europeans do not know the difference between Arabs and Iranians. They don’t know anything of our centuries-old culture. They seem to think Iran has always been a country of religious fundamentalists, that Iranian women either have no place in our society or that they are hysterical black crows. In fact, Iranian women are not downtrodden weeds: my mother’s maid has kicked out her husband, and I myself slapped so many men who behaved inappropriately in the street. And even during the worst period of the Iranian Revolution, women were carrying weapons,” Marjane declares with conviction (Kutschera).

Bechdel counters Second Wave feminism's injunction to women to think back through their mothers and transgenders or queers the narrative of genealogical recovery.

Many more graphic memoirs and novels are now being produced around the world by cartoonists such as Julie Doucet and Phoebe Gloeckner. Their emphasis on representing faces and bodies indicates that our ideas of autobiographical subjectivity and our readerly identifications will increasingly be shaped by this conjunction of visual and verbal representation. That is, we turn to comics for not just pleasure and humor but for the unique way they register gender in our times and motivate a relationality through which the graphic artist and reader co-construct narratives across gutters and frames.

MODERNIST CITIZENS AND THE STATE

There is an increasing number of narratives published since 2000 that emerge out of the powerful transformations taking place in nations around the world and the realignments of national interests across regions of the globe. These narratives engage the relationship of modernity, the nation, and women's citizenship in the 21st century.

Probably the most widely read and translated political life narrative has been Hillary Clinton's *Living History* (2003). Sold for several million dollars and bought by several million people around the globe, Clinton's narrative is the story of her self-making as a viable presidential candidate. It narrates the modernist story of the individual's rise to prominence and success in her profession and her deeply personal calling to serve the country.¹⁰ As a celebrity narrative, Clinton's *Living History* offers blue-prints and talking points, fables of origin in "Middle America" and performances of credentials on the world stage, testaments to character and calls to identification, apologies and manifestos; its publication has offered sources of income for the campaign and sound bites for the media.

Produced in the shadow of scandal and in anticipation of a presidential run for the White House, *Living History* can be read as a narrative weighed down by its multiple agendas. Those multiple agendas are projected through the heterogeneous subject positions that the narrating "I" takes up. The "Hillary" who narrates *Living History* assumes the political subject positions of sitting senator, former first lady, and presidential aspirant. Clinton attempts to consolidate the figure of the first woman presidential candidate as American, woman and winning politician, at once intimately human and remotely experienced and confident. To refute her detrac-

¹⁰ Of course this association of bourgeois individualism, the ideology of national progress, commodity capitalism, and autobiographical narration is at least two and a half centuries old in the United States. So, too, is the understanding that the life story can be a lucrative venture, or at the least can bring in capital (financial, moral, cultural).

tor's caricature of her as a "femi-nazi" and reposition herself as a centrist candidate/senator whose values align with the normative values identified with women's role and identities, she also must project her normative femininity through the feminized subject positions of daughter, mother, wife, and wounded spouse who suffered but stuck by her man. At the same time, she must project her claims to political viability through the subject positions of patriot, policy wonk, and battler. She does this in part by invoking the metaphor of politics as "war," figuring herself as a warrior and survivor of scarring battles. And always she has to situate her defining identity as quintessentially "American," a self-understanding that locates her origins in "middle America" and her values as spiritual and liberal.

As a promise of electability, *Living History* becomes a vehicle that enables Clinton's reader to imagine a woman as president. Through it, Clinton confronts the bias against women in high office, exposes the workings of gender ideology in responses to her, affirms her long struggle to change the terms of women's participation in public life, and claims her story as a break-through story of overcoming the gender barrier to presidential leadership. She thus figures herself as the embodiment of social change: "I represented a fundamental change in the way women functioned in our society" (5). Projecting herself as a "symbol" of the change in women's lives, identities, aspirations, and achievements in the United States, the Clinton of *Living History* imagines herself as the new face of the nation itself, and her political trajectory as the realization of the promise of "America's" liberal democracy.

Elsewhere around the world women have also been producing narratives of their "rise" to public office. There are, of course, the official and unofficial biographies of such figures as Angela Merkel of Germany, Helen Clark of New Zealand, and Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf of Liberia. But women who have achieved high office have also been writing their own versions of their rise to public prominence. Such retrospective narratives rehearse through the performativity of self-narrating the progressive goal of women's advancement in the public sphere as viable candidates and effective politicians, despite the obstacles placed in their way. They, too, are claiming their lives as embodiments of the modernization of the nation.

