

Avant-Folk Experiments  
in Late Twentieth-Century American Feminist  
Moving Image and Literary Self-Representation

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## ABSTRACT

### **Avant-Folk Experiments in Late Twentieth-Century American Feminist Moving Image and Literary Self-Representation**

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In the 1970s, influenced by a confluence of radical politics, social justice movements, and new intellectual paradigms including postmodernism, poststructuralism, and postcolonialism, American women embraced personal and collective storytelling with vigor. Feminist historians including Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, Janet Theophano, Marianne Hirsch, and Amelie Hastie have since reframed once peripheral acts of self-inscription—from letter and diary writing to scrapbooking and recipe collecting—as central to the ongoing social and political objectives of the feminist movement, rethinking female authorship along the way. This dissertation builds on their important scholarship to focus specifically on the unique intersections of folk traditions with radical formal and political experimentation in feminist self-representational art made by queer and BIPOC women between the 1970s and the early 2000s. Representing a wide range of intersecting identities, the artists whose work I explore confront the limited and limiting patriarchal conventions of personal narrative and narrative “truth,” but they also challenge mainstream American feminism’s often exclusionary politics by exploring paradigms of sexuality, class, race, and ethnicity in addition to gender. Their interventions exemplify why and how personal storytelling became a privileged means of counter-discourse and rebellion for women across a diversity of subject positions and a range of media.

The enactment of *socially* radical goals through *formally* radical techniques places the texts I examine squarely within a lineage of historical avant-garde movements. At the same time, feminist interventions led historians and artists alike to reconsider and reclaim traditional (and traditionally “feminine”) discursive practices and “folk” traditions like the cookbook, the family album, and the folktale. The seemingly incompatible or contradictory intersections of “folk” and avant-garde, tradition and experimentation, and the domestic and the radical are in fact highly

generative, and they set the stage for further subversions of any clear distinctions between art and theory, self and other, memory and History, fiction and nonfiction, and public and private.

Autobiographical, ethnographic, and archival representational practices have historically upheld white colonial and patriarchal regimes of knowledge and power. Rethinking and remaking the mechanics of representation to suit their own unique identities and subject positions, feminist artists and authors began to experiment with newly hybridized modes that subvert rigid generic boundaries and rules. This thesis examines the “auto-archival” work of filmmakers Michelle Citron, Margaret Stratton, and Nina Fonoroff, Chicana author Norma Cantú, and graphic memoirist Alison Bechdel, who reimagine and remake personal and family archives. Contextualized by the legacy of Zora Neale Hurston, the “fictional autoethnographic” strategies of filmmakers Cauleen Smith and Cheryl Dunye and authors Cantú and Laguna Pueblo writer Leslie Marmon Silko are seen to invent auto/biographical stories and collapse collective histories into single, folklore-inflected life narratives. Finally, in “gastrography,” a representational mode exemplified by the writing of Alice B. Toklas and Vertamae Smart-Grosvenor and the new media experiments of Michelle Citron, explorations of individual and collective identity are enacted through recipes and food narratives. These works are explored as invitations to “cook up” each of the authors’ subjectivity and identity. In each case, the imaginative and literally *creative* acts of feminist “Avant-folk” storytelling restores the stories of marginalized women to public attention and historical discourse, rectifying gaps in the representation of the communities to which they belong on their own terms.

My approach blends close readings of illustrative moving image and literary texts with scholarship from a variety of disciplines in order to investigate the ways in which different modes and media of expression are inextricably linked with self-construction, self-knowledge and self-presentation. This dissertation is indebted to Catherine Russell’s scholarship on experimental ethnography (1999) and archiveology (2018), as well as Leigh Gilmore’s feminist theories of women’s self-representation (1994). Finally, inspired by and taking my cue from the very artists whose work I explore, I have attempted, where possible, to create a text that is itself fluid, that resists imposing singular meanings, rigid generic boundaries, or monolithic definitions on texts that understand identity not as a stable entity but rather as multiple, even contradictory.



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## **Chapter 1. Experiments in Feminist Life Narrative: An Introduction**

“To speak ‘I,’” Laura Rascaroli suggests, is “a political act of self-awareness and self-affirmation.”<sup>1</sup> The active assertion of identity—especially by those who have been historically marginalized from and dispossessed by hegemonic forms of representation—is an essential and powerful expression of agency. As such, self-representation has become an important means for feminist artists and activists of resisting patriarchal regimes of knowledge and power, especially over the course of the last five decades in the United States. The period between 1970 and the early 2000s witnessed the substantial growth and development of Western feminism(s) as political goals and practices were defined and re-defined, legal battles were fought, and conventional understandings of “what counts” as knowledge and knowledge production were challenged by the emergence of new fields of study, critical theories, and oppositional discourses. The battle cry of the Women’s Movement—“The Personal is Political”—fully endorsed self-exploration and autobiographical storytelling in the service of raising consciousness among the disenfranchised women of the nation. Experiments that emerged during this period not only confronted limited and limiting patriarchal conventions of personal narrative and narrative “truth,” many also challenged mainstream American feminism’s often exclusionary politics by exploring paradigms of sexuality, class, race, and ethnicity in addition to gender.

Recognizing that dominant narrative structures and forms are frequently at odds with the representational needs of a wide spectrum of gender-, sex-, class-, and race-based experiences, female-identifying artists—especially those inhabiting other intersecting identities that have been othered and marginalized by mainstream American society—have long experimented with and reworked the so-called “rules” and conventions of autobiography (and self-representation more generally) to fit their needs. One powerful strategy has been the rehabilitation of traditional (and traditionally “feminine”) discursive practices and “folk” traditions—the cookbook, the family album, and the folktale, in particular—in works that wed a radical spirit of experimentation and (post)modern political, ideological, and formal concerns with a deliberate return to marginalized or forgotten narrative traditions. That the socially radical goals of such autobiographical experimentation are enacted through formally radical techniques, moreover, places the works examined in this dissertation squarely within a lineage of historical avant-garde movements. The

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<sup>1</sup> Rascaroli, *The Personal Cinema: Subjective Cinema and the Essay Film*, 2.



seemingly incompatible or contradictory intersections of “folk” and avant-garde, tradition and experimentation, and the domestic and the politically radical are in fact highly generative and can be traced in diverse examples of feminist autobiographical filmmaking and life writing practices in the last three decades of the twentieth century, though they have equally intriguing implications in today’s media landscape.

Indeed, autobiographical discourse, consciousness, and modes of address have today become ubiquitous, infiltrating everyday life alongside the digital technology and social media platforms that have facilitated easy and near-constant self-presentation and self-narration. Bearing their most intimate (or, conversely, their most curated) selves online, women and girls around the world have unprecedented and largely unfettered access to myriad tools and technologies of self-expression and an unparalleled ability to amplify their voices, reaching—if they wish—ever-larger audiences on a near-global scale. Virality and follower-counts have entered everyday parlance, young girls manipulate and exert control over their own image-production using high-tech, high-resolution cameras with the ease and skill of seasoned professionals, and self-aware, media-savvy young bloggers, vloggers, podcasters, and (Insta)’grammers are crafting sophisticated personal narratives grounded in nuanced understandings of identity politics and popular culture. And yet, despite their innovations using new platforms and media of self-inscription, the vernacular interventions into personal narrative made by young women are frequently written off as frivolous by the so-called arbiters of culture and taste.

In this, such young women continue the legacy of generations of foremothers who, despite having been historically excluded from canonical studies of autobiography, have nevertheless always produced life narratives, often in peripheral forms previously deemed frivolous. Furthermore, if the lines between feminist empowerment and agency, the commoditization of the self, and its exploitation under late-stage capitalism seem to have become especially murky in recent years, it bears remembering that the exploitation of women’s lives and life stories is nothing new. As long as there has been a market for intimate storytelling and women willing to speak their proverbial truths, there have been savvy publishers and media conglomerates in the wings eager to bankroll (and cash in on) such efforts, circulating their newest “hot commodities” through national and international markets and fueling, over the



course of the second half of the twentieth century, an increasingly voracious hunger for life stories.<sup>2</sup>

The “outsider” art examined in this dissertation, with its adoption of maligned, devalued, erased or forgotten modes of storytelling and its embrace of experimentation, was birthed in opposition to this commodified culture of confession and its mainstream circuits of distribution and consumption. My exploration here of late-twentieth-century identity politics and its expression in women’s self-representational art is grounded in a genealogy of such works, encompassing a diverse corpus of feminist, avant-folk, autobiographical texts in a variety of mediums and modes, from film and video to written and illustrated memoirs, gastrographies to “fictional autobioethnographies.” Each work is uniquely hybridized—from Vertamae Smart-Grosvenor’s wildly funny, intimate, and informative “cookbook memoir,” *Vibration Cooking: or, the Travel Notes of a Geechee Girl* (1970), to Michelle Citron’s blend of fiction, documentary, and auto-archival filmmaking in *Daughter Rite* (1978) and in her later interactive “database film,” *Mixed Greens* (2004)—and each thus resists easy generic categorization. Each of these texts, in its own unique way, challenges the established “rules” of self-representation, and each contributes to our collective understanding of how women from different generations, ethnic, and class backgrounds, sexual orientation, and life experience approach the task of telling their own stories. As a whole, they are united by their decisively feminist approach to women’s identity and subjectivity, by their experimentation with form and generic boundaries, and by their embrace of a hybridization that complicates the categories of art and theory, fiction and non-fiction, history and autobiographical memory, personal and collective, and public and private.

Americans currently find ourselves in the midst of an unprecedented public reckoning with xenophobia, the climate crisis, ongoing sexual and domestic abuse of women and, above all else, with our country’s disturbing legacies of systematic and structural racism that have long contributed to mass incarceration, financial inequality, police violence and other crises affecting people of color in our country. One important element of this legacy has been the methodical suppression of stories that do not fit the country’s founding myth that the “American Dream”—and all of the privileges and protections entailed therein—is a right for one and for all. This reckoning, it seems, has (re)ignited a new wave of intersectional feminist activism and artistic

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<sup>2</sup> Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*, 125.



and literary output to rival the burst of activity that accompanied the Women's Movement. Among them are deeply personal autobiographical and self-representational works that bring these systemic crises down to an intimate level of individual experience. Of course, feminist art and activism can (and should) never be confined to neat, easily definable, rolling waves of activity as though such work only occurs at specific historical moments; it is ongoing, unrelenting, constantly evolving, and never complete (so, too, is "the" avant-garde, which must continually push forward—covering new territory, breaking new rules, constantly battling with the contemporary "status quo" on its heels—or risk becoming irrelevant). We thus find ourselves at a uniquely opportune moment to *look back* even as we push forward, to uncover and to celebrate the feminist artists and artist-activists who have long produced boundary-breaking work that engages the political through the lens of the personal, artists who have dared to speak "I" regardless of their historical moment.

Although my focus on women's experiments with life narrative puts an emphasis on gendered identity front and center, other important variables like class, race, and sexuality are, as suggested above, crucial to the texts I have chosen to examine. The heterogeneity evident in this work challenges the identification of a shared feminist aesthetic or essentialist characteristics related to women's personal filmmaking and life writing, encouraging instead an acknowledgement of the differences among women and their approaches to self-representation. Most importantly, perhaps, the female authorship represented in each of these works fights against the erasure of women's stories and experiences in all their multifaceted glory and counters gendered essentialism in literary and cinematic representations. Nevertheless, in my efforts towards an interdisciplinary genealogy of feminist, avant-folk, self-representational artistic practices, I have identified a handful of broad strategies that feminist life narrators used repeatedly, each in her own idiosyncratic way, during the period under investigation: the appropriation, de(con)struction, and re-working of auto-archival material; the emphasis placed on fragmentation and multiplicity, relationality and even interactivity; the subversion of discourses of authenticity and truth-telling; and the salvaging and championing of previously marginalized modes and "folk" traditions like the cookbook or family album.

Overall, I aim to delineate critically neglected modes of feminist self-representational media from the 1970s to the early 2000s, untangling their socio-cultural, political, and theoretical roots, and examining their inner workings, while still honoring their idiosyncratic, often deviant,



manifestations in individual texts. In so doing, I endeavor to continue the work of feminist scholars before me whose work in both rehabilitating forgotten women's work and pointing to potential new avenues of theorization offer a corrective to "the astigmatism of patriarchal histories."<sup>3</sup> This undertaking will require me to navigate simultaneously between many intersecting and diverging critical discourses and disciplines, including feminist criticism, film theory, autobiography studies, and even food studies.

Over the course of my research, two primary questions have emerged: First, how do women—who have long seen themselves represented by men and as objects of the male gaze—begin to assert their own agency within a patriarchal culture and while using patriarchal terms, mediums, and language? Indeed, autobiography has historically been understood as a master narrative of white, Western, male hegemony in its celebration of the autonomous individual, and as such does not easily welcome representations of subjectivities that have long been deemed "Other." Second, as a scholar, how does one write about women's counter-discursive works without over-relying on interpretive strategies and frameworks developed by and to discuss the works of these same white, Western, heterosexual men? The following will endeavor to answer these questions, keeping in mind the powerful advice of Leigh Gilmore to "follow a route of estrangement from dominant codes of meaning and look again at the microhistory of cultural production and the critical histories of reception."<sup>4</sup>

I will thus begin with an examination of existing definitions of autobiography and a brief history of different relevant moments in autobiography criticism as well as avant-garde film criticism as it relates to women's self-representation, including a discussion of the historical legacy of exclusion in both fields. This will be followed by an introduction to key historical and theoretical interventions made by feminism and the evolution of discourses of the self, subjectivity and identity during the period under examination, as well as the legacy of these interventions on the fields of life writing and experimental filmmaking.

### **1.1 Historicizing Critical Approaches to Autobiography**

The act of narrating a life, as Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson reveal in their expansive study of the practice, *Reading Autobiography* (2010), can take innumerable forms, from life

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<sup>3</sup> Petrolle and Wexman, *Women and Experimental Filmmaking*, 2.

<sup>4</sup> Gilmore, *Autobiographics: A Feminist Theory of Women's Self-Representation*, 6.



writing to autographics,<sup>5</sup> performance art to works of self-portraiture in mediums like painting, photography, and film. Put most simply, life narrative comprises “a set of shifting self-referential practices” and acts of self-presentation in diverse media that “take the producer’s life as their subject.”<sup>6</sup> Although “autobiography” is the term most commonly used in reference to life writing, it denotes for contemporary scholars a very specific post-Enlightenment generic practice of retrospective life narrative, written by a privileged and self-interested Western subject (almost always white and male) who uses the form to evaluate spiritual development and/or public achievement.<sup>7</sup> Popular and critical understandings of what autobiography is (and who is authorized to write it) have evolved over time, but a brief overview of critical approaches to the genre will help to situate my own study and the reasoning behind my decision to use more inclusive terms like “life narrative” or “self-representational practices” in my discussion rather than the term “autobiography,” which carries with it a historical legacy of exclusionary politics.<sup>8</sup>

German philologist Georg Misch’s multi-volume *A History of Autobiography in Antiquity* (1907) and the work of German historian Wilhelm Dilthey influenced a first wave of critical interest in autobiography in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries alongside a growing public interest in and consumption of autobiographical writing.<sup>9</sup> Early critical interventions focused on works of “high culture” written by accomplished, “representative” subjects within “elite” Western civilizations whose life stories could be read as reflecting the progress of—and aligning with important moments in—Western history.<sup>10</sup> Autobiographical texts were evaluated based on the quality of the life lived, the moral character of their subject, and their ability to shed light on the human condition more generally through their own experiences. This focus excluded popular quotidian forms—including letters, diaries, and journals—and works produced by subjects on the social, cultural, and political margins. Indeed, autobiography has historically served to bolster the paradigmatic narrative of the superiority of the Western, male subject and to control who is—and is not—authorized to produce knowledge; in other words, classical

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<sup>5</sup> Gillian Whitlock coined the term as a “mean[s] to draw attention to the specific conjunctions of visual and verbal text in th[e] genre [of graphic memoir]... and also to the subject positions that narrators negotiate in and through comics” (Whitlock, “Autographics,” 966).

<sup>6</sup> Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*, 1–2.

<sup>7</sup> Smith and Watson, 2.

<sup>8</sup> For lack of a better adjective, however, I will be using the term *autobiographical* to designate self-referential work, both literary and cinematic.

<sup>9</sup> Spengemann, *The Forms of Autobiography: Episodes in the History of a Literary Genre*.

<sup>10</sup> Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*, 195.



autobiography and autobiography criticism was a means of controlling the cultural narrative to maintain the patriarchal and imperial domination of knowledge production.

Georges Gusdorf's *Conditions and Limits of Autobiography* (1956) is a foundational text in autobiographical studies that helped to spark a second wave of autobiography criticism. Although Gusdorf, like earlier critics, posited individualism as the essential condition of Western autobiography and focused on limited cultural models of selfhood that were predominantly Western, male, and white, he contributed to the expansion of autobiography studies by exploring genre conventions and calling attention to the mode's creative and formal elements. This helped to situate autobiography, for the first time, as its own literary genre rather than a subcategory of history.

Additionally, a growing canon of autobiographical texts further served throughout the 1960s to legitimate autobiography studies as a scholarly field. This canon, however, was characterized by a Mischian emphasis on the narratives of "great men" and culturally "representative" (that is, representative of hegemonic culture) life stories. Texts that expressed racialized, gendered, and other non-normative identities were generally ignored, excluded from the canon, or assigned "a subliterary status."<sup>11</sup> As Leigh Gilmore suggests, "Autobiography names the repeated invocation of [the] ideological formation... that autobiography is what men write, and what women write belongs to some 'homelier' and minor traditions."<sup>12</sup>

Scholars in the 1970s, influenced by Gusdorf and by Francis R. Hart's *Notes for an Anatomy of Modern Autobiography* (1970), began to complicate the project of self-representation—which earlier critics had taken for granted as a straightforward, truthful presentation of a unified self—by addressing questions of self-knowledge, self-deception, and self-narration.<sup>13</sup> With the growing influence of postmodern and poststructuralist schools of thought, furthermore, conceits of authority, authenticity, truth, and the possibility of a single "master" narrative were each in turn dismantled and discredited. The 1970s also saw the beginning of feminist scholarship dedicated to life writing; however, the theoretical approaches of these early feminist critics, still grounded in the work of scholars like Georg Misch, would soon be problematized as new theories of women's self-representation were developed. These

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<sup>11</sup> Smith and Watson, 202–3.

<sup>12</sup> Gilmore, *Autobiographics: A Feminist Theory of Women's Self-Representation*, 2.

<sup>13</sup> Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*, 200.



nascent feminist analyses, for example, reflected Misch's understanding of autobiography as the sincere, authentic, and unmediated presentation of the author's sense of (her)self, and they interpreted women's texts as reflections of both the individual's life and the broader reality of all women, thus harkening back to early approaches to autobiography. While this approach would be critiqued by intersectional feminist scholars who rejected essentialist depictions of women's experiences, it also cannot be simply read as feminist scholars being behind the critical curve. Indeed, the critical emphasis on truthfulness and authenticity in women's autobiography can be read as a corrective of the long-standing "attachment of 'lying' to women's cultural productions" and to gendered legacies of authority and power inscribed in the genre.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, the desire to read women's texts as universally representative, while obviously problematic, may be attributed to the simple fact that there was less available women's life writing than men's at the time.

It wasn't until 1980 that the first feminist anthology of autobiography criticism was published. *Women's Autobiography: Essays in Criticism*, edited and with a much-cited introduction by Estelle Jelinek, brought gender into the conversation and, for the first time, sparked debates about the ways in which men and women's life writing might be theorized differently. Moreover, Jelinek and other authors who contributed to the anthology argued for an expansion of the field of autobiography studies to include other kinds of writing like memoirs, diaries, letters, and even fictionalized works that had previously been dismissed or ignored. Concurrently, Mary Mason's equally groundbreaking 1980 essay "The Other Voice: Autobiographies of Women Writers" similarly argued that women's autobiographies do not mimic the patterns established by prototypical male autobiographers, whose egocentric quests for self-discovery or spiritual salvation do not resonate with women's experiences.<sup>15</sup> Together these texts marked the dawn of a new wave of feminist scholarship, which—in response to the limited and exclusionary approaches of previous scholars—worked to theorize women's life writing as its own unique area of study, separate from androcentric understandings of autobiography.

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<sup>14</sup> Gilmore, *Autobiographics: A Feminist Theory of Women's Self-Representation*, ix.

<sup>15</sup> The examples cited by Mason include the model of the self as battleground for the opposing forces of spirit and flesh in Augustine's "Confessions" and the secular, but equally egocentric, tale of individual, isolated self-discovery in Rousseau's "Confessions" (Mason, "The Other Voice: Autobiographies of Women Writers," 20–21).



Feminist scholars of this period also began to form their own counter-canon, through which they have reclaimed previously dismissed forms of life writing and forgotten authors.

Although diverse approaches to theorizing women's life writing would follow, feminist scholars generally agreed that a fundamental difference in the lived realities of men and women translates into differences in their autobiographical texts. Some scholars, like Jelinek, argued that women's texts did not fit the (male) autobiographical archetype of the retrospective, coherent, linear life narrative and its deployment of a sovereign and unified sense of self, but that they were, rather, exemplified by discontinuity, fragmentation, and interruption, a pattern that she connects to the structure of women's daily lives.<sup>16</sup> Others focused their attention on the relationality of women's texts, following Mason's argument that "the self-discovery of female identity... and the disclosure of female self is linked to the identification of some 'other'," which they contrasted to narratives of the autonomous individual exemplified by male autobiographers.<sup>17</sup> While the work of Jelinek, Mason, and other early feminist scholars of autobiography and life writing was groundbreaking for bringing gender into a conversation from which it was previously absent, these early approaches were later critiqued for their essentialist approach to gender in life writing.

Postmodern and poststructuralist theorizing have perhaps had the most profound influence on the contemporary study of life writing and life narrative. Theorists including Lacan, Derrida, Althusser, Foucault, and Bakhtin each problematized Enlightenment understandings of subjectivity and selfhood in their own specialized vocabulary, positing the subject as split and fragmented, constituted in—and bearing an ever more complicated relationship to—language, interpellated by ideological discourse, inhabiting multiple intersecting, overlapping, or conflicting identities, and speaking through multiple, dialogic voices. Furthermore, conceits of authority, authenticity, truth, and the possibility of a single "master" narrative were each in turn dismantled and discredited. The flowering of paradigm-shifting theoretical activity in a variety of fields—from linguistics to cultural studies, history to anthropology—during this period contributed to reconceptualized understandings of the subject, identity, and the possibility of its coherent representation, ultimately re-making monolithic understandings of the autobiographical subject. There is a tendency among poststructuralist literary critics, however, to take the

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<sup>16</sup> Jelinek, "Women's Autobiography and the Male Tradition," 51.

<sup>17</sup> Mason, "The Other Voice: Autobiographies of Women Writers," 20–21.



Foucauldian understanding that discursive regimes, in addition to constructing the subject and shaping the operations of memory, experience, and identity, also govern *who* can tell their stories, the *kinds* of stories they can tell, and the *forms* those stories will take; by this logic, “there is no autonomous, agentic subject outside of discourse, and no freely interpreted or fully controlled self-narration.”<sup>18</sup> And yet, there are subjects who *do* radically break—in their lives and life narratives—with the cultural scripts and strictures by which they are supposedly inescapably governed and defined. Discursive systems, social structures, and the relationships of power they encode can be subverted and resisted by a diversity of tactics in life narration. As Gilmore puts it, “the law of genre”—and, one might add, of gender—“creates outlaws.”<sup>19</sup>

The new critical discourses generated by postmodern, postcolonial, and poststructuralist theories were embraced by many feminists, despite the fact that they often complicated their theoretical work in the study of life narratives. Scholars influenced by postmodern and poststructuralist theories began to problematize previous approaches to autobiography, authorship, and even gender itself. The expansion of feminist theory into new postmodern, intersectional, or what have been called “third wave” iterations led many scholars and activists to insist upon the plurality, fluidity, and multivocality of women’s identities and therefore of feminist politics, which had begun to be criticized for its essentialist definitions of womanhood that privileged the experiences of straight, white, largely middle-class women. Heavily influenced by the work of Judith Butler, Leigh Gilmore’s (1994 ) intervention into feminist life writing criticism and scholarship, which has provided an invaluable discursive framework for my own scholarship, argued against essentialist readings of “women,” “gender,” and “autobiography” as coherent and unified categories of analysis throughout history and across texts. Gilmore suggests that although the early insights of scholars like Jelinek and Mason were important to the trajectory of feminist scholarship, their work made problematic generalizations about the nature of women’s lives and its translation into life writing that are “difficult to sustain when class, race, and sexual orientation are substantively and theoretically incorporated into analysis.”<sup>20</sup> Because, as Gilmore argues, female identity and experience is neither “unitary” nor “transhistorical,” it is misguided to read any single text of life writing as representing a “unif[ied]

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<sup>18</sup> Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*, 55–56.

<sup>19</sup> Gilmore, *Autobiographics: A Feminist Theory of Women’s Self-Representation*, 22.

<sup>20</sup> Gilmore, x.



grounds of meaning” applicable to all women.<sup>21</sup> Gilmore’s admonition against essentialism is an important one for scholarship that seeks to provide nuanced examinations of the differences and idiosyncrasies across women’s self-representational texts.

In opening up the study of life narrative to non-canonical, experimental feminist texts, it is crucial to consider the historical, political, and cultural contexts that have shaped both the subject and the text, for each individual subject “come[s] to consciousness of who they are, of what identifications and differences they are assigned, or what identities they might adopt” in relation to contemporaneous ideological discourses and the cultural formations that surround them.<sup>22</sup> Intersecting elements of identity related to social class, ethnic background, gender, nationality, sexuality, or religion, for example, can take on drastically different meanings depending on the geographical and historical locatedness of the subject, and can in turn profoundly affect the models of personhood and autobiographical expression that are available to her. The fact that cultural understandings of selfhood can change drastically from one historical moment—even one decade—to the next is reflected in assumptions about whose stories are considered culturally significant or relevant, what stories are told, and the shape these stories take. As the above-outlined trajectory of life writing scholarship has shown it would be reductive to presume that any autobiographical text—whether produced by a man or a woman and regardless of the date of production—can be productively read without a thorough understanding of its contexts of production. As such, my exploration of feminist avant-folk life narrative will be grounded in discussions of the specific contexts in which these works were formed, including the site of narration (1950s in the U.S.-Mexico borderlands, for example, or early-1990s Philadelphia as in the cases of Norma Elía Cantú’s *Canícula* and Cheryl Dunye’s *The Watermelon Woman*, respectively) and the historical and sociopolitical context of creation. In what follows, I offer a brief overview of the political and artistic contexts in which these works were formed, and the following chapters will include more nuanced discussions of specific historical or cultural frameworks, where appropriate.

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<sup>21</sup> Gilmore, xii.

<sup>22</sup> Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*, 40.

## 1.2 The Women's Liberation Movement and the Legacy of Consciousness Raising in Feminist Life Narrative

The Women's Liberation Movement radically altered the possibilities of, and importance accorded to women's storytelling in the United States. American feminist activists of the late 1960s and 1970s, having declared that "the personal is political," brought unprecedented political and cultural attention to the experiences of individual women. With the goal of fostering a collective awareness of the systematic oppression faced by women—and the hope that this new consciousness might lead to action—New York Radical Women (NYRW) began to experiment with a new model of group discussion in the spring of 1968 that would rapidly spread across the country. Consciousness Raising (CR), as it was later termed, drew on a diversity of

methodologies—from the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee's methods for "testifying" about racism to the Chinese Revolutionary practice of "speaking 'bitterness'" and revolutionary socialist practices of criticism/self-criticism—in order to encourage women to share



Fig. 1.1 *The Woman's Film* (San Francisco Newsreel, 1971)

their personal experiences with one another.<sup>23</sup> CR groups began to form across the United States, facilitating safe sharing among women about the struggles of their daily lives, forming feminist book clubs where foundational texts like Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) and Shulamith Firestone's *The Dialectic of Sex* (1970) were read, and screening documentaries made within the movement like Julia Reichert and Jim Klein's *Growing Up Female* (1971) and San Francisco Newsreel's *The Woman's Film* (1971).

Emboldened by the awareness that their own personal experiences were not unique—that the systematic oppression of women in a patriarchal society was the norm—women began to

<sup>23</sup> Dougherty, "Feminist Film, A 'First Foray' as Change Agent," 7.



speak publicly about previously private or taboo subjects, from unequal pay and sexism in the workplace to experiences with abortion, abuse, and the quiet traumas of home life typically suffered in silence. The significance for women of finally having permission to speak about their experiences cannot be understated. As Belenky et al. suggest, the sharing of and reflecting upon experiences with others “lead to ways of knowing that enable individuals to enter into the social and intellectual life of their community,” whereas without these interactions, “individuals remain isolated from others” and, perhaps most significantly, “isolated from the self.”<sup>24</sup> Consciousness-raising enabled women to form communities and to embark on journeys of self-discovery. Carol Hanisch, author of the feminist treatise “The Personal is Political” (1969) from which the movement borrowed its rallying cry, called CR “the key to building the Women’s Liberation Movement,” and indeed the practice had profound effects both within the movement itself and on larger cultural practices, including self-representation in literature and film.<sup>25</sup>

With the acknowledgement of the political value of personal storytelling, scholars and artists alike began to examine rhetorics of identity, strategies of self-presentation, and the impact of intersecting discourses on the individual. Indeed, consciousness-raising left a profound legacy in women’s art and literature of the 1970s and beyond, influencing feminist interest in both the consumption and production of autobiography. Feminists seem to have initially been drawn to autobiography during this period based on the common assumption—bolstered by critics of the era (see above)—that the genre gave readers reliable and direct access to the author’s authentic experiences.<sup>26</sup> In other words, their interest in autobiography stemmed from its potential function as a consciousness-raising tool and its ability to foster the sharing of apparently real and truthful experiences of oppression among and between women.

Inspired by the very same CR initiatives, feminist filmmakers in the early 1970s acknowledged that intimate storytelling and acts of bearing witness were invaluable tools that enabled the mining of lived experiences to create a collective form of women’s knowledge. Documented on film, these stories could be shared widely in CR groups and on college campuses, contributing to the movement’s goal of raising consciousness and inspiring action by using the stories of individual women to speak to the systematic problems and multiple

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<sup>24</sup> Belenky et al., *Women’s Ways of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice and Mind*, 26.

<sup>25</sup> From her speech at Marist College, ‘Women & Society Conference’, June 11, 1999. Qtd. in Dougherty, “Feminist Film, A ‘First Foray’ as Change Agent,” 7.

<sup>26</sup> How this “authenticity” would later be challenged by both artists and critics is discussed in Chapter 3.



intersecting and overlapping oppressions faced by women. Much of this potentially revolutionary storytelling was solicited, captured and disseminated by the movement's privileged cinematic form: Cinema Verité-style documentary filmmaking. Taking advantage of lightweight, easy to use cameras and portable sound recording equipment, feminist filmmakers entered the domestic sphere and coaxed stories out of "ordinary" (though typically heterosexual and white, and often middle-class) women in films like Reichert and Klein's *Growing Up Female* (1971) or Kate Millet and Susan Kleckner's *Three Lives* (1971).

Although vérité documentaries had broken important ground in the 1970s and were effective organizing tools and invaluable archives for the intimate testimonies of women, the



Fig. 1.2 *Growing Up Female* (Reichert & Klein, 1970)

form was nevertheless critiqued by a crucial group of feminist film theorists. Scholars like Laura Mulvey and Claire Johnston largely denounced the aesthetics of realism and lack of filmmaker intervention in these films, and they encouraged filmmakers instead to seek new forms of expression that broke with established, male-dominated forms of cinematic language.<sup>27</sup>

As Mulvey articulates in "Film, Feminism, and the Avant-Garde" (1979), the history of both avant-garde and classical Hollywood cinema is a history dominated by men and thus by depictions of women from a male point of view. As a result, women have a political stake in formal experimentation, Mulvey argues, and she points to the marriage of form and content as imperative to a feminist filmmaking practice.<sup>28</sup> Moving beyond the face-to-face discussions of CR groups and the realist aesthetics of vérité documentary by the close of the decade—but not leaving the imperative of personal storytelling behind—feminist artists began increasingly to experiment in their search for

<sup>27</sup> Mulvey, "Film Feminism, and the Avant-Garde"; Johnston, "Women's Cinema as Counter-Cinema."

<sup>28</sup> Mulvey, "Film Feminism, and the Avant-Garde."

aesthetics and forms that would be more adequate to the task of conveying women's subjectivity and experiences.

Reflecting in 1980 on the previous decade's feminist contributions to the art world, Lucy R. Lippard argues that the social structures and "interaction techniques" (as exemplified by CR strategies) developed in the bosom of the Women's Movement offered new models for feminist art based not simply on new ways of working with figures or landscapes but on "inclusive structures or social collages."<sup>29</sup> Art has historically been stereotyped as an "absolutely isolated activity," exemplified by the "narrow, highly mystified, and often egotistical monologue[s]" of male modernist art and by the fetishization of the isolated genius creating "pure" (read: socially and politically detached) art commonly found in histories of the cinematic avant-garde; in contrast, however, Lippard argues that the emerging feminist art of the 1970s emphasized relationality and dialogue, connectivity and inclusivity.<sup>30</sup> The feminist artist does not simply express herself: she expresses herself "as a member of a larger unity, or comm/unity" in a way that could be described by the metaphors of "the web, or network, or quilt."<sup>31</sup> Feminist art of the 1970s, in other words, endeavored to connect the personal to the political, the private to the social, and the individual to the collectivity. In so doing, it created work that engaged with public consciousness-raising, encouraged interactivity, and "insist[ed] on an inclusive and expansive structure" in a way that blends formal, personal, and social concerns.<sup>32</sup>

### **1.3 The 1980s and 1990s: Feminist Sex Wars and Intersectionality**

By the end of the 1970s, the Women's Liberation Movement had made many significant gains—among them the repeal of oppressive laws that discriminated based on sex, the creation of Title IX to ensure equal access to education, increasing public discussions about the harassment, abuse and rape of women, the creation of women's shelters across the country, and securing access to contraception and legal abortions—and, although the concerns of BIPOC, trans, and queer women remained peripheral within the movement, it appeared that social attitudes towards gender roles, at least, were beginning to change for the better. However, the 1980s witnessed the dawn of a newly conservative political regime in America with the election

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<sup>29</sup> Lippard, "Sweeping Exchanges: The Contribution of Feminism to the Art of the 1970s," 364.

<sup>30</sup> Lippard, 363, 365.

<sup>31</sup> Lippard, 363, 365.

<sup>32</sup> Lippard, 364.



of Ronald Reagan, a vocal opponent of abortion and reproductive rights, affirmative action, and many liberal social programs. A growing populist conservative movement—“the New Right”—lamented the social changes of the 1960s and 70s. They rallied against the Equal Rights Amendment (which failed to be ratified to the constitution in 1982), condemned the women’s and gay rights movements, and ultimately denounced what they perceived as the erosion of “traditional family values.”

In addition to the backlash it faced in American politics and popular culture, the American feminist movement also underwent significant changes within its own ranks, with critiques of racial exclusivity and conflicting views on sexuality beginning to overtake the movement’s earlier priorities like reproductive rights and legal inequalities. Black and lesbian feminists criticized the movement for its lack of minority voices and for its essentialist definitions of femininity, which they argued privileged the experiences of upper middle-class, heterosexual, white women. Furthermore, the so-called “feminist sex wars” virulently pitted anti-pornography feminists against “sex-positive” feminists beginning in the early 1980s, opening up sexuality as a major topic of debate for the coming decade(s), and post-structuralist interpretations of gender and sexuality as socially and culturally constructed—not biologically determined—also began to influence feminism towards the end of the decade.<sup>33</sup> Finally, the politics of intersectionality—a term coined by Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw in 1989 to describe the layers of oppression experienced by women caused by overlapping identities of gender, race, and class (with sexual orientation and other identity markers entering the conversation as well)—became an important, lasting concern of the feminist movement.<sup>34</sup> By the 1990s, the collective contributions of women of colour, lesbians, and working-class women had transformed and diversified the feminist movement.

Women’s self-representation in experimental film and life writing once again reflected these changes in feminist priorities. Disillusioned by a growing backlash against feminism, a younger generation of artists viewed the “utopian” strategies of their foremothers in the Women’s Liberation Movement—especially the promotion of positive role models through auto/biographical stories about overcoming oppression or victimhood—as “naively optimistic”

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<sup>33</sup> See, for example, Butler, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution”; and Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*.

<sup>34</sup> Crenshaw, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics.”



and exclusionary.<sup>35</sup> They began to push the boundaries of so-called “respectability,” expanding the terrain of what was allowed into public expressions of their life narratives. Breaking with feminist art practices of the 1970s, they “incorporated transgressive or taboo subject matter,” including “explicit sexual representation,” into their works.<sup>36</sup> In this sense, the art and literary worlds witnessed a new wave of feminist media that was often about coming out—not only in terms of sexuality, though this is certainly the case in many examples, but also “coming out” about experiences that have historically been considered taboo in Western culture. These new works pushed the boundaries of female propriety to a new limit.

While personal storytelling and bearing witness continued to be used as consciousness-raising tactics and counter-discourse, feminist filmmakers and writers increasingly rejected conventional approaches to life narrative, which, more often than not, attempted to stitch women’s experiences and subjectivities onto forms historically dominated and defined by white men (and, eventually, white women) that emphasized “truthful” and “authentic” storytelling in accessible and generally linear forms, exemplified by *vérité* documentary and traditional literary autobiography. Instead, influenced by newly emerging postmodern and poststructuralist schools of thought, they began crafting reflexive portraits that explored identity as fragmented, socially constructed, relational, and multiple. They also turned to hybrid forms that blurred genres—blending fiction and nonfiction or, in film, melding documentary, narrative, and avant-garde practices—and challenged distinctions between the personal and the social, individual and collective, narrative and non-narrative, fact and fiction, popular and academic.

As such, the highly personal, artisanal, and non-hierarchical world of avant-garde filmmaking was attractive to those feminist filmmakers who, having rejected the generic rigidity of both *vérité* documentary and New Narrative (the new critical darling), sought to experiment with self-representation and explore new conceptions of subjectivity established by feminist and poststructuralist schools of thought. William Wees has suggested that the expanding presence of important women filmmakers working in the North American avant-garde over the course of the 1980s was one of the two most important developments of the decade (the second being the growth and evolution of found footage filmmaking).<sup>37</sup> However, the avant-garde film world—

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<sup>35</sup> Tamblin, “No More Nice Girls,” 53.

<sup>36</sup> Tamblin, 53.

<sup>37</sup> Wees, “Carrying On: Leslie Thornton, Su Friedrich, Abigail Child and American Avant-Garde Film of the Eighties,” 72.



not unlike that of autobiography—has long been dominated by male filmmakers and critics and was not especially hospitable or welcoming to women, especially young women looking to upset tradition. In 1987, J. Hoberman suggested in *The Village Voice* that the American Avant-Garde was becoming “increasingly sterile, derivative, and self-involved,” declaring the movement “moribund... the shadow of a shadow,” and Fred Camper announced “The End of Avant-Garde Film” in the Spring issue of *Millennium Film Journal*, exemplifying the oxymoronic “establishment” avant-garde’s surprising resistance to change.<sup>38</sup> In spite of these funereal proclamations, however, the movement’s young women continued to make boundary-pushing, formally and thematically radical personal films.

Indeed, if the avant-garde’s old guard was hostile to these newcomers, many of them were no less hostile to established male avant-garde traditions.<sup>39</sup> Many women who had begun experimenting in film and video rejected the boys’ clubs of lyrical and structural filmmaking, seeking instead a new cinematic language with which to represent their own subjectivities and experiences. Taking advantage of the avant-garde’s rejection of realist mandates of linearity, transparency, and closure—tropes that were being problematized at the time by feminist scholars in their critiques of documentary and narrative filmmaking—they nevertheless sought to challenge the “masculinist avant-garde aesthetic dogmas” that emphasized formal experimentation above all else, including a commitment to political, historical, and socio-cultural issues.<sup>40</sup> As Wees observes in his history of this turbulent period, many of the young experimental filmmakers who emerged in the 1980s heartily opposed the movement’s longstanding celebration of individual, isolated geniuses and “giants” (to borrow from Camper’s un-ironic use of the term) who, aside from Maya Deren, had all been men. Instead, many explored highly personal themes while still maintaining a social or political emphasis.

Crucially, the artisanal and typically individual production practices of experimental filmmaking encouraged profoundly intimate investigations of the Self, and the socially and historically grounded nature of documentary was attractive to the politically engaged filmmaker.

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<sup>38</sup> Wees, 70.

<sup>39</sup> Perhaps the most infamous example of these tensions culminates in the open letter, signed by 75 film- and videomakers and scholars from both Canada and the U.S., that circulated at the 1989 International Experimental Film Congress in Toronto, enumerating a list of complaints and concluding with the declaration that “The Avant-Garde is dead; long live the avant-garde.” (See “Open Letter to the Experimental Film Congress: Let’s Set the Record Straight”; See also Wees, “Let’s Set the Record Straight: The International Experimental Film Congress, Toronto 1989”).

<sup>40</sup> Petrolle and Wexman, “Introduction: Experimental Filmmaking and Women’s Subjectivity,” 3.



Thus, for feminist filmmakers interested in modes of self-representation that were not isolated from the social and political realities of their daily lives, the hybridization of documentary and avant-garde forms held the key, and they forged new paths within the avant-garde that broke with formal rules. The ranks of the American avant-garde had been officially infiltrated by a new generation of artists who—roused by the political demands of the feminist movement and its focus on the everyday lives and experiences of women—were motivated to engage with issues of historical and social consciousness without abandoning personal issues and self-representation. Ultimately, much of the feminist avant-garde filmmaking produced beginning in the late 1970s used the freedom of expression inherent to this mode to experiment with new, self-reflexive approaches to self-portraiture and personal storytelling.

#### **1.4 Automediality, Relationality, and “Evidence” in Women’s Self-Representation**

As has been established, women are not a monolithic category whose experiences can be translated into a coherent set of textual practices or generic conventions. However, in reading individual texts, there are certain recurring patterns, motifs, and strategies that emerge and need to be contextualized before they can be examined in relation to cinematic and literary works of feminist self-portraiture. Automediality, relationality, and “evidence” are three such concepts that are crucial to my exploration of women’s self-representation.

The Women’s Movement’s legacy of consciousness-raising through personal storytelling was invaluable in supporting the growth of public storytelling by women working in a variety of artistic mediums and modes. The more radical and inventive of these women were interested not just in personal storytelling but in changing the very terms—even the mechanics—of self-representation. Confronting and resisting historically male-dominated traditions, many forged novel paths in mediums new and old alike, challenging entrenched ideas about visual language, narrative structure, and form in literary and photo/graphic memoirs, films, videos, and more. The experiments that emerged from the 1970s to the early 2000s exemplify an incredible diversity in terms of both the stories told and the media used.

Much like literary scholars had begun by the 1970s to dismantle Enlightenment understandings of the subject of autobiography as a fixed, stable, and autonomous figure, a similar intervention is underway in the twenty-first century that seeks to challenge traditional understandings of the *media* of self-representation. The media of representation has historically



not been thought about much in autobiography studies beyond its basic conception as an apparently ideologically neutral tool used for the inscription of a preexisting self. Proponents of the relatively young interdisciplinary study of “automedia,” however, have acknowledged that the possibilities of self-representation expand far beyond autobiographical writing and in so doing have expanded the conversation to include expressions of subjectivity and self-inscription in more diverse cultural and media landscapes.<sup>41</sup> This intervention has had important reverberations for scholars interested in life narrative and self-representation by sparking debates about if (and how) different forms of mediation actually *influence* self-construction, self-knowledge, and self-presentation.<sup>42</sup> Studies of automedia, in other words, invite explorations of the ways in which the self (“auto”) and its forms of expression (its “media”) are inextricably linked. By observing the diverse ways in which identities are documented, constructed, and presented through a range of media, technologies, and textual practices, the framework of automedia offers an important corrective to the tendency within autobiography studies to neglect questions about how life stories are shaped by their mediums.

The choice of medium—each with its own unique materiality and its own conventions that may limit or expand the possibilities of self-presentation—is thus both influenced by and influences the subjectivity presented. Given the different conventions and systems of meaning associated with different media, the same subject may experiment with self-representation in written memoir, cinematic self-portraiture, or interactive digital media—as does Michelle Citron at different stages in her career—with (potentially) radically different results. The mixing of different media, moreover, is liable to produce its own unique result in different hands. Photographs are, of course, a medium of (self-)representation in their own right, but they often also accompany or are deployed in written life narratives, film and video self-portraits, and even graphic memoirs, to different effect depending on the contexts of production of the original image (empowered self-portrait? remnant of a traumatic childhood?) and the work into which it has been recontextualized. Each individual medium has near limitless possibilities for subjective expression. In filmmaking, for example—and especially the idiosyncratic and highly individual mode of experimental filmmaking—subjectivity may be expressed behind the camera, at the

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<sup>41</sup> Dünne and Moser, “Automédialité. Pour Un Dialogue Entre Médiologie et Critique Littéraire”; Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*, 168.

<sup>42</sup> Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*, 168.



editing table, through voiceover narration, through the selection of appropriated materials, and myriad other ways.

This dissertation will therefore place great emphasis on the possibilities (and limitations) of self-expression accorded by the artist's chosen medium(s) and the ways in which subjectivity and medium of expression are intertwined. In order to read autobiographical texts through a framework of automediality, some of the following questions will be explored: What are the features, including the freedoms and constraints, of this medium, and how have they shaped the subject's self-presentation? How is this medium implicated in networks of power and does this restrict or enable the subject's self-inscription in any way? In what ways does the medium facilitate the exploration and expression of the subject's multiple, possibly even competing or conflicting, identities? How might traces of the past preserved in (or, conversely, excluded from) different media affect the preservation and (re)presentation of personal or collective memory? Does the subject use multiple media in her self-representation and what effect does this media mix have on the possibilities of self-representation?

Questions of autonomy versus relationality in identity construction and representation will also be a crucial consideration in this study. In contrast to the emphasis in early criticism on the autobiographical subject as autonomous individual, feminist scholars have argued that, because women's identity is often formed in relation to family or community, their self-knowledge and self-inquiry and thus their autobiographical acts are frequently relational.<sup>43</sup> For example, Bella Brodzki and Celeste Schenk, in their introduction to *Life/Lines: Theorizing Women's Autobiography* (1988), echo Mary Mason when they declare that "self-definition in relation to significant others...is the most pervasive characteristic of the female autobiography."<sup>44</sup> Feminist psychoanalytic theory helped to ground theories of women's relationality in life writing that appeared during the late 1970s and 1980s. Nancy Chodorow's *The Reproduction of Mothering* (1978), for example, was a widely cited text. In it, Chodorow notes asymmetries in the relational experiences of girls and boys that stem from gendered mothering practices: "From the retention of preoedipal attachments to their mother, growing girls

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<sup>43</sup> See, for example, Mason, "The Other Voice: Autobiographies of Women Writers," 20–21; Brodzki and Schenk, *Life/Lines: Theorizing Women's Autobiography*, 8; Friedman, "Women's Autobiographical Selves: Theory and Practice.," 42; Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*, 86.

<sup>44</sup> Brodzki and Schenk, *Life/Lines: Theorizing Women's Autobiography*, 8.



come to define and experience themselves as continuous with others; their experience of self contains more flexible and permeable ego boundaries.”<sup>45</sup> “Boys,” on the other hand, “come to define themselves as more separate and distinct, with a greater sense of frigid ego boundaries and differentiation. The basic feminine sense of self is connected to the world, the basic masculine sense of self is separate.”<sup>46</sup>

Other scholars, however, have located questions of relationality in epistemological,<sup>47</sup> sociological, and political rather than psychoanalytic structures. Susan Stanford Friedman wrote in 1988 about the “fundamental inapplicability of individualistic models of the self to women and minorities,” pointing instead to what she calls a “group consciousness” that can be found in their life writing; in these cases, the individual’s identity is inextricably bound to a community’s identity, especially to the collective experience of an oppressed social group.<sup>48</sup> Overall, however, Friedman avoids essentialism in her work by suggesting that women autobiographers generally present an identity that is neither fully autonomous nor fully collective. Still, a relational subjectivity can be teased out of each of the works I examine, for each subject’s understanding of her individual identity is profoundly inflected by ties to family and community. The means of presenting this relationality—and the relationality itself—account for some of the counter-discursive elements of women’s life narrative.

Finally, the sources and “evidence” through which the subject crafts her life narrative are also an important concern here. Memory, the primary source for life narrators, is inherently personal, not always reliable, and is inevitably fragmentary and fragmented. How a life narrator relies on or problematizes memory in her work is an important consideration. Of course, other sources of “evidence” may aid in the piecing together of a life: subjects may rely on the oral storytelling of family members, historical documents, or personal archives, which may include letters, journals, photographs, home movies, and other material artifacts. This material evidence may be used to reinforce or to undermine and problematize the subject’s presentation of her own memories in the crafting of her life narrative.

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<sup>45</sup> Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering*, 169.

<sup>46</sup> Chodorow, 169.

<sup>47</sup> See, for example, Belenky et al., *Women’s Ways of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice and Mind* in which women’s relationality is theorized in the context of cognitive development.

<sup>48</sup> Friedman, “Women’s Autobiographical Selves: Theory and Practice.,” 34, 42.



The three above-outlined concerns—automediality, relationality, and “evidence”—are key touch points in each of the following three chapters. The individual texts examined in this dissertation have been selected for the idiosyncratic ways they complicate, challenge, and expand contemporary ideas about identity, evidence, and (self-)representation from a diversity of subject positions and using a variety of media(ted) strategies. My intention is not to impose a set of representational strategies that might apply to *all* women’s autobiographical or self-representational art; rather, I have deliberately chosen a narrow set of practices (that nevertheless support a diversity of approaches within their permeable generic boundaries) and case studies with the awareness that myriad other rebellious and counter-discursive strategies have been harnessed by women working in other countries, cultures, and media, including mainstream media. While such considerations are beyond the scope of this project, they would undoubtedly provide an important avenue for future research. Here, my focus is on three individual approaches to or modes of self-representation—auto-archival media-making, fictional autoethnographic storytelling, and gastrography—that overlap, intersect, and resonate with one another in surprising ways.

In Chapter 2, “(Auto)Archival Storytelling: Ghosts in the Family Archive,” I explore the ways in which women harness what I call “auto-archival” material in their literary and cinematic experiments with self-representation. The examination of works that appropriate and rework material whose provenance is the subject’s own family supports an inquiry into the possibilities of women’s relational self-definition: her self-conception, in other words, in relation to the media of domestic and family record and in relation to the family in which she was raised. Exemplary texts of this mode visualize, both literally and metaphorically, the ways in which the weight of patriarchal family values informs identity politics and constructions of identity, and their narratives prompt reflections about how family—the subject’s own idiosyncratic family and The Family as an ideological institution—has worked to shape their beliefs, behaviors, and identities. The interventions make a strong case for the appropriation of auto-archival material in works of deeply intimate storytelling and in critiques of patriarchal family roles that demand a reconceptualization of women’s place in the world.

The re-use of auto-archival material—largely family photographs, home movies and childhood journals, though letters, newspaper clippings, and other ephemera also make their appearances—in the life narratives examined here offers an intriguing position from which to



examine strategies/practices of automediality. The mediation of the subject in such texts is often multiple and layered: the artist must contend at once with representations of her childhood self (often idealized visions crafted by a parent, as in the case of posed snapshots and highly curated home movie footage) and with childhood self-representations (as in the case of diary entries or drawings drafted by her younger Self) in addition to her self-conception(s) as an adult. She revisits, reflects, de- and re-constructs. Excavating such media artefacts from dingy basements and dusty attics, the artist here is performing a media archaeology of the self, uncovering sedimented layers of 8mm Christmas mornings, paper napkin sketches, and letters from summer camp—material remnants that, together, never quite add up to a coherent narrative. Nor can they contend with those other, less material traces—the personal narratives of self we construct from memories fond and foul. In fact, it is these very tensions—between images created by the parent and the self-imaging (whether through image or text) of the child (and later the adult), and between the so-called material “evidence” of one’s past and one’s subjective memories—that make the works that re-use such material so dynamic and challenging. Auto-archival material may serve as a touchstone to trigger (or problematize) memory or may be subjected to de(con)struction, both ideologically or quite literally (as in the case of filmmakers who must physically cut the material or manipulate it in other ways for its re-use in their work). The auto-archival texts examined in Chapter 2 in many ways literalize the generative tensions between the interior and exterior, the documented self (“evidence”) and the undocumentable (memory), in their strategic deployment of (auto-)archival media within multilayered and fragmented visual and narrative structures that break with the formal structures of traditional autobiography. Each text examined here embodies the suggestion made by Laura Feigel and Max Saunders that “the chosen medium of self-representation is often itself a moving between different media: between voices, between text and image, between biography and autobiography, between diary and fiction.”<sup>49</sup>

Michelle Citron is an important figure in this dissertation: her film *Daughter Rite* (1978), which has received a fair amount of (well-deserved) critical attention, will serve as a touchstone in my discussion of other, less recognized work in Chapter 2, and it will factor into a larger comparative examination of Citron’s self-representational work in other media, including her written memoir, *Home Movies and Other Necessary Fictions* (1999), and two of her interactive

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<sup>49</sup> Feigel and Saunders, “Writing Between the Lives: Life Writing and the Work of Mediation,” 243.



digital works, *As American as Apple Pie* (1999) and *Mixed Greens* (2004), which are discussed in Chapter 4. In addition to Citron's film and memoir, I examine Margaret Stratton's video *Kiss the Boys and Make Them Die* (1994) and Nina Fonoroff's film *A Knowledge They Cannot Lose* (1989), as well as the strategies of auto-archival appropriation in Norma Cantú's semi-fictional meta-photographic memoir, *Canicula: Snapshots of a Girlhood En La Frontera* (1995), and in Alison Bechdel's autographic *Are You My Mother?* (2012). Each of these texts returns to childhood and its auto-archival remnants in order to exorcise past traumas and bring to light difficult relationships with family members, all while closely examining processes of identity formation within the nuclear family.

