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# Autobiographics

## Self-Representation: Instabilities in Gender, Genre, and Identity

There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender.
—Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*

A genre, whether literary or not, is nothing other than the codification of discursive properties.
—Tzvetan Todorov, *Genres in Discourse*

You are of course never yourself.
—Gertrude Stein, *Everybody's Autobiography*

Autobiography provokes fantasies of the real. Its burden is not only to represent gender, genre, and identity in any particular lived and imagined configuration, but to posit a ground from which that configuration is thought to emerge. Gender, genre, and identity and, therefore, autobiography, are similarly "grounded" in metaphysics, in the belief that representation is layered over substance. As my epigraphs suggest, however, this seeming *real* is, in no small part, fantasy. In several books devoted to (self-) representation, Gertrude Stein questioned how autobiography could be produced and what effects its production would have on the identity of the autobiographer.[1] Stein discovered how representing oneself to oneself and to others creates enough discursive spacing to allow the autobiographer to see the discontinuities in "identity" and to construe its representation as a

[1] The following works are central to an understanding of Gertrude Stein's experiments in self-representation, autobiography, and biography: *The Making of Americans: Being a History of a Family's Progress, 1906–1908* (1925; New York: Something Else Press, 1966); *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (1933; New York: Vintage, 1961); *Everybody's Autobiography* (1937; London: Virago, 1985); and *Fernhurst, Q.E.D., and Other Early Writing* (New York: Liveright, 1971).



problem in writing. Indeed, autobiography wraps up the interrupted and fragmentary discourses of identity (those stories we tell ourselves and are told, which hold us together as "persons") and presents them as persons themselves. Autobiography as a genre, however, has come to be identified less with these discourses and the act of piecing them together, than with master narratives of conflict resolution and development, whose hero—the overrepresented Western white male—identifies his perspective with a God's-eye view and, from that divine height, sums up his life. Scholars of autobiography have developed this master narrative into an interpretive grid and judged as worthy those autobiographers who represent themselves within its limits.

The limits of value in autobiography are demonstrated by the conflation of the value of the text with the value of the autobiographer. That is, the notion of what an autobiography is, which involves a judgment rendered within a network of identity-constructing discourses (such as the spiritual and legal confessions, certain religious and philosophical practices, psychoanalysis, and so on) is historically bound up with what we understand to be identity itself. Insofar as any notion of autobiography is necessarily enmeshed with the politically charged and historically varying notions of what a person is, we can focus on autobiography as a way to understand how (self-) representation and authority get linked up with projects that encode gender and genre. The encoding of gender and genre in the case of autobiography can be focused initially in this way: gender is produced through institutions and discourses that seek to divide and differently authorize persons as "men" and "women"; genre is produced by stabilizing and seeming to answer the questions: What is a "self" that it can be represented? What is autobiography that it can represent a self? We can see the ways in which autobiography is produced within discourses of identity that are powerfully informed by concerns about gender when we ask the definitional question that links gender with genre: What is women's autobiography?

The question turns for an answer in two directions: to its generic base—"What is autobiography?"—and to a question posed in increasingly sophisticated ways by feminists: "What are 'women'?"[2] Neither has a commonsensical answer and both have tumultuous recent critical histories. Autobiography, a discursive hybrid, has only

[2] See especially Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*; and Denise Riley, *"Am I That Name?" Feminism and the Category of "Women" in History* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), for discussions of the conceptual, historical, and political instabilities in the categories "woman" and "women."

recently achieved the kind of critical respect and interest indicated by university press publications and panels at professional conferences, and it seems to have done so rather suddenly. In a recent book, one critic claims that suddenly everyone is interested in autobiography.[3] Yet, what it *is* is up for grabs. The struggle for the meaning of both gender and genre, a category autobiography still strains, is being waged, as it long has been, in the practice and criticism of autobiography. The following illustration of differing theoretical positions indicates one interpretive contest. At one end of the spectrum of interpretation, a poststructuralist position developed through deconstruction reads autobiography tropologically and construes the self as an effect of language, a textual construction, the figuration of what we call identity. At the other, a feminist position grounds autobiographical form and meaning in the experiences of the women who write autobiography and looks to women's lives for the framework to understand self-representational texts. But the analogy to a spectrum supports only one version of the debate, for feminist and poststructuralist critical positions refuse to delimit even this single controversy in autobiography studies. They form, rather, open sets with some shared, or partially shared, figures. What is significant here is how both feminism and poststructuralism become involved in producing the discourse of identity when both address the definitional questions related to autobiography.

Both gender and genre as they converge in autobiography are produced through a variety of discourses and practices that depict "the individual" in relation to "truth," "the real," and "identity." This relationship is no less constructed when it relies on "experience" for authority than when the individual is construed wholly as a reading effect, as a subject position, or as an object of discursive production. Following Michel Foucault (who described sex as a technology) and Teresa de Lauretis (who analyzed the technologies of gender) deeper into the technologies of autobiography (of self *and* self-representation), we may describe how certain discourses and practices produce what we have come to call autobiography and the autobiographical subject, as well as the values that subtend this category.[4]

Autobiography has been founded upon principles of identity: ontological, epistemological, and more generally, organizational. To

[3] Sidonie Smith, *A Poetics of Women's Autobiography: Marginality and the Fictions of Self-Representation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 3.

[4] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1: *An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Random House, 1978); Teresa de Lauretis, *Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film, and Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987).



question whether or not there is a self behind the autobiographical representation of self, a gender behind the representation of gender, a genre behind each expression of genre, challenges the founding notion of identity on which autobiography depends. To some extent, this questioning of identity (through gender and genre as they are represented in autobiography) goes beyond questions about autobiography's referentiality to challenge how we understand autobiography. I grant that autobiography's task is always to strive to produce "truth" and that cultures code this truth production through discourses that can be judged as truthful. If so, gender would be a technology of truth that is policed, regulated, enforced. And genre, too, insofar as I take autobiography to have a history as a genre—hence an effective legacy of determining which texts are and are not autobiographical—is a technology that is read for truthfulness. We can use the notion of technology to focus on the discursivity of "identity," that is, on identity as a network of representational practices in which the production of truth is everywhere on trial.

Here I would assert with Foucault that "what is at issue" in autobiography, broadly, is the overall "discursive fact" (*History of Sexuality* 1:11), and what is at stake is the relation between discourses of power and identity. For the autobiographers I study here, whose subjectivities and truths reveal the limits of dominant notions of identity, the "discursive fact" of being interpellated or not interpellated as a subject had (and continues to have) a rippling effect throughout the historically varied technologies of autobiography. That these autobiographers' identities could not be inscribed in relation to dominant forms of truth telling—or, when they were, were not interpreted so—broadens our notion of "discursive fact" to include the material consequences that precede, coincide with, and follow self-representation. In order to emphasize this discursivity and its effect on the interpretation of autobiography, one could pursue Foucault's strategy of "locat[ing] the forms of power, the channels it takes, and the discourses it permeates . . . in short, the 'polymorphous techniques of power'" (11). For de Lauretis, whose work both challenges and extends Foucault's "technological" inquiry into the category of gender, power is exercised over and through representations of gender. One critical aspect of de Lauretis's method is an understanding of gender as (self-) representation, drawn from Louis Althusser's influential theory of ideological interpellation.[5] De Lauretis wishes to theorize a "female-

[5] Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," trans. Ben Brewster, in *Critical Theory since 1965*, ed. Hazard Adams and Leroy Searle (Tallahassee: Florida State University Press, 1986), 239–50.

gendered subject" who is positioned both inside and outside the ideology of gender; a subject interpellated as a "woman" who recognizes and knows herself, to some extent, through her culture's gender codes but who can also critique this coding and read gender as a construction. De Lauretis presses this argument less as a way of further alienating women from the dominant cultural codes of gender (though this is certainly one of its effects), than as a conceptual framework through which to reconceive the subject as a site of excessive and oppositional solicitations and markings. Her feminist theory of gender views female-gendered and feminist subjects as discursive products of the technologies of gender. For de Lauretis, the recognition of gender as a construction follows the logic of consciousness raising: it politicizes the subject.

To pursue the Althusserian connection, both the state ideological apparatuses and the micropolitical and sociocultural technologies of gender overwhelm the subject. They disallow its "coherence." The subject is crisscrossed by a multiplicity of "discourses, positions and meanings" (de Lauretis, *Technologies*, x), none of which totalizes the subject. Thus, the "feminine" subject immersed in the ideology of gender is not the only gendered construction available to women. Indeed, the various positionings of women within and against constructions of gender provides a powerful illustration for claims against the "naturalness" of gender. Throughout *The Technologies of Gender*, de Lauretis argues for a feminist subject and its "inscription in certain critical textual practices" (xi) as both a description of how gender construction functions and a prescription for how it can be made to "malfunction" through feminist intervention. I take genre to be one of the critical textual practices that de Lauretis's analysis can illuminate, especially as generic criticism deploys variously "gendered" rhetoric and criteria for evaluation. Given Althusser's insight about self-recognition as a feature of ideology—one is hailed as a subject and waves a hand of acknowledgment in return—we can hypothesize the significance of nonrecognition as an act of resistance, a refusal to speak when spoken to in the language of address. To refuse the location of subject, to speak ex cathedra, has been an underinspected mode of self-representation. For some autobiographers, when autobiography seems to collect under a single name the related ideologies of identity, power, and history, the refusal to identify self-representation with that name marks the site of resistance. Similarly, some autobiographers who, for a variety of reasons, do not recognize themselves within dominant representations and self-representations of gender refuse to represent themselves as "knowable" through gender. But the history of such refusals, a history indicated through absences in traditional studies of autobiography, is written against the grain of a powerful technology of identity.



The law of genre which defines much of traditional autobiography studies has been formulated in such a way as to exclude or make supplemental a discussion of gender.[6] The order of analysis has gone something like this: "First, we'll figure out what autobiography is; then we'll figure out what women's autobiography is." The appeal of such a method needs to be inspected immediately, especially since the metaphors of law on which it depends tend to generate critical narratives: once one has adopted figures such as "the law of genre" to describe cultural production, the oppositional figure of the outlaw—here, the woman writer as the protagonist of her own cultural narrative—must emerge, and isn't she all-too-familiar in this role? In

[6] What I am characterizing as traditional autobiography studies designates the pre-structuralist writing about autobiography which more or less ended its hegemony by the early 1970s. Its methods and premises have been recuperated by a number of critics who began publishing on autobiography in the 1970s. My use of the word "traditional," then, does not denote "past"; rather, it characterizes criticism that shares the humanist bent I outline. Specifically, "traditional" interpretations of autobiography take the self as a coherent and unified producer of truth and meaning and claim that this "self," as in Georges Gusdorf's significant article, is formed outside a community. See Gusdorf, "Conditions and Limits of Autobiography," trans. James Olney, in Olney, ed., *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*, 28–49. One critical precursor of the renewed interest in autobiography is Roy Pascal, *Design and Truth in Autobiography* (London: Routledge, 1960). A survey of important work contributing to the transformation of autobiography studies would include Elizabeth W. Bruss, *Autobiographical Acts: The Changing Situation of a Literary Genre* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976); Spengemann, *Forms of Autobiography*, with a valuable bibliographical essay; James Olney, ed., *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980); a groundbreaking feminist anthology edited by Estelle C. Jelinek, *Women's Autobiography: Essays in Criticism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980); followed by Domna Stanton's collection, *The Female Autograph* (1984; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987); Karl Weintraub, *The Value of the Individual: Self and Circumstance in Autobiography* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978); and Paul John Eakin, *Fictions in Autobiography: Studies in the Art of Self-Invention* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985). See Sidonie Smith, *A Poetics of Women's Autobiography*, for a lucid and learned analysis of this history and the impact it has for feminist criticism of autobiography.

Feminist criticism of autobiography uses gender as a category of analysis. Some excellent recent work includes Bella Brodzki and Celeste Schenck, eds., *Life/Lines: Theorizing Women's Autobiography* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988); Shari Benstock, ed., *The Private Self* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988); Nancy K. Miller, *Subject to Change: Reading Feminist Writing* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988); Smith, *Poetics of Women's Autobiography*; Felicity Nussbaum, *The Autobiographical Subject: Gender and Ideology in Eighteenth-Century England* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989). New work is coming out even as I write these footnotes.

short, the law of genre creates outlaws. Although she was already lurking in the discourse of law and "crime," such a metaphor and its ensuing narratives efface other analyses. Primarily, the outlaw image immediately obscures how women's fairly visible and sometimes highly visible cultural contributions were marginalized, as well as how real cultural struggles of regulation and control force some texts and persons to the margins. Struggles for interpretive power are waged not only *by* noncanonical genres and marginalized writers but *with* the very contexts that make such struggles possible and necessary. Indeed, as I will show in a later chapter on the mystics, women's self-representation cannot strictly be considered as an outlaw or marginal discourse, because of its shaping influence on how the church came to know, interpret, and regulate religious experience through the confession. As a figure for an interpretive strategy, the law-outlaw metaphor is useful; yet, as a metaphor for women's writing, it tends to reinforce the conception that women are always already banished to the margins, and it may naturalize the practices that construct margin and center and then relegate some women to those margins.[7] Many women autobiographers, wary of the problem to varying degrees, have produced within the dominant mode an alternative autobiographicality that attests to the entrenched patriarchal view, reinforced by traditional studies of autobiography, that powerful cultural institutions and the very possibilities of self-representation are interpreted as the same discourses.