In contrast, other narratives of the nation written by women use personal narrative to reposition themselves vis-a-vis gendered citizenship. Given the West's "war on terror" and the rise of Islamic fundamentalism, it is not surprising that a proliferation of narratives by women coming out of Islamic nations and circulating in the West, there to be taken up in culture wars about the status of women in Islam and in the Islamic state. Gillian Whitlock describes such autobiographical narratives as "soft weapons" in the war on terror. In the last decade, for instance, memoirs by Iranian women have attained global prominence and circulated, in several languages, throughout both literary and popular culture. We have already noted the importance of Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* (written in France) as an autographic addressed to the West that offers a revisionary history of the Iranian Revolution and, in so doing, makes a substantial critique of British and American imperialism, as well as in-house fundamentalism, in maintaining a dictatorial regime in Iran. Satrapi's is only one memoir to come out of the aftermath of the Iranian Revolu-



tion. Since 2000, three other memoirs by Iranian women have been circulating internationally in English: the well-known *Reading Lolita in Tehran* by Azar Nafisi (2003), *Lipstick Jihad* by Azadeh Moaveni (2005), and *Iran Awakening* (2006, written with Moaveni) by Shirin Ebadi, who won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2003 for her work on women's rights.

Nafisi, daughter of the mayor of Tehran before the revolution, was a professor of English literature at its University of Tehran but was expelled in 1981 for refusing to wear the veil and did not teach again until 1987. Her memoir chronicles how, in 1995, under surveillance by the authorities, she left the university and held regular secret meetings with seven of her female students at her house to read and discuss great novels of the Western tradition, such as Nabokov's *Lolita* and Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, from a post-revolutionary Iranian perspective. In 1997, Nafisi left Iran for the US, where she wrote the memoir and where she currently teaches (Johns Hopkins). "I left Iran, but Iran did not leave me," Nafisa notes in a memoir that intertwines the pleasures of reading Western novels with nostalgia for a world and culture left behind. Given Nafisi's current location in the American academy and her powerful evocation of the danger of discussing Western literature illicitly in Iran, some reviewers have noted the book's excessively pro-Western stance and remarked on the political context in which it circulates, inviting Western readers to reaffirm stereotypes of Iranian Islamicism and thereby providing a soft weapon in the "war on terror."¹¹

While Nafisi's memoir has circulated internationally, Azadeh Moaveni's *Lipstick Jihad: A Memoir of Growing Up Iranian in America and American in Iran* is less well-known. As a writer for *Time* magazine whose family moved to California when she was a child, Moaveni is curious about an Iran she never knew and so relocated there for over a year to write a memoir of discovering post-revolutionary Iran. Moaveni critiques the regime as a "culture of lies," but is also drawn to life in Tehran. Her memoir traces how she made friends among the upper-class youth culture in Tehran during the days of the short-lived pro-democracy movement around 1997-2001, and assesses the complex mixture of resistance and fundamentalist ideology that informs young people's views of themselves and the world. She describes herself donning a head scarf to appear in public, where she visits malls and cafés to find a youth culture that is, beneath its surface proprieties, permeated by eroticization expressed in drugs, dancing and sex. Moaveni observes that for secular women the opportunity for education increased after the revolution, but for traditional women life became more restricted, and women generally have difficulty finding positions and validating the independence that they have come to expect. Her critique of the persistence of gender-specific norms despite a shift in national ideology and values has important implications, particularly for nations in which Islamic practices, such as head scarves, become a matter of policy.

¹¹ See Theresa Kulbaga's review in *College English*.



Another kind of response to shifts in concepts of gendered work and practices in the nation is articulated in *Iran Awakening: A Memoir of Revolution and Hope* by Nobel laureate Shirin Ebadi, which was published in 16 languages but not in Farsi. As someone who had been, at 31, a leading woman judge before the revolution and critical of the US-backed regime of the Shah, Ebadi remained in Iran throughout it, although she was gradually demoted because she was a woman, and finally stripped of her position. She became a human rights lawyer protesting through the courts the premeditated killings of dissidents, at considerable danger to herself. In her memoir, she argues that Iran's legal system betrayed the revolution by diminishing women's rights (because under the new penal code, a woman's life was declared worth half that of a man). But her memoir also narrates how she challenges the regime day by day in the courts, in the name of patriotism and morality. And she mingles her history of post-revolutionary Iran with accounts of her domestic life as a mother balancing the demands of home and its gendered labor. She then details her time in Tehran's Evin prison —she is imprisoned in 2000 because she videotaped the testimony of a key witness to the killing of a young activist during student riots in 1999— where women inmates are assumed to be prostitutes. And, in this book addressed in particular to a United States that labeled Iran part of the “axis of evil,” Ebadi makes a case for the possibility of social justice in the new nation, asserting that a progressive version of the Islamic Republic can be compatible with modern democracy (see Boustany).¹²