Chapter 3, "Tricksters, Myth, and Autoethnographic Experimentation," grew out of my interest in the ongoing American reckoning with the critical importance of representation and identification for people whose lives have historically existed on the margins of or in opposition to the dominant culture or who have historically not been "authorized" to speak. As Cheryl Dunye suggests in her film *The Watermelon Woman* (1996), representation "means hope, it means inspiration, it means possibility, it means history." What, then, does it mean to be confronted with an absence of historical representation with which to identify? For Dunye, a lesbian African American filmmaker, it means one must invent a history and/of representation for oneself and one's community. This is precisely the creative challenge undertaken by each of the artists whose work I examine in this chapter. As women with variously intersecting marginalized identities (woman, lesbian, racially or ethnically "other," and so on), they have each consciously historicized or politicized their own selves—body, experiences, memories, and desires included—in their autobiographical work, tracing lineages—sometimes real, sometimes imagined, sometimes fictionalized—between their own stories and the stories of others and filling gaps in representation that just might serve future generations.

In order to fill such gaps, these artists have had to get creative in the most literal sense of the word, *creating* fictionalized subjects or stories—versions of themselves transposed to a different time or location, for example, or a tangled amalgamation of the stories of a multiplicity of subjects—within their own autobiographical works. It is in this sense that such texts can be read as fictional autoethnographies, drawing on collective myth and memory to connect the personal with the communal, thus "resituat[ing] an autobiographical 'I' within an ethnic 'we'."<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*, 176.



They disrupt the hierarchical relations of power within conventional autobiography and ethnography in favor of more collective approaches to storytelling that are better suited to the unique cultural, social, and political locations from which their authors speak. Given that the autobiographical genre has been classically defined by strictures about the truth and authenticity of the author's self-representation and has insisted on the *individual* life as a basis for the form, these life narratives are doubly radical in their representations of previously un- or under-represented relational subjectivities and their subversions of generic rules related to truth-telling and "lies" in autobiography.

In this chapter, I will examine an assortment of critical positions regarding truth in autobiography, including those of Philippe Lejeune (1989) and Leigh Gilmore (1994), in order to examine the motivations behind and the ways in which many feminist life narrators complicate, subvert, or outright reject the autobiographical promise of veracity, authenticity, and reliability in their work. Challenging the truth-lie and nonfiction-fiction dichotomies held so dear by a coterie of scholars and critics of autobiography who insist on rigid generic boundaries has become, in the wake of expanding feminist and postcolonial consciousness, a way for marginalized subjects to distance their work from autobiography and ethnography's legacies of upholding colonial and patriarchal regimes of knowledge and power.

Indigenous women and women of colour have a rich and varied history of experimenting with life narrative and self-representation in the visual and folk arts, in song and dance, and in written and oral storytelling, and my focus here will be grounded in literary and moving image texts that draw on these diverse traditions. Zora Neale Hurston's *Dust Tracks on a Road* (1942)—to my mind the prototypical fictionalized autoethnography—will be discussed in addition to four exemplary literary and cinematic texts made in the final two decades of the twentieth century. The establishment of a literary precedent for this particular mode of life narrative will enable a discussion of how (or whether) moving image technology expands the representational possibilities of the form. Cauleen Smith's *Chronicles of a Lying Spirit (by Kelly Gabron)* (1992), and Cheyl Dunye's *The Watermelon Woman* (1996) are both subversive moving image texts, one short and one feature-length, that invent alter-egos to challenge the apparent authenticity of cinematic representation and the implied truthfulness of the documentary and autobiographical modes, combining personal desires with collective concerns about the history, representation, and visibility of black American women. Leslie Marmon



Silko's amalgamation of poetry, songs, and short stories in *Storyteller* (1981) creatively tells the author's life story as one that is interwoven with the stories of real and mythological foremothers from her Laguna Pueblo tribe. Norma Elia Cantú's *Canicula: Snapshots of a Girlhood en la Frontera* (1995) is another literary counterpart to Smith and Dunye's films that blends photographs (which may or may not all be Cantú's) with snapshot-like stories (which, again, may or may not all depict Cantú's own experiences) to capture life between two cultures. Significantly, these "lying" or fictionalized interventions are not meant to deceive. Indeed, their authors explicitly acknowledge their experimentation with truth. Ultimately, the weaving of fiction with truth in these cases is both a deconstructive act—challenging the generic boundaries and rules of a field that historically denied the participation of subjects like Cantú, Silko, Smith, and Dunye—and a generative one that brings the stories of marginalized women to the page and the screen.

In addition to the appropriation and deconstruction of auto-archival material and the overt blending of fact and fiction, the life narrators that are the focus of this study have also turned to modes of self-representation previously marginalized and dismissed as trivial by critics, rehabilitating traditionally "feminine" forms like the photo album or the cookbook as important means of self-inscription. In Chapter 4, "Gastrography: Exploring Identity Through Food Narratives," I will turn my attention to life narratives in which the subject's self-representation is intimately linked to the creation and/or consumption of food, a mode Rosalia Baena has termed "gastrography."<sup>51</sup> Alternately called "cookbook memoirs," "culinary memoirs," or "alimentary life writing," these works combine recipes or food metaphors with personal storytelling as an interactive means of weaving self-representation with family legacy and national or ethnic background.

Food is a universal daily experience that is inherently social, connected with storytelling, and tied with familial, community, cultural, national, ethnic, and religious backgrounds. "We are," as the clichéd saying goes, "what we eat." Culinary experiences can also open the door to other(ed) cultures and identities and, as a powerful means of triggering memory, it can deepen a connection to one's roots. The inclusion of recipes in some of these works is both a narrative strategy and a means of self-representation, but it also invites a profound level of interactivity

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<sup>51</sup> Baena, "Gastro-Graphy: Food as Metaphor in Fred Wah's Diamond Grill and Austin Clarke's Pig Tails 'n Breadfruit."



with the “provocative suggestion that the subjectivity of another can be ‘cooked up,’ reproduced, and tasted.”<sup>52</sup>

Much like the *Alice B. Toklas Cook Book* (1954) before it, Vertamae Smart-Grosvenor’s magnificent *Vibration Cooking or, The Travel Notes of a Geechee Girl* (1970) uses recipes and reminiscences about dinner parties to craft a portrait of her own idiosyncratic social context, weaving stories of her life with those of fellow African Americans in the United States and fellow expats abroad around the soul food recipes they shared with one another. For Smart-Grosvenor, soul food is explicitly tied to pre-slavery African culinary traditions that have been kept alive in the foodways of the (post-slavery) Black lower classes, but it is also connected to family legacy, friendships, and special occasions, and it is *always* a conduit to storytelling.

If food in the gastrography is “metonymic of the elaboration of culture and identity,” it functions in Michelle Citron’s *Queer Feast* quartet as a conduit to explorations of lesbian identity and community.<sup>53</sup> Citron takes gastrography to a new medium in the four interactive digital works—of which I focus on two, *As American as Apple Pie* (1999) and *Mixed Greens* (2004)—collected online on her *Queer Feast* platform.<sup>54</sup> *As American as Apple Pie* uses the task of cooking as a metaphor for the eroticism, violence, and daily minutiae of a relationship and serves as an amuse-bouche for what is the main course of this chapter: *Mixed Greens*. The most interactive of the four pieces, *Mixed Greens* invites the user to build an audiovisual salad by selecting eight of forty-eight possible ingredients, each of which is connected to an uncontextualized “scene” from two separate but intertwined narratives: the stories of four generations of Citron’s Irish Jewish family and four decades of Citron’s life as a lesbian in America. Here, the work’s salad metaphor offers a productive way to explore the diverging and intersecting threads of Citron’s own multiple identities and offers an avenue through which to explore the confluence of lesbian identity and food that is an important theme across many lesbian autobiographical texts.<sup>55</sup>

Overall, my discussion of gastrography as feminist autobiographical counter-discourse will reflect upon the gendered patterns and hierarchies of food preparation and consumption,

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<sup>52</sup> Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*, 150.

<sup>53</sup> Baena, “Gastro-Graphy: Food as Metaphor in Fred Wah’s *Diamond Grill* and Austin Clarke’s *Pig Tails ‘n Breadfruit*,” 2.

<sup>54</sup> [www.queerfeast.com](http://www.queerfeast.com)

<sup>55</sup> Lindenmeyer, “Lesbian Appetites’: Food, Sexuality and Community in Feminist Autobiography,” 470.



paying close attention to where and how these cultural constructions are subverted, and I will be examining the ways in which food is used as metaphor for colliding sexual and ethnic identities. Finally, I will be exploring how gastrography offers an interactive form of life narrative that invites the reader or spectator to participate in new cultural practices through cooking or through combining metaphoric “ingredients” to piece together the story of a life and community.

While much of the political work of the life narratives examined in this dissertation lies in displaying, questioning, and attacking hegemonic language (cinematic or written) and discourse as it relates to women, the breaking of taboos by telling formerly inaudible stories is *equally* important. By telling formerly unspeakable stories in formally innovative ways, the enunciating subject of self-representational media disrupts imposed systems of meaning and calls attention to the lack in patriarchal culture of adequate language or forms to describe a woman’s experience. Crucially, these works call attention to subjectivities, deeply personal, intimate experiences, and forms of oppression that have been largely omitted from discourse altogether. The genre-bending, hybrid nature of the works I examine does not lend itself to easy categorization, but their avant-folk strategies reflect contemporaneous political and cultural theorizing in ways that open a window onto the unique historical, cultural, social, political, and gendered situatedness of their authors.

## **Chapter 2. Auto-Archival Storytelling: Ghosts in the Family Archive**

As the theories and politics of identity formation have grown increasingly complex and nuanced, artistic engagement with questions of self-formation and -representation at the intersections of gender, ethnicity, sexuality, class, and other markers of identity have followed suit. Feminist artists and scholars have been at the forefront of contemporary efforts to expand the boundaries of autobiographical theory and practice to encompass an ever-evolving variety of alternative self-representational practices that challenge familiar genre conventions and cultural codes. Turning to personal archives of family photographs and home movies, letters, diary entries, newspaper clippings and other intimate ephemera—what I call “auto-archival” material—the artists discussed in this chapter subvert the conventions and expectations of family storytelling in its various guises, creating works that undertake critiques of the heterosexual, patriarchal, nuclear family, excavations of transgenerational trauma, and experiments with the representation of feminist and queer subjectivities. Exploring the connections between individual and family identity, they mediate between the genres of autobiography and biography and remediate other media culled from the familial archives. Calling attention to that which is often taken for granted—the “rules” of family- and self-representation and the discourses they uphold—the works examined in this chapter explore new configurations of subjectivity, and they subject auto-archival material to reevaluation and literal or symbolic de(con)struction in what is ultimately a re-working or re-making of the family album.

When the texts examined in this chapter are read in relation to one another, two things are accomplished: first, medium specificity is brought to the fore, inviting reflection about how similar kinds of stories are communicated differently via literary, illustrated, or cinematic means, where their strategies overlap, how each medium enables or challenges auto-archival appropriation, and what such interventions tell us about feminist approaches to the representation of identity formation; second, a transdiscursive lineage is established among works from different disciplines and eras that share many of the same objectives and related tactics, but which have never before been comparatively discussed. Spanning a period from the height of the Women’s Liberation Movement to the present, the case studies that will be the focus of this chapter are Michelle Citron’s *Daughter Rite* (1978) and *Home Movies & Other Necessary Fictions* (1999), Nina Fonoroff’s *A Knowledge They Cannot Lose* (1989), Margaret Stratton’s



*Kiss The Boys and Make Them Die* (1994), Norma Elia Cantú's *Canicula* (1995), and Alison Bechdel's *Are You My Mother? A Comic Drama* (2012). These works are united in their use of material strategies grounded in the appropriation and reevaluation of personal archives to explore alternative modes of identity formation and representation. By telling formerly “unspeakable” stories in formally innovative ways, the enunciating subject of each work disrupts imposed systems of meaning and calls attention to the lack in patriarchal culture of adequate language or forms to describe a woman's experience(s), whether she is queer, a survivor of abuse, ethnically or racially othered, or otherwise marginalized.

In spite of their different eras and mediums, a number of important similarities shared by these works will be emphasized: they each demonstrate an understanding of women's subjectivity as both fragmented and relational, explore a complex relationship to the material remnants of difficult or even traumatic childhoods, and even share a preoccupation with (literal or metaphorical) ghosts. The implicit or explicitly haunting phantoms of personal and transgenerational trauma in auto-archival narratives invites an examination of the hauntology of the photographic medium (the specters that both are and are not present in photographs and filmic images), for this mode of storytelling may trigger both forms of haunting: the appropriation of material from the family archive calls attention to the ghostly presence in films and photographs of deceased family members and past selves, and it may also summon long-suppressed or hidden family secrets. Artists even thematize the experience of being haunted by discrepancies between their own memories and the apparent “reality” captured on film, which, they emphasize, is never entirely neutral or even truthful.

Another motif that unites the texts discussed below is their emphasis on and examination of parent-child—especially mother-daughter—relationships. The symbolic (and literal) father has historically been the target of much feminist activism, theory, and art via challenges posed to white male supremacy and the heteropatriarchal family structure; here, however, it is frequently the troubled or troubling relationship with the mother that is subjected to scrutiny. Women—and mothers in particular—often play a role in upholding patriarchal and heterosexist ideologies and in transmitting them to the next generation. The identification of mothers variously as role models, as victims, or as pawns of the patriarchy has long been a crucial point of tension



throughout the Women's Movement. The auto/biographies<sup>56</sup> examined in this chapter, which define the Self against or in complex relation to the mother, exemplify the relationality attributed to women's life narrative by scholars like Smith & Watson (2010), and they exemplify Alisa Lebow's suggestion that first-person films—and here I would add autographics and other forms of life narrative—“are, very often, not a cinema of ‘me’, but about someone [else]... who nonetheless informs the [artist's] sense of him or herself.”<sup>57</sup> The (re)evaluation of the mother-daughter relationship (and of identity formation in the familial context more generally) is an important motif in the life narratives discussed below that informs the artist's approach to auto-archival appropriation.

All individuals and thus all life narratives are subject(ed) to the universal and yet utterly idiosyncratic force that is the family. For better or worse, it is hard to imagine a more formative, consequential, and ultimately inescapable influence on the Self than the family into which one is born, and every life narrator must contend with how (or whether) to undertake the delicate, often fraught work of family storytelling. Although not *all* auto-archival storytelling revolves around the family, it is clear that artists entangled in particularly challenging or dysfunctional family lives or legacies are drawn to auto-archival material, often as a means of working through trauma. The revisitation of the past afforded by auto-archival appropriation, Hilary Chute suggests, may support an “emotional recuperation” or “a textual one.”<sup>58</sup> The works examined in this chapter, with varying degrees of success, attempt to accomplish both.

## 2.1 The Family and Its Documentation as Ideological Imperative

Whether one takes a psychoanalytic or sociological approach, it is within the bosom of the family—especially, in most Western cultures, the nuclear family—that crucial elements of identity formation are thought to take place. A return to the family archive in an effort to unearth evidence of trauma, abuse, or other pivotal moments in the formation of individual identity, however—to trace the emotional *in the material*—generally comes up short, given the limited nature of what is recorded in family photographs, home movies and other residual artifacts of family life. It is at the often dissonant, incongruous intersection of memory and material

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<sup>56</sup> A work that blends autobiography with the biography of another subject (See Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*, 256).

<sup>57</sup> Lebow, *The Cinema of Me: The Self and Subjectivity in First Person Documentary*, 1.

<sup>58</sup> Chute, *Graphic Women: Life Narrative & Contemporary Comics*, 3.



“evidence” that some of the most productive and groundbreaking work of this mode occurs, as the artist reevaluates, reworks, remakes images of the Self, claiming agency over her own identity and its representation. In order to appreciate the radical power of such interventions, it is helpful to understand not only the artist’s individual experience but the deep-seated ideological discourses of the family more broadly.

Highly sentimentalized and romanticized in popular media representations, the nuclear family is at its core an ideological construct that “reinforce[s] the existing social formation,” upholding and literally reproducing the capitalist hetero-patriarchal ideology of the ruling class.<sup>59</sup> The family, in turn, is itself sustained by the conventions and rituals of family storytelling, “an institutional practice” (though it is rarely thought of as such by the storytellers themselves) that “takes up, circulates, and renews models of acceptable identity.”<sup>60</sup> Finally, family storytelling is aided by—and visually rendered in—material artifacts like family photographs and home movies, each of which functions as an important artifact in the repetitive, life-long process of “making [and] re-making... sense of ourselves.”<sup>61</sup> The conventional family photo album, for example, narrativizes family life through chronological series of formal portraits and/or informal snapshots that document the customs and rites of heterosexual life, from dating to marriage, birth to birthdays, and other important milestones that are at once personal and “generic and overdetermined” milestones, and which serve above all to “legitimat[e] family”—and hence the State’s—“interests of survival and reproduction.”<sup>62</sup> Though this is certainly not the most romantic way to regard the decades or even generations of family history lovingly and dutifully preserved in photo albums, one of the things that makes feminist auto-archival art so powerful is its unsentimental approach to highlighting and critiquing the ideological discourses cloaked in such seemingly innocent or banal cultural artefacts.

Home movies,<sup>63</sup> too, have historically served to document, promote, and regulate the middle-class, patriarchal, heteronormative family. As early as the turn of the twentieth century, discourses in popular magazines began championing the use of the amateur camera as a tool to

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<sup>59</sup> Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” 154.

<sup>60</sup> Langellier and Peterson, “Performing Families: Ordering Group and Personal Identities,” 113.

<sup>61</sup> Kuhn, *Family Secrets: Acts of Memory and Imagination*, 19.

<sup>62</sup> Langellier and Peterson, “Performing Families: Ordering Group and Personal Identities,” 126.

<sup>63</sup> My use of the term “home movies” will refer to both amateur film and video, though I will differentiate between the two where necessary.



document the family.<sup>64</sup> Developments to simplify and economize the 16mm (and later the 8mm) film apparatus—including the production of inexpensive 16mm reversal film in the early 1920s and the mass production of easy-to-use, hand-held 16mm cameras geared towards inexperienced users—contributed to its adoption as the standard gauge for amateurs and gave middle class American families unprecedented access to the technology. Articles geared towards amateurs increasingly flooded mass-circulation magazines, promoting the cameras as “recorders of family history” and idealizing technology’s ability to “[mediate] between... the past and the present,” to preserve memories, and to manage and control family interactions.<sup>65</sup>

Crucially, the amateur film industry repeatedly emphasized the importance of capturing *happy* memories. Amateurs were instructed to create “a narrative spectacle of idealized family life,” and the results transformed family history into “a commodity that invoked only good times, selectively erasing contradiction, struggle, or disintegration.”<sup>66</sup> In an attempt to adhere to or replicate the ideal of the American family, to conform to social norms and “acceptable” representations of identity, therefore, home movies often self-consciously and deliberately *stage* an image of the model nuclear family for the camera. While home movies exist outside dominant modes of representation and independently of the mainstream film industry, in promoting a definition of the idealized American family as patriarchal, heteronormative, white, and middle class, they have historically upheld dominant codes of cultural representation.

Labour, conflict, divorce, illness, funerals, and other challenging elements of quotidian life are typically erased from the auto-archive, because what is captured and preserved in family imagery is highly limited and controlled. In this sense, a family’s home movies and photographs can be said to reflect Derrida’s argument in *Archive Fever* that the archive is founded on two paradoxical drives: to preserve memories and to forget.<sup>67</sup> In their systematic denial of personal trauma and family strife, auto-archival materials do not adequately represent quotidian life and may even misrepresent family history in a way that shapes not just the archive but memory itself. As Michael Chanan suggests, home movies and family photographs “often turn out to represent screen memories in the Freudian sense—images which screen out other memories, less

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<sup>64</sup> Zimmermann, *Reel Families: A Social History of Amateur Film*, 43.

<sup>65</sup> Zimmermann, 44–45.

<sup>66</sup> Zimmermann, 46.

<sup>67</sup> Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*.



celebratory, less happy, and sometimes repressed.”<sup>68</sup> In this sense, they function to provide an image of the family as it wants to be seen and wants to remember itself: they are, as the subtitle to Michelle Citron’s memoir suggests, “necessary fictions” or, as that of Annette Kuhn’s posits, as “acts of memory *and imagination*.”<sup>69</sup> While they undeniably function as touchstones between the past and the present, home movies and family photos inevitably also exist on the contentious borderlands between reality, memory, and the constructed vision of the family perfected. Given that it was often the father who shot early home movies,<sup>70</sup> moreover, a certain level of possessiveness and control inherent to the dynamics of the family can be read in the images he films and even in the language of amateur filmmaking (one “captures” or “shoots” that which is in front of the lens). As Susan Sontag suggests, “there is something predatory in the act of taking a picture... it turns people into objects that can be symbolically possessed.”<sup>71</sup> Unsurprisingly, home movies generally reproduce the power dynamics of the family, normalizing and maintaining the social status quo.

Family photographs and their moving-image counterparts are commonly referred to and/or included in life narratives and self-representational art as part of the memory work required of artists who engage in auto/biographical storytelling. Most frequently and conventionally, the photograph in cinematic or literary auto/biography serves as “a prop, a prompt, a pre-text [that] sets the scene for recollection” or as expository evidence, reinforcing the documentary imperative of such modes.<sup>72</sup> However, in contrast to conventional understandings of (still and moving) photography as a literal trace of the real, as an index documenting lived reality, feminist auto-archival experiments often posit a more complex relationship with photographic “evidence.” Whether it is made to appear dreamlike, conspicuously absent (described but not shown), reworked (cut, slowed down, or otherwise manipulated), or any number of other strategies enumerated below, alternative approaches to auto-archival material serve as a means of (re)claiming agency for the feminist artist who identifies the amateur camera as a proxy for or tool of the surveilling, disciplining gaze of the literal and/or symbolic patriarch. As Marianne Hirsch suggests in her analysis of family photography, if the snapshot contributes

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<sup>68</sup> Chanan, “The Role of History in the Individual: Working Notes for a Film,” 30.

<sup>69</sup> Citron, *Home Movies and Other Necessary Fictions*; Kuhn, *Family Secrets: Acts of Memory and Imagination* (my emphasis).

<sup>70</sup> Zimmermann, *Reel Families: A Social History of Amateur Film*, 134.

<sup>71</sup> Sontag, *On Photography*, 14.

<sup>72</sup> Kuhn, *Family Secrets: Acts of Memory and Imagination*, 13.



to the production of familial roles, the process of “resisting the image—either at the time or later in the process of rereading—becomes a way of contesting that construction.”<sup>73</sup> Annette Kuhn similarly posits that while “the family album” undeniably “produces particular forms of family in particular ways,” its conventions and principles can nevertheless always be subverted and reshaped to reflect other experiences.<sup>74</sup> Ultimately, such work is highly self-reflexive in its de(con)struction of not only personal family photographs and/or home movies but the possibilities and limits of (self-)representation altogether. By reevaluating, reworking, or remaking childhood photographs, home movies and other loaded auto-archival material, the subject symbolically wrests control from the patriarch/parent and asserts ownership over and control of images and narratives of the self.

## **2.2 From Verité to the Feminist avant-garde: New Experiments and Domestic Storytelling**

Nurtured by the Women’s Liberation Movement, feminist activists of the 1960s and 1970s declared that “the personal is political” and brought unprecedented political and cultural attention to the experiences of individual women. It was out of this context that domestic storytelling and, eventually, feminist auto-archival experimentation began to take root. In newly formed consciousness-raising groups, women began to speak out about previously private or taboo subjects, including the quiet traumas of home life typically suffered in silence, and to critique and reimagine the dynamics and values of the heterosexual, patriarchal, nuclear family. The advent of lightweight cameras and portable sound recording equipment enabled women filmmakers—amateurs and professionals alike—to document this outpouring of personal storytelling among women. Cinema Verité-style documentary filmmaking, as discussed in Chapter 1, became the privileged cinematic form of the early movement and broke important ground in the 1970s, but it was ultimately rejected by influential feminist film theorists who advocated for a *new* cinematic language that avoided tired, male-dominated forms and modes of representation. Many artists were drawn to the highly personal, artisanal, non-hierarchical (but still largely male) world of avant-garde filmmaking, and some began their early experiments with cost-effective appropriated or recycled materials and familiar domestic themes, transgressing boundaries between private and public spaces and experiences. They recognized,

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<sup>73</sup> Hirsch, *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory*, 193.

<sup>74</sup> Kuhn, *Family Secrets: Acts of Memory and Imagination*, 20.



as Patricia Zimmerman argues, that home movies, like avant-garde cinema, “provoke a reexamination of issues of identity, culture, history, politics, and memory from the point of view of images made outside the dominant channels of representation.”<sup>75</sup>

While many scholars, including P. Adams Sitney, David James, Jeffrey Ruoff, and Paul Arthur, have argued that home movies and experimental cinema have an intertwined history, their primary examples have largely been limited to American Avant-Garde patriarchs like Stan Brakhage and Jonas Mekas, artists who in the 1960s and 1970s drew on home movie technologies, aesthetics, and domestic subject matter in their films, epitomizing for such scholars the integration of daily life into experimental filmmaking.<sup>76</sup> To be sure, the experimental and home movie modes share a history grounded in personal, amateur filmmaking practices, both rely on so-called amateur (16mm and eventually 8mm) equipment, and both are certainly at odds with the collaborative hierarchies typical of Hollywood productions, existing outside the mainstream film industry, its language and grammar, and its channels of distribution and exhibition. However, I would like to challenge the androcentrism of scholarship that privileges the Great Man of Vision behind the “amateur” camera and in the domestic setting—men for whom wives, lovers, and daughters are frequently the object of the possessive gaze, as in Brakhage’s arguably exploitative use of his wife Jane’s body in his birth and sex films.

It should go without saying that women, too, have explored the intersection of the avant-garde, the domestic, and the amateur. In the Era of Brakhage and Mekas, groundbreaking filmmakers like Carolee Schneemann (*Fuses*, 1965) and collaborators Gunvor Nelson and Dorothy Wiley (*Schmeerguntz*, 1965) pushed some of the same boundaries and taboos as their male counterparts while working from a distinctly feminist position. Women in fact can be credited for pioneering the



Fig. 2.1 The existential dread of having to vacuum, again. *Schmeerguntz* (Nelson & Wiley, 1965)

<sup>75</sup> Zimmermann, “Introduction: The Home Movie Movement—Excavations, Artifacts, Minings,” 20.

<sup>76</sup> Sitney, “Autobiography in Avant-Garde Film”; James, *Allegories of Cinema: American Film in the Sixties*; Ruoff, “Home Movies of the Avant-Garde: Jonas Mekas and the New York Art World”; Arthur, *A Line of Sight: American Avant-Garde Film Since 1965*.



appropriation of home movies, a technique that can be traced all the way back to Soviet filmmaker Esfir Shub, whose (literally) revolutionary *Fall of the Romanov Dynasty* (1927) is widely recognized to be the first compilation film.<sup>77</sup>

The practice of found footage filmmaking became pervasive in the 1980s in the realms of the cinematic avant-garde and pop culture alike, as the decade witnessed an explosion of artists recycling the detritus of a mass(ive) media landscape and other cinematic ephemera into postmodern mashups and cultural critiques. By this time, many politically engaged feminist filmmakers, influenced by the consciousness-raising of the Women's Movement in the United States, had already recognized the personal and political potential of recycling material that was (quite literally) closer to home. Feminist filmmakers like Michelle Citron and Su Friedrich harnessed appropriation tactics to great effect in their autobiographical work, assembling an assortment of diverse personal artifacts from the family archive—what I am referring to as “auto-archival” material—including home movies, photographs, letters, and diaries, into nonlinear self-portraits that embraced multiple sources of material, genres, and media. Not only did it offer a less expensive means of making films, it also enabled powerful deconstructions of domestic imagery and the hetero-patriarchal traditions of family life and, above all, it fostered incredibly intimate autobiographical storytelling. What is unique here is that rather than privileging the camera—whether her gaze behind it or performativity before it—above all else, the filmmaker instead inscribes her subjectivity via the appropriation and recycling of pre-existent audiovisual material. The process, in fact, is not limited exclusively to filmmaking practices: it has been experimented with in a variety of other mediums and genres, including literary memoirs, autographics, and “image-texts,”<sup>78</sup> by feminist artists who have similarly drawn on auto-archival materials to create new outlets of (self-



Fig. 2.2 Domestic bliss in Schneemann's *Fuses* (1965)

<sup>77</sup> Petric, “Esther Shub: Film as a Historical Discourse.”

<sup>78</sup> Hirsch, *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory*, 271.



)expression that transgress boundaries between private and public spaces and experiences, enacting public explorations of private spheres and drawing on appropriated material to tell intimate stories.

Michelle Citron's *Daughter Rite* (1978), to which I now turn, is an exemplary text of the auto-archival, auto/biographical mode of storytelling. It offers a sly critique of the verité-style documentaries that had dominated feminist cinematic expression in the 1970s while also turning to the filmmaker's own childhood home movies to deconstruct traditional understandings of women's identity formation within the nuclear family and to challenge long-held assumptions about the supposed truthfulness and neutrality of documentary images.

### 2.3 Michelle Citron's Home Movies

As a young filmmaker, Michelle Citron embraced the intimate storytelling and consciousness-raising of the Women's Liberation Movement by developing an artistic practice that blended personal with social and political concerns. Exposed to the work of American experimental filmmakers like Maya Deren and Carolee Schneemann while pursuing a PhD in cognitive psychology, Citron recognized the potential of the medium to facilitate explorations of the seemingly dichotomous ideas—"[m]emory/history, fiction/documentary, fragments/narrative cohesiveness, bodies/ideas, visual pleasure/text, life/art"—with which she was fascinated.<sup>80</sup> Her early film *Daughter Rite* (1978) exemplifies the artist's embrace of the contradictions between fiction and documentary, fragmentation and narrative coherence, and it demonstrates the experimental, meticulously structured approach to personal storytelling that would come to define her work for decades to come. The film raises questions about processes of identity formation, intergenerational trauma, personal and collective storytelling, and alternative narrative strategies—all concerns that are essential to not only this chapter but to succeeding chapters of this dissertation as well.

Thematically, *Daughter Rite* reflects on the complex, often fraught relationships between mothers and daughters, blending Citron's own personal storytelling with the stories of thirty-five interviewees, and it points to the role that women, especially mothers, can play in perpetuating the patriarchal status quo and the sexual and psychological violence it engenders against girls. Formally, the film moves between two distinct narrative and visual threads: first, appropriated

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<sup>80</sup> Citron, "Slipping the Borders/Shifting the Fragments," 66.



(and subsequently manipulated) home movie footage shot by Citron's father during her childhood is accompanied by a first-person voiceover narration; second, cinéma vérité-style "documentary" footage features two sisters candidly discussing their strained relationship with their mother. The artist's innovative repurposing of her own childhood home movies and diaries in the film has made *Daughter Rite* an ur-text of feminist auto-archival filmmaking and thus a useful introduction to the practice. As part of the canon of feminist experimental filmmaking, *Daughter Rite* has been the subject of many thoughtful analyses examining its subversion of generic boundaries, its ground- and taboo-breaking story of incestual abuse, and its effective satire of feminist vérité filmmaking.<sup>81</sup> My own interest in the film has long been captured by Citron's striking use of auto-archival material and the challenge she poses to what are traditionally considered autobiographical and documentary conventions of truth and authenticity.

*Daughter Rite* is a film completely immersed in the domestic realm. Influenced by feminist thought, by her own queer sexuality, and by her traumatic childhood, however, Citron's approach to conventional domesticity and familial relationships is complicated and often critical. In the "vérité" segments of the film, this critique is exemplified in the story of Stephanie's rape and her mother's subsequent refusal to acknowledge what happened, but it is also performed in



Fig. 2.3 Actresses convincingly play sisters in the pseudo-*vérité* segments of *Daughter Rite* (Citron, 1978)

other, more subtle ways. Shot in the intimacy of the home and using a roving camera with quick pans and sometimes awkward zooms—conventions of vérité documentaries of the era—these sequences “document” two sisters talking to the camera and each other about their childhood and their relationship to their ailing mother. The credits eventually reveal that these two women are in fact actors reading lines, catching many spectators off

guard and forcing them to reckon with their assumptions about the trustworthiness of supposedly authentic documentary “evidence.” In fact, their casual performance of sisterly affection and the banality of their conversations as they perform household tasks, make a fruit salad, or rifle

<sup>81</sup> Feuer, “Daughter Rite: Living with Our Pain, and Love”; Williams and Rich, “The Right of Re-Vision.”



through their mother's vanity drawers are so convincing that some viewers have a hard time believing that the footage is scripted.

That this pseudo-documentary material is intercut with Citron's *real* home movies further complicates the spectator's ability to clearly delineate documentary from fiction and fiction from autobiography. The original,

unmanipulated domestic footage from which the artist works overflows with images of Citron, her mother, and her younger sister posing and performing stereotypical middle class femininity for the father's camera, which captures familiar scenes: a seemingly cheerful, nurturing mother socializing her apparently compliant daughters, smoothing their hair, stroking their cheeks, and encouraging them to wave to



Fig. 2.4 Citron strides away from her mother and her cameraman father. *Daughter Rite* (1978)

the camera. Exemplifying the edict of amateur filmmaking to record happy moments within the idealized family, we witness images of Citron and her mother racing with egg-topped spoons in their mouths, Citron and her sister blowing kisses at the camera, and innumerable instances of all three posing and waving in oppressively ruffled dresses.

However, rather than preserve the documentary evidence of this apparently idyllic childhood with the care of an archivist, and instead of using it as a straightforward visual aid in the narration of her life, Citron deconstructs and remakes her family's home movies. Dismantling the footage with the help of an optical printer, she translates it into the visual language of experimental film. Crucially, she never succumbs fully to the abstraction favored by many of her contemporaries in the avant-garde film world, using her craft instead to call attention to gestures that might otherwise go unnoticed by slowing down, enlarging, rewinding and repeating particularly resonant moments. Citron's defamiliarization of images from her childhood points to the seemingly innocuous home movie or family album as objects worthy of social critique and de(con)struction by a new wave of feminist artists. With the aid of rephotography, she exposes—photochemically and metaphorically—the ways in which these





**Fig. 2.5** Citron's mother obsessively primps and preens her daughters. *Daughter Rite* (1978)

home movies are haunted by something darker. By reversing and repeating material, for example, the artist causes the mother and daughters to repeatedly move towards and away from the camera, as if attached to a leash controlled by the cameraman father. The man behind the camera, however, is less a target of the artist's resentment than her mother, evidenced by the narrator's complaints and by the footage chosen for deconstruction.

The gestures with which the mother primps and preens her daughters, repeated and slowed down, become obsessive, stifling, and strange. As we watch Citron and her sister, both very young, wash dishes with curlers in their hair and squirm in their claustrophobically feminine attire, we become uncomfortably aware of the ways in which she is grooming them for their “womanly” duties, for a future dominated by domestic labour within the patriarchal family. Even the egg races—one of the few moments in the footage when the girls are active and visibly free and comfortable in their bodies—are connected in the voiceover to the heteronormative mandate to reproduce as the narrating voice notes that she, unlike her mother, has no children.

Other important contributions to the tone of the film are similarly made in the voiceover narration, whose candor, lack of restraint, and episodic nature make it reminiscent of another intimate, domestic form: the diary. The affectless voice of the narrator confesses that for two years she has been working through contradictory feelings about her mother, “a woman whom I am very much like and not like at all.” Over the slowed-down home movie images of the mother grooming, poking, and prodding her daughters, the narrator says “I hate my weaknesses... My weaknesses are my mother.” She continues, naming the loathsome traits she believes were inherited from her mother, before admitting “In hating my mother I hate myself.” Not insignificantly, the traits that the narrator dislikes in both herself and her mother—“weakness,” “bitchiness,” “selfishness”—are stereotypically “feminine” traits for which women are often condemned. While these admissions may break with feminist ideals of uplifting women and presenting positive role models, their astonishing honesty pushes the boundaries of women's



personal storytelling and what is “allowed” to enter public discourse. This strategy confronts and encourages a difficult but important conversation about the internalization, reproduction, and transmission of patriarchal and sexist ideals. While much of the political work of feminist films more broadly lies in displaying, questioning, and attacking hegemonic visual language and discourse as it relates to women and in creating new cinematic forms and visual and narrative languages, equally important is the breaking of taboos by telling formerly inaudible<sup>82</sup> stories. The dark shadow uncovered by the artist as she questions the supposed neutrality of the home movie mode and breaks down the wholesome facade of her own family’s films encompasses the power dynamics of the patriarchal family, the antiquated gender roles and heterosexual mores upheld therein, the mother’s complicity in maintaining and reproducing these norms, and the psychological and physical consequences this has for girls and women.

Citron’s editing of the home movie footage as a decontextualized collection of moments emphasizes their fragmentation and gives the impression more of a series of flashbacks or the fractured construction of traumatic memory than it does a linear narrative. Dreams—a recurring motif in the voiceover—are similarly evoked by the artist, whose rephotography enhances the material’s dreamlike quality. Much as the analysis of dreams is an attempt to excavate the unconscious and to shed light onto the darkest corners of the psyche, Citron’s systematic probing of the footage from her childhood—her use of repetition, enlargements, slow motion, and other manipulations—signal to the spectator that she is searching for something in the images. As Citron reveals in a memoir published twenty years after the release of *Daughter Rite*, it was precisely the anguishing discrepancies between the home movie footage and her own memories of her childhood that led her to re-read the images in the first place, and the extreme dis-ease she experienced working with this footage stemmed from her awareness that something dark had evaded the camera’s eye altogether.

I would argue that it was here, at the crossroads of childhood trauma and visual storytelling, that Citron had found some of the limits of the family archive, of narrative fragmentation, and even of memory. While troubling patterns are certainly exposed in *Daughter Rite*, there are experiences and family dynamics that will never be captured on film. As Citron herself would later put it, “the surface image” cannot be taken as “a sign for the whole lived

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<sup>82</sup> This turn of phrase is borrowed from Ellerby, *Intimate Reading: The Contemporary Women’s Memoir*.



experience.”<sup>83</sup> The true trauma of her childhood would not be uncovered by the artist until much later when, faced with severe illness and an inability to make films, she turned out of necessity to narrative and the written word. It was under these disorienting circumstances that she was finally able to recognize that, in an unconscious act of self-preservation, she had for decades suppressed her family’s deeply buried secret of repeated incestual trauma. Citron, like her mother, had been abused, and the conspiratorial silence that surrounded this trauma had haunted two generations of the family. Thus, while she successfully draws attention to forms of social control inherent to the family and replicated in home movies and explores the ways in which memory and visual representation (especially representations of the past) influences processes of identity construction, *Daughter Rite* is nevertheless haunted by what is absent—the gaps in representation, enforced by the unspoken rules and taboos of home moviemaking, that cannot be filled. Her recognition of the liminal space between fiction and reality inhabited by home movies, family narratives, and even memory contributes to Citron’s wariness of the ability of documentary modalities to present unvarnished, objective truth, and this wariness extends to and shapes her approach to later cinematic and autobiographical experiments.

Published twenty years after she made *Daughter Rite*, Citron’s experimental literary memoir, *Home Movies and Other Necessary Fictions* (1999), explicitly addresses the absences that had haunted her while making the film and long after. In addition to its autobiographical content, *Home Movies* expands upon *Daughter Rite*’s interrogation of the neutrality of amateur home movie production and its critique of the innocence and naiveté traditionally associated with the form,<sup>84</sup> offering a unique chance to compare her approach to overlapping content and concerns in two different mediums. Like *Daughter Rite*, *Home Movies* is a complex, genre-bending, multi-layered experiment that blends incredibly intimate, personal storytelling with a close reading of the author’s family’s home movies (including much of the same footage recycled in *Daughter Rite*), along with a historically- and socially-grounded examination of home moviemaking as a cultural practice in the United States, and sections of fictional writing. While there are significant formal and thematic resonances between the two works, the artist’s ability in her literary memoir to fill in the gaps of what was absent in her home movies (and consequently from *Daughter Rite*) and her unique interventions that use recycled material to

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<sup>83</sup> Citron, *Home Movies and Other Necessary Fictions*, 12.

<sup>84</sup> Williams and Rich, “The Right of Re-Vision,” 18.



push the boundaries of auto-archival storytelling in an entirely different medium make the memoir worth further examination.

*Home Movies and Other Necessary Fictions* opens with a prologue in which the author begins, explicitly, with the end (“The last story first,” as she writes).<sup>85</sup> Book manuscript completed, she must share her revealing memoir with her parents—a vulnerable and frightening prospect upon which she reflects candidly, noting the strain that complex emotions, family dynamics, and even processes of memory formation (and suppression) can put on life writers, especially those attempting to bring experiences of adolescent trauma to light. She self-reflexively meditates upon her ability to tell the complete truth of her childhood and explicitly expresses an interest in probing the boundaries of non/fiction storytelling, a concern that has occupied much of her oeuvre, in which distinctions between “scripted” and “authentic,” “fiction” and “nonfiction,” “truth” and “lie” are never entirely straightforward.

Notably, before the first chapter even begins, Citron also acknowledges where these particular efforts in the memoir have *failed*. Whereas the author had framed the experiment for herself as an effort to “test the sly, fictitious nature of memoir against fiction’s nugget of truth” by “interweaving... memoir with fiction,” her mother completely misses the “theoretical nuances” and “accepts all the words as real.”<sup>86</sup> This apparent failure echoes Citron’s realization after public screenings of *Daughter Rite* that some spectators could or would not accept that the “verité” footage was scripted, in spite of credits that explicitly revealed the ruse. These outcomes make a case for the importance of accessibility in experimental works with social or political ambitions, including feminist art. On the other hand, by calling attention to the work’s apparent failures before it even begins, Citron cleverly guides the reader’s attention directly to these experiments with fact and fiction and to their psychological and artistic motivations so that s/he might better grasp those nuances missed by the author’s mother. Citron’s belief that it is in “the narrow current between [fiction and lived experience] that the truth breathes,” resonates across not only her own oeuvre, but is also apparent in diverse modern and postmodern feminist experiments with literary and cinematic life narrative, works that blend fact with fiction in a fluid dance that enables them to “walk the edge between the personal and the political, the

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<sup>85</sup> Citron, *Home Movies and Other Necessary Fictions*, xi.

<sup>86</sup> Citron, xii–xiv.



psychological and the social.”<sup>87</sup> An emphasis on the deliberate slippage between fact and fiction in works that also subvert other “unbreakable” generic conventions will thus be a common refrain throughout this dissertation.

In addition to her work as an artist and educator, Citron also holds a doctoral degree in cognitive psychology, putting her in a unique position to explore her own childhood trauma both in her capacity as an artist as well as from a medical perspective. Both approaches are on display and in dialogue in *Home Movies*, making the life narrative one of the more fascinating literary experiments with self-inquiry and -representation of the latter half of the twentieth century. In the book’s second chapter, Citron briefly cites a unique therapeutic approach used to treat certain victims of trauma “whose memories,” like her own, were “encoded in a dissociative state [and] are [thus] inaccessible as narrative.”<sup>88</sup> Under the influence of either sodium amytal or hypnosis, however, the subject is temporarily able to construct the previously inaccessible story of her trauma, and she is filmed doing so. In subsequent sessions, which are also filmed but which now take place without the aid of consciousness-altering drugs or hypnosis, the subject is asked to watch and respond to the original tape, and “the succeeding videos are of her watching herself watching and discussing the previous tape.”<sup>89</sup> The therapy is ultimately a series of “nested tape sessions” that continue until the subject can, “in a state of normal consciousness,” “fill in the gaps and silences of her narrative” in order to “tell a detailed and complete story of her trauma.”<sup>90</sup> Though Citron dedicates no more than two paragraphs of her book to this therapeutic approach, it is significant for its proximity to the decades-long, self-guided process by which she herself became conscious of her own trauma. The artist’s idiosyncratic auto-archival approach to filmmaking and to storytelling more generally is based in a process of recycling and reworking the same personal material over and over again in different mediums, genres, and contexts until, finally, it begins to unfold into (or provide the scaffolding for an unfolding of) personal narrative truth. Thus, the nesting that is at the heart of this unique trauma therapy functions as a particularly useful metaphor for Citron’s formal approach to her material in *Daughter Rite* and in *Home Movies*.

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<sup>87</sup> Citron, xiv.

<sup>88</sup> Citron, 41.

<sup>89</sup> Citron, 41.

<sup>90</sup> Citron, 41.



*Home Movies* is in explicit dialogue with the artist's earlier experiments, especially *Daughter Rite*, upon which it builds. Having already watched and re-watched her own home movies and returned to old diaries and other artefacts from her childhood to make *Daughter Rite*, she returned *again* decades later to the very same material to write *Home Movies*. In the book's opening chapter, "What's Wrong with This Picture?", three separate but interconnected streams of information are presented on alternating pages. On the odd numbered pages, Citron writes about the phenomenon of home movies in the United States using a broad, socio-cultural lens, citing historians and anthropologists and discussing the use of family images in everything from mainstream television shows to Christmas cards. On the even numbered pages, using a different font, she writes in the first person about her own family's home movies, describing and contextualizing their content and commenting on her family's performances



**Fig. 2.6** Citron recycles some of the same home movie images in *Daughter Rite* (1978) and *Home Movies and Other Necessary Fictions* (1999, p. 11).

in and ritual exhibitions of the films, her frustration at the unrelenting opacity of the images and the emotions they trigger, and her earlier use of this very material in *Daughter Rite*. In the margin between the two alternating texts are a series of stills from these childhood home movies, reprinted vertically on the page to approximate a strip of film. Citron explores different possible interpretations of the images—writing as the child in the films and as the adult watching her child-self; from a sociological perspective and from a psychological one; as a filmmaker; as a daughter; as an incest survivor—and, in so doing, she reminds the reader that the meanings of such images, like identity itself, is far from fixed. Her own thinking about (and complicated relationship to) this auto-archival material has evolved across the years, and her writing in much of this chapter—much of the memoir as a whole, in fact—is about the experience of watching

herself watch herself, approximating the nesting at the heart of the above-cited therapeutic treatment.

The chapter, like much of the memoir as a whole, also replicates an alternation not uncommon in trauma survivors between flashes of vulnerable, coherent narrative truth and distancing approaches that make the fragments of material (memories, images) safe. In this case, Citron's ethnographic and sociological approaches to home movies mitigates some of the pain radiating from her family's archive. And so, back and forth, from intimate to distanced, vulnerable to safe and back again, we stagger forward through the memoir on a jagged path not unlike the movement in *Daughter Rite* between the formally experimental, decontextualized, dreamlike home movie footage and the scripted pseudo-*verité* footage that allowed the artist's unconscious to simultaneously reveal and protect her from her own experiences.<sup>91</sup> Intimate to distanced. Vulnerable to safe. This pattern continues into the next chapter, "Speaking the Unspeakable: How We Talk When Words Fail," in which Citron, alternately inquisitive, confessional, and scientifically detached, approaches a central question of the book: why, for most of her life, was she unable to narrativize or even recognize the story of her own abuse?

As discussed above, home movies erased Citron's trauma, and it was the discrepancy between their cheerful content and her knowledge that something dark lurked in their shadows that led her to recycle and scrutinize the footage in her own art. Though *Daughter Rite* did not ultimately reveal the complete truth to Citron, the film did lead her *mother* to confess her own experience of abuse, triggering in the artist a severe illness of acute, uncontrollable asthma. Unable to sleep or to make films, she found herself *writing a narrative* during bouts of insomnia—a surprising turn of events for an artist who had "spent nearly fifteen years developing a language of *images* and *fragmentation*" and who had completely avoided "conventional storytelling."<sup>92</sup> The short story that came out of this experience, *Pandora*, turns out to have been an important component of the process through which Citron finally discovered what happened to her. The first half of *Pandora* tells "the story of the two Doras... the Dora-of-the-Mind and the Dora-of-the-Body" as a dialogue between these "two aspects of the same character" (or, alternately, "the same character at two points in time") as she slowly uncovers a

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<sup>91</sup> Citron, 48.

<sup>92</sup> Citron, 48 my emphasis.



long-suppressed traumatic episode.<sup>93</sup> Italicized segments of Dora’s story alternate throughout the chapter with Citron’s research and reflections, existing—like Dora I and Dora II and like the other dichotomous components that fill the artist’s oeuvre—in dialogue with one another and representing two different paths—the fictional narrative of the artist and the research of the Cognitive Psychology PhD—on her road to the truth and to healing.

The second half of *Pandora* occupies the entire third chapter, “The Simple Act of Seeing,” and alternates between the voice of Dora’s mother, Emma (the “Grandmother”), and her daughter, Dory (the “Granddaughter”), to narrate the family’s story of intergenerational abuse. The line between autobiography and fiction is obviously blurred here (the “Granddaughter” opens by discussing the making of *Daughter Rite*, for example), and it seems that the guise of “fiction” has had a similar effect on Citron to the hypnosis or sodium amytal used clinically in the “nested” therapy: it enables her, finally, to “See” as the chapter title suggests, and consequently to craft a coherent narrative that mirrors her own experience. Ultimately the structure of *Home Movies*, by no means linear or chronological or narratively straightforward, might be read as functioning as something of a road map through the author’s various artistic and academic efforts towards self-knowledge and understanding, marking the treacherous, winding path upon which she gradually became aware of the critical, long-suppressed, defining event of her childhood.

Following the conclusion of *Pandora*, the third major section of the book, “Necessary Fictions,” contains five concise chapters that recount a complete, coherent narrative of Citron’s experience of trauma and the resulting series of mental and physical illnesses and other symptoms of her abuse that interrupted an otherwise full and successful life. Never one to succumb completely to conventional narrative, however, Citron moves *backwards* in time in the section’s first four chapters—“The Story in 1988...” “The Story in 1980...” “The Story in 1969...” and “The Story in 1956...”—before jumping ahead to conclude with “The Story in 1997...” . The chapters otherwise epitomize, for the first and only time in the book and in her oeuvre as a whole, conventional “explicit” memory: “continuous, storylike, and easily verbalized...[much] like a movie.”<sup>94</sup> Though several defining moments of this narrative have been alluded to numerous times before in *Home Movies* and *Daughter Rite* in various guises—

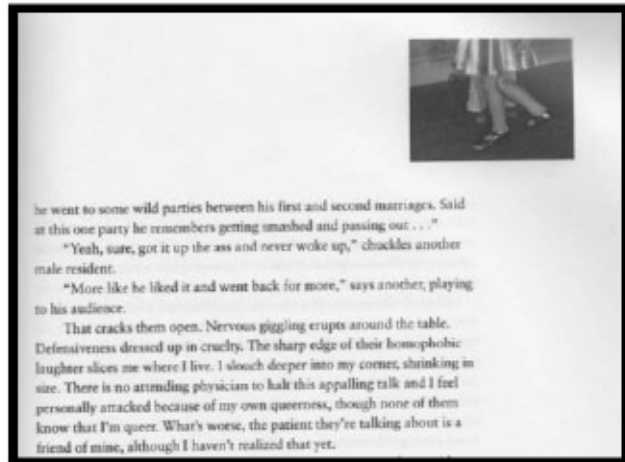
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<sup>93</sup> Citron, 31.

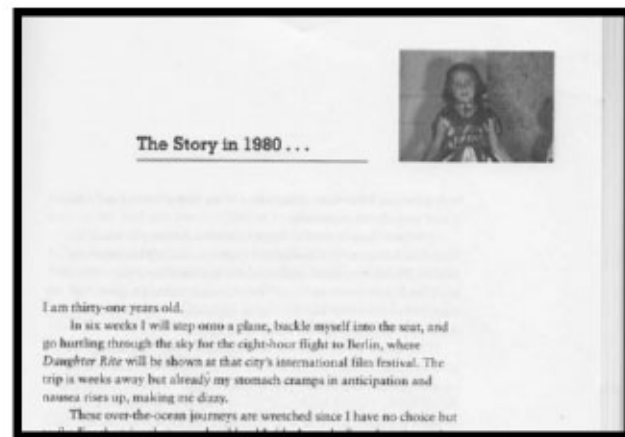
<sup>94</sup> Citron, 36.

visually, fictionally, as a sliver of memory or dream—the construction, finally, of a complete story contextualizes these previously unmoored fragments.

Still, Citron reaches *again* in these final chapters back into her physical auto-archive in order to craft what I read as a suggestive final acknowledgement of the fragmentation that



**Fig. 2.7** Traumatic memory, “like a single frame snipped out of [a] film” (*Home Movies*, p. 79).



**Fig. 2.8** Frame-by-frame, the images reveal young Citron in a majorette’s uniform (*Home Movies*, p. 109).

dominated much of her life and art to this point and which the narrative constructed in *Home Movies* has helped her overcome. The top right corner of every odd numbered page in all five of these closing chapters features a single frame from one of Citron’s home movies, a nod to her own description earlier in the book of implicit, traumatic memory as “fragmented . . . [and] inarticulate . . . like a single frame snipped out of the film . . . an image that can’t be positioned within a narrative.”<sup>95</sup> As she moves backwards in time narratively from 1988 to ‘80, ‘69, and ‘56, the frames, conversely, advance page-by-page. The first dozen frames feature what appear to be the legs of a dancing young woman, shot from the waist-down wearing patent leather shoes and a full, knee-length dress. Eventually, frame-by-frame, the camera pans up revealing that the legs in fact

belong to a young child, Citron, who is wearing what appears to be a majorette’s costume. As the chapters narratively progress backwards in time and the frames progress forward—in both cases, barreling towards the period of abuse she suffered as a child—the girl turns to face away from the camera. Finally, after having exorcized the most horrifying and difficult of her stories—the events of 1956, which bring Citron (and her reader) face-to-face with the very core of her

<sup>95</sup> Citron, 36 my emphasis.



trauma—the last chapter jumps forward to “The Story in 1997...” and the final two frames show the young Citron once again facing the camera, smiling and waving.