The renewed interest in autobiography has been energized by various contemporary interests in the subject, language, and history. I agree with the critical insight that texts perform a complex kind of cultural work—never more so than when they seek to represent the

[7] For two different views on marginalization, see bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (Boston: South End, 1984); and Alicia Ostriker, *Stealing the Language: The Emergence of Women's Poetry in America* (Boston: Beacon, 1986). Important work that explores these cultural dynamics and constructs a context in which to read African-American, Chicano, and Native American autobiography includes William Andrews, *To Tell a Free Story: The First Century of African-American Autobiography, 1760–1865* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986); Arnold Krupat, *For Those Who Come After: A Study of Native American Autobiography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985); Françoise Lionnet, *Autobiographical Voices: Race, Gender, Self-Portraiture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989); Ramón Saldívar, *Chicano Narratives: The Dialectics of Difference* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990); Valerie Smith, *Self-Discovery and Authority in African-American Narratives* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987); Robert Steptoe, *From behind the Veil: A Study of African-American Narrative* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1979); Hertha Dawn Wong, *Sending My Heart Back across the Years: Tradition and Innovation in Native American Autobiography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).



"self." Insofar as a text forms a specific discursive instance of more generalized and determining modes of production, the text and its readers participate in the modes of production. Part of the work of any text is the reproduction of ideology. I continue to use Althusser's definition of ideology here to describe "the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence" (241).

But how does one identify? With what, precisely? And how does this sense of identification signify in autobiography? A text momentarily stabilizes ideology for a reader, allows her to identify with or against the persons and situations represented, to imagine the scene, and, in so doing, creates the conditions in which ideology is reproduced. Yet, I would argue that this identification is not the result of a face-to-face encounter between reader and autobiographer in which the text is the mediator. Rather, the identification of the reader's text with the writer's text results from their triangulation with ideology. The reader sees not so much herself in the autobiography as the representation of her position in relation to other familiar positions within cultural scripts. Put another way, readers read texts ideologically, but the critical effects of that reading are obliterated through the mechanism of identification.

In autobiography, identification entails reproducing the complex ideology of "identity," variously inflected in the categories of "personhood," "citizenship," "women," and so on. By identifying with an autobiography, the reader constructs an "imaginary relation" to the situation the text depicts. Autobiography as unproblematized "realism" licenses this seeming referentiality between the text and real life. Identification as a primary mode of reading, then, is precritical and reinforces the value-laden sorting of autobiographers into "same as" or "different from" the reading *I*. To read an autobiography in this way, then, is to participate in a "truth"-structuring discourse, to affirm the reality of the autobiography, to naturalize ideology, and to stabilize "truth" as if all these simply pointed to the "real conditions of existence." Given this strong statement, however, it is important to clarify the differing politics of identification as a reading strategy, particularly in this respect: With what ideology is the reader identifying? Dominant ideology is reproduced through the precritical reading practice of identification. The reader projects into the text and extrapolates from the text an imaginary relation to, on the one hand, another imaginary relation (the domain of the text) and, on the other, material reality. In so doing, in the case of autobiography, the reader remakes the subject of autobiography into an extension of reading practices and confers upon that subject the status of an object.

Readers at odds with the dominant ideology may use identification as a critical reading strategy, but the theory of this practice works differently. Clearly, for many readers the possibility of seeing not only some aspect of their lives but a member of their community represented in print may decisively alter their notions of what counts culturally, of what is possible. Hence, the representational politics of identification are not used only to maintain restrictive ideological values. For many gay and lesbian readers, for example, the pleasures of identification are considerable, especially in a representational and legal culture of constraint, and many of the autobiographers I consider have been read to those productive ends. Imagine a reading practice that listens for another's voice, sees another's face even where sameness is sought, and searches not for the universal but for the specific, the unexchangeable. Identification, then, is contoured along the lines of the politics and possibilities in the cultural unfolding of self-representational writing.

As an example of reading strategies that can be usefully applied to autobiography, de Lauretis gains considerable theoretical leverage by situating the subject in relation to interimplicated networks and by theorizing the contradictory and opposing grounds on which (self-) representation must occur. She defines the subject as "en-gendered in the experiencing of race and class, as well as sexual, relations; a subject, therefore, not unified but rather multiple, and not so much divided as contradicted" (*Technologies*, 2). Gender, as de Lauretis has shown, should not be conceptualized as sexual difference, which boils down to woman's difference from man, but as both "representation and as self representation, . . . the product of various social technologies . . . and of institutionalized discourses, epistemologies, and critical practices, as well as practices of daily life" (2). Gender is not a static category, nor—and this is crucial—does it attach only to women. An analysis of the technologies of autobiography also allows for a focus on the formation and expression of race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and class—in short, all aspects of identity which are represented, in varying degrees, through and in relation to the discourses of gender. Gender as the category that seems to sum women up, indeed, legitimates and necessitates the very category of women, can be further externalized and inspected by an analysis of the category of "women." As Denise Riley argues (*"Am I That Name"*), "women" is not as stable, as inevitable (let alone natural) a category as it seems. Indeed, according to Riley's historically oriented argument, it never has been. The political uses to which such constructions have been put is based less on "nature" than on arguments that claim a natural



right. These same contradictions in the single subject "woman" and the plural subject "women" to a large degree structure what I take to be the technologies of autobiography.

To apply de Lauretis's formulation concerning gender and representation to autobiography, we can say that the autobiographical subject is a representation and its representation *is* its construction. The autobiographical subject is produced not by experience but by autobiography. This specification does not diminish the autobiographer; rather, it situates her or him as an agent in autobiographical production. For the discourses of truth and identity are varied and complex and when an autobiographer wishes, for example, to represent herself in opposition to a certain standard of "truth," I would argue that she knows what she's doing *rhetorically* and is not merely telling what happened. An emphasis on the rhetorical dimension of autobiography indicates its performative agency. Agency, as performance (that is, as discourse), has been identified as the action of the subject. How might autobiographical agency, identified in the rhetoric of truth telling, recast the autobiographical subject?

Autobiographical identity and truth are produced in relation to, if not precisely through, a subject I may now describe as "contradictory." That is, the subject is not simply what autobiography seeks to represent, as if it existed prior to the text. In saying this I am not invoking the specific arguments that drive philosophical discussions about perception and knowledge, namely, that the differences between persons and texts, between language and reality, are constitutive and not secondary. Nor am I suggesting that the *person* who writes an autobiography is *created* by discourse. Rather, I locate the subject of autobiography in relation to discourses of identity and truth. For that reason, I do not understand autobiography to be any experientially truer than other representations of the self or to offer an identity any less constructed than that produced by other forms of representation simply because the autobiographer intends the subject to correspond to herself or himself.

Much autobiography criticism acknowledges an interpretive division between those who take autobiography as a factual document and those who view it as much more closely, and less damningly, aligned with fiction. This very division, however, results from premises about autobiography's relation to "truth" in conjunction with premises about the "truthful" and "authentic" subject position that autobiography itself constructs. The ethical and political meanings of this subject position contain powerful contradictions: whereas "truth" is the neutral term toward which all persons strive (this is, by human-

ist definitions, our task and our reward), some are already farther ahead in the climb and stand to reap more massive material rewards for their efforts, while others may climb a bit behind or to the side of those persons who are privileged through their proximity to the alignment of "truth" with race, class, gender, and sexual orientation. Some stories are criminalized from the start when the amount of "truth" one can claim devolves from the amount of cultural authority already attached, within a terrain of dominance, to the person speaking and the place from which s/he speaks. This cultural terrain, in which truth represents both a place where some may not stand and a language that some are not authorized to speak, is mapped onto the practice and study of autobiography through publishing practices, college curricula, community reading programs, and a range of practices through which we are interpellated as readers and writers of autobiography.[8]

Thus it is inadequate to understand the contradictions generated by the demands of "truth" production through the deceptively neat binary of truth/falsehood or to explain that subject's authority through this implicitly juridical grid. Feminist theories of self-representation and subjectivity offer more shaded and internally differential interpretations as well as a way to explore what happens formally when the instabilities in gender represented by the category "women" and the instabilities in genre manifest in the category "autobiography" converge. Frequently, as in Audre Lorde's *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (1983), the search for a way to represent this instability forms the grounds of autobiographical experimentation. In *Zami*, Lorde sketches her parents' immigrant history in Harlem and traces her own growing up from early childhood to adulthood in the late 1950s. Arriving in New York from the West Indies in 1924, her mother and father fashion a home from the practices, memories, and rituals they bring with them. Trips to the market for the familiar fruits and spices of what is increasingly presented as the mother's home, become an

[8] In 1989, as part of a Maine Humanities Council grant that helped to fund a conference on autobiography at the University of Southern Maine, I designed a reading series for public libraries in New England. The person in charge of those programs in Maine resisted the inclusion of Carolyn Kay Steedman's *Landscape for a Good Woman* because of Steedman's analysis of class, asserting that this emphasis, while important to British readers, would be lost on Maine readers because the United States is not a class-stratified society. The book stayed in the series, and I elaborated the significance of Steedman's critique of class, though I cannot say that either the inclusion of the book or my description of it was successful in framing the issue of class. The institutional assumption governing the reading series was that readers prefer "good, easy" reads that reproduce rather than challenge ideology.



exercise in nostalgia for a distant island that Audre the child knows as little and with as much longing as she knows her mother's body. Reinventing the island home, a "home" Lorde never knew, becomes a central feature of her mythmaking project in which what is not yet visible propels the autobiographer into a textuality of invention as well as documentation. The *topos* of autobiography—self/life/writing—is exchanged for the terrain of *biomythography*, Lorde's name for her form of writing. In a self-representational text subtitled *A New Spelling of My Name* Lorde's renaming of her text and her self creates a representational space where homes, identities, and names have mythic qualities.

In her foreword to *Wild Women in the Whirlwind*, and in reference to the systematic devaluation and erasure of black women's cultural contributions, Lorde writes: "It's not that we haven't always been here, since there was a here. It is that the letters of our names have been scrambled when they were not totally erased, and our fingerprints upon the handles of history have been called the random brushings of birds."[9] I want to use Lorde's interpretation of the historical silencing of black women's writing as a way to contextualize her emphasis on renaming and new spellings. If, as Lorde suggests, the problem is not with the presence of black women but with their visibility, not with writing but with the means of cultural expressivity, not, in short, with production but with power, then what is needed is a form of interpretation that rereads the misspellings, misnamings, and mistreatment of black women as oppression rather than as simple omission. In terms of autobiography, what does it mean always to have been here, "since there was a here," only to be constructed as nowhere or elsewhere by autobiography studies? And more to the point, how do we re-member—which I take to imply both the act of memory and the restoration of erased persons and texts as bodies of evidence—that place, that "here"? As Lorde defines this project in *Zami*, it requires us to "[move] history beyond nightmare into structures for the future."[10] Lorde re-members as myth a history that has been forgotten and destroyed.

In the transposition of autobiography to biomythography, the self,

[9] Audre Lorde, Foreword to *Wild Women in the Whirlwind: Afra-American Culture and the Contemporary Literary Renaissance*, ed. Joanne M. Braxton and Andrée Nicola (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1990), xi. For a discussion that situates Lorde's project in relation to an overall black diaspora, see Chinosole, "Audre Lorde and the Matrilineal Diaspora," in *Wild Women*, 379–94.

[10] Audre Lorde, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (Trumansburg, N.Y.: Crossing, 1983), acknowledgments.