ON-LINE LIVES

The burgeoning modes of online self-expression are shaping new modes of self-presentation. Some, such as blogs, adapt written genres of self-writing. Other mixed-media forms such as social networking sites generate composite modes of digital life narrative. Yet others, such as massively multiplayer online games, use avatars that allow users to reimagine themselves —with different gender, ethnicity, bodily features. Consider how the following sampling of online sites are changing our concepts of what constitutes the gendered self.

Journalistic web-logs or blogs are the most obvious link to written life narrative. On them users write extended personal narratives, update them regularly, and air deeply personal experiences and thoughts. But the majority of blogs are unlike diaries in that they are interactive sites for communities which allow users to comment interactively by raising questions, offering the comfort of shared experience, and “being there” for others in the network of friends, most never met in the flesh. Such websites as *Xanga* provide a means of translating between languages, which

¹² See the review by Nora Boustany and the *New York Times Book Review* piece by Laura Secor.



facilitates international exchange and encourages diasporan users to communicate with others in their home countries.

The public site *LiveJournal* offers bloggers a method of both self-expression and self-help. While they may post photos, images, and music, it is driven by diary-like entries, grouped in forums that users join to engage in dialogue. On the Depression Forum, for example, members discuss a range of feelings from teenaged angst to struggles with mental illness and self-harming practices, such as cutting, that they may have engaged in. Although users attest to its therapeutic value and the comforts of having a responsive community, a skeptic might raise some issues: to what extent are clichés of depression rehearsed by self-dramatizing writers adopting stereotypic personas? What of the voyeurism encouraged especially among users who consume others' posts without participating? It is of course not possible to validate the authenticity of those posting, though regular users often claim someone is "posing"; but many seem unconcerned about accuracy if the "authenticity effect" is sufficient. On the other hand, interactive blogs encourage the sharing of self-experience and promote a view of the self as flexible, responsive and dynamic. They enable users in remote and rural areas to discuss sensitive issues of sexuality, gender dysfunction, and experience which may promote greater education and foster resistance to repressive community norms.

Lest we assume that life narrative blogs are always liberatory, however, consider such sites as the so-called "Pro-ana" and Pro-mia" blogs of anorexics and bulimics, which are popular among young women worldwide. These sites focus on how the community of users can achieve and maintain hyper-thin bodies. They reject the notion that such practices constitute mental illness, and encourage self-surveillance and discipline by encouraging confession of lapses, posting "thinspirational" songs and images of stick-thin models that link the hyper-thin body to fame and wealth. Concerned that such sites, typically only open to users, are contributing to illness and death, MicroSoft shut down four of them in 2007 (Catan); but some believe that such censoring only drives true believers underground and strengthens their sense of persecuted dedication.

We cannot discuss the many other kinds of online sites that are reshaping ideas of life writing, but the following are particularly provocative:

- *PostSecret*, a website created by Frank Warren to showcase postcards that people mail in. The option for anonymous confession of dark secrets and participation in the voyeuristic pleasure of reading them have made this site a favorite for the public performance of intimacy.
- *YouTube*, which emphasizes online performance, has a category called self-videos, where videomakers perform the self. These are seemingly solo autobiographical presentations (although they require either a crew or a webcam) and videomakers often adopt personas and imitate other characters as they confide "private" feelings. Thus impersonation is everywhere on YouTube, and the line between disclosure and performance is a fluid, even illusory, boundary. YouTube was notoriously the site of the popular LonelyGirl 15 videos, which in 2006 were revealed to be, not the haunting disclosures of a teen-



ager, but the performance of a woman in her twenties stylizing moments of adolescent angst. Will YouTube self-performance, with its instantaneous circulation and global audience, become a mode of sustained and introspective self-narration? Who knows whether, a century from now, we will all record our life narratives in video capsules for posterity, thereby producing an extensive archive realizing the call to narrate the personal (with or without the political).