Ultimately, *Home Movies and Other Necessary Fictions* embodies the filmmaker’s interest in processes of memory- and identity-formation, especially in the face of trauma. Having explored the possibilities and limitations of personal storytelling using a variety of conventions, modes, and hybrid approaches, the filmmaker comes to the ironic conclusion that in the end it was “[w]riting [that] brought resolution to childhood experiences that had dominated my life.”<sup>96</sup> Home movies, long mythologized as unfiltered and spontaneously recorded documentary “evidence” of authentic domestic life, are reassessed and reframed by Citron in both *Home Movies* and *Daughter Rite*. Staging, performing, and preserving images of the family *as it wants to be seen*, amateur domestic filmmaking encourages an erasure of things as they really are or were, causing subjects like Citron to question the reliability of their memory. Her deconstruction of the phenomenon of home movies in general and of her family’s footage in particular is a catalyst for the more challenging work of composing a narrative for herself from the fragments. In both her film and her memoir—each a complex and polyvocal text—Citron approaches her own life narrative at once obliquely, from a safe distance as fiction and with astonishing directness as memoir; as a tangle of fragments (of memory, of dream, of image) and as a coherent and complete narrative; as embodied and intellectualized; as image and as text; as an artist and as a scholar; as achingly personal and as indicative of systemic patterns of violence against women. Material and ideas, stories and photographic images are appropriated, recycled, and appropriated again, examined in different contexts and from different angles in a process that is at once economical and apparently interminable (in Chapter 4, I examine another of Citron’s works, *Mixed Greens* [2004], which again recycles some of the very same visual and narrative material that appears in *Home Movies*). Ultimately, her approach effectively approximates the repetitive, never-finished processes of identity formation and/as narrative construction in trauma survivors.

## 2.4 Margaret Stratton’s *Kiss the Boys and Make Them Die*

In the sixteen years between the release of *Daughter Rite* in 1978 and Margaret Stratton’s *Kiss the Boys and Make Them Die* in 1994, the Women’s Liberation Movement had made

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<sup>96</sup> Citron, xi.



significant gains, experienced crushing losses, faced important critiques, and ultimately reoriented its priorities as a new century dawned. Feminist film, literature, and visual art of the 1980s and 1990s reflected and responded to newly conceptualized post-structuralist understandings of sexuality and gender in reflexive portraits that explored identity as fragmented, socially constructed, and multiple, pushed the boundaries of so-called “respectability,” and subverted boundaries between truth and fiction. *Daughter Rite* was an important early touchstone in conversations among feminist scholars, activists, and artists about how women should be represented on-screen and what experiences could and should enter public discourse about women’s lives, and its tactics were pushed even further by artists in the 1980s and early 1990s who “incorporat[ed] transgressive or taboo subject matter” into their works,<sup>100</sup> publicly “coming out” about formerly unspeakable experiences that had previously been relegated to the margins or silenced.

Margaret Stratton’s *Kiss the Boys and Make Them Die* (1994) returns to childhood and its auto-archival remnants in order to exorcise past traumas and examine processes of identity formation within the confines of the nuclear family. It is at once a fractured self-portrait and a disavowal of hetero-patriarchal family life that draws on a variety of psychoanalytic and postmodern theories in which the artist is well-versed to unpack her own troubled relationship with her mother and the ghosts that haunt them both. In addition to its appropriation of auto-archival and other found material, *Kiss the Boys* can be contextualized as part of a legacy of lesbian and gay artists who turned to the less expensive, more accessible medium of video to explore their queer sexualities and subjectivities in boundary-pushing first-person tapes. Anchored by a dense voiceover narration in which Stratton ruminates on the themes of



Fig. 2.9 Margaret Stratton, “saved by Prozac.” *Kiss the Boys and Make Them Die* (1994)

<sup>100</sup> Tamblyn, “No More Nice Girls,” 53.



childhood and family legacy, lesbian sexuality, the surveillance of women, death, mental illness, and ghosts, *Kiss the Boys* emerges as an exploration of the creation of memory, sexuality, and the self within the confines of a dysfunctional family that pushes the boundaries of auto/biographical storytelling.



**Fig. 2.10** “I broke myself into two: normal, not normal; queer, not queer” *Kiss the Boys and Make Them Die* (1994)

Fluent in contemporary feminist, linguistic, and cultural theories, Stratton’s presentation of her own identity in the tape illustrates ideas about the multiple subject positions inhabited by women and the shattering of the postmodern subject. Hers is not a coherent, unified, singular identity: she is, at once, daughter, victim, survivor, friend, lover, queer, mentally ill, “saved” by Prozac, watched and watcher, outsider and insider, and many, many more identities that are formulated and then questioned throughout the tape. She explicitly acknowledges the splitting of her psyche as a queer woman and as someone who has struggled with mental illness and suicidal tendencies from a young age. As she admits in voiceover, “I broke myself into two: normal, not normal; queer, not queer.”

Whereas Citron’s tendency was to make her own home movies “safe” by reading them with an “ethnographic eye”—“focusing,” in other words, “on the social and de-emphasizing the psychological”—Stratton’s narrating voice actively probes her own psychological wounds.<sup>101</sup> What Stratton’s video *does* share with Citron’s two works, however, is how it formally replicates the psychological rupture(s) at its heart in the tape’s fragmented narrative structure. Eschewing a linear reconstruction of her life’s major events, Stratton instead weaves a chaotic web of anecdotes and private musings that has no obvious beginning or end and lacks transitional devices, continuity, and markers of time. The shards of Stratton’s memories and pieces of the stories she tells are not presented in chronological order; rather, they loop back and forth between different phases of her childhood, adolescence, and adulthood so that past and present

<sup>101</sup> Citron, *Home Movies and Other Necessary Fictions*, 14.

painfully intersect. Her repeated refrain “This is a story about...” (... about childhood, about cruelty, about taboos, seduction, and so on) impedes the forward momentum of her narrative and frustrates our desire for resolution or even for a coherent story in the traditional sense. However, while it may forestall narrative momentum, the device enables Stratton to move freely from one topic to the next without the constraints of “logical” cause and effect or the traditional story arc of autobiography. Though the effect suggests a stream-of-consciousness improvisation, the voiceover—like the video as a whole—is in fact carefully crafted and constructed.

In addition to her own multiple identities, Stratton’s tape is also haunted by a (number of) ghost(s) whose shifting identity is difficult to pin down. Like the pain, shame, and humiliation she traces throughout the tape—and inseparable from it—these ghosts are a part of her familial legacy. Folkloric beliefs about ghosts and the afterlife are handed down in family lore, especially by Stratton’s namesake, her grandmother Margaret, who was a psychic. However, these ghosts can also be read as signs of transgenerational trauma, as theorized by Nicolas Abraham in his essay “Notes on the Phantom: A Complement to Freud’s Metapsychology,” which was published the same year *Kiss the Boys and Make Them Die* was released. As Abraham suggests, we are haunted not by the dead but by the gaps left in us by the unspeakable secrets



Fig. 2.11 Folkloric beliefs about ghosts...



Fig. 2.12 ... and the afterlife...



Fig. 2.13 ... are part of Stratton’s familial legacy. *Kiss the Boys and Make Them Die* (1994)



they took to the grave.<sup>102</sup> When the living are haunted, they are often suffering “the effects... of something that had inflicted narcissistic injury or even catastrophe on the parents” or other ancestors, an unfinished or unspoken business that is unconsciously handed down to descendants.<sup>103</sup> Stratton, for her part, suggests that the ghost that haunts her had originally haunted her mother, postulating in voiceover that her mother was haunted by the trauma and humiliation of her own father’s abandonment of the family and thus by his ghost: “Maybe this ghost is her father, my grandfather who I never knew, haunting her until she stops hating him, until she forgives him.” The absent father is never forgiven, however, and the cycle is perpetuated: alive and well and living under the same roof, Stratton’s father is also turned into a ghost, haunting the house of a woman who refuses to let her daughter have a father because she herself was denied one. So, too, does he haunt the tape in which he is rarely mentioned. Thus, raised by a woman who “hated men” and who “hated her father,” Stratton is taught to do the same, inheriting her mother’s own pain and shame.

Stratton also ties the haunting phantom to her mother’s repressed lesbian sexuality. “This is a video about inheriting the sins of the mothers,” she says, a video “about a mother who desired her daughter but couldn’t admit it,” about “a mother who desired women and hated herself for it,” and about “a woman who hated herself and thought her daughter should too.” If, as Abraham suggests, the phantom of intergenerational trauma points to the gap in speech, to what could not be said but was communicated nevertheless, the mother’s self-hatred over her repressed lesbian sexuality (a sexuality that was publicly *unspeakable* during much of her lifetime) is Stratton’s inheritance. An internalization of her mother’s own unspoken traumas, the ghost watches Stratton “make love,” ultimately complicating her relation to and understanding of her own desire for women and prompting confusing slippages between hatred and desire.

Less threatening though equally haunted, another inheritance from Stratton’s mother is an album of family photos, which the filmmaker incorporates into her video alongside other auto-archival material. Here, the photographs actually do serve, in part, as documentary evidence of her family’s history: traditionally posed photos of her mother, grandmother, and Otto, candid shots of the filmmaker as a baby in her father’s arms, and strips of photo booth photographs affirm that this fractured family unit did, at one time, exist. The photographs, as images of the

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<sup>102</sup> Abraham, “Notes on the Phantom: A Complement to Freud’s Metapsychology,” 171.

<sup>103</sup> Abraham, 174.



dead, also function as a spectral presence throughout the tape, much like the ghosts that haunt Stratton. Indeed, photography is, inherently, a spectral technology.<sup>104</sup> Like film, it records a precise moment in time, embalming and preserving the ghostliness of the past and thus permitting its return. Derrida,<sup>105</sup> Roland Barthes,<sup>106</sup> and others have commented on the “haunted” or phantomic nature of photographs and film. Unlike the video on which Stratton shoots, the photographs she handles throughout the film bear the indexical trace of their subjects, and her father and grandfather—figures whose absences loomed large throughout Stratton’s childhood—haunt the album with their photochemical presence, even as the artist’s use of video in a sense negates that presence.



**Fig. 2.14-16** Stratton’s camera lingers on the spectral presences haunting her family photo album. *Kiss the Boys and Make Them Die* (1994)

Yet the appropriated auto-archival remnants are also haunted by what they cannot represent, frustrating Stratton’s effort to visualize the (largely invisible) traumas of her childhood and their effects on the formation of her own subjectivity and sexuality. While the photographs literally illustrate the filmmaker’s voiceover narration of family stories—or exist, at times, as a counterpoint to it—the faces that smile back at us from the preserved black and white family photographs betray no sign of the secrets that lie buried beneath. Like home movies, these family snapshots are curated portraits that preserve what the family wants to know about itself, suppressing any evidence to the contrary. Thus, while the photographs are, for Stratton, symbolic

<sup>104</sup> Derrida, *Right of Inspection*, vi.

<sup>105</sup> As he writes, “No phantasm and thus no specter (phantasma) without photography—and vice versa.” Derrida, “Aletheia.”

<sup>106</sup> After sitting for a photograph, Barthes famously reflected in *Camera Lucida* (1988), “I then experience a micro-version of death (of parenthesis). I am truly becoming a specter.” Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, 14.



of the family's quiet traumas of desertion, obsession, mental illness, and suppressed sexuality, their benign contents contain no trace of these proverbial skeletons. The photographs' banality speaks to the hidden, secret nature of family trauma that Stratton is compelled to exorcise in her tape.

In fact, it is perhaps *because* traditional family photographs and home movies promote a spectacle of idealized family life that Stratton is not overly reliant on this material. Indeed, no home movie footage from Stratton's childhood appears in this tape, though it is unclear whether this is because her family did not own a camera, because the home movies did not survive into her adulthood, or because the filmmaker has simply chosen not to use them. The only home video included in the tape of her biological family is shot by Stratton *as an adult* and (aside from a very brief clip of a 92nd birthday celebration) the footage rejects the traditionally happy family portrait, depicting instead material typically excluded from home movies: Stratton includes tape of her dying mother in the hospital, for example, and later in an open casket. Finally, although queer life was, unsurprisingly, vastly underrepresented in early American home movie traditions, Stratton does choose to tape some members



Fig. 2.17 Queer desire, friendship, and family in *Kiss the Boys and Make Them Die* (Stratton, 1994)

of what might be read as her “chosen” family—including an African American lesbian couple and a gay male friend—in her newly shot home video, (briefly) filling in certain gaps in the history of home moviemaking and in her own personal collection by replacing the heterosexual, patriarchal nuclear family with representations of LGBTQ+ love.

Supplementing the auto-archival and newly-shot material included in *Kiss the Boys*, Stratton also weaves “found” material into her tape, including pages from a children's book aptly titled *The Ghost Avenger* as well as footage appropriated from Hollywood films released in the 1950s and '60s when she was a child. Close-ups of menacing captions from *The Ghost Avenger* repeatedly appear on screen when Stratton discusses the “haunting” of her childhood. Recalling the precarity and fear permeating this period of her life, one caption reads “I'd Be Careful What I

Said,” while another, accompanying an illustration of a lecherous-looking man holding a young girl from behind, reads “It’s Nothing to Be Afraid Of.” Such images are especially unsettling in light of the artist’s admission (which she neither affirms nor denies) that her therapist believes she was a victim of incest.

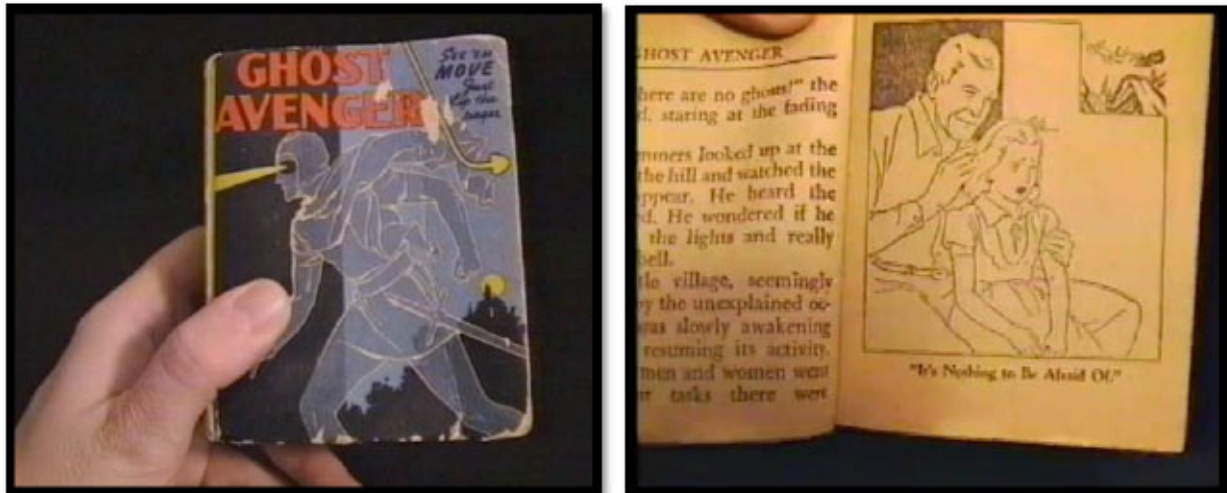


Fig. 2.18-19 Stratton returns throughout the tape to the pages of a pulpy children’s book called *Ghost Avenger*. *Kiss the Boys and Make Them Die* (1994)

Among the appropriated material and contributing to Stratton’s ghost motif are also several clips from Robert Wise’s *The Haunting* (1963), adapted from Shirley Jackson’s 1959 novel *The Haunting of Hill House*. The film, heralded by film historian Richard Barrios as “the unique American film of its era... to keep its homosexuality both evident and reasonably positive,” follows two women studying paranormal activity in a haunted mansion.<sup>107</sup> The film’s unapologetic lesbian character, Theo, is not characterized as depraved, evil, or sick—as was generally the rule under the Hays code—but rather is portrayed by actress Claire Bloom as intelligent, self-assured, and outspoken.<sup>108</sup> As such, she may have served as a model for the formation of Stratton’s lesbian identity at a time when few other models were available in popular culture. In what is, significantly, the only appropriated clip in *Kiss the Boys* to punctuate the tape uninterrupted and in full sound, its dialogue allowed to play out rather than competing with Stratton’s voiceover, Theo accuses another character, Eleanor, of hallucinating and being “crazy as a loon”; Eleanor in turn accuses Theo of being “unnatural” and “nature’s mistake”

<sup>107</sup> Barrios, *Screened out: Playing Gay in Hollywood from Edison to Stonewall*, 319, my emphasis.

<sup>108</sup> Barrios, 319.



(code, of course, for gay). This scene bears an obvious resemblance to Stratton's troubled relationship with her mother, who allegedly saw ghosts and who despised her daughter's (and her own) sexual orientation. It also, crucially, calls attention to the fact that such spats, including references to mental illness and homosexuality, are conspicuously absent from the auto-archive and erased from most family narratives.



Fig. 2.20-21 Stratton queers Hollywood and vintage stag films alike. *Kiss the Boys* (1994)

As a whole, while the exact provenance of much of the recycled footage is unclear, Stratton's selection of appropriated material—from Hollywood horror and dance films to explicitly sexual vintage stag films, all full of beautiful women—speaks to her lesbian desire, which is both an important theme of the tape and a significant point of contention with her mother. While these images illustrate her voiceover ruminations about “cruising, desire, seduction, and surveillance,” they also speak to the “invisibility of being a lesbian,” as Stratton herself puts it in the video. Historically, lesbian identity and female desire was rarely documented in home movies, and it was similarly absent—or coded as “unnatural” behavior and punished—from the heteronormative narratives of Hollywood film, with the unique exception of *The Haunting's* Theo, who ultimately survives the film's frightening paranormal attacks much as Stratton survives her own “haunting.” Her excavation of vintage lesbian (and heterosexual) amateur pornographic footage—primarily catering to and only accessible to men, historically—and her queering of the Hollywood archive rehabilitates the appropriated material for queer

culture, working to positively fill in gaps left in the history of both amateur moviemaking and the Hollywood narrative tradition.

Ultimately, Stratton's tape is an effort to make sense of her childhood and its effect on the shape of her identity. The auto-archival material salvaged from her childhood consists primarily of family photographs which, though ghostly, betray none of the family trauma or haunting secrets that Stratton brings to light in her voiceover narration, which she supplements with found and newly shot footage. Shining a light on family secrets that were buried and deemed "unspeakable," Stratton exorcises the phantoms of shame, humiliation, and trauma that had haunted the filmmaker and her family while also defying codes about taboo subject matter and challenging the limits of autobiographical storytelling and traditional narrative standards. The film's open-endedness and contradictory or competing information leaves many questions, including what "really" happened in her childhood home, unanswered—a tactic that strongly opposes the clichéd legacy in verité documentary of emotional direct-to-camera testimonies about pain and suffering. Instead, Stratton's awareness of feminist and post-structural thought shapes the structure and language of her narrative which, full of gaps and repetition, and lacking linear temporality, forward momentum, and closure in the traditional sense, formally translates the artist's highly individual life experiences to the spectator who bears witness.

## **2.5 Norma Elia Cantú's *Canicula: Snapshots of a Girlhood En La Frontera***

Chicana writer Norma Elia Cantú's *Canicula: Snapshots of a Girlhood en la Frontera* (1995) combines photographic snapshots with narrative "snapshots" (short prose reminiscences) in a text that describes a multi-generational family's life in the borderland world between Laredo, Texas and Nuevo Laredo, Mexico from the late 1940s to the mid-1960s. Structured by and around auto-archival artifacts, especially conventionally posed family portraits, *Canicula* at first glance resembles a family photo album; however, Cantú's self-conscious use of photography complicates rather than corroborates the autobiographical text, challenging widely accepted standards and conventions like the truth-claims of the genre and the indexicality and documentary truth "inherent" to photographic images that had begun to crumble in the wake of poststructuralism and postcolonialism. Indeed, the reader is told upfront that this apparently autobiographical work is in fact a *fictionalized* portrait of self and community or, as Cantú calls



it, “fictional autoethnography.”<sup>109</sup> *Canicula* combines the author’s own autobiographical experiences growing up *en la frontera* with the experiences of others, and lends them—along with her own image(s)—to a fictionalized narrator named Nena, whose “memories” of her childhood in the Mexican-American borderlands accompany and contextualize the photographs at the heart of the work.

Cantù’s work, like that of Citron, has its origins in family rituals whereby the past is compulsively revisited through the home movies and photographs that have been collecting dust in old shoeboxes.<sup>110</sup> Whereas such rituals are emotionally fraught for Citron, the experience is here framed in a more positive light: *Canicula* opens with the author’s stand-in, Nena, revisiting treasured family snapshots with her mother and five sisters, collectively sorting through physical reminders of their shared past. “For days, for weeks, for months” the women exchange stories and reminisce, filling in gaps in memory for each other and “argu[ing] amiably” about the details.<sup>111</sup> The family’s narrative, in other words, rests largely on the collaborative, intergenerational exchange of stories between women, who are framed as the guardians of family and cultural memory, history, and traditions. Cantù even explicitly connects the labour of life writing and memory work with what has traditionally been considered “women’s work”—in this case the delicate task of garment-mending—when she writes that “Nena... shape[s] her story... as carefully as when she ripped a seam for her mother, slowly and patiently so the cloth could be re sewn without a trace of the original seam.”<sup>112</sup>

Before Nena returns home from Madrid to unpack the photographs with her mother and sisters, however, and before *Canicula* makes its transition from its brief Prologue, written in the third-person, to the first-person reminiscences unleashed in Nena by the snapshots, we are told

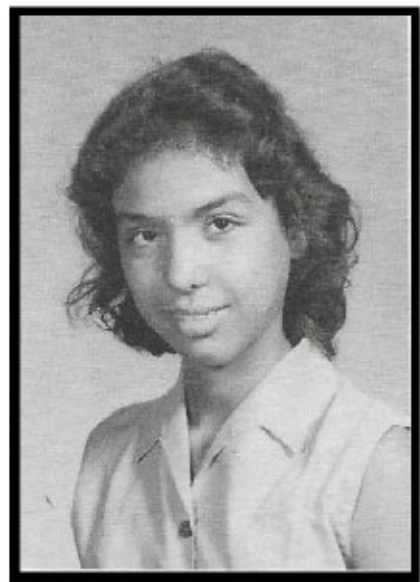


Fig. 2.22 Norma Cantù’s childhood photos accompany “Nena’s” narratives of identity. *Canicula* (1995, p. 60)

<sup>109</sup> Cantù, *Canicula: Snapshots of a Girlhood En La Frontera*, xi.

<sup>110</sup> Cantù, 2; Citron, *Home Movies and Other Necessary Fictions*, 8.

<sup>111</sup> Cantù, *Canicula: Snapshots of a Girlhood En La Frontera*, 2.

<sup>112</sup> Cantù, 2.

that “a woman reads about the accident” that killed Roland Barthes in 1980.<sup>113</sup> This peculiar reference to the death of the semiotician and to the posthumous publication of his last work, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (1988), is initially perplexing, not least because despite his name occupying a privileged place in these opening lines, Barthes is never mentioned again. The reference does, however, point to Cantù’s familiarity with his work on the nature of photography and thus suggests a possible lens through (or against) which the reader might interpret her use of photographs.

*Camera Lucida* is perhaps best known for the author’s very personal, contemplative discussion of a childhood snapshot—dubbed the “Winter Garden” photograph—of his recently deceased mother, with whom he lived for 60 years and was exceptionally close. Though the book reproduces many photographs, the “Winter Garden” portrait is famously withheld. Not coincidentally, *Canicula* similarly contains numerous detailed descriptions of photographs—what Marianne Hirsch calls “prose pictures”—that are conspicuously absent from the text.<sup>114</sup> In fact, more snapshots seem to be missing than actually appear in the work, and the omissions are mysteriously neither addressed by Nena nor by Cantù. Were the images lost? Have they, like Nena, been imagined, fashioned from a composite of extant images? Cantù’s verbal sketches of and stories about the images excluded from the text spark the reader’s imagination while frustrating her desire for closure in a manner that contributes to heightened reader engagement with the text.

It is also in *Camera Lucida* that Barthes develops his theories about the *studium* (the elements of cultural, historical, or symbolic interest) of a photograph and the *punctum* (the poignant, “piercing” personal reactions it inspires), as well as photography’s relationship to death (the ultimate *punctum*). The photographs included in *Canicula* can similarly be framed as both documents of ethnographic interest capturing images of mid-century, working class, Mexican-American family life, and as highly personal and emotionally loaded totems. Witness, for example, the poignancy of the snapshot labeled “Easter 1952.” Of the four young siblings pictured, “Tino” (far right), who playfully pantomimes aiming a “gun” at the camera, would be killed in Vietnam ten short years later, his spectral presence destined to haunt the uncannily

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<sup>113</sup> Cantù, 1.

<sup>114</sup> Hirsch, *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory*, 3–4.



prescient photograph.<sup>115</sup> While Cantú/Nena's approach to photographs in *Canicula* may appear, at least superficially, to align with observations made by Barthes in *Camera Lucida*, however, the author's attribution of *fictionalized* life narrative(s) to her own very real photographs—her separation of the photograph from its referent, in other words—poses a challenge to the semiotician's approach. That the opening lines of *Canicula* recall the *death* of Barthes is thus not insignificant.



Fig. 2.23-24 "Tino" (left) haunts this childhood photo (far right) long after his death in Vietnam. *Canicula* (117, 14)

The archetypal French bourgeois intellectual, Roland Barthes epitomizes the patriarchal establishment against which many radical feminists and women of colour were fighting in the 1970s, '80s, and '90s. Significantly, it was Barthes who announced the so-called "Death of the Author" in 1967. This poststructuralist rejection of authorial identity, which coincided in the United States with the emergence of identity politics and the growth of a variety of movements for civil rights, was decried by many feminist scholars and writers for whom it represented a denial of the ways in which identities *matter* and of the very subjectivity for which marginalized subjects were fighting.<sup>116</sup> To say that a piece of writing and the identity of its creator are

<sup>115</sup> Cantú, *Canicula: Snapshots of a Girlhood En La Frontera*, 14.

<sup>116</sup> This position is exemplified by Nancy K. Miller's argument in "Changing the Subject: Authorship, Writing and the Reader." Miller recognizes the potential benefit (especially to women, minority, and marginalized writers whose work has been excluded from the canon) of this so-called "death" of the "anthologised and institutionalised" Author; however, rather than making "room for a revision of the concept of authorship," she concludes that it has, in practice, simply "repressed and inhibited discussion of any writing identity." Miller, "Changing the Subject," 194–95.



unconnected is to speak from an obvious position of privilege, and the argument is antithetical to the goals of many feminist, postcolonial, or queer explorations of subjectivity. Cantú's Chicana identity is absolutely, inarguably central to the authorship of *Canicula*, inseparable from the story she weaves and the form it takes.

While Barthes insisted that a piece of writing could and should be separated from the identity of its author, he conversely argued in *Camera Lucida* that a photograph could “never [be] distinguished from its referent,”<sup>117</sup> a position that was, perhaps not surprisingly, unpopular semioticians and certain postmodern artists and critics.<sup>118</sup> In Cantú's case, however, it seems that Barthes's death symbolically freed the author to play with and challenge photography's apparently incorruptible indexicality, complicating its relationship to its referent by lending her personal photographs to the life of a (semi-)fictionalized character. Photographic indexicality is further destabilized by Cantú throughout the text by way of descriptions of photographs that are often slightly at odds with their referents. In contrast to the semiotician's rigorous pursuit of precision, Cantú's prose might falsely describe a subject's attire, for instance, or contain erroneous details about the image's background. These kinds of minor “errors” might be brushed off as a consequence of (or, indeed, a metaphor for) the fallibility of memory, but I would argue that this position is ultimately untenable given that the inaccurate descriptions are printed directly opposite the photograph itself. Rather, the tension in *Canicula* between “fact” and “fiction” or “truth” and “lies” is exemplified in and amplified by these inconsistencies. Though the discrepancies, examined one-by-one, appear to be quite inconsequential, they build up over the course of the narrative and demand a reckoning with the reader's frequently unquestioned faith in the veracity and authenticity of photographic evidence, echoing Cantú's deliberate separation of photographs of herself from their referent by telling stories that may or may not be “true” or even about her.

Over the course of this hybrid text, Cantú's emphasis on her own personal images and on collective stories of Mexican and Mexican-American women and children puts pressure on conventions of photographic indexicality, and it complicates issues of individual identity formation and representation as well as binary distinctions between fact and fiction and between Self and Other. This emphasis, however, also helps the author challenge the dominant macho

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<sup>117</sup> Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, 5.

<sup>118</sup> Grundberg, “Death in the Photograph.”



mythologies of the South Texas *frontera*, and for this reason *Canicula* will be taken up again in more detail in the next chapter, where I explore myth and fiction in autoethnographic storytelling.

## 2.6 Nina Fonoroff's *A Knowledge They Cannot Lose*

Though the texts discussed above primarily relate to the subject's relationship with her mother, naturally fathers too make appearances in auto-archival experiments. Nina Fonoroff's *A Knowledge They Cannot Lose* (1989) is a dichotomous film, at once about a father's death and the (artistic) birth of his daughter, about absence and presence, about intellect and emotion, about relational subjectivity and autonomous identity, and about the tactile and the intangible. Drawing on home movies and other auto-archival material, Fonoroff's layered and highly fragmented film emphasizes the haptic visuality of such artefacts. Though her approach may be read as an attempt to coax memory from the material left behind by her father, Fonoroff's embrace of the chaotic, the fragmented, and the sensuous also signifies a break with the patriarch's epistemophilic and highly ordered, rational, and controlled vision of the world. Epitomizing the “/” in “auto/biography,” a sense of the artist's own identity emerges as she memorializes her father.

As a public intellectual, Bernard Fonoroff left behind a wealth of archival material related

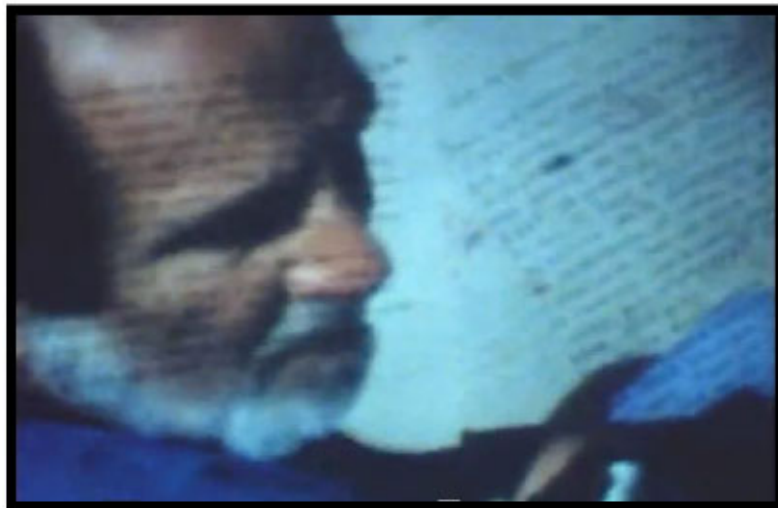


Fig. 2.25 Fonoroff's strategies of superimposition and collage approximate of the palimpsestic nature of memory...  
*A Knowledge They Cannot Lose* (1989)

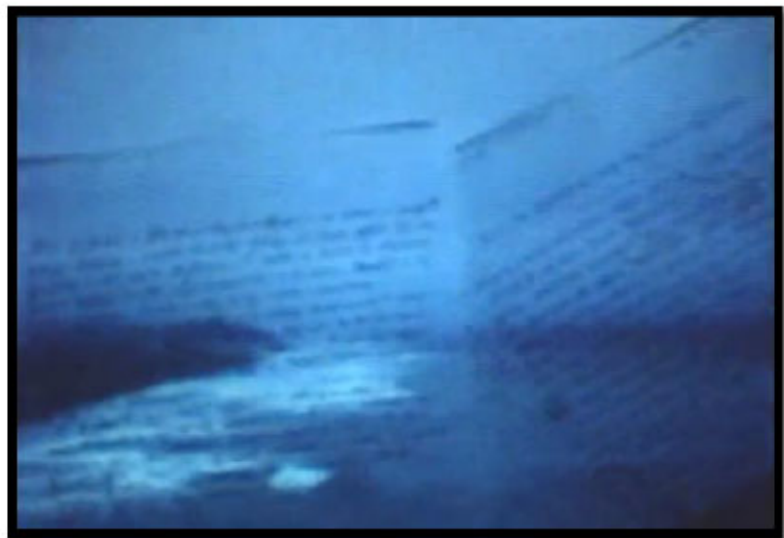
to his pursuits.<sup>119</sup> Material remnants of his public life are combined in the film with more intimate auto-archival remains (personal journals and letters, audio recordings of conversations with his young daughter, and home movie footage) as well as found footage and appropriated music. However, as in the

<sup>119</sup> Although his specific accolades are not directly referenced in the film, Bernard Fonoroff was a celebrated IBM engineer, university professor, and even a close friend of Isaac Asimov. "OBITUARIES"; "Obituaries"; Asimov, *I. Asimov: A Memoir*.

texts discussed above, this material is not mined for its narrative potential or presented as documentary evidence in a linear reconstruction of her father's life; rather, Fonoroff's poetic film functions more like a reverie or an approximation of the palimpsestic, nonlinear, and highly personal nature of memory. Though such physical "evidence" provides the literal building blocks of the film, Fonoroff's deployment of visual and audio fragments in a seemingly haphazard manner has a surreal effect, as images of her father briefly flicker on screen and disappear, not beholden to temporal logic, and decontextualized pieces of conversation punctuate the film's equally fragmented and diverse musical soundtrack. Her meticulous hand processing techniques lend her footage a dreamlike quality, which is enhanced by the ghostly images of her father brought to life via projection.

A straightforward feminist reading of this film and its use of auto-archival material and family storytelling is challenged by its visual and aural opacity and by what initially might seem to be the filmmaker's erasure from her own film. Whereas the other works discussed above by no means rely on conventional narrative structures, visual storytelling, or even traditional voiceovers, they are united by the fact that their personal storytelling—examinations of important and challenging family relationships, the working through of trauma, explorations of new feminist and queer subjectivities—is crucial to their work. Fonoroff, on the other hand, does not speak her mind or

explicitly bear witness at all. And yet, rather than dismiss this fascinating auto-archival auto/biographical film as an outlier, I would like to make the argument that her intervention is perhaps a more subtle one than its predecessors, relying almost exclusively on her editing strategies, her choice of appropriated material, and her use of haptic imagery.



**Fig. 2.26** ... and contribute to the film's haptic visuality.  
*A Knowledge They Cannot Lose* (1989)



The film's haptic visuality—a tactile way of seeing that privileges “the material presence of the image” over its “representational power”—is created through Fonoroff's collage-like editing strategies and her manipulation of the footage with which she works.<sup>120</sup> Unlike Citron, Stratton, and even Cantú, she does not emphasize the content of her auto-archival material in the service of critique or personal storytelling. Rather, Fonoroff relies on optical printing to build up layers of images and emphasize the grain of the film, reducing the legibility of the footage and drawing our attention to its surface qualities. As Laura Marks argues, “both film and video become more haptic as they die,” gradually decaying and becoming scratched and faded with use and with time, and Fonoroff calls attention to the texture of the aging, physically deteriorating auto-archival material.<sup>121</sup> While her use of fading images enhances the film's haptic qualities, it also alludes to the decline of memory with time. Her tactics also include the use of extreme close-ups, quick cuts and fast pans, all in the service of alienating the viewer from optic vision, frustrating our desire to make sense of the content, context, or narrative meaning of the imagery in front of us.



**Fig. 2.27-28** Fonoroff uses optical printing techniques to emphasize the (physical and digital) decay of the material remnants of her deceased father's life. *A Knowledge They Cannot Lose* (1989)

The film's haptic imagery serves another purpose, however. Beyond merely emphasizing its physical materiality, Fonoroff's manipulation of this footage shifts our focus to its sensuous and emotional potential, encouraging a different way of interacting with material that might otherwise (especially to an outsider) be considered commonplace or even banal. Marks

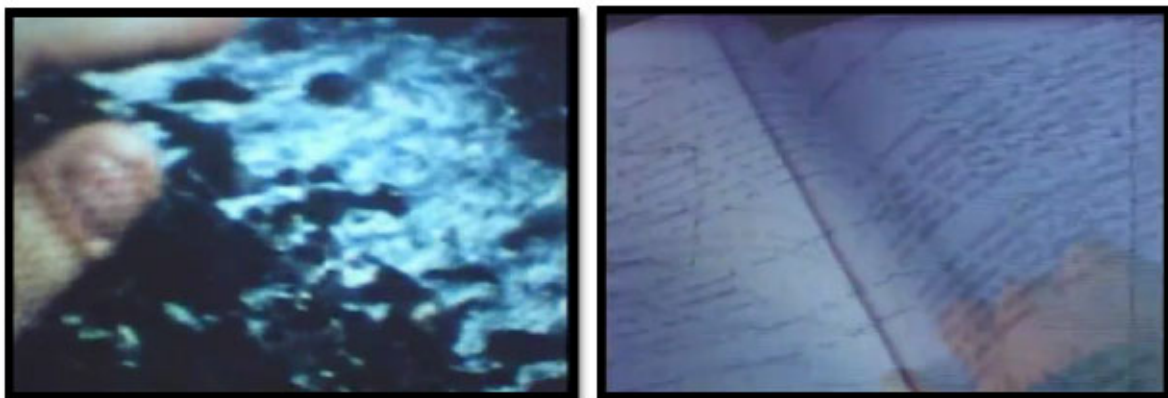
<sup>120</sup> Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses*, 162–63.

<sup>121</sup> Marks, 172.

poignantly connects haptic visuality and mourning in her examination of “the tentative process of creation that begins at the time of grieving,” through which “the knowledges of the body [and] the unrecordable memories of the senses” are coaxed from family relics and translated to an audiovisual medium.<sup>122</sup> By engaging haptically with auto-archival material, therefore, Fonoroff promotes an affective relation to her film, uncovering the sensuous experiences encoded in its images that might otherwise be imperceptible to the spectator.

In this way, Fonoroff is commemorating her father while also enacting a decisive break with his legacy, shifting the terms of what counts as knowledge. This deconstruction of the hierarchy of knowledge—where embodied and emotional forms of knowledge are traditionally valued less than its ivory tower iterations—is perhaps what is most engaging about *A Knowledge They Cannot Lose*. On the one hand, voices on the soundtrack eulogize Bernard Fonoroff as an enthusiastic learner and teacher who was formative in the lives of students and their pursuit of knowledge, and he often appears in the film surrounded by books or on university grounds. Conversely, whereas the knowledge prized above all by Bernard Fonoroff belonged to the realms of science and language, his daughter’s use of haptic visuality prioritizes the opposite: a more bodily, sensuous, and intimate form of knowledge and engagement.

For example, while images of his journal entries and letters permeate the film, rarely are they legible. Though their insights may be of value to the daughter, they are not the focus of her film, and our attention is drawn not to the words written on the page but to the very materiality of these artifacts. Indeed, they invite a special kind of knowledge “that can only be had in the



**Fig. 2.29-30** The visual motif of the filmmaker’s fingers and hands superimposed over her father’s writing emphasizes both the tactility of the film and her yearning for physical contact with her lost parent. *A Knowledge They Cannot Lose* (1989)

<sup>122</sup> Marks, 5.



physical presence of an object” for, as Marks observes, “[t]o touch something... [that someone else has] touched is to be in physical contact with them.”<sup>123</sup> The letters and pages of notes, having been touched by her father and carefully written in his hand, have a sacred, auratic, even fetishistic character for Fonoroff, whose lovingly hand processed images of this material—diametrically opposed to Citron’s more destructive techniques—suggest that their importance exceeds the words scrawled in ink. They are visually layered on top of one another or superimposed over images of rolling waves and close-ups of their author’s craggy, aging face, their contents obfuscated in favor of the sensations and emotions produced by the collaged images. By appealing to the sense of touch, Fonoroff coaxes the “fetish object[s]” salvaged from her father’s paper archive “to unfold into memory.”<sup>124</sup> In this sense, the filmmaker is able to commune with her lost father; in touching the paper that he touched, she is closer to him. Though Bernard Fonoroff lectured and wrote prolifically, his daughter’s film—with its gestural camera movements, its handcrafted, manipulated surfaces, and its emphasis on light, color and rhythm over representational content and narrative meaning—conveys the idea of being beyond the verbal.

The physical presence of his letters and journal entries and the ghostly, indexical traces of his image on film make his absence even more poignant. Unable to assemble a complete portrait of her father through the material fragments he left behind, Fonoroff instead surrenders to the material itself, to the process of weaving and collaging it together, and to the emotions and sensations thus elicited. Although the filmmaking process in this case reflects an attempt to catalyze and process grief after her father’s death, Fonoroff’s return to dusty family home movies enables her to watch the dead uncannily returned to “life” through projection, the cinematic illusion of movement lending Bernard Fonoroff a spectral presence where he exists somewhere between life and death. Ultimately, however, the delicate, painstaking work of optical printing puts the material he left behind literally in the filmmaker’s hands, requiring her to work closely with the footage in its unanimated state, a series of still photographs and discrete fragments in which her father is once again inanimate, nothing more than a photochemical trace that she can manipulate at will. The power is ultimately in the hands of the daughter, who has

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<sup>123</sup> Marks, 112.

<sup>124</sup> Marks, 125.



crafted a film that is at once an experimental portrait of her father and a break with his legacy in its emphasis on the sensuous, the emotional, and the intimate.

## 2.7 *Are You My Mother?* Auto-Archival Appropriation in the Autographic

Best known for her autographic *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* (2006) and her long-running comic strip *Dykes to Watch Out For*, cartoonist and graphic memoirist Alison Bechdel is credited for helping to bring attention and cultural legitimacy to the medium of comics, which has for much of its history been confined to the “underground” and the margins of popular culture. The massively popular<sup>125</sup> *Fun Home* is an illustrated memoir about Bechdel’s coming of age in the small-town funeral home run by her closeted, often tyrannical father, who committed suicide shortly after she came out to him. Bechdel uncovered her father’s own homosexuality while sorting through the material artifacts—especially photographs—left behind after his death, and the entire narrative of the autographic is structured around this material. In the much-anticipated 2012 follow-up to *Fun Home*, Bechdel turns her attention to her equally complicated relationship with her mother. Like *Fun Home*, *Are You My Mother?* revolves around auto-archival (and other intertextual) material, and it is at once strikingly intimate and highly relatable in its depiction of the struggles between love and dysfunction that plague the mother-daughter relationship.

The medium of comics and the family photo album are remarkably similar in the way each “shape[s] stories into a series of framed moments.”<sup>126</sup> However, *Are You My Mother?*, like each of the other works discussed in this chapter, rejects the constrained narrative possibilities (retrospective, linear, chronological) offered by the photo album and by conventional life writing alike. Instead, Bechdel favours a non-chronological structure that, though it is meticulously constructed, gives the impression of being guided by chance and free-association: a photograph, conversation, or line of text in a book is apt to trigger dynamic, stream-of-consciousness-style leaps between depictions of her mother’s pre-child life, impactful moments from her own childhood, the aftermath of her father’s death and the publication of *Fun Home*, relationships

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<sup>125</sup> Among other accolades, *Fun Home* was a *New York Times* Best Seller, *Time* magazine’s No. 1 Book of the Year, and was even adapted into a Tony Award-winning Broadway musical.

<sup>126</sup> Chute, *Graphic Women: Life Narrative & Contemporary Comics*, 6.



with lovers, breakthroughs with therapists, and an impressive array of nonfictional intertexts.<sup>127</sup> Its logic, in other words, is closer to that of dreams than to the narrative logic of “straight” autobiography. Fittingly, each chapter opens with the depiction of a dream—contextualized by Bechdel in relation to her filial responsibilities, her ongoing work on her memoir(s), her interest in psychoanalytic theory and her actual therapeutic treatment—before moving into intricately interconnected, painstaking visual renditions of memories, conversations (from the seemingly banal to the life-altering and even conversations about the very book we are reading), ruminations about art, psychoanalysis, and a wide range of other topics, all contributing to the author’s effort to visualize and thus to understand key moments from her own childhood as well as from her mother’s life.

Much as dreams are a critical object of inquiry for psychoanalysis, auto-archival images and artifacts are the raw materials (and often, like dreams, a key to deeper insights) for auto/biographical storytelling. Bechdel narrativizes the labour of both processes, dedicating as much space to an analysis of photographs and diary entries as she does to analyses undertaken with the aid of her therapists of her own traumas, complexes, and dreams. *Are You My Mother?* is filled with illustrated reproductions of the material artifacts of Bechdel’s personal family drama—photographs, letters, diary entries, and newspaper clippings—which, combined with the rest of its diverse materials, creates a palimpsestic auto/biographical portrait that explores the artistic drives, interior lives, and interpersonal relationships of Alison and Helen Bechdel. While this rich work could tempt the interdisciplinary scholar along many varied paths of interpretation, I will close my discussion of alternative auto-archival and self-representational artistic practices with an examination of the artist’s repeated mediation of her own family photos and her narrativization of the labour of archival research and of family storytelling.

As the above analyses have established, the memory work required of artists engaged in auto/biographical storytelling conventionally—perhaps even inevitably—leads to the excavation

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<sup>127</sup> Among the most frequently invoked intertextual sources are the diaries of Virginia Woolf—especially references to the cathartic release that came with writing about her mother—and the work of childhood psychologists and psychoanalysts like D.W. Winnicott and Alice Miller. Exemplifying the dizzying variety of her allusions, a 15-page section of Chapter 2 quickly moves from Freud’s *Psychopathology of Everyday Life* (1901) to *The Holistic Health Handbook* (author and date unknown) to Bechdel’s childhood journal, back to Freud, then to Alice Miller’s *The Drama of the Gifted Child* (1979), which leads Bechdel to D.W. Winnicott, who brings her to A.A. Milne’s *The World of [Winnie-the-]Pooh* (1957), and back to Freud, and each allusion includes an illustrated excerpt from the given text (Bechdel, 46-59). *Fun Home* on the other hand, relied on largely *fictional* intertexts, as Bechdel considered her father’s life in relation to great works of modernist literature, from Joyce’s *Ulysses* to Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*.



of auto-archival material, though in many feminist interventions, such material “evidence” of personal and/or family history is challenged or critiqued, manipulated or mediated, subverted or subject to de(con)struction. What is unique about the deployment of such artifacts in autographics is the embodied nature of their mediation: each image (re)produced for *Are You My Mother?* is hand-drawn by Bechdel and thus bears the indexical trace of the author-illustrator. We see each image through *her* eyes, as conveyed by *her* pen; all visual information is inevitably filtered through both her own subjectivity and her physical body. In her analysis of Bechdel’s earlier memoir, Hillary Chute observes that the artist’s “compulsive reproduction” of auto-archival artifacts is a means of “going back into the past to *re-mark archival documents with her own body*” and, further, that the medium of comics offers the artist “a way to intimately touch the subjects... on whom her work focuses... through drawing,” observations that apply equally to Bechdel’s second memoir, which is itself “glued together by the intimacy of... touching.”<sup>128</sup>

The remediation—of photographs in particular, but also of diary entries, letters, and other documents as illustrations—inherent to Bechdel’s process is a revisioning of the past, a new way of seeing both literally and metaphorically. Bechdel’s illustrations, which take the place of actual photographic reproductions or photorealistic drawings, translate each image into a signature graphic style of simple lines and a muted colour palette (largely white, blue-greys and rusty reds), minimizing extraneous detail in order to emphasize the most essential information in each panel. While she largely avoids the cartoonish exaggeration sometimes associated with comics, the medium enables Bechdel to draw the reader’s attention to important elements like facial expressions, body language, and other visual information that signifies powerfully for the artist—a graphic cognate to her penchant for “highlighting” resonant lines of text from the writing of Woolf or Winnicott.

The very first close reading of family artifacts performed by the artist in *Are You My Mother?* (fig. 2.3) provides a potent example of how the appropriation of auto-archival material, so crucial to her work, enables Bechdel to (psycho-)analyze her younger self in relation to her parents. Excerpting a letter written by her mother “when she was exactly the age I am now” in which Helen Bechdel muses about the “crazy” penchant, shared by mother and daughter, for

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<sup>128</sup> Chute, *Graphic Women: Life Narrative & Contemporary Comics*, 199–200, my emphasis.



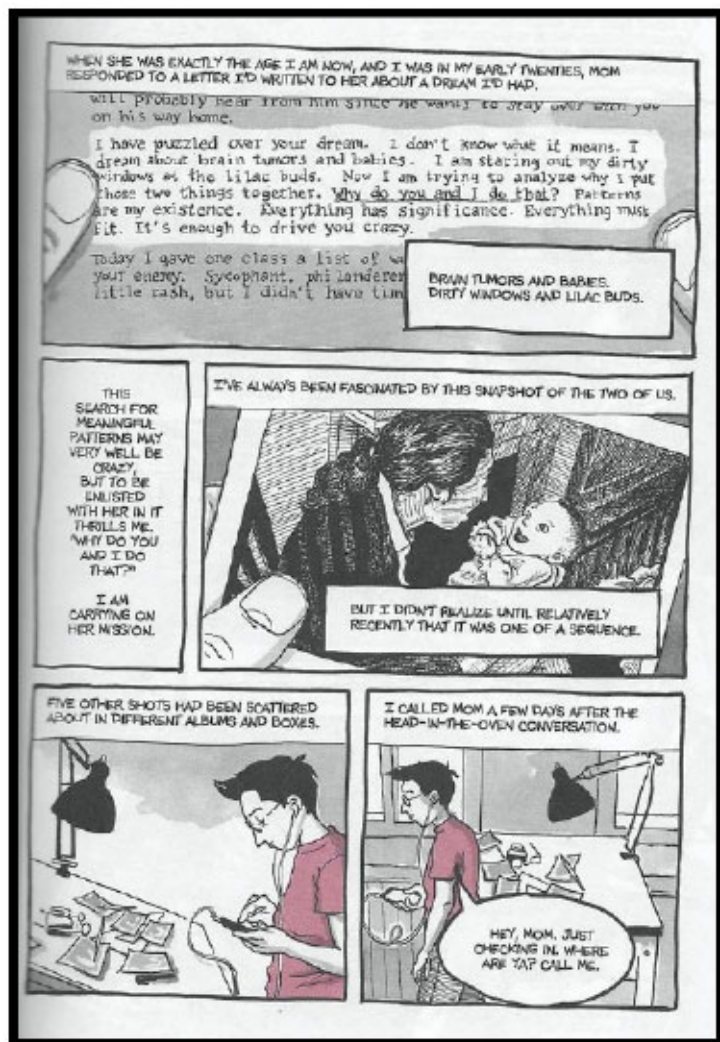


Fig. 2.31 *Are You My Mother?* (Bechdel, 2012, p.31)

finding “meaningful patterns” in dreams and in life, Bechdel fixates on a single phrase: “*Why do you and I do that?*”<sup>129</sup> To be “enlisted” by her mother to “carr[y] on her mission,” she admits, “thrills” her.<sup>130</sup> Directly following this avowal is an illustrated snapshot of mother and daughter—the first such image we are shown in close-up—drawn using a more visually complex cross-hatched style that will come to signify “photograph” throughout the autographic. This snapshot, which had “always... fascinated” Bechdel, shows Helen in silhouette holding her infant daughter, who is grinning and staring directly into her mother’s eyes.<sup>131</sup> Replicating a common experience in the non-

professional, often disorganized or incomplete “archives” of family ephemera, Bechdel notes that she eventually finds five other photographs from the same sequence of shots that she had not known existed, “scattered about in different albums and boxes.”<sup>132</sup> Turning the page, the reader is confronted with a two-page-spread that shows all five photographs in close-up, arranged somewhat haphazardly on Bechdel’s work-space among her art supplies and her reading glasses.

<sup>129</sup> Bechdel, *Are You My Mother?: A Comic Drama*, 31.

<sup>130</sup> Bechdel, 31.

<sup>131</sup> Bechdel, 31.

<sup>132</sup> Bechdel, 31.