"auto," is renamed "myth" and shifted from the beginning to the center of the "new spelling." Lorde's mythmaking attaches less, then, to the life she retells than to the self who can tell it. Central to this mythic self is her place in a history where she can feel at home, in particular ways, with women. The emotional and representational focus lies between the hunger for language, for adequate meaning, expressed in a phrase that could well function as a signature clause for the book, "but my heart ached and ached for something I could not name" (85), and the desire for a place replete with the mythic qualities of home: "But underneath it all as I was growing up, *home* was still a sweet place somewhere else which they had not managed to capture yet on paper, nor to throttle and bind up between the pages of a schoolbook" (14). Between the hunger for language and the desire for home, Lorde builds a mythic image of herself in relation to mythic, historical, and potential lesbians: "When I was growing up, *powerful woman* equaled something else quite different from ordinary woman, from simply 'woman.' It certainly did not, on the other hand, equal 'man.' What then? What was the third designation? . . . I believe that there have always been Black dykes around—in the sense of powerful and women-oriented women—who would rather have died than use that name for themselves. And that includes my momma" (15). Lorde is concerned throughout *Zami* with finding an adequate form to represent herself in relation to her mother and other women, a form that will claim the designation "lesbian" for the power women possess.

Lorde's first act of renaming involves a simply orthographical operation: "I did not like the tail of the Y hanging down below the line in Audrey, and would always forget to put it on, which used to disturb my mother greatly" (24). Such a decisive removal of what hangs down, the unattractively phallic *y*, prefigures a more comprehensive renaming. Lorde renames her biomythographical subject and herself "Zami. A Carriacou name for women who work together as friends and lovers" (255). Because Lorde works to rename the signing self, the *auto*graphical aspect of autobiography, and not to discover its origin, her self-representation is antidevelopmental and even, in the context of traditional autobiography, antiontological. For her identity derives through the challenges to incorporate the nonidentical, other woman. Lorde writes in the epilogue: "Every woman I have ever loved has left her print upon me, where I loved some invaluable piece of myself apart from me—so different that I had to stretch and grow in order to recognize her. And in that growing, we came to separation, that place where work begins. Another meeting" (255). "That place where work begins," with its historical and mythical resonances, is figured as the mother's West Indian birthplace: Carriacou. It is an especially difficult place to locate. In a footnote to a discussion of the sounds, smells, sights, and meanings of Carriacou, Lorde writes: "Years later, as partial requirement for a degree in library science, I did a detailed comparison of atlases, their merits and particular strengths. I used, as one of the foci of my project, the isle of Carriacou. It appeared only once, in the *Atlas of the Encyclopedia Britannica*, which has always prided itself upon the accurate cartology of its colonies. I was twenty-six years old before I found Carriacou upon a map" (14).



*Zami* pulls at the coherence of autobiography, refuses the identity of its name, constructs and claims a subject position that renders genre and gender codes unintelligible by looking to other textual forms for self-representation and other geographies for identity. The traditional development of the male autobiographical self begins in relationship (to a person, a family, a place) but develops into an understanding of his separateness from others, the nonidentical correspondence of relationship, the self-identical foundation of the proper name. Thus the autobiographical self closes the hermeneutic circle on others and rests on the mimesis of the self as self-naming and self-named, where identity has its meaning in the identical relationship between self and name. In contrast, the ontological status of the autobiographical self is everywhere questioned and, ultimately, nowhere bound for too long in *Zami*.

Lorde begins using destabilization and the mobility it produces in the prologue, a half-page italicized speculation on family, sexuality, and identity, which explores graphically what in Adrienne Rich's terms is the "geography closest in—the body." Lorde begins: "I have always wanted to be both man and woman, to incorporate the strongest and richest parts of my mother and father within/into me—to share valleys and mountains upon my body the way the earth does in hills and peaks" (7). The imagined geography that links land to body also links parents to child. The image is clearly incorporative, but instead of offering a single metaphor or emblem that Lorde will pursue through a recounting of her history, the image sets the stage for further subject positioning. In the second sentence of the "biomythography," Lorde replaces a focus on landscape with the dynamic of desire that will refigure the familial and the communal she has just posited: "I would like to enter a woman the way any man can, and to be entered—to leave and to be left—to be hot and hard and soft all at the same time in the cause of our loving." In this image of identity as

penetrative sexuality, Lorde presents a series of mobile fantasy positions in which subject and object interchange, "to enter . . . and to be entered—to leave and to be left," which demonstrate how she might incorporate, make bodily, "mother and father within/into me." For Lorde, the fantasy of mobility is revealed as a politics as the eroticism becomes "the cause of our loving."

The sequence of subject positions shifts again in the prologue when the autobiographer as musing masturbator draws toward the "geography closest in": "When I sit and play in the waters of my bath I love to feel the deep inside parts of me, sliding and folded and tender and deep" (7). From the subject position of masturbation, Lorde reimagines the legacy of sexual difference so that it does not translate into heterosexuality: "I have always wanted to be both man and woman, to incorporate the strongest and richest parts of my mother and father within/into me." She also links autoeroticism to autobiography as a way to reposition and rethink the sources of eroticism and biography. What is previously unthought becomes centrally imagined. The body's geography is redrawn against the formalist gender logic I described as a domino theory of desire in which the sex one can *see* becomes the gender one must *be* and is, consequently, the setup of heterosexuality. The remapped geography of the body abandons the prescribed development of sex, gender, and desire as Lorde denaturalizes gender through an analogical slide to nature: "to incorporate the strongest and richest parts of my mother and father within/into me—to share valleys and mountains upon my body the way the earth does in hills and peaks."

Such a revised embodiment reorients the meaning of identity from ontology through epistemology, imagination, and desire, all of which become politicized in the "cause" of love: "I would like to enter a woman the way any man can, and to be entered—to leave and to be left—to be hot and hard and soft all at the same time in the cause of our loving." By touching herself and constructing sexuality as the focal point of her identity, Lorde can see her family and, most important, her mother differently. No longer the role model for normative heterosexual development, the mother affords the daughter a way to experience herself in relation to other women, a shift in perspective which Lorde figures as a change in identity: "I have felt the age-old triangle of mother father and child, with the 'I' at its eternal core, elongate and flatten out into the elegantly strong triad of grandmother mother daughter, with the 'I' moving back and forth flowing in either or both directions as needed." Lorde refuses to write autobiography because it represents and solidifies identity in "the age-old triangle of mother father and child." In order to represent identity in mobility, Lorde finds self-representation at the limit of autobiography and refashions form into "biomythography."



Framing her autobiographical act with concerns about beginnings and endings similar to Johnson's in *Minor Characters*, Lorde builds the beginning and end of her book into spaces in which she can feel at home. Such a textual site is often at odds with the limited safety and familiarity the world would offer. Yet, the sort of "home" traditional autobiography offers would domesticate Lorde's experimentation, and she rejects it as a textual site of sustenance and meaning. If, as I am suggesting, her refusal to spell the self-representational form "a-u-t-o-b-i-o-g-r-a-p-h-y" is an act of resistance, a refusal to recognize herself within the gender and genre boundaries delimited by that spelling, Lorde's biomythography raises two questions: What does it mean to refuse the name of autobiography and to "spell" or name self-representation through different categories of identity and writing? What political possibilities are generated through the visibility this new spelling commands?

Lorde's text has many of the "classic" features of autobiography: it concerns the author's self-development and struggle to become a writer, and its organization depends on certain narrative continuities in time, place, and person. Yet the eurocentrism and heterosexism that define that "classicism" lead Lorde to conclude that "autobiography" itself combines a political law of the subject within its formal law of genre. In wishing to write a coming-out narrative and to represent the mutual complexities of race and sexual orientation within identity, Lorde discovers she has no models and renames her text a "biomythography." When Lorde confronts the law of gender and genre, a "law" that Derrida has rather ironically elaborated as two versions of the same old structure, she brings the genre to crisis, generates an excess that demands repression—or interpretation.[11] By taking on the problematic of self-representation, Lorde confronts gender as an internalized and naturalized "condition" deriving from history and experience and, through writing, externalizes gender as a construction. Writing her life offers a different perspective on her estrangement from the codes of gender and positions her as a feminist subject (that is, both inside and outside the ideology of gender). From the black, lesbian, feminist subject position that Lorde carves out, then,

[11]Jacques Derrida, "The Law of Genre," trans. Avital Ronell, *Glyph* 7 (Spring 1980), rpt. *Critical Inquiry* 7 (Autumn 1980): 55–81. See also Derrida, *The Ear of the Other: Otobiography, Transference, Translation*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Schocken, 1985).

the effects of gender can be accounted for, even argued against, rather than simply represented as the experience that follows naturally from a bodily condition. Gender, race, and sexual orientation, quite to the contrary, must always be enforced and policed, their codes scrupulously monitored and attended, and their challengers, like Lorde, must continually find strategies of (self-) representational resistance.

As a subject, Lorde is complexly positioned. Literary tradition and aesthetic categories alone do not fully describe her situation, although she defines herself as a literary subject who knows herself as a developing writer. So, too, Lorde moves both within and against political ideologies that take the subject to have a single, primary identity: either lesbian *or* black *or* working class. I take the problem of Lorde's subject positions to be central to autobiography's law of the subject. While subjects are doubtless complex, our ideologies of personhood reduce this complexity for political ends. One is permitted to be a member of *a* group; indeed, the force with which we are named and contained therein testifies to the compulsory nature of group identification. But the more politically troublesome challenges to such ideologies of the person are precisely those that cannot be contained by a single group identification.

The absence of autobiographical categories to mirror the complexity of human life reveals, of course, autobiography's sustaining role in hegemony. Where, for example, is the narrative of development that constitutes political identification as an irreducible, fully embodied "identity"? Where is the ideology of identity that collects sexual orientation, class, and race and represents them together in the fullness of lived experience? Where are the interpretive devices, so crucial for political and self-representation, that make us knowable in our complexities to ourselves and to others for the purposes of social change, cultural analysis, imaginative transformation, and political activism? The reduction of identity to a one-to-one correspondence between *the* group and *the* individual is reinforced in studies of autobiography which value a single representation of subjectivity and therefore suppress the range of subjectivities written in relation to, and often in complicated interaction with, one another. Lorde's subjectivities have different representational trajectories: narratives of coming out as a lesbian, of struggling with levels of racism, of leaving home and returning, of becoming educated, and of becoming a writer overlap in *Zami* and would, within traditional autobiography studies, be outside the categories of analysis. But Lorde's multicultural autobiography is a contemporary example of the rhetorical strategies shared by many women writers who have already crossed a boundary of the dominant representations of identity by resisting the codes of gender in a particular culture; by inhabiting the sexual body as a lesbian, bisexual, or celibate; by crossing class or achieving a rebellious class consciousness; or by seizing upon self-representation as a strategy to change the story of one's life.



The law of genre contravened by Lorde's biomythography, like the law of gender, stipulates that genres are not to be mixed. At its base, the law of genre stakes its claims through a rhetoric of purity and contamination. Generic criticism thus installed as a border guard defends against the threat of mixed forms. If we shift our attention from the law of genre to the vigorously enforced law of gender, the politics of this rhetoric becomes clearer. The law of gender erects an enforceable border between the selfsame and the other, for it stipulates that there are two genders and that we know which two they are. This rhetoric reveals its internal strains when homosexuality is described as the third sex. The law of gender marks out two and only two domains of sexed identity and requires that persons mix sexually across that border and not within the domain of the selfsame. The compelling attractions of the selfsame, however, while impermissible for genders, are fully expected of genres. The relationship, then, between gender and genre operates through the logic of the chiasmus, but where do the twisting complications of gender and genre intersect with each other?

Lorde indicates that the translation of gendered identity into heterosexual identity intersects with the translation of self-representation into the recognizable genre of autobiography. For Lorde, then, this is the intersection at which *Zami* is situated, a sexual and textual crossroads where she determines to follow what we could call, following Jonathan Dollimore's suggestion, a "perverse dynamic." The division between genders is maintained up to the point of sexuality and then a swift but sure crossing of the gendered border into heterosexuality is required, a crossing made possible through the seeming stability of that border. The schematic simplicity of this arrangement is imposed, however, as Freud acknowledged, on a considerably more complicated field of desire. As Dollimore has cogently argued, although the definition of homosexuality as "perversion" implies a swerving away from this static field, in fact, according to Augustine, Shakespeare, Freud and others, it is precisely "perversion" that is structured into our early and late modern notions as the developing self. It is precisely the "perverse" desires, Freud theorized, that must be sublimated or repressed and the "mastering" of them is what we are thought to share: they constitute our social interests. For Dollimore, then, "one does not

become a pervert but remains one; it is sexual perversion, not sexual 'normality', which is the given in human nature. . . . The clear implication is that civilization actually depends upon that which is usually thought to be incompatible with it."[12] The division among genres speaks of a polymorphously perverse textuality that must be regulated at many different borders. In autobiography, then, "perversion" underlies and threatens the laws of gender and genre, fractures the spatial logic of separate (and separable) spheres, and emerges in Lorde through her choices not to reproduce legalized sexual and textual identities.

