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REPRESENTING THE SUBJECT: AN INTERDISCIPLINARY STUDY OF WOMEN'S
AUTOBIOGRAPHY, SELF-PORTRAITURE, AND AUTOETHOGRAPHY IN THE
TWENTIETH CENTURY

BY

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THESIS

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Comparative Literature
in the Graduate College of the
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2002

Urbana, Illinois

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CORINNE ELIZABETH ANDERSEN

ENTITLED REPRESENTING THE SUBJECT: AN INTERDISCIPLINARY STUDY OF

WOMEN'S AUTOBIOGRAPHY, SELF-PORTRAITURE, AND AUTOETHOGRAPHY

BE ACCEPTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR

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*For my parents
and Ben*

Acknowledgements

I wish to thank the members of my thesis committee Nancy Blake, Alice Deck, Jordana Mendelson, and Michael Palencia-Roth for their tireless support and insightful comments. It has been a humbling and rewarding experience working with such excellent scholars and patient teachers.

I would also like to thank the graduate students in the Comparative Literature Program at the University of Illinois for their friendship and encouragement.

I am extremely appreciative of the various forms of institutional support I have received. I am grateful to the Graduate College at the University of Illinois for several travel grants that helped defray conference related expenses. I also owe a debt of gratitude to the Center for Latin American and Caribbean studies for the Tinker Foundation Summer Field Grant that enabled me to travel to Mexico City and study the art of Frida Kahlo. I was honored to receive The Campo Elías Palencia Memorial Fellowship from the Program in Comparative Literature. I would also like to thank the Ford Foundation for their support of my work on Gloria Anzaldúa.

A debt of gratitude goes to the faculty and staff in the Women's Studies Program (to have an office of one's own, and a TA stipend!).

My family has always been very supportive of me. My parents, Gary and Cindy Andersen, deserve more thanks than I can possibly offer them. My sisters, Samantha and Jaime, also provided me with an enormous amount of encouragement.

Finally, I would like to thank my partner, best friend, and technical advisor Ben for his patience, love, and support.

Table of Contents

List of Figures.....	viii
Introduction.....	1
Introduction to Part One: A Critique of Genre.....	17
Autobiography.....	17
Self-Portraiture.....	19
Autoethography.....	21

Autobiography

Chapter 1	
I Am Not Who "I" Pretend to Be: <i>The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas</i> and Its Photographic Frontispiece....	25
Chapter 2	
A Self Without Closure: Lyn Hejinian's <i>My Life</i>	44

Self-Portraiture

Chapter 3	
Que me veux-tu?: Claude Cahun's Canceled Confessions...	63
Chapter 4	
"What one looks at is what cannot be seen": Cindy Sherman's <i>Film Stills</i>	77

Autoethography

Chapter 5	
Adjusting the Spy-Glass of Anthropology: Zora Neale Hurston's Autoethographic <i>Oeuvre</i>	92
Chapter 6	
The Muted Serpent: Ruth Behar's <i>Translated Woman</i>	111
Introduction to Part Two: Strategies for Representing the Subject.....	128
Mimicry/Masquerade.....	128
Abjection.....	131
The Third Term.....	133

Mimicry/Masquerade

Chapter 7	
"You say that everything being the same everything is always different": The Representation of Gender in <i>The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas</i>	137

Chapter 8	
Incog(n)ito: Claude Cahun's <i>Autoportraits</i>	157

Abjection

Chapter 9	
Between Abject and Subject: Cindy Sherman's <i>Fashion, Fairy Tale, and Disaster/Disgust Series</i>	173

Chapter 10	
The Game of Getting Subjectivity: Racial Abjection In Zora Neale Hurston's "How It Feels to Be Colored Me".....	189

The Third Term

Chapter 11	
Remembrance of an Open Wound: Frida Kahlo and Post-revolutionary Mexican Identity.....	207

Chapter 12	
Beyond Border Thinking: Gloria Anzaldúa's <i>Borderlands La Frontera: The New Mestiza</i>	226

Conclusion.....	246
-----------------	-----

Bibliography.....	249
-------------------	-----

Appendix A Figures.....	266
-------------------------	-----

Vita.....	294
-----------	-----

List of Figures¹

Figures appear in Appendix A (see Table of Contents)

1. Man Ray. *Alice B. Toklas at the Door*, 1922. 4 3/4" x 3 3/4". Rpt. In *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, Inc., 1933.
2. Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore. *Aveux non avenues*. Plate VIII, 1929-30. 15.4 x 10.4 cm. Private Collection, Paris.
3. Claude Cahun. *Untitled*, 1928. Black and white photograph, 30 x 23.8 cm. Musée des Beaux Arts, Nantes.
4. Claude Cahun. *Untitled*, 1921. Black and white photograph, 10.9 x 8.2 cm. Private collection.
5. Claude Cahun. *Untitled*, 1927. Black and white photograph, 11.7 x 8.9 cm. County Museum of Art, Los Angeles.
6. Claude Cahun. *Que me veux-tu?*, 1928. Black and white photograph, 23 x 18 cm. Private collection, Paris.
7. Claude Cahun. *Untitled*, 1929-30. Black and white photograph. Printed in *Bifur* #5.
8. Hans Holbein the Younger. *The Ambassadors*, 1533. Oil on oak, 207 x 209.5 cm. The National Gallery, London.

¹Height precedes width for all dimensions.

9. Cindy Sherman. *Untitled Film Still #2*, 1977. Black and white photograph, 8" x 10". Edition of 10. Collection of the artist.
10. Cindy Sherman. *Untitled Film Still #14*, 1978. Black and white photograph, 8" x 10". Edition of 10. Collection of the artist.
11. Cindy Sherman. *Untitled Film Still #11*, 1978. Black and white photograph, 8" x 10". Edition of 10. Collection of the artist.
12. Cindy Sherman. *Untitled Film Still #12*, 1978. Black and white photograph, 8" x 10". Edition of 10. Collection of the artist.
13. Romaine Brooks. *Self-Portrait*, 1923. Oil on canvas, 46 1/4" x 26 7/8". National Museum of American Art.
14. Claude Cahun. *Untitled*, 1927. Black and white photograph, 10.4 x 7.6 cm. Galerie Berggruen, Paris.
15. Claude Cahun. *Untitled*, 1928. Black and white photograph, 10 x 7.5 cm. Galerie Berggruen, Paris.
16. Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore. *Aveux non avenues*. Plate X, 1929-30. 15.4 x 10.4 cm. Galerie Zabriskie, Paris.
17. Claude Cahun. *Untitled*, 1928. Black and white photograph, 10 x 7.6 cm. Private collection, Paris.

18. Cindy Sherman. *Untitled #132*, 1984. Color photograph, 69" x 47". Edition of 5. Collection of the artist.
19. Cindy Sherman. *Untitled #140*, 1985. Color photograph, 72 1/2" x 49 3/8". Edition of 6. Collection of Susan and Lewis Manilow, Chicago.
20. Cindy Sherman. *Untitled #175*, 1987. Color photograph, 47 1/2" x 71 1/2". Edition of 6. Collection of the artist.
21. Frida Kahlo. *My Dress Hangs There*, 1933. Oil and collage on masonite, 18" x 19 3/4". Estate of Dr. Leo Eloesser, San Francisco.
22. Diego Rivera. *Rockefeller Center Mural*, 1934. Destroyed. Repainted at the Palace of Fine Arts, Mexico City, 1934.
23. Frida Kahlo. *Memory*, 1937. Oil on metal, 15 3/4" x 11". Private collection, Paris.
24. Frida Kahlo. *The Two Fridas*, 1939. Oil on canvas, 67" x 67". Collection of the Museo de Arte Moderno, Mexico City.
25. Frida Kahlo. *Self-Portrait on the Border Line Between Mexico and the United States*, 1932. Oil on metal, 12 1/2" x 13 3/4". Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Reyer, New York.
26. Frida Kahlo. *Four Inhabitants of Mexico*, 1938. Oil on wood panel, 23.8" x 18.3". Private Collection, California.

27. Frida Kahlo. *The Wounded Table*, 1940. Oil on canvas, 47.8" x 96.5". Collection unknown.

28. Frida Kahlo. *My Nurse and I*, 1937. Oil on Metal, 12 1/2" x 14". Collection of Dolores Olmedo Foundation, Mexico City.

Introduction

In *A Room of One's Own* Virginia Woolf laments the paucity of historical material available on women and their lives. When Woolf attempts to create a profile of the Elizabethan woman she not only discovers that scholars barely mention her, but also that "she never writes her own life" (45). Looking at the past century, one can only admire the prodigious efforts undertaken to fill this lacuna in the human story. In order to break with unfortunate precedents, women in the twentieth century not only filled in historical gaps, they wrote their own lives in record number.

While self-representation allowed women to assert themselves as subjects, and therefore challenge their object-status in the Western tradition, their efforts were often impeded by the definition of "self" embedded in conventional forms of self-representation. The Enlightenment postulates of individual liberty and autonomous agency that inform contemporary notions of "the self" (Tim Dean 224) occlude women's lived experience of oppression. In time, many women realized that if their self-representations simply reproduced new versions of the Enlightenment "self," they reinforced the power dynamic that led to their oppression.

In this dissertation, I explore a sample of twentieth century artists who challenge Western constructions of "the self" and "Woman" in their innovative self-representations. Some of the artists reshape existing genres of self-representation, including autobiography and self-portraiture, and others fashion new genres, such as autoethography, to accommodate their voice and vision. In the following chapters, I discuss the ways in which Gertrude Stein (1874-1946), Claude Cahun (1894-1954), Zora Neale Hurston (1901-1960), Frida Kahlo (1907-1954), Lyn Hejinian (b. 1941), Gloria Anzaldúa (b. 1942), Cindy Sherman (b. 1954) and Ruth Behar (b. 1956) investigate the alienation of the subject in Western culture. Because they understand the ego as a façade, these artists do not aim to represent "the self" or the ego. Instead, they attempt to represent subjectivity and thereby initiate a more penetrating analysis of the human condition and a more profound inquiry into the foundations of human suffering. Their examination of the origins and manifestations of unconscious desire results in a nuanced interrogation of identity and the markers directly related to them individually and collectively: gender, sexuality, race, and ethnicity.

Before I detail the reasons behind my focus on the aforementioned artists and provide an outline for the progression of this thesis, I believe it useful to establish

the theoretical basis for my project. I will begin with a brief introduction to the Lacanian principles that fuel my interest in representations of the subject and then supplement that discussion with the relevance of gender, sexuality, race and ethnicity to this study.

"Individuality is Someone Else's Fiction"¹

Attempts to represent the self stem from the age-old desire to "know thyself." Since the latter half of the past millennium, up until the dawn of the twentieth century, definitions of "the self" revolved around the *cogito* and the belief that a self-reflective consciousness was knowable. With Freud's introduction of the concept of the unconscious, notions of "the self" changed radically. Freud suggested that irrational impulses, often ineffectively quelled by the heavy armor of rationality, also define a subject. Although many artists in the twentieth century remained focused on the portrayal of the *cogito* in their self-representations, some explored the force of unconscious desire in conscious life. In this thesis I examine a qualified sample from the latter category.

The artists in this project question the Enlightenment ideal of the rational, knowable, unified self and challenge

¹ I take my sub-title from a line in Ellie Ragland-Sullivan's *Jacques Lacan and The Philosophy of Psychoanalysis* (106).

the ego structures (linearity, rationality, objectivity, etc.) that shelter the subject from its own discord. They choose themselves as their object of representation in order to more thoroughly explore the process of social determination. If the artist were to chose

a model who was not herself, then her work would be a continuation of this notion of the artist as consciousness which is both anterior to the world and distinct from it, a consciousness that knows the world by judging it. (Krauss "A Note..." 23)

To occupy dual positions, both subject and object, is to gain a unique insight into the self/Other dynamic that makes subjectivity possible. The artists in this study understand that no one can "judge" or alter the operation of signification from an outside vantage point; they therefore scrutinize this process from within.

Any study of Lacan's theories of subjectivity must begin with an analysis of his mirror stage. According to Lacan, the mirror stage marks the infant's entry into lack and language, or its commencement as a subject. Before Lacan's metaphorical mirror, the infant first understands the differentiation between self and Other. The emerging subject both delights in the coherence exhibited by its reflection, and despairs at its inner sense of dissymmetry. The ideal image of the reflection, this fictional construct

of coordination, marks the subject's alienation, and foreshadows its lifelong existential crisis. "Human beings will forever after anticipate their own images in the images of others" (Ragland-Sullivan *Jacques Lacan and..* 25).

In order to ease the conflict that emerges as a result of the mirror stage, the subject represses its failure to embody its ideal ego (the *moi* or me) and builds up conscious defenses against this knowledge. Although it remains veiled, the *moi*, or the illusory image of coherence first found in the reflection, fuels the speaking subject's (the *je's* or I's) desire. In other words, the subject seeks to find its *moi* in the gaze of the Other, or the accepted cultural and social discourse, throughout its lifetime.

The artists under discussion replicate and interrogate the foundations of the ego ideal (one's alter ego as reflected in the Other). Representations of the subject (versus self-representations) afford them the unique opportunity to view their subjectivity as an object. While many persons represent themselves in order to strengthen the illusion of their stability, or reinforce the ego, the artists included in this thesis recognize their desire as the Other's, and view themselves, and all subjects, as necessarily conflicted. The representations of subjectivity that comprise the examples in this dissertation do not attempt to deny or resolve this division, but to expose and

explore it. The artists seek to know the *moi*, not in order to accept it, but in order to identify its demands as impossible. They seek to understand this powerful, but fictional structure.

As soon as the *je* disengages itself from the *moi* and sees its alien source in the Other(A), the *moi* assumes the status of a mirage and gradually becomes no more than one element in the object relations of a subject. The key to relative psychic health and self-knowledge lies in the direction of *je* de-objectification from *moi* fixations. (Ragland-Sullivan *Jacques Lacan...* 50)

The artists included in this project inhabit the fringes of symbolic reassurance in relation to such markers of identity as gender, sexuality, race, and ethnicity. The psychic pain caused by their inability to embody their *moi* fixations, or find their desire reflected in the gaze of the Other, serves as an impetus for their artistic productions. Their goal, however, is not to achieve legitimacy within the existent hegemony. Because the power structure of the status quo serves as the foundation of individuation, everyone internalizes the Symbolic or cultural order one enters. Representations of the subject allow the artists in this study to achieve a critical distance between their

image of self and the Other's desire and therefore possibly reprogram their *moi*, and even affect cultural change.

The Significance of Gender and Sexuality

A large amount of psycho-biographic criticism exists on several of the artists studied in this thesis. I feel, however, that the artwork discussed transcends the personal sphere and extends into the realm of cultural critique. In other words, I want to explore how these artists understand the constitution of subjectivity in Western culture, more than just their particular experience of subjectivity.

An assumption persists that women cannot help being autobiographical. For many, the abundance of self-representations produced by women in the twentieth century reinforces the stereotype of their incapacity for self-transcendence and inability to rise above the concrete, the daily, the domestic, and the personal (Behar "Rage" 232). In this thesis, I challenge this stereotype in several ways. While I have no interest in dismantling the feminist rallying cry of the 1970s, "the personal is political," and while I appreciate artistic expression that highlights the daily and the domestic, not all self-representations can be neatly classified under such rubrics.

One may choose the self as model for a wide variety of reasons. The most prominent need not be solipsism. Often

times, women's self-representations are stamped as acts of narcissism. The women in this project, however, focus on the social construction of the subject and therefore reach beyond what might be labeled an erotic obsession with their own bodies.

A considerable irony surrounds my designation of the artists selected for this project as "women." Many of the "women" included insist upon the inadequacy of this classification. The deconstruction of such identity categories as Woman² serves as one of the principle goals of this study. The idea of Woman available in the Symbolic, as well as the requirements of femininity transmitted by the Other, play a key role in the construction and maintenance of the unconscious ego or *moi*. "Femininity elaborates a philosophy of gender insufficiency in which the ideal ego itself...supports a masculinity conceiving of itself as complete sufficiency" (Ragland-Sullivan *Jacques Lacan...* 301). The artists included in this dissertation explore these ideals in order to dismantle, at least partially, the cultural myths they perpetuate. Their acknowledgement of the *méconnaissances*³ of the ego, and their manifestation in conventional self-representation, constitute a critique of the phallocracy.

²Woman with a capital "W" refers to the cultural ideal of womanliness.

In many ways, issues of gender and sexuality intersect and overlap. Society conditions subjects about accepted/unaccepted sexual roles just as it schools subjects about accepted/unaccepted gender roles. The women in this study seek to know the structural order of such desires (Ragland-Sullivan "The Signification..." 52) in order to alter that discourse.

The Significance of Race and Ethnicity

The categories of race and ethnicity, like gender, find their basis, not in biology, but in cultural conditions. Race/ethnicity can therefore be analyzed through a psychoanalytic model. As numerous scholars in the past decade have stressed, gender and race cannot be neatly compartmentalized and studied separately.

Historically, gender and race have constituted separate fields of scholarly inquiry. By studying each in isolation, however, each field marginalized major segments³ of the communities it claimed to represent. In studies of 'race,' men of color stood as the universal racial subject, whereas in studies of 'gender,' white women were positioned as the universal female subject. Women of color were left out of both narratives,

³A Lacanian term: misconstructions, or the failure to

rendered invisible both as racial and as gendered subjects. (Glenn 3)

In accordance with such theories, and in order to examine the multiple oppressions women of color experience simultaneously, I adopt an integrative versus an additive approach in this dissertation.

Lacan's theories of subjectivity enable a provocative exploration of women of color's experience of racial/ethnic and gender subordination. A woman of color's *moi*, for example, may be comprised of multiple and conflicting cultural ideals. In environments of extreme oppression, women of color are excluded from full subjecthood in the cultural symbolic. In such cases, self-representations become the battlegrounds for access to subjectivity.

Criteria for Inclusion

Although I examine only a handful of women from a limited geographical area, North America (US and Mexico) and Europe (France), women's representations of the subject span much wider geographical (as well as sociological/cultural, etc.) locations. In no way can I pretend that this study is comprehensive. First and foremost, the works chosen suggest a relationship with the theoretical framework outlined above. Not all self-representations highlight the

recognize.

self/Other dynamic of subjectivity, nor question the power structures of the status quo. The works discussed here were chosen for their innovation. Finally, each of the women included has produced a substantial amount of self-representational material(s). More than a single painting, photograph, or individual poem, a prolonged and profound commitment to the representation of subjectivity was a prerequisite for inclusion in this thesis.

The artists examined in this project interrelate in still further ways. Stein, Cahun, Hurston, and Kahlo all produced the majority of their oeuvre during the first third of the twentieth century. While their backgrounds are quite disparate, their intellectual milieux cross-connect in significant ways. As an expatriate in Paris, Stein provides evidence in *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (240) that she met Cahun (néé Lucy Schwob). Carl Van Vechten, a good friend of Stein's, was also a patron/friend of Hurston's. In addition, Hurston published in Nancy Cunard's volume on Africa and the African diaspora, *Negro: An Anthology* (1934). Cunard serves as another important figure in this cross-Atlantic exchange of ideas. An English woman who moved to Paris in the 1920s, she knew many of the people in Stein's circles, and maintained close ties with the Surrealist

group. Kahlo lived in New York City⁴ during the height of the Harlem Renaissance (1933) and exhibited in Surrealist shows in both New York and Paris (1938,1939). She immersed herself in the intellectual climate of New York City and Paris during her stays there.

More than hoping to strengthen these somewhat tenuous connections, I want to explore a diverse sample of women's representations of the subject. The artists chosen for this project adopt a wide variety of modes, methods, and themes in their exploration of the experience of individuation.

Many of the artists discussed thus far virtually disappeared from critical discourse during the middle decades of the century. In *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf stares perplexedly at the nearly empty selves devoted to women's literature. Although women produced vast amounts of important artwork in the early decades of the twentieth century, by the 1950s and 60s the selves that housed their artistic production were virtually cleared once again. Thanks in part to research inspired by the various feminist movements of the later third of the century, these women now occupy their rightful place in the canon.

In the 1980s, members of the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E school of American Poetry (including Lyn Hejinian), dissatisfied with the patterns established by the confessional school, revived

⁴Her husband, Diego Rivera, had been commissioned to paint a

an interest in radical modernism and artists such as Gertrude Stein. A curiosity about women's involvement in Surrealism gained momentum in the late seventies and eighties. Information on Cahun's life and involvement in Surrealism resurfaced in the 1990s with the publication of François Leperlier's biography. In the 1970s, Alice Walker's research into the life, times, and work of Zora Neale Hurston broke the several decade silence on this pioneering figure in literature and anthropology who faded into obscurity. In 1983 Hayden Herrera published her hugely influential biography of Frida Kahlo and helped establish the Mexican painter as a Western icon.

Directly and indirectly, the second wave of women's representations of the subject that appeared in the later third of the twentieth century reveal the influence of these artistic foremothers. As mentioned, Hejinian openly acknowledges her debt to Stein and includes several intertextual references to her work in her lengthy prose poems. Sherman draws on Surrealist themes and reappropriates modernist aesthetics in her widely discussed postmodern photographic series. Both Behar and Anzaldúa expand upon the notion of transculturation and the concept of border identity prevalent in Hurston's and Kahlo's oeuvre. In turn, these works from the 80s and 90s have

mural in Rockefeller center.

inspired what might be labeled a third wave of feminist artistic production.

Principles of Organization

I have divided this thesis into two thematic parts, genre and strategy. Each part consists of six chapters that only partly adhere to a chronological sequence. Half of the artists discussed, Stein, Cahun, Hurston, and Sherman, appear in both parts. This break with chronology not only produces more provocative juxtapositions of material, it allows me to compare and contrast the verbal and visual lexicons more effectively.

In Part One, "A Critique of Genre," I introduce the three genres of self-representation examined in this study: autobiography, self-portraiture, and autoethography. Following a brief analysis of the conventions of each genre, I devote two chapters each to unconventional twentieth century examples. The chapter pairs juxtapose the work of an artist from the first third with an artist from the latter third of the twentieth century (Autobiography: Stein and Hejinian, Self-Portraiture: Cahun and Sherman, Autoethography: Hurston and Behar.) The couplings demonstrate various cross-generational connections and ruptures that blur and strengthen the borders that separate the modern from the postmodern.

Part Two, "Strategies for Representing the Subject," maintains the same tripartite structure, but the pairings and the sub-headings are different. Following a brief introduction, I devote two chapters each to three modes of self-representation: mimicry/masquerade, abjection, and the third term. In Part Two I investigate these themes in inter-genre pairs. In other words, I compare verbal and visual works in each sub-section. (Mimicry/masquerade: Stein and Cahun, Abjection: Sherman and Hurston, The Third Term: Kahlo and Anzaldúa.)

On the one hand, I focus on the modes of production in this dissertation. I place an emphasis on the structural, conceptual, and thematic innovations the artists employ in their attempts to re-define the genres of self-representation. On the other hand, I examine the modes of reception. I not only study the artists' investigation of established reading/viewing patterns, I also explore the profile of the artist constructed in the critical discourse. Although a large body of criticism exists on women's autobiographical practices, and a steady amount of critical analysis continues to be published on women's self-portraiture, only a small amount of material exists on

autoethnography.⁵ Interdisciplinary work remains scarce.
With this thesis, I attempt to fill in these gaps.

⁵I distinguish between the genres autoethnography and autoethnography in my introduction to Part One.

Introduction to Part One:

A Critique of Genre

Autobiography

Let me begin this investigation of autobiography by breaking the term down into its component parts. The first element, and the one repeated, in some form, in every genre term of this study is *autos*, Greek for self. The second component, *bios*, is often translated as "life;" in this context, however, it points to something more specific, "the course of human life" (Oxford Encyclopedic Dictionary). Autobiography, therefore, requires duration and narrative. The last element, *graphy*, is taken from the Greek suffix for writing, *graphia*. Although this section deals with two verbal texts, *graph* does not necessarily refer to the writing of letters. Photography, for example, literally means "writing with light." A provisional definition for autobiography reads as follows: a self-written description of the course of one's own life.

The controversies that stem from this basic definition form autobiography's pervasive subtext. Its non-fiction designation inspires the most debate.

To the uncritical eye, autobiography presents as untroubled a reflection of identity as the surface of a mirror can provide. The corresponding

assumption has been that autobiography is a transparency through which we perceive life, unmediated and undistorted. (Brodski and Schenck I)

As my previous discussion of Lacan's mirror stage suggests, all reflections distort. Despite autobiography's privileged relationship to "real life," the genre remains highly mediated. The translation of "a life" into language, itself a mode of representation, renders that life at least somewhat opaque.

Where "the uncritical eye" mistakes a reflection for "the truth," the critical eye questions the reliability of the autobiographer's self-knowledge. Autobiographers often project a fantasy of coherence onto their textual representations, or "I"s. In other words, they only construct "the surface of the mirror," or the ideal ego, and deny their own alienation.

The conventions of the genre parallel the autobiographer's denial. As Shari Benstock suggests, "autobiography reveals the impossibility of its own dream; what begins on the presumptions of self-knowledge ends in the creation of a fiction that covers over the premises of its construction" (11). Some autobiographers reconstruct the past in order to validate their present success and fulfillment. The gaps, omissions, and glosses in such

autobiographies speak as loudly as the patched together text itself.

In the first two chapters of Part One, I investigate the presumption of the autobiographer's self-knowledge. Equipped with the analytical tools of poststructuralism, I examine the premises of autobiography's construction, and contest its status as a "simpler" or more direct "mode of referentiality" (de Man "Autobiography..." 920). The unconventional autobiographers I study in this section challenge the Western ideal of the fully conscious self and the Romantic concept of a unique individuality.

Self-Portraiture

While the genre of self-portraiture shares something in common with autobiography, certain distinctions stand out. Most significantly, the term does not reference the *bios*. In other words, self-portraits do not represent duration, or the course of a human life. Nonetheless, a series of self-portraits may or may not construct a visual narrative (hence the possibility of autobiographical self-portraiture). Although verbal self-portraits exist, in this section I examine visual representations of the subject.

"The uncritical eye" often conceives of self-portraiture as an untroubled mirrored reflection of identity. Historically, the production of self-portraiture

literally depended on the artist's use of a mirror, or other reflective material (Meskimmon 1). Viewers demand more of self-portraiture than just surface accuracy, however. A portrait is valued as much for its "likeness," as it is for its ability to capture "the essence" of the person represented.

The artist's drive to master his image supposedly parallels his desire to know himself completely. But do self-portraitists represent themselves as they "truly are," as they see themselves, or as they would like to be seen? In other words, the reliability of the self-portraitist's self-knowledge must also be questioned. In the two chapters of this section, I interrogate the concept of an inner truth, or individual essence.

Autobiography's "exemplary life" finds its double in self-portraiture's "great geniuses." During the Renaissance, self-portraits were used to display the wealth, power, and social status of the artist. As the definition of the artist changed from the Enlightenment to the Romantic era, so did self-portraiture. No longer the bourgeois intellectual, the artist became "a visionary, someone who stood on the periphery of middle class society rather than in the center of it" (Meskimmon 16-17).

To a large degree, art historians have excluded women self-portraitists from the mythology of the misunderstood

genius, or the anti-bourgeois bohemian. Often times, women's self-portraits are re-inscribed within gendered stereotypes. Even in the twentieth century artists tend to have their "complex self-portraits explained with simplistic reference to anecdotal details of their personal lives...because of assumed links between women and the personal sphere" (Meskimmon 79). When a woman produces a self-portrait she actively investigates her own and women's, in general, objectification. In the chapters on self-portraiture, I challenge critics who dismiss women's self-portraits as symptoms of the artist's narcissism and vanity.

Autoethnography

In the chapters discussed in this final section, I explore biases in ethnographic writing. The Oxford Encyclopedic Dictionary defines ethnography as a "scientific description of the races and cultures of humankind." Anthropology, as the discipline that produces ethnographic discourse, endures the same contradictions as all of the social sciences. A "scientific description" implies a systematic and formalized method of observation and documentation that stresses objectivity. The study of human beings, and their complex and diverse cultures, does not meld seamlessly with "the neutral, impersonal, and

scientific nature of the enterprise" (Okely 9). In this section, I question the ethnographer's ability to describe human cultures objectively.

Ethnography shares much in common with conventional autobiography and self-portraiture. The "founding fathers" of the discipline constructed the ethnographer as the mirror image of the "universal subject" of the Enlightenment.

The ethnographic conceit of a neutral gaze will always be a white gaze, an unmarked white gaze, one which passes its own perspective off as the omniscient, one which presumes upon and enacts its own perspective as if it were not perspective at all. (Butler *Bodies that...* 136)

By contrast, autoethnography, as Alice Deck defines it, is a genre of ethnographic writing "written by individuals indigenous to the culture under scrutiny, who are as concerned with examining themselves as natives as they are with interpreting their cultures for a non-native audience" (246). Autoethnography requires a process of self-examination that dismantles traditional ethnography's ruse of objectivity.

Although the *auto* of autoethnography highlights the observer's subjectivity and indirectly spotlights the subjective nature of all ethnographic writing, the root *ethno* remains problematic. It derives from the Greek *ethnos*, which means nation. In current use, the adjective "ethnic" can mean "non-European" or "exotic" (Oxford Encyclopedic English Dictionary). In the Greek, an *ethnikos* is a heathen, or an unenlightened person who lacks culture or moral principles. In other words, racial and cultural bias is inherent in the term.

In order both to call attention to the disturbing origins of ethnography, and to set the subjective descriptions of culture discussed in this dissertation apart from this tradition, I have coined a new term, autoethnography. In the Greek, *ēthos* means custom, usage, manners, and habit. The *OED* defines "ethology," for example, as "the science of character-formation in human behavior" and "ethos" as "the characteristic spirit or attitudes of a community, people or system." Because the authors discussed are natives of the cultures described, they do not view their home traditions as foreign or exotic. The term autoethnography displaces ethnography's link to racial

science and places the emphasis on the study of customs and behavior.

In the first pair of chapters in Part One I explore experimental autobiography. Both Gertrude Stein in *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (1932) and Lyn Hejinian in *My Life* (1987) disrupt the conventions of autobiography in order to deconstruct the *cogito*. The visual artists discussed under the next sub-heading use the photographic medium to challenge traditional modes of viewing. In her *Autoportraits* from the teens and 20s, Claude Cahun stages a resistance to the normative force of the Other's gaze. In her *Untitled Film Stills* Cindy Sherman reconstructs the ideal imagos of the 50s and 60s in order to demonstrate their seduction and impossibility. Part One concludes with two autoethographies. Zora Neale Hurston in *Mules and Men* (1935), and various other essays, and Ruth Behar in *Translated Woman* (1993) displace the false objectivity of anthropological discourse in order to interrogate the imbalances of power inherent in ethnographic research.

With this theoretical foundation in mind, it is time to turn to the works themselves.

Chapter 1

I Am Not Who "I" Pretend to Be: *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* and its Photographic Frontispiece

In this first chapter, I take an interdisciplinary approach. In order to stress the artifactual nature of all representation, including self-representation, I compare two purportedly "direct" modes of referentiality, autobiography and portrait photography. In particular, I ponder why a photograph by Man Ray¹ (1890-1976) (fig. 1), that depicts Alice B. Toklas entering the study where Gertrude Stein sits at her desk, was chosen as the frontispiece for the first edition of *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (1933).

Although Man Ray ranks among the many frequenters of Stein's rue de Fleurus apartment, a more famous portrait of Stein exists, painted by an artist who holds a more prominent position in the text. After all, Picasso's *Portrait of Miss Gertrude Stein* (1906) serves as a topic of discussion in the book. Picasso's portrait, however, would have overshadowed the title's focus on Toklas and immediately unraveled Stein's ruse of authorship.

The caption for the frontispiece, like the title of the book, fails to acknowledge Stein's presence. It simply

¹Né Emmanuel Radnitsky, Man Ray was an American artist/photographer that moved to Paris in 1921 and photographed Montparnasse's artists/intellectuals.

reads, "Alice B. Toklas at the door, photograph by Man Ray." The frontispiece and its seemingly askew caption highlight the discrepancy between the book's title and its content. The medium of photography, in general, complements Stein's deconstruction of autobiography as a genre. The frontispiece, in particular, reads as *The Autobiography en abyme*.²

According to Stein's own specifications, her name did not appear on the spine, front cover, or the title page of the first edition. This stands out as a curious decision for an author constantly labeled an egotist. Although *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* does not represent Toklas' autobiography, this does not imply, as many critics have suggested, that Stein fashioned Toklas as her mouthpiece merely to disguise her own selfish motives. The pretense that defines the "I" in *The Autobiography* brands all "I"s simulacra. In this chapter, I explore how Stein's innovative ruse of authorship explicitly uncovers the premises of autobiography's construction and implicitly exposes the ego's basis in alienation.

Since its first publication, publishers have exhibited a palpable anxiety about the absence of Stein's name on the

² "In the vocabulary of literary criticism, the phrase 'en abyme' describes any fragment of a text that reproduces in miniature the structure of the text in its entirety" (Owens 17). In other words, Man Ray's photograph reproduces in miniature the structure of *The Autobiography*.

front cover and title page. To this day, republications of *The Autobiography* almost always feature Stein's image (sans Toklas) on the cover and her name on the spine, front cover, and title page. The title's transgression of autobiographical convention still requires considerable explanation in publisher's eyes.

While not a household name, by 1933 Stein had achieved a literary reputation in the United States. Toklas, on the other hand, was completely unknown. The title, therefore, failed to deliver autobiography's usual pledge. *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* did not promise to provide the details of an exemplary or otherwise extraordinary life.