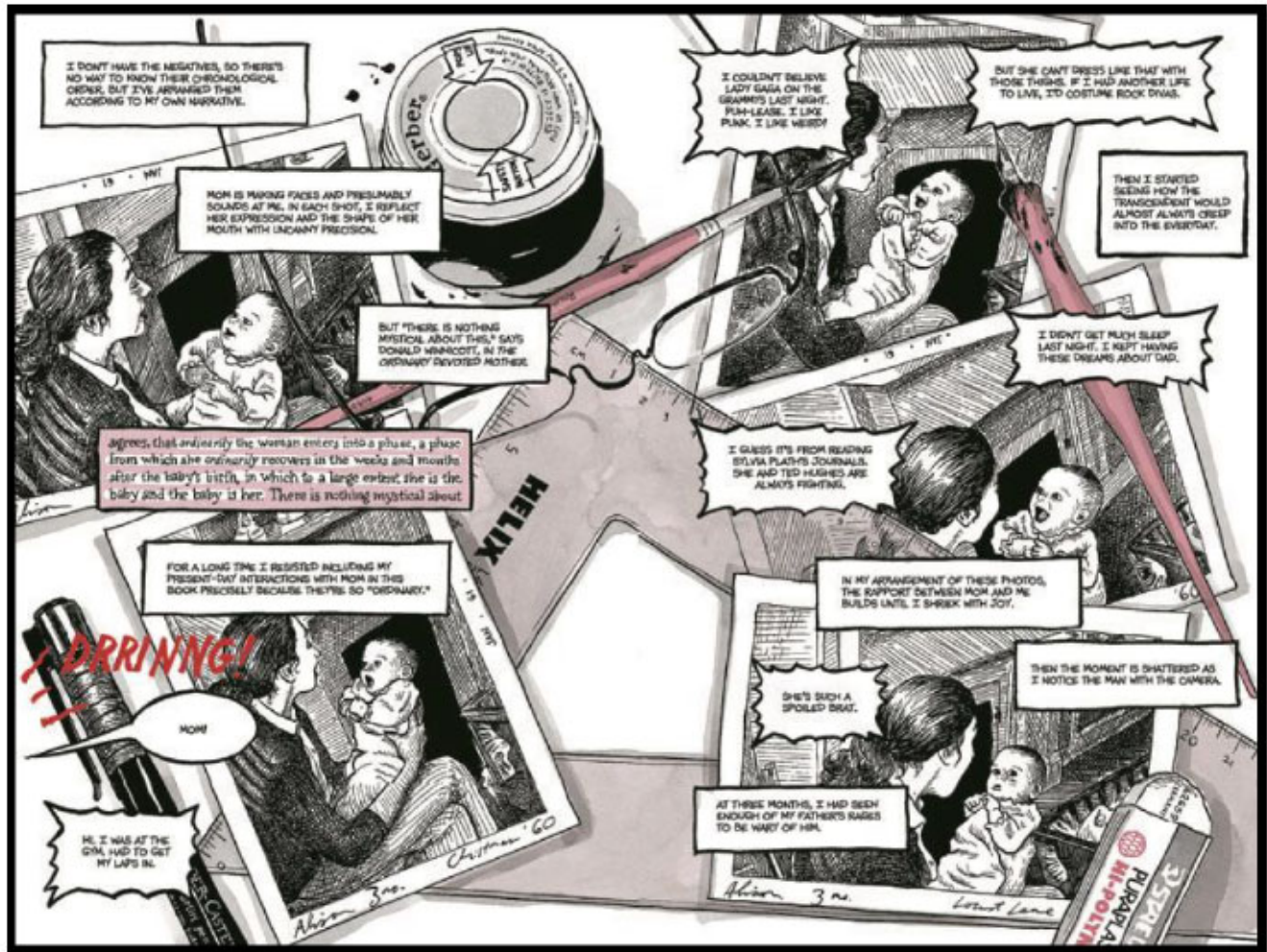


Fig. 2.32 Photographs of Alison and Helen Bechdel, scattered across the artist's desk among the tools of her trade. *Are You My Mother?* (2012, pgs. 32-33)

Bechdel's assertion of her own identity—as an artist and as an individual subject separate from her parents—is well-illustrated in this spread. If the images capture that brief moment in time during which the mother “is the baby and the baby is her,” as Winnicott suggests in a quote cited by Bechdel, the author's artistic interventions firmly emphasize her adult autonomy.<sup>133</sup> The temporal disparity—what Jamie Baron has theorized as the “archive effect”<sup>134</sup>—between the narrative present and the archival images is emphasized in two ways. First, the childhood photographs are self-reflexively scattered among illustrations of the artist's tools—a Faber Castell pen, an eraser, a protractor, a paintbrush, a fountain pen and, fascinatingly but

<sup>133</sup> Bechdel, 32.

<sup>134</sup> Baron, *The Archive Effect: Found Footage and the Audiovisual Experience of History*.



inexplicably, what appears to be a Gerber baby food jar filled with black ink—and the reading glasses that poignantly remind us of the passing of time, that the infant in the photos is now an aging adult. Second, layered over the photographs and art supplies across both pages are sixteen text boxes containing Bechdel’s narrative commentary—which attempts to make sense of the disparities between what we see in the childhood photographs and the complex adult relationship between the mother and daughter—as well as snippets of “ordinary,” “present-day interactions with mom.”<sup>135</sup> One major point of tension in the relationship between Alison and Helen Bechdel as it is presented to us revolves around the fact that, whereas the former has enjoyed a successful artistic career, the latter was forced to put her artistic ambitions as a poet and actor aside when she got married and had children. In this sense too, then, Bechdel has carried on her mother’s “mission,” and the palimpsest of tools, photographs, conversation and narration are a poignant reminder of this fact.

Because, Bechdel acknowledges, there is “no way to know th[e] chronological order” of the five snapshots without the photographic negatives, she has “arranged them according to [*her*] *own narrative*,” and its structure conveys a good deal of important information about the artist’s (adult) perspective regarding her early childhood.<sup>136</sup> Each of the first four photos, in which Alison appears to mimic or mirror the facial expressions made by her mother, could conceivably have been arranged in any order without changing Bechdel’s narrative. Each contributes equally to a scene of undivided attention and uncomplicated intimacy, of a mother and child so entranced with one another that they are, for a fleeting moment, blissfully unaware of the world around them. On the other hand, Bechdel’s deliberate placement of the fifth photograph—which may have been taken at any point in relation to the others—at the end of the sequence makes a profound statement. In it, Alison stares directly into the camera and looks as though she is about to cry; the game with her mother has been interrupted by an interloper in the form of the photographer-husband/father, Bruce Bechdel, an intruder whose haunting presence has been there all along, and who will continue, always, to haunt—both during his lifetime and long after his suicide-by-bread-truck, which is explored obsessively by his daughter in *Fun Home* (2006). “[T]he moment is shattered as I notice the man with the camera,” Bechdel writes, “At three

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<sup>135</sup> Bechdel, *Are You My Mother?: A Comic Drama*, 32.

<sup>136</sup> Bechdel, 32.



months, I had seen enough of my father's rages to be wary of him."<sup>137</sup> This single photograph, she observes a few pages later, "feels like a picture of the end of my childhood."<sup>138</sup>

Bechdel's singling out of this moment—the infant's acknowledgement of the intrusive violence of the man behind the camera—as marking the end of innocence is a key moment of insight into the author's own identity. Caught in her father's (photographic) crosshairs constantly as a child whose "butch" gender performance clashed profoundly with his own exacting "nelly" sensibilities and sartorial demands, Bechdel had little agency over her own (re)presentation growing up.<sup>139</sup> Like everything else in his life, Bruce Bechdel's photographs of his wife and children were painstakingly constructed and carefully posed to present an illusion—images of a happy, "normal" family—that he hoped would conceal or somehow erase his own homoerotic desires.<sup>140</sup> Now, however, as an artist who has taken on the task—twice—of telling her parents' stories along with her own, it is the daughter who exerts control over their portrayal. Her mediation and reevaluation of her childhood photographs inverts the parent-child power structure, empowering her to challenge the myths of unity, cohesion, and contentment artfully cultivated in her father's family images, delving into the places where these myths start to break down, where they are vulnerable, and she illustrates what they don't show. The process bestows upon her power over the images that she did not have as a child. As Citron insightfully observed in *Home Movies and Other Necessary Fictions*, family portraits (whether moving or still) often embodied "ritual[s] of presentation" performed for the father behind the camera, and the deconstruction of these rituals can serve as belated acts of protestation against the "idealized family portrait."<sup>141</sup>

If Bechdel's method involves a revisioning of the past, it is also a *restaging* in which she enacts every role. Indeed, critical to the artist's well-documented<sup>142</sup> process is a unique intermediate step: before she begins sketching, Bechdel takes photographs of herself posing as *every* subject in *every* panel. Whether illustrating a memory, a dream, or—most intriguingly in the context of this chapter—an extant photograph, Bechdel must always perform this additional embodied step first, re-inhabiting past selves and even temporarily becoming her parents.

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<sup>137</sup> Bechdel, 33.

<sup>138</sup> Bechdel, 35.

<sup>139</sup> Bechdel, *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*, 13–16, 95–99, 117–19.

<sup>140</sup> Bechdel, 16–17.

<sup>141</sup> Citron, *Home Movies and Other Necessary Fictions*, 25.

<sup>142</sup> Chute, *Graphic Women: Life Narrative & Contemporary Comics*; Bechdel, *OCD*.



It is inevitably an awkward performance, she jokes in a video demonstrating her process, when she must act out both sides of their frequent quarrels,<sup>143</sup> but it does not take a psychoanalyst to see the cathartic possibilities such “acting out” might provide. In addition to the practical artistic function of staging reference images from which to draw and the psychological benefits of revisiting and working through childhood traumas, Bechdel’s incredibly laborious process



Fig. 2.33 Bechdel demonstrates her process, sketching from a digital camera with which she has just taken a photograph of herself (“OCD”)

ultimately speaks to an empathic desire on the artist’s part to emotionally connect with, to truly understand, her dead father and her emotionally-withholding mother.

Bechdel’s embodiment of her parents (and of past selves) is not limited to the reproduction of photographs, however. Her reliance on hand-written texts—especially journal entries and letters—from the family archive similarly offer her a chance to commune with them and with family history as she rewrites these documents, meticulously mimicking each subject’s handwriting, for inclusion in her autographic. After discovering a box of letters written before she was born from her father to her mother, for example, Bechdel takes it upon herself to type each letter—preserving them for her own personal archive—before rewriting them by hand and returning them to her mother. The process, she narrates, was “a peculiar performance in which I played both my mother the reader... and my father the writer” (128). Mimicking her father’s scrawling penmanship forces her to read each correspondence *so* closely and precisely that she learns to read emotional shifts in his handwriting, and she becomes equally acquainted with her mother’s “light, neat typing” which for her is “as identifiable as a signature.”<sup>144</sup> This element of her artistic process, much like the reference photographs for which she poses, enables Bechdel to at once temporarily inhabit the bodies of her father or mother while simultaneously inserting a little of herself into the reinscription of artifacts from their pre-child lives.

<sup>143</sup> Bechdel, *OCD*.

<sup>144</sup> Bechdel, *Are You My Mother?: A Comic Drama*, 128.

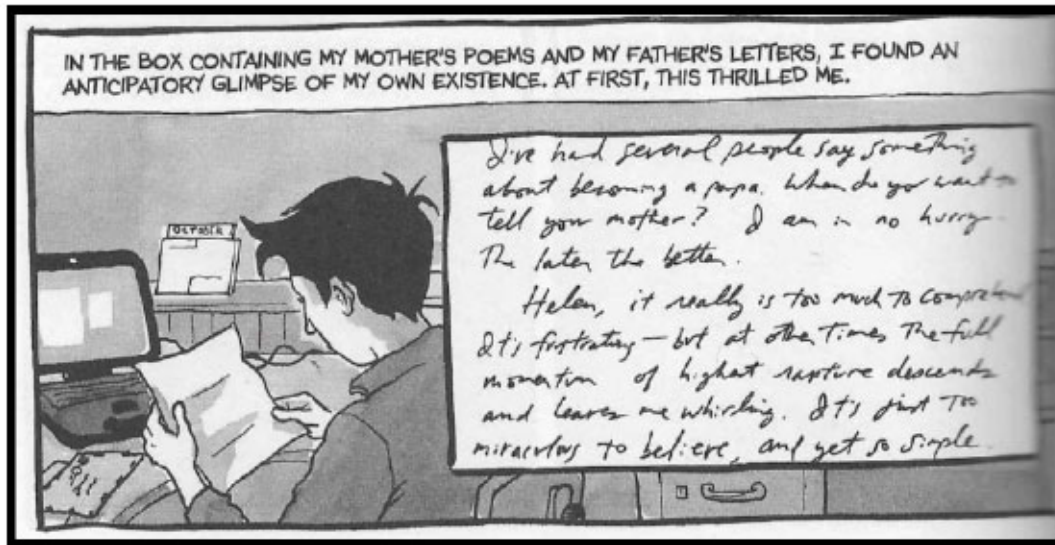
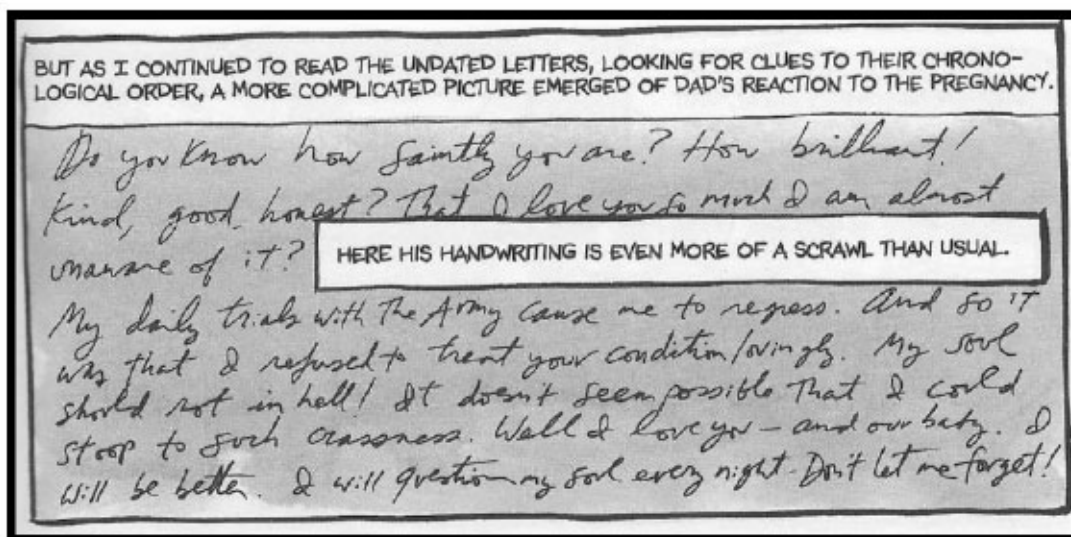


Fig. 2.34-35 Bechdel communes with her father by mimicking his scrawling penmanship. *Are You My Mother?* (2012, pgs.138-139)



A unique result of Bechdel's particular approach to the auto-archival graphic memoir is her creation of an enormous "shadow" archive, as Chute called it in her analysis of *Fun Home*, of the family "archive... at the book's center."<sup>145</sup> In typing up letters, journal entries, even phone conversations with her mother, and in restaging photographs with the aid of a digital camera, Bechdel first creates an electronic auto-archive, housed on her ever-present laptop. Then, reinscribing the images and texts by hand for inclusion in her book—a process by which she

<sup>145</sup> Chute, *Graphic Women: Life Narrative & Contemporary Comics*, 200.



produces *many* preliminary sketches for each panel—she creates a *second* paper archive.<sup>146</sup> This shadow archive ensures the preservation of (copies of) sentimental auto-archival material, which is not in itself abnormal (witness, for example, the phenomenon of families carefully scanning images from photo albums in order to preserve digital copies or, conversely, printing physical copies of digital photographs); however, one of the most intriguing aspects of Bechdel’s meticulous, obsessive, idiosyncratic process to my mind is its apparently incidental byproduct: the several thousand individual new photographs, each an unintentional, sub rosa self-portrait, that issue from her approach to reproducing family photographs and to figure drawing more generally. Somewhere—on an old hard-drive, perhaps—are thousands of photographs of an artist enacting, alone, every role in a multi-generational family drama. Is her embodiment of her parents in this manner Bechdel’s way of claiming agency over their—and her own—representation, of “composing [them]” the way they, throughout her childhood, “composed [her]”?<sup>147</sup> Is it her way of claiming an emotive space of her own in relation to her emotionally-withholding parents?

One thing is certain: Bechdel’s acts of reevaluating, mediating, revisioning, and restaging childhood photographs taken by (and of) her parents, in addition to other auto-archival material produced by them, invert the traditional parent-child power structure, giving the artist a unique level of power, control, and agency unavailable to her younger self. The meticulous process—at once physical and highly cerebral—by which Bechdel intimately studies and replicates the material artifacts of her family’s past, moreover, yields profound psychological and emotional insight for the author (and, given the universality of many of her experiences, for the reader as well). The effect is a better understanding of the therapeutic and cathartic possibilities of auto-archival work and family storytelling, especially the empowerment that comes with rereading and remaking the archive, which is critical to the artist’s efforts to define her own self in relation to her parents and to represent the specificities of her identity as a storyteller, an artist, a queer woman, and as a daughter.

Bechdel’s efforts in both *Fun Home* and *Are You My Mother?* to pair an auto/biographical examination of the parent-child relationship and a personal exploration of LGBTQ+ identity politics with the appropriation and mediation of auto-archival material are

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<sup>146</sup> Chute, 200.

<sup>147</sup> Bechdel, *Are You My Mother?: A Comic Drama*, 14.



today among the best-known examples of such work, owing in part to the wide release and critical acclaim of both books and, in the case of *Fun Home*, its translation into a Tony Award-winning Broadway musical. However, as I have established, Bechdel's subject matter and auto-archival approach are not unprecedented. Her work is predated by a decades-long history of feminist and queer interventions, in a variety of mediums, in which auto/biographical experimentation meets the critique of hetero-patriarchal norms and narratives, and the individual's appropriation of intimate auto-archival materials meets wider efforts aimed at the de(con)struction of the visual tools conventionally used to represent and reproduce the ideals of the hegemonic American Family. My intention here has not been to suggest a direct correlation or line of influence or transmission between these earlier works and Bechdel's twenty-first century autographics, but rather to examine thematic and formal points of convergence and divergence and to begin to think through feminist, auto/biographical archival appropriation across mediums.

The acts of auto-archival appropriation performed in each of the works discussed above translate formerly private texts into material available for public consumption and scrutiny, enabling feminist filmmakers to undertake acts of protestation against the idealized family portraits of their childhood and to claim agency over their own narratives. The children of the home movies and photographs have grown and formed their own individual identities, symbolically wresting power away from the parents by appropriating, scrutinizing, and challenging sacred family images, lore, and legacy, and exorcising the ghosts of both childhood and intergenerational traumas. They dissect the social relationships and power dynamics inscribed in family imagery, address gaps in representation, tease out latent content through optical printing, fragmented editing strategies, and carefully crafted narration, and they challenge the prevailing acceptance of this domestic imagery as an unmediated documentation of reality. The inability of home movies and family photographs to fully and completely or even truthfully reflect our lives, complete our memory, or compensate for the inevitable loss (of innocence, of memory, of life) that comes with the passing of time is a theme present in each work discussed in this chapter. Overall, the labour performed in these texts is at once de(con)structive—a dismantling of hetero-patriarchal (hi)stories, imagery, genres and modes of storytelling—and productive, a repurposing or transmutation of these images and codes, visual languages and narrative structures into new forms through which women might tell their own stories on their



own terms. This does not mean, however, that the auto-archival experimentation outlined here conforms to a single unified strategy or approach; rather, the idiosyncratic identities, life experiences, families, and artistic practices of each artist translates into fabulously idiosyncratic texts, each opening up a different avenue of analysis for the scholar, and each expanding for the reader or spectator the diversity of women's lived experiences to which we might bear witness and gain understanding.

### **Chapter 3. Tricksters, Myth, and Fictional Autoethnographic Experimentation**

Narrative traditions like the autobiography, memoir, and *bildungsroman*<sup>148</sup> have historically been the domain of the paradigmatic subject of liberal humanist ideology, he of self-determination and free will, and have thus long proven inhospitable and inadequate to the self-representation of those whose free will and autonomy have traditionally been denied. The lives and life stories of disenfranchised women, for example, including those marginalized by intersections of class, race, and sexual orientation, have long been controlled, minimized, and even erased by hegemonic discourses and historical and cultural narratives. However, a rich tradition of unauthorized, unruly, and subversive acts of self-representation and knowledge production among women has flourished, largely underground, for just as long. In the 1970s, a new—and newly visible—wave of experimental self-representation began to appear, sparked by a confluence of radical social and political upheaval in the second half of the twentieth century. Many feminist, black, and LGBTQ+ artists, authors, and activists had begun to critique in their work some of the major foundational tenets of male-dominated, Western imperialist traditions of representation, including autobiography, ethnography, and documentary filmmaking. Instead, they experimented with alternative representational modes that both innovated and drew inspiration from their own cultural traditions. It is in this context that what can be termed the “fictional autoethnography”—this chapter’s object of study—evolved, fostering explorations of the self as inseparable from its social context and encouraging dialogue with forgotten foremothers, cultural, ancestral, and mythical alike.

The hybridized, genre-defying new works of women’s life narrative that had begun to appear in the 1970s and ‘80s—exemplified by now-classic texts like Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts* (1976) and Audre Lorde’s *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name: A Biomythography* (1982)—blended (and even transcended) the methodologies of diverse disciplines from autobiography to narrative fiction, oral and collective history to folklore and mythology, ethnography to poetry, and beyond. Yet in reading the personal through the lens of culture, many of their strategies are perhaps most closely aligned with the genre of autoethnography, itself a hybrid form. As the portmanteau suggests,

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<sup>148</sup> A genre of life narrative that focuses on the moral and psychological coming-of-age of its protagonist/narrator/author.



autoethnography combines the self-reflection and -representation of autobiography with the cultural analysis of ethnography. More precisely, the replacement of the “bios” in “autobiography” (as self/life/writing) with “ethnos” crucially shifts focus from the life of the autonomous, singular self of traditional autobiography—with its emphasis on the interior landscape of the psyche or the soul—to the self in relation to the collective, enabling explorations of identity as relational and the self as uniquely formed in the context of a given community and its cultural practices.

Significantly, many feminist, postcolonial, and LGBTQ+ autoethnographers—Lorde and Kingston included—challenged the developing conventions of autoethnography from the very start, troubling its nonfiction status, for example, by questioning the position of “truth” in relation to issues of cultural and personal memory, history, and power. A strategy of blurring the line between lived experience and fiction organically emerged in the autobiographical texts of many women—especially women of colour—whose life stories had long been systematically suppressed, distorted, and excluded from “official” or public narrative and who faced a troubling legacy of the dismissal of their autobiographical testimony as “lies” or fabrications.<sup>149</sup> Combining culturally-specific storytelling traditions with a dash of postmodern satire and subversion, the works of this particular mode of fictionalized autoethnography simultaneously introduce elements of myth and fable, create composite subjects to portray the grossly underrepresented collective experiences of their own communities, and harness other strategies of fictionalization that may seem antithetical to conventions of ethnographic and autobiographical work alike. In light of these subversive strategies, I have found it productive to frame the authors and/or narrators of such works as “trickster” figures. Taking on the guise of the trickster—a near-universal archetype, albeit with culturally-distinct iterations that will be taken into account—and strategically incorporating fiction and myth into her life narrative, the author resists and ridicules gendered discourses about truth that have long sought to control and/or discredit women.

In this chapter, I will examine Zora Neale Hurston’s *Dust Tracks on a Road* (1942)—to my mind the prototypical literary autoethnography—in addition to four exemplary literary and cinematic fictional autoethnographic texts made in the final two decades of the twentieth century: Leslie Marmon Silko’s amalgamation of poetry, songs, and short stories in *Storyteller*

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<sup>149</sup> Gilmore, “Policing Truth.”



(1981), Cauleen Smith's short film *Chronicles of a Lying Spirit* (by Kelly Gabron) (1992), Norma Elia Cantú's photographic memoir *Canicula: Snapshots of a Girlhood en la Frontera* (1995), and Cheryl Dunye's feature-length film *The Watermelon Woman* (1996). Taken together, these works epitomize the diverse narrative and aesthetic approaches to self- (and cultural) representation encompassed by fictional autoethnography. Examining what these experiments have in common, where they diverge, and why, will illuminate why these seemingly disparate texts, made by members of different cultural and racial minority groups, can productively be read as a body of work, and it will advance the goal of better understanding their contributions to the amorphous field of late twentieth-century experiments in feminist self-representation.

This chapter will center around how each text approaches self-(re)presentation through socio-cultural identification. Each author revises and reworks the disciplines of autobiography and ethnography, whose hierarchical relations of power she disrupts in favor of a more communal approach to storytelling that is better suited to the unique cultural, social and political locations from which she speaks. The works under discussion are united, in part, by their rejection or defiance of many of the foundational tenets of the Western autobiographical tradition, including the genre's seemingly fundamental emphasis on the *individual* life, its presumed patrilineal foundation, and the nonfiction status of the genre. These texts innovate and expand our understanding of cinematic, photographic, and literary self-representation, while simultaneously highlighting and subverting structures and discourses of hetero-patriarchal and imperialist domination. Each illustrates Mae Gwendolyn Henderson's assertion that the self-inscription of women of colour requires an "interventionist, intertextual, and revisionary activity," a "disruption, rereading and rewriting [of] the conventional and canonical stories," and of the "conventional generic forms that convey these stories."<sup>150</sup>

### **3.1 Autoethnography by (Any) Other Name(s)**

The last three decades of the twentieth century witnessed a series of major social and cultural upheavals, including the growth of feminist consciousness-raising and activism and the mobilization of racial, ethnic and other minorities through social justice movements like the Black Power, Gay and Lesbian, and disability rights movements, which called attention to

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<sup>150</sup> Henderson, "Speaking in Tongues: Dialogics, Dialectics, and the Black Woman Writer's Literary Tradition," 131.



political, linguistic, and socio-economic structures of inequality and oppression. At the same time, monolithic definitions of identity based on gender, race, or other identity markers had begun to be challenged, shattering, for example, the false assumptions made by many (white, middle class) feminists that all women share the same struggles and oppressions. In the academy, new fields of study were introduced, among them Gender and Women's Studies and Ethnic Studies, which included Black Studies, Asian American Studies, Native American Studies, and Chicana Studies. Many established disciplines, faced with critiques of their patriarchal and colonial histories, underwent major revisions, and long-standing canons were questioned and redefined. Such upheavals had profound effects on American society, its academic institutions, and thus its intellectual, cultural, and artistic output.

Humanist fields in particular experienced substantial reforms as postmodern, poststructuralist, postcolonial, and feminist scholars sought to dismantle and redefine conventional understandings of authority, identity, truth and representation. Anthropology, for example, experienced a so-called "crisis" beginning in the late 1960s and early 1970s, brought about by a variety of complex political and ethical factors, including global decolonization and a growing unease about the unequal and potentially exploitative relationships between anthropologists and their subjects. This led to major reorientations in the field and in related social science disciplines in the following decades. As one scholar succinctly describes the shift, "staunch empiricism gave way to theoretical reflection, positivism to interpretivism, and the quest for objectivity to the demand for subjective accounting."<sup>151</sup> Such transformations encouraged and nurtured experiments with the rhetorical, poetic, narrative, and interdisciplinary possibilities of ethnographic writing.<sup>152</sup> Most important to my concerns here is the proliferation of highly subjective, self-reflexive ethnography, which signaled a shift away from strictly objective work in which the self and the "field" of study were mutually exclusive.

It was no coincidence that this newly subjective turn coincided with the dawn of an era in which "the personal" was embraced as "political"—a sentiment espoused not just by the Women's Movement, but by other identity and social justice movements across the nation. Many of the most potent voices to emerge with the growth of personal ethnographic writing belonged

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<sup>151</sup> Bunzl, "Anthropology Beyond Crisis: Toward an Intellectual History of the Extended Present," 187.

<sup>152</sup> An early accounting of such experiments can be found in Clifford and Marcus, *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*.



to subjects historically excluded from or marginalized by the discipline, including members of communities that had previously been the “*object*” of ethnographic study. Similarly, a growing diversity of voices and experiences—Black, American Indian, Chicana, LGBTQ+, migrant, and so on—had begun to find expression through new politicized and culturally-grounded approaches to life writing that encouraged examinations of the myriad intersections of self, community, and society. In both cases, idiosyncratic early experiments contributed to the legitimization of heretofore invisible or marginalized experiences and heralded a new wave of politicized storytelling at the intersections of social science, identity politics, and self-expression.

As novel approaches to ethnography and autobiography became increasingly more hybridized and drew ever closer into each other’s orbits, diverse practices emerged that would, collectively, come to be known as “autoethnography.” Crucial to the self-representational concerns of feminist, postcolonial, and queer subjects, autoethnography seeks to eliminate the suspect hierarchies perpetuated in and by many traditional social science research methodologies, and it eschews their potentially essentializing depictions of hegemonic society’s so-called Other; instead, the practice draws on the personal lived experiences of the author-as-cultural-insider to reflect on wider cultural experiences, beliefs, and practices. Ultimately, the autoethnographer is “both the author and focus of the story, the one who tells and the one who experiences, the observer and the observed.... the person at the intersection of the personal and the cultural, thinking and observing as an ethnographer and writing and describing as a storyteller.”<sup>153</sup>

The term “autoethnography” was first used (albeit infrequently) in the second half of the 1970s to describe self-reflexive practices in the field of anthropology, though none of these early sources actually advocated for (or themselves practiced) the integration of autobiographical storytelling and ethnographic research.<sup>154</sup> The 1980s saw an expansion of ethnographic work that introduced subjectivity, reflexivity and personal narrative—a trend mirrored in communications, sociology, women’s studies, and other academic disciplines—but the label of “autoethnography” was not widely adopted until the 1990s, when it began to be more extensively used to describe work that combined personal introspection with the examination of cultural experiences,

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<sup>153</sup> Ellis, *Revision: Autoethnographic Reflections on Life and Work*, 13.

<sup>154</sup> Heider, “What Do People Do? Dani Auto-Ethnography”; Goldschmidt, “Anthropology and the Coming Crisis: An Autoethnographic Appraisal”; Hayano, “Auto-Ethnography: Paradigms, Problems, and Prospects.”



practices, and beliefs.<sup>155</sup> By the second half of the decade, autoethnographic inquiry, representation, and scholarship had spread beyond the realm of the social sciences, finding expression in essayistic<sup>156</sup> and literary work, in cinematic experimentation, and beyond. This expansion is exemplified in Catherine Russell's groundbreaking study, *Experimental Ethnography: The Work of Film in the Age of Video* (1999), whose chapter "Autoethnography: Journeys of the Self" notably contains the first examination of the practice in the context of film and moving image studies.

Although "autoethnography" has been the most commonly used designation for works that blend the personal and the ethnic or cultural, however, it has certainly not been the only classification used by scholars or artists. Michael Fischer's concept of "ethnic autobiography," for example, describes a very closely related, even overlapping, mode of life narrative and was influential to the work of later scholars, including Russell. In his essay "Ethnicity and the Post-Modern Arts of Memory," Fischer asserts that ethnic autobiographies, which began to appear in the 1970s and 1980s, represented ethnicity not as a stable entity, but rather as something unique to each generation and each individual, to be explored as part of an understanding of identity as multiple, even contradictory.<sup>157</sup> He also argued that ethnic autobiographies were "revelations of traditions [and] re-collections of disseminated identities" that moved *beyond* "individualistic autobiographical searchings," a claim that is crucial to my own examination of relationality in women's self-representational texts.<sup>158</sup> Fischer outlines a number of tactics used by authors from diverse backgrounds in their explorations of ethnic identity, many of which he grounds in psychoanalytic theory. For example, he compares the transmission of ethnicity via "fragments of traditional stories, myths, and customs" in works like Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* (1975) to psychoanalytic dream-work and transference.<sup>159</sup> Although Fischer's scholarship is compelling in many ways, his analysis lacks any sustained consideration of social, structural, or even psychological issues of gender. Indeed, though he briefly (and rather vaguely) mentions "feminist perspectives," Fischer suggests that "the ways ethnicity is engendered" in ethnic autobiographies is "somewhat less innovative" than the deployment of psychoanalytic

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<sup>155</sup> Adams, Jones, and Ellis, *Autoethnography: Understanding Qualitative Research*.

<sup>156</sup> This is exemplified by the diversity of essays collected in Carolyn Ellis and Arthur P. Bochner's *Composing Ethnography: Alternative Forms of Qualitative Writing*.

<sup>157</sup> Fischer, "Ethnicity and the Post-Modern Arts of Memory," 195.

<sup>158</sup> Fischer, 198.

<sup>159</sup> Fischer, 196.



language and logic to model ethnic processes.<sup>160</sup> I would argue to the contrary, however, that the diverse and complex intersections between ethnicity and gender in feminist life narratives in fact yields a number of important innovations, as the work of Kingston and other innovators reveals.

It is important to note that the term “autoethnography” itself has not been universally embraced by feminist artists of colour, several of whom have rejected the label in favour of novel classifications of their own design. For example, Audre Lorde’s *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (1982) is a “biomythography,” Norma Elia Cantú’s *Canícula: Snapshots of a Girlhood en la Frontera* (1995) is “fictional autobioethnography,” and much of Gloria Anzaldúa’s writing, including *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987), is “*autohistoria*.” In choosing to create and name their own genres, such artists claim power over their life stories and ownership over its idiosyncratic representation, differentiating the work from conventional autoethnography. In much the same way that many feminist artists have distanced themselves from autobiography’s reputation as an androcentric, bourgeois discipline by adopting the label “life writing” or “life narrative” in its stead, Lorde, Cantú, Anzaldúa, and others similarly distance themselves from ethnography’s suspect historical affiliation with colonial structures of power. Finally, the adoption of their own nomenclature for their work also points to the fact that conventional categories and genres—frequently created by and in service to the maintenance of hegemony—can in fact *confine* rather than liberate the life narrator who has embraced radical new strategies through which to write herself and her community back into history, restoring their heretofore repressed and invisible stories to the public record.

Anzaldúa’s concept of “*autohistoria*” signifies a socially-engaged form of life writing fashioned by the author in response to the inability of conventional genres and rhetorical strategies (often part of wider hetero-patriarchal and colonial structures) to serve her representational needs as a self-described “Chicana, tejana, working-class, dyke-feminist poet, writer-theorist.”<sup>161</sup> Anzaldúa engaged in *autohistoria* throughout her career, but it is in a footnote to her essay entitled “now let us shift... the path of *conocimiento*... inner works... public acts” (2002) that she comes closest to offering a definition of the practice: *autohistoria*, she writes, is “the genre of writing about one’s personal and collective history using fictive elements, a sort of

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<sup>160</sup> Fischer, 203.

<sup>161</sup> Anzaldúa quoted in Pitts, “Gloria E. Anzaldúa’s *Autohistoria*-Teoría as an Epistemology of Self-Knowledge/ Ignorance,” 363.



fictionalized autobiography or memoir.”<sup>162</sup> In “now let us shift...”, the author aligns personal experiences of physical “dismemberment” (including a hysterectomy, physical complications resulting from diabetes, and the Loma Prieta earthquake) with those of the Aztec moon goddess, Coyolxauhqui, whose body is violently torn apart by her brother and scattered across earth and sky, her severed head becoming the very moon that brings light to Anzaldua in moments of physical and metaphorical darkness. Coyolxauhqui, moreover, also recalls for the author the daily violence to which the bodies of indigenous women and women of colour are subjected. Appropriately, Anzaldua allegorizes performing *autohistoria* as a process of “dismembering” and “re-membering” both collective and personal stories in order to create a “new personal myth,” a process she likens to the creation of Frankenstein’s monster.<sup>163</sup> This and other references to Coyolxauhqui throughout her oeuvre<sup>164</sup> suggest how Anzaldua reframes personal, biographical experiences as well as wider cultural experiences using folklore from her own cultural- and ethnic-background. By piecing together a narrative that is both personal and collective, the autohistorian affirms her place in a given community, its history, and its cultural traditions without sacrificing the acknowledgement of personal idiosyncrasies or limiting an identity to a single dimension. In this way, Anzaldua’s understanding of *autohistoria* is very closely related to my own conception here of fictional autoethnography.

“Biomythography,” another influential, related mode of life writing, was first used by Audre Lorde in a subtitle to her 1982 memoir, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name: A Biomythography*, and the neologism has since been adopted by some literary scholars<sup>165</sup> and even artists and curators<sup>166</sup> to read and interpret the storytelling practices of postcolonial subjects and people of color. The term in Lorde’s original usage describes *Zami*’s blending of nonfiction (the text is part autobiography, part biography of the women who populated the author’s life, including her mother, friends, and lovers) and myth. Through her personal narrative, Lorde speaks more widely to the experience of being a black queer woman in the 1930s, ‘40s, and ‘50s in America; she bears witness and gives voice not only to her own experiences, but to the experiences of others like her whose stories have rarely been told. Lorde’s intimate nonfiction

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<sup>162</sup> Anzaldua, “Now Let Us Shift... the Path of Conocimiento... Inner Works, Public Acts,” 578.

<sup>163</sup> Anzaldua, 560–61.

<sup>164</sup> See also Anzaldua, “Putting Coyolxauhqui Together: A Creative Process.”

<sup>165</sup> Bascomb, “Water, Roads, and Mapping Diaspora Through Biomythography.”

<sup>166</sup> Christian and Wimbley, “Biomythography: Investigating Biomythography as an Interdisciplinary Visual Arts Practice.”



narrative is bookended by references to the mythologies of Carriacou, her mother's island homeland, which Lorde harnesses in an effort to represent a new, utopian queer black mythology that contrasts starkly to the harsh, painful reality depicted in the rest of the work. Like *autohistoria*'s use of fictive elements to create new, regenerative myths, Lorde's use of myth in her biomythography to envision alternate realities serves, if nothing else, a healing function. *Zami* is a powerful, moving, and beautifully written narrative that highlights an underrepresented, marginalized community, and as such it has become a canonical text among Women's Studies, Queer Studies, and African American Studies curriculum. It is also, however, a reminder that radical intent and/or radical content does not necessarily translate to radical form: *Zami*, with its retrospective cause-and-effect linear narrative, is structured like a conventional autobiography, moving in an arc from childhood to young adulthood and focusing on major life events. What draws me to the works I examine in this chapter, conversely, is their marriage of "radical" content (radical, largely, because the author dares to represent what has historically been invisible or marginalized) with radical experiments in form.

In the end, my decision to use the term "fictional autoethnography," despite the numerous possible appellations, to describe the collection of texts examined below largely serves a practical purpose, enabling me to discuss a heretofore unnamed body of work *as* a body of work. United by their subversion of the hetero-patriarchal, imperialist roots of autobiography and ethnography and their defiance of the autobiographical ideal of the autonomous individual, these hybridized, experimental feminist life narratives confront distinctions between fact and fiction and truth and lies, and they challenge hegemonic Western understandings of memory, authorship, and authority. While the addition of the prefix "fictional" in this designation signals immediately that these works are deviant, transcending the genre's nonfictional imperatives, I have also chosen to frame my analysis of the subversion performed by each of these texts and their authors in mythologically-grounded terms by using a gender-bent version of the trickster archetype (who is most commonly coded as male) to discuss their interventions. Finally, each text explores an alternative to patriarchal discourses and systems, including sexuality, marriage, and kinship. One of the most common motifs they share, in fact, involves the search for ancestresses and foremothers—real or, exemplified by Anzaldúa's relationship to the Aztec goddess Coyolxauhqui, imagined—tracing a *matrilineage* from among familial, cultural, and even folkloric histories. The importance of female relationships and historical legacies of



powerful (or, conversely, tragic) women have, unsurprisingly, become a staple of feminist art; here, such concerns echo across a wide diversity of self-representational texts that account for different cultural understandings of family and community.

### **3.2 Birthing a Genre: Zora Neale Hurston's *Dust Tracks on a Road***

Although the first recorded scholarly references to autoethnography appeared in the mid- to late-1970s, Zora Neale Hurston's *Dust Tracks on a Road* (1942) can productively be read as a precursor to the later autoethnographic experiments of the 1970s, '80s, and '90s. Hurston was a novelist with connections to the Harlem Renaissance as well as a practicing ethnographer and folklorist who studied under the celebrated "father" of modern anthropology, Franz Boas. The influence of this training is evident not only in collections of folklore like *Of Mules and Men* (1935), but also throughout her own life narrative. Her training as an ethnographer and folklorist gave Hurston the tools to dissect the stories she was taught as a child and their impact on her own identity, and it undoubtedly influenced the mythological bent and subversive undercurrent evident in her own autobiographical storytelling. Although it is less overtly experimental than the later works of fictional autoethnography discussed in this chapter, *Dust Tracks* nevertheless sidestepped many generic conventions of its day and pioneered some of the culturally-grounded, relational, and mythologically-influenced strategies of self-representation that would be used decades later in the experimental life narratives of Hurston's successors.

"Like the dead-seeming, cold rocks," Hurston tells us in her memoir's opening lines, "I have memories within that came out of the material that went to make me. Time and place have had their say."<sup>167</sup> And, indeed, with the keen observations of a trained anthropologist—though never without the doses of humour and pain that accompany having actually *lived* the experiences about which she writes—Hurston goes on to depict her childhood growing up in the "pure Negro town" of Eatonville, Florida and stints in Baltimore, Washington D.C., and New York, describing with great care the characters that populated these locales.<sup>168</sup> Whereas the book's opening chapters establish the geographical, cultural, and familial landscape from which Hurston emerged, its five short closing chapters contain pointed meditations on Hurston's relationships through the lens of race, sexual and romantic love, friendship, religion, and politics.

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<sup>167</sup> Hurston, *Dust Tracks on a Road: An Autobiography*, 1.

<sup>168</sup> Hurston, 1.

Though she seems to have spent a good deal of time alone with her imagination as a child, Hurston represents herself throughout the text not as an isolated, inwardly focused subject, but rather as a subject whose identity is relational, bound up with (the observation of) others.

Instead of focusing her attention merely on her own accomplishments (of which there are many) or psychological and spiritual growth, therefore, the author weaves between tales of



Fig. 3.1 Zora Neale Hurston.  
Courtesy Library of Congress

family, friends, and her community on the one hand, traditional folktales collected throughout her youth and during her time as an ethnographer on the other, and the rich, imaginative world of her childhood that connected the two. It was in this myth-inspired childhood world, for example, that an unassuming elderly neighbor was secretly, in Zora's mind, the troublemaking "king of the 'gators" who had a raucous good time in the water come dark.<sup>169</sup> Young Zora, by her own admission, was so deeply influenced by the "lying" sessions" (the telling of folk tales) held on the porch of the local general store—stories in which local men interacted with God, the Devil, Brer Rabbit, Sis Snail, and other "wood folk [that] walked and talked like natural men"—that

she did not care to distinguish between fiction or myth and the reality of her surroundings.<sup>170</sup> Some of her finest childhood friends, she tells us, were a talking tree named "the loving pine,"<sup>171</sup> an animated corn-husk called Miss Corn-Shuck, and Mr. Sweet Smell, an amorous bar of soap.<sup>172</sup>

Just as her childhood was imbued with myth, so too is her life narrative. Deeply influenced by the storytelling of her hometown, Hurston infuses *Dust Tracks* with elements of these "lying" sessions," embellishing stories and making herself and those around her into

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<sup>169</sup> Hurston, 57.

<sup>170</sup> Hurston, 47.

<sup>171</sup> Hurston, 51.

<sup>172</sup> Hurston, 53–57.



exaggerated character types so that it is sometimes unclear where reality ends and fantasy begins. It is no wonder, then, that many critics deemed Hurston's representation of herself and her life unreliable, suggesting that the autobiography was filled with lies or fiction or both.<sup>173</sup> Hurston paints herself, for example, simultaneously as a pitiable, unloved child whose mother was stolen away by Old Death,<sup>174</sup> as a bloodthirsty brawler pitted in a fight to the death against her evil stepmother,<sup>175</sup> as an innocent, gullible plaything for a company of (white) singers and stage performers,<sup>176</sup> and as a brilliant and much-admired student.<sup>177</sup> However, while these depictions are obviously overstated and frequently at odds with one another, their intent is not to deceive. Rather, Hurston models her own life story on the narrative structure, idioms, and rhetorical devices available to her via the tall tales in which she was immersed as a child—and later as a scholar—of the black American South. Although *Dust Tracks* has been maligned as an inauthentic or even a lying portrait, it exemplifies the argument of autobiographical scholars Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson that “to reduce autobiographical narration to facticity is to strip it of the densities of rhetorical, literary, ethical, political, and cultural dimensions.”<sup>178</sup>

That many of the “lies” called out by critics in Hurston's work are arguably part of an intentional rhetorical and artistic strategy necessitates an investigation of the racialized, classed, and, as Leigh Gilmore argues, gendered nature of discourses about “truth-telling,” “lying,” and (in/)authenticity.<sup>179</sup> The perceived legitimacy of an autobiographical text is affected by cultural assumptions about what constitutes a “‘truthful’ and ‘authentic’ subject position,” assumptions made based on the author's proximity to the dominant society's “alignment of ‘truth’ with race, class, gender, and sexual orientation.”<sup>180</sup> It is, unsurprisingly, white, heterosexual, educated and/or wealthy men who claim the most cultural authority and thus the most privileged relation to truth and authenticity in Western societies, while all other(ed) parties are automatically placed

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<sup>173</sup> One critic, for example, called *Dust Tracks* “the best fiction Hurston ever wrote” (Turner qtd in Walker, “Zora Neale Hurston and the Post-Modern Self in ‘Dust Tracks on a Road,’” 388); and Elizabeth Fox-Genovese has argued that Hurston's autobiography “does not inspire confidence in the ‘authenticity’ of her self-revelation,” but rather that it “constitutes a marvel of self-concealment.” (Fox-Genovese, “My Statue, My Self: Autobiographical Writings of Afro-American Women,” 78).

<sup>174</sup> Hurston, *Dust Tracks on a Road: An Autobiography*, 65.

<sup>175</sup> Hurston, 74–76.

<sup>176</sup> Hurston, 98–101.

<sup>177</sup> Hurston, 110–11, 120–25.

<sup>178</sup> Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*, 13.

<sup>179</sup> Gilmore, *Autobiographics: A Feminist Theory of Women's Self-Representation*, 14.

<sup>180</sup> Gilmore, 25.



at a disadvantage, their truth claims more closely scrutinized or dismissed altogether depending on their distance from that most culturally privileged of identities.<sup>181</sup> As Gilmore eloquently puts it, “truth” in our culture “represents both a place where some may not stand and a language that some are not authorized to speak.”<sup>182</sup>

If cultural biases about gender, race, class, and sexual orientation thus position “truth” as less attainable for some, then it should come as no surprise that those whose access to or alignment with “truth” is inherently handicapped, those subjects most at risk of unwarranted scrutiny whose credibility and authenticity are challenged, would rebel against the compulsive “truthiness” of the autobiographical genre, harnessing fiction or, at the very least, reinforcing ambiguity in relation to the truth claims made in their texts as an act of subversion. Whereas earlier women writers of colour were often driven to insist (usually unsuccessfully) on the truthfulness of their own life narratives,<sup>183</sup> Hurston broke ground by deliberately challenging the genre’s preoccupation with truth and its celebrations of autonomous individualism in innovative ways.

Perhaps unsurprisingly given her ambitious and competitive spirit, boisterous personality, and unwavering drive to succeed—all qualities women have historically been denigrated for possessing—Hurston’s politics, her character, and her business decisions were harshly critiqued by many of her Harlem Renaissance peers as well as by later critics who rediscovered her work decades after her death. Most harshly and insidiously of all, she was accused of being a traitor to her race by those who seem to have missed the subversion of her approach to self-representation or, worse, who had a personal distaste for the woman herself. Langston Hughes, originally a friend and collaborator of Hurston’s, had a major falling out with her and took revenge in his own autobiography, where he called her “the ‘perfect darkie’ for her white friends.”<sup>184</sup> Other writers and black literary critics have disparaged her as an “‘Aunt Jemima’ hypocrite who took money from a white patron” and who “used ‘extravagant flattery’ to get attention from those

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<sup>181</sup> Gilmore, ix.

<sup>182</sup> Gilmore, 26.

<sup>183</sup> See, for example, Christy Rishoi’s poignant comparison of Frederick Douglass’s *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845), which was widely celebrated by abolitionists as the truthful account of surviving and escaping slavery, and Harriet Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) which, despite the author’s insistent preface—“Reader, be assured this is no fiction,”—was thought to be a fabrication for over a hundred years after its publication. As Rishoi suggests, “tension between truth and fiction is not new to twentieth-century autobiographical texts.” Rishoi, *From Girl to Woman: American Women’s Coming-of-Age Narratives.*, 22, 34.

<sup>184</sup> Lyons, *Sorrow’s Kitchen: The Life and Folklore of Zora Neale Hurston*, 56.



who could help her career.”<sup>185</sup> While it is true that Hurston did write primarily for a cosmopolitan, white audience and for white patrons who had the money and the social standing to help her further her career,

the same can be said of many (if not most) other early black writers.<sup>186</sup> Hurston in fact *shared a benefactor* with Hughes and other writers of the Harlem Renaissance,<sup>187</sup> and she paid an undeniably hefty price for this financial support: Mrs. Charlotte Mason maintained control over the material collected under her patronage, claiming, for

example, “the power to censor ‘the dirty words’ she found in the folktales Zora had collected”

and even the form of its expression (no novels or plays), and perhaps most humiliating of all, she insisted her beneficiaries call her “Godmother.”<sup>188</sup> In exchange, Hurston was given the money that funded five years of her important ethnographic research and writing. It may have been distasteful, even demeaning, but Hurston clearly felt the sacrifice was necessary to pursue her work. By the early 1940s, however, she was completely out of money and at the mercy of her “publishers [who] insisted” that she write an autobiography.<sup>189</sup> As Hurston wrote in a letter to a friend, “I was not happy to write it... It is much too personal to suit me.”<sup>190</sup> But she had, it seems, no choice.



**Fig. 3.2** Hurston’s ambitious, competitive spirit, boisterous personality, and drive to succeed are all qualities for which she was disparaged. Photo by Laurence Holder.

<sup>185</sup> Lyons, 56.

<sup>186</sup> Calle, “Audre Lorde’s *Zami* and Black Women’s Autobiography: Tradition and Innovation,” 161.

<sup>187</sup> Mrs. Charlotte Mason was a wealthy white patron who gave tens of thousands of dollars to support (and claim ownership over) the careers of promising young black writers. (Lyons, *Sorrow’s Kitchen: The Life and Folklore of Zora Neale Hurston*, 51).

<sup>188</sup> Lyons, 53.

<sup>189</sup> Lyons, 100.

<sup>190</sup> Lyons, 101.

Writing from within a deeply racist, highly segregated, patriarchal America, writing before the Black Power or Women's Liberation movements and before the advent of slogans proclaiming that "black is beautiful" or that "the personal is political," Hurston found inspiration for the strategies of subversion that she would adopt in this memoir in the very folk traditions she had spent her life recording. She adopted a trickster's posture and strategically deployed what she had elsewhere called "featherbed resistance." Tricksterism is a core element of the African American folk traditions in which Hurston was immersed as a child, and the archetype can be found throughout her novels, collections of folk tales, and other writing. Adam Ewing even goes so far as to suggest that "[t]he patron saint of Hurston's canon is the trickster figure."<sup>191</sup> Trickster characters in the black American tradition use humour, hyperbole, irony, and doublespeak, often in order to undermine, cause trouble to, or avoid punishment from white society. Trickster stories, in other words, articulate strategies for negotiating and surviving in a hostile, unfamiliar and deeply dehumanizing white world, while also providing a laugh. Not coincidentally, the use of humor by way of hyperbole, irony, and doublespeak are also key rhetorical strategies used by Hurston in *Dust Tracks* where, like a trickster, she adopts a variety of roles and masks to ensure her own survival.

What Hurston's critics have decried as her apparent willingness to fulfill the expectations of white readers with clichéd performances of gender and race in *Dust Tracks* is in fact constantly—if subtly—undermined. In *Mules and Men* (1935), the author dissects the insider/outsider division with which most anthropologists must contend and its highly specific construction within rural black communities in the Jim Crow South. "[T]he Negro," she explains, "in spite of his open-faced laughter, his seeming acquiescence, is particularly evasive."<sup>192</sup> Inquisitive outsiders are typically greeted not with answers or insight but with niceties and with smiles. This Hurston calls "feather-bed resistance," a performance of affability that camouflages the more deceptive or defensive posture that hides the truth of lived black experience.<sup>193</sup> As Hurston explains, "The white man is always trying to know into somebody else's business... All right, I set something outside the door of my mind for him to play with and handle. He can read my writing but he sho' can't read my mind. I'll put this play toy in his hand, and he will seize it

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<sup>191</sup> Ewing, "LYING UP A NATION," 138.

<sup>192</sup> Hurston, *Mules and Men*, 2.

<sup>193</sup> Hurston, 2.



and go away. Then I'll say my say and sing my song."<sup>194</sup> The "truth," in other words, and access to *inside* "the door of [Hurston's] mind" is deliberately closed off to outsiders in *Dust Tracks*. I would argue that many of the memoir's more controversial elements, including what her detractors have described as its assimilationist racial politics and pandering to a white audience, take on new meaning when examined through this lens. Her trickster's subversive wit, use of irony, hyperbole, and charm do not pander to but rather destabilize and undermine her readers' racist or naive assumptions.

Hurston's uniquely marginalized position as a black woman in early-twentieth-century America undeniably engendered different experiences of oppression than those of many of her contemporaries—the black memoirist Richard Wright (*Black Boy*, 1945), for example, or white memoirist Mary McCarthy (*Memories of a Catholic Girlhood*, 1946)—and thus required different strategies of (self-)representation. *Dust Tracks* demonstrates how women of colour articulate their experiences from socially, culturally, and historically complex positions. As Mae Gwendolyn Henderson argues, black women writers "must speak [expertly] in a plurality of voices [and] in a multiplicity of discourses," but they must *disrupt* and *revise* dominant, hegemonic (white, male, heterosexual) discourse *as well as* subdominant or "ambiguously (non)hegemonic" (i.e. black *male* or white female) discourses in order to represent their own idiosyncratic experiences as subjects who are "othered" by both their race *and* their gender.<sup>195</sup> Hurston speaks expertly to both her black ethnographic subjects and peers and her white readers, moving with ease between the highly expressive patois of her southern upbringing and the elegant Park Avenue dialect of her patron. But she also undermines and irreverently pokes fun at everyone, at all times—herself included. In constructing a story of self, Hurston did what she somehow always managed to do, regardless of the limitations in place or the insults hurled her way: her own thing. By grounding her life narrative in the stories, structure, and rhetorical strategies of black American folklore and, above all, by borrowing from the tradition of the trickster, Hurston crafts a deeply idiosyncratic life narrative that enables her to subvert expectations and to take part in a world from which African-American women were historically excluded, while still ultimately protecting her own intimate truths. Approaching *Dust Tracks* as a

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<sup>194</sup> Hurston, 3.

<sup>195</sup> Henderson, "Speaking in Tongues: Dialogics, Dialectics, and the Black Woman Writer's Literary Tradition," 123, 121, 137.



fictional(ized) autoethnographic portrait enables the reader to more deeply grasp the ways in which Hurston's subjectivity was shaped by her community and its culture of mythmaking. Although her necessary and productive disruptions of familiar discourses—hegemonic and subdominant alike—certainly contributed to the controversy surrounding her autobiography and to its reputation as an inconsistent and inauthentic text, her use of the rhetorical strategies of the trickster ultimately enabled Hurston to craft a complex, multi-layered self-portrait that opened itself to a wide variety of interpretations.