- *Social networking* sites such as FaceBook and MySpace have taken the younger generations, those in their teens and twenties, by storm. On such sites, our students navigate the anonymity of the large research university and the complexities of life without family and old friends. Such sites enable users to join collectives linked by their creation of a user profile and to gain numerous online “friends,” but the formats sharply curtail possibilities for self-narration because of their question protocols and limited formats. Because business interests use them for advertising and for gaining information on the consumption habits of users, one might ask to what extent such social networking sites work against a concept of the complex and interiorized self? Regarding users as social beings defined by consumer tastes and the size of their friend group suggests a conformist sense of personhood. At the same time social networking sites enable transnational exchange among those in the world’s developed nations with the means and leisure time for such networking.
- *Avatar Selves/SecondLife* offer opportunities for enhanced self-referencing. While many online sites suggest that users are “authoring” themselves—as makers, filmmakers, expressers—virtual self-presentation can also occur on simulation sites that allow users to choose fantasy personas to act out their desires as avatars, or alter egos. SecondLife, perhaps the best known of these, is defined as an unstructured virtual role-playing environment¹³ in which users can create new, dramatically different personas, extending themselves online to escape the constraints of their everyday lives. An avatar may be a creature with wings (since everyone can fly), horns, or bestial features, or a hybrid of several beings. The central activity of SecondLife is consumption through economic transactions. While this may hone entrepreneurial skills and reward a Franklinian notion of enterprise, the potential uses for autobiographical narration through role-playing are as yet limited, although the potential they afford autofictional reflection through visually projecting oneself “otherwise” are intriguing.

¹³ More specifically SecondLife is an example of massively multiplayer online games (MMORPGs). See the discussion by Tracy Wilson in the newsletter from <<http://howstuffworks.com>> (Fall 2007?) exploring the deep connection between the user and the avatar: <<http://electronics.howstuffworks.com/mmorpg.htm>>.



Digital life writing introduces new questions for scholars of autobiographical narration. When virtual self-recording is for unknown, communities, how are self-presentation, and indeed self-experience, changed? In what ways is the previous reliance of life narrative on a stable self with recognizable features thrown into question? We are only at the beginning of this transition from analog writing to digital self-presentation, but such questions will increasingly occupy theorists.

VULNERABLE SUBJECTS: NARRATIVES OF TRAUMA, TESTIMONY AND WITNESSING

Since the late 1990s, as scholars across the humanistic disciplines theorize trauma, those in literary and cultural studies have considered acts of testimony and witnessing. This activity within the academy has tracked the publication of testimonies and memoirs of radical trauma, political violence, physical, social and political vulnerability. The practice of witnessing informs such autobiographical genres as Holocaust narratives, identity movement narratives of rights, narratives of incest and violence in the family, disability narratives, and narratives of exile and displacement. It emanates from Western publishers, but also from the dispersed global sites of national storytelling such as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa and the Inquiry into the forced removal of indigenous children from their families (the inquiry into the Stolen Generation) in Australia. Such acts of personal storytelling are being employed increasingly in the service of nation-building and national projects of reconciliation.

Narratives produced and circulated within this regime of human rights confront readers with emotional, often overwhelming accounts of dehumanization, brutal and violent victimization, and exploitation. The speaker insists that the history of suffering and abuse he or she (of those for whom s/he speaks) experienced and remembered can no longer go un-narrated. Often, witnesses understand and position themselves as members of a collectivity whose story can and must be told. Readers and listeners are asked to recognize the risks of witnessing, to validate suffering and survival, to confer a different status on those who have been disparaged by history, and to play a role in protecting the humanity and dignity of the other. Narratives of witness thus make an urgent, immediate, and direct bid for the attention of the reader/listener and call the reader to an ethical response through their affective appeals for recognition.¹⁴

Such narratives are, at this time, often gender-specific. Over the last two decades, the majority of those people bearing witness to histories of profound degra-

¹⁴ Thus, while there can be many unpredictable responses to the publication, circulation, and reception of personal narratives of suffering and loss, scenes of witness are ones in which the narrator, the story, and the listener/reader are entwined in an ethical call to empathic identification and accountability, recognition, and oftentimes action.



dation, vulnerability, and violence (psychic and physical) have been women—mothers, wives, and children of those who disappeared through murder and torture. This was the case of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings in South Africa. Two kinds of witness narratives are predominantly (though not exclusively) masculine: one is prison memoirs of common or political prisoners who may have been activists in or out of prison. The male witness is thus a victim of state repression. The other kind is narratives of child soldiers telling shocking stories of coming-of-age as gun-toting, brutally violent young men who are victims of campaigns of organized hyper-masculinization that turn them into perpetrators of violence. One such best-selling story of masculinization through violence is Ishmael Beah's *A Long Way Gone* (2006). In these two kinds of narratives the male witness is a victim of state repression, jailed for his intellectual (gendered masculine) activities.