In autobiography, the law of genre has not been as uniformly codified as those concerning gender; indeed, as one of its most influential critics observes: "Everyone knows what an autobiography is, but no two observers, no matter how assured they may be, are in agreement."[13] The familiarity of this formulation identifies a dangerously commonsensical appeal. It is the same nonargument that elides seeing and knowing and thereby makes interpretation superfluous and somehow indulgent in the face of the obvious. It is manifestly difficult to steer out of the definitional ruts of common sense. The statement, however, goes to the problem of defining autobiography, for autobiography is the point where the unknowns that haunt questions of self and identity seem written in the form of a single equation: How is the self in the text constituted? How is the self in "real life" constituted? The incommensurability of those two questions has until recently formed a stumbling block to the development of theories of autobiography, for the differences between and within the selves in question constitute the production of autobiographical identity. That is, the questions are irreducible to a single answer: those multiple levels of self-representation, in fact, help to define autobiography. Still, the perceived form of autobiography's equation has persisted. It offers the assurance that could we answer either question successfully, the whole of the self would then appear, miraculously summoned from the page. While "no two observers" might agree on how to characterize the unknowns of autobiography, its promise appears as the coincidence of incommensurables, the single equation "everyone knows" must exist. The ontological being is manifest in the author's signature.

[12] Jonathan Dollimore, "The Cultural Politics of Perversion: Augustine, Shakespeare, Freud, Foucault," in *Sexual Sameness: Textual Differences in Lesbian and Gay Writing*, ed. Joseph Bristow (New York: Routledge, 1992), 9.

[13] James Olney, "Autobiography and the Cultural Moment" in *Autobiography*, ed. Olney, 7.



In this circular referentiality, the constitutive differences among and within a historical self, a fictive self, and the writing self in the process of constructing an autobiographical text disappear into the signature's guarantee of anchoring textual and temporal concerns.

Questions of genre immediately pose the problem of boundaries, of determining limits. In genre studies autobiography has been located almost wholly within the realm of nonfiction. A further discrimination may be made: in a hierarchy of generic distinctions, autobiography carves out a niche within categories that are already divided (nonfiction/fiction, poetry/prose, books/letters, memoirs, diaries); thus its status as a border discourse can easily be put in the service of discrediting a text (as in "*only* an autobiography"). Popular and critical attention has focused almost exclusively on the person as "real individual in history," even as opposed to "author," rather than on the text. Thus the answer to Foucault's question "What is an author?"—or as we may currently be inclined to ask, "What was an author?"—when applied to autobiography seems glaringly obvious to many. What is an autobiographer? The person who writes an autobiography. For autobiography has been interpreted as the arena in which the self speaks itself without the artifice of fiction, where language is in some nonmysterious way a pure mirror of the writer's life, where Walt Whitman, for example, can assert along with Rousseau and Montaigne that the proper name conjoins the text and the self. "Who touches this," proclaims Whitman, "touches a man."[14] Yet, for all its variations, the autobiographical self emerges in these interpretations as a creation somehow independent of the pressures of writing in a way that implicitly privileges history and sameness over language and difference. And nowhere is the reliance on naive autobiographical realism more evident than in the conflation of "book" and "man" on the grounds that they share the same proper name.

The definitional locus of any generic category provides a clue as to what can and cannot be represented through any further analysis or elaboration of the category. In autobiography, that locus is formed by the narrativization of the self and history. In traditional studies of autobiography, both the self and history are overdetermined as "male." From the intractability of Augustine's *Confessions* as a point of generic origin to the formal limits such a precursor sets, traditional studies of autobiography repeat the founding, gendered premise of

[14] Walt Whitman, "So Long," *Leaves of Grass*, ed. David McKay (Philadelphia: Sherman & Company, 1900), 345.

autobiographical subjectivity and authority. A stable and fixed perspective (Augustine's) conjoins time, space, and identity in a signifier of commanding proportions: the autobiographical *I*. The mutually reinforcing networks of value which credit some and not others as authors, as persons having a story worth telling—that is, of possessing a life worth remembering and of being sufficiently representative to have their texts matter—has tended to seek a definition of autobiography in a very narrow sample: those that can be represented as identical with the unified *I*.

The sufficiency of autobiography's definition is interrogated by a feminist subject in *Landscape for a Good Woman: A Story of Two Lives* (1987), a text in which the analysis of class figures prominently in a way that it does not in "classic" autobiographies with their elitist or upwardly mobile or assimilationist politics. In it, Carolyn Kay Steedman challenges the sufficiency of two identity-authorizing discourses, psychoanalysis and Marxist class critique, to describe women's lives, here, hers and her mother's. Steedman, a scholar who has written working-class history in other forms, triangulates these two powerful theories of real life with her own history. Working within and against both discourses, Steedman confronts the centrality of stories drawn from a variety of sources in the constitution and interpretation of identity. Identity, in her view, is always multitextual, riddled with the discontinuities of each story, its embeddedness in other stories, and its competing interpretations. *Landscape for a Good Woman*, she writes, "has a childhood at its centre—my childhood, a personal past—and it is about the disruption of that fifties childhood by the one my mother had lived out before me, and the stories she told about it."[15]

In an effort to stretch what can be represented through autobiography, Steedman gives her book a painterly title, meant to evoke a place and the people who live there. A landscape is a representation, the painter's interpretation, and not, as we all know but habitually forget, the thing itself. This forgetting is so common that it constitutes a significant feature of aesthetics. We try to understand reality through our interpretations, through the stories we raise to significance, and through the meaning those stories make in the rest of our lives. It is also a feature of traditional autobiography. Stories told by others become part of our experience, as "real" as any house, school, or person in their ability to shape our lives. Steedman describes stories as "interpretative devices." Working within the methods of psychoanalysis, she agrees that the child prefers stories that resonate with some feature of her or his experience. If the adult can then interpret the stories, s/he can see into the developing world view of the child. Anyone who has watched a child become attached to a particular story, request it night after night, enact its narrative in play, and identify with a particular character has observed the child developing an emotional landscape. Whether it will be characterized by poverty or plenty has to do both with material and imaginative conditions.

[15] Carolyn Kay Steedman, *Landscape for a Good Woman: A Story of Two Lives* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1987), 5.



Steedman's mother's life was shaped by loss and longing. She surveyed the difficulty of her working-class life and wanted *things*. Her interpretation of life never admitted any possibilities but those of grinding struggle, with the myth of her own good motherhood at the center of her daughters' lives. How did Steedman know she had a good mother? Her mother repeatedly told her so. Within the mother's self-representation emerged, in fact, a familiar enough working-class myth of the enduring mother, which, as Steedman understands, is perceived differently by boys and girls:

> Mothers were those who told you how hard it was to have you, how long they were in labour with you ('twenty hours with you', my mother frequently reminded me) and who told you to accept the impossible contradiction of being both desired and a burden; and not to complain. This ungiving endurance is admired by working-class boys who grow up to write about their mother's flinty courage. But the daughter's silence on the matter is a measure of the price you pay for survival. I don't think the baggage will ever lighten, for me or my sister. We were born, and had no choice in the matter; but we were burdens, expensive, never grateful enough. There was nothing we could do to pay back the debt of our existence. 'Never have children, dear,' she said; 'they ruin your life.' Shock moves swiftly across the faces of women to whom I tell this story. But it is *ordinary* not to want your children, I silently assert; normal to find them a nuisance. (16–17)

But it is not the mother's self-naming as a "good mother" that titles this text; rather, the title echoes the father's simultaneous defense of the mother and his flight from domestic conflict when he answers all challenges to the mother's authority with the disclaimer "She's a good woman."

The mother's interpretive legacy for her daughters, "the impossible contradiction of being both desired and a burden," reproduces the "impossible contradiction" that founds their family. Steedman's par-

ents never married. Steedman pieces together the family secret of illegitimacy and the interpretation that she and her sister were inducements to marriage and the better life it signified to her mother. Mostly, the father enters the narrative through his effective absence. Describing the monumentality of his inconsequence in their lives, Steedman writes of her father's death in a logic of longing and unmet need which is strikingly like that which she attributes to her mother:

> When he died I spent days foolishly hoping that there would be something for me. I desperately wanted him to give me something. The woman he'd been living with handed over two bottles of elderberry wine that they'd made together out of fruit gathered from the side of the ring road where her flat was. I drank one of them and it gave me the worst hangover of my life.
>
> He left us without anything, never gave us a thing. In the fairy-stories the daughters love their fathers because they are mighty princes, great rulers, and because such absolute power seduces. The modern psychoanalytic myths posit the same plot, old tales are made manifest: secret longings, doors closing along the corridors of the bourgeois household. But daddy, you never knew me like this; you didn't really care, or weren't allowed to care, it comes to the same thing in the end. You shouldn't have left us there, you should have taken me with you. You left me alone; you never laid a hand on me: the iron didn't enter into the soul. You never gave me anything: the lineaments of an unused freedom. (61)

As the Lacanian law of the father prescribes, the father need not be present as the one to make good on the threat "Wait till your father gets home." In this passage Steedman addresses the dynamics sustained by this heavy absence. Her complaint turns swiftly from how she did not know him, through material or imaginative means, to how he did not know her: "you never knew me like this." Their mutual unknowability prevents other forms of self-knowledge, Steedman argues, as it is reinforced by what she cites as the dominant aspects of psychoanalysis and class critique. Neither adequately addresses how the daughter remains unknown.

Steedman refuses to be read and to read her family's life in the master narratives of class critique and psychoanalysis. Taken independently, neither master narratives nor stories (our imaginative lives) nor material reality (our social and economic conditions) can fully account for the meaning of a life, for it is a person's capacity to interpret which centrally concerns Steedman. From a feminist subject position she recognizes how she has been interpellated by both psychoanalysis and Marxist class critique to know herself as a woman. Steedman finds herself on a landscape, the landscape for a good woman, and does not recognize two prominent features (psychoanalysis and class critique) in relation to which she can plot a course. She does not trust the map to represent where she is; therefore, she becomes exemplary of the subject who must find her way by making a map for getting lost. She follows a route of persistent estrangement from master narratives, all the while homing in on the relationship of mother and daughter, the relationship insufficiently interpreted by the dominant theories of human development and social theory, but whose irreducibility and aching specificity run through so many self-representational texts by women. It is a relationship for both Steedman and Lorde in which the limitations of traditional notions of gender and sexuality are especially glaring.



What emerges from the self-representational strategies of Lorde and Steedman is not only a new way to understand the autobiographical agent but, in fact, a kind of autobiographical writing that breaks with monocultural imperatives of being.[16] No longer exclusively an object in the discourses of gender and identity, the differently positioned subject and the rhetorical and political strategies upon which this positioning depends lead us to examine not what autobiography is but what it does. In *Landscape for a Good Woman*, Steedman cautions about the irresistibility of narrative, of the way it seems synonymous with identity, when she writes of her own efforts to make the stories of working-class autobiographers comprehensible:

> I know that the compulsions of narrative are almost irresistible: having found a psychology where once there was only the assumption of pathology or false consciousness to be seen, the tendency is to celebrate this psychology, to seek entry for it to a wider world of literary and cultural reference; and the enterprise of working-class autobiography was designed to make this at least a feasible project. But to do this is to miss the irreducible nature of all our lost childhoods: what has been made has been made out on the borderlands. I must make the final gesture of defiance, and refuse to let this be absorbed by the central story. (144)

Although *a* stable autobiographical form against which women

[16] In the conclusion to her excellent book, *Subjectivities: A History of Self-Representation in Britain, 1832–1920* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), Regenia Gagnier asserts that "multicultural autobiographies" such as Lorde's *Zami* and Steedman's *Landscape* are "new narratives of social justice" (278). The texts she cites as examples are all by women, though Gagnier does not analyze this feature of her list.

have written about their lives does not exist, an evolving notion of what autobiography is has *not* been deduced from texts women did write, or from texts that problematize autobiography (or have been seen as problematical in themselves) or challenge the genre's formation, limits, and illusion of stability. Narrative, it was once agreed, was better suited to self-disclosure and historical writing than verse or drama, but when critics began to analyze autobiography in relation to representation, they found examples of self-reflexive writing in other genres. Yet, while autobiography began increasingly to mark a point of generic instability, autobiography criticism preserved the gender hierarchy within which that instability could be recontained. Hence even across recognizable changes in generic definition, women's autobiographical writing remains anomalous. Even when some critics open the canon—unformed as it may be in autobiography—to admit such "untraditional" works as Whitman's *Song of Myself*, Wordsworth's *Prelude*, or Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, they do not so much open the field for women's writing as expand it to include more men's writing.