In the end, the controversy surrounding her life and its representation in *Dust Tracks* did not preclude the rediscovery and celebration of Hurston's work more than three decades after its publication by black feminist writers who looked to her oeuvre for inspiration in their creation of a new tradition. Although Hurston died in relative obscurity and absolute poverty, the publication of Alice Walker's "In Search of Zora Neale Hurston" in *Ms.* magazine in 1975 led to renewed interest in Hurston's writing, her recognition as an important cultural foremother, and her canonization in the black, feminist, and American literary traditions. As Henry Louis Gates Jr. suggests in his Afterword to *Dust Tracks*, "In a tradition in which male authors have ardently denied black literary paternity," the rehabilitation of Hurston's work and her establishment as a maternal literary ancestor "is a major development, one that heralds the refinement of our notion of tradition... [and of] black women's voice[s]."<sup>196</sup> The legacy of Hurston's early blending of folklore and reality, her mélange of careful ethnographic observation, mythologically-influenced imagination, and self-representation, and her adoption of a trickster persona can all be felt in the experiments of later generations of artists and writers of colour, many of whom encountered and were inspired by her work.

### **3.3 Coyotes, Matriarchs, & Mythological Inheritance: Leslie Marmon Silko's *Storyteller***

Writing forty years after Hurston, Laguna Pueblo poet and novelist Leslie Marmon Silko shares with her literary foremother an interest in myth and folklore and a calling to preserve and disseminate these living (but nonetheless at risk of being forgotten) cultural artefacts. Recognizing, like Hurston, that storytelling traditions are an important way of structuring meaning for individuals and cultures alike, Silko turns to the Pueblo myths and collective stories with which she was raised in order to tell her life narrative. In *Storyteller* (1981), she

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<sup>196</sup> Gates Jr., "Afterword- Zora Neale Hurston: 'A Negro Way of Saying,'" 262.



experiments with a multiplicity of styles and forms, crafting a self-portrait that is radically hybridized, fragmented, and interconnected. The work weaves together poetry, prose, and photographs, and moves between auto/biographical stories about Silko and her family, traditional folktales and myths she was taught as a child, and newly written, fictionalized short stories about contemporary American Indian life, themselves grounded in both reality and myth. The result is an innovative, lyrical autoethnographic portrait that recognizes Pueblo mythology as a framework for tribal *and* individual narratives of identity. Silko's work sheds light onto the interconnected ways the Pueblo Indians of the Southwestern United States understand and experience family and community, history and myth by mirroring these constructs in the very form and structure of her own life narrative, deliberately challenging established (Euro-American) rules of authorship and genre.

Given that the individual-focused, introspective genre of autobiography is antithetical to the historically communal and deindividuated way of life of many tribal cultures, literary scholar Cynthia Carsten observes that the American Indian life writer has historically had to “accommodat[e] the language and power structures of the [colonial] other” in the creation of autobiographical work.<sup>197</sup> Many early indigenous American “autobiographies” were in fact forged through a process by which an American Indian “informant” was petitioned to tell their life story—orally and usually with the help of a translator—to a Euro-American researcher. This interlocutor, often an anthropologist or ethnologist, subsequently transcribed, edited, and framed the material, shaping it into a form (almost always chronological and building toward a climactic moment) recognizable to a Western audience. Regardless of the editor's intentions, the resulting narrative, shaped by and for an Anglo worldview, inevitably “distort[ed] the sel[f] [it] portray[s],”<sup>198</sup> obscuring the nuances of the subject's own understanding of selfhood, community, and even storytelling. Even many early twentieth-century autobiographies written without the “guiding hand” of such interlocutors by literate American Indians—often victims of aggressive Americanization and assimilation policies that forcibly relocated indigenous children to residential schools where their own languages, religions, and cultural practices were banned—were structured according to dominant Euro-American autobiographical conventions. It has been

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<sup>197</sup> Carsten, “Storyteller,” 113.

<sup>198</sup> Brumble III., *American Indian Autobiography*, 10–11.



suggested that such texts were written to cater to the tastes of white publishers and readers,<sup>199</sup> but as my discussion of Hurston above argues, such an assertion denies the author agency and erases the possibility of subversive tactics.

The late 1960s and early 1970s marked the beginning of a profound expansion of Native American literary activity—termed the “Native American Renaissance” by critic Kenneth Lincoln<sup>200</sup>—through which authors sought to reclaim tribal heritage, exploring and celebrating American Indian mythology, ritual, and oral storytelling traditions.<sup>201</sup> This shift was accompanied by the growth in the academy of the interdisciplinary field of Native American studies, which interrogated indigenous American history, sociology, and cultural traditions, as well as legacies of violent “assimilation” tactics. The early writing of Leslie Marmon Silko, a founding mother of this “Renaissance,” helped to usher in these welcome changes.<sup>202</sup>

Although Silko has been lauded as “thoroughly modern” (often code for Western) in her “sense of what it means to tell the story of one’s life,” *Storyteller* is deeply steeped in Pueblo cosmology and ontology, breaking with hegemonic Euro-American expectations of genre, narrative structure, and authorship. Silko presents a “new” (to Anglo-American readers) model of self-representation that is grounded in Pueblo principles and storytelling traditions, interweaving personal and communal stories—or, perhaps more accurately, presenting them as an inseparable whole—to create a unique, polyphonic self-representational text. Because of *Storyteller’s* generic fluidity, some have had trouble recognizing it as an autobiographical text,<sup>203</sup> and even the generic guidelines of *autoethnography* are challenged by Silko’s inclusion of fictional short stories and other unconventional material and forms. Taken as a whole, however, and read in the context of Laguna storytelling traditions, *Storyteller* is a masterful—if at times challenging—portrait of Silko’s relational self.

In its appropriation of Laguna oral tradition, *Storyteller* avoids Euro-American models of autobiographical emplotment (and narrative emplotment more generally), which are linear, chronological, and retrospective and which follow cause-and-effect logic. Instead, its non-linear structure can be read, in part, as reflecting the Pueblo conception of time as circular and cyclical:

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<sup>199</sup> Brumble III., *American Indian Autobiography*.

<sup>200</sup> Lincoln, *Native American Renaissance*.

<sup>201</sup> Lundquist, *Native American Literatures: An Introduction*, 38.

<sup>202</sup> These include a collection of short stories and poems entitled *Laguna Woman* (1974), Silko’s first novel, *Ceremony* (1977), and *Storyteller* (1981)

<sup>203</sup> *Storyteller* is classified, for example, as “Fiction” and “Poetry” on its publisher’s website.



as Silko has elsewhere suggested, because “time is round” for the Pueblo people, “something that happened 500 years ago may be quite immediate and real, whereas something inconsequential that happened an hour ago could be far away... [T]ime [i]s an ocean always moving.”<sup>204</sup> In order to translate this idea to the printed page, Silko experiments with a variety of strategies that invite readers to move back and forth in time, unconventionally blurring distinctions between “then” and “now” and frequently occupying multiple timescapes at once.

In the author’s re-telling of ancient humma-hah stories,<sup>205</sup> for example, the undefined mythical time of the fable intersects with personal memory and family history. This is exemplified in the book’s very first folktale, called “This is the way Aunt Susie told the story,” wherein Silko moves the reader back and forth between “mythic time” and a complex strata of past- and present tense that includes the author’s childhood memories of first hearing the tale—complete with her great-aunt’s frequent, informational interjections (italicized in the text) that served to provide her niece with translations of Keres words, bits of cultural trivia, and other contextualizing information—and Silko’s ultimate re-telling of the story as an adult.<sup>206</sup> The fluidity of time in “This is the way...” hints at the overarching temporal fluidity of the rest of *Storyteller*, in which archetypal characters from ancient Pueblo stories might find themselves suddenly in modern retellings or, conversely, modern women self-consciously wonder if they are in fact living out the narrative of a familiar folktale. This is especially the case with the archetypal “Yellow Woman” character, who seems to transcend past and present as well as myth and reality, appearing again and again in various guises, much like the author herself.<sup>207</sup>

Complementing this circular understanding of time, Pueblo mythology and oral storytelling practices also use an elaborate “story within a story” framework wherein all stories are part of one overarching Story, mimicking “a spider’s web—with many little threads radiating

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<sup>204</sup> Silko, *An Interview with Leslie Marmon Silko*.

<sup>205</sup> Humma-hah stories are an important part of Pueblo social and spiritual life. They are, as Silko explains, “traditional Pueblo stories that have been told continuously for thousands of years about a time when... the plants and animals and even rocks and stars used to converse with human beings. [They] describe the various supernatural beings and other worlds and other times that still exist right beside the present world and present time” (Silko, *Storyteller*, xx).

<sup>206</sup> Silko, 7.

<sup>207</sup> In fact, Louise Barnett and others have suggested that Silko’s presence can be traced in *Storyteller*’s many versions of the “Yellow Woman” stories, including both traditional folktales and their modern reinterpretations. Yellow Woman (or Kochininako as she is also called) is associated with maintenance of balance between Man and Earth, sacred and profane, “male” and “female” (Barnett, “Yellow Women and Leslie Marmon Silko’s Feminism”).



from the center, crisscrossing each other.”<sup>208</sup> The Laguna creation myth, for example, contains within it a veritable maze of interconnected stories that identify the origins of different clans and extended families within the tribe. Although anthropologists and ethnographers have in the past mistakenly “differentiated the types of stories the Pueblos tell,” privileging “the old, sacred, and traditional stories” and “brush[ing] aside family stories,” Silko insists that Pueblo people themselves “make no distinction between types of story,” whether “historical, sacred, [or] plain gossip,” giving “equal recognition” to family tales and ancient myth.<sup>209</sup>

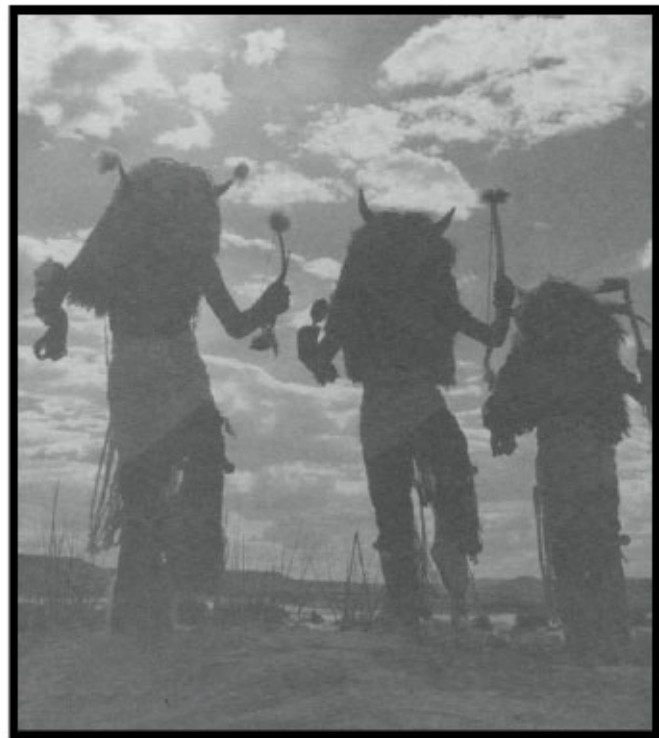
*Storyteller*'s own web-like narrative structure similarly makes no distinctions between personal, family, or tribal stories, between poetry and prose, or between (auto)biography and myth. Silko's story of her first hunting trip as a child, for example, is infused with elements of myth and fable, leaving the reader

uncertain whether the young hunter has seen a massive bear, has crossed paths with a spirit, or simply possesses a powerful imagination.<sup>210</sup> On the

opposite page, a stunning black-and-white photograph, reminiscent of traditional ethnographic photography (though distinguished by the fact that it was taken by a community insider,

Silko's own father), captures the silhouettes of tribal “Buffalo Dancers” performing a sacred ritual that celebrates the ancient alliance between humans and buffalo.<sup>211</sup> The indexical

nature of the photographic medium grounds the image as a literal trace of the real, capturing the physical presence of the costumed performers and the vast open landscape



**Fig. 3.3** “The Buffalo Dancers commemorate... the alliance that existed between humans and buffalo.” *Storyteller* (1981, p.75). Photo by Lee H. Marmon.

<sup>208</sup> Silko, “Language and Literature from a Pueblo Indian Perspective,” 55.

<sup>209</sup> Silko, 57.

<sup>210</sup> Silko, *Storyteller*, 74.

<sup>211</sup> Silko, 75.



in the distance, but what it signifies—a connection with tribal history, myth, and ritual and an alliance with beast and land—is far less tangible. A few pages earlier, Silko recounts a foundational myth in the Laguna tradition, a Kochininako (“Yellow Woman”) legend that explains how and why the Pueblo have historically survived by hunting Buffalo in times of drought.<sup>212</sup> Although only Silko’s childhood hunting story might be read as conventionally autobiographical, it is not in any way privileged over or distinguished from the other material. Each individual piece of *Storyteller*, however seemingly disparate, is united on the same plane; each comes together to tell both the story of Silko and the story of the Laguna pueblo, which are themselves inseparable pieces of a single united whole.

Nevertheless, these three individual pieces of *Storyteller*—the photograph, the autobiographical hunting story, and the supernatural Yellow Woman myth—are never explicitly connected by the author. Instead, her rhetorical strategies invite the reader to interact with the text, to intuitively make their own associations across the diverse collection of stories and photographs and thus to engage with the material in a manner more akin to the Laguna oral storyteller’s interlocutor. It has been well established by scholars of indigenous storytelling that, unlike other monological forms of oral history, the practice almost always involves so-called “conversive”<sup>213</sup> or “dialogic”<sup>214</sup> efforts between the teller and her audience.<sup>215</sup> Silko has replicated on *Storyteller*’s printed page this dynamic, interactive relationship embodied by Pueblo oral traditions. The web-like structure of the book and the refusal of hierarchies or divisions among its material, allows the reader to engage in nonnormative, interactive reading practices.

In addition to the refusal in the Pueblo tradition to distinguish between family history, sacred myths, and “plain gossip,” there is also no concept of “ownership” over stories, so that *Storyteller* includes stories told to Silko by friends alongside the tales passed down over generations and the author’s reminiscences of her own experiences. For example, the “Skeleton Fixer” parable is attributed to “a *Version Told by Simon J. Ortiz*,” but it is also noted to be “A Piece of a Bigger Story They Tell Around Laguna and Acoma Too.”<sup>216</sup> Just as often, a complete

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<sup>212</sup> Silko, 65–72.

<sup>213</sup> de Ramierez, *Contemporary American Indian Literatures and the Oral Tradition*, 6–7.

<sup>214</sup> Fast, *The Heart Is a Drum: Continuance and Resistance in Contemporary American Indian Poetry*, 13–14.

<sup>215</sup> Silko, “Language and Literature from a Pueblo Indian Perspective.”

<sup>216</sup> Silko, *Storyteller*, 237.



absence of contextual information obscures a tale's origins altogether. *Storyteller* thus frequently bucks the logic of traditional autobiography by including a number of stories in which Silko is clearly *not* the protagonist or possibly even the narrator. In this, she actively and purposefully undermines one of the most important rules for the production and classification of autobiographical texts in the European and American contexts: the Lejeunian "autobiographical pact." This so-called "pact," as outlined by Philippe Lejeune, is "a contract of identity that is sealed by the proper name."<sup>217</sup> By this logic, the truth claims of a work of life writing are immediately suspect when the narrating "I" does not correspond to the authorial signature—as is the case in many sections of *Storyteller*—thus suggesting another means by which autobiography, like self-representation more generally, has historically been policed by hegemonic ideas about authorship, identity, legitimacy, and authenticity that are frequently not applicable in non-hegemonic contexts. Indeed, the life narratives of racially, ethnically, or culturally othered women and the issues of identity, naming, and narrative truth frequently explored therein are far more complex and varied than such limited generic rules can account for.

"Truth" in the Euro-American tradition is frequently based on Western religious or juridical customs and doctrines such as confession (which, of course, has applications in both the courtroom and the church). Paradigmatic examples of autobiography like Saint Augustine's *Confessions* (c. 397) and Rousseau's secular 1782 work of the same name or Mary McCarthy's *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood* (1957) are each structured around the rite, which has become central to a large proportion of life writing. However, questions about "Truth" in works produced in a non-Western and/or non-Catholic context may seem paradoxical or even irrelevant. At the very least, questions about identity, truth, and authorship necessitate a basic understanding of a work's socio-cultural context of production.

As an autoethnographic text, *Storyteller* does invite its reader into the Pueblo world and worldview without ever becoming overly didactic. Whereas the confessional mode of life writing relies on the existence of a self that is individual and introspective, Silko's text ultimately reveals—in both content and form—that the Pueblo conception of the self is communal, interconnected, and outwardly-focused. Truth for the Laguna people, the author seems to suggest, is thus grounded not in the act of confession but in *storytelling* (itself a cooperative, shared act), in the mythology that infuses everyday life and in the folklore through which

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<sup>217</sup> Lejeune, "The Autobiographical Pact," 19.



ancestral wisdom and community truths are kept alive. Unconcerned with the fact that myths and hummah-hah stories are understood in much of the Western world to be inherently *incompatible* with the kind of truth-telling conventionally required of non-fictional life writing, Silko skillfully weaves such material with anecdotes and memories from her childhood, suggesting that divisions between veracity and mendacity, fiction and nonfiction, myth and life are not always as unambiguous as might be expected.

*Storyteller* also undermines Euro-American assumptions about the universality of patriarchal family structures and patrilineal traditions. Indeed, though her work is by no means exclusively about women, Silko largely constructs and contextualizes her own identity through stories about women storytellers (her own Aunt Susie, for example) and the heroines of Laguna mythology (including the oft-cited Yellow Woman), giving the reader additional insight into both the position occupied by folktales in Pueblo life and the role they have played in shaping the author's own understanding of what it means to be a woman. The stories of Silko's genetic and mythical foremothers emphasize the strength, power, and resourcefulness of Pueblo women and suggest a liberated sexuality and sense of adventure—all qualities that have been historically embraced by the matriarchal culture.<sup>218</sup> Thus, although the search for maternal ancestors, foremothers, and lineages has long been a core practice of feminist scholarship and artistic practices, the autoethnographic drive of *Storyteller* ensures that Silko's own explorations are emphatically grounded in Laguna tradition.



**Fig. 3.4-5** Silko's celebration of real and mythical foremothers is emphatically grounded in her own family history and in Laguna tradition. *Storyteller* (1981, pgs. 31 and 144). Photos by Lee H. Marmon.

<sup>218</sup> Silko, *Storyteller*, 144.

Given the matriarchal structure of Laguna society, it will come as no surprise that its myths are filled with powerful female deities like Spider Woman and Corn Mother. In fact, women are at the very center of the Pueblo creation myth: it is ultimately Tséitsinako (“Thought Woman”) who, with the help of her two sisters, thinks the entire world into being.<sup>219</sup> *Storyteller*



Fig. 3.6 Aunt Susie. *Storyteller* (1981, p. 5). Photo by Lee H. Marmon.

itself opens, fittingly, with Silko’s (Great-)Aunt Susie, a Tséitsinako-like figure in the book as well as a teacher, Laguna Pueblo historian, and passionate storyteller in her own right. Aunt Susie, we are told in verse, belonged to the “last generation.../ that passed down an entire culture/ by word of mouth/ an entire history/ an entire vision of the world/ which depended upon memory/ and retelling by subsequent generations.”<sup>220</sup> Silko’s great-aunt endeavored to keep oral traditions alive by passing down ancient humma-hah stories and other tales “about the old days” to her receptive niece.<sup>221</sup> Recognizing the peril that Euro-American assimilationist policies posed to Laguna oral tradition,<sup>222</sup> however, Aunt Susie had also laboriously begun to record written copies of family and community stories, preserving them for future

generations.<sup>223</sup> *Storyteller* is at once Silko’s own autoethnographic life narrative and a continuation of this beloved Aunt’s work. By opening her story with Aunt Susie, and by including herself as part of the lineage of women storytellers who preserve and pass on Laguna

<sup>219</sup> Silko, “Language and Literature from a Pueblo Indian Perspective,” 55.

<sup>220</sup> Silko, *Storyteller*, 4.

<sup>221</sup> Silko, xxiv.

<sup>222</sup> Silko’s great grandmother Marie Anaya (“Grandma A’mooh”), for example, was forcibly removed from her home as a child, placed in an “Indian school” where she was forbidden from speaking her native language or partaking in tribal traditions. Silko explains that Grandma A’mooh “had been converted by Presbyterian missionaries” at the school and had been urged “not ‘to go back to the blanket’ after [she] returned home.” Thus, although Grandma A’mooh” was herself a storyteller, she refused to tell traditional humma-hah stories or to pass on tribal knowledge, signifying a tragic break from oral cultural traditions (Silko, xxi–xxii).

<sup>223</sup> Silko, 4.



tradition—heroines in their own right—Silko challenges assumptions about the centrality of patriarchal traditions and ties women most closely to the fecundity of storytelling and its ability to connect and create. In this way, she trades the stereotype perpetuated in American popular culture of the American Indian as a fierce (and typically defeated) male warrior for a more nuanced depiction of the knowledgeable, powerful female storyteller.

Crucially, the storytelling women in Silko's life were the author's "lifeline with the Laguna language and culture" and were thus essential to her developing sense of identity. Because she is of mixed-race heritage and is only one-quarter Laguna (she also identifies as Mexican-American and Anglo-American), Silko was in many ways separated from her Laguna heritage as a child. She was prevented from learning the Keres language, for example, was sent to an English-language Catholic school in Albuquerque beginning in the fourth grade, and even lived in a house positioned on the margins of the pueblo.<sup>224</sup> Thanks to the important, storytelling women in her life, however, she was nevertheless immersed in—and identified most closely with—Laguna culture. "I am of mixed-breed ancestry," she says, "but what I know is Laguna."<sup>225</sup>

By bringing together the sacred and the quotidian, the mythological and the autobiographical, Silko poses a challenge to standards of autobiographical truth and transparency and can thus, like Hurston before her, be aligned with the folkloric trickster figure. The author-narrator's shifting personas and her hybrid text, whose generic "identity" is itself difficult to pin down, both align with the trickster's penchant in Pueblo lore for shape shifting and for occupying conflicting domains.<sup>226</sup> It has also been suggested, however, that it is Silko's mixed ancestry that identifies the author as a trickster: "Since a capacity to shift shapes is among the most prominent and universal characteristics of a trickster," Lynn Domina observes, "mixed-race identity almost inevitably provides one with a precondition for trickster ability."<sup>227</sup> Midway through "Toe'osh: A Laguna Coyote Story"—note that the trickster is represented by Coyote in Laguna lore—we are told that "Some white men came to Acoma and Laguna a hundred years ago/ and they fought over Acoma land and Laguna women, and even now/ some of their descendants are howling in/

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<sup>224</sup> Silko, xxiii–xxiv.

<sup>225</sup> Velie, *Four American Indian Literary Masters*, 106.

<sup>226</sup> Domina, "The Way I Heard It: Autobiography, Tricksters, and Leslie Marmon Silko's Storyteller," 46.

<sup>227</sup> Domina, 46.

the hills southeast of Laguna.”<sup>228</sup> Silko herself, we learn, is one of these “howling” descendants, the great-granddaughter of Robert G. Marmon, a white man who, along with his brother, married Laguna women and infiltrated the pueblo. The Marmon brothers are controversial figures in Laguna history, blamed by ethnologists “for all kinds of factions and trouble at Laguna.”<sup>229</sup> Zora Neale Hurston’s mentor and teacher, Franz Boas, visited Laguna in 1918, and another of the famed anthropologist’s protégées, Elsie Clews Parsons, stayed in the pueblo to document Laguna stories. The resulting collection contains “a coyote story/ told in [the] Laguna [language]/ by [Silko’s] great-grandfather.”<sup>230</sup> In the end, although she identifies most closely with Laguna culture and with the storytelling women of her family, it is ironically a *white, male* ancestor that appears to be, in part, responsible for leading Silko to her most interesting guise: Coyote, the archetypal trickster.

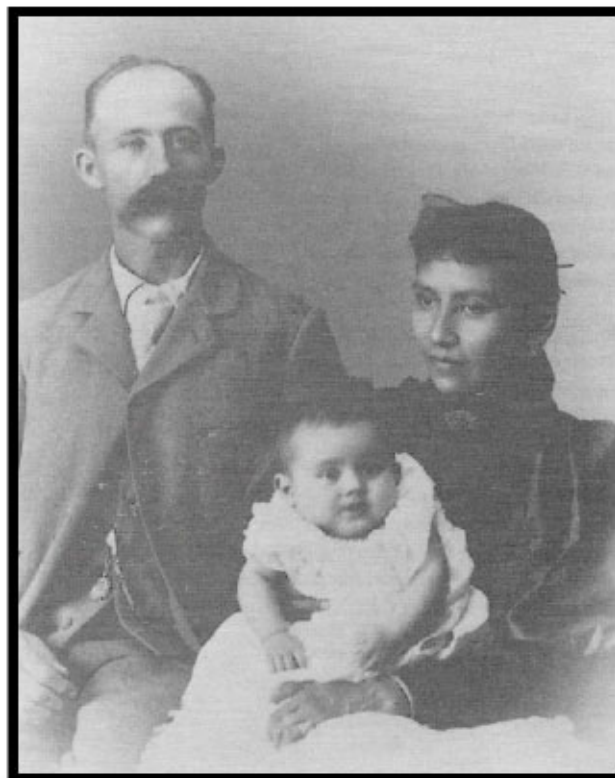


Fig. 3.7 Silko's great-grandparents, Robert G. Marmon and Marie Anaya Marmon, with her grandpa Hank. *Storyteller* (1981, p. 2).

Although Silko found unprecedented success in attracting a wider (white) readership to the work of indigenous writers *Storyteller* never caters to this non-indigenous audience; Keres words are largely left untranslated, for example, and the reader has to go elsewhere to find background information about archetypal Laguna myths or tribal history. On the contrary, a certain winking quality underlies much of *Storyteller*, and Silko’s trickster strategies can be found in her defiance of the expectations of Euro-American readers or in her frequent decision not to include contextualizing information. One of the most characteristic examples identified by

<sup>228</sup> Silko, *Storyteller*, 230.

<sup>229</sup> Silko, 247.

<sup>230</sup> Silko, 246.



Domina of Silko's aptitude as a trickster (not to mention her skill as a writer) is her "ability to seduce (white) readers into identifying themselves as among the Laguna [protagonists], into laughing at [caricatures of white settlers and their descendants] and their own impotent cultural modes of dominance," a tactic that significantly "reverses the more common manipulation produced... when classic Hollywood westerns... persuade Indian children to root for the cowboys."<sup>231</sup> Silko's inhabitation of the trickster archetype has powerful rhetorical and ideological consequences, grounding her subversion of a traditionally androcentric, Euro-American literary genre in a culturally-relevant trope that speaks to the author's genealogical and intellectual positioning between two cultures.

*Storyteller* overtly undermines traditional Euro-American conventions of self-representation and autobiographical storytelling, including the rules of authorship that require a singular, unified authorial voice and conventions of linear, retrospective narrative employment. More compelling than the practices she discards, however, are the culturally grounded traditions she highlights and the way her experiments with form and content serve the ultimate goal of crafting a portrait of self and community appropriate to her Laguna heritage. Silko's approach affirms the communal way of life and interconnected sense of self embraced by her own community and others like it. Although the Western reader might be tempted to distinguish between the diverse material collected in *Storyteller*—between collective tribal history and family stories, for example, between folklore and gossip, or between sacred tales and narratives of the everyday—Silko's rhetorical strategies make this impossible. Because the self is inextricable from the community in Laguna culture, Silko understands and represents her life as bound to the history of the tribe, her story to its stories. Even the defiant act of aligning herself with Coyote—the archetypal Trickster of Pueblo lore, through whom she acknowledges her mixed-race heritage—is grounded in the mythology of her community. In the end, each element of the text is given equal importance, each story, poem, and photograph coming together to paint a portrait of Leslie Marmon Silko that is, in many ways, also the story of Laguna people as a whole.

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<sup>231</sup> Domina, "The Way I Heard It: Autobiography, Tricksters, and Leslie Marmon Silko's *Storyteller*," 61.



### **3.4 Cauleen Smith's *Chronicles of a Lying Spirit***

In her short film *Chronicles of a Lying Spirit* (by Kelly Gabron) (1992), Cauleen Smith, like Silko and Hurston, defies established rules of self-representation, her low-fi, optically printed experiment even spurning some of the most basic expectations of moving image texts. Smith's alter-ego, the trickster-like Kelly Gabron, empowers a spirit of experimentation and rule-breaking in the (then-)young filmmaker. Like Silko's self-inscription as an archetypal storyteller who is connected to a long line of historical and mythological raconteurs, Gabron is a simulacrum not just of Smith, but of other real historical black women from disparate times and places, including a lineage of radical women artists, theorists, and activists whose influence on Smith's work is deeply felt in this early film.

During her formative years at San Francisco State University, where she earned a B.A. in Cinema, Smith studied under Angela Davis, Lynn Hershman Leeson, and Trinh T. Minh-ha. Davis's legacy of radical feminism and civil rights activism nurtured Smith's own politicization, and the filmmaker's acknowledgement in her work of disparities linked to class, gender, and race can also be attributed to the two years she spent studying with filmmaker and theorist Trinh T. Minh-ha, known for her experimental documentary explorations of postcolonial and feminist themes. In particular, the aesthetic choices and sociopolitical concerns expressed in the film—the refusal of Smith's softly spoken but decisive voiceover to assign meaning to the film's montage of images, for example, and the critique of stereotyped and exoticized images of black women—are especially reminiscent of Trinh's early work in films like *Reassemblage* (1982) and *Naked Spaces—Living is Round* (1985). The ambiguous relationship to fact and fiction in *Chronicles*, moreover, call to mind Trinh's *Surname Viet Given Name Nam* (1989). Finally, it was under the tutelage of artist and experimental filmmaker Lynn Hershman Leeson that Smith began work on the project that would eventually become *Chronicles*. Leeson assigned her students the task of performing their life story twice for her class—once as “truth” and once as fiction—using the same materials for both performances.<sup>232</sup> Leeson's permission to fictionalize—to create a “lying” self-portrait—led Smith to consider the power dynamics tied to discourses of truth and to create her time-travelling alter-ego, Kelly Gabron. Gabron would serve as a medium through which Smith, recognizing her own agency as an educated, middle-class (future-)filmmaker, would pay

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<sup>232</sup> MacDonald, “Interview with Cauleen Smith,” 126.



tribute to “all the accomplished black women in global history who are not documented anywhere.”<sup>233</sup>

Like literary experiments with autoethnography, biomythography, autohistoria and other hybridized (self-)representational texts, *Chronicles* challenges the limits of autobiography as a genre. The film shares many alternative strategies of representation with Silko’s text—an emphasis on collective and relational representation, a structure that is cyclical, fragmented, and multiple in nature, and a narrative that is infused with myth—though in Smith’s case the rhythms of the work are grounded in African(-American) music, dance, and narrative patterns and its “myths” in Afrofuturist tropes. The translation of autoethnographic representation to *film* enables Smith to include vibrant imagery of herself and other black women and to harness the intimacy of her own physical voice, adding a crucial new layer to the representational possibilities of the mode.

Throughout her career as a filmmaker and visual artist, Cauleen Smith has created innovative work that indefatigably explores the many facets of black identity and community in America. *Chronicles of a Lying Spirit* (by Kelly Gabron), although it is one of Smith’s very earliest works, epitomizes the political concerns and formal creativity that would come to define her career. As mentioned above, Smith’s work on this powerful short film was begun, incredibly, while she was still an undergraduate art student, and it was completed shortly after her graduation. When *Chronicles of a Lying Spirit* was screened at the prestigious Flaherty Film Seminar in 1992, “it was so popular that seminar attendees demanded it be re-shown.”<sup>234</sup> Twenty-five years later, in 2017, the Brooklyn Academy of Music (BAM) screened *Chronicles* alongside a collection of Smith’s other short films as part of the exhibition “Cauleen Smith: Afro-futurist Tapes.” In this context, the film was potent as ever, epitomizing the artist’s sustained interest in representations of black womanhood, the intersections and omissions of cultural history and memory, the potential of filmmaking to confer or deny agency, and finally, as the program title suggests, the generative influence of Afrofuturism on her work. Smith’s Afrofuturist space- and time-travelling, “superhero”-trickster alter-ego enables the filmmaker to call attention to critical gaps in the representation of black women and to explore alternative possibilities for the future.

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<sup>233</sup> MacDonald, 126.

<sup>234</sup> MacDonald, 120.



Afrofuturism is at once an artistic movement and a philosophy, drawing on influences from the realms of science, technology, non-Western philosophy and cosmology, and African diasporic history. The term was coined in 1994 by critic Mark Dery, who argues that “African-Americans, in a very real sense, are the descendants of alien abductees: they inhabit a sci-fi nightmare in which unseen but no less impassable force fields of intolerance frustrate their movements; official histories undo what has been done; and technology is too often brought to bear on black bodies.”<sup>235</sup> In other words, Afrofuturist art and music equates the quotidian realities of black experience with science-fiction and alienation with actual “alienness.” Although later in her career Smith would come to find the Afrofuturist label increasingly reductive, her early work was undeniably influenced by the movement.<sup>236</sup> Afrofuturism, therefore, serves as a matrix through which to examine the mythological functions of *Chronicles of a Lying Spirit*. The permeability of time in Afrofuturist work, for example, means that the past, present, and future are always in dialogue in much the same way they are in the Pueblo cosmology and storytelling traditions. As Smith herself suggests, “Afrofuturism isn’t for me about dressing in a space suit. It’s about pushing notions of space and time.”<sup>237</sup> Ultimately, her use of Afrofuturist tropes connects the filmmaker (via her alter-ego) to a lineage of historically silenced and erased black women while simultaneously pointing the way forward to an empowered future.

*Chronicles of a Lying Spirit* (by Kelly Gabron) is incredibly dense and complex for its short run-time. On the image track, we see an intricate, beautifully layered collage of optically printed (still) images, including a variety of historical images of black women and children scavenged from the detritus of popular culture, polaroid photographs taken by (and of) Smith herself, and re-photographed fragments of typed text that repeat what is being spoken on the soundtrack. The images chosen by Smith for inclusion in the film are representative, she says, of “cultural icons, images that operate as stereotypes in the minds of a white audience” and that have historically defined and constrained representations of African Americans in the mainstream media.<sup>238</sup> This is perhaps most clearly exemplified in the black and white illustration of a young black girl, grinning while holding a large slice of watermelon, which Smith replicates in a staged photo of herself. However, Smith/Gabron ultimately transcends these one-

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<sup>235</sup> Dery, “Black to the Future: Interviews with Samuel R. Delany, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose,” 180.

<sup>236</sup> Smith, A Moving Image Artist Finds Freedom After Abandoning the Film Industry.

<sup>237</sup> Smith.

<sup>238</sup> MacDonald, “Interview with Cauleen Smith,” 120.



dimensional and stereotyped visual representations by vocally calling attention both to the myriad positions black women have occupied throughout history and to her own privilege as an educated, middle-class woman from the suburbs with the (“master’s”) tools of communication at her disposal.



**Fig. 3.8-15** The above eight stills from Cauleen Smith's *Chronicles of a Lying Spirit* (1992) exemplify the film's handmade, optically printed, collage aesthetic and its appropriation of found print material.

Smith's use of apparently rudimentary technology—polaroid film and a tape recorder, for example—and style in her work belies a sophisticated film theory background, rich practical filmmaking vocabulary, and skilled use of an optical printer. In fact, this seeming simplicity, including the artist's refusal of *moving* images—arguably one of the most basic elements of



film—is one of the many manifestations of her tricksterism. The deliberate (though ultimately misleading) lack of polish in *Chronicles* can be equated to Hurston’s frequent use in *Dust Tracks* of a southern black vernacular in place of the polished Barnard eloquence in which she was equally fluent. Although *Chronicles* is a highly unconventional and experimental film, moreover, Smith ultimately distinguishes herself—and her interest in collective identity politics, representation, and agency—from the elitist and exclusionary white male avant-garde, with its focus on pure aesthetic experimentation and its masturbatory preoccupations with the individual.

The voiceover in *Chronicles* is complex and rebellious, further reflecting the film’s tricksterism in its refusal of the didacticism and intelligibility of traditional documentary film narration. On this multi-layered soundtrack we hear two voices—that of a white man (a fellow filmmaker named Chris Brown) and that of Smith-as-Gabron—speaking simultaneously, each telling different stories and competing for our attention. Brown’s voice, in an approximation of the traditional omniscient documentary voice-of-god narration, relays Cauleen/Kelly’s experiences in the third person, listing the dates and locations of events that she allegedly lived through and bore witness to at a fast clip that initially drives the tempo of the film. However, we begin to realize that this supposedly omniscient narrator is untrustworthy, as many of the times, places, and events listed (“Detroit, Summer 1972: Cauleen dances for lunch money,” “Bermuda Triangle, 1763: Cauleen dies in the middle passage,” and so on) are mutually exclusive. This tactic slyly invites us to rethink our belief in the accuracy and efficacy of traditional modes of (white, male) historiography, autobiography, ethnography and documentary film techniques. Furthermore, it points to how limited our knowledge is and how fragmented the historical record when it comes to disenfranchised peoples, especially those whose lives were torn from them through the slave trade, the repercussions of which have reverberated across generations.

Smith’s quietly confident voice, on the other hand, speaks in the first person at her own pace, competing for space on the soundtrack with the other voice and challenging its narration of “her”/Kelly’s life. “I never went hungry a day in my life,” she tells us emphatically, “I grew up in a middle-class suburb in Sacramento.” Smith-as-Gabron’s narration has a fluid, improvisational quality that contrasts starkly to Brown’s pace-setting, marching-band staccato. While the two voices are heard simultaneously throughout most of the film, Smith’s voice slowly gains control and dominance until finally, by the film’s close, hers is the only voice we hear. Beginning to gain the auditory upper hand, Smith acknowledges, “I know now that the only way



*I'm going to get on TV is to make my own goddamned tapes and play them for myself, my sisters, my brothers,*” but she also acknowledges her privilege as a middle-class woman with access to education and the ability to “indulgently” pursue an art, a privilege that has enabled her to “use the master’s tools to make my own, to help my own.” Indeed, although the “tools” she uses have been used by artists for decades, Smith has created an aesthetic style and a structure in this film that is all her own. Finally, her voice amplified and alone on the soundtrack for the first time, Smith/Gabron asserts: “*This is my story. This is my life story. I stand on the shoulders of those who fought, died... worked and lied to get me here. You are always with me. You are what keep me here in the struggle, in the spirit.*” Surprisingly, the male voice returns after this powerful assertion to note that in “San Francisco, 1990, Cauleen purchases new technology”; however, the joke is on him, as she has ultimately used this technology, “the master’s tools,” to claim agency for herself as a black woman, to intervene in the historically inadequate (racist, sexist or even non-existent) representations of her foremothers and sisters—slaves, sex workers, and immigrants, but also suburban artists and students—and to pave the way for *future* empowered women of colour. She ultimately has the last laugh as the male voice says “Sound Off” and the sound of gently breaking waves lingers on the soundtrack.

Smith’s voice, telling her own story and combining it with the stories of others, challenges the white, male narration of black history—literally *drowns* it out. She further rebels against the retrospective, linear structure of traditional autobiography by presenting a circuitous route through time and place that could not possibly represent the life of a single individual, shapeshifting to occupy multiple subject positions. Finally, Smith repeats the entire overwhelming volley of (auto)biographical words and images a second time. Not only do we hear her story, she makes us listen twice. Though she has suggested that her decision to repeat the two minute and fourteen second section of film twice is *not* a “rebellious statement,” but simply a way of giving the viewer time to process the four layers of soundtrack and dense visual collage so that s/he “can get it,”<sup>239</sup> I would argue that the repetition of this material, so much of which is historically absent from mass media representation, is indeed a rebellious choice regardless of the artist’s intention.

Smith’s acknowledgement that she is “standing on the shoulders of those who fought, died... worked and lied to get [her] here,” to a position where she has the agency to tell her story

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<sup>239</sup> MacDonald, 125.



(and, to a certain extent, theirs), suggests the interconnectedness of black women's experiences and the importance of representation. As Alexandra Juhasz has suggested, "Kelly Gabron's life is nothing less than the history of all black women," and Smith's deployment of this alter-ego functions "as a way to claim the truth of those many histories for herself."<sup>240</sup> In claiming these identities as her own, Smith is both giving voice to stories written out of history and looking forward to a future in which marginalized women have a stake in their own representation. *Chronicles of a Lying Spirit (by Kelly Gabron)* ultimately weaves elements of Smith's own experience, identity, and image with incidents from other eras and places that could not possibly be hers, tying the contemporary moment to the past and the individual to the communal experiences and struggles of a historical lineage of African-American women.

### 3.5 "Truer than true": Norma Elia Cantú's Borderland Girlhood

It is a truism within the body of scholarship examining the intersection of photography and autobiography that both, as referential art forms, have a privileged relationship to "truth." However, because of the indexical nature of photography—its ability to capture "physical traces of actual objects"—Timothy Dow Adams observes that photographs "somehow seem more referential than words."<sup>241</sup> Photographs are thus frequently used in autobiographies to illustrate or corroborate details of a life narrative in much the same way they serve as "evidence" in documentary films. At the same time, photographs—especially family photographs—also serve many of the same symbolic functions as myth, immortalizing special occasions, structuring important experiences and information in the life of an individual or group and, above all, affirming the narrative that a family unit, tribe, or even nation tells about itself, to itself, and the narrative it seeks to project to others. This intersection of "truth" and myth or symbolism makes photography an especially potent medium through which to explore fictionalized autoethnography.

Discussed in Chapter 2 for its subversion of the indexicality and documentary truth apparently "inherent" to the photographic image, Chicana artist Norma Elia Cantú's *Canicula: Snapshots of a Girlhood en la Frontera* (1995) also uses the artist's personal photographs and collective storytelling to challenge dominant cultural myths. *Canicula*, like the other texts

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<sup>240</sup> Juhasz, "Bad Girls Come and Go, But a Lying Girl Can Never Be Fenced In," 113.

<sup>241</sup> Adams, *Light Writing & Life Writing: Photography in Autobiography*, xv.



discussed in this chapter thus far, moves beyond the limits of autobiography’s individual, autonomous subject in order to craft a composite, communal portrait that advances an alternative worldview to that of imperialist, white, patriarchal society and even the limited and limiting purview of white, middle-class feminism.

Cantù acknowledges upfront in *Canicula*’s introduction that this apparently autobiographical work is in fact a fictionalized portrait of self and community or, as she calls it, “fictional autobioethnography.”<sup>242</sup> The work’s hybridity complicates binary distinctions between fact and fiction and between Self and Other even as it presents nuanced details about the cultural traditions of the borderlands. Though she does directly tell the reader that her work is fictionalized, however, one element of Cantù’s tricksterism revolves around the fact that we don’t know which elements are fictionalized, which are based in fact (and in Cantù’s own experiences), and which are “truer than true.”<sup>243</sup>

The “Canicula” of the work’s title refers to the interstitial period between summer and fall when the bulk of the cotton is harvested in South Texas, under the harshest conditions, by Mexican and Mexican-American families,<sup>244</sup> a “mini-season” during which it is so brutally hot “not even dogs venture out.”<sup>245</sup> However, beyond its literal reference to this “in-between” season, the title also more broadly points to an overarching theme of liminality in the work. For example, Nena lives between countries and cultures and Cantù embodies a similar hyphenated identity as a Mexican-American. By inhabiting the in-between world of the borderlands, she can shift fluidly between these two worlds, and yet, trickster-like, she never quite fits in either. Like the shapeshifting narrators discussed above, Nena is neither fully at ease in the United States nor in Mexico, but rather in



**Fig. 3.16** “In-between”: “Nena”/Cantù is identified as white on one ID card... *Canicula* (Cantù, 1995, p. 21)

<sup>242</sup> Cantù, *Canicula: Snapshots of a Girlhood En La Frontera*, xi.

<sup>243</sup> Cantù, xi.

<sup>244</sup> As *Canicula*’s first chapter, “Las Piscas,” reveals, it is not just migrant men, but entire families living in the borderlands, young children included, who undertake this challenging task.

<sup>245</sup> Cantù, *Canicula: Snapshots of a Girlhood En La Frontera*, xii.



the in-between, *en la frontera*, where duality and liminality are the norm. This indeterminacy is reflected in that of the text, itself difficult to classify. Indeed, *Canicula*'s complex fluidity and hybridity have been connected by several scholars to that of the borderlands about which Cantú writes.<sup>246</sup>

Continuing the motif of the “in-between” that haunts much of *Canicula*, Nena is herself experiencing the awkward period between childhood and adulthood in much of the narrative, a detail that enables Cantú to connect women’s bodies—represented by the changing body of her narrator—to the danger and uncertainty that frequently accompanies the crossing of physical (and ideological) borders.<sup>247</sup> In this sense, the intimate stories we are told of Nena’s quotidian life stand in for the wider experiences of women living on the border, and they call attention to the inadequate, frequently sexist representations of Mexican-American women (when they are represented at all) in popular media and by social scientists alike. In this way, blending ethnographic cultural representation with autobiography and fiction, Cantú is able to craft a portrait of life *en la frontera* that is, as she says, “truer than true.”<sup>248</sup>

Cantú’s photographs serve a similar function in *Canicula*: by presenting images of Mexican and Mexican-American women and children, the snapshots help the author to challenge the dominant macho mythologies of the South Texas *frontera*, offering, as Michael Cucher has also observed, “a much different vision of the borderlands than the celebratory images of the Texas Rangers and other hypermasculine heroes of the so-called Wild West” that populate both “Chicano cultural nationalism” and the American imaginary and popular media.<sup>249</sup> The second image that appears in *Canicula*, for example, is a photograph of two-year-old Norma/Nena on a

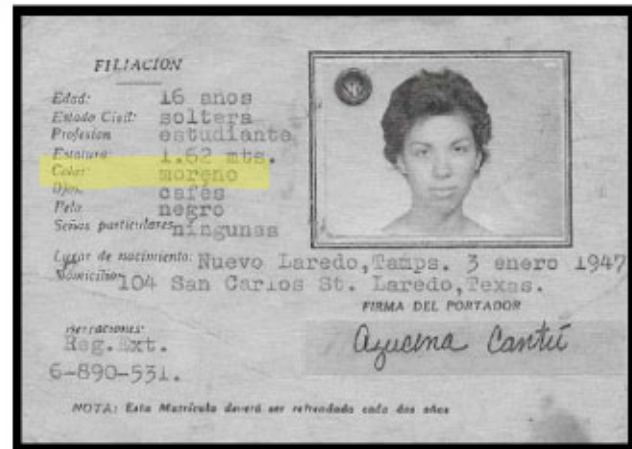


Fig. 3.17 ... and black on the other.  
*Canicula* (Cantú, 1995, p. 22)

<sup>246</sup> Adams, “‘Heightened by Life’ vs. ‘Paralyzed by Fact’: Photography and Autobiography in Norma Cantu’s *Canicula*”; Cucher, “Picturing Fictional Autobiography in Norma Elia Cantú’s *Canicula*”; Portillo, “WRITING PHOTOMEMORIES.”

<sup>247</sup> Cucher, “Picturing Fictional Autobiography in Norma Elia Cantú’s *Canicula*,” 94.

<sup>248</sup> Cantú, *Canicula: Snapshots of a Girlhood En La Frontera*, xi.

<sup>249</sup> Cucher, “Picturing Fictional Autobiography in Norma Elia Cantú’s *Canicula*,” 97.



wooden rocking horse, glaring into the camera with a squint to rival Clint Eastwood's. The book opens, in other words, by immediately subverting the traditional virile cowboy archetype. This



Fig. 3.18 "Nena" and her trusty steed. *Canicula* (Cantù, 1995, p. 6)

intelligent, independent, sensitive young girl—not a gunslinging Ranger or a womanizing *vaquero*—will be our guide through the borderlands. Indeed, Cantù responds to the legacies and stereotypes of the borderlands—promoted by movies and television on the one hand and by racist, anti-immigrant sentiments on the other—by calling attention to “alternative,” but no less heroic, “histories and... iconographies of the borderlands” that focus on empowered Chicana women.<sup>250</sup>

Nena/Cantù confronts the legacy left by the pop culture cowboys of her childhood most directly in the chapter entitled “Cowgirl,” which opens with a photo of eight second-graders at a square dance, boys coupled with girls, each posed

and dressed according to hetero-patriarchal norms. The chapter goes on to enumerate the film and TV cowboys, from *The Lone Ranger* and *Hopalong Cassidy* to the “Mexican cowboys” portrayed by Pedro Infante and Jorge Negrete, that obsessed Nena and her friends as children, serving as models for their own neighborhood games of “cowboys and Indians.”<sup>251</sup> The borderland mythologies perpetuated in the popular media of the 1950s and 1960s were not exclusively grounded in the white, imperial violence of American lore (the Mexican cowboys, at least, “never fought Indians”); they were, however, conspicuously devoid of women.<sup>252</sup> This absence certainly had an impact on young Nena, whose first short story, written for a contest hosted by a local TV personality known as “Cowboy Sam,” “had no female characters and the cowboy, the hero, saved the day for his friend and killed the bad guys in a shoot-out.”<sup>253</sup> With an

<sup>250</sup> Cucher, 99.

<sup>251</sup> Cantù, *Canicula: Snapshots of a Girlhood En La Frontera*, 34.

<sup>252</sup> Cantù, 34.

<sup>253</sup> Cantù, 34.



adult's hindsight and perspective, on the other hand, Cantú calls our attention to the questionable race and gender relations upheld in American and Mexican popular culture alike.<sup>254</sup> As a corrective, *Canicula* privileges women's stories, narrating the quotidian experiences of Mexican-American women and children, but also not forgetting or erasing the idiosyncratic (Nena's aunts, after all, "liv[ed] out stories no fifties scriptwriter for Mexican movies or U.S. TV ever divined").<sup>255</sup> The "Cowgirl" chapter especially remakes the myths of the Mexican-American borderlands, writing Chicana experience back into history.

Overall, Nena's intimate stories run the gamut of human experience, from fear (financial instability, the precarity of childbirth for impoverished women) to shame (teenage insecurities about body hair, repeating the same false, formulaic "sins" at every confession for years), joy (the companionship and support of female friendships), and grief (the loss of family members); these are, in many ways, universal experiences, and yet her stories also speak to the cultural idiosyncrasies of her Mexican-American, South Texas community. Nena's depictions of dangerous border-crossings or of picking pesticide-riddled cotton as a child in deadly heat to earn her parents an extra dollar per day have the power to alter the American imaginary and its male-focused, frequently racist narratives about the South-West and, especially today, its criminalization of border-crossing families and of what American Republicans have pejoratively termed "chain migration." Her descriptions of quinceaneras and birthday parties, *Día de los Muertos* celebrations and Halloween, weddings and funerals, moreover, serve the ethnographic function of shedding light on the unique cultural world she inhabits. The stories collected in *Canicula* may be fictionalized, but they are all grounded in what Cantú calls "raw truth"—whether her own or that of friends and family. They are also grounded by a deep connection to place, even if in Cantú's case this place is "in-between." In all, the hybridity of *Canicula* reflects that of the Mexico-American *frontera* about which she writes. In her narratives about growing up in this contested land, Cantú offers alternatives to the myths—both of American and Mexican origins—of the South Texas borderlands.

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<sup>254</sup> Cucher, "Picturing Fictional Autobiography in Norma Elia Cantú's *Canicula*," 101.

<sup>255</sup> Cantú, *Canicula: Snapshots of a Girlhood En La Frontera*, 34.



### 3.6 Cheryl Dunye's *The Watermelon Woman*

Cheryl Dunye's *The Watermelon Woman* (1996) is a fictionalized autoethnographic exploration of black lesbian life that shares many concerns and strategies of representation with its literary and cinematic predecessors. Briefly summarized, *The Watermelon Woman* is a semi-autobiographical feature-length film that follows a young black lesbian filmmaker named Cheryl (played by, and based on, Dunye herself), who has become fascinated by a beautiful black classical Hollywood actress. Cheryl decides to document her search to find out more about “the Watermelon Woman” and reflects on her own identity along the way. Embracing both autoethnographic and archival practices, Dunye combines a highly personal exploration of race, artistic vocation, and sexuality with an investigation of the political, social, and psychological ramifications of (an absence of) historical representation and visibility within her own black lesbian community. Endeavoring to discover more about her community's past by investigating the life of a single representative foremother, Dunye/Cheryl simultaneously reveals much about herself and her community's present (and *presence*), ultimately adding to the representational project in the process.

As a hybrid text that weaves between 16mm narrative sequences, documentary and “diary film” footage shot on video, and a wealth of aging black-and-white “archival” films and photographs, *The Watermelon Woman* is a fascinating example of automediality. Because we learn in the closing credits—after having become invested in Cheryl's search for Fae “the Watermelon Woman” Richards—that Fae is a fabrication, the film also invites an examination of our assumptions about “truth” and “authenticity” in relation to autobiography, documentary, and indexical media of representation. In its subversion of our expectations, *The Watermelon Woman* draws attention to crucial gaps in the representation of queer black women and encourages the spectator to question the very means of representation itself while placing an explicit emphasis on archival preservation and access as a political issue. While I will examine Dunye's fabrication of the Fae Richards “archive” in more detail below, I would first like to explore how Cheryl's search for a forgotten foremother serves as a springboard for Dunye's autoethnographic exploration of the lives of lesbians of colour in her own Philadelphia community at the close of the twentieth century.



Taking into account the film's hybridity, its subject matter, and its (artisanal, microbudget) means of production, *The Watermelon Woman* can be read as an extended "Dunyementary"—a term coined by Dunye early in her career to describe her short experimental films that revolve around her own life and community, combining tropes of autobiographical, documentary, and fiction filmmaking, and using production practices in which cast and crew alike are composed of friends and lovers.<sup>256</sup> Just as Cheryl relies on the help of her friend Tamara to shoot the "documentary" within the film, Dunye similarly (though on a larger scale) relied on a cast and crew of intimates, which further contributed to the bleeding of reality into fiction.