In the production, circulation and reception of women's narratives of witness within the human rights regime, the figure of the victim has often been feminized as an oppressed subject of tradition or political oppression. She is represented as passive, physically and sexually vulnerable, and emotionally overwhelmed by the very act of remembering in public. Nonetheless, women's willingness to come forward to testify, however problematic in the contexts of human rights protocols and institutions, has produced critical acts of intervention in bringing to public attention the erasure of the kinds of violence suffered by women in contexts of radical harm.¹⁵

Recently, women have turned to personal narrative to play another role in projects of national truth and reconciliation. Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela's *A Human Being Died that Night* (2004) is a powerful example of the genre of standpoint reconciliation. A Harvard-trained psychologist and facilitator for victims at the TRC, Gobodo-Madikizela produces a hybrid narrative, part inquiry into evil, part meditation on forgiveness, part account of her interviews in prison with Eugene de Kock, the notorious perpetrator of apartheid responsible for killings and torture, and part psychological encounter with the "victim" within. From the positionality of black survivor of the apartheid regime, Gobodo-Madikizela confronts her own vulnerability, the figure of the perpetrator who positions himself as victim of higher-ups, the moral ambiguities of binary regimes of adjudication, and the legacies of a dehumanizing history. In the case of Gobodo-Madikizela's memoir, the witness takes up the position of vulnerability not as victimization but as a standpoint, however unstable, for investigating the conditions of violence and returning intersubjective vulnerability to the other. As Butler suggests in *Giving an Account of Oneself*, the willingness to imagine oneself in the position of the other and remain vulnerable to the opacity of the other in giving an account of oneself is an important aspect of women's contribution to the human rights project of social justice and reconciliation after great violence (3-40).

¹⁵ The terms of reference of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, for instance, failed to acknowledge gender-based violence against women: degradation, sexual and physical violence, and the social death that may result.

Marie Beatrice Umutesi's *Surviving the Slaughter: The Ordeal of a Rwandan Refugee in Zaire* is also the narrative of genocide and survival combining the survivor's tale of violence, displacement, and vulnerability with the professional sociologist's standpoint of analytical objectivity. Like Gobodo-Madikizela, Umutesi takes her experience as a refugee as the ground and compulsion for her journey through the madness of violence unleashed and human abandonment sanctioned as she attempts to answer the question: "What led us to this extremity?" Her standpoint as a professional sociologist offers her compensatory structure and distance before the abyss of extremity.

In the personal arena, there has been an outpouring of life narratives of vulnerability that interpret gendered experience. Consider, for example, the story of mourning after the death of a loved one, whether a partner or family member, what critics have called "thanatography." This generic form was widely employed to express grief and outrage about the situation of those who succumbed to HIV-AIDS, where it was often used to confront and counter social intolerance of homosexuals (including the linkage of gay sexuality to the culture of drug addicts). And certainly survivors have often written memoirs of those lost to them as a form of consolation and a memorial to the deceased.

Some recent examples mark new departures in using thanatography as a public form of gendered mourning, and two quite different examples suggest how it links up with other areas we have discussed. Joan Didion's *The Year of Magical Thinking* (2006) begins with the sudden death, one night at dinner, of her husband of nearly 40 years, and chronicles her non-rational responses to the event, acts aimed at bringing him back or denying that his death really happened. The event is complicated by the sudden and ultimately fatal illness of their 38-year-old daughter Quintana, who requires extensive hospitalization. Didion's journal is written in a raw prose evoking her feelings of pain and rage, as the narrative seeks a frame for understanding this uncharted experience and what it makes of being a "partner" and "mother." Interweaving textual scraps from poets, psychologists, doctors, and etiquette advisors, Didion also theorizes her own process as a way to gain distance from it and affirm that she can continue as a writer, despite great loss. Her story refuses the comfort that writing such stories are supposed to discover, the notion that "scriptotherapy" is indeed healing. In her bleak assessment and insistence on the fragmentary nature of contemporary experience, Didion charts a new kind of vulnerability that can invade the certainties of intimate life.