To remedy this situation, the Literary Guild of New York introduced the book to its members by means of a brief, clarificatory letter. The revised title became *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas: The Life Story of Gertrude Stein/* by Gertrude Stein. As editor-in chief Carl Van Doren states in this letter: "It is important to know from the outset that while this book is called the autobiography of Alice B. Toklas³ (a companion of Miss Stein), it is actually the story of Gertrude Stein's life since 1903." In other words, Van Doren does not want the reader to judge this book by its cover. With a tone of urgency, he attempts to void from the title the very

ambiguities Stein wanted to project. Van Doren places Toklas within parentheses in more ways than one. His introduction blatantly dismisses her importance as both narrative persona and Stein's life-long partner.

Van Doren's imposition severely hampers the reader's participation in the construction of the text's meaning. The "by Gertrude Stein" decreases the reader's active skepticism of the "I." Van Doren's decided explanation of Stein's ruse undermines her interrogation of the fully conscious self of conventional autobiography.

By contrast, the photographic frontispiece amplifies the ambiguities Stein intended with the title. The image does not privilege either subject's visage, but bifurcates the center of focus. Man Ray shot the photograph used for the frontispiece in 1922, a full decade before *The Autobiography's* publication. In Man Ray's original composition, Toklas' figure marks the middle of the photograph. In the severely cropped frontispiece, Toklas appears left of center.⁴

Although Stein's face remains in the shadows, a natural light bathes over the various papers on the desk. Toklas,

³Van Doren does not capitalize, italicize, or offset the original title in any way.

⁴In all probability, Stein, not Man Ray, cropped the frontispiece. Although Stein does not discuss it in *The Autobiography*, her friendship with Man Ray fell apart in 1930 when she refused to pay for a series of photographs he took of her and her dog (Lottman 177-8).

somewhat farther in the background, and bathed in light, lingers at the room's entrance. If Toklas' presence at the door symbolizes her entrance into (textual) subjecthood, then the double portrait privileges Rimbaud's 'I is an Other' over Descartes' 'I think therefore I am.' The frontispiece, like *The Autobiography*, disturbs the fundamental logic that drives both conventional autobiography and the ego, or the *cogito*. Man Ray's altered photograph undermines the illusion of singularity suggested by the caption⁵ just as Stein's ruse of authorship challenges the "auto" of the book's title.

For some critics, the photograph exhibits Stein's egotism. Stein, the brooding genius, toils away in mental solitude at her desk. Toklas, a mere figment of Stein's imagination, lacks free will. As Leigh Gilmore suggests, "Alice⁶ seems summoned to the scene" by Stein's pen (214). Nonetheless, the altered composition does not entirely support this interpretation. In many ways, Stein and Toklas balance out each other's physical presence. The two thin candles that rest upon the heavy desk repeat Toklas and Stein's visual complement. Stein, seated at the desk, fully occupies her chair. The bulk of her form, partially consumed by shadow, emphasizes the broad horizontal plane.

⁵Once again, in all probability, Stein provided the caption.

Toklas, accentuated by the thin vertical stripes on the wall, conveys length. Shadows do not consume her; she stands in light. Although Stein occupies the foreground, she does not overwhelm the image. Toklas occupies a proportionate amount of the visual interest.

For many critics, the ruse of authorship confirms Stein's egotism. According to this point of view, Stein constructs *The Autobiography's* "I," or the narrative persona of Alice B. Toklas, as her foil. As Sidonie Smith states, "The camouflaged Stein displaces her monumental egotism into the self-effacing voice of 'Alice'" (*Subjectivity...* 77). Smith not only grounds Stein's artistic innovation in personal desire, she suggests that, with enough detective work, the "true Stein" can be located in the text.

Critics who interpret *The Autobiography* as "the auto-referential clothed in biographical dress" (Neuman 15) ironically mistake Stein's critique of genre for a clever disguise of her selfishness. In other words, they fail to account for the balance "Toklas" adds to the text. Stein's critique of autobiography requires the "I" to improperly signify. In conventional autobiography, the autobiographer constructs himself as his ideal ego. This foreclosure of the dynamic of individuation sustains an illusion of the

⁶While critics, perhaps out of sympathy for the perceived "victim," frequently refer to Toklas as Alice, they rarely refer to Stein as Gertrude.

ego's infallibility. Subjects deny their alienation when they retrospectively establish, then fulfill, their own definition of self-actualization. Autobiographies that culminate in the "always-foreseen fullness" of "the writer's present life and vocation" (Clark 316) perpetuate a fantasy of self-knowledge because they seemingly shut out the Other's alienating effects. Stein crafts *The Autobiography* from Toklas' perspective in order to denude the "I" of its unified status. She underscores the dependent nature of the subject, that I exist only in the eyes of the Other, as she confounds the transparency of the personal pronoun, that I am not who "I" pretend to be.

As Roland Barthes suggests in *Camera Lucida*, photography achieves a similar "disassociation of consciousness from identity" (12). Because "'myself' never coincides with my image" (ibid.) a photograph repeats for its subject the frustration first experienced during the mirror stage. The frontispiece amplifies this frustration for the reader. The viewer's/reader's faith in one-to-one correspondences fuels Stein's critique. The caption for the frontispiece signifies the presence of one subject, but the image conflicts with that expectation. The viewer/reader anticipates coherence, but does not experience it.

In their haste to condemn Stein as overbearing and manipulative, critics tend to overlook the passages that

reveal Stein's dependence on and appreciation for Toklas. As "Toklas" states early on, "if you must do a thing do it graciously"(5). Stein, for example, insists upon Toklas' joint participation in the text's construction.⁷ As "Toklas" relates, when Stein's composition was chosen for a display that required perfect penmanship, she turned to a friend for help.

After she had tried to copy it twice and the writing became worse and worse she was reduced to letting someone else copy it for her. This, her teacher considered a disgrace. She does not remember that she herself did. As a matter of fact her handwriting has always been illegible and I am very often able to read it when she is not (AB 93).

This detail contests Stein's reputation as arrogant and controlling. Despite the level of independence required by the teacher, Stein acknowledges her dependence on others. As does the frontispiece, this passage conveys a balance. Where poor handwriting suggests a lack of patience and discipline, the ability to decipher poor handwriting requires an abundance of these attributes.

⁷ Gilmore, for example, discusses the doodle "Gertrice/Altrude" that was found in the manuscript "Lend a Hand."

On the last page of the first edition Stein includes a facsimile of the hand-written first-page of *The Autobiography's* manuscript. This reproduction provides a glimpse at Stein's horrible handwriting. As a result, the reader develops an appreciation for Toklas' contribution to *The Autobiography* as typist and editor. More than just a secretary, Toklas comes across as Stein's literary confidant. "Speaking of the device rose is a rose is a rose is a rose, it was I who found it in one of Gertrude Stein's manuscripts..." (AB 169).

For many critics, *The Autobiography's* final paragraph, which reveals the secret of the book's "true" authorship, undermines any suggestion of symbiosis and supports the diagnosis of Stein as egotist.

About six weeks ago Gertrude Stein said, it does not look to me as if you were ever going to write that autobiography. You know what I am going to do. I am going to write it for you. I am going to write it as simply as Defoe did the autobiography of Robinson Crusoe. And she has and this is it (AB 310).

It is difficult to believe that the composition of either *Robinson Crusoe* or *The Autobiography* was a "simple" task. The last line exaggerates this point. With these closing

remarks, Stein satirizes the conception of autobiography as a simple translation of experience into discourse.⁸

The Defoe analogy blurs the boundaries between fact and fiction, not to erase "Alice as the gaze, the eye that fixes Stein's identity" (Stimpson "Gertrude Stein..." 159) but to complicate the genre status of autobiography. With this conclusion, Stein classifies the textual "I," and the entire *Autobiography*, as fiction. In other words, Stein suggests that the "I" does not represent Toklas, nor does it represent herself. In *The Autobiography*, Stein provides a fictionalized account of Toklas' perceptions of Stein.

Unfortunately, critics often fail to acknowledge the complexity of the "I" and refer to *The Autobiography* as Stein's most transparent text. According to this point of view, the ruse of authorship stands as the only obstacle between the reader and the text's "true" meaning. If Stein is the author, and the book privileges information about Stein, then *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* can be thought of as Stein's autobiography. "Toklas'" declaration of "Gertrude Stein's" genius, therefore, reads as a self-congratulatory statement.

⁸Four years later, in *Everybody's Autobiography* (1937), Stein issues a similar lampoon of this misconception. "Anyway autobiography is easy like it or not autobiography is easy for any one and so this is to be everybody's autobiography" (4).

I may say that only three times in my life have I met a genius and each time a bell within me rang and I was not mistaken, and I may say in each case it was before there was any general recognition of the quality of genius in them. The three geniuses of whom I wish to speak are Gertrude Stein, Pablo Picasso, and Alfred Whitehead. (6)

Once again, this line of argument roots Stein's motivation for *The Autobiography* solely in personal desire. As Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar suggest, Stein "turns collaboration into collusion. [...] The result is a kind of cannibalism, Stein makes Alice into a character of her own devising who, in turn, certifies Stein as the genius who will usher in the twentieth century" (251). Words such as "collusion" and "devising" proclaim Stein's intent as sinister, and cast Toklas in the role of victim. The accusation of cannibalism suggests predation. Such comments reduce the ruse of authorship to a personal struggle for power.

I find it curious that critics so eagerly dismiss Stein's characteristic playfulness. "Toklas'" incessant reference to "Gertrude Stein" teeters on the ledge of farce. Stein does not attempt to bolster her own ego with the declaration of "Gertrude Stein's" genius as much as she takes comic advantage of the unique position the ruse of authorship affords her.

Within *The Autobiography*, "Gertrude Stein" functions as an unstable element in an endless cycle of reduplication and resignification.⁹ Stein's incessant repetition of her name exposes the instabilities in the relationship between signifier and signified. Rarely "Gertrude," "Miss Stein," even "she" or "her," the full name, "Gertrude Stein," appears an average of four times per page. Although critics often interpret the repetition of Stein's name as a masterstroke of egotism, the reiteration ironically achieves the opposite effect. After hundreds of pages, "Gertrude Stein" does not exist apart from its shape in the composition (Dydo 4).

"Toklas'" focus on "Gertrude Stein" undermines the conventional definition of autobiography. Philippe Lejeune defines autobiography as a "retrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality" (Lejeune 4). *The Autobiography* is a retrospective prose narrative written by a real person, but it does not focus on an individual life¹⁰. Stein's mind-boggling refraction of the "I" calls into question the

⁹This statement has been adapted from Craig Owens' discussion of photography. "Photographs are but one link in a potentially endless chain of reduplication" (26).

¹⁰The book loosely documents Toklas and Stein's separate lives in the United States, then focuses on the couple's life together.

signification of such terms as "real," "existence," "individual," and "personality."

Photography, like autobiography, has erroneously been labeled a transparent medium. With *The Autobiography*, Stein suggests that neither photography nor autobiography should be thought of as "a straightforward transcription of an observed reality" (Owens 16). Something is transparent if it allows light to pass through so that objects be can seen. In the image used for the frontispiece, "Stein" cannot be distinctly discerned; only her hands and back are illuminated. While light accentuates "Toklas'" form, shadows obscure the features of her face. If one interprets the dispersion of illumination symbolically, the frontispiece does not make its subjects more accessible to its audience. While the frontispiece can be studied for the internal relationships that structure it, it does not furnish any clues about the inner lives of its subjects (Owens 27). In a similar move, although readers often expect autobiographies to "tell all," Stein reveals more about the structure of conventional autobiography in *The Autobiography* than she does about her personal life.

Neither the frontispiece nor *The Autobiography* itself portrays "reality". Man Ray captures Toklas and Stein as they pose for the camera, not as they "truly are." At first glance, the frontispiece appears to capture a spontaneous

moment. Quite similarly, on a first reading, "Toklas'" narrative comes across as off-the-cuff. Upon further inspection, however, it becomes obvious that the photograph, like *The Autobiography*, has been thoroughly constructed.

The slight smile on Stein's shadowed face suggests her anticipation of Toklas' arrival, as well as her foreknowledge of Man Ray's presence. Although she holds a pen, Stein does not write upon the papers on her desk, but simulates this activity. Toklas' blank look in Man Ray's direction betrays her attempt to ignore the photographer's position. Her stiff posture breaks the illusion that she spontaneously entered the room. Instead, it appears that she wants to 'hit her mark.' Photographs, like autobiographies, are often mistaken for reality when they are nonetheless only substitutes (Owens 27). The constructedness of the frontispiece and *The Autobiography* upset the idea that photographic and autobiographical texts come closer to "reality" than other modes of representation.

Likewise, in his *Portrait of Miss Gertrude Stein* (1906) Picasso challenges both the "traditional mimetic function of painting" as well as "the traditional physiognomic reading of portraits as imprints of the sitter's soul" (Lubar 57,63). Although Stein sat for Picasso over eighty times, the latter was never satisfied with the portrait. In the summer of 1906, Picasso quit Paris for Spain and left the

unfinished canvas behind. When he returned, he painted over the portrait's naturalistic features and replaced them with anti-naturalistic features inspired by ancient Iberian sculpture (Hilton 66, 73). Picasso's infamous quip "...everybody says that she does not look like it but that does not make any difference, she will..." (AB 14) calls attention to the artist's confidence in his ability to change the way people see. In this manner, Picasso highlights portraiture's "referential illusion." What portraiture pretends "only to reflect and refer to is in fact something it constitutes" (Berger as quoted in Lubar 62).

Although Stein's unorthodox narrative strategies typically draw comparisons with the unconventional (multiple and simultaneous) visual perspectives introduced by Picasso and Braque at the height of analytical cubism, Stein's construction of a time indiscernible from space and an "I" indiscernible from language also find a parallel with photography. Just as the broken down planar components and *trompe-l'oeil* techniques of cubism suggest a world of artifice¹¹, the photograph's repeatability breaks down the distinction between the original and the copy. As Rosalind Krauss states in "A Note on Photography and the Simulacral":

¹¹Much more could be said about the connections between cubism, Picasso, and Stein's writing than my current focus will allow.

At a certain point, in its precarious position as the false copy- the image that is resemblant only by mechanical circumstance and not by internal, essential connection to the model -served to deconstruct the whole system of model and copy, original and fake, first- and second-degree replication. (27)

The famous device, "ROSE IS A ROSE IS A ROSE IS A ROSE," printed in a one-inch circle in the lower right corner on the cover of the first edition, deconstructs mimesis in a similar fashion. This microcosm of a linguistic system suggests that all signs are simulacra, or false copies. Like the repetition of "Gertrude Stein," the endless repetition of "ROSE" releases the "signifier from its signified into its wordness and sound" (Smith *Subjectivity..* 81). "ROSE" does not reference a reality outside of the device itself; its meaning changes in relation to its reiteration in the cycle.

As its prominent place on the front cover suggests, this device, like the photographic frontispiece, reflects the overall structure of *The Autobiography*. Although the period inserted at the top of the circle divides the phrase into a beginning, middle, and end, the device perpetually repeats itself. In this way, it ruptures the notion of "time as departure, progression, and arrival" (Kristeva

"Women's..." 17). While the titles of *The Autobiography's* chapters¹² maintain the underpinnings of chronological time, the point of arrival, or the end of the book, does not mark a final destination. The point of arrival perpetually dissolves into the point of departure, or the book's beginning. The last line, "And she has and this is it," encourages a second reading.

Furthermore, a photograph perpetually retains the fleeting instant. This results in a distinct philosophical phenomenon. As Barthes states, "The photograph mechanically repeats what could never be repeated existentially" (4). In this sense, Stein's use of the continuous present in *The Autobiography* achieves a similar effect. No one will ever have the opportunity to enter into Stein's atelier and find Picasso and Matisse mingling there, and yet, this instance perpetually replays itself in the "snap shots" (AB 11) of the atelier Toklas looks at as well as in the text itself.

Characterized by simple transitions, and slightly punctuated run-on sentences that overflow with present participles, the continuous present, like a photograph, suggests a "monumental temporality, without cleavage or escape" (Kristeva "Women's..." 14, 16). Transitional phrases such as "As I was saying..." (AB 4) and "Before I tell about...I must tell about..." (AB 8) not only create a

¹² *Before I Came to Paris, Gertrude Stein in Paris 1903-1907,*

casual, conversational, spontaneity that establishes an intimacy with the reader, they perpetuate an illusion of a perpetual here and now. Although the events described in *The Autobiography* occurred in the past, "Toklas'" energetic retelling, quite like a photograph, continuously reproduces a fleeting moment.

The photograph of the handwritten first-page of *The Autobiography's* manuscript also undermines the notion of progress. The reader does not return to the first page at the end of the book, but to a photograph of a rough form of that first page. The ability to infinitely reproduce a photograph of the hand-written manuscript diminishes its uniqueness and reemphasizes the artifactual nature of all representation.

The photographic frontispiece, the repetition of "Gertrude Stein," the cyclical device on the front cover, and the facsimile of the manuscript all aid Stein in her deconstruction of the genre of autobiography. Within the internal system of *The Autobiography*, all reference to an extra-textual world becomes nothing more than an illusory effect. Likewise, the ruse of authorship reduces the subject to the status of a grammatical pronoun (de Man *Allegories...* 18). Because the "I" of *The Autobiography* does not transparently reflect the identity of the author, it

1907-1914, *The War*, *After the War* 1919-1932

challenges the unified ego as the metonymy of the "I"s signification (Lacan *Écrits* 307). Where the "I" in conventional autobiography reinforces the *méconnaissances* that constitute the ego, Stein's innovative ruse of authorship exposes as a denial the ego's investment in coherence.

Chapter 2

A Self Without Closure: Lyn Hejinian's *My Life*

In this chapter, I examine another innovative autobiography. Like the title *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, the clichéd title of Lyn Hejinian's book-length prose poem *My Life* creates the expectation that a conventional autobiography lies within the slim volume. The reader not only expects that the book will divulge the intimate details and record the major events of the author's life, but that these episodes will unfold in a chronological sequence. *My Life* fails to comply with each of these presuppositions. Hejinian does not neatly press out the key incidents of her life. Instead, she juxtaposes sensory perceptions, fragmented recollections, banal descriptions, and clichéd phrases within an alternatively structured framework.

For example, the third section begins in the following way:

We see only the leaves and branches of the trees close in around the house. Those submissive games were sensual. I was no more than three or four years old, but when crossed I would hold my breath, not from rage but from stubbornness, until I lost

consciousness. The shadows one day deeper.
Every family has its own collection of
stories, but not every family has someone
to tell them. (12)

Disorientation rules the text. Hejinian combines generalities such as "every family" with sentence fragments such as "The shadows one day deeper". Who does the opening "we" include? Who "crossed" the "I," how, and why? The third sentence, which begins "I was no more than three or four years old," references a relatively specific point in the past, but the poem does not maintain the past tense.

The huge narrative gaps and jarring juxtapositions in this abstract and experimental autobiography encourage the reader's active participation in the production of the text's meaning, and in the construction of the poem's "I". Like "Gertrude Stein" in *The Autobiography* the "I" of *My Life* remains an active textual element. In this chapter, I argue that *My Life's* openness implies that an Other, unconscious and alien, desire defines all subjects.

Hejinian belongs to the Bay Area branch of the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E school of American poetry. This association of poets, that includes such writers as Ron Silliman, Carla Harryman, and Bob Perelman, came together in the 1970s to explore nonstandard poetic forms and themes. In their poetry, they reinstate a radical interrogation of language

in its artistic and everyday use. The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets want to reanimate the dying tradition of modernist experimentation and displace the personal expressive lyric as the canonical expressive form. They think of their experimental poetry as an antidote to confessional poetry and its solipsistic emoting. As they state in their manifesto, in their move away from "fetishized personal experience" (Silliman et al. 262) and toward the physicality of words, they strive to disrupt language's convention as communicative transparency.

It is intriguing that Hejinian writes a book entitled *My Life* at a time when "the self as the central and final term of creative practice is being challenged and exploded" in the poetry of the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E school (Silliman et al. 263). Hejinian examines "the self" in *My Life* in order to redefine it as a construct. As do many of the writers in this group, Hejinian focuses on "the possibility of a dissociated self as critique" (Silliman et al. 263). In other words, Hejinian does not explore the "I that thinks," but "the I that is the object of thought" (Silliman et al. 266). Hejinian, like Stein, deconstructs the *cogito* under the guise of autobiography.

Thus far, Hejinian has published two editions of *My Life*. The first edition, published in 1980, consists of thirty-seven sections of thirty-seven sentences each. The

number corresponds to Hejinian's age at the time it was written in 1978. Forty-five sections of forty-five sentences each comprise the 1987 edition. Once again, the number corresponds to Hejinian's age at the time of publication.

My Life's mindfully tailored sections share something with Stein's poetry and prose. Stein often confined her compositions, including *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, to the amount of space available in a single cahier or pre-determined number of notebooks. Hejinian discussed *My Life's* invented form in an interview conducted by fellow L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets Larry McCaffery and Brian McHale:

Since you're always born in the middle of this and you stay in the middle of it, the question of where to begin and where to stop raises itself as a problem. An invented form allows one to begin anywhere—the form says begin now and then the form says stop now. You're always already writing, and it's always already going on when you stop and you're not making any particular claims on that particular moment as being divine... ("A Local..."140).

Hejinian's vague statement, "since you are always born in the middle of this," speaks generally about the subject's

entry into language. We are all born into a fully formed Symbolic and must function by its codes. In her comment Hejinian also makes reference to the difficulties involved in the textual representation of the subject. Because the autobiographer must construct the past from the vantage point of the present, all autobiographies actually begin *in medias res*.

Although Hejinian describes *My Life's* form as "invented," one cannot characterize it as arbitrary. Hejinian did not just add eight new sections to the 1987 version, she intermixed eight new sentences within each of the existing sections. As a result, *My Life* resists organization into a distinct beginning, middle, and end.

These additions reinforce the anarchic aspects of memory. One might reconnect with early adolescence at mid-life, or come into an understanding of one's early-twenties at thirty. Our memories, like *My Life*, do not tell a coherent story. "*My Life* tempts the reader to indulge in a fantasy of coherence" because so many of the poem's fragments "seem to form recoverable thematic systems" (Dworkin 77). Nonetheless, even the most avid reader would not be able to fit together the poem's details and construct a cohesive narrative.

According to psychoanalytic theory, the unconscious knows no time and knows no negation. Hejinian compares the

process of writing to the constant re-cycling of information in the unconscious when she states, "you're always already writing, and it's always already going on when you stop." Hejinian's break with life-story narrative frustrates any sense of causality. The poem's lack of transitions minimizes any sense of a logical progression in time. In this way, *My Life* functions as manifest content. The meaning the reader pieces together, or the dream-work, remains infinitely variable, and individual.

With the second edition, Hejinian makes manifest the latent material of the first edition. As Lisa Samuels observes, "The fact that eight sentences not present in 1980 can materialize in each section in 1987 suggests that many more sentences not in appearance do potentially exist" (117). Hejinian has promised to publish further editions. In doing so, she emphasizes the unconscious subjectivity that lies behind all systems of signification (Ragland-Sullivan "Seeking the..." 58). To slightly alter Samuel's comment, it is as if the sentences of future editions already exist in the subtext of the poem.

When autobiographers construct a chronological narrative, they tend to smooth over the gaps and inconsistencies that might otherwise obstruct a linear progression. In other words, conventional narrative order tends to make a life remembered in fragments seem whole. In

My Life gaps function as part of the text; they play a key role in the reader's cognition. "...what remains in the gaps, so to speak, remains crucial and informative. Part of the reading occurs as the recovery of that information (focus backward) and the discovery of newly structured ideas (focus forward)" (Hejinian "The Rejection of Closure" *W/T* 274). The gaps in *My Life* signal an unwritten, but nonetheless present in its absence, unconscious desire. "Only fragments are accurate" (*ML* 55).

Conventional autobiography's diachronic structure conceals the synchronous patterning of memory (Clark 319). "What follows a strict chronology has no memory" (*ML* 13). *My Life's* structure allows the past, like the material of the unconscious itself, to surface with each new edition. "One is growing up repeatedly" (*ML* 24). In *My Life*, Hejinian attempts to represent the synchronous at the level of the entire poem, its various sections, down to each individual sentence. Each section, for example, contains forty-five sentences. This implies the presence of all forty-five years in the reconstruction of the first year.¹ "To some extent, each sentence has to be the whole story" (*ML* 67).

¹The position of each "chapter" in the overall book roughly corresponds with the "I"'s age (e.g. section three includes the sentence "I was no more than three of four years old").

Hejinian demonstrates the synchronic aspects of memory through the medium of language, a task replete with contradictions. The sentence "this autobiography of expansive sensations is divided horizontally" (ML 61) refers to this conflict. How can one represent the synchronous patterning of memory in a system of language where one word is read after the other? There are boundaries within language's operation of separation that limit one's ability to express the spatial. "The synchronous, which I have characterized as spatial, is accurate to reality but it has been debased" (ML 16).

In order to approximate the synchronous, Hejinian constructs several interdependent webs that break the poem free from the trappings of "obsessional time." Julia Kristeva defines linear or "obsessional time" as follows:

It might also be added that linear time is that of language considered as the enunciation of sentences (noun + verb; topic-comment; beginning-ending) and that this time rests on its own stumbling block, which is also the stumbling block of that enunciation- death. A psychoanalyst would call this "obsessional time," recognizing in the mastery of time the true structure of the slave. (17)

My Life's many fragments and non-sequiturs disrupt the slavish structures of language. The poem's disjunctive syntax destabilizes the stumbling block of linear time.

In her attempt to reach beyond the communicative aspects of language and towards its generative ones Hejinian resists the illusory mastery offered by linear constructions. In her interview with McCaffery and McCale, Hejinian further explores the generative possibilities of language:

I want to suggest that we make our lives.
So what I was really trying to do with the
form of *My Life* is emphasize that what you
have here is a made life - a written one,
but a made one. If there's any hope at all
for people, it's that we can make our lives
rather than just sort of being dragged
along by them. (Hejinian "A Local..." 136)

Hejinian's suggestion that "we make our lives" sounds utopian and dismissive of the force of unconscious desire. Upon further reflection, however, Hejinian calls attention to the material qualities of language, the Lacanian notion that language "gives concrete specificity to desire" (Ragland-Sullivan "Seeking the..."49) with this statement. *My Life* disrupts communication; the poem produces an absent and illogical discourse. *My Life's* incoherence encourages the

reader to pause for thought, and reflect on the processes of meaning making. We are only "dragged along" by our lives if we fail to recognize the structure of our desire.

Empowerment stems from an acknowledgment of the force of unconscious motivation.

In this way, *My Life* serves as an example of Barthes' concept of text as tissue.

Text means tissue; but whereas hitherto we have always taken the tissue as a product, a ready made veil, behind which lies, more or less hidden, meaning (truth), we are now emphasizing, in the tissue, the generative idea that the text is made, is worked out in a perpetual interweaving. (*The Pleasure of the Text* 64)

This notion of an organic text breaks with the "obsessional" drive of chronological time. Texts that function as tissue resist closure, for tissue expands from all sides, and from all dimensions. Both Hejinian and Barthes focus on the reader's active participation in the production of the text's meaning. Where conventional autobiographers often relegate their readers to passive roles, Hejinian encourages her readers to produce their own network of associations.

Hejinian's innovative use of repetition reinforces the concept of text as tissue. Each section heading reappears

at least once elsewhere in the poem. These headings do not fulfill a narrative function, or bracket off a specific time period (as the chapter titles in *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* do). Instead, they serve an associative purpose. These reoccurring phrases resurface like traces of memory, or repressed material, and mark the presence of the unconscious in conscious life.

My Life's first heading, "a pause, a rose, something on paper" (ML 7), appears no less than twenty times in the poem. Every time the entire phrase reappears, the reader recalls the poem's original heading. In this way, Hejinian resists autobiography's linear progress and evokes a cyclical temporality. The choice of a "rose" for the poem's first and most repeated heading deserves comment. With every repetition Hejinian pays homage to her modernist mentor Gertrude Stein and her famous cyclical device.

Having established the trope "a pause, a rose, something on paper" in the first chapter, the evocation of "a rose" in subsequent chapters immediately evokes the rest of the phrase. In this way, Hejinian suggests that no choices are innocent. The entire phrase, like a memory, is made both familiar and strange each time it resurfaces. It serves as both a point of stability and instability for "no element, whether similar or antithetical, can be reduced to

the same" (Ragland-Sullivan "Seeking the..." 60). As Hejinian comments:

Repetition, conventionally used to unify a text or harmonize its parts, as if returning melody to the tonic...challenges our inclination to isolate, identify, and limit the burden of meaning given to an event (sentence or line). Here, where certain phrases repeat in the work, recontextualized and with new emphasis, repetition disrupts the initially apparent meaning scheme. ("The Rejection of Closure" *PJ* 135)

Just like the "ROSE" in Stein's device, the "rose" in *My Life* allows for multiple meanings. The entire phrase "a pause, a rose, something on paper" emphasizes the importance of context. A pause is dependent on the sound that surrounds it for meaning. A rose, one of the most frequently adapted and varying symbols in the arts, can refer to a flower, an action, or a name (Spahr 150). Words do not have meaning in isolation, but in relation to each other and our memory's network of associations.

Hejinian repeats, inverts, and slightly varies her headings to convey this point. A few examples are as follows: "I found my self dependent on a pause, a rose,

something on paper" (ML 21), "A pause, a rose, something on paper implicit in the fragmentary text" (ML 41), "A pause, a rose, something on paper, of true organic spirals we have no lack" (ML 65). Each sentence situates the core phrase under a slightly different light. When Hejinian writes, "But perceptions are more accurate in threes" (ML 95), the reader cannot help but recall the first and most recurrent title of *My Life*. The phrase "a rose, a pause, something on paper," like Stein's "ROSE IS A ROSE IS A ROSE IS A ROSE" functions as a miniature network of signification. The metonymic structure of the poem simulates the mind's cyclical processing as well as reproduces the structure of desire. Language operates through a series of substitutions. "Things are different but not separate, thoughts are discontinuous but not unmotivated (like a rose with out a pause)" (ML 96).

The clichés, aphorisms, wives' tales, and homilies scattered throughout the text also serve as a type of repetition. They represent the often repeated and rarely analyzed adages that filter into our psyches over a lifetime. One example reads as follows: "A cluttered room makes for a cluttered mind" (ML 34). Clichés suggest, as a result of their catchy phrasing (they often use rhyme, alliteration, etc.) and their authoritative tone, that they contain the truth. Their overuse makes them easily

digestible. As a result, they do not typically provoke analysis.

Although Hejinian's phrases and short sentences maintain an air of familiarity, they are placed outside of a context in which their hollow wisdom makes sense. As a result, their simple logic and trivial sentimentality merit the reader's attention, even become suspicious. In this way, Hejinian exposes the social, cultural, and political agendas such simple platitudes mask with their trite precision.² She increases her reader's awareness of the power structures imbedded in language.

At first glance, many of *My Life's* sentences appear to be clichés. Upon closer examination, these sentences are not what they should be; they are clichés made strange. Hejinian's slight alterations of common sayings disorient the reader. "Seeming is believing" (ML 86) provides an example. If scanned quickly, the mind fools itself into thinking that it reads the more familiar "seeing is believing." The addition of one consonant radically changes the meaning in an ironic and humorous way.

The reader cannot accept the phrase "Seeming is believing" as a simple truth. The play-on-words encourages the reader to question the logic of the adage "seeing is

²*My Life* can be understood, in part, as a reaction to the simplified slogans, such as "Just Say No to Drugs," of Reagan's America.

believing." Where the cliché suggests that first hand observation provides evidence of existence, the manipulated cliché undercuts that message. "Seeming" denotes the ostensible, not the factual. In other words, the altered sentence suggests that one tends to accept mere appearances as the truth. In this way, Hejinian disrupts the initially apparent meaning scheme. She takes the form and cadence of the empty cliché, opens it up, and lets subversive thought creep in. She contrasts the desired depthlessness of communicating in clichés with the hidden abundance of the actual transmission.

Hejinian destabilizes clichés in several ways in *My Life*: through word substitution, as illustrated by the previous example, or by leaving a cliché incomplete, as in the phrase "Wild horses couldn't keep" (*ML* 33) (Clark 330). When presented with this phrase, the rest of the cliché, "me away," teeters on the tip of the reader's tongue. With this incomplete cliché, Hejinian calls attention to the network of associations the reader relies on and once again obstructs language's communicative transparency.

Occasionally, Hejinian places quotes around all or part of a phrase in an attempt to unsettle its meaning. "My father would say I've a 'big day' tomorrow" (*ML* 50). The quotes call into question even the most banal utterance. Here, Hejinian asks her reader to identify as strange the

workings of language that typically elicit the least amount of resistance. As a result, "we're less likely to view sentences as neutral transmissions of signs" (Jarraway 322).

Hejinian also uses the quotes to demonstrate how the available lexicon structures the subject's desire.

Well, in *My Life* I wanted to write a work in which 'I' is tremendously mediated by knowing prior to being 'I.' I tried to do this with all of the snippets of language that are in quotes which are a kind of ambient structuring of the 'I' or contextualizing of the 'I': social, parental, and familial contextualizing. (Hejinian "A Local..." 136)

In order to communicate, we must operate within the network of signification culture imposes upon us. Hejinian's placement of quotes disrupts communication; she thereby introduces some instability within the Symbolic's standard code.

The quotes also emphasize the inaccessibility of meaning. Conventionally, one places quotes around a word when its literal meaning does not suffice. This underscores language's inevitable failure to match desire. "That doesn't say it all, nor even a greater part" (*ML* 15). "Desire, therefore, always exceeds the lack it denotes, marking a place of incompleteness or *aphansis* in language and

unconscious representations, thus pointing to a hole in being that must continually fill itself up" (Ragland-Sullivan "Seeking the..." 45). Despite our drive for precision, language cannot be rid of its uncertainties. "Undone is not not done" (*ML* 20).