Fig. 3.19 Irene Dunye as "Cheryl's" mother. *The Watermelon Woman* (Dunye, 1996)

Dunye's own mother, for example, was cast as Cheryl's mother in the film, while her romantic partner, film scholar Alexandra Juhasz, not only appeared in but was also a producer of *The Watermelon Woman*. By working in this way, Dunye breaks from Hollywood tradition by employing a small, mostly black, and/or queer, and/or female cast and crew, but she also breaks from the highly individual production practices of the cinematic avant-garde. Dunye's intimate,

collaborative way of working is significant in that it enables members of the community whose lives she seeks to portray—who themselves have stakes in the representational project—to share in the process. *The Watermelon Woman* is full of notable LGBTQ+ figures of the 1990s,<sup>257</sup> for example, who have each in their own ways contributed to queer art, history and visibility and who contribute to the film's intellectual and representational projects. It must be noted that if *The Watermelon Woman*, as "Dunyementary," has much in common with the fictionalized autoethnographic practices discussed thus far in this chapter, it does also diverge from them in important ways, including in its feature length and production values, its reach and accessibility,

<sup>256</sup> McHugh, "The Experimental 'Dunyementary': A Cinematic Signature Effect," 340.

<sup>257</sup> These include writer and activist Sarah Schulman, who has a hilarious turn as a manic archivist at the Center for Lesbian Information and Technology (C.L.I.T.), Brian Freeman (founder of the theater group Pomo Afro Homos [1990-1995]), who plays film buff Lee Edwards, lesbian poet, essayist, and activist Cheryl Clarke, who plays the fictional June Walker—Fae's partner of over twenty years—and feminist academic and critic Camille Paglia, who plays herself.



and its narrative coherence. Ultimately, Dunye's production practices and rhetorical strategies in the film further helps to present, preserve, and celebrate images of LGBTQ+ life, especially the un(der)documented world of queer, black communities.

Anna Julia Cooper has suggested that black women have historically been “open-eyed” but “mute and voiceless.”<sup>258</sup> In *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence* (1979), Adrienne Rich similarly acknowledges that “[w]omen’s love for women has been represented almost entirely through silence and lies.”<sup>259</sup> Black lesbians have thus been triply silenced—as women, as African-Americans, and as lesbians—by oppressive structures of power and hegemonic social “norms.” Confronted with a lack of historical representation of her own community and thus a perceived absence of foremothers and models which to identify, Dunye set out in *The Watermelon Woman* to fill this gap in representation, seeking to rectify the fact that, as Cheryl acknowledges in direct address to the camera, “our stories have never been told.” The critical importance of representation, especially in the lives of marginalized populations, lies in its ability to constitute a framework of meaning through which an individual might locate herself in the world, make sense of her life, and more fully embrace her own identity. As Cheryl suggests, the very possibility of such identification “means hope, it means inspiration, it means possibility, it means history.” The explicit task undertaken by both Dunye and her fictionalized counterpart in *The Watermelon Woman* is thus first and foremost to make the lives of black LGBTQ+ women *visible*, to represent their experiences for themselves and also for a wider public.<sup>260</sup>

Such an undertaking echoes and is very much in the spirit of Alice Walker’s real-life search for aspirational models, about which she writes poetically in “Saving the Life That is



**Fig. 3.20** Dunye acknowledges her foremothers. *The Watermelon Woman* (1996)

<sup>258</sup> Quoted in Gates Jr., *Reading Black, Reading Feminist: A Critical Anthology*, 1.

<sup>259</sup> Rich, *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence: Selected Prose*, 190.

<sup>260</sup> Notably, *The Watermelon Woman* was the first feature-length film ever made by an (out) queer woman of colour, representing queer women of colour. The film also had a wide reach: it had a theatrical run, received a number of awards at prestigious film festivals, was aired on the Sundance and BET television channels, and was (and continues to be) distributed by First Run Features, who released a DVD of the film for its 20th anniversary in 2017.



Your Own: The Importance of Models in the Artist's Life" (1983). Her quest brought renewed attention and, ultimately, canonical stature to Zora Neale Hurston, who had been all but forgotten before Walker's intervention.<sup>261</sup>

Dunye, for her part, nods to the real historical black actresses—Hattie McDaniel, Butterfly McQueen, and Louise Beavers among them—who broke the ground on which she herself now stands and without whom she may not have the career she now enjoys. On the other hand, Dunye also acknowledges in the

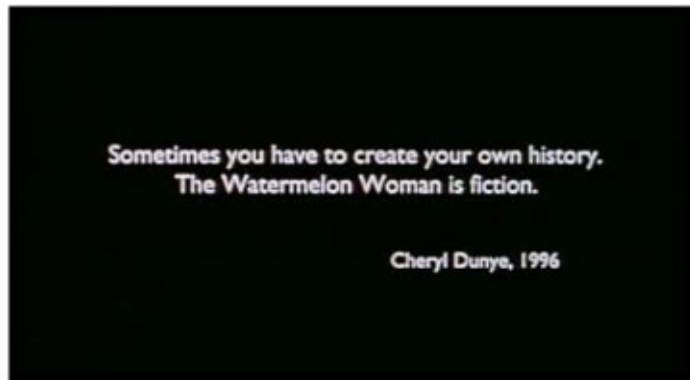


Fig. 3.21 Dunye acknowledges the necessary fictions of her film in its closing credits. *The Watermelon Woman* (1996)

closing credits that one must sometimes “create [one’s] own history” to fill the void, and this is precisely what she accomplishes, both with the creation of Fae Richards and the autoethnographic representation of her own experiences and those of her community.

Utilizing strategies of fictionalization and mythmaking in *The Watermelon Woman*, Dunye has created a portrait that rings true in spite of its fabrications. She produces, in other words, an identity *in* and *with* this new audiovisual material. The autobiographical pact



Fig. 3.22 Fae (Lisa Marie Bronson) as the idealized (but ultimately fictional) representation of liberated black lesbian sexuality. *The Watermelon Woman* (Dunye, 1996)

predictably does not stand up to the weight of such tactics, but Dunye and Cheryl nevertheless share important biographical details: a name, a face, an identity as black lesbians living in Philadelphia, a vocation (filmmaking), and desires (for women, for representation, for [a] history). Their shared desires coalesce in the beautiful, talented figure of Fae Richards, the idealized (and ultimately mythical) representation of a liberated

<sup>261</sup> Walker, “Saving the Life That Is Your Own: The Importance of Models in the Artist’s Life.”



black lesbian sexuality. Because she is a fabrication, Fae ultimately gives us insight into not just the filmmaker's desire for women (though there is certainly "something in her face, the way she moves" that draws Cheryl to her), but also her desire for artistic success and for historical representation.

The characters of both Cheryl and Fae thus serve as vehicles through which Dunye is able to explore deeply personal struggles and concerns that have wider social and cultural reverberations. In the film, Cheryl's romantic involvement with a white woman, Diana (Guinevere Turner), brings up uncomfortable questions about class, race and sexuality in her life that are never quite resolved. Fae too, we learn, may have had a white lover, and as Cheryl uncovers more about the actress's life, further similarities between Fae and Cheryl (and by extension Dunye) begin to appear. When Tamara (Valarie Walker) accuses Diana of fetishizing Cheryl's blackness, for example, troubling questions simultaneously arise about Martha Page, whose position of power as a bigshot Hollywood director potentially troubles our understanding of her affair with the beautiful young black actress. That Alexandra Juhasz plays Page further



**Fig. 3.23** Diana (Guinevere Turner) and Cheryl. *The Watermelon Woman* (1996)



**Fig. 3.24** Martha Page (Alexandra Juhasz) and Fae (Bronson). *The Watermelon Woman* (1996)

complicates the matter. The dynamics of interracial lesbian relationships and concerns about the fetishization of black women within (or, conversely, their exclusion from) lesbian communities are recurring themes throughout Dunye's oeuvre, including in early short films like *Janine* (1990), *Vanilla Sex* (1992), and *Greetings from Africa* (1994). Ultimately, the knotted threads of Cheryl and Fae's fictional lives and Dunye's real life are difficult to untangle, and it is clear by the resonances between all three figures that the fictional autoethnographic mode has enabled



Dunye to explore personal concerns in addition to the film's larger social, political, and historical inquiries.

Dunye's decision to focus in her art on both the historical legacy and the quotidian lives—including her own—of queer women of colour arguably has its roots, at least in part, in her formal education in feminist theory at Rutgers (my own alma mater) and Temple Universities, where she read the canonical work of many white, heterosexual, middle class feminists whose writing and activism frequently ignored the experiences of black and LGBTQ+ women. Fortunately, she was also likely introduced at this time to the influential writing of feminist lesbians and women of colour, including Adrienne Rich and Audre Lorde, whose thematic concerns Dunye echoes in her own work. In fact, *The Watermelon Woman* can productively be compared to *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (1982), in which Lorde “re-memembers as myth a history that has been forgotten and destroyed.”<sup>262</sup> Dunye too works to “re-member” black lesbian history in the doubled sense of the word used by Leigh Gilmore to suggest “both the act of memory and the restoration of erased persons and texts as bodies of evidence,”<sup>263</sup> and she, like Lorde, turns to myth in response to the erasure of black lesbian history, fabricating a new, idealized version of what has been irrevocably lost. Whereas Lorde otherwise constructs a relatively straightforward autoethnography (or biomythography, as she calls it), however, Dunye inhabits the role of the trickster and structures her own autoethnographic portrait like a joke, with a closing punchline—the revelation that “the Watermelon Woman” is a fake—that forces the spectator to reconsider her entire experience of the film.<sup>264</sup>

Dunye's use of visual media, especially photographic and moving image technology, expands the representational possibilities of her mythologizing and re-membling beyond the capabilities of literary interventions. As a queer black woman, Cheryl/Dunye's body is inherently politicized: the color of her skin and her gender performance mark her as visibly Other to the white, heterosexual hegemonic norm, and this fact is thematized throughout her oeuvre. Her effort to recuperate and represent black lesbian identity, therefore, inherently lends itself to a visual medium, which enables a literal *embodiment* that is simply not available in the same way

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<sup>262</sup> Gilmore, *Autobiographics: A Feminist Theory of Women's Self-Representation*, 27.

<sup>263</sup> Gilmore, 27.

<sup>264</sup> Baron, *The Archive Effect: Found Footage and the Audiovisual Experience of History*, 121.



to artists working with the written word. Dunye's decision, moreover, to use not just visual but *indexical* mediums of representation—to literally capture a physical trace of the photographic subject, attesting to her presence, her very existence, in addition to preserving her likeness—is especially important.<sup>265</sup> *This is what a queer black woman looks like*, such an intervention says, *I exist. We exist. Bear witness to our stories*. It is a powerful statement. Although it is ultimately revealed that the images of Fae have been fabricated for the film using an actress, the fact nevertheless remains that Dunye has put beautiful, empowering images of queer black women into the world, regardless of whether that woman's name is Fae Richards or Lisa Marie Bronson, June or Cheryl Clarke, Tamara or Valarie Walker, Cheryl or Cheryl Dunye.

In addition to the influence of black and lesbian feminist writers, the influence of experimental and underground filmmaking is also evident in Dunye's thematic concerns and production practices. While the video diary sequences in which Cheryl, alone in her bedroom, directly addresses the camera are reminiscent of the casual, seemingly unrehearsed, direct-address monologues of *Janine* (1990) and other early "Dunyementaries," they also crucially bring to mind the videos of fellow queer experimental filmmakers Sadie Benning and George Kuchar. As Catherine Russell observes in *Experimental Ethnography: The Work of Film in the Age of Video* (1999), the video diaries of Kuchar and Benning are exemplary autoethnographic texts.<sup>266</sup> Whether behind the camera or in front of it, Benning and Kuchar, like Dunye, enact and explore queer identity and its relationship to image culture, blurring the boundaries between experience and its representation.<sup>267</sup> Cheryl, like Benning, shoots most of her video diary in the intimacy of her own "bedroom-studio-laboratory," as Russell fittingly calls the space,<sup>268</sup> which for both young artists functions as a safe, private place of introspection, self-discovery, sexual experimentation and, of course, artistic creation. It is in her own intimate bedroom confessions that we learn about Cheryl's goal of becoming a filmmaker, about her interest in "the Watermelon Woman," about her desires, tensions with her friends, and the progress of her documentary.

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<sup>265</sup> Although video was also used in addition to 16mm film in sections of *The Watermelon Woman* for aesthetic and narrative reasons (and to keep costs down), it is not technically indexical itself. Nevertheless, arguments have been made that seek to revise our understanding of indexicality in the digital age. See, for example, McMullan, "The Digital Moving Image: Revising Indexicality and Transparency."

<sup>266</sup> Russell, *Experimental Ethnography: The Work of Film in the Age of Video*, 286–95.

<sup>267</sup> Russell, 286.

<sup>268</sup> Russell, 294.





Fig. 3.25-27 Cheryl addresses the camera in *The Watermelon Woman*'s "video diary" sequences (Dunye, 1996).

Cheryl is also, like Kuchar, highly mobile with her camera, using it to interact with strangers on city streets and to conduct interviews in the homes of the queer elders whose oral histories—like Miss Shirley's reminiscences about early lesbian nightlife in Philadelphia—fill in many gaps in Cheryl's knowledge about her community's past. The camera, in other words, functions for the filmmaker as a tool of (auto)ethnographic documentation in addition to its function as a diaristic interlocutor to whom she muses and confesses. Like Benning and Kuchar, Cheryl's videos document her own personal hopes, dreams, and struggles on the one hand and, on the other, the idiosyncratic community of artists and queer women of colour to which she belongs. Both Cheryl's personal testimony and her use of the interview thus ground the film in autoethnographic practices and align her work with a lineage of queer experimental filmmaking.

In addition to the autoethnographic video diaries of Benning and Kuchar, Dunye's work is also in dialogue with the work of black experimental documentary filmmakers like Marlon Riggs and Michelle Parkerson, who themselves represented African American LGBTQ+ life in their films. Groundbreaking feminist experimental filmmakers like Michelle Citron, Carolee Schneemann, Barbara Hammer, and Chantal Akerman, too, seem to have influenced Dunye's oeuvre, contributing to her recognition that her own lived experiences and her own desire—however marginalized by race, gender, or sexual orientation—are valid topics for artistic representation, and each expanded her understanding of the political and representational possibilities of the medium.<sup>269</sup> The influence of Citron's *Daughter Rite* (1979), for example can be read in *The Watermelon Woman*'s emphasis on domestic space and intimate relationships among women, its subversion of *vérité* documentary practices, its appropriation of "archival" material, and its blending of autobiography with fiction. The influence of Schneemann and

<sup>269</sup> McHugh, "The Experimental 'Dunyementary': A Cinematic Signature Effect," 339–41.



Hammer, on the other hand, are felt in the female-focused eroticism of the sex scene between Cheryl and Diana: with its tightly framed shots, tangle of limbs, and aestheticized contrast of light and dark skin tones, this sequence is certainly the most formally experimental in the film, though it is never so abstracted that we are alienated from its representation of lesbian sexuality, desire, and pleasure.<sup>270</sup>

Just as she aligns her work in many ways with these cinematic foremothers, Dunye also positions herself in *opposition* to much of the male-dominated avant-garde, eschewing apolitical, self-indulgent explorations of her own idiosyncratic vision à la Brakhage in favour of making her experiences and her community both visible and—perhaps most important of all—*accessible*. To this end, Dunye uses narrative as a tool to make the lived experiences depicted in her films accessible to a wider audience, seeking to make her text *more*—not less—familiar. In so doing, she does not just break with “visionary” male avant-gardists, but also with predecessors like Schneemann and Hammer, whose fragmented, often abstract, non-narrative films and video she has acknowledged as an influence while nevertheless remaining critical of the opacity of some of their work, which makes engagement with a general public a challenge.<sup>271</sup>

Dunye’s influences, therefore, are not limited to the realms of experimental filmmaking and feminist theory. In fact, her work also takes inspiration from the popular culture and sitcoms of her childhood, including favorites like *The Brady Bunch* and *The Addams Family*,<sup>272</sup> the impact of which is evident in Dunye’s comedic sensibility, the emphasis she places on domestic life and interpersonal relationships, and even the film’s one-liners and witty repartee between Cheryl and Tamara. However, like Cantú, who recognizes the influence of the television cowboys of her youth but who ultimately questions and dismantles these macho, male-dominated myths of the borderlands, Dunye similarly subverts the conventionally hetero-patriarchal values and storylines of the traditional situational comedy in the service of queer storytelling. The narrative sequences in which Cheryl interacts with Tamara, Diana, and other friends and

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<sup>270</sup> The film’s lesbian themes in general and this sex scene in particular led to a major scandal: having been funded in part by a National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) grant, the lesbian sex scene incited a national controversy over NEA funding practices. United States Representative Peter Hoekstra, for example, denounced the NEA for giving taxpayer money to finance “the production and distribution of patently offensive and possibly pornographic movies”—and the backlash ultimately led to major restructuring within the NEA. For more see Moss, “The NEA Gets Gay-Bashed—National Endowment for the Arts.”

<sup>271</sup> McHugh, “The Experimental ‘Dunyementary’: A Cinematic Signature Effect,” 141.

<sup>272</sup> McHugh, 141.



potential lovers are undeniably coded as “black lesbian sitcom,” and certain familiar tropes of the genre (the bad date, the work scam, the sidekick, etc.) are even employed by Dunye to maintain the forward momentum of the narrative. The use of a conventional narrative structure is itself a conscious, politicized choice on Dunye’s part. Her appropriation of the recognizable traditions of the sitcom and even the “rom-com” enabled her to successfully craft an enjoyable film *about* black lesbians *for* black lesbians. Dunye’s ability to merge the avant-garde with popular culture and feminist and queer theory with engaging storytelling has succeeded in making her work accessible to a wider audience.

In addition to the autoethnographic representation undertaken by Dunye in *The Watermelon Woman*, the filmmaker’s concern with reclaiming the history of black (and queer) women in the American film industry engenders an examination of—and ultimately an intervention into—the complex dynamics of historical representation, archival preservation, and our faith in the indexical mediums of film and photography as “authentic” and “true.” The idea for *The Watermelon Woman* was sparked when Dunye, attempting to conduct research as a student into the involvement of lesbians and women of colour in the early film industry, came up empty-handed. Inhabiting the role of the trickster to make her own history, Dunye’s subsequent fabrications call attention to the importance of reliable documentation. Her skilled blurring of fiction and nonfiction is everywhere apparent in the film, from its narrative, as discussed above, to its formal and aesthetic strategies.

Working with actress Lisa Marie Bronson and photographer Zoe Leonard, for example, Dunye fabricated a phony photographic archive to document the life of “Fae Richards,” staging 78 photographs and faking clips from several films and newsreels. The material that resulted



Fig. 3.28-29 The film’s narrative sequences are often coded as “black lesbian sitcom.” *The Watermelon Woman* (Dunye, 1996)





from this collaboration was all exquisitely shot, with lighting, costuming, and other details of mise-en-scene familiar from plantation films and melodramatic “passing” films—two early



**Fig. 3.30** Collaborating with photographer Zoe Leonard, Dunye created an archive of audiovisual material documenting the (fictional) life of Fae Richards. *The Watermelon Woman* (1996)

Hollywood genres that would have employed black actresses—all perfectly recreated and entirely convincing. The “archive” provides moving (in both senses of the word) examples of Richards’s acting as well as glamour shots and charmingly “candid” snapshots and newsreel footage, all of which has been distressed to simulate age and wear. The apparent authenticity of this evidentiary material and the documentary form into which it is placed bestow a sense of

authority—which is later called into question—upon the results of Cheryl’s research.

Dunye’s skill at “faking it”—her ability to harness the audiovisual tools and models available to her as a filmmaker, using different visual mediums to signify different narrative threads and representational concerns—is evident elsewhere, too. The film’s more traditional narrative sequences—those documenting Cheryl’s daily life, including her job at a video store, time spent with Tamara and other friends, and her growing intimacy with Diana—for example, are shot on 16mm film with the scripted dialogue, narrative arc, and aesthetic polish of conventional fiction filmmaking. With elements of the romantic comedy and TV sitcoms, this material, visually and narratively coded as fiction, is paradoxically grounded in autobiographical details of Dunye’s own life. The sections of *The Watermelon Woman* shot on video, on the other hand, which align themselves stylistically and ontologically with autobiography and documentary modes of filmmaking—the “diary film” sequences, interviews, and other documentation of Cheryl’s research—are all faked for the film. The improvisational style and intimate address of “diary” sections lend them a feeling of immediacy and authenticity, while the amateurish home video aesthetic of Cheryl’s interviews and the implied spontaneity of her “on



the street” interactions with occasionally awkward or inarticulate subjects suggests a realism that is similarly convincing. These sequences so successfully read as “real” and “truthful,” in fact, that spectators are often taken by surprise when it is revealed that they are fictional.

The initial believability and apparent authenticity of such material supports Vivian Sobchack’s argument in “Toward a Phenomenology of Nonfictional Film Experience” that “documentary is... an experience”—that it is, in other words, a mode of reception.<sup>273</sup> Documentary film and autobiography are both grounded in a “presumed basis in referential truth,” and both rely on a “pact with the audience that establishes intentionality.”<sup>274</sup> Dunye’s ability to maintain such a pact with her spectator owes much to the sincerity of the film’s protagonist (not to mention her uncanny resemblance to the filmmaker herself), but it is also a testament to her savvy understanding of and ability to reproduce the hallmarks of the documentary form, evidenced in the use of interviews and talking heads, archival material including film, photographs, and letters, and a voiceover that ties all of these disparate pieces together. The spectator is led to believe until the very end that s/he is watching an authentic, honest, and truthful excavation of a missing piece of black and LGBTQ+ history. The archival material is so convincing in fact that, in my experience, many (first-time) viewers of the film do not even think to question its credibility, nor do they question the reliability of Cheryl’s documentary or the existence of its subject. The success of the ruse is ultimately a testament to the power of our belief in the inherent veracity of indexical images and the authority granted to the documentary genre.

In addition to illustrating Sobchack’s argument, Dunye’s work similarly affirms Jamie Baron’s suggestion that our recognition of an appropriation film as such relies on its ability to produce what she terms “the archive effect”—that is, the viewer’s recognition that the appropriated material comes from a different time or intended context of use.<sup>275</sup> Because spectators of *The Watermelon Woman* perceive a temporal and intentional disparity between the “found” material’s original context and its new use in Cheryl’s film, we are led, mistakenly, to believe in the authenticity of the “archival” footage and photographs of Fae Richards. However, this is by no means to suggest that Dunye’s audience is particularly gullible or unsophisticated.

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<sup>273</sup> Sobchack, “Toward a Phenomenology of Nonfiction Film Experience,” 241.

<sup>274</sup> Lesage, “Women’s Fragmented Consciousness in Feminist Experimental Autobiographical Video,” 319.

<sup>275</sup> Baron, *The Archive Effect: Found Footage and the Audiovisual Experience of History*, 9.



On the contrary, it is a testament to both the manipulability of the medium and the skill with which the filmmaker is able to fake signs of age and to mimic Hollywood production values, creating a “false archive effect.” Furthermore, as Robert Reid-Pharr suggests in his own analysis of the film, *The Watermelon Woman* calls attention to the fact that a “materialist conception of history has become so deeply ingrained in our discourses of identity [that] even when audiences are told explicitly that the object they are being offered is fake, they will insist on the object’s authenticity.”<sup>276</sup> This is the power that images can have over those hungry for representation. The film, in this sense, “does its work too well.”<sup>277</sup>

*The Watermelon Woman* was made at a historical moment marked by increasing public interest in archival film preservation.<sup>278</sup> Amateur film, home movies, and other examples of noncommercial filmmaking practices were beginning to gain the recognition of historians and artists as important cultural documents of “regional history and minority voices.”<sup>279</sup> To paraphrase Patricia Zimmermann’s introduction to archival documentary and experimental filmmaking practices in *Mining the Home Movie: Excavations in Histories and Memories* (2008), the artists who began appropriating and reworking forgotten archival material in the 1980s and 1990s were most often those who sought to call attention to forgotten, lost, or suppressed voices and experiences and to examine of the disparities between personal memory and official history.<sup>280</sup> Though Cheryl Dunye fits in this philosophical camp, she was nevertheless unable to find archival material of any kind pertaining to the history of women of colour and/or lesbians working with film. Even the comparatively well-documented and -preserved history of early Hollywood film frequently omitted the names of black actresses, and the growing interest in queer film history at the time rarely if ever focused on black women. Thus, although *The Watermelon Woman* initially appears to be another addition to the burgeoning practice of appropriation filmmaking à la Alan Berliner, Su Friedrich, and Peter Forgacs, Dunye actually pushed many of the movement’s concerns in new directions by crafting *artificial* (but highly realistic) archival footage that calls attention to a history that has largely

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<sup>276</sup> Reid-Pharr, “Makes Me Feel Mighty Real: The Watermelon Woman and the Critique of Black Visuality,” 132.

<sup>277</sup> Reid-Pharr, 132.

<sup>278</sup> The National Film Preservation Act was passed into law and the National Film Registry was established in the United States by 1988-89, and in 1996—the year of *The Watermelon Woman*’s release—the National Film Preservation Foundation was established.

<sup>279</sup> Zimmermann, “Introduction: The Home Movie Movement—Excavations, Artifacts, Minings,” 11.

<sup>280</sup> Zimmermann, “Introduction: The Home Movie Movement—Excavations, Artifacts, Minings.”



been ignored and undocumented and to imbalances of power inherent to photographic representation and its preservation.

An examination of the history of falsified “documentary” footage<sup>281</sup>—Méliès’s restaged “Dreyfus affair” films (1899), for example, Winsor McCay’s *The Sinking of the Lusitania* (1918), or Flaherty’s *Nanook of the North* (1922) and *Man of Aran* (1934)—suggests that in many cases such faking originated in a perceived absence or lack of essential material. Many documentary filmmakers have no qualms about using reenactments to recreate what was never filmed. Dunye’s falsification of archival material might similarly be read, then, as a restitutive gesture. To be sure, the filmmaker’s decision to stage photos and film footage serves a practical purpose by providing visual material to illustrate her film where no such material previously existed, and in so doing it calls attention to gross inadequacies of historical and visual representations of queer women of colour.

The creation of her own archival material, moreover, allows Dunye to control *how* her foremother(s) are represented, to claim a power that has historically not been available to lesbians and women of colour. Indeed, the history of Western visual culture—from orientalist paintings and early ethnographic photography to classical Hollywood cinema—is rife with images that oppress, debase, or exoticize women of colour, perpetuating racist stereotypes and ultimately exerting a kind of possessive violence over the bodies of black women (“The act of taking pictures,” as Sontag asserts, “is a semblance of appropriation, a semblance of rape”)<sup>282</sup> that has been made possible by a long history of abject marginalization. Although Dunye does not erase this history—Fae Richards is shown in Mammy roles, for example—she does confront it by presenting glamorous and empowering images of Fae alongside those that are more degrading. Among the “appropriated” photos, we see her confidently wooing a crowd of “stone butches” in her cabaret act or embracing June, her loving partner of 20+ years. In many ways, then, the fabricated images present Fae as an aspirational figure—a foremother to claim and be proud of.

In order to grasp *why* Dunye was unable to find examples of such figures in her (real-life) research, it may not be necessary to unpack the entire complex operation by which historical

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<sup>281</sup> Juhasz and Lerner, *F Is for Phony: Fake Documentary and Truth’s Undoing* offers a wide-ranging analysis of the practice.

<sup>282</sup> Sontag, *On Photography*, 24.



narratives are shaped or, conversely, erased, but it does help to understand the basic processes and prohibitions of some of its component parts. In *Archive Fever*, Derrida acknowledges that archives—like other social and cultural institutions—have always been governed by the discourses and ideologies of those in power, which determine what kind of material is to be preserved and what is to be literally and metaphorically discarded. Regulating access to archives, moreover, further homogenizes and controls the mythologies and historical narratives of a nation or group. These power dynamics and models of exclusion perpetuated by archives are apparent (on a small scale) in Dunye’s film. For example, Cheryl’s research is frequently thwarted by archons of public knowledge (the condescending and uncooperative male librarian, or the film historian, Lee Edwards, who is indifferent to the role played by black *women* in the early film industry) and private (Martha Page’s tight-lipped sister who insists that Page was not a lesbian). In fact, the only place Cheryl finds anything of use for her documentary—aside from the oral history she collects—is the tiny C.L.I.T. archive, which has problems of its own: the space is highly disorganized, with ephemera of all sorts randomly thrown together into boxes, and its idealistic, communal model of governance, while progressive in theory, makes it impossible for anything to get accomplished. Furthermore, hinting at systemic issues of racism that had infiltrated even feminist and queer enclaves, the archive’s materials were segregated by race. Ultimately, even the non-institutional, lesbian-focused community archive proves imperfect and largely ineffective in the context of Cheryl’s search.

That Cheryl’s search begins with a VHS tape of *Plantation Memories* (1937), illicitly and anonymously borrowed along with Tamara’s porn tapes, is a fact that seemingly suggests that *both* forms of entertainment are something to be ashamed of and hidden. And yet, the fact that Cheryl has access to this and other VHS copies of Fae Richards films speaks to the power of the Hollywood machine, whose preservation of (its own) early film history is largely financially motivated but is nevertheless more comprehensive than many other archival efforts. Beyond these VHS tapes, however, Cheryl’s search is frustrated by the fact that there simply was not much documentation *anywhere* about the lives of black women of this era—including those who had public lives as actresses in Hollywood—and even less about the lives of lesbians.

The filmmaker’s powerful parting words in *The Watermelon Woman*—“Sometimes you have to create your own history”—might be read several different ways. On the one hand, Dunye’s creation of the beautiful and desirable Fae Richards essentially simulates the smoke and



mirrors of Hollywood’s assembly-line production of starlets—and the mythologies surrounding them—while also explicitly calling attention to the industry’s manufactured absence of race and of homosexuality. Perhaps more profoundly, Dunye’s concluding statement suggests not that black lesbian women are *without* a history, but rather that they have been willfully forgotten, their stories and artistic contributions erased from the public record. Harboring no illusions that such an erasure will be rectified without an active(ist) intervention, Dunye has created a fictional foremother and a believable history to stand in for that which has not been preserved. In this way, when she reveals that the Watermelon Woman is a fiction, Reid-Pharr suggests, she “reminds us that *all* of our attempts to recapture the past, to produce narratives of ‘forgotten’ or ‘lost’ histories, are exercises in fiction.”<sup>283</sup> Finally, the film documents the labour performed by



Fig. 3.31-32 The oral storytelling of Miss Shirley (above) and Fae’s partner, June (below, right), unlocks the story of “The Watermelon Woman” (Dunye, 1996)



Cheryl to construct the history of her community, piece by piece, through archival and oral history research. With its closing statement, *The Watermelon Woman* also hints at Dunye’s own labour (she has *made her own history!*) leading the spectator to reflect back upon the work, the artistry, the care—and even the occasional mischievousness—that went into crafting such a convincing forgery. Cheryl’s (fictional) work and Dunye’s work in fiction ultimately offer a model for future work still to be done, inspiring a new generation of researchers and artists to celebrate and preserve black LGBTQ+ history.

I would like to close this discussion of *The Watermelon Woman* by noting that although issues of visual representation and archival preservation are clearly core thematic concerns of Dunye’s work, most critical analyses of the film seem to ignore the emphasis that the filmmaker also places on the

<sup>283</sup> Reid-Pharr, “Makes Me Feel Mighty Real: The Watermelon Woman and the Critique of Black Visuality,” 137–38 my emphasis.



power, importance, and even the subversiveness of maintaining oral storytelling practices and intergenerational communication among women. Indeed, the feature films and the photographs Cheryl eventually finds of Fae do not in themselves tell the actress's story. Given the taboo nature of homosexuality during Fae's lifetime, moreover, and the fact that many lesbians of the era were likely closeted, it is no surprise that Cheryl's archival research turns up nothing explicitly related to the actress's sexuality or romantic partnerships. It is only through word of mouth that Cheryl learns of Fae's sexual orientation and other key biographical details. In other words, our protagonist is only able to construct her portrait of Fae when the visual artefacts are read in conjunction with the intergenerational storytelling of women like Miss Shirley and June who, though they may not be biologically related to Cheryl, are nevertheless part of the (lesbian) "family." Even Cheryl's own personal testimony in the diary film segments—in which she confesses the effects that Fae Richards has had, decades later, on her understanding of and relationship to her own black, queer identity—contribute to the narrative constructed around the actress and her legacy. In this way, Dunye confirms Susan Sontag's assertion that "Photographs... cannot themselves explain anything... Only that which narrates can make us understand."<sup>284</sup>

In this way, *The Watermelon Woman* takes its place among the other works here, where myth-making and intergenerational storytelling among women are presented as an alternative, intimate form of knowledge production and transmission that uses a combination of fictional, autobiographical, and ethnographic storytelling. Although Dunye does not ultimately offer a solution to the representational conundrum to which she has drawn our attention, the film does represent an important point of departure: addressing June Walker via direct address to her video camera in a final bedroom shot, Cheryl enumerates what Fae Richards means to her, concluding, "what I understand [now] is that I'm going to be the one who says 'I am a black lesbian filmmaker who's just beginning,' but I am going to say a lot more and have a lot more work to do." By piecing together a narrative about the life of Fae Richards—a fake but nevertheless representative foremother—Dunye-as-Cheryl is also simultaneously piecing together her own identity as a queer black woman, thus highlighting the importance of representation to identity formation. The film and its protagonist's fictional documentary both serve as an excuse to capture and celebrate glimpses of life as and among a community of black, LGBTQ+ women.

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<sup>284</sup> Sontag, *On Photography*, 23.



Although the film is likely the most accessible work discussed in this chapter, it is no less subversive in its subject matter, its hybridity, its complicated relationship to myth and history, and the challenge it poses to traditional documentary and autobiographical discourses.

Ultimately, each of the texts examined here powerfully resists and subverts the “elite,” imperialist, hetero-patriarchal roots of both autobiography and ethnography—the progenitors of the autoethnographic genre—and respond to the hierarchical and frequently exclusionary practices and worldviews of their predecessors by representing individuals and experiences that are rarely (or mis-)represented in mainstream culture and by doing so in largely accessible, “folk” traditions. The urgency to tell representative stories within the feminist (including the Chicana and Black feminist) movement(s) can explain, at least in part, the use of fiction and the rejection of the autobiographical pact. Though each individual work examined here must be grounded in its author’s own historical and sociocultural situatedness, their strategies can be read together as part of a larger “shift toward a conception of communal identity” in feminist and other identity-based movements that led to an emphasis being placed on “*the representative aspects*” of an author’s experience “rather than those that mark [her] as unique.”<sup>285</sup> The use of fiction in the autoethnographic texts of Silko, Smith, Cantú, and Dunye, in other words, enables each author to depict experiences shared by women in her community and to creatively and imaginatively fill important gaps in the historical record, creating a communal portrait that may be, as Cantú suggests, “truer than true.”

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<sup>285</sup> Felski, *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics: Feminist Literature and Social Change*, 93, 95, my emphasis.



## **Chapter 4. Gastrography: Exploring Identity Through Food Narratives**

As historian Janet Theophano has observed, “The kitchen [is] an oddly evocative place to understand other ways of living.”<sup>286</sup> The aphorism that “we are what we eat” can be interpreted according to two different lines of thinking: the quotidian acts of cooking and eating are, on the one hand, deeply personal, both as literally embodied practices that satisfy a biological need and as intertwined with individual memory and emotion. On the other hand, they are also inescapably relational, tied to our social identities and activities and contributing to our perceptions of cultural differences. Indeed, what anthropologists and scholars in the field of food studies call “foodways”—the what, why, and how of food production and consumption—are shaped by race, sexuality, ethnicity, religion, and class, by our beliefs, behaviours, preferences and taboos, and by cultural constructions of gender and domesticity.<sup>287</sup> Cultural artifacts related to foodways, from cookbooks to television cooking shows to advertisements, thus have the potential to offer insight into complex socio-cultural concerns. The cookbook, in fact, has recently been reevaluated by feminist scholars who argue that the ubiquitous domestic tool is much more than a “simple” collection of instructions for food preparation, indeed that it can and should be understood as “a literary text whose authors constructed meaningful representations of themselves and their world.”<sup>288</sup> As such, the cookbook and its cognate forms—chief among them, the cookbook *memoir*—are ripe for autoethnographic analyses. Indeed, experiments with life storytelling in relation to food offer author and reader alike the opportunity to explore complex topics of individual identity in the context of family, national, or ethnic heritage, gender roles and body politics, and beyond. Combining auto-archival and autoethnographic tactics, gastrographies counter the convention of the autonomous autobiographical self, using food memories to construct an identity that is relational and intersectional.

Vertamae Smart-Grosvenor’s *Vibration Cooking, or The Travel Notes of a Geechee Girl* (1970), the primary literary case study in this chapter, exemplifies how the gastrography’s

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<sup>286</sup> Theophano, *Eat My Words: Reading Women’s Lives through the Cookbooks They Wrote*, 7.

<sup>287</sup> Brown, “Remembrances of Freedoms Past: Foodways in Slave Narratives,” 160; Parsons, *Gender, Class and Food: Families, Bodies and Health*, 1; Avakian, *Through the Kitchen Window: Women Explore the Intimate Meanings of Food and Cooking*, 5–6.

<sup>288</sup> Bower, *Recipes for Reading: Community Cookbooks, Stories, Histories*, 2; see also Inness, *Secret Ingredients: Race, Gender, and Class at the Dinner Table*, and; Theophano, *Eat My Words: Reading Women’s Lives through the Cookbooks They Wrote*.



characteristic intimate stories about the author's relationship to and memories of particular foods give us insight into her inner life while also shedding light on her cultural identity, her relationships to family and community, and complex social issues of gender, race and class. Smart-Grosvenor's work further demonstrates how, with the inclusion of replicable recipes, the genre at once expands the possibilities of (auto-)archival work and fosters an engaged and interactive relationship with the reader, who is invited to literally "cook up" the author's own subjectivity.

Although a veritable movement has been born around the gastronomic memoir since the publication of *Vibration Cooking* in 1970,<sup>289</sup> feminist artists have also experimented with gastrography in other mediums, especially in film, video, and performance art. The translation of the genre to the (computer) screen in particular, as exemplified by Michelle Citron's quartet of interactive, multimedia, database "films" collected together online as *Queer Feast*, has fostered increasingly complex and sophisticated work at the intersections of food culture, moving-image experimentation, identity politics, and the World Wide Web. Significantly, three of the four works were made between 1999 and 2004, in that utopian moment before the Instagram "food porn" boom and before the astronomical growth of personal food and recipe blogs forever altered the landscape of food as/and self-representation online. Citron's work in *As American As Apple Pie* (1999) and *Mixed Greens* (2004) in particular foster extremely personal and political explorations of gendered labour, body politics, lesbian sexuality, and other feminist themes eternally bound up with our relationship to food, while adding layers of complexity to the genre's interactivity, its (auto-)archival potential (and challenges), and its engagement of the senses. An analysis of these two works also invites reflection on the evolution of Citron's autobiographical work since *Daughter Rite* (1978), and the evolution of feminist experiments in self-representation more generally. Citron's open-ended works ambitiously attempt to approximate the very process of identity formation itself by requiring a high level of user-engagement with fragmented and multi-layered narratives, inviting us to think about the future of experimental, identity-based, interactive storytelling.

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<sup>289</sup> Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*, 148.



#### 4.1 Feminism(s) and Food

Feminists have long had a fraught, complex relationship with the subject of food. The gendered hierarchy that feminists, by definition, seek to dismantle is epitomized in food practices, inscribed as they are with highly gendered patterns of production and consumption where men are categorized as “eaters” whose voracious appetites (for more than just food) must be satisfied, while women are “feeders” who themselves should consume little and demand less. One of the key battlegrounds of the Women’s Liberation Movement, the kitchen was framed by activists as a literal and metaphorical prison that upheld and maintained oppressive normative gender roles. While men were entitled to public lives outside the home, they argued, women had long been confined to domestic duties and spaces, performing the unpaid labour of feeding, nurturing, and cleaning up after the American family.<sup>290</sup> To make matters worse, unrealistic standards of beauty had contributed to the policing of women’s relationship to food and to their own bodies, leading to an epidemic of disordered eating. If cooking (and eating) food was a crucial part of women’s oppression, then it followed in the Movement’s rhetoric that women’s *liberation* required freedom from the kitchen—freedom from having to prepare, to think about, or even to discuss food.<sup>291</sup> This translated among feminists and feminist scholars to a reticence towards—if not an outright disavowal of—food scholarship by or about women, to the point that “[d]oing food scholarship has often meant further marginalizing oneself from academic and/or feminist communities that did not value food as an object of research.”<sup>292</sup> This stigma against food as a worthy topic of feminist scholarship lasted in large part until the late 1980s and early 1990s, when a new generation of scholars recognized its importance to contemporary explorations of identity politics.

Feminist artists, on the other hand, rather than shying away from the topic, sought to use motifs of food in their work to raise consciousness among women about the many possible intersections of “the personal” and “the political” in everyday life. Moving beyond simple associations of food with the eroticism of the female body—though never quite relinquishing that legacy—some feminist art of the 1970s positioned the kitchen and the dinner party as

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<sup>290</sup> Avakian, *Through the Kitchen Window: Women Explore the Intimate Meanings of Food and Cooking*, 9; Cairns and Johnston, *Food and Femininity*, 6.

<sup>291</sup> Avakian, *Through the Kitchen Window: Women Explore the Intimate Meanings of Food and Cooking*, 5.

<sup>292</sup> Brady et al., “Filling Our Plate: A Spotlight on Feminist Food Studies,” 4.



metonymic signifiers of the oppression faced by women. Indeed, much of the most notorious moving image and performance art of the Women's Liberation era protested the gendered nature of domestic labour and expressed women's frustrations with their prescribed roles in Western society. Martha Rosler's *Semiotics of the Kitchen* (1975) and Chantal Akerman's *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai de Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975) exemplify the best of such work from both sides of the Atlantic. Although they were released the same year and despite their shared critique of compulsory domestic labour, however, Rosler's infamous performance art video and Akerman's marathon of a feature film take strikingly different, almost inverse, approaches to the topic, thus hinting at the incredible diversity of feminist kitchen critique.

*Semiotics of the Kitchen* offers a pointed yet humorous critique of traditional gender roles, namely women's confinement to the kitchen and the barely concealed rage that many felt in response to a life sentence of unpaid, often unappreciated domestic labour. Rosler, a highly-trained visual and performance artist who had just completed her MFA at UC-San Diego, deliberately chose to use an inexpensive black-and-white video camera—a tool whose ease of use and affordability has patronizingly associated it with housewives and home video—and to capture her performance as simply and unobtrusively as possible using a single, unedited take and a fixed camera. In a tightly framed shot of a small kitchen reminiscent of the sets of popular cooking shows like Julia Child's *The French Chef*,<sup>293</sup> Rosler mimics the cooking show's didactic, direct address, staring directly into the camera and reciting an alphabet of kitchen utensils ("apron, bowl, chopper, dish, egg-beater, fork..."). In contrast to the artist's mock serious, completely deadpan delivery



Fig. 4.1-3 *Semiotics of the Kitchen* (Rosler, 1975)

<sup>293</sup> Kirby, *Martha Rosler - Semiotics of the Kitchen - West Coast Video Art - MOCAtv*.



of her lines, the accompanying gestures she performs are strange and aggressive, even violent, as when she pantomimes stabbing motions with a fork and, later, an ice pick, menacingly snaps a hamburger press, or demonstrates the use of a nut-cracker with comic ferocity. In this, Rosler's performance perhaps draws closer to a parody of another domestic genre geared towards housewives—the late-night infomercial, with its amateur actors and over-the-top demonstrations<sup>294</sup>—and it even calls to mind the eccentricities and D.I.Y. aesthetic of public-access television. Despite its humorous effect, Rosler's performance captures the exasperation and rage felt—and finally acknowledged publicly and in growing numbers—by women of the era. Though *Semiotics* is not traditionally autobiographical, Rosler's performance and her investment in its theme (which she continues to explore in other work including *A Budding Gourmet* (1974), *The East is Red, The West is Bending* (1975), the “postcard novels” collected in *Service: A Trilogy on Colonization* (1976-1978),<sup>295</sup> and beyond) nevertheless make it a deeply personal tape. In contrast to the apolitical, male-dominated Structural/Materialist experimental film movement of the moment, whose obsessions with logic and structure are exemplified by Hollis Frampton's *Zorns Lemma* (1970)—a film whose alphabetical framing device is, not coincidentally, parodied in *Semiotics of the Kitchen*—Rosler's embodied performance emphasizes how political, emotional, and absolutely personal the stakes are for feminists fighting against entrenched patriarchal discourses about gender and domestic labour.

Living in New York in the 1970s, Belgian filmmaker Chantal Akerman was also exposed to the work of East Coast structural filmmakers like Michael Snow, who she credits for opening her mind to “the relationship between film and [one's] body” and to “time as the most important thing in film”—two major insights that would contribute to the production in 1975 of what is arguably the most infamous feminist film of the twentieth century: *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai de Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles*.<sup>296</sup> Although Akerman's film is, like *Semiotics of the Kitchen*, a critique of women's domestic oppression, the two works take vastly different approaches to the task: if in *Semiotics of the Kitchen* Rosler tempers the aggression of her performance and the seriousness of its topic with humour and satire, Akerman offers no such escape, humorous or

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<sup>294</sup> Kirby.

<sup>295</sup> In this fascinating, lesser-known work, Rosler reveals herself to be an artist who is not just interested in the plight of the white, middle-class housewife, but who in fact is also engaged in complex considerations of the intersecting experiences of gender, class, and race. Each of the three “postcard novels” examines a woman's experience of cooking from three very different class and racial/ethnic perspectives.

<sup>296</sup> Kinder, “Reflections on ‘Jeanne Dielman,’” 2.



otherwise, from the tedium of the domestic life of her protagonist. Over the course of 201 minutes, *Jeanne Dielman* depicts three days in the life of the widowed housewife as she goes



**Fig. 4.4-6** Jeanne (Seyrig) works in the kitchen in (close to) real time. *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai de Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (Akerman, 1975)

about her daily shopping, cooking, cleaning, caring for her teenage son, babysitting for a neighbor, and—because she has taken to prostitution to maintain her lifestyle after the death of her husband—sexually satisfying middle-aged men. Whereas the mere act of donning an apron or presenting a ladle to the camera sparks an open expression of the hostility and resentments engendered in Rosler's housewife by her domestic chores, Jeanne (Delphine Seyrig) betrays no emotion, stoically going about her housework until the film's shocking climax.

The tedium of the housework with which women have historically been burdened is cleverly rendered here in real-time: we watch Jeanne peel a pile of potatoes, for example, until the job is completed approximately fifteen minutes later. Akerman foregoes the traditional jump cuts or ellipses through which women's labour has long been erased from cinema and television screens, where beautiful housewives are rarely depicted performing the decidedly unglamorous work of cleaning the bathroom or making meatloaf. In opposition to this conventional erasure,

Akerman's depictions of Jeanne's chores are a brilliant study in authenticity and duration. Like Rosler, she uses a static camera and minimal cuts in a way that powerfully conveys the stagnant,



often claustrophobic life of the housewife. She similarly includes minimal dialogue, no music, no zooms or tilts, indeed *no* distractions, formal or otherwise, from the quotidian routine of the film's protagonist. This austere minimalism and Akerman's decision to render her protagonist's work in real-time is radical in its invitation to meditate on the housewife's actions with a singular focus. By enabling an intimate familiarity with Jeanne's physical presence and her movements, Akerman's approach makes "empathy... virtually unavoidable."<sup>297</sup> We have, moreover, become so attuned to the precision of her routine that even the most minor anomaly attracts attention. We are primed, in other words, to quickly notice when things start to break down, as when a client overstays his appointment and sets off a chain reaction of consequences in Jeanne's highly regulated life, as domestic "perfection" and the cultivated façade of normalcy begin to break down. Although Jeanne initially seems to maintain some semblance of her usual poise—unlike Rosler's unhinged performance in *Semiotics of the Kitchen*—her disintegration culminates in a violent murder appropriately committed with sewing scissors. Jeanne fatally enacts the tabooed, liberatory revenge to which *Semiotics* only jokingly refers. Ultimately, both *Jeanne Dielman* and *Semiotics of the Kitchen* express dominant Western feminist attitudes towards imposed domestic labour and the mental anguish it can cause. They are at once cathartic expressions of rage and warnings to the patriarchal system that seeks to confine women to such meaningless roles.

Despite the vocal feminist outcry against domestic oppression, and in spite of the well-known examples of feminist art that, like *Jeanne Dielman* and *Semiotics*, approach the topic of women's relationship to food and cooking with expressions of bitterness or resentment or even rage, this represents only one possible (albeit for a long time the *dominant*) narrative. It would be overly simplistic to presume that all women wanted to—or even *could*—escape from the kitchen or from culinary labour and traditions. The realities of women's relationships to food and cooking are nuanced and highly diverse, shaped by the socioeconomic realities of class or the diverse cultural experiences of women of colour, immigrants, or of LGBTQ+ individuals and any number of other intersecting identities that are implicated in our relationships with food and domesticity. As Arlene Avakian reminds us, "the work of cooking is more complex than mere victimization," and "women have forged spaces within that oppression."<sup>298</sup> Cooking, she notes,

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<sup>297</sup> Loader, "Jeanne Dielman: Death in Installments."

<sup>298</sup> Avakian, *Through the Kitchen Window: Women Explore the Intimate Meanings of Food and Cooking*, 6.



“is also an activity that can be a creative part of our daily lives,” an activity that can become “a vehicle for artistic expression, a source of sensual pleasure, an opportunity for resistance and even power.”<sup>299</sup> However, because the dominant narrative of the Women’s Movement equated cooking unequivocally with patriarchal oppression and thus seemed to sanction only one possible response—what I call “kitchen liberationism”—feminist explorations of the creative possibilities, or the nostalgic comfort, or the maintenance of cultural and familial ties enabled by food, while they did exist, were less common.

The taboo against feminist engagement with food as an object of inquiry finally began to shift in the 1990s and early 2000s as feminist analyses of foodways began surfacing in ever greater numbers and “food studies” became a sanctioned academic discipline, bringing together disparate fields from anthropology and sociology to economics, gender and ethnic studies, and literature.<sup>300</sup> Early gastrographies were recognized and reevaluated in this new context, and food memoir began to gain popularity as a sanctioned form of life writing. Feminist historians such as Janet Theophano began mining seventeenth- and eighteenth-century handwritten “receipt [recipe] books” for their insight into the little-documented lives of ordinary women,<sup>301</sup> while collections of short, culturally diverse gastrographies<sup>302</sup> began to be published in increasing numbers and extended cookbook-life narrative hybrids like Diana Abu-Jaber’s *The Language of Baklava: A Memoir* (2006) and Judith Newton’s *Tasting Home: Coming of Age in the Kitchen* (2013) found major publishers and enjoyed wide distribution and popular and critical acclaim. The decades-long reticence of scholars to engage with the topics of food, cooking, and eating began to fall away, and new, diverse voices and narratives began to emerge from obscurity.

## 4.2 Literary Gastrography

The term “gastrography,” originally coined by Rosalia Baena<sup>303</sup> and later adopted by Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson in their comprehensive study of life writing,<sup>304</sup> refers to a diverse mode of autobiographical writing. Alternately called cookbook memoirs, food memoirs,

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<sup>299</sup> Avakian, 6.

<sup>300</sup> Avakian, “Cooking Up Lives: Feminist Food Memoirs,” 277.

<sup>301</sup> Theophano, *Eat My Words: Reading Women’s Lives through the Cookbooks They Wrote*.

<sup>302</sup> See for example Avakian, *Through the Kitchen Window: Women Explore the Intimate Meanings of Food and Cooking*.

<sup>303</sup> Baena, “Gastro-Graphy: Food as Metaphor in Fred Wah’s *Diamond Grill* and Austin Clarke’s *Pig Tails ‘n Breadfruit*.”

<sup>304</sup> Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*, 148–50.



memoirs with recipes, or culinary memoirs these works connect narratives of identity to the production and/or consumption of food. The “sensory and affective qualities of food provide mnemonic mechanisms” that translate to especially potent memories,<sup>305</sup> and—as anyone with a basic familiarity with Proust can affirm—food-based recollections are a popular device in literary memoir. While gastrography does harness the power of food memories, it also undertakes complex explorations of the individual’s material and symbolic relationship to food, cooking, and eating within the larger contexts of class, gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, and other intersecting markers of identity. As such, the gastrography can be read as an autoethnographic form. Many gastrographies weave recipes—themselves a discursive form recently reframed by feminist scholars as “important documents of women’s lives”<sup>306</sup>—into their stories, thus engaging in auto-archival (re-)production by sharing and recontextualizing meaningful artefacts from the author’s cultural and/or familial past. Ultimately, the genre of the gastrography offers a compelling opportunity to examine the intersection of autoethnographic and auto-archival production, synthesizing the discoveries and conclusions of the previous two chapters of this dissertation.

Although domestic genres like the cookbook have historically been written off as culturally unimportant or relegated to “minor” traditions, feminist scholarship has in recent decades sought to rehabilitate such artefacts. Lynne Ireland (1981), for example, made an early case for reading cookbooks as *collective autobiographies*, citing their ability to narrate social, ethnic, or religious elements of a group’s identity,<sup>307</sup> and Theophano (2002) similarly discusses cookbooks as important historical and autobiographical documents whose “intimate stories reveal individual women telling their own life stories, their versions of their communities, and the visions they have of society and culture.”<sup>308</sup> Susan Leonardi focuses her work even more narrowly on the recipe itself, emphasizing the “gendered nature” of the recipe’s unique form of narrative which, bound to domestic—that is, traditionally “feminine”—spheres, remain antithetical to what are conceived of as traditionally “masculine” forms of auto/biographical and historical narrative.<sup>309</sup> Like feminist historiography more generally, cookbooks have been

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<sup>305</sup> Abarca and Colby, “Food Memories Seasoning the Narratives of Our Lives,” 4.