Edwidge Danticat, the Haitian-American author of several novels, also published a memoir of mourning in 2007, *Brother, I'm Dying!* Danticat chooses to tell her story quite differently, as a generational memoir of how the recent decades of dictatorship and violence in Haiti registered on her family divided between a home ravaged by the Tonton Macoutes, brutal soldiers of the Duvalier regime, and immigrant life in New York, where her father, Mira, a salesman, was reduced to driving a cab. It focuses on the deaths of her father and his brother, her uncle Joseph, within months of each other. This framing of how lives in the family as linked or divergent situates the story of how she and one brother were left in Haiti when their parents and the younger children moved north, how they dealt with feelings of abandon-



ment through letter exchanges and negotiated their dangerous world. Danticat thus tells a profoundly relational story that connects the extended, diasporan family to centuries of national history and shows the intersections of the personal with national and transnational histories of colonial violence in the Americas.

While reviewers praised the “healing power” of this family story, with its use of memory to construct a family memoir, Danticat is, like Didion, less sanguine about the demise of her relatives and the transnational story of casual violence revealed in their deaths. Her uncle, who had lost his voice to a radical laryngectomy, left Haiti at 81 and was detained by US agents on arrival; he died a day later. Her father wasted away from pulmonary fibrosis. Both were buried in a remote New York cemetery, far from home. Although she is pregnant with new life in the family, it does not compensate for these indignities. In observing “I wish I knew that they were offering enough comfort to one another to allow them both not to remember their distressing, even excruciating, last hours and days,” Danticat refuses the comfort that writing grief supposedly brings and underscores the vulnerability of refugees in these times.

MATERIAL LIVES

The body, in its senses and materiality, has been a central site for theorizing gender and subjectivity and for remembering the past and envisioning a future. Writers of many sorts who were positioned at the margins of discourse at various historical moments —women, slaves and colonized subjects, the dislocated and disabled— have used narratives of their experience to intervene in social arrangements and to seek amelioration of their condition. Many kinds of embodied narratives are being explored, particularly those of gay and transgendered subjects in narrative and performance. We will speak about shifts in the presentation of what Tom Couser has called the “some body memoir,” the narrative that foregrounds the organs and desires of the literal body. We want to turn to a few particular kinds of life narrative that may not spring as readily to mind: the positioning of the body in activist disability narratives and the framing of materiality in food narratives.

The US is one of several nations in which social movements to address rights for the disabled have produced memoirs written by those with disabilities and impairment, people seemingly situated at the margins of mainstream culture. In many of these stories the authors have tended to portray themselves as victims, and disability as a personal illness or tragedy to be overcome by extraordinary effort. Arguments now being made by rights activists, however, suggest that if cultural conditions were changed, impaired individuals could be accommodated in society; further they insist that the social meaning of disability is stigmatizing and degrading of those with disabilities, and that discourses of “disability” reproduce able-ist norms that encode the differences of those with various forms and degrees of impairments as abnormative (Gerschick 1264). Rosemarie Garland-Thomson notes the analogical relationship of disability and gender as socially constituted axes of identity: “Disability, like femaleness, is not a natural state of corporeal inferior-



ity, inadequacy, excess, or a stroke of misfortune. Rather, disability is a culturally fabricated narrative of the body, similar to what we understand as the fictions of race and gender. The disability/ability system produces subjects by differentiating and marking bodies” (77).

The growing strength of the disability rights movement and the increasing sophistication of disability studies and theory are contexts through which recent memoirs experiment with alternative genres of the autobiographical that are explicitly in dialogue with the social terms of their narrators’ identities as differently abled and the history of the social construction of abnormative bodies. Such dialogues can take the form of memoir and produce a kind of “writing back” to conventional victim narratives of wounded suffering, as they call for social change and enact or perform alternative subjectivities that claim, especially in the case of women, the possibility of a sexualized body outside the representations of disabled women as either desexualized or hypersexualized. In positioning themselves as disabled subjects who address the history of their marginalization, life narrators who focus on reframing their impairment not as disability, as stigmatized abnormality, but as visible difference, however, risk making a kind of side show or entertainment of themselves. Brief discussion of a few recent narratives suggests some of the stakes of writing a disabled life in both its vulnerability and its materiality.