Hejinian blatantly disregards the tenets of composition espoused within the poem in order to mock the illusion of precision they imply. "Whenever you have exhausted setting, topic, or tone, begin a new paragraph" (*ML* 37). She draws attention to the reader's dependence on and acceptance of convention when she breaks the rules. For example, Hejinian completes one section with the awkward statement "Is pink pretty" (58). The syntax begs the reader to read the sentence as a question, but that desire is frustrated by the period, not question mark, that punctuates the sentence. Nonetheless, "Is pink pretty," is not a nonsensical assertion. As Hejinian comments:

you can't make nonsense with words, in my opinion. There's always some kernel of sense that somebody will extrapolate from the words, even if you don't want it to be there. ("The Rejection of..." *PJ* 138)

The gap that separates the signifier from the signified sustains the Symbolic order. "If words matched their things we'd be imprisoned within walls of symmetry" (*ML* 70). In *My*

Life, Hejininan does not attempt to close this gap, but to widen it. She wants to destabilize language's comforting illusions in order to possibly affect change.

In this way, *My Life* complies with Barthes' definition of the text of bliss:

Text of bliss: the text that imposes a state of loss, the text that discomforts (perhaps to the point of a certain boredom), unsettles the reader's historical, cultural, psychological assumptions, the consistency of his tastes, values, memories, brings to a crisis his relation with language. (*The Pleasure of the Text* 14)

My Life does not provide its reader with an illusion of wholeness. In compliance with Barthes' definition, this poem of bliss constantly defers meaning. "The intellect lingers, this too is erotic -the anticipation of the pleasure of making sense" (ML 104). *My Life* "unsettles" the reader's expectations. The last line of the poem reads, "reluctance such that it can't be filled" (ML 115). The reader may have anticipated a complete account of the author's life, but that expectation "cannot be filled." *My Life* does not end; it pauses.

Hejinian brings the genre of autobiography to a crisis. She disrupts chronological order and encourages the reader to look at language as generative of unconscious materials.

In this way, Hejinian suggests that "the human subject is not the end product of a narrative development called maturation," but rather "a discontinuous layering and sedimenting of always active elements" (Pollock 274). Hejinian disrupts language's communicative transparency to better analyze how language exercises power and negotiates desire. She highlights language's conventions in order to test their purpose and strength.

Chapter 3

Que me veux-tu?: Claude Cahun's Canceled Confessions

In this second section of Part One, I not only shift from autobiography to self-portraiture, but from a verbal to a visual lexicon. Here, I more closely examine the modes of reception and the determination of the subject in the field of vision.

In 1930, Claude Cahun,¹ née Lucy Schwob, published a collection of poems, prose, autobiography and photomontage under the title *Aveux non avenues*. The photomontages that mark the book's chapters are comprised of the self-portraits Cahun produced throughout the late teens and 1920s. Just as Stein collaborated with her lover Alice B. Toklas on *The Autobiography*, Cahun arranged the photomontages with her life partner Marcel Moore, née Suzanne Malherbe. With these fragmented and over-determined amalgamations, Cahun provides a dizzying deconstruction of the unified self (fig. 2). The imaginary landscapes of the photomontages do not operate according to the codes of the Symbolic. In these fantasies of

¹Born into a prominent Jewish family from Nantes, France, the artist adopted the last name of her mother's brother, Cahun, and the gender ambiguous Claude in 1918, and subsequently published in several journals and exhibited her surrealist objects under that name.

psychosis, Cahun's segmented body floats in a sea of detached signifiers.

By contrast, Cahun's more conventional self-portraits² reproduce the determination of the subject in the field of vision. Because the self-portraits replicate the operation of the Symbolic, I feel that they ultimately stage a more effective critique of the normative force of the Other's gaze than the photomontages. Although complete self-awareness remains impossible, the messages of the Other, once realized, can be partially rejected (Ragland-Sullivan *Jacques Lacan...* 78). No subject can fully escape the Other's imposed demands, but the dual positions of self-portraiture enable Cahun to put them into clearer focus.

The oxymoronic title of Cahun's book from 1930 provides insight into the rationale behind the self-portraits. *Aveux non avenues* roughly translates as "canceled confessions." Where *aveux* signifies avowals, statements of consent, or confessions, *non avenues* negates the first term. It translates as absent, disavowed, voided, or canceled. Like Stein and Hejinian, Cahun critiques the conventions of the genre she adopts. Cahun

²Cahun never exhibited, and very rarely published these photographs in her day, perhaps because photomontage and object-based constructions better captured the spirit of the Surrealist avant-garde.

does not "cancel her confessions" in order to revoke an embarrassing revelation, or rescind a damaging admittance. On the contrary, she breaks self-portraiture's link with confession. Cahun's self-portraits expose the viewer's desire to occupy the position of the Other and gain false psychic reassurance through compliance with its Law.

Cahun's self-portrait before a mirror from 1928 (fig. 3) functions as a canceled confession. In this photograph, Cahun stands in the foreground and stares directly at the camera, or in the viewer's imagined direction. Her confrontational look transmits a message of intimidation; she resents her implied viewer's intrusive gaze, and wants to discourage it. With her hand in a loosely clenched fist, Cahun stretches forward the lapel on her boldly checked shirt and conceals her neck. Her protective gesture only increases the viewer's curiosity, however. In this way, Cahun explores the desire to access the forbidden.

The image in the bust length mirror betrays Cahun's attempt at concealment. In the reflection, Cahun's glance appears averted; her eyes peer indeterminately outside of the photograph's frame of reference. As a result, nothing arrests the viewer's gaze. The mirrored image provides visual cues that encourage the viewer to look without

inhibition. The same gesture that prohibited the viewer from seeing Cahun's neck, now reversed by the reflection, invites the viewer to take a peek inside the shirt. In a clever twist on the theme of *vanitas*, the viewer is absorbed by the image in the mirror, not Cahun.

The mirror's frame emphasizes the reflection's distance from reality. Once the viewer recognizes the reflection's construction, it becomes obvious that the Cahun who stands before the mirror does not represent "the real thing" either. Ironically, it is the reflection, the image twice removed from "reality," that the viewer wants to read as the "true" Cahun. The photograph's layered artifice challenges the viewer's propensity to equate intimacy with verity.

Nonetheless, critics frequently raid Cahun's photographs for clues about the artist's personal life. For some, Cahun's photographs document her psychological traumas. As Dickran Tashjian comments: "The transgressions of androgyny were deeply felt in the multiple representations of self that became self-portraiture, as though she needed continual reassurance of her chosen identity" (40). According to Tashjian, Cahun's decision to pose as the subject of her own photographs implies an identity crisis. Her "representations of self"

become "self-portraiture" only as she unveils an uncertain self. Furthermore, Tashjian implies that the sheer number of photographs signals Cahun's insecurity. Her supposed "need" for "continual reassurance" suggests her total lack of self-confidence.

This mode of analysis draws from a highly gendered pool of assumptions. In the quote under discussion, Tashjian assumes that Cahun's androgynous appearance necessitates her therapy. He mistakes her photographs for confessions and roots their motivation in an emotional cause; her "transgressions of androgyny were *deeply felt*." The word "transgression," much like "confession," carries with it both legal and religious connotations. To transgress is to break the law, to sin. Cahun's supposed need for "reassurance" reinforces her guilt. But who needs the reassurance, Cahun or the critic?

As Foucault argues, confession, as a ritual of discourse, unfolds within a power relationship:

For one does not confess without the presence (or virtual presence) of a partner who is not simply the interlocutor but the authority who requires the confession, prescribes and appreciates it, and intervenes in order to judge, punish, forgive, console and reconcile (61-2).

Tashjian positions himself as judge and stakes his authority over the image, and over Cahun's identity. Cahun must confess her sins of androgyny in order to find absolution in the Other, her confessor.

Indeed the essence of the confession is that the one who feels outcast pleads with humanity to relate his [sic] isolation to its wholeness. He pleads to be forgiven, condoned, even condemned, so long as he is brought back into the wholeness of people and of things. (Spender 120)

The therapy of confession cannot "heal" someone who rejects "the wholeness of people and things." The power issued from the center only appears whole (rational, natural, etc.) because it regulates normalcy. In this image, Cahun makes it clear that she does not accept the existent power dynamic. She does not want to assimilate into a flawed "humanity."

The rituals of confession require the viewer to imitate the position of Other. Cahun interrogates the viewer's desire to occupy this locus via her pose and look. A photograph from 1921 (fig. 4) serves as an example. In this image, Cahun stands with her legs hip-distance apart. She clenches one fist, and firmly places her other hand on her hip in defiance. As in most of her self-portraits, all

background clutter has been eliminated (Kline 67). The viewer's gaze has nowhere to hide.

Cahun demonstrates more than her self-awareness in this photograph (Lichtenstein 64), her look presumes the viewer's guilt. The viewer feels as if s/he has transgressed a boundary, stepped over a line. The translation of *aveux* as "statements of consent," seems particularly apt in this instance. Through her pose and look Cahun withdraws her permission. With her intimidating stance she bars the entrance to the private sphere, and discourages the viewer from occupying the position of the Other. Cahun's fierce look cancels the confession.

"To confess is to acknowledge a 'genuine' or 'authentic' self, to give access to a psychological persona who exists, at very least, for the length of the confession" (Lasalle and Solomon-Godeau 11). When one poses, however, one turns oneself into an image in advance; one presents an inauthentic self (Barthes *Camera...*10). Cahun's pose not only underscores her awareness of the camera (after all, as the photographer, she set up the shot), it forewarns. "To strike a pose is to pose a threat" (Hebdige 86). Cahun poses in order to confound the viewer's attempt to occupy the Other's position. She wants

her viewers to know that she feels the presence of their gaze and she resents it.

In his analysis of the portraits of prominent businessmen assembled in the book *Power*, Dick Hebdige, characterizes the viewer's relationship to posed portraits in the following manner:

It is clear when we look at these photographs that our curiosity has been anticipated and a counterstrategy deployed: these faces have been thoroughly prepared. [...] In the face of these faces...our curiosity turns on itself, devours itself, becomes, for us, preposterous, futile, presumptuous, vulgar. What did we expect to learn? (69).

Cahun's self-portrait from 1921 achieves a similar effect. Cahun disarms the viewer's gaze with her look. Where viewers may want to serve as confessor, or judge, in relation to this image, they find themselves in the position of the accused.

Typically, viewers assume that by claiming a position at the geometral point (in this case, the imagined location of the camera) that they obtain mastery over the image. This false sense of control can be thought of as an ego assurance. As Kaja Silverman explains, fronto-parallel

alignment with a work of art provides the viewer with an illusory autonomy:

When one occupies a certain geometral point everything seems to radiate from our look. Any painting organized in relation to it encourages us to enact that form of *méconnaissance* that is, for Lacan, the visual equivalent of the *cogito* (Silverman 176).

Cahun does not allow her viewers to experience mastery before her self-portraits, however. Like Stein and Hejinian, she exposes the ego's belief in its own coherence as a fiction. As the subject of representation, Cahun questions the viewer's authority through her penetrating look. As the photographer, Cahun establishes the photograph's frame and therefore determines the viewer's vision.

Cahun's self-portrait with a reflective globe from 1927 (fig. 5) doubly implicates the viewer. In this photograph, Cahun's mask-like visage, accentuated with dark eye and lip make-up, appears to float amidst the blackened plane. The only other element that draws the viewer's eye is the reflective globe Cahun encases with her hands near her chest. Although she appears less hostile than in the previous image, in this photograph Cahun stares directly at

the camera. The mirrored globe she holds functions as yet another eye. Cahun not only confronts the viewer in this photograph she occupies the position of the social gaze.

As Silverman explains, the social gaze signifies "the inscription of Otherness within the field of vision" (56). Although unlocatable and unapprehensible, and therefore much like the implied viewers Cahun constructs as she stares into the camera, the social gaze determines the subject's intelligibility. In this photograph, Cahun turns herself into a camera, and therefore turns the tables on her viewers. Before this image, viewers feel the presence of the social gaze upon themselves. "When we feel the social gaze focused upon us, we feel photographically framed" (Silverman 135).

Although viewers may stand fronto-parallel before the photograph, they will never see their own image reflected in the globe.³ In this way, Cahun's self-portrait underscores the impossibility that any subject will ever find its *moi* (ideal ego) reflected back to it through the Other's gaze. The reflective globe prohibits the viewer from fully occupying the position of the Law.

³Exactly what the mirrored globe reflects remains unclear. It probably displays the camera Cahun used to take the photograph.

Although Cahun's double self-portrait (fig. 6) from 1929 also explores the impossible demands of the Other, in recent analyses of this work it is Cahun's identity that tends to stand trial. In this photograph, two heads stem from one torso; one faces forward and stares vacantly off into the distance, the other, oriented backwards, peers over her left shoulder and acknowledges, with annoyance, the gaze of the viewer. This face's dark lipstick, thick black eyeliner, and shaved head all convey a rebellious spirit.

Unlike most of Cahun's self-portraits, this photograph received a title, *Que me veux-tu?* or *What Do You Want of Me?* Katy Kline reads this image as an "interrupted narcissistic dialogue" that underscores "Cahun's uncompromising self-interrogation in her quest for identity" (Kline 73). According to Kline, the two Cahuns direct the title's question at each other. Because the eyes of the two Cahuns do not connect, she suggests that the attempt at communication fails. Hence, Cahun's supposed desire for a stable identity remains unfulfilled.

The 'tu' or 'you' of the title need not signify one of the Cahuns, however. The title can also be understood as outwardly accusatory. Cahun does not beg for the viewer's approval, or signal an appeal for advice. Instead, she

poses a rhetorical question in a frustrated and angry response to the Other's impossible demands for coherence, and adherence. Beyond "What do you want of me?" the title asks, "What me do you want?" In response, viewers either realize the impossibility of such a choice, or become more cognizant of their preference. Either way, Cahun presumes her viewers' imposition.

Although she reverses the orientation, Cahun uses the image on the left hand side of *Que me veux tu?* in another photograph (fig. 7). In this untitled self-portrait from 1929, Cahun appears to float once again. On the one hand, the distortion widens Cahun's eyes, extends her ears, and implies her hyper-awareness. On the other hand, Cahun's averted glance suggests her ignorance of the viewer's presence. Cahun's distraction invites the viewer to peruse uninhibited. Despite the invitation, however, the viewer experiences apprehension before this photograph. Cahun's alien appearance alienates the viewer in more ways than one.

In this self-portrait, Cahun's elongated head appears as an anamorphic distortion. In "A Mutable Mirror," Therese Lichtenstein discusses the anamorphic effect of Cahun's photomontages.

Embedded in her art like an anamorphosis is a nonsensical, eerie, uncanny return of the repressed, of that moment existing paradoxically before the symbolic, before the rationalization of language and image, of that primordial, pre-oedipal existence that must emerge within a foreign, frightening language. Cahun's recessional play of identities, masks, and illusions situates the viewer vertiginously at the boundary of horror. (67)

According to Lichtenstein, Cahun's photomontages evoke a pre-Symbolic realm, or the Imaginary. If one adopts Lichtenstein's point of view, Cahun's "recessional play of identities" places the viewer in a precarious position, on the verge of the nonsensical, or on the cusp of psychosis.

Cahun's self-portrait with an elongated head from 1929 situates the viewer at the boundary of horror, but for other reasons entirely. Cahun's elongated head, like the distorted skull in Hans Holbein's *The Ambassadors* (1533) (fig. 8), prevents the viewer from experiencing mastery before the image. In relation to Cahun's photograph, the viewer must stand at a location other than the geometral point for the head to come into "common proportions." The anamorphic head frustrates the viewer's desire for fronto-

parallel alignment. Cahun's distorted head locates the viewer at a point other than the imagined position of the camera. The viewer would have to stand at an impossible location, somewhere below and to the extreme left of the photograph, for the head to appear in customary measure.

As Lacan explains in his analysis of Holbein's painting, because of its distortion, the skull takes over a position analogous to the social gaze. The skull determines where the viewer needs to stand. Cahun's self-portrait achieves the same effect. Cahun's anamorphic head, like the skull, effects a deconstruction of normative vision (Lacan *The Four Fundamental... 87*). Where a conventional portrait encourages the viewer to approximate the position of the Other, this photograph highlights the impossibility that one could ever occupy the Other's position.

In this way, Cahun's self-portrait underscores the constructedness of perception. This self-portrait focuses the Other's gaze back on the viewer. As do all of the self-portraits discussed in this chapter, this self-portrait qualifies the modes of viewing the viewer mistook for natural as wholly constructed. The dual positions of self-portraiture allow Cahun to displace the viewer's sense of mastery and thereby challenge the autonomy of the ego.

Chapter 4

"What one looks at is what cannot be seen":

Cindy Sherman's *Film Stills*

In her *Untitled Film Stills* (1977-1980), Cindy Sherman, like Cahun, dons elaborate and highly accessorized outfits, and places herself within extensively designed, although never extravagant, settings. Upon graduation at the State University of New York at Buffalo in 1977, Sherman moved to New York City and began to photograph herself in various mid-twentieth century retro costumes in and around her apartment. In her first series of photographs, she presents a pastiche of femininity, the media, and 1950s Americana. Like Cahun, Sherman appears in each of these photographs. Unlike Cahun, Sherman does not deploy a confrontational look. Instead, she diverts her glance and creates a seemingly comfortable space for viewing. Once viewers realize that Sherman is both the object of representation¹ and the photographer, however, their ease dissolves. In this chapter, I explore how the *Film Stills* construct the

¹I refer to Sherman as the object of representation (not the subject) because she explores women's objectification by the male gaze.

viewer as voyeur² and thereby expose femininity as a "fantasy of presence."

An astounding amount of critical material exists on Sherman's oeuvre. While many feminist, Lacanian, and postmodern critics laud Sherman's early work for its provocative interrogation of the "feminine mystique," other critics disparage such acclaim. As Jeff Perrone states:

That her photographs are ostensibly about female representation in popular culture seems beside the point, not to mention evasive. Her work is, from the consumer's point of view, having your cheesecake and eating it too (39).³

Words and phrases such as "ostensibly," "beside the point" and "evasive" imply that persons who interpret Sherman's early work⁴ as discerning feminist critiques fail to account for the oppressive stereotypes of women these photographs supposedly perpetuate.

²This chapter draws and expands on Laura Mulvey's groundbreaking analysis of Sherman's art in "A Phantasmagoria of the Female Body: The Work of Cindy Sherman."

³Some feminists hold a similar view. "One has only to see certain Sherman photographs on a collector's wall to understand the rather traditional nature of their appeal: a wet T-shirt clinging to breasts is the same old thing, whether you call it *draperie moillée* or tits and ass. These negative representations were disturbingly close to the way men have experienced or fantasized women. Her camera seemed male and her images so successful not because they threatened phallocracy but because they reiterated and confirmed it" (Shor 225).

In order to emphasize the link between the perceived sexual exploitation found in these images and their resounding financial success, Perrone plays on several meanings of "consumer." A consumer is someone who uses a product, or purchases goods and services. According to this point of view, Sherman exploits herself as a sexual object in order to service her "consumer," the male ego, and reap financial gain. A consumer is also someone who eats and drinks. The clichéd phrase "to have your cake and eat it to" means to "enjoy both of two mutually exclusive alternatives" (Oxford Encyclopedic Dictionary). In other words, it is impossible for those who view, review, and purchase Sherman's photographs to praise them for their analysis of voyeurism without implicitly approving of their erotics. The term "consumer" also places Sherman's photographs into a precarious status in terms of their reception as "high art." These photographs function so effectively as "cheesecake," or low art pin-ups, that Perrone questions their ability to transcend this stratum and work on an intellectual level.

Other critics, such as Ken Johnson, understand Sherman's early work as confessional.

⁴Perrone's comment makes specific reference to Sherman's "horizontals."

Through her fictional identification [Sherman] is acknowledging something in herself that the hard-nosed professional artist would resist. That is that in some important way she shares with these women their loneliness and their shameless craving to be romantically loved.

(50)

Sherman's artistic production, like Cahun's, is often mistaken for her therapy. According to Johnson, Sherman works out her personal insecurities in these photographs; the *Film Stills* help her acknowledge "something in herself." The verb "to acknowledge," means to admit or confess the truth. Here, Johnson's analysis echoes Rita Felski's definition of the confession. "The confession is a cry for love, allowing the author to express powerful emotional feelings to an unknown reader without fear of rejection" (110).

In this passage, Johnson makes several assumptions about Sherman's, in particular, and women's, in general, need for male companionship. He understands the *Film Stills* as Sherman's confession of her "loneliness;" they reveal her desire to be "romantically loved." Johnson underscores the vulnerability implied in the phrase "shameless craving" when he sets Sherman up against the profile of "the hard-nosed professional artist." A hard-nosed person is realistic and

uncompromising. Sherman, defined by contrast, is idealistic and compromising; she's too weak willed to "resist" her need for male attention. In terms of the larger claims implied by this statement, women's self-portraiture cannot hold its own in the professional art world.

Both Perrone and Johnson fail to acknowledge the critical edge of Sherman's early photographs. Their misprision results from their failure to recognize the agency self-portraiture provides. Although their approaches dramatically differ, Sherman, like Cahun, determines her viewer's gaze.

Compare Sherman's *Untitled Film Still #2* (fig. 9) to Cahun's self-portrait before a mirror from 1928 (fig. 3). Where Cahun forcefully turns up her collar in order to conceal, Sherman casually lets her towel slip down in order to entice. Where Cahun stares directly at the viewer, and therefore disregards her reflection in the mirror, Sherman, completely absorbed with her own reflection, feigns an ignorance of the camera's presence.

The narcissism Sherman displays allows the viewer to gain a comfortable sense of mastery over the image. The truncated mirror, and the loose, open in the back, towel, all increase the viewer's desire to see more. Other, subtler, visual cues also engage the viewer. The two toothbrushes that rest in a cup on the sink, for example,

encourage the viewer to include the possible presence of another in the fantasy created by the image. Furthermore, the photograph's small size (all of the *Film Stills* are 8"x 10") creates a sense of intimacy. The image provides its viewers with a sense of control because they could ostensibly hold it in their hands (Metz 157).

Although the content and composition indulge the male gaze, Sherman also challenges the viewer's position of privilege in several ways. In *Untitled Film Still #2*, Sherman establishes a series of frames that, in turn, frame the viewer.⁵ The frame around the mirror, for example, sets off an overtly idealized vision of femininity. Sherman's elegant, delicate, yet highly stylized hand position suggests, within that frame of reference, an air of sophistication and refinement. Her bare, demurely poised shoulders and back convey a soft sensuality. When placed within the entire scene, however, several elements detract from this illustration of feminine grace. The plumbing under the sink, the waste in the garbage can, and the plain appearance of the exterior walls, all work against the glowing, idyllic reflection centered perfectly in the mirror.

⁵See also Rosalind Krauss' discussion of frames in *Cindy Sherman: 1975-1993*.

The wooden frame of the closet in the background, and the visible doorframe on the left hand side of the picture plane echo the frame around the mirror. All of these frames emphasize the photograph's borders. As it did in Cahun's self-portrait, the frame around the mirror enhances the photograph's distance from "the real" or the constructed qualities of the image.

The frames establish a chain of viewing that expands beyond the picture plane and implicates the viewer. Just as the reflection in the mirror absorbs Sherman, Sherman's self-absorption engrosses the viewer. "Sherman's" narcissism allows the viewer to look without consequence. Nevertheless, because Sherman, as photographer, set up the shot, she also determines the viewer's desire. She controls the gaze that positions her viewer as voyeur and therefore surprises him as he "looks through the keyhole."

Sherman constructs her viewer as voyeur in order to deconstruct the fetish of femininity. According to Lacan, what the voyeur "looks at is what cannot be seen."

What the voyeur is looking for and finds is merely a shadow, a shadow behind the curtain. There he will phantasize any magic of presence, the most graceful of girls, for example, even if on the other side there is only a hairy athlete. (Lacan *The Four Fundamental... 182*)

Sherman's *Film Stills* supply the fantasies of presence ready made. Her photographs depict the most graceful of girls, or Woman as fetish object.

In psychoanalysis, a fetish object serves as a substitute for the infant's fantasy of the maternal phallus. Before it enters into the mirror stage, the infant understands the maternal figure as a whole being (because she provides everything it needs: food, warmth, love, reassurance, etc.) and itself as an extension of that wholeness. Eventually, the infant comprehends the maternal figure's de-privileged relationship to the phallus, or power and prestige. This results in the infant's comprehension of its separateness from the mother, a necessary part of the process of individuation. The infant's cognizance of the maternal figure's lack, paired with its realization of its own incoherence, produces an anxiety that persists in that subject's unconscious. Although, unconsciously, fetishists know that the maternal phallus, or the complete Woman, does not exist, they pretend that a feminine appearance signifies psychic wholeness in order to approximate the pleasure experienced as an infant. Persons who obtain sexual stimulation from the masquerade of femininity indulge in a fantasy of presence. In the *Film Stills*, stockings, high-heeled shoes, form-fitting clothes, dramatic make-up, all of

the accoutrements of femininity Sherman adorns, compensate for woman's lack.

At the same time the *Film Stills* indulge the fantasy of a complete Woman, they also highlight the impossibility of the maternal phallus. With these photographs, Sherman exposes as impossible the viewer's desire to return to what was only ever an illusion. In other words, the *Film Stills* not only depict the most graceful of girls they also reveal the hairy athlete behind the curtain.

On the one hand, Sherman seems to fill the *Film Stills* with the presence of the past. Her use of retro furniture, vintage clothes, Campbell's® soup cans, and chunky ashtrays all reference a bygone era. The appearance of these objects in black and white further suggests the authenticity of these images. On the other hand, the *Film Stills* do not capture the 1950s, but only the look and feel of media constructions of the 1950s. They are 1970s reconstructions of the past. Just as Sherman refutes the possibility of the maternal phallus, she labels the coherence of nostalgic longings "false". Nostalgia functions like a fetish; it only captures the fantasy of presence.

When one views the entire corpus of *Untitled Film Stills*, Sherman's identifiable presence in each role renders the individual photographs strange. Once again, knowledge of the artist's presence both in front of and behind the

camera pushes to the fore their constructedness. The considerable amount of effort required to produce their "spontaneous look" exudes a considerable irony. Like the "I" in *The Autobiography*, the "women" of the *Film Stills* are simulacra. Where Cahun's confrontational pose and look confirm her careful anticipation of the shutter's click, the number and variety of "women" in the *Film Stills* emphasize the thoughtful and extensive preparation behind each of these photographs.

The title of "untitled" provides room for fantasy, but the designation of these photographs as film stills highlights their basis in simulation. A film still is not an isolated frame from a motion picture, but a still photograph used to promote or advertise a given film. The *Film Stills*, therefore, do not present "fictional" takes on real women; instead, they simulate a Hollywood actress's simulation of the fictional role she played in a film. Careful examination of the B movies from which Sherman supposedly drew her images does not provide tremendous insight therefore. As Rosalind Krauss poses, "How can one copy "the real" of the Hollywood film?" (*Cindy Sherman* 20).

Although Sherman creates a comfortable space in her *Film Stills* that indulges the viewer's desire to see, she also reveals tears in the fantasy of presence that make the viewer, turned voyeur, uncomfortable. The variety and poor

quality of the wigs, the theatrical make-up, the stiff, often awkward poses, and the oddly decorated rooms all suggest artifice. The reappearance of the same dress on a "different woman," or the same ashtray in two different settings produces a sense of alienation. These recycled materials operate in a similar fashion to the reappearance of the name "Gertrude Stein" in *The Autobiography*, or the repeated phrases in *My Life*. They mark the return of the repressed.

As with Stein's repeated name, and Hejinian's altered clichés, something about these images just doesn't feel right. These fantasies of presence exude absence. *Untitled Film Still #14* (fig. 10) serves as an example. On the surface, Sherman achieves a level of sophistication in this photograph. A champagne glass rests on the table; two unlit candles sit on the bureau. Sherman wears a pearl choker, and a form-flattering dinner dress. The photograph of Judy Garland in the background suggests a certain reverence for Hollywood style. The image also conveys an air of mystery. The viewer spies a man's coat draped over a chair. Smoke from an unseen cigarette wafts into the foreground, and implies the recent presence of another. Sherman's look of concern corroborates and intensifies this suggestion. Viewers feel excitement and anticipation as they spy upon this unfolding drama.

As this description implies, to some degree, the photographs come equipped with ready-made narratives. The viewer's tendency to pick up on clues and fill in other "implied" details marks a desire for completeness. The success of these photographs depends upon the viewer's familiarity with the formulas of viewing and meaning making evoked. To some degree, the desire to fill in a story around the *Film Stills* can be compared to the reader's frustrated attempts to construct cohesive narratives around the chapters of Hejinian's *My Life*. At the level of the entire series of *Film Stills*, or of Hejinian's entire poem, this fantasy of coherence cannot be maintained. Both *My Life* and the *Film Stills* work against notions of progress or culmination. The variety of "characters" in the *Film Stills* disrupts the continuity necessary to construct "a life." The desire to complete the narrative, or make the lack whole, parallels the fetishist's desire to restore the phallus to the mother.

In #14, as in #2, the mirror serves a dual function. On the one hand, it indulges the desire to see for it reveals the contents of the table as well as the delicate back of "Sherman's" dress. On the other hand, the mirror provides a behind the scene's look at this photograph's fabrication. It exposes the "shadow behind the curtain." The reflection in the mirror reveals the table and the chair

to be of the cheap, folding variety. It shows that no decorations or designs ornament the wall. In other words, elegance does not exude from every detail. In such details, Sherman shows her viewer a glimpse at the studio lot.

Quite literally, the hand of the artist is visible in Sherman's work. In #14, for example, Sherman awkwardly clutches her purse. More than a fashionable accessory, the purse disguises Sherman's action. The reflection in the mirror reveals her depression of the camera's shutter release button. In other photographs, such as *Untitled Film Still #11* (fig. 11), Sherman's depression of the trigger becomes even more apparent. In #11, the viewer not only notices Sherman's fist-like grip, and the deployment of her thumb, but also the cord that snakes out under the bed. The appearance of the shutter release device makes plain the artist's residence behind the curtain. Sherman's click of the shutter catches the viewer as voyeur and further impoverishes the fantasy of presence. The visibility of this mechanism of production encourages the viewer to look at all of the *Film Stills* with a more critical eye. Sherman's disruption of the fantasy of presence motivates the viewer's search for other "flaws" and anachronistic details.

Sherman's poses, whether designed to suggest preoccupation, anger, fear, or distress, also come across as

staged, or extremely well rehearsed. In *Untitled Film Still #12* (fig. 12), for example, Sherman clings to the wall for support. Her shoulders arch dramatically upwards as her whole body inhales into a sob. Although the clothes around her suitcase are disheveled, her appearance is flawless. Her robe opens suggestively on the upper thigh, tastefully at the neck, and her hair frames her face perfectly. Although Sherman appears to be sobbing, her lips do not contort, but open in a delicate oval. Her make-up has not been disturbed by her tears. While the scene suggests that the woman is alone (there is only one suitcase, with its contents spewed across the mattress), she seems to be crying for the benefit of the Other's gaze.

Despite these attempts, "Sherman" does not come across as attractive. Her make-up appears too heavy, the pattern on her robe distracts. The angle of the shot emphasizes her flared nostrils. While Sherman, as the object of representation, conveys an appearance of frailty and beauty, Sherman, as photographer, undermines this effect in the way she sets up the shot. The woman Sherman portrays comes across as just as framed and clichéd as the picture of the ship centered squarely over the headboard.

The photograph serves as a reminder that the "camera/gaze does not always apprehend us from the vantage point to which we direct our self-imaging" (Silverman 210).

In this photograph, the viewer witnesses the object of representation's failure to embody her *moi* (ideal ego). The viewer does not see "this woman" in the way she wants to be seen. This staged alienation symbolizes the viewer's own. The *Film Stills* simulate the Other's apprehension of the subject. Through them we understand that we cannot control our apprehension by the Other's gaze.

While it may seem that the *Film Stills* teeter on the edge of farce, they do much more than poke fun at the over-determined femininity of a bygone era. Sherman reveals all subjects' deep investment in cultural idealizations through these photographs. The *Film Stills* expose the subject's identification with an image as its dispossession (Owens 84). In other words, while the *Film Stills* interrogate the male gaze, they also magnify all subjects' alienation. The *Film Stills* encourage us to realize that, despite our self-imaginings, we will never become our ideal ego.

In this series, Sherman explores the integral role the fantasy of femininity plays in the construction of identity, for each gender. To varying degrees, one either wants to be the phallus or to possess it. Sherman highlights the pretense of the *Film Stills* in order to spoil the "magic of presence" such fantasies perpetuate and encourage a more cognizant and critical relationship to cultural ideals.

Chapter 5

Adjusting the Spy-Glass of Anthropology: Zora Neale Hurston's Autoethographic Oeuvre

In this final section of Part One, I examine the third genre of self-representation included in this dissertation, autoethography. All of the artists in Part One relocate the bar that separates self from Other in their representations of subjectivity. The authors included in this section recast this dividing line within the terms of their discipline, anthropology. In this section, I explore the self/Other dynamic via the relationship between the site informant and the ethnographer.

Robert Hemenway's¹ and Alice Walker's rediscovery of Zora Neale Hurston's substantial oeuvre in the 1970s created a deluge of interest in the writer's work. As a result, many critics turned to Hurston's autobiography, *Dust Tracks on a Road* (1942), for insight into the author's life and times. While a great deal of scholarship has been devoted to the elusive self of *Dust Tracks*, Hurston's autoethographic work provides an alternate angle from which to view this controversial figure.

Dust Tracks constitutes only one panel in the triptych of Hurston's autobiography. The second

¹Hurston's biographer

can be found in her extraordinary novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, and the third in her collections of black folklore, notably *Mules and Men*. (Fox-Genovese 80)

From her unique perspective as Barnard educated anthropologist and native amongst her informants, Hurston challenges the objective discourse of her contemporary anthropology. In her autoethographic work, Hurston dismantles the white man's universal authority as she authenticates an African American subjectivity in the cultural symbolic. Her dual position, as both observer and observed, allows her to critically examine the gross imbalances of power that ethnographic conventions perpetuated.