Women's self-representational writing, bracketed from the defining discussions of genre, has both escaped and never been offered the fate of being defined as a genre of its own. Of course, the lack of generic definition poses particular problems. It seems to me that many women autobiographers, approaching autobiography from a profusion of positions, recognize the textuality of autobiographical identity; indeed, they insist upon it. The autobiographer is tethered, even if by the most slender of lines, to a discourse of self-remembering in which identity is preserved. Nor is this preservation the mark of unsophistication, a failure to grasp the poststructuralist lesson that identity has always already been created and dissolved in textuality. The recurring mark in the women's autobiographies I study here can be found in the shared sense that a written record, a testimonial, or a confessional document can represent a person, can stand in her absence for her truth, can re-member her life.[17] Indeed, even in the narrowest and most ambivalent sense, writing an autobiography can be a political act because it asserts a right to speak rather than to be spoken for. Such a claim is often made quite narrowly; that is, the writer may stand to gain little leverage against a particular institution or condition. It may be enough to refigure the grounds of contention as ideological.

[17] See especially, Doris Sommer, "'Not Just a Personal Story': Women's *Testimonios* and the Plural Self," in *Life/Lines*, 107–30.



## Interruptions

> J/e is the symbol of the lived, rending experience which is m/y writing, of this cutting in two which throughout literature is the exercise of a language which does not constitute m/e as subject.
> —Monique Wittig, *The Lesbian Body*

No longer understood mainly as the most available and uncomplicated kind of writing imaginable, "the story of my life" has been framed within increasingly sophisticated critical discourses on the shifting displacements of "identity" within language itself and on the possibility of political opposition based on testimonial and confessional writing as forms of resistance. The construction of autobiography as a simple form of nonfictional prose is based in the notion that it is closer to reporting than, say, to the realist novel. That is, the organizational work is solved by chronology, the challenge of characterization is removed by what people really said and did, and invention is displaced by recalcitrant reality. What has been stabilized as "autobiography," however, is more accurately described as a collection of the discourses and practices individuals have used to represent themselves in relation to cultural modes of truth and identity production. The "subject of autobiography" emerges within these practices, although that subject is unevenly authorized by the varying modes of dominant ideology. As Lorde and Steedman demonstrate, the perception of autobiography as a generically unified set of texts does not appeal to all writers. It neither composes an enabling tradition nor offers an adequate access to "truth." The self-representational texts within this network of identity and identification are less characterizable, therefore, as autobiograph*ies* when they do not reproduce dominant ideologies of subjectivity.

According to Althusser, "All ideology has the function (which defines it) of 'constituting' concrete individuals as subjects" ("Ideology," 244). In this sense, the subject of autobiography has been interpellated by a host of institutions and discourses which have effectively privileged certain men. The subject of autobiography has come to designate a stable *I* anchored within a relatively stable genre, though this definition has come at the cost of dramatically narrowing the field of self-representation. It is important to claim autobiography as a kind of writing and not a genre per se in order to emphasize further the extent to which women's autobiography invades, permeates, and also is invaded by canonical genres. Erupting in texts where it is not licensed, women's self-representation has frequently been silenced or

marginalized because it has not been interpreted/named/authorized as such.

I offer the term *autobiographics* to describe those elements of self-representation which are not bound by a philosophical definition of the self derived from Augustine, not content with the literary history of autobiography, those elements that instead mark a location in a text where self-invention, self-discovery, and self-representation emerge within the technologies of autobiography—namely, those legalistic, literary, social, and ecclesiastical discourses of truth and identity through which the subject of autobiography is produced. Autobiographics, as a description of self-representation and as a reading practice, is concerned with interruptions and eruptions, with resistance and contradiction as strategies of self-representation.

A text's autobiographics consist in the following elements in self-representational writing, or writing that emphasizes the autobiographical *I*: an emphasis on writing itself as constitutive of autobiographical identity, discursive contradictions in the representation of identity (rather than unity), the name as a potential site of experimentation rather than contractual sign of identity, and the effects of the gendered connection of word and body. Autobiographics gives initial conceptual precedence to positioning the subject, to recognizing the shifting sands of identity on which theories of autobiography build, and to describing "identity" and the networks of identification. An exploration of a text's autobiographics allows us to recognize that the *I* is multiply coded in a range of discourses: it is the site of multiple solicitations, multiple markings of "identity," multiple figurations of agency. Thus, autobiographics avoids the terminal questions of genre and close delimitation and offers a way, instead, to ask: Where is the autobiographical?[18] What constitutes its representation? The *I*, then, does not disappear into an identity-less textual universe. Rather, the autobiographicality of the *I* in a variety of discourses is emphasized as a point of resistance in self-representation.

I think of autobiographics operating within texts that have not been seen as autobiographies and occurring in the margins of hegemonic discourses within cultural texts, in the social spaces carved in the interstices of institutions, and so it is there that the terms of a different reading and retextualization of the subject of autobiography must be located. It is there also that we may begin to think about agency. Thus, the traditional construction of autobiography may be pressured

[18] See Celeste Schenck, "All of a Piece: Women's Autobiography and Poetry," in *Life/Lines*, 281–305.



further by my refusal to produce a critical study that differs from its predecessors and contemporaries in content only. A study of autobiographics allows for removing the following writers, among others, from interpretive contexts in which their works are canonized, though not as autobiography: Julian of Norwich, Gertrude Stein, Monique Wittig, and Minnie Bruce Pratt. These writers removed themselves in material and psychological ways from a social economy in which they would function as objects of exchange through self-representational practices and social and political acts and choices, and they represented their identities through an emphasis on the *I* that contrasts with the *I* in the traditional forms or epistemologies they restructure.[19]

Steedman, for example, retains the argumentative and intellectual emphases of scholarship, though with an autobiographical *I* as the speaker. She resists, too, the chronological and developmental emphases associated with the autobiographical *I* and produces a social study of the politics of childhood fantasy and everyday life. Similarly, Lorde, writing from the multiply marked subject position of poet and essayist uses an autobiographical *I* through which to represent the

[19] I use the phrase "objects of exchange" in reference to Claude Lévi-Strauss's claim that the exchange of women fundamentally underlies and perpetuates culture. See *The Elementary Structure of Kinship* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969). As a repeated and distinctive feature of kinship structures and as a code that articulates male bonding and authority, the cultural definition of women as objects of exchange is inscribed within language, history, economics, the family, and all other mutually constitutive systems that produce us as gendered beings. Lévi-Strauss does not conclude that women are only objects, though his theoretical failure to account for gender leads him to conclude, basically, that man is the universal human. Women share in this humanity as subjects when they are coded as men. As Gayle Rubin notes, "'Exchange of women' is a shorthand for expressing that the social relations of a kinship system specify that men have certain rights in their female kin, and that women do not have the same rights either to themselves or to their male kin" ("The Traffic in Women: Notes on the 'Political Economy' of Sex," in *Toward an Anthropology of Women*, ed. Rayna R. Reiter [New York: Monthly Review Press, 1975], 177). If the "exchange of women" is an aspect of the myth that produces man as a coherent subject capable of sustaining ties with others through the shared, almost unconscious reliance on variously integrated systems, then women are external to the language of myth. Myth as it reproduces culture encodes women as objects of exchange whose words and bodies function for the use of others: "Women do not have the same rights . . . to themselves." Yet there is an opening in the objectification of women, for in the realm of myth women function both as signs and as exchangers of signs, as both objects and subjects. "Woman's" condition as a dweller on this borderline suggests for Lévi-Strauss a time in which all objects were endowed with subjectivity. For women writers, the legacy cuts the other way; women can and do remember how subjects are subjected and reduced to the status of objects. And insofar as women can produce representational and semiotic practices that confound "exchange," the genres in which we read their autobiographics broadens.

histories of communities of women, and thereby dislocates the singleness of the autobiographical subject through her depiction of female influence and desire. In the context these readings create, we see how, as an interpretive project, finding a text's autobiographics initially depends on a revised reading of the autobiographical *I* and depends as well on a critique of contractual metaphors that represent identity as what one solely owns by virtue of signing the representational contract in the appropriate language and form of autobiography.

Emile Benveniste's essay on the nature of pronouns can serve as a beginning:

> What then is the reality to which *I* or *you* refers? It is solely a "reality of discourse," and this is a very strange thing. *I* cannot be defined except in terms of "locution," not in terms of objects as a nominal sign is. *I* signifies "the person who is uttering the present instance of the discourse containing *I*." This instance is unique by definition and has validity only in its uniqueness.[20]

As in language more generally, selves in autobiography seem to proliferate and are ambiguously tethered to the overdetermined autobiographical *I*, a linguistic "shifter" that does not properly refer. Many critics of autobiography have sought to insulate autobiography's truth claim from the radical impossibility of sustaining this claim. The autobiographical code of referentiality deploys the illusion that there is a single *I*, sufficiently distinct from the *I* it narrates to know it and to see it from the vantage of experience and still, more problematically, to be that *I*. All of this depends on not looking too closely at the profound shakiness caused by the motion of these *I*'s. They not only redouble their path through the looking glass of time and space but press against the constraints of linguistic reference through an overdetermined dependence on the "shifter," *I*. The shifting levels of textual identity in autobiography construct its characteristic rhetorical instability as well as the illusion, often put to political ends, of its stability. This is the problem of referentiality established through the complicated and specific dynamics of the autobiographical *I*.

I want to demonstrate here how to read for a text's autobiographics,

[20] Emile Benveniste, *Problems in General Linguistics* (Coral Gables: University of Miami Press, 1971), 218. For an excellent feminist discussion of the autobiographical *I*, see Brodzki and Schenck, Introduction, and Brodzki, "Mothers, Displacement, and Language in the Autobiographies of Nathalie Sarraute and Christa Wolf," in *Life/Lines*.



that is, how to discern in the discourses of truth and identity those textual places where women's self-representation interrupts (or is interrupted by) the regulatory laws of gender and genre. But first a methodological concern: I need to insist that my own analysis of texts as "interrupted" does not lead me, in a final move, to unify them through my readings, to discover among the fragments the true voice of a woman speaking. Nor do I find that women's self-representation shatters discourses that were previously whole. Masculinist discourses of identity are themselves already built up through repressions and silences, chief among them the cultural imposition of silence on women. Rather, my inspection of discontinuities in the technologies of autobiography leads to a focus on how women negotiate the interrupted discourses of self-representation. Certainly, other approaches to these texts are possible, useful, and illuminating of other interpretive and theoretical claims. I wish, however, to underscore that the technologies of autobiography are conflictual through and through, derived as they are in relation to discourses of identity and truth which are themselves held together by means of some rhetorical violence.[21] Even in their surface presentation of unity and linear development, autobiographies pull together such a variety of kinds of writing (history, memoir, confession, even parody) that the "unifying" *I* at their "center" is already fractured by its place in varying discourses (political, philosophical, psychological, aesthetic), and what frequently fractures such totalizing theories of identity is gender. Thus, my own argumentative teleology can only be a structural substitute for the coherence I find neither in the technologies of autobiography nor in the agent that pieces and is pieced together through them. Considering the history of autobiography and its study, the recognition of what is provisional in a theory of self-representation may be rather welcome.

If Augustine's question "How can the self know itself?" has a corollary in the history of women's self-representation, perhaps it would be Margaret Cavendish's gritty appropriation of the question she knew would be turned against her: "Why hath this lady writ her own life?" In her *True Relation of My Birth, Breeding, and Life* (first published in 1656), the duchess of Newcastle addresses the ways in which her culture codes women's texts as marginal, marks women's self-representation a priori as an act that will require defending. Cavendish's comment reveals an attention to an interlocutor or a witness to whom autobiographies of the marginalized are frequently addressed.

[21] Teresa de Lauretis, "The Violence of Rhetoric," in *Technologies of Gender*, 31–50.

How does this incorporation or intertextualization of an audience differ from other autobiographical positionings of writer and audience? Augustine, for example, presents the *Confessions* as a discourse of the relation of the self to itself. He defines his project as a dialogue that takes a split self as speaker/knower of identity. This closed circuit of self-referentiality obscures the tautological nature of his autobiographical act: the self knows itself as a self knowing itself. Autobiographies that present God as an ultimate reader tend to isolate the autobiographer from human communities. That Cavendish poses autobiography as an activity to defend relocates human agency in a broader discursive context: she is addressing other interlocutors than the self/God of the *Confessions*. Her enemy is not as metaphysical as Augustine's. Whereas writing the *Confessions* certainly offered Augustine the opportunity to represent his crisis of legitimation and identity as a cosmic struggle between good and evil over the fate of his soul, the duchess of Newcastle's antagonists were closer to home and less susceptible to metaphysicalization. Even in her grander autobiographical moments, when she appears to be writing about the soul—an effect after which autobiographers only infrequently strive, despite what taking the *Confessions* as a paradigm would suggest—she continually calls the reader's attention to the technologies of autobiographical production: What are the culture's views of truth, of personhood, and hence, of appropriate autobiographical representation? How can she position herself within these discourses in order to be read as she wishes?