In *Blind Rage: Letters to Helen Keller* (2006), Georgina Kleege engages with the narrative by the deaf and blind Keller, *The Story of My Life* (1903), written when Keller was 23 with the help of her teacher Anne Sullivan, as well as Keller’s subsequent letters. Kleege, who has become nearly blind, troubles Keller’s portrayal of the helpless, trusting female child and counterpoints it to her own experience of losing sight. Developing the concept of “blind rage” to signal her quarrel with the “plucky, chirpy self-reliance” expressed in Keller’s narratives, she writes, “You set an impossible standard. You with your cheerfulness, your stiff upper lip, your valiant smile in the face of adversity” (190). In both critiquing Keller as “the first disability poster child” (192) and acknowledging the woman as a trailblazer who ironically cannot speak to her, Kleege stages an explicitly relational engagement with the disable other that challenges the disability paradigm of silent, valiant female suffering and suggests a new mode of dialogic intervention.

Similarly the recent memoirs of other disabled writers such as Anne Finger in *Elegy for a Disease: A Personal and Cultural History of Polio* (2006) take issue with their own positioning —as paralyzed in Finger’s case— to focus on cultural conditions that have made it difficult for them to negotiate their lives. As Simi Linton asserts in *My Body Politic* (2005) forming collectivities in disability studies at this time enables people to refuse being identified as pathological or abject. They are enabled to refuse a marginal location as outsiders and to critique “how disability is represented in all kinds of texts —in literature, film, the annals of history” (Tuhus-Dubrow).

A focus on embodied materiality has also generated new kinds of memoirs, indeed new kinds of subjects, formerly relegated to the margins of life writing. A notable example is the widespread popularity of the food memoir as a way to tell stories of the family and the nation, of ethnic heritage and diasporan mixing. Although food has been a subject of narrative for as long as there have been cook-

books and eating diaries, the food memoir has become a mode of wide interest and enabled new narratives about production and consumption, a domestic domain formerly seen as the work of women or servants. “Gastrography” (Baena 105-16), as these memoirs are called, offers readers multiple kinds of pleasure and “food” for self-revision.

Some memoirs conjoin the food narrative with discovery of a vocation, such as adult food critic Ruth Reichl’s *Tender at the Bone* and two subsequent memoirs, *Comfort Me with Apples* and *Garlic and Sapphires*. For Reichl, after growing up in a dysfunctional home in the 1950s, the pleasures of cooking, eating, and being recognized as an accomplished woman on her own terms are linked—literally, as with the tasty vegetarian casserole recipe of her days in a Berkeley commune. The relationality of Reichl’s narrative is potentially a literal one: the reader, preparing the recipe, may “taste” Reichl’s experience and share her remembered pleasure palpably. Thus the narrative grounds her—as former *New York Times* food reviewer and editor in chief of *Gourmet* magazine—in the authority of genuinely embodied experience. The food memoir, as a genre of food-laced memory for both readers and writers defining themselves through their culinary expertise, is also a genre in a gendered field. In the US as in much of Europe, the prominent chef is a powerful role usually the province of white males (from James Beard to Emeril Lagasse, Mario Batali, and Paul Prudhomme), and the upper echelons of chef-dom and reviewing still difficult for women to break into.

Increasingly, memoirs linking ethnicity and food have become a way to register difference and specify the coordinates of the writer’s cultural identity, as is the case in the “soul food memoirs” of Nikki Giovanni in *Quilting the Black-Eyed Pea* (2002), where her grandmother’s meatloaf becomes a way to tell the family’s story over generations.¹⁶ More globally food functions in our age of the internationalization of cuisine as a tangible means to evoke for readers the particularity of cultures they have not encountered, regions to which they have not traveled and may imagine only in negative stereotypes. *The Language of Baklava*, the recent first-person memoir of Diana Abu-Jaber, an Iranian in exile in Los Angeles, interweaves the pleasure of eating Persian food with other aspects of negotiating the family’s lives as diasporan subjects.