After earning an associate's degree in English at Howard in 1920, Hurston entered Barnard College in 1925, as the only African American student, and began to study anthropology under the tutelage of Franz Boas. Boas' break with nineteenth century evolutionary theories and move towards cultural relativism revolutionized the emerging field. Nevertheless, vestiges of "racial science" lingered. Hurston began her fieldwork in Harlem, measuring heads of passersby, in an attempt to disprove theories of African American's mental deficiency (Wall 964).

During this era, it was assumed that the ethnographer represented an unproblematic, "stable, self-identical, authoritative subject, a fully present consciousness" who stood over an external reality in order to register and interpret it (Dorst 308). Although ethnographers from the period, in concordance with this profile, tried to manufacture a guise of objectivity, their subjective biases constantly bled through. As the following excerpt reveals, Hurston received extensive training in the production of "objective discourse."

A bit of Negro drama familiar to all is the frequent meeting of two opponents who threaten to do atrocious murder one upon the other. Who has not observed a robust young Negro chap posing upon a street corner, possessed of nothing but his clothing, his strength and his youth? Does he bear himself like a pauper? No, Louis XIV could be no more insolent in his assurance.

("Characteristics of Negro Expression" 831)

Although this selection does not exhibit an "I," one would have a hard time labeling it as objective. The tone conveys more than "a bit" of condescension, so much so that it teeters on the ledge of satire. Hurston's borrowed prose drips with elitist Barnardese. Her reference to Louis XIV smacks of snobbery. The word "drama" and the reference to

"posing" link the behavior under discussion with the theatrical and flamboyant. Hurston's exaggerated use of the adjective "atrocious," with its connotations of the savage and inhumane plays on still other vicious assumptions.

In this passage, Hurston includes herself amongst the "all" she addresses. In order to write as an "authoritative subject" she turns her lived experience as an African American² into an "external reality." In other words, she distances herself from her object of study, the Negro³, in order to establish an affinity with her readers. Hurston attempts to gain her reader's trust through her performance of the accepted discourse. As the essay progresses, however, Hurston uses her position of authority to actively challenge hegemonic misconceptions. Variations on the phrase "contrary to popular belief" appear throughout the remainder of the text. Albeit initially compromising, Hurston's strategy represented an avenue for change. With patience and perseverance she could use the master's tools to dismantle his house.

Hurston's strained relationship with academia produced a palpable double-consciousness in her writing. W.E.B

²Hurston grew up in the all black town of Eatonville, Florida and later lived and worked in Harlem. Her childhood will be discussed in more detail in Part Two.

³Later in the article Hurston uses the first person plural to include herself among her informants. "We are an outdoor people" (839).

DuBois first defined this psychological conflict in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903):

...this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness, -an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings, two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (11)

DuBois' famous analysis provides a startling commentary on Hurston's first fieldwork experience; she literally measured the heads of Harlemites. Turn of the century anthropology, in its quest to evaluate, can be thought of as a measuring tape of the world. At Barnard, Hurston learned to look at herself "through the eyes of others," and, as discussed, an "amused contempt and pity" occasionally surfaces in her writing as an unfortunate result. The "two unreconciled strivings" or "warring ideals" present in Hurston's writing find their basis in her dual position. Hurston's desire to validate her subjective experience of African American culture clashes with an obligation to conform to the accepted discourse of her contemporary anthropology.

On one level, anthropology appealed to Hurston because it allowed her to show the basic humanity of her people to an audience of readers living outside the community under scrutiny (Deck 239). On another level, Hurston objected to the white male privilege anthropology masked as objectivity. As made evident in her description of a prayer at a Southern Baptist church in the essay "Spirituals and Neo-Spirituals," Hurston used her intimate knowledge of diverse milieux to bridge cultural gaps as well as critique the possibility of a purely "external reality."

There are certain rhythmic breaks throughout the prayer, and the church "bears him up" at every one of these. There is in the body of the prayer an accelerando passage where the audience takes no part. It would be like applauding in the middle of a solo at the Metropolitan. (873)

Once again, Hurston translates African American culture into the words and imagery of New York elite culture. In this instance, however, she attempts to lessen the distance between "us" and "them." Hurston makes use of terminology from the European musical tradition, such as "rhythmic breaks" and "accelerando passage," as a way of introducing an African American folk expression, "bears him up." Perhaps more significantly, the simile Hurston applies suggests that the congregation's role during this prayer is

just as sophisticated as the audience's role during an opera at one of the premier venues of high culture. In this way, Hurston forces her readers to see their own daily practices as rituals. As a result, she challenges the hierarchy that defines the culture of the dominant group as transparent (Glenn 10).

Members of the dominant racial group tend to classify their behavior as "normal" and the behavior of the other as deviant or "problematic" (Glenn 10). In his essay, "The Negro's Americanism," Melville J. Herskovits, a student of Boas' and a professor of Anthropology at Barnard, exercises this faulty logic. He describes Harlem as an American community like any other, "The same pattern, only a different shade!" (353).

What there is to-day in Harlem distinct from the white culture which surrounds it, is, as far as I am able to see, merely a remnant from the peasant days in the South. Of the African culture, not a trace. Even the spirituals are an expression of the emotion of the Negro playing through typical religious patterns of white America. That they have absorbed the culture of America is too obvious, almost to mention" (359).

Herskovits equates "the culture of America" with "white culture."⁴ As the word "pattern" implies, white practices serve as the model of excellence. The exclamation point conveys an enthusiasm for a rapid assimilation to European American standards of behavior. The verbs "surround" and "absorb" promise amelioration through a process of cultural osmosis, or acculturation. In this instance, anthropology barely masks its roots in imperialist era dominance (Calloway 33). According to Herskovits' view, African practices must be contained, and, like an infectious disease, eradicated. He belittles the legacy of the slave era and the trials of reconstruction in his description of "the peasant days of the South." "Merely a remnant" of Southern folklore has survived the so-called journey to enlightenment in the North and this too, it is promised, will be sloughed off in time.

Herskovits completely dismisses the artistic innovations and contributions of African Americans in this passage. Although Hurston recognizes "the patterns of white America" in African American traditions, such influences do not bankrupt African Americans' creativity. Hurston criticizes the concept of originality with a definition that sounds similar to, but, of course, precedes Harold Bloom's conception of influence:

⁴Herskovits never provides a list of the "essential

What we really mean by originality is the modification of ideas. [...] So if we look at it squarely, the Negro is a very original being. While he lives and moves in the midst of a white civilization, everything he touches is reinterpreted for his own use. (*Negro: An Anthology* 838)

Hurston rejected the implications implicit in Herskovits' comment. She wanted to preserve, not slough off, African American folk traditions and celebrate their manifestations in her contemporary American culture. In this way, her opinions meshed with those held by Arthur A. Schomburg, co-founder of the Negro Society for Historical Research. In the essay "The Negro Digs Up His Past" he writes:

The American Negro must remake his past in order to make his future. Though it is orthodox to think of America as the one country where it is unnecessary to have a past, what is a luxury for the nation as a whole becomes a prime social necessity for the Negro. (231)

Here, Schomburg acknowledges the necessity for an African American subjectivity. Unlike immigrants who perceive of America as the place where they, or their relatives, made a

characteristics" of American culture.

fresh start, African Americans recognize their ancestors' arrival in America as their entry into bondage. The violence of their displacement, and their ensuing status as property, ensured a de-privileged relationship to the cultural Symbolic. Schomburg believes that African Americans must re-write the past from their own perspective in order to mark out their subjectivity. They need not assimilate to white standards of behavior, or accept the dominant culture's version of the past, to gain privilege within the Symbolic.

Hurston uses her dual insider status, as an African American anthropologist writing about African American culture, to both rewrite and institutionally authenticate African American experience. Like all of the artists discussed thus far, she exposes and challenges the conventions of the genre she adopts. "And the more that the group knows about its own doorstep, the more it can bend and control what it sees there, the more civilized we say it is" (Hurston "Works in Progress" 876). The discipline of anthropology, despite its objective posture, enabled Hurston to "bend" and "control" the representation. Although the "we" of the last phrase acknowledges that an elite still holds the power, in this excerpt Hurston emphasizes the instability of social categories such as "the civilized." She suggests that self-representation, not elegance or

propriety, defines civilization, and therefore echoes Schomburg's message.

In her book-length collection of African American folklore, *Mules and Men*⁵, Hurston adopts a first person approach in order to better represent her "own doorstep." Hurston's insider status allows her to promote an interpretation of African American culture as authentic without the validation of other social scientists (Deck 247). At the same time, her approach flew in the face of accepted ethnographic practices. "The Boasian tradition of Hurston's training typically subordinates particularistic, personal narrative, to generalized, objectified description" (Dorst after Pratt 314). Although a first person account destroys the anthropologist's veneer of objectivity, the "I" of *Mules and Men* cannot completely collapse the distance that separates Hurston the anthropologist from Hurston the Eatonville native. Despite the critique of anthropology inherent in *Mules and Men*, Hurston never completely disregards the discipline's critical tools. In the introduction, she records her appreciation for the anthropological perspective.

When I pitched headforemost into the world I
landed in the crib of negroism [...] but it was

⁵ *Mules and Men* threads together the folklore Hurston collected in Eatonville and Polk County Florida as well as New Orleans, Louisiana.

fitting me like a tight chemise. I couldn't see it for wearing it. It was only when I was off in college, away from my native surroundings, that I could see myself like somebody else and stand off and look at my garment. Then I had to have the spy-glass of Anthropology to look through at that.

(1)

This passage exudes what Dubois refers to as "dogged strength." The words "pitched" and "headforemost" suggest an aggressive and adventurous personality. Words such as "crib" and "tight" provide a stark contrast. Although her copious studies of Eatonville demonstrate her affection for the Florida town, one senses Hurston's acute awareness of the limitations of small town existence in the phrase "the crib of negroism." Hurston's full immersion in Eatonville life effectively barred her from an appreciation of its uniqueness.

That Hurston describes "negroism" as a "chemise" also warrants comment. During college, Hurston began to understand race as a social construct. She does not describe her "negroism" as an essential aspect of her physical being. Instead, she refers to it as an intimate "garment" that she wears close to her skin. Hurston's conceptualization of race stands out as ahead of its time.

In this passage she de-essentializes race and highlights the pervasive effects of socialization.

Hurston's position as the only African American student at Barnard allowed her to "see [her]self like somebody else." Although this comment references Dubois' analysis of double-consciousness, in this instance, Hurston's message diverges from his in significant ways. Dubois points out the danger of "always looking at one's self through the eyes of others." He wants to break down the power imbalances that force African Americans to internalize the negative attributes others project on them. He wants African Americans to reject the dominant culture's objectifying gaze and obtain subject status. While Hurston shares the same goal as Dubois, in this particular excerpt she highlights the insight that total immersion in a foreign environment enables. Her "difference" helps her realize the pervasive influence of one's social and cultural background on identity formation. The paradigm shift Hurston experiences at Barnard develops her interest in anthropology. Its "spy-glass" encourages her to do more than "look at her garment," or understand the social construction of race, but eventually, and in line with Dubois, "look through" or penetrate the power dynamics that categorize cultural practices.

Anthropology affords Hurston the opportunity to bring into focus for herself, and others, the African American folklore of the South. With her "spy-glass" she magnifies the richness and complexity of her native culture. The word "spy-glass" also suggests the deviousness of anthropology. Ethnographers, as scientifically modified eyes, keep a furtive and detached watch. To some degree, Hurston suggests that ethnographers act like voyeurs. Just as the viewers turned voyeurs of Sherman's *Film Stills* indulge in an illusory fantasy of presence, ethnographers often impose impossible ideals on the cultures they observe. While Hurston does not regard her informants as "the enemy," or vice versa, the choice of "spy-glass" versus telescope also conveys antagonism. The research methods ethnographers use take advantage of and further perpetuate gross imbalances of power.

Although Hurston takes on the role of spy in *Mules and Men* she does not observe from a distance. Her status as an Eatonville native allows her to lay down the spy-glass, to some degree. Her insider status does not grant her immediate and total access, however. Once back in Florida, Hurston finds that her New York fashions, her automobile, and her Barnardese make her immediately suspect. She must adjust her behavior in order to get beyond her informants' circumlocutory responses and begin to gain their trust.

Hurston strategically metamorphoses into "down home" Zora in order to interview her skeptical informants without their resistance. In the following passage, Hurston describes her informants' opposition to her intellectual curiosity.

And the Negro, in spite of his open faced laughter, his seeming acquiescence, is particularly evasive...The Negro offers a feather-bed resistance. That is we let the probe enter, but it never comes out. It gets smothered under a lot of laughter and pleasantries. (10)

Here the authoritative tone of anthropology's objectivism gives way as Hurston includes her own voice amongst her informants. Her distant appellation, "the Negro," shifts into "we" as she attempts to clarify her position. With this description, Hurston strives to dispel the stereotype of the contented black; she tears at the screen that disguises this "fantasy of presence" as the truth. Words such as "seeming," "evasive," and "resistance" undercut "laughter" "acquiescence" and "pleasantries." A "feather-bed resistance" is "the strategic surrender of the superficial in order to keep the meaningful unobserved" (Dorst 313). Hurston suggests that African Americans disingenuously perform amiability as a defense mechanism.

Where Hurston, the ethnographer, writes of her anthropological spy-glass, in identification with her informants she describes the anthropologist's "probe." She not only cuts anthropology's self-professedly noble quest down to size with this passage, she labels the ethnographer's research invasive. A "probe" violates in its drive to measure and test. In this way, Hurston highlights the imbalance of power at the base of any ethnographic encounter. The "probe" symbolizes the phallus, or white male privilege, as it exists both within the field of anthropology and the greater society.

Hurston also acknowledges her informants' agency in this quote. In the statement "...we let the probe enter, but it never comes out," the "we let" conveys Hurston's, and her informants', cognizance of the violence committed in this pursuit of knowledge. The "it never comes out" may imply African-American's reluctant acquiescence to the hegemony, or, by contrast, an active resistance. The ethnographer's attempt to occupy the position of the Other⁶ comes across as an assault, if not a rape. The ethnographer's "probe" violates the informants' autonomy and integrity. Just as Cahun confronted her implied viewer's gaze with a stern look, the informants must counter the ethnographer's

⁶Here, and throughout the chapter, Other signifies the cultural order and not, as it might in post-colonial discourse, the disenfranchised other.

questions with their circumlocutory responses in order to preserve their dignity and pride. Even if they cannot disarm the "probe," they can "smother" the aims and objectives of the study in order to challenge the ethnographer's authority.

Hurston conveys her skepticism of anthropology's methods as she challenges the validity of its results. She suggests that the discipline's modes of observation necessarily produce superficial analyses. Hurston's intimate knowledge of her informants helps her realize that the full complexity of a culture cannot be appreciated from a distance. When ethnographers attempt to view culture as an "external reality" they mistake the "feather-bed resistance" for an "authentic" cultural traits.

In order to demonstrate the challenges of ethnographic research, Hurston highlights the layers of performance at play in *Mules and Men*. She takes on the role of "down home" Zora in order to access the front stoops and store porches of Eatonville. These locales serve as center stage for the transmission of folklore, tellingly referred to as "lying." While Hurston's insider status grants her special privileges, her worldly status compromises her acceptance. Throughout *Mules and Men* Hurston, and her readers, must try and determine the point when "lying" blurs into "feather-bed resistance."

Even Hurston's autoethographic "I" constitutes a narrative performance. Both Hurston and her editor Harry Block wanted to capture a wider, and therefore not entirely academic, audience with this book (Wall 968). They decided that a first person sustained narrative would add to the book's readability.

Hurston's "I" unmaskes the subjective voice muted by anthropology's guise of objectivity. Nevertheless, Hurston does not exchange one ruse for another. She does not replace ethnography's objectivity with an illusorily coherent "I." The "I" of *Mules and Men*, like the "I" of *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, does not represent a unified subject. On one level, Hurston's "I" lends authority to a voice from the margins. She inserts an African American subjectivity into an often times impenetrable white Symbolic and authenticates a folk culture she cherishes. On another level, Hurston demonstrates that the "I" can never be more than a "feather bed resistance." Just as Hurston adopts the personas of "down home" Zora and Barnard anthropologist to obtain her objectives, she crafts her "I" as a narrative ploy to seduce an audience.

In some respects, *Mules and Men* marks Hurston's disenfranchisement with the discipline of anthropology. The year before its publication Hurston writes: "it is almost useless to collect material to lie upon the shelves of

scientific societies. [...] The Negro material is eminently suited to drama and music" (Wall 970). Although the discipline allowed her to promote an interpretation of African American culture as authentic to other social scientists, Hurston did not feel that anthropology allowed her to effectively promote a positive interpretation of African American culture to African Americans.

Where Hurston innovatively avoids certain representational acts of violence, as devious anthropologist she commits others. She uses the critical tools of anthropology to re-make African American folk culture within academic institutions. Although its scope and influence may not have been as broad as she would have liked, Hurston produced a body of work that challenged the objective perspective of her contemporary anthropology. Hurston breaks with the oppressive models of ethnographic research and occupies dual positions, the observer and the observed. In doing so, she achieves a successful critique of the dynamics of a discipline that perpetuated gross imbalances of power.

Chapter 6

The Muted Serpent: Ruth Behar's *Translated Woman*

The subtext of representational violence latent in Hurston's *Mules and Men* becomes a manifest theme in Ruth Behar's *Translated Woman: Crossing the Border with Esperanza's Story* (1993). In this multi-genre book, Behar presents her case study of Esperanza Hernández¹, a sixty-year-old Mexican woman of native Tlaxcalan descent from Mexquitic². Roughly half of *Translated Woman* consists of Esperanza's story "in her own words." Esperanza chronicles her mother's and her own abusive marriage, relays her struggles to raise her children, traces her reputation as a witch in the community, and discusses her work as a peddler, selling flowers and vegetables door to door. Throughout, Behar supplements her research with self-reflexive commentary on her fieldwork experience.

Behar frames Esperanza's narrative within auto/etho/biographical chapters. In these chapters, Behar, born in Cuba and raised in New York City, analyzes the challenges she faces as a wife, mother, daughter, and university professor.

¹a pseudonym

²Mexquitic is about eight hundred kilometers south of the border with the United States.

According to the definition outlined in the introduction, *Translated Woman* does not qualify as autoethnography. Although Behar explores her cultural heritage, a large portion of the book consists of her translation of Esperanza's story. In order to simultaneously call attention to *Translated Woman's* connection with, yet emphasize its distinction from, autoethnography I have separated the prefix from the root. In adaptation of the definition outlined in the introduction, auto/ethnography is a genre written by individuals who are as concerned with examining themselves and their cultural position as they are with interpreting another culture for a non-native audience.

Behar's attempt to weave the story of another with her own results in a series of complications. Although Behar examines the role of the ethnographer as authoritative Other for the informant, Esperanza never transcends her status as "the object" of study. The bar that divides the "auto" from "ethnography," therefore, also symbolizes Esperanza's barred subjectivity. Unlike Hurston, Behar merely describes the power imbalances that ethnographic research perpetuates, and never really analyzes them.³

³My thesis is freely adapted from Ragland-Sullivan. "If we cannot say why or how language exercises power or negotiates narcissism or desire, poststructuralist feminists are left in a phenomenological impasse where men and women are framed within a masquerade they can only describe but not really analyze" ("Seeking the..."60).

Behar prefaces each of the eleven chapters that comprise Parts One and Two (Esperanza's 200+ page testimonial) with a one to two page self-reflexive commentary. These introductions read like Behar's personal journal. They provide a date, describe the current state of the project, convey Behar's frame of mind, and set the scene for Esperanza's telling. For example:

July 29, 1985. Two weeks passed before Esperanza could come back to talk to me in the kitchen. During that time, David and I returned to Mexico City to work in the archives for several days. [...] I couldn't yet know that my *comadre*⁴, with her stories, was slowly but consistently winning me over to her side. (109)

In Part Three, "Literary Wetback," Behar examines her almost ten year relationship with the townspeople of Mexquitic. She also details the process of writing and revising *Translated Woman* in this section. In Part Four, *Reflejos*/"Reflections," Behar interprets Esperanza's *historias* in light of North American feminist thought, and provides a brief analysis of contemporary Mexican culture. In the final chapter "Biography in the Shadows," Behar looks

⁴"David and I [Behar] became *compadres*, spiritual coparents of Esperanza's daughter and her *niño Dios*. Esperanza and I would from then on address one another as *comadre* and participate in the intimate but respectful friendship and patronage that goes with being *compadres*" (*Translated* 5).

back at her young adulthood in Queens, and discusses the major obstacles and stepping-stones of her academic career.

Parts One and Two share something in common with the tradition of testimonial writing in Latin America. In this genre, "the *testimonialista* gives his or her personal testimony 'directly,' addressing a specific interlocutor" (Yúdice 15). *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú y así me nació la conciencia* (1983), edited by Elizabeth Burgos, stands out as one of the best-known examples of *testimonio*. For this book, Menchú, a Mayan Quiché Indian of Guatemala, responded orally in Spanish, a non-native tongue, to Burgos' questions. Burgos then translated Menchú's responses into written Spanish and edited them into book form. Burgos corrected Menchú's grammar and rearranged the sessions to form a cohesive text with distinct thematized chapters that follow a thread of chronology. Hence, it is easy to understand why Yúdice places the word directly in quotes. *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú* reads as if Menchú were speaking directly to the reader, however, the editor's voice lingers as a subtext.

Much controversy surrounds this book. After Menchú received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1992, it was discovered that she had reported some events that she did not witness. In response to allegations of fraud, Menchú had this to say, "For common people such as myself, there is no difference

between testimony, biography, and autobiography. What we do is tell what we have lived, not just alone" (Poniewozik 2). While some critics accept Menchú's testimony as part of an oral tradition, and representative of a collective voice, others dismiss it as Marxist propaganda.⁵

Although Behar wrote *Translated Woman* before the controversy, and makes no reference to *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú* within its pages, similar concerns arise in relation to Behar's book. First of all, although Behar tape-recorded Esperanza's account in her native language, Spanish, she nevertheless provides a double translation, from audio into written text, from Spanish into English. Although Behar did not reorder Esperanza's *historias*, she guided Esperanza's telling ("I'd like you to tell me about your life. From your first memory" (27)). Furthermore, in Spanish, *historia* signifies both history and story. Hence, as with *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú*, no clear distinction can be drawn between fact and fiction. Like Hurston's informants, Esperanza often refers to her *historias* as "lies" (18).

One element distinguishes *Translated Woman* from *Me Llamo Rigoberta Menchú*, however. Where Burgos feigns her absence, Behar explicitly encourages her reader to view Esperanza's testimony, and the entire book, as a

⁵See David Horowitz' article "I, Rigoberta Menchú, Liar." *Salon News Real*. 11 January 1999.

construction. In *Translated Woman*, Behar does not attempt to capture the "seamless style of the testimonial novel" (*TW* 13). Like all of the women discussed in this Part, she exposes the means of the text's production. Familiar with the criteria for a good story within her own cultural milieu, Behar molds her account to fulfill academic expectations. In Chapter 6, Behar candidly reveals her desire to achieve closure in her taped interviews with Esperanza. "Not knowing that my conversations will continue in later years, I feel compelled to create a sense of closure, no matter how artificial, and I find myself asking some rather crude questions" (156). Behar's "artificial" and "crude" echo Hurston's "probe." Behar lets her quest for a powerful ending guide her interview, rather than curiosity or interest.

Like Hurston, Behar demonstrates her informant's skepticism and resistance. "The laughter that punctuates all our conversations is, perhaps, also her critique of my academic pretensions: the way I find things 'interesting' and cajole her and pounce on her so that she will talk and tell me more" (8). Words such as "cajole" and "pounce" reveal Behar's discomfort with the manipulative techniques she utilizes. At times, Esperanza offers a "feather-bed resistance" to Behar's leading questions.

<<http://www.salon.com/col/horo/1999/01/nc-11hor02.html>>

Unlike Hurston, Behar entered into her fieldwork with a romantic notion of the perfect informant, or a fantasy of presence already in place. When Behar first encountered Esperanza at a cemetery on the Day of the Dead, she closely resembled Behar's ideal. "She held a bulging bouquet of calla lilies and seemed to me like something out of one of Diego Rivera's epic Indian women canvases" (4). When Behar asks to take Esperanza's photograph, however, the idyllic fantasy dissolves. Esperanza does not shyly consent to Behar's request, but unexpectedly confronts her with an abrupt 'why?' "I jumped on her as an alluring image of Mexican womanhood, ready to create my own exotic portrait of her, but the image turned around and spoke back to me, questioning my project and daring me to carry it out" (4). This incident resonates throughout the book. It sets up the primary conflict. On the one hand, Behar wants to include Esperanza's resistance, her suspicion, and her propensity to interrogate. On the other hand, as the photo/ethno/grapher, Behar determines how Esperanza will be perceived. In their photography, Cahun and Sherman frame their own image. In *Translated Woman*, Behar literally and figuratively frames Esperanza.

Extremely conscious of her position of authority, Behar becomes pre-occupied with her reception in the community. In particular, her perceived status as "rich *gringa*" from

the United States disturbs her. Once again, Behar uses photography to make an analogy about the exploitive side of anthropology. At a town fiesta, Behar takes a photograph of a man who proceeds to call out "five hundred" at her. Confused by his comment, Behar tells the man that she did not plan to charge him for the picture. In actuality, the man was requesting five hundred pesos from her. As in *Mules and Men*, the ethnographer's unprovoked and unsolicited curiosity meets resistance. In a strategy employed to preserve pride and dignity, this man attempts to turn the tables on the power dynamic. He not only confronts Behar's objectifying "eye," he assumes the role of capitalist and reifies Behar as the ugly *gringa* as a result.

Behar's discomfort with her social status in Mexquitic reveals a lot about the desire for objectivity in anthropology. In some of the self-reflexive sections, Behar expresses her desire to stick to archival research, and informants who cannot talk back, in order to avoid the power imbalance inherent to ethnographic field research.

The violence of representation surfaces as the prevailing theme of the book from the outset. In the Introduction, "The Talking Serpent," Behar includes a story Esperanza related to her about the serpent that tempted Adam and Eve. At the end of the parable Esperanza states, "Any serpent I find, I kill it, open up its head,

and cut out its tongue. So later it won't be telling me I killed it" (2). Behar realizes that, with *Translated Woman*, she has committed a similar act of violence against Esperanza.

Yet when I am done cutting out her tongue, I will patch together a new tongue for her, an odd tongue that is neither English nor Spanish, but the language of a translated woman. Esperanza will talk in this book in a way she never talked before. (19)

While forthright in her awareness of the imbalance of power, Behar does little to correct it. To a large degree, Behar reduces the volume of Esperanza's voice through her amplification of the fact that it has been "translated" in several senses of the word. As a result, *Translated Woman* resonates with a dour inevitability: 'Esperanza will speak through me or she will not speak.' Commentary by the editor (self-reflexive and otherwise) diminishes the voice *testimonio* gives to the inhabitants of the margins. "More than any other form of writing in Latin America, *testimonio* has contributed to the demise of the traditional role of the intellectual/artist as spokesperson for the 'voiceless'" (Yúdice 15). Behar reclaims the role of the intellectual/artist as spokesperson in *Translated Woman*. Behar's name, not Esperanza's, appears on the spine of the

book. In a reversal of the typical criticism of ethnographic case studies, Behar places theory in the foreground at the risk of pushing Esperanza's story too far into the background.

Esperanza's reaction to the book supports this criticism. In "Writing in My Father's Name: A Diary of *Translated Woman's* First Year," Behar writes about her return to Mexico after the publication of *Translated Woman*. After initially accepting a copy, upon Behar's departure, Esperanza asks Behar to take it back. "We can't read it, anyway" (77). Although Behar rightly interprets this comment as Esperanza's refusal to be the translated woman, she does not fully explore the ramifications of this refusal. Instead, she sets Esperanza up as both the proud peasant and a feminist heroine.

And then I ask: If I come back next time with the book in Spanish, will she accept it? Yes, she says she will. And she'll know how to handle any criticisms, from her husband, from her neighbors, from anyone. She's not afraid anymore of being called a witch. (77)

Behar turns her effacement of Esperanza into a self-congratulatory declaration of Esperanza's empowerment. Behar compensates for the guilt caused by Esperanza's rejection with her diagnosis of Esperanza's personal growth.

Even if Esperanza, and the other inhabitants of Mexquitic, cannot read *Translated Woman*, at least she has gained self-acceptance and confidence as a result of the experience ("She's not afraid anymore of being called a witch"). Here, as throughout a large portion of the book, Behar mutes Esperanza's voice with her paraphrasing and wishful thinking.

Although Behar refuses to completely smooth over the edges of Esperanza's *historias*, I do not believe, as Deborah Gordon has stated, that *Translated Woman* marks "the end of feminist utopias in anthropology" (80). On the one hand, by holding her conversations with Esperanza in her mint green kitchen, Behar revalorizes that space as a site of power. In making reference to her husband's role as primary care taker of both child and home, as well as his role as administrative assistant, Behar highlights and ironizes the traditional view of the "anthropologist's wife." On the other hand, some of Behar's feminist appropriations are less successful. While Behar admits, for example, that "Esperanza didn't fit the part of the exemplary feminist heroine for whom Western women are always searching among 'native women'" (269), she nonetheless relies upon catch phrases of North American feminism to resolve Esperanza's paradoxical and "problematic" subject positions (*Translated* 269). For example, she compares Esperanza to the "Woman

Warrior," as she exists in Maxine Hong Kingston's novel by the same name. She also links her with a line out of a Billy Holiday song, "She's no hero out of books" (296). In doing so, Behar replicates the very practices of North American feminism she critiques. ("One of the limitations of North American feminism has been its narrow definition of the kind of knowledge and practice that can be counted as feminist" (*Translated* 297)).

For many of the same reasons, Behar's use of epigraphs stands out as one of the least successful strategies of the book. Behar begins each chapter and part with one or two epigraphs from Audre Lorde, Alice Walker, and Sandra Cisneros among others. These passages frame Esperanza's narrative within the various ideologies of North American feminism. In Parts One and Two, the epigraphs and self-reflexive commentary interrupt Esperanza's story and read more like editorial interventions. Behar occasionally pairs Esperanza's real-life experiences with fictional accounts. For example, when Behar quotes from Alice Walker's novel *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* ("If I can never own nothing, he told her, I will have women") she collapses the social/political/cultural differences that distinguish African American life from rural Mexican life. Such quotes create a tenuous and largely artificial unity that homogenizes women of color's oppression.

Because Behar not only translates Esperanza's oral *historias* into written English, but into the discourse of anthropology as well, she finds it necessary to critically examine her multiple and often times contradictory subject positions in the academic world. Although Behar celebrates the versatility of her postmodern existence, she also finds it draining and confusing. "How many masks could I wear without my face starting to stretch?" (244).

Although her informants in Mexico objectify her as a *gringa*, Behar's peers in the United States, especially those within the university system, objectify her as a minority. In the following passage, Behar comments on her position in the university system⁶:

Yet I realize that I will continue to slip in and out of shadow, as I become non-Latina for purposes of inclusion and Latina for purposes of exclusion, just the way my *comadre* is visibly Indian and yet invisibly Indian in Mexican society. (339)

The comparison, however, is not as even as Behar makes it seem. Behar crosses a dangerous border when she uses Esperanza's experiences as a metaphor for her own professional crises. Such statements too easily unite extremely different circumstances. Behar insists, for

example, that her *compadrazgo* relationship with Esperanza made it possible for ethnographer and informant to "forge a relationship of mutual caring, reciprocity, and trust" and therefore transcend the respective positions of *gringa* and *Mexicana* (6). Yet, the *compadrazgo* relationship finds its basis in social and economic inequality.

A *compadrazgo* relation in rural Mexico is typically forged between persons of high and low economic standing, so that as the better-off person in my relation with Esperanza I would be expected to offer financial or other assistance if she requested it. She would be expected, in turn, to offer me small gifts from time to time, say, of produce from her field, and to act with extreme courtesy whenever we encountered one another. (5)

Behar oversimplifies the *compadrazgo* relationship by reducing it to a code of etiquette. Furthermore, her emphasis on the parallels that exist between herself and Esperanza falsely suggests that they share equal access to subjecthood within the Symbolic.

Even when Behar acknowledges the gross imbalances of power on which her relationship with Esperanza depends, she offers no solutions, only fresh metaphors. For example, Behar refers to Esperanza as a literary wetback and herself

⁶Behar borrows from Gloria Anzaldúa in this passage. I will

a literary broker. Behar claims that Esperanza's story remains:

a kind of commodity that will have a value on the other side that it doesn't have at home...the question will be whether I can act as her literary broker without becoming the worst kind of coyote, getting her across, but only by exploiting her lack of power to make it to *el otro lado* any other way. (234)

Although Behar hopes that Esperanza's life story remains "too big for easy consumption" (xii), as a commodity, it has been made disposable.

In the previous example, Behar portrays herself as an exploiter; in the following example, Behar compares both herself and Esperanza to La Malinche,⁷ translator to Cortés.

Esperanza has been a traitor, translating for me in ways that transgress the norms of Mexican rural society. [...] I, in turn, have compounded this act of betrayal by translating Esperanza's *historias*, her "lies," for *gringos* to read. (20)

discuss Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera* in Part Two.

⁷Within Mexican and Mexican American culture La Malinche, an autochthonous woman, is despised as the ultimate traitor for sleeping with and translating for Cortés. In recent times, she has been recast as the victim of physical and mental abuse and venerated as the mother of the modern *mestizo/a* (person of mixed Spanish and native ancestry).