Cavendish's opening query indicates her awareness that her position as a woman requires some further effort on her part to justify seizing the authority of autobiography. She realizes also that the gender and genre codes are at odds in the project of self-representation, and she looks to the points of rupture in both. Yet even when self-consciousness about the technologies of autobiography goes unspoken or unwritten, concealed as it is within the daily functioning of ideology, evidence of this awareness persists. Women have frequently been compelled to adopt defensive postures in autobiography and to argue for some claim to the discourses of truth telling it deploys. The shared argumentative strategies of Cavendish and other marginalized authors reveal the extent to which the technologies of autobiography involve political agendas that specify who is authorized to tell and judge the truth in a culture, as well as the historical persistence of this nonetheless shifting structure of authorization.

I want to show how these technologies can be interrupted, first, by describing a grid for theorizing how the temporal instability of autobiographical self-representation constitutes a persistent form of interruption and makes rupture a feature of self-representation and, second, by focusing on how rupture works internally and externally through a discussion of four kinds of interruption. Then I want to question the autobiographical agent's role in the appropriation of rupture for feminist ends.



One's relation to the discourses of truth and identity is always historically specific and determined: this claim has relevance to the synchronic and diachronic axes of historical meaning, and we can describe the intersection of these lines as the point at which the autobiographer appears as author of her text. This intersection can be described as a map of tradition in which neither the diachronic continuum—what we can call the history of women's self-representation—nor the synchronic slice of life—what we can call the network representing a specific autobiography's relation to the technologies of its production at any point in time—is a sufficiently isolable axis for the interpretation of an autobiography. Neither history nor a specific text can sufficiently explain autobiographical production or the complicated claims made on art and life through these technologies, because each must be grasped in its relation to the other. We can see how the *X* that marks the spot of autobiography, sketched as the relation between the synchronic and the diachronic, really involves at least four terms rather than two: any intersection does, although we customarily understand a straight line as a single identity (and the intersection of any two lines as a point of convergence between the two).

I would like to call attention to the four vectors that move through and away from the intersection. The meaning of this intersection—a point reread as the convergence of four terms—places us beyond the initial triangulation of autobiographical selves with which I began, where the autobiographical *I* simultaneously named the historical person, the textual construction, and the author—all of which describe different functions in the autobiographical act. I pointed first to the intersection itself in order to indicate the place where meaning both escapes and returns via four vectors. What can be gained by reference to autobiography's location at the temporal crossroads—past/future as horizontal axis and thick present as vertical axis—is a recognition that the subject of autobiography is stretched out in time in a way that the problem with pronouns, the autobiographical *I*, obscures. The *I* refers to all the "times" of the person (the appearance of temporal coherence across past, present, and implied future), which are subordinated to the process of naming. The coincidence between the historical person and the autobiographical representa-

tion of that person by her- or himself is enabled by the noncoincidence of discourses that create this effect. Thus it is crucial to examine this *X* (perhaps it designates the signature of those who cannot sign the autobiographical pact) as a key feature of autobiographics: it allows us to focus both on the autobiographical *I*'s temporal locations and on the autobiographical *I* as an agent of dislocation and disruption in history and in the text. This agent is represented by the figure of the signature—autobiography's *X*-factor, the referential anchor that will not hold—as a site of dissimulation, a site where identity is produced through the technologies of autobiography and is not unproblematically *there*.

I do not mean that autobiographers have not claimed the certainty of identity, have not obscured the problems of its production. In fact, it may be important here to acknowledge that the fiction of identity has been especially significant for feminist criticism and theory. Some feminists will surely question whether my focus on the duplicity of autobiographical writing disallows a focus on political agency for women autobiographers, taking duplicity as dissolving the representation of women's experience into another rewriting of the logic of the chiasmus.[22] To that challenge, I would respond that autobiographical identity and agency are not identical to identity and agency in "real life"; rather, they are its representation, and that representation, as I argued above, is its construction. To confer upon the autobiography the authority of a person and to read her or his agency as inevitably the same thing is to repeat the referential fallacy that consigns all autobiographies and their authors to the same space in history. I see this strategy as profoundly limiting to a feminist study of autobiography and women's self-representation. Autobiographical identity and agency are historically dynamic. There is no single transhistorical identity that all autobiographers invariantly produce or strive to produce. To thematize "a" question or "a" goal toward which all autobiographers tend is to privilege the constructed continuity of literary and historical tradition over the discontinuity of self-representation and the insights we can derive from that discontinuity, a history of Truth over a history of "truth" *telling*. Moreover, the technologies of autobiography—the discourses of truth and identity available at a particular time—will vary for autobiographers positioned differently within those discourses because of gender, race, class, sexual orientation, religion, and so on. Thus, a series of intersections and the axes

[22] See Alice Jardine, *Gynesis* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), for an extended analysis of the chiasmus and of the multiple effects of putting "woman" into discourse.



that determine them may allow us more flexibility in locating women's autobiographicality in texts that do not and, indeed, cannot sign the autobiographical pact, and thus may open up an inquiry into self-representational texts previously sealed by critical practices.

To return to the main analysis, then, the *X* as a sign of illegibility, as well as the space where the signature belongs, can be used to illustrate another feature of the technologies of autobiography: interruption. Interruption is a discursive effect of gender politics and self-representation and evidences the possibilities of and limitations on women's self-representation. Each text is itself an instance of how women's agency and efforts at self-representation exist in complicated relation to each other and to the texts in which we read them.

The tradition of women's autobiography is an interrupted one. Margaret Cavendish's challenging question indicates that she knew she would have to turn the question around within discourses inhospitable to her presence. In order to develop a way of reading women's autobiography, we need to look beyond criticism that would legitimate mainly "the lives of famous men" as bona fide autobiography. Further, if any text with a more or less legible title page is in some ways autobiographical, such a text may record the interrupted autobiography of more than one person. A broader view of what constitutes textual self-representation may allow us to see how genres other than autobiography are already ruptured by autobiographics. How, then, does such rupture work? Internally, it erodes the illusion of textual coherence, not just thematic or even formal coherence, for what is being interrupted in autobiography is the more entrenched coherence of "subjectivity," on one hand, and, on the other, the cultural production of "writing" through the silencing of women. Externally, rupture works against hegemonic discourses of identity, whether they are psychological or political. I will examine four instances that constitute interruptions of the autobiographical: the "preparation" of women's writing for publication, the censuring responses of readers and reviewers, the subtler infiltrations of texts by women, and the appropriation of women's narratives by men.

The fate of Sarah Knowles Bolton's autobiography is a representative case of the first form of interruption. Bolton, an animal rights activist living in Boston in the early twentieth century, kept volumes of diaries, which she collected into an autobiography. Her son "edited" the text and published it privately as *Autobiography for My Son* in 1915. The unedited version—that is, Bolton's own manuscript—dwells at length on her advocacy of animal rights; her focus on what she clearly viewed as her life's work is as prominent as her discourse

on her family. Integrating her political activism with family and social life shapes her autobiography and characterizes the major interests of her middle and later years. She was unafraid of personal criticism, which she withstood, and while she justified her activism as ultimately in harmony with the Christian ideal of stewardship, Bolton was no fanatic. Some of the most humorous passages tease out the dilemma of political consciousness at odds with social obligations and pleasures. For example, Bolton had both a long-standing friendship with the Rockefellers and an intractable disagreement concerning the insufficient care of some cats living in their barn. Bolton fed the cats and found them homes while the Rockefellers remained oblivious of the shrinking and growing feline population Bolton scrupulously monitored. Nor did she conceal her management of the situation. On the day of an elegant luncheon at the Rockefeller mansion, Bolton details the sumptuous menu and describes the guests with obvious delight. She concludes the narration with witty understatement: "Didn't feed the cats today."[23]

Much of her autobiography catalogs scenes of cruelty to animals. While her commitment is strengthened and renewed by successes and Bolton is sustained by the daily work of caring for animals, images of abuse dominate the text and renew her sense of her life's work. When her son prepared the text for publication, he seems to have found those images redundant or perhaps superfluous to his sense of her life's work: being his mother. So the document she prepared to stand, at least in part, as a record of her effort to end animal abuse, becomes the story of a woman's place in relation to her family. The virtues of patience and endurance are channeled into their "normal" expression of motherhood and wifely and neighborly service. Bolton's son acted against Bolton's sense of her identity and attempted to refashion her as a more appropriate woman. He thereby, in a sense, denied her ownership of her self, editing her back into the confines of her role as he conceived it. When the liberal autobiographical pact, modeled on the liberal social contract, can be so easily and so violently disregarded by a helpful son, how sufficient is it to an exploration of women's self-representation? But perhaps this question implies that the autobiographical pact is fine in itself, and we need only ensure that it be extended to all. The liberal position here needs a critique in terms other than its own, for the unequal positioning of persons in relation to the autobiographical pact, to self-

[23] Sarah Knowles Bolton, "Autobiography," unpublished manuscript, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe College, not numbered.



ownership, reveals its complicity in social structures of hierarchy. Although a radical and a socialist feminist critique would differ, they agree in their mutual refusal of the pact's seeming fairness, its seductive packaging of the self as a commodity that it already owns and whose circulation it controls.

Even in those instances when the autobiography is published without such editing, censure frequently follows in the form of public disapproval, a form of interruption so loud that many authors cannot be heard over the clamor. Indeed, the socially constructed silence of women suggests how highly endangered the autobiographical act can be. One has to claim, with authority, the very grounds of identity that patriarchal ideology has denied women: a self worth its history, a life worth remembering, a story worth writing and publishing. When Hannah Tillich, who fled from Germany to the United States as Hitler was gathering ground, published *From Time to Time* in 1974, she was roundly criticized for having wasted the reader's time by telling the story of her own life when she could have written about her husband. The transgression was clear: she had valued her story rather than history. Her autobiographical recollections of marriage to theologian Paul Tillich were scandalous in what they revealed of his private life. The multiple infidelities, his habit of hiding pornographic photos in theology books, and the generally shabby treatment Hannah Tillich struggled through were equally represented alongside his better-known activities. These revelations were unexpected and perhaps inexplicable because they got at the complexity of a particular marriage in a way that rendered bitterness and savagery with tenderness and forgiveness. The autobiography is never simply focused on Paul Tillich, never, that is, a biography. And Hannah Tillich's denial of the form she was expected to produce prompted severe scrutiny of her character rather than her husband's.

Significantly, she began her autobiographical project dutifully enough: she would focus on the story of their life together as a way to deepen the historical record of Paul Tillich's contributions to the spiritual life of the twentieth century. But she failed to write this hagio/biography when, in the process of writing, she discovered her subject: "From those [stories about Paul Tillich] the tale of *my* life unrolled in an attempt to understand and clarify my own self."[24] The emphasis on her self brings about "the triumphant return of the '*I*'" that had been lost through a lifetime of learning to listen to and tell

[24] Hannah Tillich, Interview in *Contemporary Authors*, vol. 73–76 (Detroit: Gale Research, 1978), 610.

the "proper" story. Refusing a master narrative that prescribes silence and submission for women becomes a defiant act, along the lines of Steedman's refusal, which wins back for Tillich the self she felt she had lost to a husband, a social circle, a religion, and two cultures (German and American) that owned the Truth.

As Bolton and Tillich's autobiographies demonstrate, what one might think the most available subject matter, one's own life, is not equally available to all persons at all times and in all places. Significantly, during periods of prolific publication for men's autobiography, women's autobiography virtually disappears, goes unnoticed or unpublished.[25] Times of sparse publication for men (e.g., during wars) witness the proportional flowering of women's texts. The possibilities and politics of self-representation for women in a literary and historical tradition that works to exclude them focus some of the persistent conflicts many women writers experience. When the identity of real women is figured as the "dark continent" of femininity and their literary tradition is covered over and obscured deep in the heart of nowhere, what may a woman see of herself or other women in conditions of self-effacement and estrangement? What identity must she construct when the rules of sexual identity and aesthetic reception, indeed, of the hermeneutic act itself, are mapped onto a phallomorphic order?