<sup>306</sup> Avakian, “Cooking Up Lives: Feminist Food Memoirs,” 1.

<sup>307</sup> Ireland, “The Compiled Cookbook as Foodways Autobiography.”

<sup>308</sup> Theophano, *Eat My Words: Reading Women’s Lives through the Cookbooks They Wrote*, 3.

<sup>309</sup> Leonardi, “Recipes for Reading: Pasta Salad, Lobster à La Riseholme, Key Lime Pie.”



celebrated for their ability to “tell an alternative narrative about the world of women in the past through an alternative narrative form.”<sup>310</sup>

In cookbook *memoirs*, then, these connections between food, self, and culture are made all the more explicit. What unites the authors of gastrographies across all manner of racial, ethnic, sexual, and socioeconomic divides is the extent to which “cooking and eating are critical to their understanding of their lives.”<sup>311</sup> Food in the gastrography can be invoked as memory or as metaphor,<sup>312</sup> but it is perhaps most literally invoked as material practice in the form of the recipe, which invites the reader to actually taste the flavours of the author’s childhood, to physically execute the labour performed by a community of cooking women, past and present, and thus, as Smith and Watson suggest, to “*enac[t] the life chronicled*”—a truly radical possibility.<sup>313</sup> The genre illuminates the importance of maintaining familial and cultural history and culinary traditions while also creating a space where recipes and rituals might be shared across national, cultural, or socioeconomic divides, even transformed and updated to reflect a diversity of multi-hyphenated identities. The gastrography literalizes Carrie Helms Tippen’s poetic suggestion that “*the story of a time and place could just as easily be told through the chronology of a meal*” in a given cookbook “as it could through the chronology of public events.”<sup>314</sup> A single evocative recipe might be used to signify an important event or phase in the life of its author, the complex unfolding of identity mirrored in its many numbered steps.<sup>315</sup>

Although the origins of the food memoir have been attributed to different sources by different scholars,<sup>316</sup> *The Alice B. Toklas Cook Book* (1954) is, to my mind, the ur-text of the genre of gastrography, and it has (perhaps surprisingly, given its modernist roots, unconventional

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<sup>310</sup> Tippen, “History and Memory: Arguing for Authenticity in the Stories of Brunswick Stew.”

<sup>311</sup> Avakian, “Cooking Up Lives: Feminist Food Memoirs,” 280.

<sup>312</sup> Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*, 149.

<sup>313</sup> Smith and Watson, 148–49.

<sup>314</sup> Tippen, “History and Memory: Arguing for Authenticity in the Stories of Brunswick Stew,” 17, my emphasis.

<sup>315</sup> To take but one example of this practice, Judith Newton’s gastrography, *Tasting Home: Coming of Age in the Kitchen* (2013), is organized according to decade, with each decade represented by a corresponding cookbook. For example, “The Sixties” are represented by Julia Child’s *Mastering the Art of French Cooking* (1961), and recipes like Child’s “Petits Pois Frais à la Française” accompany stories about falling in love while in graduate school at Berkeley. “The Seventies” are represented by *Time-Life: Foods of the World* series, “The Eighties” by Mollie Katzen’s *Moosewood Cookbook* (1977), and so on.

<sup>316</sup> Smith and Watson argue that “food has been a subject of narrative for as long as there have been cookbooks and eating diaries” (*Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*, 149). Arlene Avakian, on the other hand, dates the emergence of the genre more precisely, pointing to Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin’s *The Physiology of Taste: Or Meditations on Transcendent Gastronomy* (1825) as the start of the genre of gastronomic writing (“Cooking Up Lives: Feminist Food Memoirs,” 277).



style, and relative obscurity of its author) become one of the best-selling “cookbooks” of all time. By the time she wrote her *Cook Book*, Toklas (1877-1967)—the life partner of Gertrude Stein—had already been immortalized in Stein’s modernist masterpiece, *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (1933), a complex work that might be described as Stein’s autobiography masquerading as a biography of Stein through the eyes of her lover (Toklas), itself posing as Toklas’s own autobiography. Curiously, Toklas apparently did seem to consider Stein’s masterpiece her own definitive “auto”/biography, responding to publisher Simon Michael Bessie’s suggestion that she write a memoir of her own by insisting “Oh, I couldn’t do that... Gertrude did my autobiography and it’s done.”<sup>317</sup> What she *could* do, she told Bessie, is write a cookbook, which “would, of course, be full of memories.” Where writing was Stein’s domain in the partnership, Toklas presided over the kitchen and other domestic affairs and, it turns out, she amassed an impressive archive of recipes over the course of her lifetime. If Stein’s language was that of literary modernism—a repetitive, playful, heady, and deeply idiosyncratic stream-of-consciousness style—Toklas communicated through the embodied language of culinary delights.<sup>318</sup>

Written eight years after Stein’s death, *The Alice B. Toklas Cook Book* was Toklas’s chance to finally (if reluctantly) recount her *own* version of her adventures with her (in)famous lover. In Toklas’s narrative, excursions made by the couple out of Paris—first in their old Model

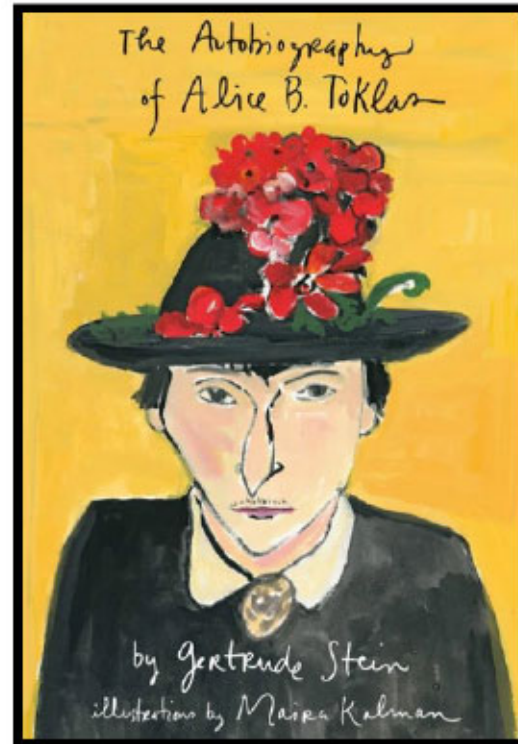


Fig. 4.7 *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (Stein, 1933/ 2020), illustration by Maira Kalman

<sup>317</sup> Bessie, “A Happy Publisher’s Note to the 1984 Edition,” vii.

<sup>318</sup> Actually, Toklas’s literal writing style is remarkably similar to that of Stein-as-Toklas in *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*. However, whether Stein perfectly captures Toklas’s patterns of speech, or Toklas has incorporated—consciously or not—Stein’s literary mannerisms, or (perhaps most likely) their two styles, personalities and individual selves had so completely merged over the course of their lifetime together that they had become more or less inextricable, is difficult to know. These are questions Anna Linzie attempts to answer in *The True Story of Alice B. Toklas: A Study of Three Autobiographies*.



The Red Cross Ambulance, dubbed “Aunt Pauline,” and later in a slick imported Ford they named “Godiva”—invariably revolve around food or, at the very least, conclude with a memorable meal. Indeed, Toklas focuses above all on the food the couple shared, whether in well-known restaurants or small village *bistros*, in military barracks or the homes of renowned artists. Many meals, too, of course, are shared in their own home, which also served as a famous literary *salon*.

The massive collection of recipes on which Toklas has drawn to write her *Cook Book* suggests how an examination of the genre of gastrography might also be a study in idiosyncratic auto-archival practices. Toklas began her collection as a young girl, asking her family’s cook and

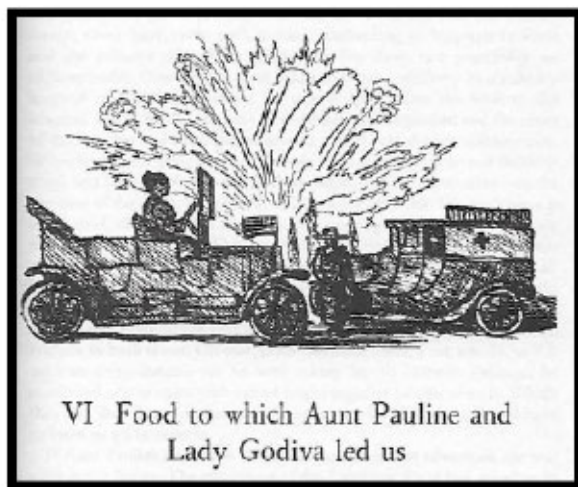


Fig. 4.8 *The Alice B. Toklas Cook Book* (1954, p.55)

her childhood friends for their recipes, and this practice continued for the rest of her life. Ironically, Toklas herself rarely cooked, but she nevertheless amassed recipes from the many domestic servants she and Stein hired to cook for them (there is an entire chapter dedicated to “Servants in France”), from chefs at restaurants she enjoyed (“Food to which Aunt Pauline and Lady Godiva led us”), from her fabulous international group of friends—writers, artists, nobility, and bohemians of all stripes—(“Recipes from Friends”), and all

manner of other sources, all stored in a cardboard box that somehow miraculously survived the German occupation. This collection, however, represents more than a library of culinary instruction or tokens of epicurean delights of days past—though it was those things, too. Rather, for Toklas each recipe signified an entire world, functioning as a mnemonic representation of a precise moment in time, enabling her to recall not just who she was with but their moods, the gossip they shared, and their dietary preferences, not just where she was but how she got there, what the weather was like, how close she was to the front lines of the current war, and the temperament of her vehicle. Toklas, in other words, delivered on her humble proposal to “write a cookbook that would, of course, be full of memories” and then some, exemplifying both the cultural and historical importance of women’s personal archives and the profound power of food to elicit memory.



Though it was certainly not the first memoir to discuss food or the first collection of recipes to include autobiographical storytelling, *The Alice B. Toklas Cook Book* does seem to have set the mold that would be followed by female gastrographers to come. Her stories of the important people, places, and events in her life are seamlessly woven together with the recipes she shares, and it is all written in her own idiosyncratic voice rather than the traditional cookbook's precise but lifeless prose, giving us a good taste of the gusto, the humor, and the sharp wit with which Toklas approached food, friends, and life alike. The recipes, too, offer the reader a glimpse into Toklas's personality and the whimsy and irreverence she applied to dinner parties with her famous friends, as exemplified in dishes like the playfully and very colourfully decorated "Bass for Picasso" ("Picasso exclaimed at its beauty. But, said he, should it not rather have been made in honour of Matisse than of me. Picasso was for many years on a strict diet")<sup>319</sup>; "Oefs Francis Picabia" ("The only painter who ever gave me a recipe was Francis Picabia and... it merits the name of its creator"; the eggs, when combined "in a saucepan—yes, a saucepan, no, not a frying pan," with "½ lb. butter—not a speck less, rather more if you can bring yourself to it... produce a suave consistency that perhaps only *gourmets* will appreciate")<sup>320</sup>; and of course the book's infamous "Haschich Fudge (*which anyone could whip up on a rainy day*)" (described as "the food of Paradise—of Baudelaire's Artificial Paradises: it might provide an entertaining refreshment for a Ladies' Bridge Club or a chapter meeting of the DAR... Euphoria and brilliant storms of laughter, ecstatic reveries and extensions of one's personality on several simultaneous planes are to be complacently expected").<sup>321</sup>

Although in many ways incredibly unconventional, however, *The Alice B. Toklas Cook Book* does also reflect its time. For example, while the *Cook Book* is primarily filled with stories about the author's life with Gertrude Stein, who is everywhere present, Toklas never elucidates the nature of their relationship in her book, never, in fact, makes explicit reference to gender or sexual politics of any kind. *The Alice B. Toklas Cook Book*, then, is the prototypical gastrography in its form, its style, and its function, but it lacks the powerful use of cultural critique and the explorations of identity politics that would come to define later texts. Just sixteen years later, another text would be published by a radically different kind of author—young, black,

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<sup>319</sup> Toklas, *The Alice B. Toklas Cook Book*, 29–30.

<sup>320</sup> Toklas, 30.

<sup>321</sup> Toklas, 259.



(metaphorically) hungry, and unabashedly political—that would draw on Toklas’s example while pioneering a revolutionary new direction for the genre.

#### **4.3 *Vibration Cooking or, the Travel Notes of a Geechee Girl***

In 1970 a young Gullah-Geechee woman from South Carolina published her own groundbreaking experiment in the genre of gastrography, interweaving auto/biographical storytelling and recipes. Entitled *Vibration Cooking or, The Travel Notes of a Geechee Girl*, Vertamae Smart-Grosvenor’s exuberant, hilarious ode to “poor” Southern food and French cuisine, family dinners and dinner parties borrows its hybrid form and blended approach to food writing and life writing from the cookbook memoir of fellow expat bohemian Alice B. Toklas.<sup>322</sup> However, in the spirit of adapting recipes and cooking by “vibration” (“Different strokes for different folks,” she says in the book’s opening pages, “Do your thing your way”),<sup>323</sup> Smart-Grosvenor adds her own special ingredients—a potent distillation of her views on race, class, and gender; a dollop of radical politics; a dash of her signature humour—to Toklas’s already robust blend of personal narrative and recipe.

Smart-Grosvenor contrasts stories about the pleasures of eating traditional food with her family in the South Carolina Lowcountry with stories about negotiating race in Philadelphia as a child and later in Paris, where she moved in 1959 at the age of nineteen to be among bohemian artists and radical intellectuals. Travelling across both Europe and the United States to pursue her dream of acting, Smart-Grosvenor found work as a dancer, as a cook known as “Obedella” at “Pee Wee’s Slave Trade Kitchen,”<sup>324</sup> and even as a costume designer and back-up singer for Sun Ra’s Solar-Myth Arkestra, and she regales us with tales about the eccentric friends she made on the road and the equally eccentric family back home in “Fairfax, Allendale County, South Carolina.”<sup>325</sup>

Food was an important, comforting presence throughout it all, providing a sense of

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<sup>322</sup> Though she does not acknowledge the influence directly in *Vibration Cooking*, Smart-Grosvenor does allude to the fact that her first apartment in Paris was a shared “room on Rue de Fleurus... down the street from Gertrude Stein’s house” (55, my emphasis). Furthermore, she did explicitly note in a 1971 interview in *Ebony* magazine that she used *The Alice B. Toklas Cook Book* as a model.

<sup>323</sup> Smart-Grosvenor, *Vibration Cooking or, The Travel Notes of a Geechee Girl*, xxxvii.

<sup>324</sup> Smart-Grosvenor, 89.

<sup>325</sup> Smart-Grosvenor, 3.



home during Smart-Grosvenor’s travels and providing her with the uncanny ability to find and/or create community wherever she happened to be. It taught her about shame and about pride—both in her heritage and her own abilities—and these are the lessons she shares in her gastrography. Like *The Alice B. Toklas Cook Book*, *Vibration Cooking* was ahead of its time,<sup>326</sup> and it offers an excellent example of the potential of the food memoir to blend personal storytelling with ethnographic observations, radical politics, and cultural critique. *Vibration Cooking* beautifully exemplifies the significance of our stories about-, memories of-, and relationships to food, opening a window onto its author’s inner life while also shedding light on her cultural identity, her relationships to family and community, complex social issues of gender, race and class, and more. Endorsing neither the (white) feminist rhetoric of kitchen liberationism nor conservative efforts to maintain traditional gender roles by keeping women confined to the home, Smart-Grosvenor carves her own rebellious path in *Vibration Cooking* with a spirited demonstration of the many ways cooking, feeding, and eating can in themselves be radical acts.

How and what people eat is influenced by intersecting markers of identity—from race and ethnicity to religion, gender and class—shaped by family legacy, and imbued with (collective) history and (personal) memory. A self-proclaimed “Geechee Girl,” Vertamae Smart-Grosvenor is descended from West African captives who survived the middle passage and were enslaved along a stretch of Atlantic coast from Wilmington, North Carolina to Jacksonville, Florida—a region designated the “Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor” by Congress in 2006.<sup>327</sup> Because they remained relatively isolated in rural coastal areas and on sea islands, the

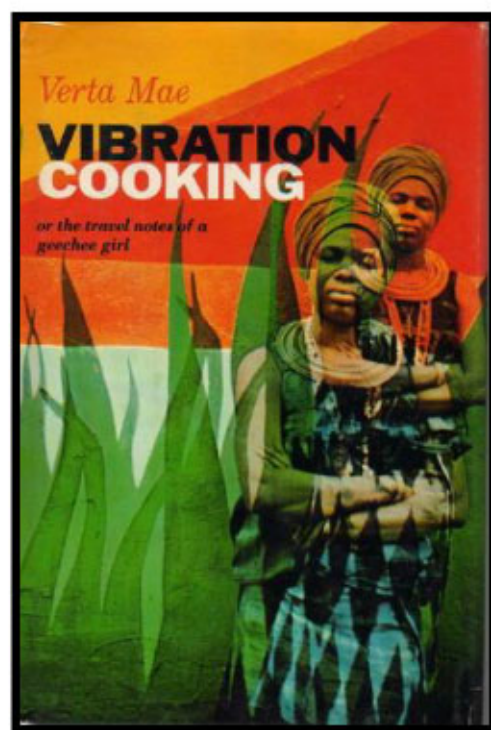


Fig. 4.9 *Vibration Cooking* (Smart-Grosvenor, 1970) Cover, First Edition

<sup>326</sup> The literary genre Toklas and Smart-Grosvenor helped spark would not truly take off until the 1990s and early 2000s

<sup>327</sup> As of July 2000, the Gullah/Geechee are officially recognized internationally as Gullah/Geechee Nation. See <https://gullahgeecheenation.com/> and <https://gullahgeecheecorridor.org/>



Gullah Geechee people were better able than the enslaved populations scattered elsewhere around America to maintain the linguistic and culinary traditions they brought with them across the Atlantic, and thus to preserve important symbolic ties with the homeland from which they were violently taken. Although food was often used as a weapon of oppression by slave-holders to “punish and torture” (whether by withholding rations from or, conversely, force-feeding captives) it was also—for many slaves, but especially for the Gullah Geechee—an agent of resistance: “foodways brought from Africa,” Jennifer Brown argues, “helped forge humanity in the midst of the greatest inhumanity,” becoming a “source of strength, memory, and identity,” of “power and pride,” and of “community [and] dignity” for those “denied their liberty and all its attendant graces.”<sup>328</sup> As such, traditional foodways were—and continue to be—fiercely protected and maintained.

Many of the recipes in *Vibration Cooking* are thus directly linked to ancestral and cultural heritage, and Smart-Grosvenor makes an important historical intervention in her gastrography by introducing the culture and history of the Gullah Geechee people to a wider American audience. Many of the ingredients and techniques with which Smart-Grosvenor cooks have their origins in the African foodways that crossed the Atlantic with the author’s enslaved ancestors. West African farmers, who had a long history of cultivating rice, were specifically targeted by slavers and forced to work the marshy land of the American coastal South, their knowledge of the grain harnessed by plantation owners who quickly grew rich on the success of their new crop.<sup>329</sup> The opening lines of *Vibration Cooking*—“And speaking of rice”—immediately convey the importance that the grain continues to have in the lives of Gullah Geechee people. “I was sixteen years old,” Smart-Grosvenor continues, “before I knew that everyone didn’t eat rice everyday. Us being Geechees, we had rice everyday.”<sup>330</sup> In this way, the author simultaneously begins telling the story of her own life *and* teaching her reader about Gullah Geechee culture and history. To do so, she takes advantage of the genre(s) (cookbook, memoir, travelogue) most readily accessible to minority women, who have historically been much less likely to have their writing published in “serious” genres like History or Autobiography and whose stories have all too often been omitted from traditional cultural and historical narratives.<sup>331</sup> As Sherrie A. Inness

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<sup>328</sup> Brown, “Remembrances of Freedoms Past: Foodways in Slave Narratives,” 160–62.

<sup>329</sup> Carney, *Black Rice: The African Origins of Rice Cultivation in the Americas*.

<sup>330</sup> Smart-Grosvenor, *Vibration Cooking or, The Travel Notes of a Geechee Girl*, 1.

<sup>331</sup> Inness, *Secret Ingredients: Race, Gender, and Class at the Dinner Table*.



observes, “ethnic cooking literature allowed alternate voices and cultures to be heard in the United States”—even those “that question the dominant white American ethos”—thanks in large part to the democratic nature of cookbooks, which are easily written and can be cheaply published, and which are used by people of all races, ethnicities, and socioeconomic classes.<sup>332</sup>

If most of the recipes in *Vibration Cooking* are mnemonic signifiers for Smart-Grosvenor’s cultural heritage and identity, many are also connected by the author to individual family members and friends (as well as family members of friends and friends of family members), much as they are in *The Alice B. Toklas Cook Book*. Eponymously labeled dishes like “Aunt Virter’s Fried Liver and Onions”<sup>333</sup> or “Eddie’s Mama’s Pig’s Feet”<sup>334</sup> are always accompanied by a story or two about the namesake and/or the occasion for which the dish was cooked, flavouring—before even the first bite!—our perception of a dish with which we might not otherwise be familiar, while simultaneously painting an auto/biographical portrait of the author’s colourful, tight knit community of passionate and creative cooks and other characters. Family tradition, food, and memory are thus all inseparably intertwined in *Vibration Cooking*, much as they are in life.

In this sense, it is possible to read the gastrography as a collection that preserves for future generations (including, in this case, the author’s two daughters) what has historically been orally-transmitted knowledge, thus *creating* auto-archival documentation, in Smart-Grosvenor’s case, *of and for* her family, her Gullah Geechee and nomadic bohemian artist communities, and herself. She ensures the survival of her Gullah-Geechee cultural heritage and culinary traditions, while simultaneously inviting cultural “outsiders” to learn about and celebrate this little known but vibrant community. Her preservation on the page of knowledge that is typically orally transmitted puts Smart-Grosvenor in league with other (auto-)ethnographers like Leslie Marmon Silko and Zora Neale Hurston who, as discussed in Chapter 2, have themselves adapted vulnerable oral storytelling traditions, myths, and folktales to the page.

*Vibration Cooking* was published at a time when racial tensions were extremely high in America. Five years earlier, the publication of another important memoir, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (1965) was followed closely by the assassination of its controversial author, helping

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<sup>332</sup> Inness, 40–41.

<sup>333</sup> Smart-Grosvenor, *Vibration Cooking or, The Travel Notes of a Geechee Girl*, 10.

<sup>334</sup> Smart-Grosvenor, 108.



to galvanize the Black Power Movement. The following year, the Black Panther Party was founded by Huey Newton and Bobby Seale, and by 1968 it had roughly 2,000 members and many more sympathizers, among them Vertamae Smart-Grosvenor, who put her culinary talents to work cooking for the Panthers' Free Breakfast program. She was also closely affiliated with the Black Arts Movement (BAM), which favoured the tactics and ideologies of the Black Liberation Struggle and the Nation of Islam and which was closely aligned with the Black Power Movement. Among her close friends and collaborators, Smart-Grosvenor counted BAM founder Imamu Ameer Baraka (aka Amiri Baraka, aka LeRoi Jones) and musician and performer Sun Ra, two artists whose convention-defying, improvisational styles expanded black American artistic traditions in new directions.<sup>335</sup> Her own formal (literary and culinary) experimentation similarly delighted in improvisation and was grounded in a nuanced understanding of and engagement with black identity politics. Her cooking relies on an unpredictable corporeal phenomenon—what she calls “vibration”—rather than reproducible steps or measurements, and she experiments with a loose, vernacular style in her prose. She harnesses her medium(s)—food and, secondarily, the written word—to create politically-engaged work that emphasizes the historical and cultural experiences of the Gullah Geechee in America. Unlike her predecessor, Zora Neale Hurston, Smart-Grosvenor was decidedly *not* writing solely for or to appease a white readership,<sup>336</sup> though her skill at sharing humorous, relatable tales about her life and her ability to de-exoticize African American food certainly had a humanizing effect at this pivotal moment in American history.

Still, *Vibration Cooking* contains frequent pointed critiques of race relations in America and of the systematic erasure of black history and the legacy of slavery from hegemonic discourses of American identity. In the book's original preface, “The Demystification of Food,” Smart-Grosvenor lays out one of the primary theses of *Vibration Cooking* and her motivation for writing the book:

“In reading lots and lots of cookbooks written by white folks, it occurred to me that people very casually say Spanish rice, French fries, Italian spaghetti... And with the exception of black bottom pie and niggertoes, there is no reference to black people's contribution to the culinary arts. White folks act like they invented food and like there is

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<sup>335</sup> Williams-Forson, “Foreword,” xx.

<sup>336</sup> Of course, as I argue in Chapter 2, this legacy is a complex one that Hurston ultimately undermines.



some weird mystique surrounding it—something that only Julia and Jim can get to. There is no mystique. Food is food. Everybody eats!”<sup>337</sup>

With her irreverent reference to American patron saints of (white, high-class) culinary tradition, Julia Child and James Beard,<sup>338</sup> as simply “Julia and Jim” and her reminder that “food is food,” Smart-Grosvenor democratizes the “art”

of cooking in her characteristic nonchalant style. At the same time, she immediately signals her openness to be frank about the topic of race, while giving the reader a taste of the sense of humour on display throughout the book. Discussing which pots to use for optimum “kitchen vibrations,” Smart-Grosvenor simultaneously alludes to ancestral culinary tradition and makes a light-hearted joke about (skin-)colour when she suggests the reader “[t]hrow out all of them except the black ones.

The cast-iron ones like your mother used to use... I only use black pots and brown

earthenware in the kitchen. White enamel is not what’s happening.”<sup>339</sup> Throughout the rest of the gastrography, she blends potent critiques of racial politics in America with funny anecdotes, cultural and family history, and recipes for all manner of delicious fare.

A short chapter entitled “Name-calling”<sup>340</sup> expands upon the concern alluded to in the preface and illustrates Smart-Grosvenor’s modus operandi in the book as a whole. The chapter opens with historical information about African American foodways: “A lot of new foods were brought to this country via the slave trade like watermelons... sesame seeds (sometimes called

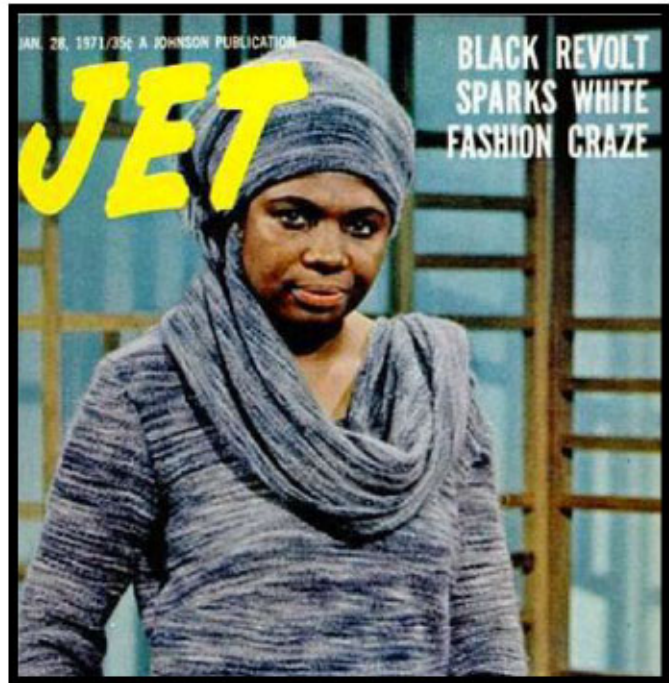


Fig. 4.10 Smart-Grosvenor on the cover of *Jet* magazine, Jan 28, 1971

<sup>337</sup> Smart-Grosvenor, *Vibration Cooking or, The Travel Notes of a Geechee Girl*, xxxvii.

<sup>338</sup> Almost three decades after the publication of *Vibration Cooking*, Smart-Grosvenor would, ironically, be awarded the prestigious James Beard Award for Best Radio Show for her NPR show, *Seasonings* (1996).

<sup>339</sup> Smart-Grosvenor, *Vibration Cooking or, The Travel Notes of a Geechee Girl*, xxxviii.

<sup>340</sup> Smart-Grosvenor, 74–79.



benne seeds), yams, cow peas (black-eyed peas), peanuts and so-called okra” (74). She follows this with a recipe for “So-Called Okra” before seamlessly pivoting to an impassioned denouncement of the racial microaggression of misnaming:

“If you are wondering how come I say so-called okra, it is because the African name of okra isombo. Just like so-called Negroes. We are Africans. Negroes only started when they got here [to the United States]. I am a black woman. I am tired of people calling me out of my name. Okra must be sick of that mess too. So from now on call it like it is. Okra will be referred to in this book asombo. Corn will be called maize and Negroes will be referred to as black people.”<sup>341</sup>

After three more recipes (“A So-Called Okra Gumbo,” “Fried Gombos,” and “Green Maize Mush”) she again shames the practice of offensively mis- or nick-naming cultural “others,” including the Germans (“krauts”), Italians (“guineas”), English (“limeys”) the French (“frogs”), and Native Americans, who taught “Chris Columbus” to make “So-Called ‘Indian’ Pudding” after he “claimed that he discovered the[m]” and “called them out of their name.”<sup>342</sup> Finally, the author’s wicked sense of humor shines through with the inclusion of recipes for “Frogs,” “Roast Guinea” (“did you know that guinea fowls are from Africa?”), “Irish Potato Soup” (“The so-called Irish potato is not Irish at all... Potatoes are native to South America”), and, the intentionally ironic *pièce-de-résistance*, “Cracker Stew.”<sup>343</sup> “Name-Calling” exemplifies Smart-Grosvenor’s acknowledgement throughout *Vibration Cooking* of the fact that everyday foodways—what is eaten or, conversely, not eaten—represent “one of the essential ways humans create social differences,” contributing to the delineation of individual and collective identities by distinguishing between “self” and “other,” “us” and “them.”<sup>344</sup>

Adapting Bourdieu’s (1984) notion of cultural capital, Kathleen LeBesco and Peter Naccarato (2012) theorize what they call “culinary capital,” in which “food and food practices become markers of social status” and legitimacy.<sup>345</sup> Social hierarchies and considerations of good or bad “taste,” in other words, are dictated by compliance with and/or deviation from

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<sup>341</sup> Smart-Grosvenor, 74–75.

<sup>342</sup> Smart-Grosvenor, 75–77.

<sup>343</sup> Smart-Grosvenor, 76–77.

<sup>344</sup> Brown, “Remembrances of Freedoms Past: Foodways in Slave Narratives,” 160; See also Parsons, *Gender, Class and Food: Families, Bodies and Health*, 1.

<sup>345</sup> LeBesco and Naccarato, *Culinary Capital*, 2.



hegemonic (culinary) norms and the sociocultural divisions they create and/or maintain.<sup>346</sup> Smart-Grosvenor is acutely aware of how culinary capital functions in twentieth-century America, and *Vibration Cooking* is filled with examples of how race and class dictate “taste.” She is especially adept at drawing attention to cultural perceptions about “white”-versus-“black” culinary traditions and “poor”-versus-“gourmet” cooking before, ultimately, turning such attitudes on their heads. The implicitly or explicitly “othered” foodways of marginalized groups, comprising what have been deemed undesirable, “inedible,” and taboo ingredients, frequently become the object of (or an excuse for) cultural hostility.<sup>347</sup> Smart-Grosvenor, however, takes pride in her family’s relationship to “poor” food, celebrating their resourcefulness and creativity in turning humble or so-called “undesirable” ingredients—certain varieties of self-procured game, for example—into delicious dishes like “Stewed Coon,”<sup>348</sup> “Betty’s Barbecued Gator Tails,”<sup>349</sup> “Possum and Taters,”<sup>350</sup> or “Fish Head Stew.”<sup>351</sup> Smart-Grosvenor’s “avant-garde”<sup>352</sup> grandmother seems to have been especially enterprising with what are usually considered less desirable cuts of meat, lending her name to such dishes as “Mrs. Estella Smart’s Brains,” “Mrs. Estella Smart’s Liver and Lights [liver and lungs] Stew,” or “Mrs. Estella Smart’s Mountain Oysters” (bull testicles).<sup>353</sup> Although unorthodox or unauthorized foodways typically serve to “reinforce legitimate forms of social, symbolic and cultural capital,” Smart-Grosvenor acknowledges and ultimately *rebels against* such hierarchical thinking, presenting “low-status” foods as delicious, resourceful, and worthy of celebration.<sup>354</sup>

In fact, Smart-Grosvenor attributes the tenacious survival of Black Americans, who “in spite of all the misery and oppression have been able to keep on keeping on,” to their adaptability and, more precisely, to culinary ingenuity.<sup>355</sup> In one wry example, she compares the grit and

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<sup>346</sup> LeBesco and Naccarato, 2; See also Brown, “Remembrances of Freedoms Past: Foodways in Slave Narratives,” 160; and Douglas, *Implicit Meanings: Collected Essays in Anthropology*, 231.

<sup>347</sup> Parsons, *Gender, Class and Food: Families, Bodies and Health*, 9.

<sup>348</sup> Smart-Grosvenor, *Vibration Cooking or, The Travel Notes of a Geechee Girl*, 5.

<sup>349</sup> A note accompanying the recipe for “Betty’s Barbecued Gator Tails” off-handedly cautions the reader that “Gator tails are not to be confused with... Gators which are \$125 shoes made of gator skins,” thus playfully juxtaposing a dish that exemplifies the resourcefulness of lower-class black cooks of the era with the laughably unaffordable luxury shoe, an “exotic” status symbol decisively out of reach for individuals of Smart-Grosvenor’s socioeconomic class (8).

<sup>350</sup> Smart-Grosvenor, 22.

<sup>351</sup> Smart-Grosvenor, 38.

<sup>352</sup> Smart-Grosvenor, 11.

<sup>353</sup> Smart-Grosvenor, 13–14.

<sup>354</sup> Parsons, *Gender, Class and Food: Families, Bodies and Health*, 9.

<sup>355</sup> Smart-Grosvenor, *Vibration Cooking or, The Travel Notes of a Geechee Girl*, 20.



determination of her beloved Aunt Rose—who “always had a pot on the stove” despite living in “a dump” where “[h]er ‘kitchen’ was a former closet” and where “[c]ooking... good meals... would be way beyond the capacity of most women”<sup>356</sup>—to the dramatic, even suicidal responses of “white folks” who lost their fortunes in the Great Depression, observing half-jokingly that “[i]f they had known about neck bones and dry peas they might have realized that they could survive.”<sup>357</sup> These ingredients are not, by hegemonic white American standards, part of “legitimate class [and race] based... foodways”; in other words, they “lack high cultural capital,”<sup>358</sup> and Smart-Grosvenor’s wry implication is that the “poor taste” signified by the consumption of such foods and their association with an especially marginalized racial, regional, and class background, rendered them “inedible” to a mainstream American society at its hungriest. Meanwhile, the book provides numerous illustrations of how, drawing on the examples set by their families and ancestors, she and her friends survived—thived, even—in the leanest of times, and Smart-Grosvenor connects creative culinary problem solving with tenacity in *all* aspects of life.

Smart-Grosvenor is also highly cognizant of the ways “othered” foodways can be co-opted, becoming the object of imperialist culinary tourism—a means, to borrow a phrase from bell hooks, of “eating the Other”<sup>359</sup>—and culinary appropriation, as tastes shift and evolve. She observes, for example, that Terrapins “[a]in’t nothing but swamp turtles,” once “[s]o plentiful that plantation owners gave them to their slaves,” they are now “the rare discovery of so-called gore-mays.”<sup>360</sup> On the topic of chitterlings (intestines), which she says “[p]eople think... is something only the southern nigras eats,” Smart-Grosvenor tells a story about eating in a “fancy restaurant in Paris” where

“the people [I was with] said, ‘Let us order, we know this place.’ You know the type...

So these people order for me and they are just on pins and needles, dying, really dying for

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<sup>356</sup> Smart-Grosvenor herself “never lived in a place that had a decent oven” (18), having even occupied rooms in which cooking was forbidden. To compensate, she learned “the high art of cooking [three-course meals!] on an alcohol burner” (55) among other creative solutions to problems presented by financial insecurity.

<sup>357</sup> Smart-Grosvenor, *Vibration Cooking or, The Travel Notes of a Geechee Girl*, 20.

<sup>358</sup> Parsons, *Gender, Class and Food: Families, Bodies and Health*, 9.

<sup>359</sup> hooks, “Eating the Other: Desire and Resistance”; See also Mookerjee, “The Taste of Desire, The Trauma of Hunger: Black Female Edibility,” 94.

<sup>360</sup> Smart-Grosvenor, *Vibration Cooking or, The Travel Notes of a Geechee Girl*, 41.



me to taste this enjoyable rare dish. Well thank you Jesus the food arrives and it ain't nothing but CHITTERLINGS in the form of a sausage. They call it *andouillette*.”<sup>361</sup>

Such observations, while good for a laugh, are also quite subversive in their suggestion that the only thing separating some of the food with the *lowest* culinary capital from the epicurean delights favored by so-called “gore-mays” is their linguistic (“andouillette” vs “chitterlings,” “terrapins” vs. “swamp turtles”) and cultural (fine French cuisine versus déclassé Poor Southern Black food) framing.

Similarly, although Smart-Grosvenor’s casual, conversational style and very particular 1970s linguistic patterns might belie the depth and rigor of her observations about culinary and cultural capital (and, indeed, the book was *not* taken seriously for a long time, only recently entering academic and popular<sup>362</sup> discourse) here too is her subversion at work. *Vibration Cooking* makes a compelling case for the argument that a writer does not need to bury her cultural identity and idiosyncratic voice or adopt the impersonal, (supposedly gender- and race-) “neutral” tone of academic or journalistic writing (a standard, of course, set by white, male consensus) in order to perform important, uncompromising cultural critique.

In fact, Smart-Grosvenor’s original manuscript was even less conventional: in addition to her memorable use of colloquial English and casual mode of address, *Vibration Cooking* was initially written entirely in lowercase—an experiment still visible in the book’s dedication, its unconventional acknowledgements, and its epigraph. Under the guidance of the (now-)renowned literary agent and editor Marie Dutton Brown, who at the time was a brand new editorial assistant at Doubleday, Smart-Grosvenor did ultimately relent on this particular point in exchange for keeping her idiosyncratic voice and *all* of the book’s content—from her many personal vignettes and anecdotes to her unabashed observations about racism—intact. Given the incredible fact that *Vibration Cooking* was her very first assignment, Brown acknowledges that she did not recognize at the time “how nontraditional the manuscript was.”<sup>363</sup> Indeed, in addition to her experiments with language, genre, and form, Smart-Grosvenor’s foregrounding of race and class and her ahead-of-its-time articulation of the politics of foodways ultimately made the work radical, then as now.

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<sup>361</sup> Smart-Grosvenor, 93.

<sup>362</sup> See, for example, VICE’s 2018 profile of Smart-Grosvenor: Sen, “Vertamae Smart-Grosvenor Is the Unsung Godmother of American Food Writing.”

<sup>363</sup> Sen.



The book was also unconventional in its generic indeterminacy, formally departing from standard conventions of both cookbooks and memoir. Blurring the boundaries between the two (as did Toklas before her), Smart-Grosvenor's recipes, as Doris Witt observes, "give rise to anecdote, and anecdote to recipe."<sup>364</sup> Often seamlessly interwoven, the line between story and recipe, where it exists at all, can be difficult to pinpoint. Smart-Grosvenor's approach further courts such ambiguity by casually discarding seemingly crucial conventions of the cookbook like traditional measurements and even, in many cases, clearly defined steps. In this way, she works in direct defiance of "the modern form of the recipe" as "rational and highly reproducible," her approach harkening back to a time when recipes came in "a range of rhetorical forms" and had no standardized system of measurement, a time before late-nineteenth-century educators like Fannie Merritt Farmer<sup>365</sup> sought to invest recipes with "a scientific ethos" as part of a larger move towards the "professionalization of homemaking into [the] academic discipline" of home economics.<sup>366</sup> This rigorous approach to food and cooking, wherein recipes are structured like scientific formulas and written in "precise and consistent diction" with "codified...replicable measurements" to mimic the "specialized language of the laboratory" is absolutely antithetical to Smart-Grosvenor's entire ethos.<sup>367</sup> She draws instead on oral traditions that made the transmission of recipes highly variable and which prized emotional connection over scientific precision and emphasized flexibility, personalization, and innovation over reproducibility. "When I cook," she says, "I never measure or weigh anything. I cook by vibration."<sup>368</sup> She writes of cooking for and with family as a heady, joyful, visceral experience that literally makes her body throb and pulse—a far cry from the sanitized "laboratory" cooking of Farmer and her disciples, whose antiseptic approach had a profound impact on the Anglo-American cooking traditions against which Smart-Grosvenor positions herself.

Further defying genre conventions, Smart-Grosvenor discards the structure that traditionally divides cookbooks according to dish type or course ("Appetizers," "Soups," "Breads & Pastas," "Meats" and so on). Instead, *Vibration Cooking* is organized into sections and sub-sections according to *autobiographical* themes, with chapters like "Home," "Away

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<sup>364</sup> Witt, "My Kitchen Was the World': Vertamae Smart Grosvenor's Geechee Diaspora," 156.

<sup>365</sup> Farmer was the principal at the Boston Cooking School and author of the *Boston Cooking-School Cook Book* (1896), the first book of its kind designed to teach "scientific cookery."

<sup>366</sup> Cognard-Black, "The Embodied Rhetoric of Recipes," 33.

<sup>367</sup> Cognard-Black, 33.

<sup>368</sup> Smart-Grosvenor, *Vibration Cooking or, The Travel Notes of a Geechee Girl*, xxxvii.



From Home,” and “Madness,” each containing its own subsections with suggestive titles like “Birth, Hunting, and Gator Tails,” “The Smarts, the Ritters and Chief Kuku Koukoui,” and “Taxis and Poor Man’s Mace.” And yet, the book similarly disregards conventions of autobiography, foregoing certain seemingly requisite topics like marriage (she barely mentions her then-husband and father to her children, sculptor Bob Grosvenor, for example) and rejecting linearity, chronology, and narrative coherence all together, instead jumping around in time and place with her characteristic freewheeling, stream-of-consciousness style.<sup>369</sup> Smart-Grosvenor even rejects the seemingly requisite visual representations of her family, her friends, and—aside from a single obligatory photo on the cover of certain editions of the book—herself. Here instead it is the recipe(s) associated with each subject that serves as his/her portrait, the various recipe-snapshots ultimately coming together, pot-luck-style, to form a veritable feast of a family portrait. Affirming the relational nature of Smart-Grosvenor’s conception of Self, the gastronomic self-portrait that is *Vibration Cooking* emphasizes above all else the importance of community and commensality, food and politics to this “Geechee Girl’s” identity.

What emerges over the course of the book is a truly joyful portrait of a strong lineage of female cooks (Mrs. Estella Smart, Aunts Virter and Rose, etc.)<sup>370</sup> and culinary-minded friends, all of whom nurtured Smart-Grosvenor’s own passion for the skill of cooking, and who kept alive the orally-transmitted knowledge of traditional dishes and techniques while encouraging creative experimentation and problem-solving. From them she learned—and in turn passes on to her reader—the sacred importance of meals for fostering community and of cooking for and with family “even when she hadn’t seen them or had never met them,”<sup>371</sup> and this translated to her ability to bring people together with food wherever in the world she happened to be.

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<sup>369</sup> In one emblematic example, Smart-Grosvenor moves quickly from memories of shelling peas and eating “Grandma Sula’s Hoe Cake” in the Low Country cotton fields of her childhood, to a favorite crepes shop on the Rue Grégoire des Tours in Paris, to eating pancakes with Raymond St. Jaques at his home “on the top floor of the house that used to belong to the “Girl on the Red Velvet Swing” (aka “Gibson Girl” Evelyn Nesbit, whose millionaire husband murdered famed Madison Square Garden architect Stanford White in 1906 for raping a then-16-year-old Nesbit, resulting in what was then called “The Trial of the Century”) in New York City (16-17). Lest the reader get any ideas that the theme of the section is “cakes,” however, the author offers a disclaimer that “you won’t find any heavy baking recipes in this book cause... [I have] never lived in a place that had a decent oven” and she bookends these memories and their accompanying recipes with instructions for “Mrs. Estella Smart’s Mountain Oysters” (14) and “Cow Peas” (19).

<sup>370</sup> Though recipes from male friends and family members are included, they are largely for meat dishes—especially those that require grilling, barbecuing, or smoking—and thus replicate familiar gendered divisions of (cooking) labour.

<sup>371</sup> Smart-Grosvenor, *Vibration Cooking or, The Travel Notes of a Geechee Girl*, 9.



Complimenting her awareness that food can create, encourage, or reinforce cultural hierarchies and divisions, then, is Smart-Grosvenor's acute understanding of the fact that sharing food has the radical power to create community across racial, socioeconomic, and other divides. Though she does not hold back in her critiques of American (and European) racial politics, Smart-Grosvenor also fondly remembers and shares recipes from spontaneous dinner parties and community cook-outs with people from all walks of life—all ages, races, creeds, and classes were welcome at her table, so long as they had “good vibrations.”<sup>372</sup>

The legacy of Smart-Grosvenor would not end here, however. She followed the publication of *Vibration Cooking* with a sociological study of domestic workers called *Thursdays and Every Other Sunday Off: A Domestic Rap* (1972), and she went on to work as a contributor to National Public Radio (NPR) on shows including *All Things Considered* and *Cultural Desk*. She also hosted the NPR radio-documentary series *Horizons* (1988-95), the James Beard Award-winning radio show *Seasonings*, and *The Americas' Family Kitchen*, which had its own TV spinoff called *Vertamae Cooks*. Smart-Grosvenor continued to write, too, publishing articles in *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and elsewhere, as well as cookbooks (*Black Atlantic Cooking* [1990], *Vertamae Cooks in America's Family Kitchen* [1996], and *Vertamae Cooks Again* [1999]). Significantly, a cinematic adaptation of *Vibration Cooking* by fellow Gullah Geechee and prominent independent filmmaker Julie Dash has been in the works for some time. Provisionally titled *Travel Notes of a Geechee Girl*, the documentary was begun with Smart-Grosvenor's blessing and, prior to her death in 2016, her participation.<sup>373</sup> In 1991, Smart-Grosvenor made a fitting appearance in Dash's *Daughters of the Dust* as a Gullah elder who, fittingly, cooks gumbo for a goodbye feast, and the film is an excellent visual companion piece

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<sup>372</sup> Smart-Grosvenor, xxxix.

<sup>373</sup> Dash began recording interviews with Smart-Grosvenor in 2012, gathering hours of material before the artist's death in 2016, but the project has, infuriatingly, been forced to stop production repeatedly because of a lack of funding. Dash launched a crowdfunding campaign in 2015 that ultimately met its fundraising goal, but production stalled again before the projected 2017 release date. Interest has since seemed to pick up again: the project was awarded a National Endowment for the Humanities grant in the Spring of 2019, and is currently funded by Women Make Movies, Black Public Media, and The Avery Research Center for African American History and Culture at the College of Charleston and is forthcoming. See McNary, “Julie Dash's ‘Travel Notes of a Geechee Girl’ Launches Crowdfunding Campaign”; Obenson, “‘Daughters of the Dust’ Auteur Julie Dash Developing New Doc ‘Travel Notes of a Geechee Girl.’”



to *Vibration Cooking* until Smart-Grosvenor's literary and culinary legacy is translated to the screen.



Fig. 4.11 Smart-Grosvenor (center) in Julie Dash's *Daughters of the Dust* (1991)

Since the publication of *The Alice B. Toklas Cook Book* in 1958 and *Vibration Cooking* in 1970, a veritable movement has been born around the genre of the gastronomic memoir. Powerful feminist gastrographies continue to be written and to find an audience eager for a “taste” of other identities and experiences, other personal and political lives.<sup>374</sup> It is, however, difficult to point to a literary work published in the last fifty years that even approaches the potent combination of political and cultural critique with radical delight exemplified in Smart-Grosvenor's experiment (even her own later writing is comparatively conventional). Feminist artists in other mediums, however, including in film, video, and digital or new media art, have in many ways kept the socially and formally radical ambitions of Vertamae Smart-Grosvenor alive in their own experiments at the intersection of food and identity.

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<sup>374</sup> Avakian, *Through the Kitchen Window: Women Explore the Intimate Meanings of Food and Cooking*; Abu-Jaber, *The Language of Baklava: A Memoir*; and Newton, *Tasting Home: Coming of Age in the Kitchen* are three excellent examples.



#### 4.4 Michelle Citron's "Queer Feast": *As American as Apple Pie & Mixed Greens*

In Chapter 2, I examined Michelle Citron's semi-fictional auto-archival film, *Daughter Rite* (1978) as well as her memoir *Home Movies and Other Necessary Fictions* (1999). In the two decades between these two works, Citron continued to make films and videos that focused on the lives of women, especially mothers and daughters, and toyed with the boundaries between documentary, autobiography, and fiction. By 1999, Citron had begun experimenting with multimedia work and while her thematic concerns still centered on the lives of women, her emphasis shifted to focus largely on queer and ethnic identity. Especially compelling to Citron were the interactive possibilities offered by new media, and her new work demanded active engagement from the participant-spectator. Digital technology enabled the artist to further her explorations, begun in *Home Movies*, of the mental processes involved in the construction of narratives of identity. By providing the pieces of a *potential* narrative, Citron put the work of constructing the (or, perhaps more accurately, *a*) narrative into the hands of the participant-spectator, thus ensuring a truly collaborative process.<sup>375</sup> Originally distributed on (now-obsolete) CD-ROM as *Queer Feast*, four of Citron's multimedia works, *As American As Apple Pie* (1999), *Cocktails & Appetizers* (2001), *Mixed Greens* (2004), and *Leftovers* (2014), are now "permanently"<sup>376</sup> housed on the website QueerFeast.com. The "database narratives"<sup>377</sup> with which I have chosen to conclude this study bring together many of the strategies and motifs discussed thus far in this chapter and in the dissertation as a whole. In addition to incorporating both auto-archival *and* autoethnographic representational strategies, Citron's work exemplifies the use of fragmented, open-ended, multi-layered narratives, an interest in familial legacy, (non-ancestral) foremothers, and inheritance, and a deliberate blurring of boundaries between autobiographical and documentary fact and fiction. Citron, like Vertamae Smart-Grosvenor before her, articulates the importance of ethnic, religious, and regional ancestral roots to (her own) contemporary American identity and emphasizes the importance of family and community bonds in the *Queer Feast* quartet. Also like her literary predecessor, she often uses food as a framing device for these explorations. However, Citron's work is less explicitly about the cultural implications of literal foodways and more about food as a *metaphor* for identity,

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<sup>375</sup> Citron, *The Ambiguous Archive: An Interview with Michelle Citron*.

<sup>376</sup> Unfortunately, permanence is not guaranteed, and the Adobe Flash Player used to play the videos on Citron's website is set to be phased out by December 2020.

<sup>377</sup> Citron, *The Ambiguous Archive: An Interview with Michelle Citron*.



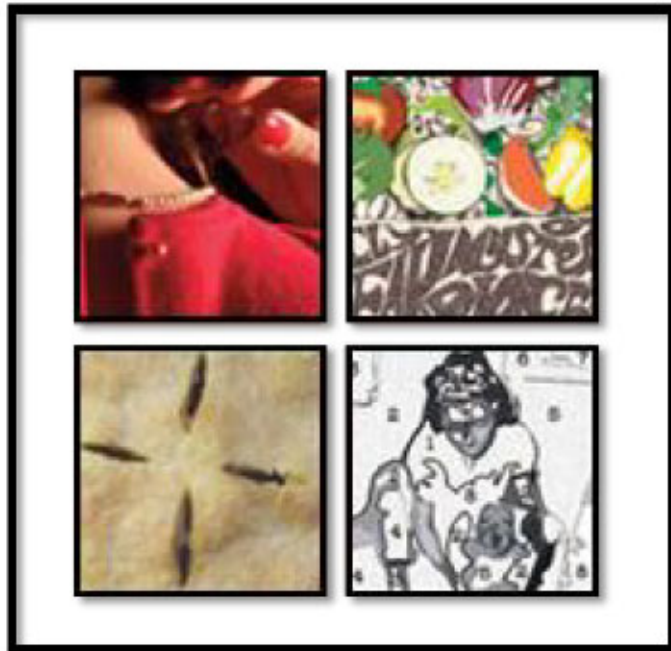


Fig. 4.12 Icons on the "Queer Feast" home page serve as hyperlinks to (clockwise from top right) *Mixed Greens*, *Leftovers*, *American as Apple Pie*, *Cocktails & Appetizers*

acceptance and desire; moreover, her use of moving-image, iconographic, auto-archival, and audio materials in *As American As Apple Pie* and *Mixed Greens*, the two texts that are the focus of this section, fosters entirely different symbolic and metaphorical forms of exploration than are available through the written word alone.

*As American As Apple Pie*, Citron's first foray into digital interactive moving-image art, is a fascinating fictionalized gastrographic text.<sup>378</sup> This work is not as explicitly autobiographical as its literary counterparts, but its explorations of

food and identity resonate with many elements of the artist's biography. As suggested in the title, Citron here explores the connection between nationality, food, and identity; however, her decision to appropriate what is arguably the most wholesome, "all-American" dessert as a framing device for a story about lesbian sexuality, infidelity, and the dissolution of a relationship is an ironic and even subversive choice. Like the literary gastrography, *Apple Pie* includes a recipe, and it focuses on the quotidian domestic experiences of its two female protagonists, from conversations about work and money to their struggles to maintain a functioning partnership. However, neither the recipe nor the narrative of *Apple Pie* are a "given": the work, which includes no instructions for use, foregrounds the active participation of the user-spectator, who must engage with the piece in order to solve both its formal and narrative "puzzles" and to unlock the Apple Pie recipe.