Once again, in her attempt to demonstrate connections Behar effaces important differences. Esperanza's "translations" put her at a much greater social risk. While Behar also occupies the role of Cortés in relation to Esperanza's Malinche, Esperanza never gains access to that position of power. Like La Malinche, Esperanza speaks in *Translated Woman*, but she never fully possesses her own tongue.

Behar cannot resolve the contradictions she describes in *Translated Woman*. Although she entitles the last, autobiographical chapter "The Biography in the Shadow," it is Esperanza's story, not Behar's, which remains obscured. On the one hand, Behar critically examines her subjectivity in this chapter, and thereby dismantles ethnography's ruse of objectivity. On the other hand, Behar literally and figuratively has the last word, and thereby mutes, if not silences, Esperanza's voice. In *Translated Woman* Behar, like Hurston in *Mules and Men*, adjusts the spy-glass of anthropology. Where Hurston reduces the imbalance of power between ethnographer and informant, Behar only magnifies it.

In many ways, *Translated Woman* brings Part One of this dissertation full circle. To some degree, Behar's ultimate control over Esperanza's story resembles Stein's authorship of *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*. In my view, however, important differences distinguish these books. In *Translated Woman*, Behar wants to accurately and

authentically portray Esperanza and her *historias*. In *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, Stein does not attempt to tell Toklas' life story as much as she challenges the textual "I's" reference to "a real" person. In *Translated Woman*, Behar de-centers the ethnographer as a coherent subject, but further marginalizes Esperanza as an unfortunate result.

Introduction to Part Two:
Strategies for Representing the Subject

A strategy is a plan of action. In Part Two, I examine three tactics twentieth century women have deployed in their attempts to de/reconstruct "the self" and represent the subject.

Mimicry/Masquerade

Although the terms "mimicry" and "masquerade" are often used interchangeably, there are key differences that distinguish them. As Diane Fuss explains, mimicry can be understood as "the deliberate and playful performance of a role," and masquerade as "an unconscious assumption of a role" (24). While this definition serves as a useful starting point, in this section I hope to complicate Fuss' distinction. In my analysis of gender and sexuality in these two chapters, I explore a hybrid strategy of mimicry/masquerade.

Both post-colonial and gender theorists suggest that the act of mimicry challenges the notion of a unique identity or individual essence. As Homi Bhaba states in "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse," "Mimicry conceals no presence or identity

behind its mask" (129). In terms more specific to this project, the successful mimetic performance of a role calls into question the depth of any subject position. An act of mimicry exposes and disrupts cultural norms.

By contrast, when one masquerades one does not achieve the same ironic distance. In psychoanalytic terms, theorists define masquerade as a compensatory act. In other words, the person who masquerades unconsciously identifies with the assumed role. Although an authentic original does not exist, persons who masquerade want to appear "authentic." They want to be mistaken for the social construction of "the real" thing, or the cultural ideal.

In the first two chapters of Part Two, I locate gender identity somewhere between mimicry and masquerade. While the artists studied in this section challenge gender norms in their representations of the subject, I am hesitant to describe their artistic productions as "deliberate." Even the most self-conscious performance (verbal or visual) reveals traces of unconscious identification. As Tim Dean suggests, "we are never fully in control of language, because words [and, I would argue, images] carry more associations than human intentionality can manage" (84). Human subjects' alienation forecloses the possibility that

they might achieve a completely playful or parodic performance of their ideal egos in their self-representations.

In *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, Stein unravels claims of heterosexuality's naturalness as she complicates gender binaries. As I did in Part One, in Part Two I continue to examine Stein's critical reception. In particular, I interrogate critics' propensity to label Stein's representation of gender as either masquerade or mimicry. In this chapter, I not only distinguish between gender and sexuality, I try to disqualify sexuality as an identity category.

In my analysis of Claude Cahun's *autoportraits* in Part Two, I further underscore the difference between mimicry and masquerade. I argue that, despite current trends, Cahun's diverse representations of the subject cannot be generically labeled as sartorial self-construction. Although Cahun may recognize identity as a construct, she does more than ironically perform femininity and/or masculinity in some of her photographs. In this chapter, I distinguish between Cahun's theatrical and identificatory masks.

Abjection

Another way to de/reconstruct the cultural definition of the legitimate "self" is to investigate the foundations of "the subject." In the second section of Part Two, I suggest that the ego is defined by its abject boundaries. In the works discussed in these two chapters, the border that divides subject from abject remains mutable. As a result, the representations of the abject studied implicitly render the dominant subject's cultural authority unstable.

Before the infant enters the mirror-stage, it does not distinguish itself from the maternal whole. In order to undergo successful individuation, however, the infant must repudiate its borderless existence. As Julia Kristeva explains in *The Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*: "I expel myself, I spit myself out, I abject myself with the same motion through which "I" claim to establish myself" (Kristeva 3).

Because subjects apprehend themselves by means of a construct, or the ideal-ego of the mirror's reflection, they invest in a fictional projection of the body as a locus of control (Butler *Bodies That...* 73). In order to deny their abject foundations, subjects seek continual reassurance of their imagined ego boundaries in the Other.

That which defies distinct borders threatens the subject's illusory autonomy. As Kristeva states, "It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite" (4). Bodily fluids such as sweat and pus serve as "concrete" examples of the abject. An abstract, philosophical example would be indeterminateness.

As mentioned in the introduction to this thesis, the subject's self-recognition is always a mis-recognition. The artists discussed in this section of Part Two identify the coherence subjects claim for themselves as an illusion. They do not choose, therefore, to represent themselves in the place of the dominant subject. Such a reversal would only put a different face on the same oppressive power dynamic. Instead, they realign the border that divides the inside from outside in their representations of the abject and thereby reposition the bar that divides the self from Other.

In Part One, I argued that, in her *Untitled Film Stills*, Sherman ultimately and deliberately undermines the sense of coherence fetishism relies on. In this section, I claim that, in her next photographs, the *Fashion*, *Fairy Tale*, and *Disaster/Disgust* series, Sherman completely

dissolves the fantasy of wholeness projected onto Woman. In her representations of women¹ as abject beings Sherman examines what lies beneath the masquerade of womanliness. These images of abjection de-idealize Woman, and therefore de-stabilize the viewer's confidence in a unified bodily ego.

Where Sherman deflates the fantasy of Woman's completeness, Hurston challenges the white subject's self-proclaimed monopoly on subjectivity. In Part One I suggested that Hurston dismantles the ethnographer's universal authority in her autoethnographic oeuvre. In Part Two, I analyze Hurston's autobiographical essay "How It Feels to Be Colored Me" (1928). In this essay, Hurston contests the abject status of "coloreds" in the white cultural Symbolic.

The Third Term

In this final section of Part Two, I revisit many of the themes and strategies I explore in the first four chapters of this part. In particular, I more closely examine intersections of gender, sexuality, and race.

¹Once again, Sherman is visible in each role.

The politically charged artistic productions I investigate in these two chapters comply with Sidonie Smith's definition of "the autobiographical manifesto":

Purposeful, bold, contentious, the autobiographical manifesto contests the old inscriptions, the old histories, the old politics, the *ancien régime*, by working to dislodge the hold of the universal through an expressly political collocation of a new 'I' (*Subjectivity...* 157).

According to Smith, this new "I" can assert itself in the locale of the universal subject in two different ways. The first strategy is mimicry. The "unauthorized subject" assumes the position of universal man and mimes his authority. The second strategy, and the one I am most concerned with here, "looks to the politics of fragmentation as the means to counter the centrifugal power of the old unitary self of western rationalism" (155).

Although both artists in this third section deconstruct the illusion of a unitary self, and therefore forge a new relationship between subjectivity and identity, they do not promote "the endless possibilities of self-fragmentation" in their work (Smith 155). They disrupt the self/Other binary, only to promote a possible "third term."

The representations of the subject discussed here contain extensive autoethographic components. Both of the artists studied in this section displace conventional anthropological theories of acculturation through their implicit reference to transcultural processes. Theories of acculturation focus on the dominant culture's influence on the culture of the oppressed.² By contrast, theories of transculturation emphasize the reciprocal transmutation that takes place when cultures meet.

Even when one takes into account inevitable power imbalances, influence never occurs solely in one direction. Where acculturation stresses a binary opposition, theories of transculturation emphasize the emergence of a third cultural entity. Frida Kahlo, as a Mexican of mixed ancestry, and Gloria Anzaldúa, as a Mexican American of mixed ancestry, both investigate *mestizaje*³ as a cultural/social/political third term.

In her auto/ethno/biographical self-portraits, Kahlo challenges the romantic pitfalls of the post-revolutionary Mexican government's idealization of the autochthonous.

²Melville Herskovits provides a textbook example of this type of analysis in his essay "The Negro's Americanism," discussed in Chapter 5.

³*Mestizaje* is a Spanish word, with fewer pejorative connotations, for miscegenation. *Mestizos/as* are persons of mixed parentage, typically indigenous and Spanish.

Although Kahlo celebrates Mexico's previously abjected indigenous roots, she does not turn the other cheek to the cultural and political tensions of modern Mexican life.

In *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, Anzaldúa rejects the foundational dualism of the self/Other dynamic. In her autoethographic essay, she complicates abstract notions of a unified Mexican American collective subject. Furthermore, Anzaldúa challenges the binaries of gender (masculine/feminine) and sexuality (hetero/homo) in her quest for a third term.

As Tim Dean claims, "No amount of subtle theorizing will get you outside of a binary system if your model of subjectivity remains focused on the self" (192). In this final section, as throughout Part Two, I examine the alienation of the subject, and the realm of the unconscious, and thereby extend my analysis beyond the parameters of the self.

Chapter 7

"You say that everything being the same everything is always different¹": The Representation of Gender in *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*

"She always says she dislikes the abnormal, it is so obvious. She says the normal is so much more simply complicated and interesting" (AB 102).

In the recent feminist scholarship on Gertrude Stein, critics attempt to decode the "lesbian aesthetic" supposedly buried within the author's oeuvre. With the name of Stein's longtime lover/partner asserted in the title, *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* holds a prominent place in such critical studies. While *The Autobiography* provides a peek behind the curtain that veiled the Parisian avant-garde art world from the common reader, some critics feel it closes the door on the intimate details of Stein's life with Toklas. In other words, for these critics, Stein fails to confess the full truth of her lesbianism.

This chapter unravels the logic that establishes the disclosure of sexuality as a requisite for, on a large scale, individual integrity, and, more specific to *The Autobiography*, authorial credibility. Although her critics

tend to understand sexuality as a totalizing identification, Stein conceives of identity in *The Autobiography* as "so much more simply complicated" (AB 102) than sexuality. In this chapter, I challenge the assumption that Stein refuses to discuss her sexuality in *The Autobiography* because she fears society's rejection, or attaches shame to her sexual desire. I argue that Stein de-emphasizes sexuality because she conceives of gender as the greater marker of identity. In their haste to "out" Stein as a lesbian, critics often overlook *The Autobiography's* subversion of gender norms. In this chapter, I investigate such subversions as I explore Stein's mimicry/masquerade of hetero-normativity.

Stein's contemporary critics often disguised their condemnation of her relationship with Toklas with much decorum. As the following poem² suggests, Stein's social status troubled her readership:

To Gertrude Stein

To the Editor of *The Inquirer*: (1)
gertrude stein miss....
what you miss miss is mrs...
 i said it...
 does she like it... (5)

¹I take my title from *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (289).

²I found the newspaper clipping of this poem in a first edition copy of *The Autobiography*. The by-line simply reads i.s., Haverford, Pa., November 16. I have yet to positively identify the source, but I suspect it to be *The Philadelphia Inquirer*. Although the year is missing, the article on the back mentions the government's development of its New Deal policy. This gives me reason to believe the poem was printed soon after *The Autobiography's* first publication in the US.

might have been more of 'em
miss mrs. miss
"and so and so shutters shut"
tight shutters tight...
is the miss miss tight... (10)
has a mr. missed the miss...
who's tight...thus thus...

In terms of formal style, the poet imitates several hallmarks of Stein's verse: repetition, clever puns, double entendres, attention to auralty, and ambiguous punctuation. In terms of content, the poem concerns itself with proper titles, and the rules of etiquette. The voice of the poem expresses disapproval, but contains it within the parameters of civility.

The opening lines construct "Gertrude Stein" as deficient; she lacks the proper title of a woman her age ("what you miss miss is mrs..."). In other words, in terms of her social status, Stein transgresses accepted social codes. Although the voice of the poem worries that his³ accusation also qualifies as a breach of etiquette, he nonetheless feels obligated to expose Stein's violation. Overall, the poem's plethora of ellipses conveys hesitation; much more could be said, but to speak in detail would be indecent.

The fifth line expresses a similar caution. "does she like it..." implies the speaker's fear of overstepping his bounds. Alternately, the line can be completed as: 'does

she like being a Miss?' (e.g. 'doesn't Stein want to be married to a man?'). The ellipsis and the vague "it" stand in for the unsayable. On one level, this gap signifies Stein's deviant gender status. On another level, these vagaries fill in for Stein's unnameable sexual desire for women.

The next lines develop the first suggestion. The verse "might have been more of 'em," constructs Stein and "her kind" as plausible threats to the poem's implied "us." The colloquial contraction "'em" contrasts sharply with the proper titles used in the rest of the poem. Line 7 plays off of line 3. "miss mrs. miss" translates into plain prose as: "Miss" Stein "misses" the mark. The title "Miss" (young girl or unmarried woman) fails to accurately describe her.

The poet places quotes around the next line to suggest that he has lifted it from Stein's own verse ("and so and so shutters shut"). A "shutter," or a louvered door, can be manually closed to secure privacy. A "shutter" also signifies the person doing the shutting. Stein is a "shutter" because she refuses to provide full access into her private chambers. The voice of the poem both resents and fears Stein's action. By shutting her shutters tightly Stein not only refuses to confess her crime, she prohibits society's full judgment. The speaker's only recourse is to

³I refer to the poet as a man for the sake of clarity.

"shudder" at the thought of the transgressions committed behind closed doors.

The repetition of "tight" reinforces Stein's alleged secrecy, and also suggests her possessiveness (i.e. she has a "tight" grip on Toklas). In the tenth line, "is the miss miss tight," "tight" implies "tight-lipped," which conveys both Stein's reticence and her sexual inexperience with men. The last two verses, "has a mr. missed the miss.../who's tight...thus thus," fortify the multiple meanings of "tight." Stein's tight grasp on Miss Toklas caused the latter to "miss" out on a husband. Stein, therefore, has not only refused her role as Mrs., she has usurped the role of Mr.. According to the voice of the poem, this represents a shameful transgression. The last line's "thus thus" sounds off on a note of disapproval, like a "tisk, tisk."

Although the poet implicitly labels "Gertrude Stein" a sexual predator, he explicitly resents the instability Stein introduces into the social fabric. The poet's expressed discomfort with Stein's unorthodox subjectivity pervades the poem. Stein's queer existence challenges the sanctity of the Symbolic order, and suggests "different ways of knotting the subject to society and community" (Tim Dean 227).

Where Stein's transgression of gender norms often elicited her contemporary readership's disapproval, Stein's present-day critics issue a "tisk, tisk" in response to her

perceived public silence on the topic of homosexuality. Stein does not make explicit reference to her sexual relationship with Toklas in *The Autobiography* and, for some, this implies her disavowal of her "true identity." Many critics consider *The Autobiography* a betrayal. According to this point of view, Stein compromises her artistic ideals, as well as her personal integrity, in order to meet with her readers' approval.

In "Gertrude Stein and the Lesbian Lie," Catherine Stimpson suggests that Stein purposefully simplified *The Autobiography* in order to gain wider acceptance. "Her modulation of subversion into entertainment both follows and refines a homosexual method of seeking acceptance in modern heterosexual culture" (153). In other words, Stein masquerades on two levels. 'Stein the high modernist' masquerades as an author of popular non-fiction. 'Stein the lesbian' masquerades as a heterosexual. On the one hand, Stimpson's analysis completely disregards Stein's attempt to deconstruct the conventions of autobiography. On the other hand, Stimpson wrongly assumes that Stein holds faith in the wholeness and moral rightness of heterosexuality.

Stimpson constructs Stein's "public silence" as a "lesbian lie" and therefore presumes her guilt.

The author respects, indeed shares a reader's sense of decorum. At its finest, such decorum

construes all sexuality as private and then begs private things to stay private. At its worst, such decorum is repression's etiquette. Stein's lie, then, is at once manipulative and courteous. (Stimpson "Gertrude Stein..." 153)

According to this view, Stein's deep shame forces her to beg, an act of humility and desperation, for her readers' acceptance. The term "repression's etiquette" implies that Stein not only denied her homosexuality, but that her writings proceeded from anxiety rather than desire (Benstock 8).

If silence constitutes Stein's "manipulative" lie, then the "truth" requires full disclosure. Interestingly, of all of the details Stein does not discuss in *The Autobiography*, such as her ugly falling out with her brother Leo, Stimpson only requires full disclosure of one aspect of Stein's life -her sexual life. On one level, Stein should be pitied because she denied herself sexual emancipation. On another level, she should be reprimanded because her silence perpetuated her audience's ignorance. "The author delicately refuses to stir her readers up too much. Proper manners prevail. So, less fortunate for post-Stonewall sensibilities, will ignorance" (Stimpson 153). Stimpson's comments ironically transform 'Stein the egomaniacal autocrat' into 'Stein the genteel adherer to the norm.'

According to Stimpson, *The Autobiography* lacks credibility and Stein personal integrity because she does not reveal her horizontal "truth". "This lie insists that no lesbians lie abed here" (Stimpson 153). Stimpson's plea for confession raises certain questions. How can the reader expect an author writing in the 1930s to "come out" in accordance with post-Stonewall protocol? Do heterosexual relationships require the same explanations? *The Autobiography* does not conceal the fact that Stein and Toklas were constant companions, nor does it cover up the fact that they lived together, but this is hardly the point.

Although Stimpson equates coming-out with liberation, as a ritual of confession, it functions as a form of social control. The process of coming-out renders sexuality "a totalizing form of self identification." As a result, "sexual avowal" becomes "a mode of social regimentation, the eliciting of an essential personal truth" (Minson 37). Stimpson, as self-imposed confessor, "outs" Stein as a lesbian. In doing so, she suggests that Stein's sexual desire determines her entire identity. Like the poet discussed earlier, Stimpson attempts to regulate Stein's gender status. She labels Stein a lesbian not only to regulate her sexual desire, but also to better categorize her as a specific social/cultural type.

As I argued in Chapter 1, Stein challenges the concept of "an essential personal truth" throughout *The Autobiography*. Nowhere in its pages does she construct sexuality as "the primary register" of identity (Tim Dean 88). Stein's "exhibitionistic reticence" (Mossberg 244) does not mask a deceitful disavowal as much as it loudly proclaims her refusal to speak what the Other requires. Stein's silence does not imply her fear or self-loathing, but marks her rejection of "the authority structure of authenticity" (Gilmore 207) that confession demands. Stein does not give "the public what she calculates it can take" (Stimpson 152). By contrast, she refuses to "give 'em what they want." Stein disagrees with the terms that the Other uses to describe her (Tambling 199) and does not reiterate them.

Stimpson criticizes Stein for her refusal to confess the full truth of her lesbianism, but Stein did not self-identify as a lesbian. As Stimpson herself states in "The Sonagrams of Gertrude Stein," neither Stein nor Toklas resembled the lesbian icon of the Parisian left bank (a "slim, breastless creature who cropped her hair and wore sleek, mannish clothes" (644)). Furthermore, Stein was not a member of Natalie Barney's fashion-conscious feminist/lesbian salon. Although critics often mention Stein's closely-cropped, "masculine" haircut as evidence of

her rebellious lesbianism, as "Toklas" asserts in the last chapter of *The Autobiography*, Stein lagged rather far behind the times in her decision to cut her hair short. "They [Stein and the Duchess of Clermont-Tonnerre] were also the only two women whom they met who still had long hair. Gertrude Stein had always worn hers on top of her head, an ancient fashion that she had never changed" (AB 304).

Even though Stein maintained a conservative hair-do for an exceedingly long time, this does not suggest that she self-identified as a woman. "Not, as Gertrude Stein explained to Marion Walker, that she at all minds the cause of women or any other cause but it does not happen to be her business" (AB 101). Although Walker feels that Stein, as a rising intellectual, might serve as an excellent spokesperson for women's equality, Stein does not find her ideal ego reflected in the cultural category of "woman" or feminist. Stein does not come across as anti-woman; the struggle for women's rights simply does not represent her desire.

If Stein does not identify as a woman, must she identify as a man? Many critics make this mistake and label Stein "the husband, male-identified woman" and Toklas "the wife, the lady" (Stimpson "Gertrude Stein..." 158). This rigid categorization reeks of hetero-normative logic. With the tag "male-identified" firmly attached, feminist critics

often claim that Stein masquerades as a man, and criticize her for her supposed adoption of misogynist ideals. Stein's attempt to write *The Autobiography* from Toklas' point of view, for example, becomes nothing more than "an outrageous act of masculinist appropriation" (Smith *Subjectivity*... 75-76).

She conceptualized genius and femaleness as mutually exclusive entities. In so doing, she participated in an essentialism that forestalled the understanding of gender as socially constructed and forced herself into contortionist impersonations and identifications against her very body (Smith 72).

Like Stimpson, Smith argues against Stein's "understanding of gender," not against her sexuality. Smith's criticisms echo Stimpson's. Where Stimpson claims that *The Autobiography* retarded gay acceptance, Smith argues that *The Autobiography* delayed the progress of feminist aims. According to Smith, Stein's masquerade of masculinity forestalled "the truth" of social construction.

Smith paradoxically accuses Stein of essentialism and claims that she identifies against her "very body" in the same sentence. Unfortunately, and ironically given her accusation of essentialism, Smith grounds her feminism in the female body. She describes Stein as a "contortionist,"

or a person who forces the body into positions against its nature. This implies that adherers to the norm do not alter their appearance and behavior to meet cultural expectations. Smith interprets Stein's "maleness" as evidence of her full acceptance of masculine privilege.

Critics often understand Stein's supposed rejection of the feminine as an unfortunate consequence of patriarchal culture. According to this point of view, Stein's lust for power obliged her to masquerade in the masculine role. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar go as far as to suggest that Stein entered into her relationship with Toklas to prove her maleness. "To certify the authority identified with both maleness and genius, these men [Whitehead, Picasso, etc.] had what Stein needed: a wife" (239). While other critics interpret Stein's relationship with Toklas in terms of desire, they nonetheless root Stein's gender identification in guilt. Stein's "self-hatred was such that she was psychologically compelled to identify herself as a man in order to be a happy, sexually active person and a functioning writer" (Dekoven 36). In both instances, Stein and Toklas' partnership is reduced to a vain and pathetic attempt to imitate "the real thing," or a heterosexual relationship (Butler *Bodies That...* 86).

Stein does not attempt to "normalize her 'aberrant' sexuality" (Smith 77) in *The Autobiography*, as much as she tries to de-stabilize the foundations of the "normal." Leigh Gilmore suggests that Stein and Toklas' respective performance of masculine and feminine roles qualifies as a butch-femme parody of normative heterosexual relationships. She claims, for example, that Stein subversively mimes heterosexual segregation (that husbands must mingle with husbands, and wives must mingle with wives) in *The Autobiography* (210).

Gilmore's views contrast sharply with those held by Stimpson and Smith. Gilmore suggests that butch-femme relations do not reinforce essentialism, but point to the social construction of gender roles.

When we situate butch-femme within lesbian dynamics, the emergent subject position constructed by this practice has a performative force in *The Autobiography* which enables the signifiers of their life together to be read as roles encoded in butch-femme relations rather than as something derivative and grimly essentialist such as the natural expression of their different natures. That is, there is a certain playfulness, a self-construction, involved in adapting these roles (208).

Gilmore not only conflates "the real" Stein and Toklas with their textual personas, she overly idealizes butch-femme lesbianism. Although Stein and Toklas may be conscious of the "roles encoded in butch-femme relations" they do not adopt such roles merely for deconstructive purposes. Gilmore effectively deflates the heterosexist feminist critique of butch-femme lesbianism, but unfortunately denies the role the unconscious plays in desire.

While Stein may recognize the non-essential qualities of gender roles, she still writes the desire of the Other to some degree. As a result, Stein inevitably re-inscribes various codes of the Symbolic, including idealized conceptions of gender, in her work. Gilmore's use of the term "performance," or her later suggestion that the adoption of butch-femme roles represents "Stein's and Toklas's choice" (209) lends Stein and Toklas *too much* agency. No subject can achieve the objectivity necessary for "self-construction." Gilmore, through her adaptation of Butler's theories of performativity, wants to find a cure for the subject's alienation (Dean 132), but only ends up strengthening the *méconnaissances* of the ego.

While subjects cannot will their own desire, or simply resignify the terms of their oppression, they can realize that their desire overflows the limits imposed by cultural boundaries. Although Gilmore confines Stein and Toklas'

relationship to a butch-femme paradigm, Stein presents their relationship as "much more simply complicated." Critics often highlight the masculine qualities of Stein's persona in *The Autobiography*, but tend to underplay, if not completely ignore, details that confound and contradict a fully masculine profile. For example, consider the following passage:

Stein once said to a soldier who was doing something for her, they were always doing something for her, whenever there was a soldier or a chauffeur or any kind of man anywhere, she never did anything for herself, neither changing a tyre, cranking the car or repairing it (215).

On the one hand, one might interpret this passage as further evidence of Stein's insecurity. She does not want any man to realize her secret lust for power so she feigns her dependence. On the other hand, one might infer that Stein simply does not enjoy this type of labor. Stein does not identify with the masculine code that requires her to perform such tasks. Why not let a man who understands such labor as "his duty" takeover? The "mechanics" of the automobile and the "mechanics" of poetry might both rest comfortably under the domain of masculinity, but Stein refuses to locate both enterprises under her hood of interest.

Toklas' persona in *The Autobiography* also overflows her reputation as kindly and reserved. On more than one occasion, Stein depends upon Toklas' assertiveness. For example, when the couple land in London, before Stein is to present a lecture at Oxford, Toklas must compensate for a reluctant Stein.

This was the spring of twenty-six and England was still very strict about passports. We had ours alright but Gertrude Stein hates to answer questions from officials, it always worries her and she was already none too happy at the prospect of lecturing. So taking both passports I went down stairs to see the officials (AB 287).

This passage does not reinforce the opinion that Stein and Toklas maintained "the conventional patriarchal relationship" (Smith 72) or a butch-femme relationship. Toklas comes across as the confident leader and Stein as the nervous novice. Perhaps more interestingly, the passage portrays Stein as someone reluctant to submit herself to any forced compliance with the Law.

Even when Toklas takes up the stereotypically feminine hobby of knitting, she challenges gender norms. In the following quote, "Toklas" recalls a conversation she had with a maid at a hotel: "She said of course *madame* knits

very slowly, all ladies do. But, I said hopefully, if I knit for years may I not come to knit quickly... No, said she firmly, ladies knit slowly. As a matter of fact I did come to knit very quickly..." (AB 204). In other words, although Toklas wants to knit, she does not aspire to be a lady.

While Stein does not offer self-construction as a possibility in *The Autobiography*, through her mimicry/masquerade of gender norms she highlights the mutability of the Symbolic. For example, in the following quote, "Toklas" recounts the correspondence she maintained with T.S. Eliot's secretary:

We each addressed the other as Sir, I signing myself A.B. Toklas and she signing initials. It was only considerably afterwards that I found out that this secretary was not a young man. I don't know whether she ever found out that I was not (AB 247).

This passage suggests that formal protocol only perpetuates an illusion of compliance with the Law. In the 1920s, men often held the position of secretary. Quite aware of this expectation, both Toklas and Eliot's secretary void their names of any gender clues and adopt initials. Although Toklas dupes Eliot's secretary, Eliot's secretary also dupes

Toklas. Toklas, well aware of her own transgression, fails to suspect the same breach from her correspondent.

Stein both stresses the false nature of appearances and undermines a faith in the signifier with this passage. The secretaries each address the other as "Sir," but that title fails to ensure that the addressee is indeed of the intended sex. Protocol provides a false security. In the poem previously discussed, the poet expresses a great deal of anxiety about his failure to secure a proper title for "Gertrude Stein." Like Toklas, all human subjects want to sustain the fantasy that the signifier corresponds perfectly with the signified, even when they know better. Here, Stein calls the reader's bluff. She suggests that labels and titles can never stabilize identity.

Stein highlights this point on the first page of her next autobiography, *Everybody's Autobiography*.

...I met Miss Hennessy and she was carrying, she did not have it with her, but she usually carried a wooden umbrella. This wooden umbrella is carved out of wood and looks exactly like a real one even to the little button and the rubber string that holds it together. It is all right except when it rains. When it rains it does not open and so Miss Hennessy looks a little foolish but she does not mind because

after all it is the only wooden umbrella in Paris. And even if there were lots of others it would not make any difference (1-2).

The wooden umbrella that Miss Hennessy typically carries looks "exactly like a real one," but it does not function "like a real one." Nevertheless, Miss Hennessy does not carry her wooden umbrella because she expects it will protect her from the rain. Stein suggests that Miss Hennessy cherishes her wooden umbrella because it confounds expectations, disassociates form from function, and destabilizes the relationship between signifier and signified.

In *The Autobiography*, Stein implies that, in terms of gender identity, everyone carries a wooden umbrella. In other words, "real men" and "real women" exist only as cultural ideals. Gender specific behaviors and appearances allow persons to approximate their internalized understanding of "realness," but "realness" cannot be attained. When critics describe Stein the author, and "Gertrude Stein" the narrative persona, as "masculine" or "butch-lesbian" they implicitly reinforce a false binary (i.e one is either masculine or feminine, a butch or a femme). In *The Autobiography*, Stein does not restrict gender identity to a binary; nor does she conflate gender identity and sexual desire. Like Miss Hennessy's wooden

umbrella, Stein's autobiographical writing underscores the gulf that separates an observable reality from "realness." Just as Miss Hennessy does not want to carry a "real" umbrella, in *The Autobiography* Stein does not accept the cultural construction of "realness" as identical to her own desire.

Chapter 8

Incog(n)ito: Claude Cahun's *Autoportraits*

Claude Cahun, like Gertrude Stein, represents gender in ways that overflow cultural boundaries. The elaborate costumes Cahun wears in many of her *autoportraits* from the teens and '20s exaggerate an exteriority. In several photographs, Cahun poses in the costumes she wore as an actor in such stage productions as *The Mystery of Adam* and *Bluebeard*. In other images, she covers her face, and sometimes her entire body, with a multiplicity of masks. The theatricality of these self-portraits has led critics to interpret Cahun's oeuvre through the theoretical lens of Joan Rivière's treatise on femininity from 1929 "Womanliness as Masquerade" and Judith Butler's more recent analyses of subversive drag.

Towards the close of "The Equivocal "I": Claude Cahun as Lesbian Subject," Abigail Solomon-Godeau claims that "a dialectical play between mimetic and identificatory impulses" operates within Cahun's work (122). Here, I use Solomon-Godeau's ending-point as my starting-point. In this chapter, I distinguish Cahun's masquerade of manliness from her mimicry of the masquerade of womanliness.

In "Claude Cahun, Dandy Provocateuse" Jennifer Blessing describes Cahun's self-portraiture in terms that echo Judith Butler's theories of gender performance.

Cahun seems to be problematizing gender and subjectivity itself by taking on identities as she would a suit of clothes. This strategy is essentially one of performance, in which Cahun becomes the actor, a point that is emphasized by the artist's obsession with masks and her use of dolls as *dramatis personae*. (Blessing 186)

While I agree that Cahun problematizes gender and subjectivity in her self-portraits, due in large part to the variety of gender roles visible in these images, I feel that she does more than perform some of these identities as an actor.

As I have argued throughout this dissertation, artists gain a large degree of control over their own representation through self-portraiture. Because Cahun, as photographer, set up her shots, she photographed herself, at least to some degree, in ways she wanted to be seen. Nevertheless, and as I stated in my analysis of Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills* in Chapter 4, no one can fully control one's own reception. Furthermore, no ego can fully

suppress the unconscious. Cahun's photographs still exude the desire of the Other.

Take, for example, Cahun's self-portrait from 1921 (fig. 4). Here, Cahun, like her contemporary Gertrude Stein, assumes a role that is not typically associated with her sex. As stated in my analysis of gender in Chapter 7, Cahun's appearance/attitude in this photograph does not convey her desire to inhabit a male body. Although Cahun, like Stein, does not essentialize, she does idealize a persona that has been culturally coded masculine. In other words, in my opinion, Cahun conveys an unconscious identification with the macho pose and aggressive stare she exhibits in the image. As Kaja Silverman states, "Idealization is not something which any of us can simply decree. It is an activity which extends deep into the unconscious, and cannot be consciously mandated" (80).

I do not want to suggest that Cahun reveals her "true" self in this photograph, nor do I understand this photograph as a confession. Cahun performs a role in this image, but not as an actor. She does more than "take on" this identity "as she would a suit of clothes"; she identifies with it. As Diane Fuss argues, "the critical difference between masquerade and mimicry, between a non-ironic imitation of a role and parodic hyperbolization of

that role depends on the degree and readability of its excess" (24). In the *Untitled Film Stills* the excess is apparent. Sherman "takes on" the role of Woman. She overdetermines the artifice in order to critique the cultural ideal of Woman. By contrast, one would be hard pressed to describe Cahun's straightforward, confrontational posture in her self-portrait from 1921 as hyperbolic. The stripped-down background does not exhibit excess. Cahun does not provide readable signals, as Sherman does in the *Film Stills*, which suggest that her pose and look should be interpreted as pure exteriority. Cahun imitates, not parodies, cultural signifiers of masculinity.

Although theories of political self-invention or sartorial self-construction are currently en vogue, not all women's self-portraiture fits under this heading. It is dangerous to label Cahun "a Cindy Sherman avant la lettre" (Foster 118). Not all of Cahun's self-portraits can accurately be described as "self-conscious ironic gesture" (Blessing 190).