The difficulties of construction are demonstrated by a third instance of interruption: the one-sided, fragmentary correspondence that intrudes onto the landscape of William Carlos Williams's *Paterson*. In books 1 and 2 of this epic about the monolithic and representative Man/City, a frustrated poet, Cress, simultaneously rebukes the master/male poet for his lack of response and pleads with him for admission to the company of poets. Cress writes:

> Despite my having said that I'd never write to you again, I do so now because I find, with the passing of time, that the outcome of my failure with you has been the complete damming up of all my creative capacities in a particularly disastrous manner such as I have never before experienced.
>
> For a great many weeks now (whenever I've tried to write poetry) every thought I've had, even every feeling, has been struck off some surface crust of myself which began gathering when I first sensed that you were ignoring the real contents of my last letters to you, and which finally congealed into some impenetrable substance when you asked me to quit corresponding with you altogether without even an explanation.

[25] Estelle Jelinek, Introduction to *Women's Autobiography*. See also Gerda Lerner, *The Female Experience* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1977).



> That kind of blockage, exiling one's self from one's self—have you ever experienced it? I dare say you have, at moments; and if so, you can well understand what a serious psychological injury it amounts to when turned into a permanent day-to-day condition.[26]

According to Williams, the letters from Cress are drawn from his own correspondence with Marcia Nardi, whom he does not name in the poem. The woman poet in the world and the one in this poem speak in the same voice about the same sense of exile. The fragment's double voice—Cress is a woman poet both in Williams's poem and in the world—dramatizes the necessity and the consequences of trying to speak/write oneself into a tradition that excludes women poets. Cress has devoted her energy to a patriarchal poetic men's club that cannot admit her. When she attempts to break into voice, to disrupt the silence threatening her, her depths are denied, and she becomes "some surface crust of myself," which nothing can penetrate and from which nothing can issue. This impenetrability signals a fatal rupture of identity, "a blockage, exiling one's self from one's self." The silence of the male and his refusal to acknowledge her act as a divisive force, which Cress internalizes as an opaque surface incapable of reflecting her self: her surface has "congealed" into undesired, ambiguously protective armor. If Cress looks to the man as gatekeeper, she will find no sympathy, no possibility of identification or engagement. Indeed, beyond the gate he is identical with the city itself.

Insofar as they are denied an active role in the city, women are identified with nature in the poem. The Woman/Nature construct functions as both the condition and the boundary of the story inscribed in *Paterson*; she is the threatening and desired wilderness that the Man/City must conquer and defend himself against. Similar interpretations advanced by recent feminist theory allow us to raise the stakes and claim that *Paterson* here stands in for Western metaphysics. Within the confines of both cities, women—or, Woman, as symbolized here—cannot think or be thought, nor can they speak for themselves. On their silence depends the flourishing of an empire. Were they to speak, these walls might come tumbling down. No chance of that in this poem, though, because Cress lacks the keys both to the city and to language. "Paterson/Williams" knows very well the importance of precursors. "There's nothing sentimental about the technique of writing," he advises an aspiring male poet. "It can't be learned, you'll say, by a fool. But any young man with a mind burst-

[26] William Carlos Williams, *Paterson* (New York: New Directions, 1963), 45.

ing to get out, to get down on a page even a clean sentence—gets courage from an old man who stands ready to help him—to talk to" (231).

In a kind of gloss on Cress's self-representation as exile, Virginia Woolf describes two forms the exile of women writers takes. In *A Room of One's Own*, the *I*-as-outsider describes an externally prohibitive version of exile: "He was a Beadle; I was a woman. This was the turf; there was the path."[27] The second form suggests the internalization of exile, in which the *I*-as-mirror "possess[es] the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size" (35). Commenting on both exiles, Woolf concludes that the former is less deeply damaging: "I thought how unpleasant it is to be locked out; and I thought how it is worse perhaps to be locked in" (24). In *Paterson*, Cress is reduced to this looking-glass function. She briefly reflects the passage of those for whom the city's maze of poetic influence is comparatively clearly mapped. The male poet looks at her and sees nothing, that is, nothing other than a magnified version of himself. She looks at him and sees, simply and devastatingly, nothing. He will not hold her gaze, and the dynamic of beholding and begetting is destroyed in this refusal.[28] Female speech as transgression and poetic tradition as male bonding are so deeply inscribed in this poem that Cress cannot steer herself out of its ruts. She vanishes into silence.

When Bolton's son tampers with the text, he changes his mother's autobiography and reveals something of himself and his culture's assumptions about what is "interesting." Similarly, by refusing to acknowledge a woman's life as sufficiently worth writing about when that woman has a famous husband, Tillich's audience recreates the ideological silencing of women. And when William Carlos Williams refuses to help "Cress" publish her poetry under her own name but includes her letters in his epic, then silencing women becomes more than a thematic coincidence or an accident of personal history.[29] In-

[27] Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1929), 6.

[28] For an extended analysis of this dynamic, see my article "The Gaze of the Other Woman: Beholding and Begetting in Dickinson, Moore, and Rich," in *Engendering the Word*, ed. Temma Berg et al. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 81–102.

[29] Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar argue that Williams uses the strategy of hiding things in the open to deflect negative reaction: "Noting that to hide her words 'would be a confession of weakness,' this man of letters who was later to tell Nardi her poems were so good 'that I feel ashamed for my sex' adopts instead the brilliant strategy of the hero of Poe's 'The Purloined Letter,' concealing the threat implied by the dangerous letters he has purloined by placing them in the open that no one would suspect their power" (*No Man's Land*, vol. 1: *The War of the Words* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988], 153). See also Sandra Gilbert, "Purloined Letters: William Carlos Williams and 'Cress,'" *William Carlos Williams Review* 10.2 (Fall 1985): 5–15.



deed, these three forms of interruption indicate the ways in which narratives of development lack a point of entry for women: the signature or autograph does not fit the narrative. Steedman's and Lorde's own use of autobiographics, I believe, indicate the extent to which they comprehend and refuse the self-representational limitations required of Bolton, Tillich, and Nardi. As the historical specificities of each of these instances make clear, Steedman and Lorde draw upon two solid decades of feminist work to stake their self-representational projects in different terms.

For a fourth form of interruption, let us turn to a text that feminist critics have been reinterpreting from a variety of perspectives: Freud's *Dora: An Analysis of a Case of Hysteria*. The talking cure has been used by some critics as a metaphor for the autobiographical process of forming the chaotic elements of life into a narrative that replaces and transcends those experiences in a healing and restorative way.[30] Autobiography scholars who take this view would agree with Freud that the events themselves are subordinated in analysis (as in autobiography) to the process of forming a therapeutic narrative. In other words, the subject moves, via autobiography, from *hysteria* to *historia*. Insofar as Freud presents his views on Dora's progress toward achieving this curative end, and inasmuch as Freud's version of Dora's story represents his desire to found a psychoanalytic method through the talking cure and, hence, a major phase in his life, perhaps *Dora*, though not the "proper" autobiography of either Freud or "Dora," is the autobiographical fragment of both.

Some aspects of Dora's case are well known.[31] Like Cress, Dora is a code name: the woman's name was Ida Bauer.[32] She was a young woman, Freud tells us, suffering from hysteria that resulted from her love for her father's acquaintance, Herr K., who attempted to seduce her. Although she desired this seduction, she could not admit her desire, and developed the syndrome of somatic effects named hysteria. According to Freud, Dora is, in almost schematic clarity, a picture

[30] Paul Jay, *Being in the Text: Self-Representation from Wordsworth to Roland Barthes* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984).

[31] Among the many critical anthologies and articles, see Charles Bernheimer and Claire Kahane, eds., *In Dora's Case: Freud—Hysteria—Feminism* (1985; New York: Columbia University Press, 1990); Monique David-Ménard, *Hysteria from Freud to Lacan: Body and Language in Psychoanalysis*, trans. Catherine Porter (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989); Dianne Hunter, ed., *Seduction and Theory: Readings of Gender, Representation, and Rhetoric* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989); Sarah Kofman, *The Enigma of Woman: Woman in Freud's Writings*, trans. Catherine Porter (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985); Biddy Martin, *Women and Modernity: The (Life)Styles of Lou Andreas-Salomé* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991).

[32] Ida Bauer's name was not revealed until 1978 by Arnold A. Rogow.

of repression. In order to succeed in analysis, Dora must craft a narrative that would restore her to bodily and psychic health, a narrative with a purpose, which would enable her to exchange the narrative in which she is ill for the narrative that will make her well. While there is considerable discussion about how Dora structures and insists upon her own hysterical narrative, Freud's writing is charged with a more pressing concern: his search for a narrative form that will found his new discipline.

In his "prefatory remarks," Freud indicates that the development of a new narrative technique to reproduce the analytical scene of the talking cure will mark the founding of a new science. He writes that "the presentation of *my* case histories remains a problem which is hard for me to solve."[33] The task, as he sees it, is representational. It involves the production of a narrative based on Dora's narrative that recasts her as a character in his narrative rather than as the speaking subject of her own. In his prolepsis, he justifies his revelation of Dora's case: "Whereas before I was accused of giving no information about my patients, now I shall be accused of giving information about my patients which ought not to be given" (21). He has changed names and locales to throw even the shrewdest of bloodhounds off the trail: "I have allowed no name to stand which could put a non-medical reader upon the scent" (23). Freud wishes to protect Dora from nonmedical readers, from "enquiring minds," although the purely professional guidelines for such confidentiality seem fuzzy to him and his remarks about them are fraught with defensiveness.

As the prefatory remarks presently reveal, Freud is obliquely addressing Dora. He counsels her from beyond the couch when he suggests how she should interpret his publication of her case history: "I naturally cannot prevent the patient herself from being pained if *her own case history* should accidentally fall into her hands. But she will learn nothing from it she does not already know; and she may ask herself who besides her could discover from it that she is the subject of this paper" (23, emphasis added). Who, indeed, is the subject of this paper? His phrase—"if her own case history should accidentally fall into her hands"—reveals Freud's ownership of this narrative. Freud moves from issues of confidentiality to the border of confession, a border that is structured like a fault line through the politics of representation: What is it proper to say? Necessary to say? For whom do I speak? About what should I remain silent? The anxiety is occasioned by an absence of clear rules; that is, the formal demands of this confessional narrative are unclear to Freud because it involves an appropriation of Dora's confession as a means to make his own. Thus, Freud maneuvers his interpretation to the fore as he reconstructs Dora's history, narrative, and interpretation as the ground from which *he* works. By taking for himself the place of confessing subject, he, rather than Dora, becomes the autobiographical subject. Freud compels Dora to confess to and through him, then offers her account as the basis for his own, as an autobiographical pre-text.

[33] Sigmund Freud, *Dora: An Analysis of a Case of Hysteria* (New York: Collier, 1963), 22, emphasis added.



How were the grounds of Freud's authorization constituted? Dora was taken to Freud by her father after she attempted suicide at age eighteen. Her father wanted her out of the way; Freud wanted to test psychoanalysis. The bargain in which they exchanged Dora included making her well. The issue of exchange comes up in Dora's analysis: "When she was feeling embittered she used to be overcome by the idea that she had been handed over to Herr K. as the price of his tolerating the relations between her father and his wife; and her rage at her father's making such a use of her was visible behind her affection for him" (50). We do not know what Dora wanted once the bargain between her father and Freud was struck, whether she embraced the idea of analysis, whether she welcomed time away from her father, whether she sensed that she was passing again from one man to another. We know what she wanted before the exchange, namely, for her parents to believe her story about what Herr K. wanted when he propositioned her by the lake. They didn't. If they were mistaken, as Dora insists they were, Freudian psychoanalysis builds from interpretive error toward claims of interpretive insight. Following her parents' discrediting of her story, Ida/Dora wrote a suicide note and, after arguing with her father and fainting, was taken to Freud. Throughout the analysis, and beyond, Dora persists in her desire to have her narrative believed. Freud was supposed to persuade Dora to collude in the bourgeois family silence surrounding sex and power. In fact, he wanted her to talk about it, but her inability to be heard in her own language and her inability or unwillingness to "tell the truth" in Freud's language undo her. She loses her voice.

Hysteria, as a pathology, is the gaping hole in the seamless fiction of bourgeois family unity borne in the bodies of women, experienced as somatic reality, as truth become burden, as medical identity, and as a lie. A densely encoded body language, hysteria signifies a disease in the body of the family expressed through symptoms in the hysteric's body, in this case, through her loss of voice. Dora returned to Freud fifteen months after breaking off the analysis to corroborate her side

of the story and also, I think, for revenge. Herr K. had admitted his sexual proposition and Frau K. had admitted her affair with Dora's father. Dora returned to the family as the place of absolution and to Freud's office for the same purpose: she has been wrongly accused, tried, and treated, and she wants her interlocutor to concede her truth. It seems to me that rather than consider the accuracy of Freud's interpretation or the literal and legal elements of this dilemma, it is possible to aim athwart the story, to come at it from an oblique angle, as Jacques Lacan advised, and see Dora's desires, her questions, her departures, and returns in the context of self-representation, most acutely in its possibilities and politics.