<sup>378</sup> For a thorough discussion of Citron's decision to use fiction in her autobiographical work, see Citron, "Fleeing from Documentary: Autobiographical Film/Video and the 'Ethics of Responsibility.'"



*Apple Pie*'s "home screen," which remains in the background for the duration of our engagement with the piece, is comprised of a large, illustrated recipe card with the work's title at the top and a semi-transparent graphic of a perfectly baked pie in the center of the screen. A

perky, twinkly instrumental song plays repetitively in the background, its melody reminiscent of the interstitial music for a sitcom about the idealized mid-century nuclear family or the jingle for the latest must-have floor polish or dessert topping. By moving the cursor around the screen, the user triggers a series of eleven words and phrases—"peeled," "cut," "use your fingertips," "lifting and turning,"

"Brush," "Serve warm," "mound," "crimp," "gashes," "soft, but dry," and "freshly squeezed"—to appear around the perimeter of the pie. Clicking a word prompts a corresponding video to play, opening with a classic "iris in," in a circular frame whose boundaries are the flakey crust of the ever-present pie. Each video presents, in extreme closeup, an individual step in the process of baking an apple pie that correlates to the selected word. Click on the word "peeled," for

example, and we are presented with a video of a woman's hand peeling and cutting apples. On the other hand, the soundtrack that accompanies each video presents decontextualized snippets of conversation that appear to be unrelated to what we see onscreen. As though eavesdropping, the user overhears intimate exchanges that represent the melodramatic highs and lows of a troubled lesbian relationship, as well as exchanges between a *man* and a woman that, we deduce, depict the infidelity of one of the partners. Once a "slice" of the pie (a word and its corresponding

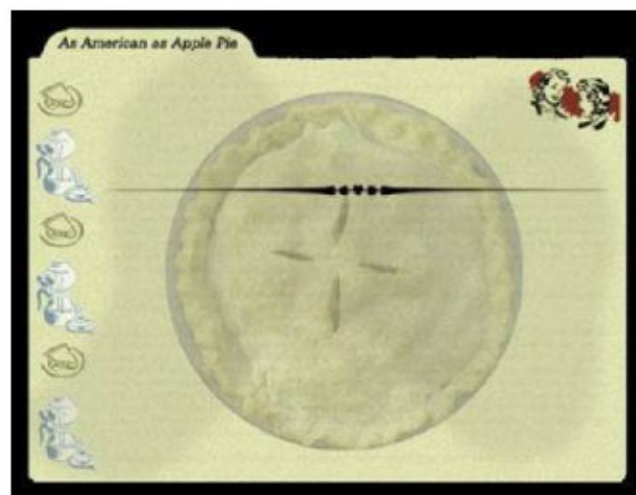


Fig. 4.13-14 A wholesome home screen (top). "Peeled" (below) Citron, QueerFeast.com





video) has been “tasted,” a wedge-shaped fragment of a recipe is unlocked, and the previously de-contextualized keyword is put into context.

Continuing the metaphor, if a user lingers with the narrative long enough to “take a second bite” of a given “slice” (watching a video for a second time, in other words) s/he will find not only that the recipe fragment will remain permanently on-screen but, more importantly, it becomes clear that although the connection between a word and its corresponding video is unchanging, the accompanying soundtrack *is* variable. For example, selecting “freshly squeezed” will always trigger an extreme close-up of a pulpy lemon being juiced, but with it we may hear either the beginnings of a sexual encounter between a man and a woman or, conversely, a heated argument between the two female partners about work and money. Our understanding of the trajectory of the relationship and its dissolution is thus dependent upon the order *and* the number of times the slices are chosen. Interacting with the narrative only briefly will yield disconnected fragments and thus an incoherent story—simply “slices of life”—whereas sustained engagement will empower the user to piece together a coherent linear narrative. In the end, if each piece is twice tasted, the user gains access not only to the narrative but to the recipe in its entirety, and the credits begin to roll, signaling the work’s conclusion. Although there are a variety of ways for each user to experience and interpret the events of *Apple Pie*, the broad strokes are as follows: Having fallen in love with another woman, “the psychologist” has left her husband to move in with her new lover, “the detective,” sparking a series of unintended consequences, including a custody battle. This new relationship, moreover, turns out to have problems of its own, and “the detective” has a one-night-stand with a man she meets at a bar, fueling a repetitive, destructive cycle of jealousy, anger, and malaise.

In her study of the depiction of “lesbian appetites” in feminist autobiography, Antje Lindenmeyer observes that lesbian writers commonly “make explicit links” in their work “between food, sexuality and lesbian community,” signaling their understanding of food as an important part of “the emergence of a complex sense of identity, [and] as a conceptual link to childhood, belonging, or ancestral roots.”<sup>379</sup> As a Jewish lesbian of Irish ancestry, however, Citron’s relationship to American identity and her experience of “belonging” might be described

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<sup>379</sup> Lindenmeyer, “Lesbian Appetites”: Food, Sexuality and Community in Feminist Autobiography,” 469.



as ambivalent at best.<sup>380</sup> Then again, the same could be said of the apple pie itself: though the first recorded consumption of apple pie in America was in 1697<sup>381</sup> and the first published American cookbook—*American Cookery* (1798)—contains several recipes for the dessert, the inconvenient fact remains that, as one *Smithsonian Magazine* article declares, “Apple Pie is Not All That American.”<sup>382</sup> In fact, though scholars have not agreed on the exact origins of the dish, its popularization has been traced to late 14th century England,<sup>383</sup> and its perfection (via the addition of an edible crust) is attributed to early 16th century Dutch bakers, who spread the dessert to France, Italy, and Germany over the course of the 1500s. As with the innumerable other imports now considered “All-American,” in other words, the apple pie—like the apple itself—was brought to the Americas by colonial settlers. Still, by the Second World War the phrase “American as apple pie” had fully entered the zeitgeist, with American soldiers commonly telling the press they were fighting “for mom and apple pie.” What else has been deemed “American as apple pie”? A cursory search for the phrase is apt to return thousands upon thousands of results in which everything from lynchings to pornography, anti-feminism to bologna are described using the phrase, and Citron’s work calls attention to this ambivalence.

Still, the association of the dessert with middle-American wholesomeness, with suburban security and motherly nurturing, persists in the American imaginary. For Citron, a survivor of childhood incest and abuse whose relationship with her mother was troubled until she was well into adulthood (see Chapter 2), the selection is a loaded one. On the one hand, *Apple Pie* is rife with signifiers of idealized domestic bliss: the wholesome melody that plays in the background, the feminine hands (which are *not* neatly manicured with red polish although, tellingly, in my memory of the piece they always have been) labouring to make the nurturing meal, and even the stylized illustration of two smiling women (mother and daughter? lovers?) facing each other in the upper right-hand corner of the screen below the link for “credits.” Each of these elements screams “happy homemaker”—an identity, perhaps, which an adolescent Citron wished her own mother had inhabited, but also one against which her own adult academic feminist and lesbian politics have fought. The pernicious stereotype that “mom’s cooking” (or women’s domestic

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<sup>380</sup> See, for example, her description in *Mixed Greens* (2004, discussed below) of being referred to as a “kyke dyke” (sic) on the occasion of a screening of her films.

<sup>381</sup> Metcalf and Barnhart, *America in So Many Words: Words That Have Shaped America*.

<sup>382</sup> Eschner, “Apple Pie Is Not All That American.”

<sup>383</sup> Mayer, “A Brief History of Pie.”



cooking more generally) is a display of love and affection for family and friends is ubiquitous, though many women became disillusioned with the association when they realized in the late 1960s and 1970s that “[t]he connection between Mom’s cooking and love was a gender role that kept her trapped in the kitchen, preparing a batch of cookies or a five-course meal to prove her affection.”<sup>384</sup> Nevertheless, as Dolores Hayden maintains, “In American life, it is hard to separate the ideal of home from the ideals of mom and apple pie, of mother’s love and home cooking.”<sup>385</sup>

In fact, we learn in one of *Apple Pie*’s audio files that “the detective’s” mother consoled her when she hurt herself as a child by making homemade apple pies. Her lover, herself a mother (from a previous heterosexual marriage) and a psychologist (like Citron herself, who holds a PhD in cognitive psychology), recognizes that “the detective” is in need of comforting after sustaining an injury, and she thus inhabits the role of the nurturing caretaker, presumably setting in motion the entire baking process around which the work’s image track is focused by offering to bake a pie of her own. This brief moment hints at the complex slippages that can and do happen when food is considered in the highly charged contexts of queer, feminist, and maternal identities and sexual politics, elements of which Elspeth Probyn examines in depth in *Carnal Appetites: FoodSexIdentities* (2000) and which I will thus not rehash here.<sup>386</sup> Significantly, this exchange is one of the only nurturing moments or displays of kindness from either partner in the entirety of *Apple Pie*. In fact, the tone of many of the audio files in the work is volatile and unpleasant. If the imagery is dominated by a wholesome (and quite literal) “mom and apple pie” motif, the narrative provided by the soundtrack paints a darker picture of infidelity, divorce and custody battles, jealousy, and self-destruction. In this, *Apple Pie* seems to align itself with the apple’s more ancient symbolism, calling to mind Greek mythology’s “apple of discord”<sup>387</sup> for example, or the biblical story of Adam and Eve, in which this “forbidden fruit” becomes the symbol of knowledge, disobedience, sexual seduction and/or illicit sexuality, shame, and

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<sup>384</sup> Inness, *Secret Ingredients: Race, Gender, and Class at the Dinner Table*, 71.

<sup>385</sup> Hayden, *Redesigning the American Dream: The Future of Housing, Work, and Family Life*, 53; quoted in Inness, *Secret Ingredients: Race, Gender, and Class at the Dinner Table*, 70.

<sup>386</sup> Probyn, *Carnal Appetites: FoodSexIdentities*.

<sup>387</sup> The so-called “apple of discord” sparked a jealousy- and vanity-fueled feud between three female goddesses—Athena, Aphrodite, and Hera—that ultimately resulted in the Trojan War. The apple also plays a key role in the Greek myth of Atalanta, whose queerness has been inferred from her decision to live as a virgin and her refusal to marry, and who was able to stave off marriage by racing (and beating) all potential suitors until she faced Hippomenes, who distracted her with three shiny golden apples and defeated her, thus winning her hand.



ultimately the fall of (wo)man. Both protagonists in *Apple Pie* have tasted the proverbial “forbidden fruit” of same-sex eroticism and have unsettled their own lives (and the lives of their families, including a son and at least one jilted husband) as a result.<sup>388</sup>

In this sense, then, the text explores the tensions that have long existed between traditional cultural expectations regarding the domestic, emotional, and sexual labour performed by women to satisfy (male) appetites, and the inverse assumption that the sexual and alimentary desires of women must be proportionately limited. Discussing the “disengaging [of] duty from desire,” in realist 1960s women’s novels, Kerry Myler notes that food in depictions of heterosexual relationships “might mean duty and be opposed to sexual desire,” or it might be “desired and used to displace sexual duty.”<sup>389</sup> These tensions and negotiations of duty and desire are further complicated in same-sex relationships. Lindenmeyer argues that “lesbian autobiographers writing about food purposely disrupt” such gendered stereotypes about food and appetites “by portraying themselves as both ‘eaters’ and ‘feeders’ and laying open the power relationships expressed in who feeds whom, and who decides what is eaten.”<sup>390</sup>

In lesbian autobiographical art (and lesbian art, film, and literature more generally), food is frequently conflated with sexual desire thanks, in part, to the metaphorical connection of lesbian sexuality to “eating” and “being eaten.” Gloria Anzaldua, for example, repeatedly connects her own queer sexuality to acts of consumption, writing in a poem appropriately titled “Poets have strange eating habits (for Irenita Klepfisz),” “I coax and whip the balking mare/ to the edge/ ... Her body caves into itself/ through the hole/ my mouth.”<sup>391</sup> This connection is made even more explicit in Anzaldua’s “The Cannibal’s *Canción*,” where she writes “It is our custom/ to consume/ the person we love./ Taboo flesh: swollen/ genitalia nipples/ the scrotum the vulva/ ... heart and liver taste best./ Cannibalism is blessed.”<sup>392</sup> In *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (1982), Audre Lorde connects fruits and vegetables from the Caribbean and Africa, including the “Goddess pear” (Avocado) and the banana, to both her lesbian sexuality and her ancestral roots. Acknowledging the erotic potential of food in an interview, Citron herself admits, “I learned how

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<sup>388</sup> Conversely, by sleeping with—and thus apparently betraying her queer identity, not to mention her partner, for—a man, “the detective” could also be read as having tasted a different “forbidden fruit.”

<sup>389</sup> Myler, “Food, Duty, and Desire in the Women’s Novel in the 1960s,” 69.

<sup>390</sup> Lindenmeyer, “Lesbian Appetites: Food, Sexuality and Community in Feminist Autobiography,” 470.

<sup>391</sup> Anzaldua, “Poets Have Strange Eating Habits (for Irenita Klepfisz),” 162–63.

<sup>392</sup> Anzaldua, “The Cannibal’s *Canción*,” 165.



to bake from my grandmother [and] I would bake things for boys all the time. It's where displaced sexuality goes—right onto food.”<sup>393</sup>

Fruit, including the apple, are often portrayed as a source of sensual pleasure, their abundant sweet juices, as well as their “suggestive shapes and textures... lend[ing] themselves very easily to [sexual signification]” and “the peeling, opening and eating of fruit offers endless metaphors for the celebration of a lesbian sexuality of... ‘tongues or fingers’.”<sup>394</sup> In Citron’s *Apple Pie*, the artist has made strategic decisions about which (highly suggestive) words and phrases—“gashes,” “mound,” “use your fingertips,” and so on—to single out from the recipe in order to entice user engagement while simultaneously hinting at these connections between fruit and women’s bodies and sexuality. Some of the videos, too, are evocative, as in the extreme closeup of fingers suggestively pinching ridges of dough together (“Crimp”). The suggestive imagery, however, is not limited to queer sex: “freshly squeezed” triggers a video of a decisively phallic looking wooden object being thrust into a lemon to extract juice, while in one of the two correlated audio files we hear a slow drip as “the detective” and the man she picks up in a bar kiss and moan. In the end, this duality of fruit as both “seductive,” its juices waiting to be sucked, and “dangerous” (the poison apple, the “apple of discord”) has “become interchangeable with the female body,”<sup>395</sup> and both iterations are on display in *Apple Pie*.

Another important takeaway in *Apple Pie* is its emphasis on the relatively profound function of the kitchen as a “women’s space”—a space where, for better or worse, women converse, argue, make-up, drown their sorrows, celebrate, and, generally, spend time together. As Locher et al. suggest, the “[i]ntimate social exchanges [that] occur[r] among close friends and family members while preparing and consuming foods” can function as what they call “kitchen therapy.”<sup>396</sup> Such conversation, they argue, can help diffuse daily stressors, while “the physical activity of preparing the food, such as chopping the fruit or kneading the dough,” can also have “therapeutic” effects.<sup>397</sup> Thus, the exchanges in *Apple Pie*—not to mention the physical labour of cutting apples and slices of butter, rolling dough, or cutting “gashes” in the soft flesh of the pie—

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<sup>393</sup> Citron, *The Ambiguous Archive: An Interview with Michelle Citron*.

<sup>394</sup> Lindenmeyer, “Lesbian Appetites’: Food, Sexuality and Community in Feminist Autobiography,” 471, 473.

<sup>395</sup> Lindenmeyer, 473.

<sup>396</sup> Locher et al., “Comfort Foods: An Exploratory Journey into the Social and Emotional Significance of Food,” 282.

<sup>397</sup> Locher et al., 282.



might actually serve a productive, healthy, even a healing function. Nevertheless, the fact of extreme fragmentation in the work, especially in the user's experience of the narrative and the disjunction between the audio and visual components, remains. If the user-spectator's fractured access to the recipe and to the narrative of the relationship might be read as a creative representation of what has been theorized as the "fragmented consciousness" of women and the often fragmented narrative structures of women's autobiographies, their engagement and interaction with the work triggers a cohesion of these divided elements and in so doing exemplifies Citron's belief that such work mimics the processes of identity formation.

Just as the magic of cooking unites an amalgamation of ingredients into a cohesive dish, the process of engaging fully with *Apple Pie* knits together the many disparate formal elements and narrative threads provided by Citron into a "digestible" story. Both processes can be read as metaphors for Citron's interest in identity formation as a constructive process. Evinced in her experimental memoir, *Home Movies and Other Necessary Fictions*, as well as autobiographical works like *Daughter Rite* and, as I discuss below, *Mixed Greens*, Citron understands identity formation and the construction of personal narratives as processes that rely on (potentially unreliable, unstable) fragments of memory and auto-archival materials like home movies and photographs. Nevertheless, her work is essentially incomplete without the engagement of a reader/spectator/user, whose labour is the key that unlocks the collaborative brilliance of her art. Without an interlocutor, a work like *Apple Pie* is nothing more than fragments of disjointed information in the ether; in making connections between the many narrative and aesthetic fragments, however, the user ultimately constructs a narrative of/and identity. As Citron argues about the process of identity formation in *Home Movies*, "In constructing a narrative, fragments are knit into a whole; what has been shattered is cohered; a sense of self is restored. Narrative construction and integration of the self, regardless of which comes first, go hand in hand."<sup>398</sup>

*Mixed Greens* (2004) is another interactive narrative—another "course," to use the artist's language—housed on the "Queer Feast" website. By far the longest and most complex of the quartet of new-media works, *Mixed Greens* expands Citron's explorations of ethnic and sexual identity into more explicitly autobiographical territory while continuing to demand a high-level of engagement from participant-spectators, who are invited to build their own narratives

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<sup>398</sup> Citron, *Home Movies and Other Necessary Fictions*, 44.



from the fragments provided by Citron. The “home page” of *Mixed Greens* consists of forty-eight vegetable icons, with six icons for each of the eight “ingredients”—lettuce, spinach, tomatoes, bell peppers, onions, arugula, cabbage, and cucumbers—randomly dispersed across eight columns and six rows. Each of the icons is also associated with one of six topics: “Desire,” “Family,” “Heartbreak,” “Mysteries,” “Place,” and “Other.” A “Legend” in the top right-hand



Fig. 4.15 Forty-eight icons represent the ingredients of an identity on the *Mixed Greens* home page (Citron, 2004)

corner contains two “family trees”—one for Citron’s biological family and one for the queer “family” depicted in the work—and a (very minimal) explanation of “How to construct a story,” which hints that “[s]ix similar vegetables [tell the] story of one decade, one identity” and “[e]ight similar words [tell a] thematic story through various decades and identities,” inviting the user to select “any combination you wish to see.” Clicking an icon puts the “ingredient” into a video player, which has room for a maximum of eight icons, at the bottom of the screen, allowing the user to compile videos out of the footage associated with each individual ingredient or word. There are thus hundreds of possible user-created video compilations, depending on the ingredients selected and the order of their selection. S/he can choose all of the icons associated with a given topic (say, “Family”), all of the icons for an ingredient (all of the onions), one of



each of the eight ingredients, all eight ingredients in a given row, or any number of randomly selected variations. The possibilities, in other words, are nearly endless, each user-selected compilation giving us different keys to the narrative, our impression of each segment coloured by the other ingredients with which it is “tossed.”

Unlike the formal and thematic coherence of the video clips in *Apple Pie*—all of which depict, in extreme close-up, individual steps in the baking process—here the individual clips are thematically, formally, and stylistically diverse. Included are conventional “talking head” interviews conducted by Citron with her father and other family members, auto-archival material including official documents, family photographs, and old home movie footage, moving “polaroids” that slowly develop before the spectator’s eyes and through which their subjects speak, as well as video, 16 and 8mm film—much (though not all) of which is scripted and performed for Citron’s camera. This scripted material, labelled “Lesbian Scenes” in the credits, is divided into four sections by date:

1962, 1975, 1997, and 2003. Two of these sections, “1962” and “1997”, are made up of fictionalized footage that successfully simulates home movies of their respective eras through the use of hair, make-up, and costuming, and thanks in large part to cinematographer Judy



Fig. 4.16 Citron's father describes his immigrant family's history. *Mixed Greens* (Citron, 2004)



Fig. 4.17 Auto-archival material supplements, illustrates, and complicates oral history. *Mixed Greens* (Citron, 2004)



Hoffman's skilled mimicry of each era's style (grainy, roving snippets of 8mm footage for the former and lengths of static, tri-pod bound video for the later). The "1975" footage, on the other hand, is authentic auto-archival material attributed to Michelle Citron and Jere van Syoc, though the voiceovers are again performed by actresses. Finally, the "2003" section also simulates a classic auto-archival medium—polaroid photographs—but with the important twist that the young queer subjects (actresses working from a script on which they collaborated) of the "photos" are able to speak for themselves, articulating their complex understandings of- and relationships to sexual and gender identities. Although some of the narrative strands in *Mixed Greens* use sync sound, a majority of the material, as in *Apple Pie*, contains divisions between what we hear and what we see, demanding engagement from the spectator who must make their own connections between image- and soundtrack.

Thematically, all of the audiovisual material in *Mixed Greens* can be divided roughly into two groups: Citron's inquiry into her paternal ancestors' Irish-Jewish heritage on the one hand and, on the other, the evolution of LGBTQ+ identity—especially considerations of gender performance, sex and relationship etiquette, family dynamics, and, of course, food—over the course of the mid- to late-twentieth and early-twenty-first centuries in America. The disparate formal and narrative manifestations of these two thematic concerns illuminate one another in unexpected ways depending on which of the limitless combinations of "ingredients" are selected. The point at which they most obviously converge is in the material most explicitly and intimately about Citron's own personal life: six clips, represented iconographically with a spinach leaf, which are composed of auto-archival photographs, home movie footage, and newly shot material (close-ups of the outside of Citron's childhood home, for example), and which are narrated in voiceover by the artist, who shares deeply personal stories about her own struggles with conflicting elements of her ethnic and sexual identities. Together, the six clips echo the overarching theme of the work as a whole: that identity, which cannot be defined with any single label (whether that label is "queer" or "Irish" or "Jewish"), is as complex and layered as a multi-course feast.

In this context, then, it is worth looking more closely at the literal and metaphorical roles played by food in Citron's complex work. First, it is noteworthy that Citron has chosen to build her work around "mixed greens," a dish that is neither demonstrably Jewish nor Irish. Although both groups have rich culinary histories of their own, the artist's excavation of her paternal Irish-



Jewish heritage does not seem to dig up a culinary legacy of any kind. As such, my focus in what follows will largely be on the intersections of food and queer identities in *Mixed Greens*, which—salad iconography aside—are remarkably more subtle and understated than one might expect for a “queer feast”; nevertheless, crucial alignments of food with gender and sexual identity—some familiar, others subversive—do permeate the piece.

First, however, I would like briefly to look at the complex issue of choosing *not* to eat, for it is here that Citron’s path to understanding and accepting her own queer identity might be said to begin. Narrating over slowed-down home movie footage that depicts brief moments in the life of a very young Citron and her soon-to-be husband—running hand-in-hand, embracing, and (unsuccessfully) trying to row a small boat together—the artist confesses to the painful truth behind these seemingly blissful images of young love. Her psyche, she says, “shattered” three months before her impending marriage and she became “obsessed with death,” “plann[ing] different ways to its door,” though she could not yet say why. Although she had “amassed a bottle of pills,” it was ultimately “the slow, female way” that got to her: *she stopped eating*, dropped an unhealthy amount of weight, and expected to die. If food signifies home and belonging, Citron’s *rejection* of food was a potent, if initially subconscious, sign that the life of the housewife—the life that had been preordained for her by cultural, societal, and familial expectations—was not where she belonged. If the mouth represents a/the barrier between the internal and external worlds, moreover, her refusal to be metaphorically and physically “penetrated” is telling. Citron points out in another clip of home movie footage—this time from her wedding, which did, in the end, take place—that she couldn’t name her feelings yet, couldn’t explain her depression, because she didn’t even *know the word* “lesbian.” Citron’s confusion—her desperate grasping for meaning at this point in her life—is powerfully rendered in the participant-spectator’s initial experience of *Mixed Greens*, before all of the necessary information has been unlocked. By piecing together the fragmented narrative strands, whether haphazardly or slowly and deliberately, s/he mimetically enacts the process of identity formation, potentially approximating Citron’s own experiences.



In contrast to Citron's rejection of food, the most conspicuous depiction of food consumption in *Mixed Greens* occurs in the fictionalized "1962" section in which a (staged) backyard barbecue is

captured on film in series of imitation "home movies."<sup>399</sup> A group of lesbians in convincing early-1960s drag (the "bitches" with short slicked-back hair sport slacks and collared shirts or muscle-tees, while their "femme" girlfriends wear picnic-appropriate summer dresses and makeup)



**Fig. 4.18** Friends laugh, drink, and eat in (fake) home movie footage. *Mixed Greens* (Citron, 2004)

dance, goof off, flirt, and fight while an asynchronous soundtrack captures a variety of conversations among the guests. The images of women dancing together, publicly displaying affection for their same sex partners, eating and drinking, and mugging for the camera are radical for many reasons, not least of which is their depiction of women actually *eating*. In defiance of conventional popular media representations from the 1950s and '60s that would have women believe their interactions with food should be limited to preparing pleasing meals for the men in their lives,<sup>400</sup> the women here are shown relaxing and enjoying a smorgasbord of food together. If home movies and outdoor barbecues are "As American as Apple Pie," Citron's staged footage at once revels in and subverts these leisure activities.

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<sup>399</sup> Why stage the material? In addition to Citron's repeated use of fiction in her autobiographical work and her preference for using actresses in place of family and friends, which she sees as her ethical responsibility (see Citron, "Fleeing from Documentary: Autobiographical Film/Video and the 'Ethics of Responsibility'"), the fact remains that in Pre-Stonewall America, many LGBTQ+ individuals remained closeted. It is thus very possible that authentic footage of such a gathering from the early 1960s was either not readily available or, if it was, its use may have been ethically problematic. Citron's *Leftovers* (2014) explores some of these concerns, reflecting on an archive of personal photographs left behind by (semi-)closeted lesbians Norma and Virginia following the deaths of both women, who lived together in abject isolation for forty-five years in order to protect their love from what they perceived to be a hostile world.

<sup>400</sup> Inness, *Secret Ingredients: Race, Gender, and Class at the Dinner Table*.



In *Reel Families: A Social History of Amateur Film* (1995), Patricia Zimmermann examines the intersection of home movie-making and the 1950s ideology of familialism, which “emphasized family relations” above all else, celebrating “the blissful domain of the home,” with its outdoor grills and swimming pools, through the production and consumption of amateur film.<sup>401</sup> In “women’s magazines, sociological studies, and the mainstream press,” Zimmerman argues, the ideology of “togetherness promoted the bourgeois nuclear family” not merely as a “natural construct” but, more insidiously, as “the *only* social structure available for the expression of common, shared experiences that could shore one up against alienation and isolation.”<sup>402</sup> Citron’s intervention in this section of *Mixed Greens* actively discredits such hetero-patriarchal propaganda and presents a different sort of familialism, reimagining the “blissful domain of the home” through this backyard-barbecue-as-queer-utopia. She appropriates and reconfigures the technologies and the pastimes most closely associated with the middle-class American family to represent alternative configurations of family and community, which are, for many LGBTQ+ individuals, a means of self-preservation.

Another example of Citron’s staged footage, however, hints at a certain ambivalence about the radical potential of queer appropriations of home movie technologies. All of the material in the “1997” segments depicts a lesbian couple, occasionally joined by friends but more typically alone, perched on a couch in front of a tripod-mounted video camera. Their



Fig. 4.19 Engagement rings, brunch and babies: a queer couple aspires to middle-class respectability. *Mixed Greens* (Citron, 2004)

reason for taping themselves is the creation of a video-diary for their soon-to-be-adopted child; however, complications in the adoption process because of their sexuality leads instead to on-tape debates about everything from the politics of assimilation in a heterosexual world to more conventional arguments about money and

<sup>401</sup> Zimmermann, *Reel Families: A Social History of Amateur Film*, 132.

<sup>402</sup> Zimmermann, 133, my emphasis.



debt. If, “[l]ike its ancestor amateur film, home video is entrenched within upper-middle-class respectability,” the (fictional) couple’s use of the medium signifies the conventional, middle-class family values to which they aspire.<sup>403</sup> They are not, in other words, “queering,” subverting, or reconfiguring the “ideological constraints” of the family home video: they have wholeheartedly bought in. In this, their tapes serve as a direct counterpoint to the more rebellious use of video in the 1990s by lesbian videomakers like Cheryl Dunye or Sadie Benning and even Citron herself, all of whom, along with many of their gay male counterparts, “commandeered the radical potential of accessible amateur technologies... [to] aggressively deconstruct [t] the privileging of the bourgeois nuclear family and heterosexuality in previous historical formations of amateurism,” insisting instead on “specificity, difference, and voice.”<sup>404</sup> The inclusion of this formal and narrative thread within Citron’s larger experimental piece ultimately represents the autoethnographic drive of her work to represent the many facets of not just her own life, but of lesbian life in America more generally.

Back in “1962,” if the imagery is utopian, the written text that occasionally accompanies the videos in *Mixed Greens* speaks in the barbecue segments to the challenges faced by queer women in the pre-Stonewall America, who were subjected to grievous discrimination, even violence. Much of the soundtrack, too, depicts a darker picture, for although these women have formed a supportive community in which they can be open about their sexuality and even mentor young, newly “out” women, some of the conversations to which we are party suggest shockingly conservative attitudes about “gender” roles between “butch” and “femme” partners that replicate hetero-patriarchal norms and power dynamics. One butch named Peg, for example, advises her (also butch) friends to set rules for themselves in their relationships, including “never do housework,” “watch your lady,” and “protect what’s yours.” True to her word, in a separate clip Peg aggressively attacks another guest for simply “looking at [her] girlfriend,” who she herself jealously guards and objectifies as a possession.

The barbecue setting of these clips, associated as it is with the consumption of meat, calls to mind Carol J. Adams’ polemic *The Pornography of Meat* (2003), in which the author deconstructs what she calls the “meatification” of women in pornography and popular culture and wonders, “how does *someone* become *something*?” and “How does someone become a piece

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<sup>403</sup> Zimmermann, 150.

<sup>404</sup> Zimmermann, 154.



of meat?”<sup>405</sup> Citron is obviously critical of the regressive assumption that women-as-meat exist to provide pleasure to the consumer—in this case, other women—an attitude that perpetuates the cycle of oppression and objectification from which feminists of the artist’s generation sought to break free. Some, though not all, of the women overheard in other strands (1975, 1997, and 2003) of the fictionalized queer narratives overtly question and problematize the conservative mindset of their older counterparts, reflecting how changes in perspective brought about by the feminist and gay rights movements affected the LGBTQ+ community.

Notably, a conversation among friends in the “1975” material also unfolds during a shared meal, though the food on offer here is *salad*, not barbecue. Not insignificantly, the conversation makes direct reference to Peg—“the old butch” from “a different time, a different generation,” as one guest describes her—and to Peg’s emphatic adherence to the patriarchal politics implied in the “butch”/“femme” divide, which the group agrees is old-fashioned. Although this conversation takes place a mere thirteen years after the first, it points to a political, generational, and even sexual divide between Peg’s cohort and this slightly younger, more socially-conscious and politically-engaged group (which, it should be said, experience tensions of their own related in large part to new attitudes towards [non]-monogamy). As movements for youth-, race-, sexual- and other identity politics captured the nation’s attention in the late-1960s and 1970s, sweeping social change seemed a very real possibility, and conventional bourgeois attitudes were challenged in a variety of social and cultural arenas simultaneously. Though radical feminism, the gay rights movement, and the ecological and natural foods movements are not often discussed in the same breath, Lindenmeyer points to a very particular junction at which they intersect, a moment when “many radical-feminist communities” began to define themselves by “refusing to eat meat, partly as a reaction to the popular association of meat eating with masculinity and power over nature.”<sup>406</sup> Salads (along with tofus, ancient grains, and other such “earthy” fare) became associated with a certain puritan, radically ascetic, lifestyle—a lifestyle that, for some women, even included “sexual veganism,” that is, abstinence from all “male-identified” sexual practices—espoused by some, though certainly not all, lesbian communities.<sup>407</sup>

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<sup>405</sup> Adams, *The Pornography of Meat*, 13, emphasis in original.

<sup>406</sup> Lindenmeyer, “Lesbian Appetites”: Food, Sexuality and Community in Feminist Autobiography,” 478.

<sup>407</sup> Lindenmeyer, 480.



A binary opposition, admittedly simplistic and in many ways reminiscent of the limited (and limiting) “butch”/“femme” divide, began to pit “drab, political granola lesbians” against “meat-eating, hard-drinking young dykes,” thus “recast[ing] both food and sex wars as a generational struggle within the lesbian community,” and reminding us that, although food is frequently posited as having the utopian power to unite people across a broad spectrum of class, gender, race, ethnic, regional, and sexual identities, it also has the power to divide.<sup>408</sup> While Lindenmeyer’s reference to “meat-eating dykes” alludes specifically to a young(er) generation who came of age in the late 1980s and early 1990s, there are many resonances with Peg and her cohort in the 1960s. In the 2003 polaroid material, BB calls out the “dykes who are ten times worse than straight men” with their “exaggerated male swagger thing” and their sexual predation—attitudes that sound remarkably similar to Peg’s macho posturing.

BB and her friends, on the other hand, seem to have traded meat and mixed greens for cocktails (incidentally, the framing device for another of Citron’s “Queer Feast” courses, *Cocktails & Appetizers* [2001]),

signaling their exploration of a new path in the context of (queer and straight) bar culture that experiments with leaving the binaries symbolized by such food choices behind.

Their nuanced discussions and performances of gender fluidity can be summed up in the strip-tease performed by one of the polaroid subjects, in which a

men’s dress shirt and tie are removed to reveal a lacey black bustier, while the phrase “I don’t believe in gender!” is scrawled on top of the polaroid and the text below declares “in the new millennium we’re queering it all.”

In the context of Lindenmeyer’s reading of the food- and sex wars as a generational conflict, Citron’s choice of vegetables as a structuring device for what is the most

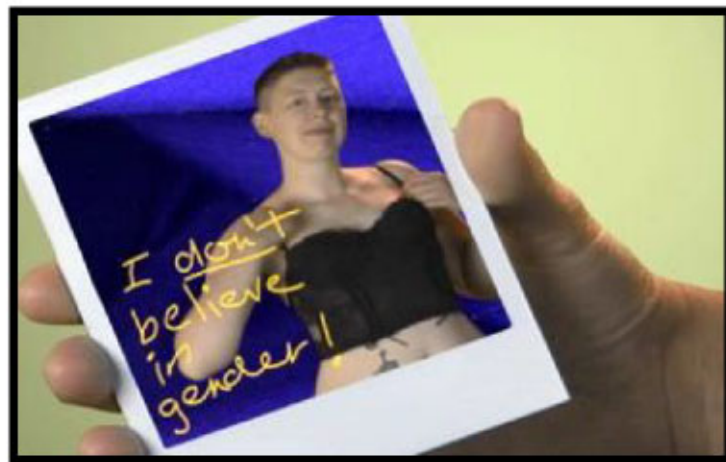


Fig. 4.20 Performing gender fluidity in moving “polaroids.”  
*Mixed Greens* (Citron, 2004)

<sup>408</sup> Lindenmeyer, 280.



autobiographical of “Queer Feast’s” four “courses” is suggestive. Reading the above-cited narrative strands in relation to one another, however, the gastrographic takeaway is that, while food preferences have in the past been used as short-hand for different queer identities, such labels are ultimately ineffectual in a twenty-first century context in which the complexities and contradictions of identity are being examined with more nuance than ever before. In the end, the most obvious interpretation of Citron’s use of food as a framing device for her explorations of identity is one that optimistically aligns the colourful produce with a symbolic representation of the many intersecting facets of the artist’s life and community and of identity more generally. Perhaps more useful in this context than the meat-eating vs. abstaining divide, then, is another motif of lesbian autobiography identified by Lindenmeyer in her study: the “lesbian ritual of potluck,” which symbolizes the possibility of “a utopian... community” that is accepting of “women’s different regional, ethnic, and social backgrounds, reflected in the food they bring to share.”<sup>409</sup> Although Citron’s mixed greens (and yellows and reds) are not as obviously varied as the smorgasbord one would expect at a potluck, they too “symboliz[e] the autobiographers’ methods of bringing together highly varied... histories and memories to be shared and consumed.”<sup>410</sup>

Arguably a more successful intervention than Citron’s engagement with food-as-metaphor in *Queer Feast*, the artist’s awareness of and play with the signifying possibilities of different visual mediums (photographs, 16mm, 8mm, video, moving “polaroids”) and representational genres (amateur home movie, documentary, melodrama) is a continuation of concerns and experiments that have occupied much of her career. Of course, by including visual and auditory elements in *Mixed Greens* and *Apple Pie*, she literally engages more senses than is possible in a literary gastrography like *Vibration Cooking*. This expansion of the representational possibilities of the genre is important in the context of Citron’s work because it allows the artist to provide “visible evidence of queer desire.”<sup>411</sup> While the lack of such visible evidence in *Vibration Cooking* might be attributable to the fact that Smart-Grosvenor’s identity as a black woman is *inescapably visible*—she writes that she felt others often saw her as merely “something in the shape of a woman but with a black skin”<sup>412</sup>—it could just as well be that an imageless text

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<sup>409</sup> Lindenmeyer, 481.

<sup>410</sup> Lindenmeyer, 481.

<sup>411</sup> Scott, “Identity, Interactivity, and Performativity in Michelle Citron’s *Queer Feast*,” 3.

<sup>412</sup> Smart-Grosvenor, *Vibration Cooking or, The Travel Notes of a Geechee Girl*, 130.



was more easily and cheaply published. Unlike race and (as Citron explores in *Jewish Looks* [2001]) ethnicity, sexuality is not inherently visible. LGBTQ+ subjects have thus for generations taken great pains with visual signifiers, and this (in/)visibility is an important element in each of the narratives about sexuality in *Mixed Greens*, an element Citron approaches not just through hair, make-up, and costuming, but right down to the literal mediums on which she captures her subjects.

With its emphasis on the visual, however, Citron's work also calls attention to the ways in which moving-image representation falls short: first, although food is an undeniably photogenic subject, the complexities of the *identities* signified by said food are virtually impossible to capture in a visual medium alone. In *Apple Pie*, all of the conversations from which we are meant to construct a narrative of identity occur "offscreen," as it were, and we are left without visual cues of any kind aside from the mouthwatering preparations of the eponymous dessert. While *Mixed Greens* contains abundant visual representations of LGBTQ+ life over several decades, on the other hand, much of the material remains somewhat ambiguous and the images frequently exceed our attempts or abilities to define them.<sup>413</sup> In the end, both *Apple Pie* and *Mixed Greens* suggest that despite all of the energy that is put into maintaining clear visual signifiers of sexual orientation and gender identity in the community, some of the most important elements of identity (and the overlaps or slippages between them) are simply not photographable.

Finally, while Citron has engaged with and added significantly to her own personal/family archive, "the" archive(s) of queer representation, and the canon of feminist experimental filmmaking, the artist's use of new media also poses a significant threat to the long-term conservation of this material. While housing the work online where it is universally available and free solves a common problem of *access* to experimental media, this access may be short-lived. Digital media does not exactly have a reputation for permanence. Citron herself admits to "having very complicated feelings about working in digital right now," because "[t]he fact is that *the interactive material is not durable...* [and] I actually hate... the fact that [digital is] so ephemeral."<sup>414</sup> Sadly, the cracks are already beginning to show. In my own interactions with the *Queer Feast* quartet over the course of several years, bits and pieces of the digital work (namely, a handful of videos in *Mixed Greens*) have begun to disappear or malfunction. Worse,

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<sup>413</sup> Citron, *The Ambiguous Archive: An Interview with Michelle Citron*.

<sup>414</sup> Citron, my emphasis.



the Adobe Flash Media Player—the once ubiquitous medium for online video streaming, which is required to view any of the *Queer Feast* content—will be completely phased out by the end of 2020.

#### 4.5 The Radical Interactivity of the Gastrographic Text

Smart-Grosvenor's *Vibration Cooking* and Citron's *Queer Feast* quartet deconstruct conventional generic and rhetorical forms and harness contemporary theories about language and representation to innovate new modes of personal storytelling that marry the autoethnographic and the auto-archival. Smart-Grosvenor's deployment of an African American linguistic vernacular and subversive humor underscore her potent racial critiques, and Citron, for her part, is extremely well-versed in postmodern feminist theories about the instability of the gendered subject as well as psychological and psychoanalytical theories of the construction of identity and memory. Formally, they forego traditionally coherent or linear narrative structure in favor of fragmentation, and while their use of (often decontextualized) vignettes remains unusual in the realm of autobiography, this formal choice actually resonates with women's historical use of recipes and recipe collections as "a form of episodic and anecdotal, non-chronological and often communal gendered life writing,"<sup>415</sup> thus enabling their interventions to be read in conversation with centuries of women's life writing.

By including recipes in her memoir, Smart-Grosvenor negates reader passivity, inviting us into her world by encouraging us to cook the dishes that are important to both her Gullah Geechee family and her nomadic, bohemian friends. While the inclusion of recipes is almost an inevitability in the genre of gastrography, here the author's encouragement to forget the rules and measurements in the kitchen and to cook instead by *vibration* encourages—if, indeed, the reader takes on the challenge and participates fully—a more sensuous, embodied, and transportive engagement with the author's subjective experiences than can be had through reading alone. While on the one hand, this process of "cooking up" the author's subjectivity could be read as a form of "culinary tourism,"<sup>416</sup> Smart-Grosvenor's strategy has the power to create in the reader a more empathic connection to the author and her world, which is in itself a radical potentiality.

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<sup>415</sup> Vasvari, "Introduction to and Bibliography for the Study of Alimentary Life Writing and Recipe Writing as War Literature," 2.

<sup>416</sup> Long, "Culinary Tourism: A Folkloristic Perspective on Eating and Otherness."



The interactivity of both *Mixed Greens* and *Apple Pie*, the invitation to engage with the works in order to form a coherent narrative and/of identity from their unruly fragments, is to my mind one of Citron's most notable interventions in the context of gastrography. This interactivity is also a key element that ties these works to Citron's earlier experiments in *Home Movies and Other Necessary Fictions* and *Daughter Rite* as well as to their literary forbears like *Vibration Cooking* or *The Alice B. Toklas Cook Book* where, as I suggest above, the inclusion of recipes is an invitation to "cook up" the author's subjectivity as a way of encouraging empathic engagement and understanding across class, race, and gendered lines. Not unlike the process of putting ingredients together in a particular combination and order, the processes by which narrative(s) of identity are constructed involves piecing together the many fragments of a subject's past and present lives—decontextualized moments captured in family photographs and home movies, fragments of memory, paper artefacts like diaries and official documents, family lore, and other disjointed bits of (physical and mental) material—to create a coherent narrative and thus a "cohered... sense of self."<sup>417</sup> Citron approaches her own personal storytelling with an uncommon depth of knowledge about the processes of identity formation, and her translation of the mechanics of this process into her art is fascinating. Taken as a whole, *Daughter Rite*, *Home Movies and Other Necessary Fictions*, *American as Apple Pie* and *Mixed Greens* encompass Citron's own journey of identity formation, and the increasing complexity of each work's interactivity demands increasingly more engagement and self-awareness from her interlocutor (spectator/reader/user).

Asked to make narrative sense of forty-eight individual audiovisual fragments, the participant-spectator of *Mixed Greens* must draw on memory, deductive reasoning, and other faculties to (try to) piece together a (more or less) logical story. Drawing on her own experiences conducting archival research—a pursuit that, for her, was driven by remarkably similar drive (the production of a narrative) and process (making connections between untidy, unruly fragments of information) to identity formation—Citron was inspired to build intentional ambiguity into her work, leaving room, as did Smart-Grosvenor (though for entirely different reasons), for improvisation, chance, and, perhaps most significantly, failure.<sup>418</sup> In this way, Citron harnesses

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<sup>417</sup> Citron, *Home Movies and Other Necessary Fictions*, 44.

<sup>418</sup> As she discusses in her interview with Price and Sutherland, the digital format enables Citron to replicate the often ambiguous nature of the archive by inscribing the possibility of not solving the puzzle, of not accessing a crucial piece of data that might shed light on how these seemingly unrelated narrative



the interactive potential of digital technologies to replicate the typically internal, unconscious processes of identity formation and the unpredictable nature of the archive in a more literal and visible way. Ideally, in the process of piecing together logical narratives of identity for the subjects in the text, the user will recognize how s/he does the same for herself in her own life. If Smart-Grosvenor and the authors of other literary gastrographies invite the reader to “cook up” their subjectivities, Citron’s project is no less ambitious in its use of interactive media to deconstruct and ultimately replicate complex processes of identity formation.

Gastrography enables us to see familiar texts (cookbooks) and practices (the cooking and sharing of meals) in a new light, pointing to the privileged place of food in identity formation and its radical potential to invite or support empathy and engagement. Vertamae Smart-Grosvenor’s *Vibration Cooking* and Michelle Citron’s *Queer Feast* quartet are rebellious in their unorthodox appropriation of a traditional “women’s genre”—the recipe book—to question the conservative discourses of gender (and race, class, and sexuality) traditionally thought to be upheld in and by such artifacts. Their work illustrates the potential alternative discursive avenues opened up by experiments in food memoir for the exploration of identity as relational and culturally grounded, and it has offered a compelling opportunity to examine the intersection of autoethnographic and auto-archival production, synthesizing the discoveries and conclusions of the previous two chapters of this dissertation. For as long as women have been literate, they have embedded “connections to people, places, and the past... in the recipes [they] kept and exchanged,”<sup>419</sup> and Smart-Grosvenor and Citron have built on this legacy, narrating both personal and communal history and memory through literal recipes and/or metaphorically suggestive links with food, while expanding the representational possibilities of the genre.

My decision to conclude this study with gastrography and, more specifically, with *Mixed Greens* stems from the fact that this mode—especially in Citron’s hands—incorporates and embodies the key self-representational strategies that I have explored over the course of this dissertation: Citron appropriates auto-archival material, she subverts rules about “truth” and combines fictionalized and real stories, and her exploration of ethnic heritage, intergenerational trauma, and lesbian sexuality are always grounded in her own intimate experiences and personal

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threads are in fact connected. As Sutherland sums up, *Queer Feast* it is at once “about agency” and about “the failure of a certain agency” (Citron, *The Ambiguous Archive: An Interview with Michelle Citron*).  
<sup>419</sup> Theophano, *Eat My Words: Reading Women’s Lives through the Cookbooks They Wrote*, 8.



relationships. By selecting and performing a close reading of texts made at different moments in the artist's career and using different media, I have endeavored to articulate the nuances of self-representation through a lens of automediality, paying especially close attention to the ways in which the media of representation—in addition to the author's historical and sociocultural locatedness—shape identity-formation and -representation.

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Family legacies, cultural mythologies, and even something as seemingly banal as the food we eat all, for better or worse, shape who we are, inflecting the subject's relationship to and understanding of her individual identity and its relation to community. These pillars of the human experience, which are at once universal and deeply specific, can thus open a window into our most intimate *and* relational selves. Contemporary ideological discourses and dominant cultural formations of course also shape and discipline the individual subject, but their effects are not inescapable or unassailable; in fact, they often provide the very scaffolding on which the feminist artist builds her social critique. The choice to collect and deploy the ephemera of quotidian family life, for example, locates the autobiographical subject within the microcosm of the family, a surround in which women have conventionally and stereotypically been framed; however, this material is deployed in surprising ways that allow the subject to *reframe* and rewrite her experiences in relation to family and the gender roles enacted therein. The re-use of home movies, family photographs, and other auto-archival material in feminist self-representational texts encourages powerful deconstructions of domestic imagery and heterosexual, patriarchal family life while still leaving room for the nuances and complexity of individual lived experiences. Similar strategies are applied to the discourses that are intertwined with and shape women's relationships to something as concrete and tangible as food or as abstract as "truth." Such discourses are, in many cases, undermined, coopted, and exaggerated, as exemplified by the "trickster" strategies outlined in Chapter 3 through which "lies" and fictionalized strategies are deliberately and flagrantly used in nonfictional contexts by queer and BIPOC artists and authors as a pointed response to their disenfranchisement by gendered and racialized discourses about "truth," "authenticity," and "authority."



The “avant-folk” designation that I have used to describe these diverse texts has served two primary purposes. First, it provides an easily recognizable shorthand that places this body of work—whose socially radical interventions are enacted through formally radical techniques—squarely within a lineage of historical avant-garde movements, while simultaneously acknowledging their reclamation of traditional discursive practices and “folk” traditions. My use of this term also serves in an important way to *distinguish* the more accessible, politically engaged feminist avant-garde exemplified here from the *apolitical*, highly individual “visionary” and structuralist modes that dominated the masculinist American avant-garde in the second half of the twentieth century. Unlike the work of many of their male counterparts, feminist interventions, even—or perhaps especially—those that are self-representational, are inseparable from the political and are steeped in the collective and relational qualities of women’s identities.

The appearance and development of the feminist avant-folk self-representational text coincided, not coincidentally, with the dismantling of the so-called “master narrative.” The recognition that autobiographical, ethnographic, and archival representational practices have historically upheld white, colonial, hetero-patriarchal regimes of knowledge and power began to take root in the 1970s alongside a confluence of other important paradigm shifts brought about by the intersection of feminist consciousness-raising with the activism of other emerging identity movements and the development of postmodern, post-structural, and postcolonial schools of thought, all of which sought to dismantle and redefine conventional understandings of authority, truth, and identity. This dissertation was conceived as a project that would trace the emergence at this unique moment in American history of three subversive, counter-discursive approaches to (self-)representation in feminist art and literature and their reverberations into the twenty-first century. It seemed clear to me that what I had identified as auto-archival, fictional autoethnographic, and gastrographic (self-)representational practices could be contextualized in relation to these social, cultural, and political transformations, analyzed through a lens of automediality, and added to a growing taxonomy of feminist artistic practices. The reality, of course, has proven to be much more complex. While these terms have indeed proven to be useful designations in the discussion of the diverse manifestations of feminist life narrative, it became clear as this study evolved that these modes could not be cleanly separated into three distinct categories. They are, rather, in dialogue with one another, overlapping and intersecting in surprising ways that speak to the complex hybridity of late twentieth-century feminist self-



representational practices. Auto-archival strategies test the limits of photographic “evidence” and referential “truth,” speaking to the cultural myths and fictions of the American Family as ideological institution even as they enable the author to perform a highly personal media archaeology of the self to deconstruct the fictions and myths of *their own* idiosyncratic and singular family. Fictional autoethnographic strategies and gastrographic texts, for their part, enable a reconceptualization of the “auto-archive” to include oral traditions like the intergenerational sharing of folklore or of family recipes, and gastrography’s inquiry into the literal and metaphoric functions of food in the identity-formation of self and community is grounded in feminist, autoethnographic discourse and practice. In other words, the divisions between the chapters, like the works themselves, is not always clear cut—the generic indeterminacy, fluidity, and hybridity of the works making strict definitions impossible.

There are, to be sure, specific elements that resonate across and between different texts, contexts, and media, among them the relational nature of women’s identities, the crucial role played by foremothers—real or imagined—in narratives of identity, and the overarching tactility of such works. Indeed, whether the artist is handling personal photographs (and other artefacts) or food, these particular modes of representation are always grounded in the embodied and the material, lived realities of their authors and, in my own experience, they can spark similar impulses in their interlocutor. Over the many years it took to complete this project, I found myself paging through my own (often melodramatically *tortured*) adolescent diaries, exchanging (and fact-checking) memories with my siblings, reexamining the photographic evidence from my own childhood and discovering relics from the childhoods of my parents and even of *their* parents. It brought me to a shoebox filled with delicate, yellowing letters written in an elegant script between my American grandmother and her new French in-laws in the 1950s, for example, and to the handwritten recipes she left behind—carefully tucked away in an unassuming small plastic box filled with index cards and newspaper cut-outs—recipes that had travelled with her through many moves across France, Algeria, and the Southern United States. I even found myself attempting to cook up some of the gourmet dishes—the rich Quiche Lorraine and dense, perfectly sweet apple cake—that I remembered from my childhood, reflecting on the fact that her love of good food, like my own, was at times marred by bouts of body dysmorphia and disordered eating. She passed away while I was working on this project, and we regrettably never got a chance to speak about the pressures or demands—emotional, physical, familial—



with which our shared gender saddled her or about her own ambitions for her life. However, my own private memories of this glamorous, graceful, and fierce woman, in addition to the personal material remnants she left behind have left an indelible impression on me and my understanding of the complexities of “femininity” and of feminism.

The texts of identity—often identities seemingly far removed from my own—that I have explored in this dissertation, in other words, have not only invited me to bear witness to their stories, they have also prompted my own unexpected reckoning with identity, a reckoning that shed light on just how entangled my sense of self is with the stories constructed by and about the impressive women of my family. That, ultimately, is the power and importance of such texts, whose stories of Self and community are at once highly personal, specific, and idiosyncratic and almost universally relatable, both accessible and challenging; they at once speak to the possibility of “women’s forms” of knowledge production and identity formation and emphatically resist essentialism. As a body of work, they represent a wholesale repudiation of the historical disenfranchisement of women’s stories and a rejection of the realm of frivolity to which “women’s genres” or vernacular modes of self-inscription have been (and, in many ways, continue to be) banished. This recognition translates into strategies of representation through which the self is mediated and (re)presented in highly self-conscious ways that challenge and subvert representational legacies and priorities of white, imperialist, hetero-patriarchal discourses and regimes of knowledge and even the discourses of conventional white, middle-class feminism. It speaks to the sophisticated understanding of postmodern, postcolonial, post-structural, psychoanalytic and other theories of identity formation developed by feminist artists in their work from the 1970s through the turn of the century and beyond, while exemplifying the fact that their interventions do not rest on high theory alone, and are never isolated, abstracted, or indicative of a singular visionary perspective; rather, they are always grounded in, shaped by, or in dialogue with the author’s lived reality and her embodied experience and with her relational sense of identity with/in family and community.



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