Just because Cahun idealizes certain markers of masculinity, does not imply that she upholds gender norms. Like Stein, Cahun disrupts neat gender binaries, although not necessarily in an ironic way. In the self-portrait

under discussion, Cahun not only poses as the "tough guy," she also presents herself as a dandy (Blessing 194). Her velvet, form-fitting dinner suit, her white cravat and handkerchief (194) all reference this cosmopolitan archetype. Cahun combines the aggression of her clenched fist and stern stare with the suave sophistication of her dandified attire, and thereby qualifies gender as "much more simply complicated" than a duality (i.e. one is either "feminine" or "masculine".)

In "'The Dandy in Me': Romaine Brooks' 1923 Portraits," Joe Lucchesi claims that many wealthy lesbians in London and Paris in the early twentieth century assumed a variation of the form-fitting attire of the dandy. He suggests that, with this "new look," women turned male homoerotic dandyism, à la Oscar Wilde, into a visual signifier of lesbian desire. According to Lucchesi, in her painted portraits, Romaine Brooks, an American expatriate and Cahun's exact contemporary, "replaced those inevitable marks of "real" womanhood in the contemporary modern woman with the outward signs of the dandy, a visually anachronistic figure inextricably tied to notions of active homosexual desire" (175). (fig. 13) While Cahun, like Brooks, may assert an active lesbian desire in her artwork, I am hesitant to suggest that either Brooks or Cahun fully

"understood and self-consciously exploited the symbolics of the dandy" (Lucchesi 153). Just as Gilmore's description of Stein and Toklas' lesbian relationship as a "choice" affords the couple too much agency, words such as "understood" and "self-consciously" deny the presence of unconscious desire. As Ellie Ragland Sullivan argues, "Freedom of choice -"self" creation- cannot reside in consciousness, unless the conscious subject had gained this freedom by peering into the unconscious netherworld" (*Jaques Lacan...* 78). One need not have self-conscious control in order to assert an active sexual desire. Although self-consciousness implies liberation in theories of political self-invention, a greater freedom can perhaps be found in the realization that your desire is not entirely your own.

While many of Cahun's early images serve as examples of non-ironic imitation, certain photographs in Cahun's weightlifter series function as hyperbolic parody (fig. 14). In these images, Cahun mimics the masquerade of womanliness. She plays a woman who plays at being a man. In this series, Cahun signifies that she is performing a role in several ways. She not only wears make-up, she lays it on thick, so to speak. Cahun has powdered her skin white, drawn fake, long, eyelashes under her eyes, and

pouted her lips with strong color and full curves. She accentuates a hyper-femininity with cutesy, curly-qed bangs and painted hearts on her cheeks and legs.

Unlike in her self-portrait from 1921, Cahun does not confront the viewer with her gaze and posture. Instead, she solicits the viewer's fantasy in this photograph. Her doe-eyes flirt, and her head tilts slightly. Both gestures operate as come-ons. And yet, because both the make-up and the flirtation are excessive, the viewer does not mistake these signifiers as genuine desire. The over-determined artifice of this photograph encourages the viewer to interpret Cahun's performance as an ironic display of femininity.

This photograph exudes artifice from every detail, even Cahun's body suit bags and sags. No bare skin remains visible, except for Cahun's hands. A scarf carefully conceals her neck, and patent leather braces cover her wrists and ankles. The viewer knows to read the clothing as skin, in part, because of the faux-nipples placed on the shirt. Positioned too high, that is, not over Cahun's actual breasts, they add to her girlish, naive appearance. The three-line message written across her chest, "I am in training, don't kiss me," further establishes this persona as pubescent. Cahun's kissable appearance, her pouty lips,

and demure pose, suggest that her apprenticeship is nearly complete. Cahun flirtatiously encourages her implied viewer to ignore the command written across her chest. Despite the warning, she appears ready to receive her first kiss.

In "Womanliness as a Masquerade," Joan Rivière describes a particular type of intellectual woman who, although professionally competent, masks her intellectual capabilities with coquettish behavior. According to Rivière, this type of woman enacts "a compulsive reversal" of her "intellectual performance" (Rivière 38) in order to disguise her desire for masculinity. Although Rivière's article was published two years after Cahun completed her weightlifter series, Rivière describes the "type" of woman Cahun portrays. In the weightlifter photographs, Cahun is training to be a Woman; she is learning how to masquerade.

The dumbbell propped up on Cahun's shoulders serves as an important symbol of her training. Here, Cahun does not appear as an "authentic" weight-lifter/body-builder, but as a clownish parody. She only plays at weightlifting; the dumbbell is merely a prop. Even though Cahun could easily lift the dumbbell over her head, she bends her knees and thrusts out her hips to feign her stress. As Woman in training, she does not want to exhibit "manly" strength.

As Rivière comments about the woman who masquerades:

She has to treat the situation of displaying her masculinity to men as a 'game,' as something not real, as a 'joke.' She cannot treat herself and her subject seriously, cannot seriously contemplate herself as on equal terms with men (39).

In the series of self-portraits as a weightlifter, the viewer can more easily separate Cahun the artist from the persona she plays. In response to Cahun's exaggerated performance, the viewer understands both the masculinity and the femininity she displays as a "joke." In other words, Cahun, the artist, does not actively seek reassurance from a father figure in these photographs. She does attempt to mask her own desire, but unmask the masquerade of womanliness as a compensatory charade. Through her excessive solicitation, or her "camp assimilation of dominant culture" (Case 302), Cahun achieves an effective critique.

As Carolyn Dean suggests, even the avant-garde surrealists, a group of artists/intellectuals with which Cahun collaborated and identified, tended to create romantic objectifications of women in their artwork. Surrealism's most ardent champion, André Breton, often

produced impossible idealizations of women in his poetry and prose.

Breton did not use sexuality to question bourgeois morality and its oppositions between good and bad, pure and impure. His problem with bourgeois morality was that it was not moral or pure enough, and he countered it with an idealized, liberated, natural heterosexuality purged of the tainted, repressed, and hence compromised bourgeois ideal of love that produced adultery, treachery, and presumably, homosexuality (79).

In her series of photographs as a weightlifter, Cahun, like Stein in *The Autobiography*, challenges a faith in the heterosexual woman's "pure" and "natural" sexuality. She adds excessive layers of artifice in order to "undo" or deconstruct idealized heterosexuality.

Although Cahun achieves an ironic distance from the masquerade of womanliness in these photographs, she does not wear the masquerade of womanliness like a removable cloak (Silverman 37) in all of her photographs. In her self-portraits from 1928, Cahun literally wears many masks on her cloak at once. Where I understand Cahun's self-portrait from 1921 as largely identificatory and her self-

portrait as a weightlifter from 1927 as largely mimetic, both mimetic and identificatory impulses seem to operate at once (Solomon-Godeau 122) within Cahun's photographs from 1928.

In one self-portrait from this series (fig. 15) Cahun appears in a long, heavy, black cape. One hesitates to even refer to this image a self-portrait because it is so difficult to determine who lies beneath. In this photograph, Cahun holds a white mask in her darkened hands and wears a black mask over her darkened face. This latter mask completely conceals her expression and adds to the image's ominous tone. Although Cahun's eyes cannot be discerned, dull, emotionless circles peer out from the artificial visage she holds in front of her body.

Quite curiously, the painted features on the mask resemble the made-up face Cahun wore in the weightlifter series. The mask's porcelain white cast, and dark, pouted lips, reference Cahun's appearance as the clown-like coquette. Even the round heart she painted on her cheeks for that series reappears on the mask's face.

Cahun presents a more sober account of the masquerade of womanliness in this photograph. Here, Cahun removes the mask she wore as the weightlifter, and reveals, not her own visage, but yet another mask. "To unmask" is to expose the

true character of something or someone. As Sherman does in the *Untitled Film Stills*, in this photograph Cahun unmask the fantasy of Woman. The hidden danger that resides beneath the mask of femininity is the unwelcome truth of Woman's impossibility.

The multitude of masks attached to the cloak suggests that the face Cahun holds in her hand represents merely the latest disguise. The 'mask wearing a mask' on Cahun's left shoulder underscores this suggestion. The many-layered cape and background curtain further reinforce this idea. In a photomontage from *Aveux non avenues* (1930) (fig. 16), Cahun produces a parallel over-determination. In the lower left hand side of this construction, twelve versions of Cahun's face emerge from the same neck. The cursive inscription written around the faces reads: "Sous ce masque un autre masque. *Je n'en finirai pas de soulever tous ces visages.*" ("Under this mask, another mask. I will never finish lifting up all of these faces"). Although I have translated "soulever" literally in this instance, figuratively "soulever" means "to raise (a question)" or "to rouse." Both in her self-portrait and in the photomontage Cahun lifts off her mask, not to reveal her true self, but to rouse the viewer's suspicion. Cahun raises a question about the possibility of a "true self."

While the masks do not disguise Cahun's "authentic self," this is not to suggest that "nothing" resides beneath them. The body and face paint, cape, and black mask do not erase Cahun's body, but turn it into a holding place. Like the number zero, in this self-portrait, Cahun's body operates as a placeholder. Her veiled figure signifies the "presence" of lack, or the space of the unconscious.

Therese Lichtenstein understands this image as evidence of Cahun's artistic control. "She may also put on a mask, perhaps full face, perhaps covering only her eyes, while her head is surrounded by other masks. Such images reveal deliberate and self-conscious choices of persona" (Lichtenstein 65). In my view, there is something uncanny about the bodiless mask that hovers near the center of the photograph. Its blank stare haunts. I understand the proliferation of masks, not as symbols of Cahun's self-conscious choices of persona, but as manifestations of unconscious desire.

Although, as a lesbian, Cahun has a different investment in the masquerade of femininity than a heterosexual woman might, as a woman, ideals of femininity still function as part of her ideal ego. As Rivière explains:

One might even say that it [the capacity for womanliness] exists in the most completely homosexual woman- but owing to her conflicts it did not represent her main development and was used far more as a device for avoiding anxiety than as a primary mode of sexual enjoyment (Rivière 38).

In conscious life the *moi* (ideal ego) surfaces in the personas we adopt, and the appearances we construct (Ragland-Sullivan *Jacques Lacan...* 45). In the context of Cahun's self-portraits, a mutable appearance does not signify a deliberate choice, but the presence of the Other's desire in one's "own" choices. The verb "soulever" also means "to stir up." In this series, Cahun "stirs up" the many personas that inhabit her unconscious. Cahun does not achieve an ironic distance from the masquerade of womanliness with this image. Instead, the mask of womanliness clings to her cloak along with all of the other masks.

In one photograph from this series, Cahun appears without a mask on her face (fig. 17). In this image, the mask of womanliness hangs from the heavily draped partition behind her. Cahun's thinly lined eyebrows, darkened lips, and pale skin give her face a mask-like appearance. The

light colored scarf wrapped around her head draws further attention to her face. Cahun's pearl necklace and decorative armband accentuate her feminine appearance.

In this photograph, Cahun has removed the mask of womanliness, only to reveal her own face's resemblance. In this way, Cahun recognizes this feminine persona as one of the personas that informs her identity. Although Cahun has successfully removed the mask and put it behind her, so to speak, it still haunts her from its position behind her shoulder. While the mask's features are reflected in Cahun's face, the two visages are nonetheless not exactly the same. In comparison to the mask's dull stare, Cahun elicits a sharp, probing look.

Of all the Cahun self-portraits studied in this thesis, I find this one the most empowering. Here, womanliness is defined as a mask. It is shown to be a construct. Like all ideals, womanliness is artificial. Although Cahun may recognize femininity as a construct, she does not claim to be free from its influence. No subject is entirely self-defining, not even in the realm of artistic self-representation. As Cahun changes costumes and masks, adopts various postures and appearances, she does not gain self-conscious control over her identity as much as she explores her unconscious netherworld. As

Ragland-Sullivan states, "The *moi* makes its way toward consciousness, proliferating through the masks it dons" (105). Through her strong stare Cahun confronts her viewers. She forces them to take notice of her face's resemblance to the mask. As a result, the viewer realizes that all subjects are haunted by cultural ideals. It is through this recognition, and not via an ego-reinforcing illusion of self-conscious control, that a measure of psychic freedom can be found.

Chapter 9:

Between Abject and Subject: Cindy Sherman's *Fashion, Fairy Tale, and Disaster/Disgust Series*

In a similar fashion to Cahun's weightlifter series, in her *Untitled Film Stills* Sherman mimics the masquerade of womanliness, or the fetish of femininity. By contrast, in her various series of photographs from the mid to late 1980s Cindy Sherman portrays degraded "non-subjects" who occupy an excluded position in relation to the Symbolic. With these representations of abject beings, Sherman investigates subjectivity at the level of the materiality of the body. Her dissolution of Woman as fetish object challenges the hegemonic force of phallogentrism. In this chapter, I argue that Sherman's "bodies that don't matter"¹ encourage viewers' to acknowledge their own abject foundations.

As I argued in Chapter 4, in the *Untitled Film Stills* Sherman attempts to deflate the fantasy of "truth as Woman." The over-determined layers of artifice in these images, from the vintage costumes to the visible shutter release cords, highlight the photographs' constructedness. As a result, the signifiers of femininity, from make-up to high-heeled shoes, begin to suggest a cover-up, a "feather-bed

¹This chapter draws on the theories espoused by Judith Butler in her book from 1993 *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex.'*

resistance" if you will. As Laura Mulvey states, "An overinsistence on surface starts to suggest that it might be masking something or other that should be hidden from sight, and a hint of another space starts to lurk inside a too plausible facade" (141). Mulvey's observation echoes Joan Rivière's assertion that men not only suspect womanliness to be a mask, but fear and dread the hidden danger that lies beneath a feminine appearance (43). The photographs Sherman produced in the mid to late eighties bring to light this "hint of another space" that "ought to have remained hidden and secret" (Freud 376). In her *Fashion, Fairy Tale, and Disaster/Disgust* series, Sherman investigates the repressed material of the unconscious. In these photographs, however, the unconscious does not represent "the lower depths, but the space between inside and outside. The space of difference. The gap that the drive toward unity can never close" (Benstock 12). These photographs depict the abject side of the mutable border that defines the culturally viable subject.

In her color photographs from 1983-4, collectively referred to as the *Fashion* series, Sherman accentuates "the space of difference," or the border that separates the abject from the subject. Supplied with clothes from designers such as Jean-Paul Gautier and Diane Benson, and commissions from such high-end magazines as *Interview*,

French *Vogue*, and *Harper's Bazaar*, Sherman not only produces a critique of the flashy world of 80s fashion, she furthers her deconstruction of Woman as fetish object with these images. In no way do these photographs reproduce the seductive allure of the *Film Stills*. Instead, they present a bizarre mismatch of *haute couture* and dementia. Despite the additional layers of artifice, Sherman remains identifiable in each role. Her persistence as the subject of representation contributes to their effectiveness. Sherman's continued resurfacings provide an uncanny continuity that emphasizes the presence of the abject in the first manicured *Film Still*.

In the *Film Stills* the clothes seductively accentuate Sherman's shape; in this series, the garments sag and bag. Sherman makes these clothes look terrible. In *Untitled #132* (fig. 18), for example, Sherman wears a red and white striped Dorothee Bis dress. Her black bra bleeds through and interrupts the strong, wide lines. In addition to this fashion faux pas, the sleeves bunch up around the elbows. The dress gathers awkwardly at the waist in accentuation of a small paunch.

The lighting Sherman uses in this photograph creates an eerie, unsettling effect. The glowing green background garishly contrasts with both the red stripes on the dress and the acrid yellow that illumines the subject's face and

chest in a fiery glow. This concentrated frontal light hits Sherman from below and reveals her badly scarred face and neck as well as an unsightly cold sore on her lip. The light's unhealthy cast tints both her teeth and eyes and contributes to a sickly appearance.

Where the *Film Stills* exude a vague, albeit entirely constructed, time, place, and social context, the *Fashion* photographs provide no such details. Although Sherman wears a designer dress and holds a drink and a cigarette, the background does not place her at a cocktail party. In fact, the Lite® beer can she holds completely clashes with her upscale attire. In other words, despite the absence of a social context, the viewer understands that this woman "does not belong."

Where Woman, as fetish object, must exhibit the clearly defined bodily contours that maintain the illusion of bodily unity, the borders of *Untitled #132* cannot contain the woman's hulking body. The image "does not respect borders, positions, rules" and therefore "disturbs identity, system, order" (Kristeva *The Powers of...* 4). The awkward hunch of Sherman's back, paired with the strained scrunch of her neck, suggests that the picture plane cannot comfortably contain her. Where the viewer initially experienced a sense of mastery in relation to the fully elongated, comfortably recessed subjects of the *Film Stills*, with their greater

than life size scale, the subjects of the *Fashion* photographs threaten to overtake the viewer's space.

Despite her formidable size, a palpable vulnerability emanates from the woman represented in *Untitled #132*. Her long eyelashes, shy squint, and awkward smile demonstrate her desire to please the Other's gaze. Fashion magazines do much more than feature clothes; they attempt to sell a cultural ideal. To buy the outfit is to buy into the notion that you too can embody desire. The woman in this photograph, however, fails to live up to the impossible standard of ideal womanliness. Sherman accentuates her failure in order to emphasize the seductive allure of its trappings.

Untitled #132, like *Untitled Film Still #12*, demonstrates the gulf that separates intention from reception. Despite the subject's attempt to appear attractive, the viewer does not see her in the way she wants to be seen. The viewer's cognizance of this discordance encourages a less identificatory and more critical relationship to cultural ideals. To recognize and explore this woman's failure to embody the Other's desire is to implicitly critique the fashion photography that perpetuates such impossible standards.

The task will be to consider this threat and disruption not as a permanent contestation of

social norms condemned to the pathos of perpetual failure, but rather as a critical resource in the struggle to rearticulate the very terms of symbolic legitimacy and intelligibility. (Butler *Bodies That... 3*)

If, as Lacan asserts, seeing and knowing are simultaneous and identical, upon confrontation with the abject, viewers can begin to acknowledge the improbable proportions of their own ego-ideals.

In the next series from this era, the *Fairy Tales* (1985), Sherman creates Grimm Brothers-esque macabre fantasies. On the one hand, in terms of their dark, disturbing tone, large scale, and foreshortened use of the picture plane, the *Fairy Tales* are quite similar to the *Fashion* photographs. On the other hand, in the *Fairy Tales*, the figure² of representation melds more fully with its surroundings. In *Untitled #140* (fig. 19), for example, the viewer can barely separate the figure from the background. Sherman's tight shot, which contains little more than the figure's head and hands, produces a sense of foreclosure. The frame traps and immobilizes. Where the acrid yellow of *Untitled #132* lit up the woman's face, the pervasive blue cast of *Untitled #140* blurs various details. Sherman's

²I refrain from the terms "subject" or "woman" in the discussion of this series because these works call the figure's subjectivity into question.

curled wig, for instance, blends with the foliage of this vaguely natural setting. The dark recesses and ambiguous surroundings further suggest a remote and therefore potentially dangerous location. A cold, clammy, stillness exudes from every detail.

The figure's pig snout exists in perfect continuity with the otherwise human face. The glassy, forsaken look in Sherman's eyes, paired with her forlorn and helpless position, elicits concern, if not sympathy. Nevertheless, the burst blood vessels and glistening sweat on the face contribute to a sense of repulsion. The absence of the rest of the body both intrigues and unsettles the viewer. In this photograph, the loss of bodily contours, the result of the fusion between figure and ground, symbolizes an absence of distinct ego boundaries. In the *Fairy Tales*, Sherman delves into the jettisoned material one must disavow in order to complete primary narcissism or ego formation.

Adults inculcate the laws of the Symbolic into young children's psyches through fairy tales. Through stories such as "Little Red Riding Hood" parents can instill a desire for order and obedience in their children, as well as create a fear of the abject. The desolate, tangled forests of so many of these tales serve as a metaphor for the perils of the unconscious. In Sherman's photographs, as in many Grimm tales, the landscape threatens to devour or subsume.

In illustration of this danger, the figure in *Untitled #140* lies paralyzed, without will. The head's sideways position contrasts with the viewers' fronto-parallel alignment. Due in part to its extremely foreshortened perspective, the photograph does not fulfill the viewer's desire for physical (bodily) or psychological (ego) reassurance.

Sherman's snout adds to the atmosphere of disorder because of the pig's association with filth. Animals that share human characteristics, from the ability to walk on two feet to the facility of speech, find common occurrence in fairy tales. They almost always represent danger or evil. These in-between, ambiguous, and composite (Kristeva *The Powers of...* 4) creatures threaten the integrity of the human form. Such beasts embody the peril of the culturally unrecognizable subject. *Untitled #140* elicits dis-ease because it fails to produce an autonomous self. A realization of the instability of ego boundaries engenders fear. As Julia Kristeva states in *The Powers of Horror* "The more or less beautiful image in which I behold or recognize myself rests upon an abjection that sunders it as soon as repression, the constant watchman, is relaxed" (13). Despite an initial denial, viewers recognize themselves in this dejected figure. The human vulnerability of Sherman's snouted visage arouses pity. The well of moisture underneath the figure's eye, quite like the awkward grin

worn by the woman in *Untitled #132*, encourages pathos. In this fairy tale nether region, quite like the repressed terrain of the unconscious, the viewer encounters the abjected counterparts of the *Film Stills*.

As the title of the next series suggests, with the *Disaster* or *Disgust* photographs (1986-89) Sherman increases the trauma and chaos. These images extend the *Fashion* and *Fairy Tales*' "rebellion against and rejection of the requirements of femininity" (Grosz 134). In the *Disaster/Disgust* series, Sherman counters the fantasy of Woman as completeness with images of non-subjects who have collapsed under the weight an over-determined femininity. These images fully expose "the hidden danger" that lies beneath the masquerade of womanliness.

What the viewer observes amidst the half-eaten food and vomit that fills up the plane in *Untitled #175* (fig. 20) is not the "bulimic excess of consumerism" (Sandler 44), but the interior of the body. Part of the viewers' disgust comes from a cognizance of the role the abject plays in the foundation and maintenance of the ego.

The subject is constituted through the force of exclusion and abjection, one which produces a constitutive outside to the subject, an abjected outside, which is, after all, 'inside' the subject

as its own founding repudiation. (Butler *Bodies That... 3*)

Sherman blurs the distinction between "the outside" and "the inside" and therefore disturbs the viewer's sense of autonomy. The word "repudiation" seems particularly apt as a descriptor of the *Disaster/Disgust* series. The verb "to repudiate" means to disown, disavow, or reject. On the one hand, this woman's body has repudiated or rejected the junk foods visible on the left hand side of the picture plane. On the other hand, this photograph presents a culturally repudiated or disavowed image of woman. *Untitled #175* does not exhibit the bikini clad beach babe, but that cultural ideal's abjected other, the physically incapacitated bulimic.

In stark contrast to *Untitled #132*, the figure of representation in *Untitled #175* takes up a very insignificant amount of the picture plane. In fact, only her reflection remains visible in the sunglasses. While the extremely foreshortened plane and severely tilted perspective limit the visible range, several details provide the viewer with a context. First of all, the ground appears sandy like a shore. In addition, several bottles of suntan lotion are scattered throughout the detritus. The sunglasses rest on a white towel. Besides these recognizable, beach-related objects, broken Pop-Tarts®,

crumbled cupcakes and squished cream pies fill up the left hand side of the picture plane. Their damaged condition and sandy state render them unappetizing. The open mouthed grimace made by the woman reflected in the sunglasses, paired with the brightly colored chunky matter spewed across the towel, compounds the repulsion. The sugary sweetness of the dessert foods, here visually overindulged, contributes to the viewer's disgust. Food's journey from the outside of the body, to the inside, and back again, symbolizes the abject's ubiquitous presence in the constitution of the subject.

A sense of borderlessness pervades *Untitled #175* and adds to the atmosphere of aversion. The dis-ease this photograph induces finds its basis in the sensation that "the edge of the image may be as significant as any other section of its space" (Mulvey 145). The small pieces of food and the absence of the subject's body all contribute to the air of disaster. At one time, the scattered sweets belonged to a whole. The image implies, therefore, that all perceived wholes are vulnerable to dissolution.

In reference to the vomit, no whole can be imagined. The environment of incompleteness, combined with the aspect of borderlessness, establishes a fear of contamination. "Remainders are residues of something but especially of someone. They pollute on account of incompleteness"

(Kristeva *The Powers of...* 76). The viewer fears that the represented space might enter and corrupt his/her own space.

In many ways, *Untitled #175* does corrupt the viewer's space. Although it is difficult to determine just where the woman whose image is reflected in the sunglasses lies, the blurred foreground forces the viewer to see the scene through her eyes. The dispersed quality of this photograph denies the viewer any mastery over image. "Where previously the child found pleasure in its bodily wastes and the satisfying undifferentiation between its body and its bodily wastes...when it needs to define boundaries and separations, feelings of disgust come into play" (Mulvey 148). The vomit, in accordance with the entire image, does not provide the viewer with any ego assurance. In this photograph, "it is no longer I who expel, "I" is expelled." As Kristeva poses, "How can I be without a border?" (*The Powers...* 4). The answer is "I," as a unified subject, cannot. In *Untitled #175* Sherman does not portray the unity of the bodily ego, but the subject's founding repudiation.

Sherman turns the tables on the gendered assumptions that surround women's self-portraiture through her emphasis on the viewer's desire for narcissistic reassurance. As discussed in Chapter 3, a geometral point exists for each work of art. From this point, the viewer grasps perspective and renders the spectacle intelligible. When the viewer

occupies this point, s/he gains mastery over the image. This sense of mastery reaffirms an illusion of psychic and bodily unity. In relation to *Untitled #175*, as with Cahun's self-portrait with elongated head, the viewer does not know where to stand. In order to return the reflected subject's look, the viewer would have to lie down and sprawl out on the floor.

Even if the viewer could occupy the woman's position, the reflection in the sunglasses remains out of focus. A specific center of focus does not exist in *Untitled #175*; instead, a dispersed area of light resides amidst the vomit. In relation to this luminous spew the viewer struggles to define boundaries. No longer in command of the image, the viewer feels overwhelmed by it. As Rosalind Krauss explains:

The desire awakened by the impossibility of occupying all of those points of the luminous projection of the gaze is a desire that founds the subject in the realization of a point of view that is withheld, one(s) that he or she cannot occupy. And it is the very fragmentation of the "point" of view that prevents this invisible, unlocatable gaze from being the site of coherence. ("Informe..." 96)

According to Lacan, the viewer's relationship to the work of art reaches beyond an understanding of the depth of vision. "I [the viewer] am not simply that punctiform being located at the geometral point from which the perspective is grasped. [...] That which is light looks at me" (*Four Fundamental ...* 96). But what does it mean to be under the gaze of the abject? To be in this picture is to be dispersed. The viewer is not a punctum, or point, but puncta, many points. The dispersion of the "point" of view suggests the dissolution of the *cogito*. In *Untitled #175*, the puncta of the vomit signifies the puncture or collapse of the illusion of a coherent bodily ego, or Woman as fetish object. The viewer's realization that the light looks at him impedes narcissism. "The voyeur's apprehension of his own specularity also leads to the discovery that he has his 'foundations' outside himself and that he exists for the other" (Silverman 165). In relation to this photograph, viewers re-experience their own incoherence. Sherman forces her viewers to see the world through the eyes of the abject woman.

The woman of *Untitled #175* exists only as a reflection. In the final images of the *Disaster/Disgust* series, the figure of representation becomes more and more difficult to locate. In some cases, "the figure" consists only of body parts, and various residues. In these later photographs,

Sherman no longer serves as her own model.³ This change completes the cycle that began with the *Film Stills*. The photographs in the *Disaster/Disgust* series "sunder" "the more or less beautiful image" of Woman in the *Film Stills* (Kristeva 13). By the end of this series, Woman as fetish object has almost completely dissolved.

The demented grin of *Untitled #132*, the vacant stare of *Untitled #140*, and the wasted gasp of *Untitled #175* all demonstrate the pain of an existence outside the Law. The repulsion viewers experience before these images signals their disavowal of their abject foundations. As Judith Butler states, "Here it should become clear that a radical refusal to identify with a given position suggests that on some level an identification has already taken place, an identification that is made and disavowed" (*Bodies That...* 113). In the *Fashion, Fairy Tale, and Disaster/Disgust* series, Sherman confronts her viewers with their "radical refusal" of the abject. She constructs sympathetic figures of representation that lure the viewer into the photographs' borderless planes. Through each woman's grotesque failure to embody the cultural ideal of womanliness, this cultural ideal becomes more and more clearly defined as an impossible standard. No one can achieve total coherence; we all fail to perfectly reiterate the desire of the Other. These

³It remains unclear if Sherman serves as the model for the

images remind us that, to some degree, we all embody the
abject.

woman reflected in the sunglasses of *Untitled #175*.

Chapter 10:

The Game of Getting Subjectivity: Racial Abjection in Zora Neale Hurston's "How It Feels to Be Colored Me"

In her work, Zora Neale Hurston, like Cindy Sherman, portrays the border that separates the subject from the abject as mutable. In this chapter, I understand African Americans' exclusion from subjectivity in the early twentieth century as a racial abjection. In her short, autobiographical essay from 1928, "How It Feels to Be Colored Me," Hurston details her individual experience of o/abjection as well as provides a general analysis of African Americans' exclusion from the self/Other dynamic. By the close of the essay, Hurston empties out the "self-grounding presumption"¹ of the white subject.

Although it ends on a note of ecstatic exuberance, Hurston begins "How It Feels..." with her initiation into Jim Crow America.² In the opening paragraphs, Hurston examines her childhood interactions with the white, northern

¹ Butler uses this phrase in reference to gender. "And yet, this disavowed abjection will threaten to expose the self-grounding presumption of the sexed subject" (Butler 3).

²Hurston grew up, the fifth of eight children, in a prosperous and prominent family. The family owned five acres of land, and lived in an eight-bedroom house. Hurston's father became the pastor of the Baptist church, and later served as mayor for three terms (Wall 961).

tourists who traveled through the all black town of Eatonville on their way to Orlando³. She makes specific reference to the performative aspects of these meetings.

The front porch might seem a daring place for the rest of the town, but it was a gallery seat for me. My favorite place was atop the gate-post. Proscenium box for a born first-nighter. Not only did I enjoy the show, but I didn't mind the actors knowing that I liked it. (152)

The porch not only served as a "gallery seat" from which young Zora could observe the passing "actors," it also sufficed as a "proscenium box," or stage, on which she could perform for others. This passage highlights young Zora's naïve awareness of social roles. Although, as the mature adult writing these words, Hurston understands the condescension involved in the tourists' offer of silver coins when she obliged their request to "speak pieces," "sing" and "dance the parse-me-la" (152), Zora, the young child, simply delighted at the attention. She could not understand why the rest of the town found her behavior "daring" and "deplored" her "joyful tendencies" (153). As Hurston explains, "during this period, white people differed from colored people to me only in that they rode

³Eatonville is about five miles north of Orlando.

through town and never lived here" (152). In other words, Zora, brought up in this unique environment, had not yet learned the codes of interracial interaction in the South.

Hurston states that she "became colored" on the day she moved away from home to Jacksonville, Florida. She distinguishes the "Zora of Orange County" from her new identity to accentuate the magnitude of this change:

I left Eatonville, the town of oleanders, as Zora. When I disembarked from the riverboat at Jacksonville, she was no more. It seemed that I had suffered a sea change. I was not Zora of Orange County any more. I was now a little colored girl. I found it out in certain ways. In my heart as well as in the mirror, I became a fast brown- warranted not to rub or run. (153)

The phrase "sea change" conveys the vast differences in emotional and cultural life that distinguished Eatonville from Jacksonville⁴. The verb "suffered" relates the negative effects of this transplantation. Although the ferry ride did not cover a large distance, Hurston explains that the trip produced as massive and unexpected a

⁴ "But both doth suffer a sea-change." Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (I.ii. 403). Sung by Ariel.

transformation in her as if she had traversed a tremendous expanse.

While Hurston refers to Eatonville Zora as a daring and joyful individual, the phrase "I was now a little colored girl," conveys a sharp contrast. In Jacksonville, Hurston was stripped of her previous identity. She instantly became a "type" in the eyes of others, a member of an anonymous, and abjected, collectivity. Although immediately aware of this shift in perception, Hurston did not immediately understand its cause. The verb "found out" suggests that some detective work was necessary. "Zora" became "colored" when her skin tone became a marker of difference.

In Jacksonville, Hurston enters into double-consciousness. She internalizes the dominant culture's perception of herself. The phrase "In my heart as well as in the mirror" communicates the overwhelming impact of society's gaze on self-perception. According to Lacan, the mirror stage occurs when a child realizes his/her independence from the maternal body. As she elucidates in her autobiography from 1942, *Dust Tracks on a Road*, an element repressed in this early essay, Hurston made the move to Jacksonville after the death of her mother. Eatonville can therefore be understood as Hurston's

imaginary register, or the site of wholeness prior to alienation.

In *Dust Tracks*, Hurston details the traumatic impact of her mother's death in the chapter "Wandering". As her mother slips away, Zora tries to prevent her father from covering up the bedroom mirror (DT 88). She tries to halt the ceremonies performed for the dying in a naïve attempt to delay her mother's passing. Her mother's death marks Zora's figurative independence from the maternal body, or, in Lacanian terms, her loss of object a.

Upon her arrival in Jacksonville, Hurston experiences a profound alienation, but she does not fully enter into the Symbolic. Hurston attempts to apprehend her image in the mirror, but it in no way reflects her. The valued image of whiteness casts a long shadow on her brown skin. Hurston cannot even mis-recognize herself in the image of coherence projected by the white Other. In her account of her arrival in Jacksonville, Hurston describes a moment of non-recognition (Lionnet 120) or her de-privileged access to subjectivity.