While some narratives are assuredly gastrographies, others invoke food as both memory and metaphor, and suggest that readers may read *for* food, eating, hunger and the like as indices of shifts in subjectivity. The invocation of a particular food can serve multiple purposes: it can reference everyday materiality or be a lens through which identity is projected. It can be transubstantial, an object that is changed into something else in the course of the narrative. Characteristically these

¹⁶ See also Vertamae Smart Grosvenor’s *Vibration Cooking: Or Travel Notes of a Geechee Girl* as a narrative of the rise of an African American middle class. Stories of unsavory food and the scarcity of food, the specter of hunger, dominate many narratives. See, for instance, Marya Hornbacher’s *Wasted*, a narrative of living with and trying to survive anorexia.

narratives may interweave close descriptions of the remembered pleasures of eating food with the politics of food —hunger and scarcity as a sign of class or economic positioning, particular diets as indicative of colonial regimes. The rise of gastrography may indeed signal the rise of a privileged, radically personal form of memoir, in which “you are what you eat,” with its provocative suggestion that the subjectivity of another can be reproduced and tasted.¹⁷

CONCLUSION

What does it mean to raise issues of gendered difference and representations of gendered experience in the first decade of the 21st century? We have suggested some of the ways that early 21st century memoirs and witness narratives by women are contributing a shift in the terms of gendered representation and gender relations. We conclude by raising some questions for further inquiry.

- How does gender intersect with multiple axes of difference to produce, inform, contest, and transform transnational identities and relations? And how does the transnational feminist subject address the asymmetries of access and power among women, as well as between men and women, amid global circuits, institutions, and processes? What genres of the autobiographical might encompass and embody new transnational formations?
- How is the articulation of gendered relationships in visual/verbal media a new formation? In graphic memoir, for example, gender is marked visually in the avatar but gender itself may be destabilized through the narrative. If the different media of self-representation register gender distinctly, then the dissonances of codes of intelligibility and social meaning may be productively multiplied.
- How is the theorization of gender impacted by the technological shift to a virtual environment where new notions of the social as digital networks and the subject as layered, fluid, and interactive emerge in a context also characterized by constant surveillance, rampant commodification, and social paranoia? When subjects become avatars in such on-line venues as SecondLife, or when they consolidate as a multiplicity through life-streaming sites or are refracted through the more eclectic tumblelogs, how might we theorize digital masculinity and virtual femininity? How are gendered representations differently negotiated in digital environments?

¹⁷ We can imagine an engaging pedagogical exercise in which students are invited to write a brief food autobiography or to keep a food diary as an opening to discussions about food, culture, and the gendered body: eating disorders and the politics of fat; genetic modification of food and its impact on children; famine and scarcity in the developing world; and the gendering, in the home and professionally, of food labor.

- What are the new narrations of the citizen and the nation in late modernity to emerge from locations around the globe, whether the narrating “I” is a prominent public figure, a refugee, or a diasporan subject of post-immigrant generational return?
- How do we track the femininization of subjects of witness in the circuits of human rights activism, discourse, and protocols? And how do we access the ethical force of feminized subject positions as people give an account of themselves? How is vulnerability negotiated outside the framework of victimization, as in the many testimonials and memoirs where positions of passivity and victimhood are refused and redefined in ways that pose possibilities for accountability and agency? What re-conceptualizations of trauma, memory and mourning are becoming visible at this historical moment through narratives by women?
- How are gender and sexuality materialized in relation to the textualized body? And what does it mean to rethink the materiality and meaning of women’s bodies in specific arenas, such as food or the environment?

The globalization of feminisms has brought the perhaps inevitable commodification of its venues of circulation and of women’s life writing (with all the constraints attending that commodification). But that very commodification of feminism and the stories that ground and energize its circulation has linked women and women’s stories with mass audiences in ways that prompt and circulate new relations and new knowledge. New genres of women’s life storytelling, coming from dispersed global locations, from differently situated subjects, and through old and new media help us meet what Ella Shohat has described as “[t]he challenge... to produce knowledge within a kaleidoscopic framework of communities-in-relation without ever suggesting that all positionings are identical” (Shohat, *Taboo* 3). It is the inherent relationality of personal narration that is so promising for feminisms in situ and in communication as women enact and position themselves as subjects of contested histories. Shohat asks: “What kind of relational maps of knowledge would help illuminate the negotiation of gender and sexuality as understood in diverse contexts, but with an emphasis on the linked historical experiences and discursive networks across borders? (Shohat, “Area” 70). Feminisms continue to be energized by acts of personal narration that theorize the contested grounds of experience and identity.

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