When Dora poses identity questions, she seems always to run into trouble: the answers she works out to questions of family identity, sexual identity, and gender identity are fraught with silencing fathers, complicitous mothers, and never the right lovers. That the urge toward detective work which Freud installs in the prefatory remarks continues to compel many critics of Dora's case indicates that psychoanalysis is a powerful technology of autobiography, interested in the subject's identity, in the narrative dimension of case history, and in the "truth," even when it constructs it as an intrusion.

Freud places a knot of desire at the center of his analysis; yet, he swerves from what he calls the "strongest unconscious current in [Dora's] mental life," her desire for women. Freud considered her homosexuality to be the perversion she had repressed even further than her desire for Herr K., for Dora was in love with the unwelcome seducer's wife, Frau K., the woman who was also her father's lover. Woven throughout Dora's narrative of the trauma that propelled her into troubled unhappiness is a narrative of more successful attachments to women. The world of women to which Dora was attracted forms the mere backdrop for Freud's analysis. Of course, Dora's lesbianism was not the kind of choice Freud could facilitate; one can imagine a very different story unfolding, though not through Freudian psychoanalysis, in which Dora's narrative of lesbian sexuality was achieved and deemed therapeutic. Yet if Freudian therapeutic narratives are more or less exchangeable (within the limitations of the political unconscious, to use Fredric Jameson's term), if the final truth is untethered to facts, then why are the healing narratives the ones that fold the female patient into Freud's discourse of "normal" womanhood? As one of the major truth- and identity-producing discourses of the twentieth century, Freudian psychoanalysis depends for its "success" on a definition of women as deformed and deficient men. Such is the production of women's authority in a discourse that



Foucault has described as "yet another round of whispering on a bed" (*History of Sexuality* 1: 5). Thus while I would agree that the "talking cure" offers a significant metaphor for thinking about autobiography, any restoration it offers must concede that, for Freud, women's constitutive lack of a penis can never be restored and women are trained by means of Freudian psychoanalysis to accept this totalizing premise.

In this context, several features of Dora's story are important. First, Dora was an intelligent storyteller. Freud found himself compelled enough by her stories virtually to invent psychoanalysis as a codification of and tribute to her hysterical talent. Imagine the hours Freud spent listening to Ida talk herself into his own dreams, creating the occasion for his interpretive talents to flower, becoming "Dora." Their interplay forms the subtext of Freud's *Analysis of a Case of Hysteria* and is the story he in some ways represses. Second, Dora controls more of the situation than Freud would admit; no doubt such admissions are not necessary to the *Analysis*, but I think we see something of the artist in Dora when she abruptly cuts off the analysis, with dramatic flair, on the final day of the year 1900. When Freud wakes up in the twentieth century, the analysis of her dreams will carry psychoanalysis forward. She is also an active and competent collaborator in their analysis of her dreams. Freud comments: "She had already had some training in dream interpretation from having previously analysed a few minor specimens" (82). Third, her absence and silence mark Freud's theory as a discourse of loss that attempts to recuperate "the hysteric" as it fails to recuperate Dora's voice.

Some more specific attention to Dora's most troubling symptom, her loss of voice, can be given here in the context of Freud's objective which he articulates in the prefatory remarks: "My object in this case history was to demonstrate the intimate structure of a neurotic disorder and the determination of its symptoms" (27). Dora's voice appears in Freud's text as reported discourse, fragmented, illustrative, a symptom of illness. There is the comment on Frau K.'s "adorable white body" (79); we hear "her usual reply: 'I don't remember that' " (74), and Dora's skilled, though still harmful repression, at which Freud marvels. He notes an example:

> "I can think of nothing else," she complained again and again. "I know my brother says we children have no right to criticize this behaviour of our father's. He declares that we ought not to trouble ourselves about it, and ought even to be glad, perhaps, that he has found a woman he can love, since mother understands him so little. I can quite see that, and I

should like to think the same as my brother, but I can't. I can't forgive him for it." (71–72)

Her interpretations contribute to her illness, according to Freud. They may be ingenious, affecting, even "right" in some way, but inasmuch as they have not cured her, they must be resisted. The psychoanalytic process turns on the subject's formulation of her past into a narrative, not on the recovery—through unblocking memory—of the past itself. The past has no existence outside this formulation; the talking cure's power lies in this transformation. In this context, it is also important to point out that the claim of psychoanalysis to disinterest in the literal truth is somewhat disingenuous or at least overstated. After all, Freud believed in lies. Memories could be falsified, obscured, repressed; indeed, the analyst's skill at dislodging the truth from the cover of protective memory is always being tested. Could Freud have been so certain that Dora was lying if he did not concede the centrality of something functioning as "truth" which he controlled? The point is, the relative relevance of "truth" is decided by those who can determine who is lying, and make their judgment count. Dora's words refuse to yield to Freud's discourse of health. Required to exchange her words and interpretations for the doctor's—and how to measure the degree of coercion involved?—Dora becomes silent. Freud's analysis of this symptom is consistent with the sexualizing of all physical, hysterical symptoms. But her loss of voice, her refusal to participate either in her illness or in Freud's transformation of it, is consistent with Cress's sense of self-exile. Cress's armored body is as impenetrable a mystery in Williams's *Paterson* as Dora's silence and disappearance is to Freud. Both represent the difficulty of locating the autobiographical site, the engendering *I*, within a discourse—poetic or psychoanalytic—in which authority is so heavily weighted, even beyond the authorizing signature, toward the masculine.

Freud located the sources of identity and desire in a sexualized economy based, for women, on scarcity and noncoincidence. Women's constitutive lack determines inferiority and projects hysteria as a plausible resistance to this flawed body. Male identity and desire circulate within a self-referential economy of met needs. Such a system cannot contain female desire and identity as "fullness"; thus, the excess or plenitude represented by rapture and ecstasy, to which I shall turn in Chapters 3 and 4, fractures this model of exchange. It is not so much that women's desire cannot be measured by the patriarchal model, rather that the measure of desire is reduced to women's



desire for the phallus. Especially in this context of representation, an economy of scarcity as opposed to an economy of plenitude is operating implicitly in the way a culture values the currency of women's lives.

The first form of interruption—the posthumous editing and private publication of Bolton's manuscript as *Autobiography for My Son*—concerns public reputation; the autobiography addressed to "others" about one's life and career is a common form of men's autobiography. Thus, I would conclude that Bolton's "signature" to such a document was illegible and that the discourse of public reputation in early twentieth-century America, despite the careers of many women, was masculinist. Even when Bolton was quite possibly attempting to present her career in animal rights activism in relation to this discourse, there was one significant reader who refused this (self-) representation. It is rather more likely that her son saw this compassion for animals as a "feminine" virtue, though Bolton's activism certainly clashed with the rules for female comportment.

In Tillich's case, I think it is possible to see further how women are refused the self-authorizing function that some critics have suggested resides in autobiography. What criteria about the value of women's lives are operating when Tillich can be criticized for choosing the wrong "subject" for her autobiography? I do not mean to let these texts stand as different examples of the more or less monolithic oppression of women; instead, I am trying to underline the "policing" of the autobiographical pact which goes on through a variety of regulations and regulators. The role of those who may judge the truth, who may appropriate women's self-representation as "inspiration" or more "raw material" for men's theories and representations of the self, make codes of reading sensitive to the disruption of the discourse of self-identity critical to a study of women's self-representation.

In neither *Paterson* nor *Dora* are the women's real names used. The women stand in these texts as figures: in Cress's case, of poetic talent thwarted and turned against itself; in Dora's case, of sexually repressed and self-deluding hysteria. They function, too, as the narrative voices enclosed within structures (poetic and scientific) of Williams's and Freud's devising and as such reveal how the self-representational desire *of* female subjects can become figures for desire *in* narrative. Like psychoanalysis and the city of Paterson, autobiography is a practice of language, a signifying system charged with the representation (and construction) of identity through the organizing modes of gender and genre. In autobiography, Woman as a figure of the desire the Other possesses and may exchange, rails against her enforced silence, writes

hard and indicting letters, or falls silent and disappears from the narrative structure designed to record her diminishment.[34] The figure of Woman as ground of representation and object of capture is implicated in autobiography's dream of identity. Once Cress and Dora are captured within a narrative that reworks their self-representational desires for agency and subjectivity into the demands of Williams's and Freud's texts, their identity is no longer coincident with the form in which they speak. They are at odds with the narrative structure; they speak against themselves. If we continue to romanticize identity, on one hand, as it is represented by the signature, then we necessarily conclude that Williams and Freud have artfully shaped the real voices of women and deserve themselves to be "authorized." If, on the other hand, we agree to read against the authority of the signature in these cases and instead to press this claim to its limits and read for self-representation at odds with the masculinist discourses that frame them, then we have interrupted Freud's and Williams's texts, denied them at least for the space of this reading the univocal voice of their authorship, and reread Cress's and Dora's signatures through and against their coding *as* illegibility.

Currently, there are at least two ways to interpret rupture within feminist theory: one perspective would align rupture with rapture, with feminine *jouissance*, and claim, as Hélène Cixous does, that women are *figures* of rupture, those wild women, sorceresses, and conjurers who threaten phallogocentrism with their witchy words and ways. Another perspective would argue that women are *agents* of rupture whose actions in the world, including writing, are appropriated by masculinist institutions that women can, nevertheless, resist. Figures of the feminine who disrupt patriarchal language or real women who are oppressed by and resist patriarchal institutions? Both have been used in feminist arguments and have been used to rally feminist actions inside and outside the academy. Both analyses help to frame the problems I have associated with authorization in self-representation. And while these two views are incompatible, depending as they do on definitions of "women" which are themselves

[34] I am reminded here of Teresa de Lauretis's, description of Zobeide, the imaginary city in Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities*, as "a city built from a dream of woman [which] must be constantly rebuilt to keep woman captive. . . . [T]he woman is at once the dream's object of desire and the reason for its objectification: the construction of the city. She is both the source of the drive to represent and its ultimate, unattainable goal. Thus the city, which is built to capture men's dream, finally only inscribes woman's absence" (*Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, and Cinema* [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984], 12–13).



unstable, both reveal the problem of grounding feminist analysis in the identity of women.[35]

Many women writers, even when they are on the apparently common ground of language and literature, experience their desire to write as trespassing. Virginia Woolf couches her ambivalence in the metaphor of property: "Literature is no one's private ground; literature is common ground. . . . Let us trespass freely and fearlessly and find our own way for ourselves."[36] Woolf associates writing with a transgression of the patriarchal privilege and indicates that the illusion of ownership which accompanies writing has been viewed as a male right to property in which a woman's access to property through the legitimate mechanisms of inheritance and ownership are denied. Similarly, Hélène Cixous claims, "It is no accident: women take after birds and robbers just as robbers take after women and birds. They [*illes*] go by, fly the coop, take pleasure in jumbling the order of space, in disorienting it, in changing around the furniture, dislocating things and values, breaking them all up, emptying structures, and turning propriety upside down."[37]

In the context of these important feminist insights, we could argue that first-person, nonfictional narrative offers voice to historically silenced and marginalized persons who penetrate the labyrinths of history and language to possess, often by stealth, theft, or what they perceive as trespass, the engendering matrix of textual selfhood: the autobiographical *I*. Such "theft," however, belongs to a language of proper, legal ownership and is therefore problematical in the resisting reading I offer of the autobiographical pact. I would conclude by suggesting that the violence described through my use of "interruption" and "autobiographics" does not necessarily denote the liberation of a female speaking subject. Rather, it seeks to be attentive to the cultural specificities of self-representational experimentation by women. Such violence may not so much mark a breakdown in the functioning of the masculinist discourses of truth and identity as evidence

[35] For other discussions of the constitutive incompatibility between and among feminist positions, see, for example, Michèle Barrett, "Some Different Meanings of the Concept of 'Difference': Feminist Theory and the Concept of Ideology," in *The Difference Within*, ed. Elizabeth Meese and Alice Parker (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1989), 37–48; and Riley, *"Am I That Name ?"*

[36] Virginia Woolf, "The Leaning Tower," quoted in Elizabeth Meese, *Crossing the Double-Cross: The Practice of Feminist Criticism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1986), 4.

[37] Hélène Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," trans. Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, *Signs* 1 (1976): 873–93. "Illes" is Cixous's third-person, plural neologism combining "elles" and "ils."

how they can be mobilized to maintain their power. Yet, feminist criticism can intervene in those practices and does interrupt those discourses, at least here and at least now, where the axis of theories of traditional autobiography and the texts they describe intersects the axis of feminist theory and women's self-representation, which is where we are. *X*.