It is only when Hurston views herself through the eyes of Anglo-Saxon prejudice that her appearance becomes shameful to her. "I became a fast brown- warranted not to rub or run." "Fast" contrasts dramatically with the

extension offered by the hyphen. The change in perception occurred swiftly, but the aftereffects promise to linger. Once in Jacksonville, Hurston begins to see her brown skin as a stain, a flaw, or defect. She emphasizes the permanence of this stigma through a second meaning of "fast." Her "brown" is both "firmly fixed" to her identity and inextricably linked to every imaginable depravity in her contemporary American culture.

In Jacksonville, Hurston experiences the dangers of essentialism. Once outside of Eatonville, her "brown" skin signifies wholly negative underlying differences. As a result, Hurston becomes a prisoner to its socially constructed signification. The phrase "warranted not to rub or run" implies the dominant culture's fear of contamination, or infiltration by the abject. "Warranted" conveys the active presence of authority. "To warrant" means both "to justify" and "to ensure." In order to maintain the system of segregation, whites strived "to secure an illusion of unfettered access to subjectivity" (Fuss 21). In other words, segregation perpetuated clear and firm boundaries around phenotypic markers such as skin tone.

In "Interior Colonies: Frantz Fanon and the Politics of Identification," Diane Fuss discusses Fanon's hypothesis

that colonialism excludes blacks from the self/Other dynamic that makes subjectivity possible.

Fanon implies that the black man under colonial rule finds himself relegated to a position other than Other. Colonialism works in part by policing the boundaries of cultural intelligibility, legislating and regulating which identities attain cultural signification and which do not. (21)

The gap that separates an African American's experience in the Southern United States in the early twentieth century from life under colonial rule is not a large one. Fuss' analysis of the boundaries of cultural intelligibility applies to the North American context.

As Fuss argues, in the colonial power regime, "black" does not stand as its own Other. Hurston's "colored" or "fast brown" is relegated to a negative position that only signifies "non-white" (22). In this chapter, I've re-labeled the position of "other than Other" the abject, or that which defines the boundaries of the Symbolic's law ("to each superego its abject" (Kristeva 2)). Instead of subjecthood, Hurston enters into objecthood, on the level of her status as a "non-individual," and abjecthood in

relation to a white collectivity. No longer Zora of Eatonville she becomes a thing, "a little colored girl."

By contrast, "white," as the transcendental signifier, never signifies "non-black." As Fuss argues, "white" stands as its own Other, and therefore remains independent of the sign "black" for its symbolic construction (22). In this chapter, I argue that "black," as the force of the abject, represents the limiting material that defines the culturally legitimate self, in this case the white subject. In this way, "white" can be understood as dependent on "black" for its signification.

After she describes the disheartening details of her sea-change, Hurston inserts a conspicuous interjection into the essay. The emboldening spirit of the Harlem Renaissance supplants her more melancholy tone as she skips ahead to discuss her here and now. Hurston sees the world as her oyster, and actively pursues its promise of a pearl.

BUT I AM NOT tragically colored...I do not belong to the sobbing school of Negrohood who hold that nature somehow has given them a lowdown dirty deal and whose feeling are all hurt about it...No, I do not weep at the world-I am too busy sharpening my oyster knife. (153)

Hurston makes it clear that she does not accept arguments rooted in "nature." She argues that the pearl of African American subjectivity will be gained only as the result of determination and activity, and therefore condemns excessive emotionalism and passivity.

At this point in the essay, Hurston reclaims the confidence of Zora of Eatonville. In recognition of her de-privileged access to subjectivity, she conveys a 'what have we got to lose' attitude. "No one on earth ever had a greater chance for glory. The world to be won and nothing to be lost" (153). Here, Hurston seems to recognize the "master's" dependence on his "slaves" for his very definition. Quite tellingly, Kristeva describes the ego's dependence on its abject foundations in similar terms. "And yet, from its place of banishment, the abject does not cease challenging its master" (2).

As Hurston suggests, "the brown specter" threatens the white subject's coherence.

The position of my white neighbor is much more difficult. No brown specter pulls up a chair beside me when I sit down to eat. No dark ghost thrusts its leg against mine in bed. The game of keeping what one has is never so exciting as the game of getting. (153)

In this passage, Hurston cleverly draws on several of the dominant culture's fears of an integrated society. Both the "brown specter" and the "dark ghost," though shadowy apparitions, represent autonomous agents. The active verbs employed relate a sense of assuredness; both "to pull up" and "to thrust" convey a threat. The white subject fears that the "dark ghost" or spook⁵ might penetrate and collapse the white/black binary. To some degree, the adjectives used in the passage, "brown" and "dark" instead of black, already disrupt the stability of this dyad.⁶ Hurston also makes reference to eating and sex in her examples. In this way, she underscores the dominant culture's palpable dread of the "outside" making its way "inside."

With the last line of the passage, Hurston reverses the contemporary power dynamic. Her reference to the battle for cultural authority as a "game" resonates as an effective understatement. In this contest, Hurston puts whites on the defensive; they must play "the game of keeping" their control over subjectivity. By contrast, African Americans occupy the offensive position, they play "the game of getting"; the possibility for change, and the excitement it brings, rests in their court.

⁵ A pejorative term for an African American

⁶ "We may call it a border; abjection is above all ambiguity" (Kristeva 9).

One change that victory in this "game" promises is self-definition. Hurston implicitly rejects the white culture's label for African Americans. She states that she "feels colored" when she is made aware of her disadvantaged position in the racial construct, or relegated to the negative term. "I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background" (154). The past participle "thrown," used in a passive construction, establishes Hurston as the recipient of repeated violence. The word "background" emphasizes the pervasive force of the white cultural order. By contrast, "sharp" underscores the strict division erected to ideologically separate black and white.

In her struggle to rearticulate symbolic legitimacy and intelligibility, Hurston not only critiques white culture's, but also "high culture's" production of its abject beings. At the midpoint of her rather sporadic essay, Hurston describes the atmosphere at The New World jazz club. In this section, she not only contests the definition of the civilized subject, but that of the primitive abject as well. In this vignette, the "background" has changed color. "Sometimes it is the other way around. A white person is set down in our midst" (154). The observer has become the observed.

Throughout her description, Hurston distances the performance of the dictates of proper etiquette from her definition of civilization. In this way, Hurston's description of the jazz club parallels Stein's discussion of the secretaries' correspondence. When Hurston sits down with a white acquaintance at the club, the two engage in small talk about "any little nothing" (154) they have in common. This brief description establishes their relationship as polite, yet superficial. While Hurston and her acquaintance idly attempt to occupy time, the jazz orchestra, by contrast, "loses no time in circumlocutions" (154). This juxtaposition of behavior can be understood as a backhanded critique of propriety. Hurston understands the rituals of civilized behavior as evasive, a waste of time.

Hurston unabashedly underscores jazz music's "primitiveness" in order to distance its energy from civilized restraint. She describes the orchestra as a wild beast: "it rears on its hind legs and attacks the tonal veil with primitive fury, rending it, clawing it until it breaks through to the jungle beyond" (154). Like the rules of etiquette, conventional tonality prohibits. As the word "veil" suggests, conventional tonal structure conceals a vast and fecund jungle of experimentation. Here "primitive

fury" does not connote a base or naïve sound, but captures the excitement of jazz's innovation. In this way, Hurston reappropriates derogatory labels. As Fuss argues, when "forced to occupy the static ontological space of the timeless primitive the black man is disenfranchised of his very authenticity" (23). Hurston counters notions of African Americans as timeless or backward through her lively description of this modern music that appeals to both black and white patrons. Tags such as "primitive" are drained of their effectiveness when they are willingly adopted and reworked by the oppressed. Hurston chooses the label, and thereby invigorates a previously static ontological space. She reestablishes authenticity by making the term her own.

Hurston saturates her description with imagery of primitiveness, not to perpetuate myths of African American's primal essence, but to mimic the exaggerated fantasies of African American's alterity in the white Symbolic. As Hurston listens to the "heathen" band members, she expresses her desire "to slaughter something."

I dance wildly inside myself; I yell within, I
whoop; I shake my assegai⁷ above my head, I hurl

⁷An assegai is an iron-tipped spear used by southern African peoples (*OED*).

it true to the mark yeeeeooww! I am in the
jungle and living in the jungle way. My face is
painted red and yellow and my body is painted
blue. My pulse is throbbing like a war drum
(154).

In this passage, Hurston hyperbolically repeats both *National Geographic's* and the modernist avant-garde's construction of the African primitive as a creature of intense physicality and wild abandon.

When the orchestra concludes their piece, Hurston's tidal wave of emotion calms: "I creep back slowly to the veneer we call civilization and find the white friend sitting motionless in his seat, smoking calmly...He has only heard what I felt" (154). Hurston dances wildly inside herself, instead of on the dance floor, to demonstrate that she can perform the codes of civility as well as anyone. In other words, Hurston not only mimes the tempestuous furor of the "primitive savage" but also the calm demeanor of the civilized elite.

Some of Hurston's most devoted readers disagree. Alice Walker, for example, finds the vignette at the jazz club "exasperating." According to Walker, Hurston perpetuates the stereotype of "the educated black person who is, underneath the thin veneer of civilization, still a

"heathen" (151). Unfortunately, Walker mistakes Hurston's mimicry for a masquerade. "Veneer" opposes essence. Neither Hurston nor her white acquaintance embodies civilization; they both enact its codes. In this instance, the white man's calm facade becomes a mask for his contentious grasp of sovereignty.

Hurston's displacing gaze disassociates the pretenses of high culture from emotional and/or intellectual depth. She contrasts the "great blobs of purple and red emotion" she experiences with her white friend's emotionless state in order to expose a cultural gap. "He is far away and I see him but dimly across the ocean and the continent that have fallen between us" (154). Here, Hurston laments her white friend's ignorance, and celebrates her knowledge of the rich musical traditions of Africa at play in American jazz.

Hurston ends the vignette with the statement, "He is so pale in his whiteness then and I am so colored" (154). The signification of "whiteness" and "colored" has changed dramatically from the beginning of the essay. During her childhood in Jacksonville, Hurston became "a little colored girl" in the eyes of the white Other. In that context, "colored" signified Hurston's reification. Where "colored" once conveyed inferiority, it now asserts a cherished

abundance; where "whiteness" once suggested authority, now, paired with "dim" and "pale," it implies vacuity. With this statement, Hurston does not confirm a racial "essence" as much as she demonstrates that the border that separates the abject from the subject remains mutable.

Nevertheless, towards the essay's close, it becomes apparent that the Symbolic is not as mutable as Hurston would like it to be. The subjectivity she wants to affirm for herself exceeds cultural possibilities. "At certain times I have not race. I am me. [...] The cosmic Zora emerges. I belong to no race or time. I am the eternal feminine with its string of beads" (155). Here, Hurston boasts that she can transcend the Symbolic's confining structures. No longer concealed under the relegation "little colored girl," "cosmic Zora" comes into full view and conveys her clout.

To a large degree, this alter ego represents a feminist fantasy. Hurston refers to this manifestation of her personality as Zora in order to suggest her access to the imaginary register. The addition of the word "cosmic" highlights Hurston's dissatisfaction with the status quo. She bypasses the earthly realm, and embraces the possibilities of the interstellar. "The eternal feminine" stands as an alternative to patriarchal systems, including

"race" and "time." In this passage, the "eternal feminine" does not imply frail dependence or skillful coquetry, but the bold defiance of the 20s flapper with her "string of beads."

Although Hurston rejects African Americans' abject status, she does not want to achieve an African American subjectivity modeled after the white male ideal. The multiple Hurstons of the essay (from Zora of Eatonville to "the little colored girl" of Jacksonville, from Hurston the Barnard student to cosmic Zora) confirm this point. As Samira Kawash suggests, Hurston's multi-faceted "I" represents

a challenge both to the fixity and boundedness of such categories of identity and race and nation and to the premise of the autonomous individual whose supposed authenticity would exclude the flux of the ever-changing. (179)

In the last paragraph of the essay, Hurston describes a subjectivity that breaks from the model of the autonomous individual. She states that she feels "like a brown bag of miscellany propped up against a wall...in company with other bags, white, red, and yellow" (155). Through this simile, Hurston declares people of all races equal subjects, for the bags differ only in terms of outer color. "...all might

be dumped in a single heap and the bags refilled without altering the content of any greatly. A bit of colored glass more or less would not matter" (155). The notion of a "single heap" challenges a belief in racial essentialism.

Here, Hurston claims that the bags all lean on a wall for support. In other words, only a paper-thin barrier separates the outside from the inside, or abjecthood from subjecthood. Hurston recognizes all subjects' reliance on a construct, or the various *méconnaissances* (autonomy, coherence, etc.) that define the ego, for their strength.

In "How It Feels to Be Colored Me" Hurston challenges the status of "white" as the transcendental signifier. She claims that all the races, or "paper bags," consist of a "jumble of small things" (155). Even the white bag contains "colored glass" within its thin lining. Through this closing simile, Hurston not only calls for a recognition of African Americans as subjects, she confirms white subjects' "radical refusal" of "coloreds" as a denial of their own incoherence.

Chapter 11

Remembrance of an Open Wound¹:

Frida Kahlo and Post-revolutionary Mexican Identity

Just as Walker's homage to Hurston in *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens* (1983) introduced the author to a new audience, Hayden Herrera's 1983 biography of Frida Kahlo set in motion a tidal wave of interest in the artist's life and work. Although Herrera deserves much praise, her psycho-biographic approach led to a flood of criticism that diagnosed Kahlo's art as a symptom of her turbulent private life. Critics who focus on Kahlo's biography tend to overlook her public agency and activism. More than cries for love, or desperate soul searches, Kahlo's self-portraits investigate the cultural and political tensions of her contemporary Mexico.

On the one hand, one can see how the Aztec, Zapotec, and Mexican folk imagery in Kahlo's paintings reflect the nationalist ideology of post-revolutionary Mexico that revered indigenous and past traditions. On the other hand, Kahlo also undermines, complicates and resists the ideologies of nationalism that romanticized the

¹I take my title for this chapter from one of Kahlo's paintings, *Remembrance of an Open Wound* (1938).

autochthonous. Post-revolutionary *indigenismo*² attempted to cauterize the wounds of Mexico's violent history. In her representations of the subject, Kahlo not only exposes these wounds, she lets them bleed. Through her investigation of her own subjectivity, Kahlo redefines the modern *mestizo/a*.

After the Mexican Revolution of 1910, and with the election of Alvaro Obregón in 1920, Mexico began to emerge from the positivist philosophy that reigned during Porfirio Díaz's thirty-four year dictatorship. The *científicos*, or positivist intellectuals, professionals, and officials of the dictatorial regime viewed society as an organism subject to the universal laws of evolution. "They saw their mission as leading Mexico down the scientifically-founded path towards Western-style 'civilization'" (Hijar Serrano 19). The Díaz administration despised indigenous Mexican culture and held the United States and Europe up as models for economics and culture.

After the overthrow of the Díaz regime, the newly elected government rejected the anti-autochthonous philosophy and policy of its predecessors. They provided funds for the creation of public, socially effective art

²Here, *indigenismo* refers to post-revolutionary Mexicans' interest in and support for the native peoples of the Western hemisphere.

that would further transmit the ideals of the Revolution to the masses (Declercq 32).

In 1922, Kahlo entered the National Preparatory School, a center of post-revolutionary Mexican nationalism. During Kahlo's period as a student, José Vasconcelos (1882-1959) held the position of minister of education. Vasconcelos called for "un nuevo arte nacional" that would allow popular revolutionary energies to follow through on a symbolic level (Hijar Serrano 21). In 1921-22 he commissioned a number of artists to paint murals in La Preparatoria, including Kahlo's future husband Diego Rivera (1886-1957). The post-revolutionary government and Mexican muralists such as Rivera, José Clemente Orozco (1883-1949) and David Alfaro Siqueiros (1896-1974) attempted to bring the conquest and colonization of Mexico, as well as the "hidden histories" of the ancient past, to light. Their glorification of ancient and contemporary native culture encouraged a largely *mestizo* population to embrace a previously disavowed aspect of their heritage.

As Stuart Hall states, this sort of reaching back, this attempt to unearth the past, not only entails a process of rediscovery, it is intimately involved in the production of identity. "...not an identity grounded in the archeology, but in the *re-telling* of the past" (Hall 393).

While Hall does not underestimate the importance of "imaginative rediscovery" he also recognizes how such acts impose false coherence on the past. "Such texts restore an imaginary fullness of plenitude, to set against the broken rubric of our past" (Hall 394). Rivera's murals, with their communist revision of the Aztec past, restore an imaginary fullness to pre-conquest indigenous life. In other words, they operate like a fetish.

By contrast, Kahlo's art, through its ambiguity and tension, suggests that cultural identities are unstable, and problematic (Hall 395). Her paintings resist oversimplification and therefore do not provide ready use for nationalist themes (Cooey 99).

Although Kahlo painted her self-portraits on a much smaller scale than the grandiose murals, one cannot describe her art as less political than the muralists'. Many of Kahlo's paintings demonstrate anti-materialist, anti-imperialist, and specifically anti-US themes. For example, Kahlo's *My Dress Hangs There* (1933) (fig. 21) provides a critique of industrialized North America.

Kahlo produced this work when she was living in New York with Rivera, who was painting a mural in Rockefeller

Center.³ Unlike Rivera's mural (fig. 22), with its romantic portrayal of a factory worker in the center, Kahlo's painting is devoid of any portraiture as such. Only a deteriorating poster of Mae West, the Hollywood icon, hangs in the background. Through this image, Kahlo highlights the prominence of sensationalized sexuality in the social fabric of US culture.

Kahlo depicts the destruction, greed and squander of capitalism through a variety of stylistic techniques and symbolic markers. The uncharacteristically dark palette creates a somber, seedy cast over the urban sprawl. The collage method at the base of the painting pieces together newspaper photographs of Depression-era food lines and military parades. The city as industrial machine dwarfs the ant-like masses. The pollution from the steamboats and smokestacks coats the New York City skyline, a fire burns a block of buildings uncontrollably, the almighty dollar appears in a church window, and a garbage can overflows with refuse. The entire scene serves as a reminder of the evils and excesses of industry and consumerism.

In the midst of the chaos and decay a brightly colored Tehuana dress, the traditional costume of Zapotec women

³This work was destroyed after Nelson Rockefeller objected to Rivera's inclusion of a portrait of Lenin.

from the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, and representative of a style of dress Kahlo frequently wore, hangs on a string suspended between an open toilet and a golden trophy. The Tehuana dress starkly contrasts with the industrial and commercial backdrop of Western urbanism. Because Kahlo did not paint herself in the garment it suggests displacement and absence.⁴ The Tehuana dress stands out as a marker of difference. It occupies the place of the exotic Mexican as spectacle in the eyes of the depersonalized, consumer-oriented, over-saturated industrial world.

To some degree, the flat, motionless dress, like the telephone, the toilet, the trophy, and the gas pump, serves as an empty symbol of culture. Kahlo first donned the Tehuantepec costume after she met Rivera, who often traveled to the region, and painted its people. Although the folklore that surrounded Tehuantepec women probably appealed to Kahlo,⁵ to a large extent, she wore traditional

⁴According to Herrera, Kahlo did not enjoy her stay in New York City, and often complained of homesickness. Part of Kahlo's discontent stemmed from the racism she experienced. The clientele and staff at her hotel frequently snubbed her. Furthermore, her attire often solicited unwanted attention (a child once asked Kahlo if the circus was in town). For further details, see Herrera, *Frida: A Biography of Frida Kahlo*.

⁵"Theirs is a matriarchal society where women run the markets, handle the fiscal matters, and dominate the men" (Herrera *Frida* 109).

clothing to please Rivera.⁶ He felt that all modern Mexican women should wear traditional Mexican costumes.

The classic Mexican dress has been created by people for people. The Mexican women who do not wear it do not belong to the people, but are mentally and emotionally dependent on a foreign class to which they wish to belong, i.e., the great American and French bureaucracy. (Rivera qtd. in Herrera *Frida* 111)

Although Rivera often spoke of Kahlo's indigenous roots,⁷ her upbringing was quite bourgeois. Furthermore, "primitive" fashions were currently *en vogue* in European and American cultural centers. Even as she criticized superficial New Yorkers for their desire to "go native," Kahlo turned a critical eye towards herself. In a letter to a friend she writes: "Meanwhile some of the *gringa*-women are imitating me and trying to dress a la *Mexicana*...and to tell you the truth they look absolutely impossible. That doesn't mean that I look good in them

⁶According to Herrera, Kahlo dressed in modern, European influenced attire whenever the couple fought, or broke up.

⁷Kahlo's father was born in Germany, to Hungarian parents, and moved to Mexico City as a young man. He married Matilde Calderón, whose mother was *mestiza* and father indigenous. As discussed, Kahlo attended The National Preparatory School, Mexico's premier institution, where she was one of thirty-five girls in a student body of over 2000 (Herrera *The Paintings* 31).

either" (Herrera *Frida* 173). Just as Hurston could not fully appreciate Eatonville until she left home, Kahlo gained a clearer perspective on Mexico from New York. Like Hurston, Kahlo could not see her garment for wearing it. In New York City, Kahlo achieved a cultural distance that allowed her to stand off and look at her Tehuana dress as a symbol of an idealized and exoticized *Mexicanidad*.⁸

The Tehuana dress depicted in *My Dress Hangs There* shows up in a self-portrait from 1937 entitled *Memory* (fig. 23). Although Kahlo appears in this work, once again, she does not wear the dress. Instead, it hangs on a red ribbon that mysteriously drops from the sky. In the background, another garment, a schoolgirl's uniform, descends from a similar, vein-like string. Kahlo, in the center, wears her hair cropped and dons European-style clothes. A rod penetrates the hole that signifies her absent heart which lies, massive and bleeding, beside her. For Herrera, this painting reads "as simple and direct as a Valentine heart shot through by an arrow." In other words, it expresses Kahlo's misery over an affair Diego had with Kahlo's sister Cristina (Herrera *The Paintings* 112).

⁸*Mexicanidad* refers to the post-revolutionary definition of mexicanness.

While Herrera convincingly supports this reading, in my view this painting expresses a conflict that reaches beyond Kahlo's relationship with her husband. Kahlo depicts herself as triply divided in this painting. Like the components of Hurston's multi-faceted "I," neither Frida the schoolgirl, Kahlo the Tehuana, or Kahlo the Europeanized Mexican appears complete. While the Kahlo in the center lacks arms, each of the dresses contains one. Unlike Vasconcelos' celebration of "la raza cósmica," his conception of a "fifth race" of people who represent the genetic and cultural combination of all of the races of the world, Kahlo's bizarre self-portrait conveys her experience of gender and cultural identity as fragmented.

Kahlo, whose creased skirt and blouse accent her division, rests one foot upon land and another, boat-like foot, floats in the ocean. The landscape evokes the Spaniards' arrival on the shores of the Americas. The heart, which stains the soil with blood, symbolizes the ensuing violence and devastating legacy of the conquest. The rod, with its potential to teeter back and forth, implies Mexico's past and current political instability. Its position through Kahlo's chest further suggests her, and all Mexican's, crisis of national identity.

The center Kahlo stands apart from the hand that reaches out of the schoolgirl's uniform. In this way, Kahlo emphasizes her distance from her childhood innocence. Instead, the center Kahlo locks arms with the Tehuana dress. This gesture conveys solidarity between the indigenous and the *mestiza*; the same red bloodline connects them. Nonetheless, the Kahlo in the center weeps for the disunity that still informs their relationship.

Kahlo revisits the themes introduced in *Memory* in her famous painting from 1939, *The Two Fridas* (fig. 24). Upon first glance, this work calls for a dualistic reading. As Herrera suggests, "the two Fridas... stand for Kahlo's dual heritage" (*The Paintings* 135). Upon closer examination, however, Kahlo destabilizes a neat duality in *The Two Fridas*. While one Frida wears a Tehuana costume, the other wears a Victorian blouse. Nonetheless, the Frida in the Victorian blouse also wears a Tehuana skirt. This Frida's exposed breast confounds traditional notions of Victorian prudishness and propriety. Furthermore, the Zapotec Frida grasps a nineteenth century photograph,⁹ a product of European technology that illustrates European conventions of representation.

⁹This is a miniature portrait of Diego Rivera as a child (Herrera *Frida* 278).

With their stern gazes, the two Fridas confront the viewer with their multiple locations of self. While some of the imagery suggests connection and interdependence, themes of interruption and violence also operate within the painting. Although the Fridas share a bloodline, the artificial means through which it functions underscores the precarious basis of their relationship. The Fridas attempt to cauterize the exposed vein with a small photograph, on one end, and a surgical clamp, on the other. Despite their efforts, blood spills on the white Tehuana skirt, and replaces its floral pattern. Once again, the violence of the past makes up the social fabric of the present.

The Two Fridas does not reproduce the stability of a dyad, but exemplifies the process of transculturation. This painting acknowledges a third cultural position, not *criollo*,¹⁰ not native, but *mestizo*. Nonetheless, Kahlo avoids an excessively harmonious celebration of the interaction of cultural components in this painting. The Fridas hold hands, but rather dispassionately. The stormy sky and the extreme tilt of the bench add further tension to the scene. The portrait does not exude peace and harmony, but uneasiness and awkwardness. In this way,

¹⁰A *criollo* is a person of "pure" Spanish ancestry born in the New World.

Kahlo destabilizes the post-revolutionary fantasy of the *mestizo* as the harmoniously balanced genetic and cultural combination of the Meso-American autochthonous and the Spanish conquerors. In *The Two Fridas*, Kahlo exposes an unconscious signifying chain that challenges the structure of this newly formed ideal (Ragland-Sullivan "Seeking the..." 59, 63).

Even when Kahlo's physical body remains unified, her image does not necessarily convey coherence. In her painting from 1932, *Self-Portrait on the Border Line Between Mexico and the United States* (fig. 25), Kahlo appears in a conservatively long, old-fashioned, pink dress and wears white lace gloves. The stone pedestal she stands on bears her Christian first name "Carmen" and her husband's last name "Rivera," not her usual "Frida Kahlo." In other words, at least partially, Western patriarchal tradition defines her identity.

Although her garments do not reflect the Tehuana style, Kahlo adorns a *Coatlicue*¹¹-like necklace. In further contradistinction to her rather delicate raiment, her confrontational gaze is anything but demure. The cigarette she holds in her right hand and her visible nipples all

¹¹*Coatlicue* is a pre-Columbian goddess. I will discuss *Coatlicue* in more detail in Chapter 12.

signify rebelliousness, defiance. Kahlo represents herself as a combination of European civility, stoic indigenusness, and macho grit. Kahlo not only resists an essential femininity, but an essential mexicanness in this painting. Unlike "cosmic Zora," who transcends both time and place, Kahlo represents herself as a product of both constructs.

In this work, like *My Dress Hangs There*, Kahlo presents a critique of the US. The US landscape, with its billowing smokestacks and skyscrapers, reveals the United States' disregard for its native past. While the Aztec landscape supports a variety of firmly rooted vegetation, on the side of the United States machines sprout cords underground. Kahlo stresses the United States' imperialist desires as well as its artificial relationship with the land in this painting. The US machines feed off of the Aztec vegetation. Although Janice Helland suggests that Kahlo provides an "idealization of the Aztec past"(8) in this painting, certain details do not support this view. For example, Kahlo does not paint the pre-Columbian artifacts in an exalted way; instead, they are small and fairly haphazardly strewn.

In *Self-Portrait on the Border* the artifacts on both sides of the border can be understood as the ideological

tools of national propaganda. Kahlo stands on the border between the industry and technology of the United States' present and the ruins of the Aztec past. In this painting, Kahlo represents herself as a border subject. Although she holds a Mexican flag, this does not suggest her patriotism. She does not wave the flag, but casually lets it rest near her waist. Here, Kahlo embodies modern Mexico; she locates the modern *mestiza* between two radically different and faulty ideals.

In *Four Inhabitants of Mexico* (1938) (fig. 26) Kahlo further explores the post-revolutionary Mexican psyche. In this work, "the inhabitants" stand larger than life and represent various stereotypes of Mexican identity (McDaniel Tarver 18). As in *Self-Portrait on the Border*, Kahlo includes an imperfect clay idol in this painting. Its broken off feet suggest immobility and instability. Just as the statue exists as incomplete, so are constructed histories of the past. Kahlo covers the Judas figure,¹² or the stereotypical macho, with explosives and fuses that symbolize his violent, dangerous, and self-destructive tendencies (Herrera *The Paintings* 24). The papier-mâché

¹²Judas effigies are brightly painted, wood, plaster, or stone casts covered with paper. They are typically made larger than life size and used during religious celebrations/holidays. The Judas in this painting, with its blue overalls, is reminiscent of Rivera.

skeleton stands for the Mexican cult of death or "the myth that Mexicans are unafraid of death" (McDaniel Tarver 19). The straw figure represents a revolutionary, the "fragility and pathos in Mexican life, a poignant mixture of poverty [and] pride" (Herrera *The Paintings* 18).

Despite the title, Kahlo actually depicts five inhabitants in this painting. A small child, similar in appearance to a young Kahlo, sits in wonder and fear as she gazes up at the figures that tower over her. This child symbolizes Kahlo's entire generation, or the post-revolutionaries who find themselves overwhelmed by the myths of the past and present. In *Four Inhabitants*, Kahlo exposes the shallow national unity of her contemporary Mexico. As Benedict Anderson suggests, regardless of "the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail" the nation is "always perceived as a *community*" or "a deep, horizontal comradeship" (16). In this painting, Kahlo implies that, despite the fervent propaganda, no such bonds exist. The barren landscape, devoid of organic life, underscores this sense of alienation. The figures' deep shadows confirm their isolated and artificial existence.

Three of the four inhabitants reappear, in slightly different forms, in *The Wounded Table* (1940) (fig. 27). No longer a bewildered child, an adult-sized Kahlo claims a

seat at the table. Kahlo, as nuevo-Tehuana, bleeds among the others, a martyr for *Mexicanidad*. In this way, *The Wounded Table* supports Roger Bartra's analysis of post-revolutionary Mexican culture. As Bartra argues:

postrevolutionary Mexican society produces the subjects of its own national culture.[...] the hegemonic political culture has been creating its characteristic subjects and has bound them to various universally applicable archetypes. [...] the subjects become actors, and the subjectivity is transformed into theater. (Bartra 2)

The curtains that frame this work, as well as the foreground's tilted perspective, suggest a stage. Here, Kahlo comments on the performative aspects of Mexican identity. Like Cahun, Kahlo suggests that this performance rests somewhere between mimicry and masquerade. In *Wounded Table*, Kahlo parodies the stereotypes of mexicanness. The shadowless inhabitants appear as one-dimensional caricatures of their former, already caricatured, selves. The skeleton, for example, with its springy appendages, looks like a jack-in-the-box. Tied to a chair for stability, it cannot support its own weight. The Judas' head, shrunk to an ironically small size, oozes with blood.

Despite her critique, Kahlo also suggests that these archetypes inform her identity. Unlike in *Four Inhabitants*, the figures of this painting interact with the rather stoic Kahlo. The Judas places a possessive arm around Kahlo's neck, the skeleton playfully lifts up a section of her hair, and the Nayarit statue's arm melds with her own. Kahlo does not resist their touch, but accepts it; her identity is inextricably tied to theirs. Bound but also supported by the stereotypes that surround her, Kahlo demands the viewer's recognition. She does not make excuses for her participation, but claims center stage for herself.

In *My Nurse and I* (1937) (fig. 28) Kahlo produces a different take on the myths of Mexican identity that have nurtured her. As in *Four Inhabitants of Mexico*, Kahlo represents herself as a child in this painting. Although her body conforms to infantile proportions, her head appears eerily adult-sized. As in *The Two Fridas*, a pronounced awkwardness defines the relationship between the two figures. The infant Kahlo does not burrow into the nurse's bosom, but stares off distantly into space. She does not suck from the nurse's breast, but passively allows milk to drip into her mouth. Through this resigned

relationship, Kahlo implicitly critiques romantic representations of the Indian mother as nurturer.

Like the black mask Cahun wore over her face in her self-portrait from 1928, the pre-Columbian funerary mask does not conceal the nurse's face as much as it suggests that no "true" visage hides underneath. In *My Nurse and I*, "the relationship of the *mestizo* present to the distant pre-conquest past is articulated with wonderful clarity as one governed not by nature but by nurture" (Braddeley 18). Kahlo is not nursed by her Aztec mother, but by a reconstruction of the Aztec past. The mask symbolizes the post-revolutionary government's attempts to mend "the broken rubric" of Mexico's past. Nonetheless, this healing process has not been entirely successful. The milk that falls in the infant Kahlo's mouth, like the rain that falls from the sky, resembles the tears that spilt from Kahlo's eyes in *Memory*.

While not immediately apparent, the nurse's long, dark hair and mono-brow suggest Kahlo's likeness. In other words, Kahlo locates her own subjectivity within post-revolutionary reconstructions of the past. As Stuart Hall states, "...identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past" (Hall 394). Kahlo cannot

separate her own identity from the re-tellings of the past she was nurtured on. These re-tellings also include Catholic myth. This classic composition of the Madonna and child, doubles as a *pietà*.

As Daniel Cooper Alarcón explains, mexicanness can be understood as a palimpsest, or "a site where texts have been superimposed onto others in an attempt to displace earlier or competing histories" (xiv). In this chapter, I have focused on the post-revolutionary *indigenismo* that displaced the anti-autochthonous, positivist philosophy of the *científicos*. In her paintings, Kahlo suggests that such displacements are never total. "The suppressed material often remains legible, however faintly, challenging the dominant text with an alternate version of events" (Cooper Alarcón xiv). Kahlo's representations of the subject explore the "suppressed material" of the post-revolutionaries' "dominant text".

In her politically charged paintings, Kahlo investigates the tensions of her contemporary Mexico. She does not dismiss or reject the artifacts of Aztec life or the costumes of traditional Mexican people, but refuses to romanticize them. As a result, she presents her viewer with a powerful critique of post-revolutionary propaganda. Kahlo represents Mexico's violent past as an open wound.

Chapter 12

Beyond Border Thinking: Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*

Gloria Anzaldúa's book from 1987 *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987), like Kahlo's paintings, interweaves themes of national, ethnic, and gender identity. In words that echo Kahlo's images, Anzaldúa explores the role of the individual within the community, or the "I" as distinct from, yet informed by, the "we." Although Anzaldúa values her participation within several communities (Chicano/a, lesbian, feminist, etc.) she refuses to claim full membership in any one. In *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Anzaldúa penetrates the façade of the coherent self and defines subjectivity as a fluid site of overlapping and conflicting identifications. Her concept of *mestiza* consciousness transcends binaries, or border thinking, and, through its embrace of the unconscious, opens up the possibility for a third term.

One would have a hard time trying to pigeonhole *Borderlands/La Frontera* into a single genre. In this hybrid auto/bio/ethography Anzaldúa examines the identity politics of the US/Mexican border from the point of view of a native *tejana*. She both affirms and critiques aspects of Chicano

culture through her re-appropriation of various aspects of its history, language, and lore.

The first volume, *Atravesando Fronteras*/"Crossing Borders," maintains a poetic prose; the second volume *Un Agitado Viento*/"Ehécatl, The Wind" includes several highly autobiographical poems. Within the first volume, the focus of this chapter, Anzaldúa mingles selections from her own poetry with extracts from other poets' work. She combines myths rooted in pre-Columbian meso-American culture with traditional songs and sayings from both sides of the border. Unlike in *Translated Woman*, the intertextual references included in *Borderlands/La Frontera* successfully intertwine the book's themes.

Where Esperanza speaks with a translated tongue, Anzaldúa communicates through the patois of her border tongue. Throughout *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Anzaldúa switches codes from American English, to Castilian Spanish, to the North Mexican dialect, to Tex-Mex to Nahuatl¹. Unlike Behar, Anzaldúa does not extensively footnote her book. She fully expects that her reader will not comprehend much of its "bastard language" (preface). In this way, Anzaldúa develops a reading praxis of disorientation. "Rather than allowing readers to simply engage in an intellectual analysis of her subject, Anzaldúa forces them

to experience alienation and the pain of exclusion"

(Quintana 138). As Anzaldúa explains:

...we Chicanos no longer feel we need to beg
entrance...to translate to Anglos, Mexicans and
Latinos, apology blurring out of our mouths with
every step. Today we ask to be met halfway. This
book is our invitation to you from the new
mestizas. (preface)

Anzaldúa describes Chicano Spanish as a variation of
over eight languages, including English slang and *pachuco*².
She explains how she acquired these languages in different
contexts, and how she speaks certain variations in
accordance with her company. While Chicano Spanish plays a
vital role in Mexican American collective identity, Anzaldúa
recognizes its diversity and celebrates it as the language
of a complex, heterogeneous people.

Anzaldúa also acknowledges the considerable amount of
emotional baggage attached to her use of her border tongue.
She relates painful memories of the speech classes she
endured in grade school to help her "get rid of her accent"
as well as explores the criticism she continues to receive
from other Spanish speakers who consider Chicano Spanish a
mutilation of "proper" Castilian Spanish. For Anzaldúa,

¹ Nahuatl is a language of the people native to Southern
Mexico and Central America, including the Aztecs.

Chicano Spanish serves as a marker of Chicanos' transcultural experience. It helps define Mexican Americans as a third cultural entity, impacted by and yet distinct from white American and Mexican traditions.

For Anzaldúa, concerns about the authenticity of language coincide with definitions of homeland. "For some of us language is a homeland closer than the Southwest -for many Chicanos today live in the Midwest and the East" (55). Although she frequently employs the first person plural, "*Nosotros los Chicanos...*" (62), Anzaldúa does not perpetuate a false homogeneity within this population. She, like Kahlo, adamantly expresses the need to investigate the imbalances of power that exist within such communities. When she refers to "our history of resistance" Anzaldúa acknowledges the power of collectivity and the importance of a shared history to a sense of common culture, but she does not dictate which histories are valid and which are not (86-7).

To provide an example that both affirms and challenges the horizontal comradeship of the Chicano nation, in the first chapter of *Borderlands/La Frontera* Anzaldúa discusses "The Homeland, Aztlán³." She explains why some Chicanos

²*Pachuco* is a form of Spanish slang spoken by the zoot-suiters of California in the mid-twentieth century.

³"Aztlán was celebrated in Aztec mythology as the Aztecs' ancient homeland, their utopic place of origin somewhere to

understand themselves as both "originally and secondarily indigenous to the Southwest" (5)⁴. At the same time, Anzaldúa recognizes that homelands are often more spiritual, emotional, and conceptual than physical. All Mexican Americans do not pinpoint the Southwestern United States as the symbolic homeland for *La Raza*⁵. A conflict exists, therefore, between the attempt to fix Aztlán in the Southwest and the claim of its universality for Chicanos everywhere (Cooper Alarcón 33).

Just as the attempt to anneal the many different Aztlán stories into a coherent, pristine narrative would ultimately lead many Chicanos to reject it, so too would attempts to pose Chicanos as a monolithic, unified community symbolized by Aztlán fragment under the weight of the diversity of those members who found their individuality,

the north of Tenochitlán [modern day Mexico City]" (Cooper Alarcón 6).

⁴ As Anzaldúa elucidates, 20,000-year-old campsites have been found in the Southwest United States. It was not until 1168 AD that the Aztecs, descendants of these original Cochise people (the Nahuatl work for people of Aztlán), left the Southwest for what is now Mexico (4). After the Spanish conquest of the 16th Century, Indians and *mestizos* returned to the Southwest, as porters to Spanish conquistadors and missionaries, and settled in that region. In the 1800s, Anglos began to drive out the *tejanos*, or native Texans of Mexican descent. In 1848, the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo left 100,000 Mexicans on the "US" side of the Rio Grande (Anzaldúa 5-8).

⁵*La Raza* is a term of ethnic pride/unity first adopted by Mexican Americans during the Chicano civil rights movement of the 1960s and 1970s.

needs, and aspirations lost in Aztlán or not represented. (Cooper Alarcón 25)

The rhetoric of *La Raza*, like that of the post-revolutionaries in Mexico, effaces important cultural differences and smoothes over the legacy of a painful and conflicted history. Anzaldúa, like Kahlo, views the US/Mexican border as *una herida abierta*, an open wound (3). She too finds it necessary to uncover the wounds of the past in order to more satisfactorily interrogate Chicano/a identity.

Anzaldúa argues that individual experience, whether it conflicts with or damages an objective of unity, need not be erased in order to achieve active participation in a group. Anzaldúa does much more than list her identifications in a multi-hyphenated string she addresses the simultaneity of oppression. The dynamic of individuation operates on many levels concurrently, and, as a result, many subjects experience a conflicted and contradictory relationship to power/privilege. Single-issue alliances deny such contradictions, and therefore tend to reinforce the false binaries that perpetuate the status quo.

Some theorists disagree. According to this point of view, a subject's refusal to claim full membership in any one social category furthers oppressive agendas.

If oppression is to be defined in terms of loss of autonomy by the oppressed, as well as a fragmentation or alienation within the psyche of the oppressed, then a theory which insists upon the inevitable fragmentation of the subject appears to reproduce and valorize the very oppression that must be overcome. (Butler "Gender Trouble..." 327)

In my view, a belief in an "autonomy of the oppressed" only reinforces the *méconnaissances* that constitute the boundaries of the ego. Single-issue alliances reproduce a process of reification that occludes a more nuanced analysis of subject positions. As Joan Scott argues:

In the case of...various others⁶ in the West, it has been precisely the imposition of a categorical (and universal) subject status (*the worker, the peasant, the woman, the black*) that has marked the operations of difference in the organization of social life. (Scott 408)

The isolation of a singular marker of identity eclipses the relevance of all others. Through her refutation of Mexican Americans as a homogeneous socio/cultural minority, Anzaldúa proposes a less polarized articulation of difference.

⁶ Here, "others" refers to disenfranchised others and not the Other, or the symbolic order.

Anzaldúa develops the concept of *mestiza* consciousness, which purposefully utilizes the feminine form, to represent a new state of awareness of cultural ambiguities:

The new *mestiza* copes by developing a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity. She learns to be an Indian in Mexican culture, to be Mexican from an Anglo point of view. She learns to juggle cultures. She has a plural personality. (79)

Here, Anzaldúa confronts static constructions of "the marginal." The designation "new" displaces the assumption that all *mestizos* are male, and, perhaps more importantly, shifts the emphasis from a biological definition (a genetic heritage) to a cultural one. Anzaldúa writes of "Mexican culture" and an "Anglo point of view" in order to denaturalize each subject position. The verb "copes" suggests that both symbolic hegemonies, Mexican and Anglo, impose an unrepresentative and universalized subject-status. While "the new *mestiza*" comprehends the plurality of her existence, she must feign unidimensionality (as an Indian, as a Mexican, etc.) in order to negotiate a recognizable position within the illusorily separate Symbolics she inhabits. Anzaldúa provides testimony of her own experience in *los intersticios* to highlight the inadequacy of compartmentalized subject positions.

Some theorists oppose experience-based writing because they feel it fails to negotiate with a greater social reality. "... it neglects the relationship of experience to discourse, the artifactual nature of representation, the operations and apparati of cultural determinations" (Smith *Subjectivity*.. 156). Such a criticism, however, does not hold true with *Borderlands/La Frontera*. Anzaldúa does not neglect the relationship of experience to discourse, but addresses it as one of the main issues of her book.

[The] first step is to take inventory.

Despojando, desgranando, quitando paja. Just what did she inherit from her ancestors? This weight on her back- which is the baggage from the Indian mother, which the baggage from the Spanish father, which the baggage from the Anglo? (82)

Although this passage makes reference to Anzaldúa's own subject positions, she switches to the third person to pose these questions. She does this not to feign objectivity, but to stress that her individual experience is also a shared experience. As the phrase "to take inventory" suggests, Anzaldúa explores "the operations and apparati" that inform her identifications in *Borderlands/La Frontera*. She attends to the social, cultural, and historical processes that position her within existent networks of meaning and produce her experience. As Scott explains,

It is not individuals who have experience, but subjects who are constituted through experience. Experience in this definition then becomes not the origin of our explanation, not the authoritative (because seen or felt) evidence that grounds what is known, but rather that which we seek to explain, that about which knowledge is produced.

(401)

Anzaldúa's desire to explain her subject positions requires a formidable investigation. The words "inventory" and "baggage" suggest that an abundance of weighty repressed materials must be accounted for and unpacked. The three gerunds Anzaldúa supplies, *despojando*, *desgranando*, and *quitando*, imply the ongoingness of such a task. Just as the unconscious knows no negation, one cannot purge one's subjectivity of its social/cultural/historical origins. As Kahlo's self-portraits make evident, because various subject positions find their basis in intolerance and/or violence this process of rediscovery is often painful.

In *Borderlands/La Frontera* Anzaldúa attempts to dismantle the defense mechanisms the conscious mind erects to barricade against such pain; *quitando paja* literally means taking away the straw, or padding. The gerund *desgranando*, or threshing, implies the need for a penetrating historical analysis. The kernel of truth must

be separated from the protective husk of denial. *Despojando*, while a synonym of *quitando* and *desgranando*, expresses a further significance. The verb *despojar*, means to rob or deprive. Single-issue alliances rob and deprive subjects of their complexity. Another meaning of *despojar* is to plunder or despoil. The Spanish plundered meso-America, the Anglos plundered Mexico; such historical and political aggressions inform contemporary subject positions. *Despojar* also means to divest, in the sense of undress or unclothe. More than the product of territorial disputes, the border subject endures the psychological scars rendered by the rape of the Indian mother by both Spaniards and Anglos. In order to promote healing, Anzaldúa does not cover over such badly mended scars, but undresses these wounds.

Although Anzaldúa shows great pride in her cultural heritage, she refuses to condone all aspects of it. "I will not glorify those aspects of my culture which have injured me" (22). Like Kahlo, Anzaldúa both cherishes and despises the traditions that have nurtured her. Through her "imaginative re-discovery" of history and her alternative interpretations of myth Anzaldúa begins to transform her experiences of oppression into a new consciousness. "What I want is an accounting with all three cultures -white, Mexican, Indian. I want the freedom to carve and chisel my own face, to staunch the bleeding with ashes, to fashion my

own gods out of my entrails" (22). Anzaldúa locates her self at the crossroads of three cultures. In order to claim her border existence as a subject position, she re-works ("carves" "chisels" and "fashions") the available mythology to account for her experience of conflict and contradiction. The ceremonies of the ancient past serve as the groundwork for her "re-telling." She does not white wash over, but carefully peels back the multiple layers of the existent palimpsest. Her "imaginative rediscovery" does not impose a false coherence on the past, but emphasizes the disunity of the past.

For example, in the chapter "Entering into the Serpent" Anzaldúa explores how the male deities of Azteca-Mexica culture eventually supplanted the female deities. As a result, the latter were disempowered, desexed, and/or demonized. Anzaldúa pays particular attention to the pre-Columbian goddess *Coatlicue*, or "Lady of the Serpent Skirt." As the goddess of birth and death, light and dark, beauty and horror, she embodies contradiction. Like the Medusa "she is the symbol of the fusion of opposites" (47). For Anzaldúa, she represents "duality in life, a synthesis of duality, and a third perspective -something more than mere duality or a synthesis of duality" (46). In a modern context, she symbolizes the process of transculturation.

Over the course of several centuries, and especially due to the influence of Roman Catholicism, the serpent goddess *Coatlicue* was subdivided into many smaller deities. Anzaldúa claims, for example, that the *Virgen de Guadalupe*, the patron saint of Mexicans and many Mexican Americans, maintains cultural ties to *Coatlicue*. The *Virgen's* Indian name, *Coatlalopeuh*, translates as 'the one who has dominion over the serpents.'

Not all of *Coatlicue's* attributes meshed with folk Catholicism's re-working of the Christian Virgin Mary, however. The historical figure of La Malinche absorbed *Coatlicue's* sensuality, and other "sinister" characteristics. While the figure of *Guadalupe*, the dark virgin, affirms the virtues of the Indian mother, La Malinche, like her Christian counterpart Eve, symbolizes the evils of women's sexuality.

As mentioned in my analysis of *Translated Woman*, many persons within Mexican and Mexican American culture regard La Malinche as a betrayer. Anzaldúa, along with other feminist mexicanas and chicanas, feels that La Malinche has become a convenient scapegoat, an outlet for misogyny. Anzaldúa finds more systemic causes for the fall of the Aztec empire. "The Aztec nation fell not because *Malinali*⁷ (*La Chingada*) interpreted for and slept with Cortés, but

because the ruling elite had subverted the solidarity between men and women and between noble and commoner" (34). La Malinche's other namesake, *La Chingada* (the fucked-one), condemns all dark-skinned women's sexuality. The divisive virgin/whore or Guadalupe/Malinche dichotomy destroys the inherent contradictions and the elusive third perspective that *Coatlicue* once represented.

Anzaldúa wants to reinsert the figure of *Coatlicue* into contemporary discourse; she seeks a return to "the *Coatlicue* state." As Ana Louise Keating states, "By adopting the figure of *Coatlicue* [Anzaldúa] offers her readers an alternative to western culture's emphasis on rational thought" (35). A letting go, an opening up, the *Coatlicue* state resists firm boundaries and borders. As Anzaldúa proclaims, "I spent the first half of my life learning to rule myself, to grow a will, and now at mid-life I find that autonomy is a boulder on my path that I keep crashing into" (50). Although a rugged individualism is idealized in the West, Anzaldúa describes autonomy not in terms of personal freedom, but as an impediment to her spiritual growth. Anzaldúa experiences the rigidified boundaries that define the autonomous self as a stumbling block. At mid-life, she no longer struggles to deny the presence of the Other's

⁷*Malinali* is the Indian name of La Malinche.

desire within her consciousness (Ragland-Sullivan "Seeking the..." 44).

In order to communicate within language's closed system, or binarism, the emerging subject must repress the proliferation of desire that language's codes and conventions cannot contain. "...by setting boundaries language also alienates and rigidifies egos (superegos) and desires into fictional oppositions" (Ragland-Sullivan "Seeking the..." 43). The figure of *Coatlicue*, in her function as a third perspective, contests the oppositional logic of binaries (virgin/whore, male/female, good/evil, life/death, heterosexual/homosexual, etc). *Coatlicue's* ambiguity undermines this illusory stability of language and the structure of the ego.

One might be tempted to understand the goddess *Coatlicue*, with her connections to fertility and her serpent skirt, as the phallic mother. Certainly, comparisons can be drawn between *Coatlicue* and *Medusa* as well as between *Borderlands/La Frontera* and Hélène Cixous' utopian essay from the mid-1970s "The Laugh of the Medusa." Anzaldúa does not write in the white ink of her mother's milk,⁸ but in the bold red ink of her ancestors' blood, and the Aztec's codices. "From the fingers, my feathers, black and red ink drips across the page. *Escribo con la tinta de mi sangre.*

I write in red. Ink" (71). While Anzaldúa comes close to emulating Cixous' tone, she avoids the trappings of utopian prose. "The Coatlicue state" is not synonymous with a pre-Symbolic *jouissance*. Anzaldúa does not call for the eradication of the border that divides self and Other, but, like Sherman and Hurston, suggests that the border that separates the subject from the abject remains mutable.

Where Cixous wants to blow up the Symbolic order, Anzaldúa wants to alter it from within. In order to achieve the *Coatlicue* state one must draw from the repressed repository of signification. In other words, Anzaldúa wants to examine, not eradicate, "the dark earth of the unconscious" (47). At areas of cultural collision, or the borderlands, the unconscious manifests itself in conscious life. When one enters into the *Coatlicue* state, which Anzaldúa refers to as an often times painful period of confusion (74), one explores the physical and psychical territories of ambiguity. Anzaldúa suggests that an acceptance of ambiguity opens up an enormous potential for change. "The borders and walls that are supposed to keep the undesirable ideas out are entrenched habits and patterns of behavior; these habits and patterns are the enemy within. Rigidity means death" (79).

⁸"There is always within her at least a little of that good mother's milk. She writes in white ink" (Cixous 251).

Like Hurston and Kahlo, Anzaldúa does not glorify synthesis or embrace the concept of assimilation; both concepts reinforce and therefore endorse the dominant power structure. Instead, Anzaldúa validates the term "alien." Although the word "alien" typically suggests foreignness (an illegal alien) and connotes the abject (the unacceptable or repugnant), Anzaldúa redefines "alien" as the new and exhilarating. The "alien element," which finds its basis in the unconscious, upsets "society's clamor to uphold the old" (preface).

Anzaldúa's imaginative use of the term "alien" overlaps with her re-appropriation of the term "queer." In several places, she uses the word "queer" to describe the inhabitants of the borderlands. "*Los atravesados* live here: the squint-eyed, the perverse, the queer, the troublesome, the mongrel, the mulatto, the half-breed, the half dead; in short, those who cross over, pass over, or go through the confines of the normal" (3). Like Hurston, Anzaldúa drains derogatory labels of their previous effectiveness. She willingly adopts terms such as "perverse" and "queer" and reinvigorates them with a new agency. She does not define "queer" against "the normal;" instead, queerness transcends and overflows the confines of "the normal".

Here, as throughout *Borderlands/La Frontera*, the territories of collision Anzaldúa explores are not exclusively bound to race.

As a *mestiza* I have no country, my homeland cast me out; yet all countries are mine because I am everywoman's sister or potential lover. (As a lesbian I have no race, my own people disclaim me; yet I am all races because there is the queer of me in all races.) I am cultureless because, as a feminist, I challenge the collective cultural/religious male-derived beliefs of Indo-Hispanics and Anglos; yet I am cultured because I am participating in the creation of yet another culture. (81)

In this passage, Anzaldúa calls attention to the intersections of racism, sexism, and homophobia within individual lives. Once again, Anzaldúa challenges the false unity that single-issue alliances demand. Although she self-identifies as a feminist and as a lesbian, she finds neither category wholly satisfactory. As Bidy Martin explains, feminism often "reproduces the demand that women of color abandon their histories, the histories of their communities, their complex locations of selves, in the name of a unity that barely masks its white, middle-class cultural reference/referent" (283). One

could make similar claims about the use of "lesbian" as an identity category. As discussed in Chapter 7, the label "lesbian" reduces one's subjecthood to one's sexuality.

Anzaldúa adopts the term "queer," which signifies a third perspective, in order to transcend such restrictions. "Because queerness is so unstable, and because it foregrounds difference rather than commonality, a queer politics, ideally, would also emphasize its own multiple and fragmented nature" (Barnard 37). For Anzaldúa, queerness reaches beyond sexuality. As Tim Dean explains:

Queer theory depends on identificatory alliances rather than on identities as such; and queer politics thus involves creating alliances between sexual minorities and other social groups whose marginalization or disenfranchisement isn't necessarily a direct consequence of nonnormative sexuality (225).

Like *Coatlicue* queer represents "a third element," a slippery, undefined, category "which is greater than the sum of its severed parts" (Anzaldúa 79-80). In this way, the term queer parallels the concepts of transculturation and *mestiza* consciousness.

In many ways, the possibility of a queer existence, the concept of *mestiza* consciousness, and the notion of a *Coatlicue* state summarize the strategies discussed in Part

Two. Like Stein and Cahun, Anzaldúa destabilizes the binaries of gender (feminine/masculine) and sexuality (hetero/homo) in her use of the term queer. Like Sherman and Hurston, she calls attention to "the extremely violent policing of inside/outside borders by which the ego maintains itself" (Tim Dean 192) and offers an alternative in *mestiza* consciousness. Like Kahlo, Anzaldúa reaches back into the histories and myths of the past. The goddess Coatlicue symbolizes unresolved conflicts, and the necessary acceptance of ambiguity.

Just as subjects are continuously in formation, in *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* Anzaldúa presents philosophies in progress. In her last chapter, Anzaldúa works towards a new consciousness with this book. To construct boundaries that exclude the relevance of life-experience to theory, to reduce the complexities of the subject to a single cultural identity, to enumerate the steps necessary to achieve *mestiza* consciousness would be to overlook the importance of the transformational process. To rigidly define an "end goal" would be to create another boundary.

Conclusion

The twentieth century was an age of disillusionment. Over the past one hundred years, many artists turned their focus inward in the hopes of locating one last refuge of stability in individual consciousness. Still others, especially those persons relegated to the fringes of acceptability in the dominant culture, wanted to destabilize the prevailing definition of selfhood.

All of the artists included in this study challenge the conception of "the self" as a completely sufficient entity. Notions of autonomy, coherence, and individuality, the very hallmarks of selfhood, are unmasked as comforting illusions in their work. In this thesis I have argued that "the self," or the ego, is an agent of misrecognition. To truly "know thyself" in a post-Freudian era is to recognize the ego as a façade.

Many of the artists included in this dissertation highlight the constructedness of representation in order to challenge the sanctity of "the self." Just as "the ego has no objective existence outside the mirror, but nevertheless compels the viewer's conviction" (Tim Dean 39), the "I" of autobiography or the subject of self-portraiture has no objective existence outside of the text, but nonetheless

compels the viewer's conviction. The artists studied here disrupt the viewer's faith in both the objective existence of the textual subject and the ego in their art.

While the textual "I," or a cultural construct such as Woman, may exist only as a façade, one cannot deconstruct human beings out of existence. In this thesis I have argued that a degree of self-knowledge comes from an acceptance of one's own alienation. The artists studied in this dissertation represent the subject, not the self, because they highlight the operations of the self/Other dynamic of individuation in their work. All of the artistic productions studied in this thesis heighten an awareness of the Other and account for the force of the unconscious in conscious life. For this project, I have defined identity not as something one achieves, but as something one must uncover.

The artists included examine the make-up of their ideal egos in their representations of the subject. They interrogate the foundations of their present subjectivity, and locate these foundations beyond the ego-boundaries of the "self". I understand this act, not as an attempt to escape the oppressive structures of the Symbolic, but as an acknowledgement of their own alienation.

The suggestion that "individuality is someone else's fiction," or that the Other's desire speaks through all human subjects, may sound pessimistic when juxtaposed with the agency and autonomy offered by theories of self-construction. While my call for an increased awareness of the unconscious subjectivity that motivates desire is perhaps a more difficult request, I feel that the struggle to locate the well of one's desire ultimately results in a more profound personal growth, and the struggle also eventually leads to greater social tolerance.

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Figures

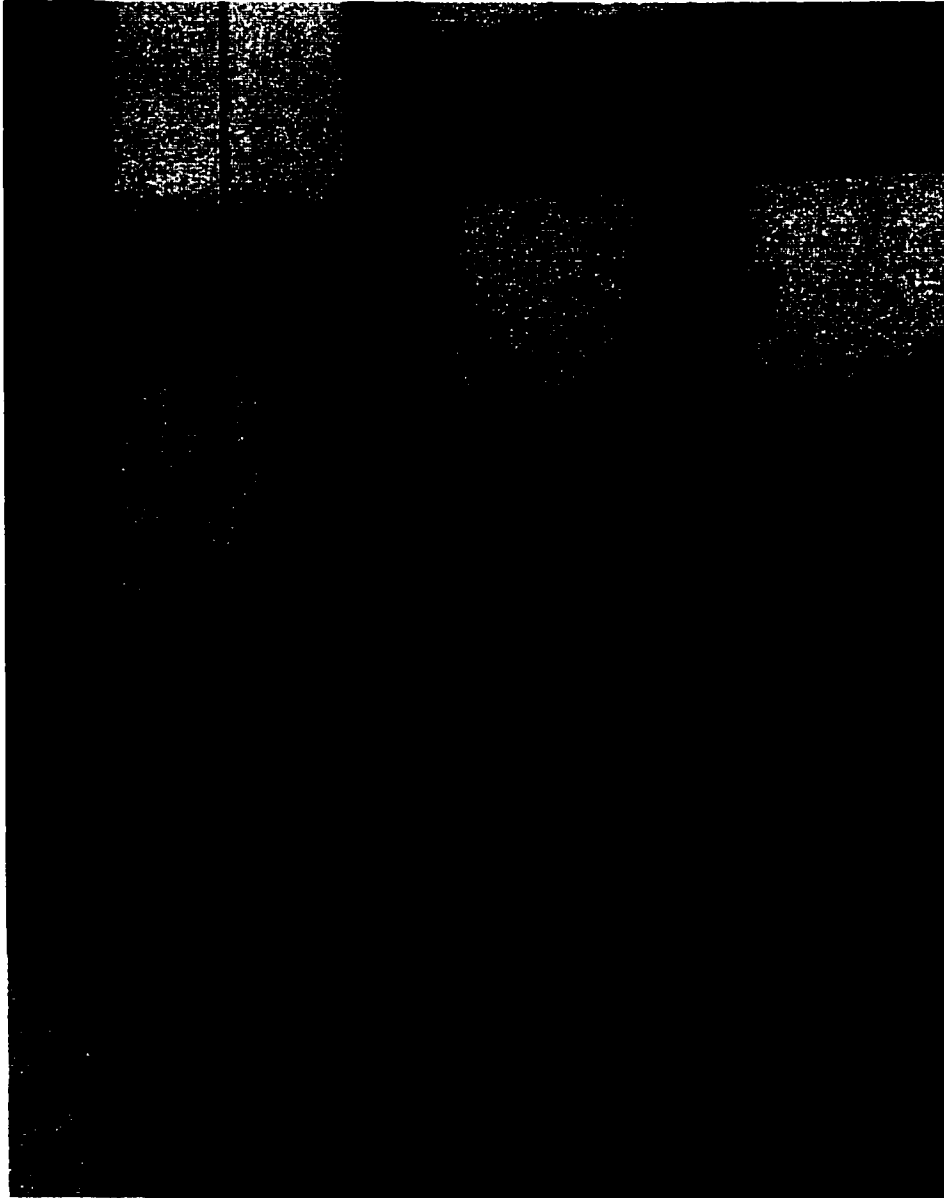


Figure 1

Man Ray. *Alice B. Toklas at the Door*, 1922.

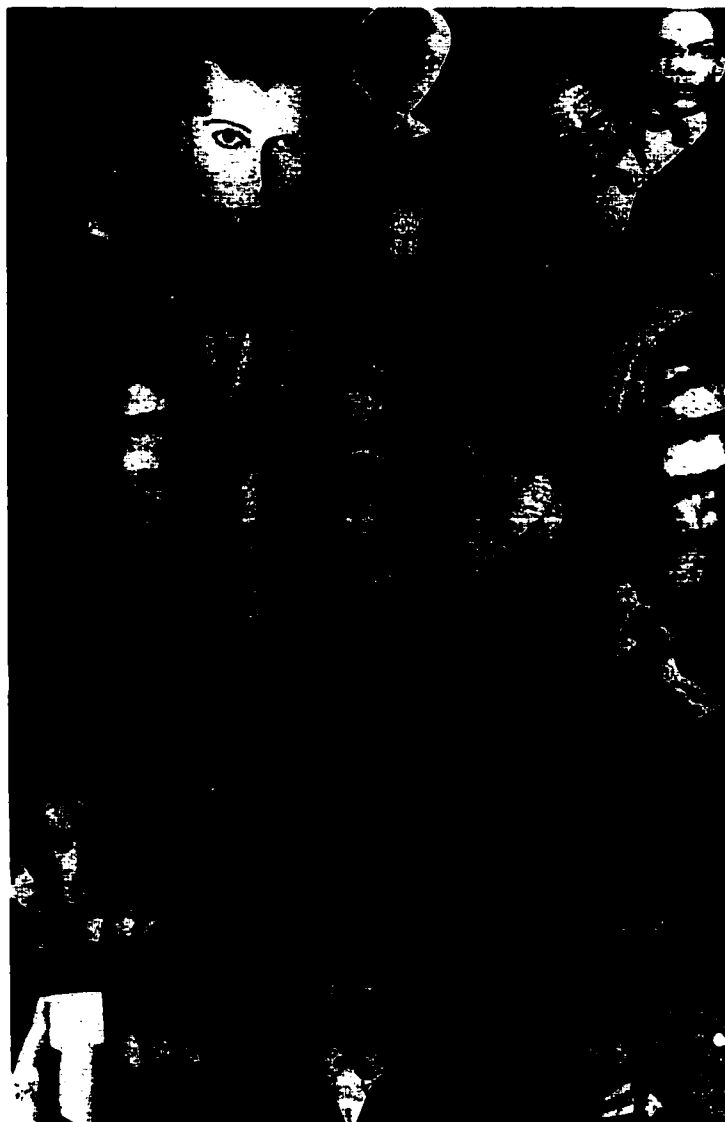


Figure 2

Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore.
Aveux non avenues. Plate VIII, 1929-30.



Figure 3

Claude Cahun. Untitled, 1928.



Figure 4

Claude Cahun. Untitled, 1921.



Figure 5

Claude Cahun. Untitled, 1927.

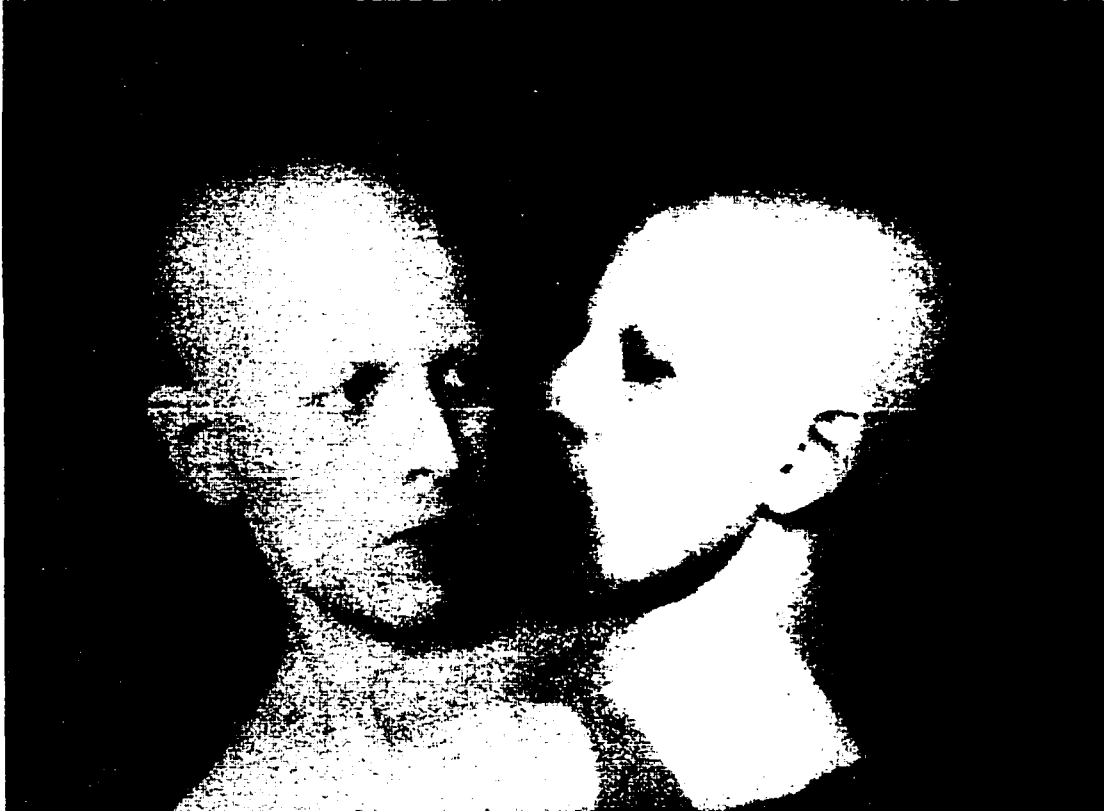


Figure 6

Claude Cahun. *Que me veux-tu?*, 1928.

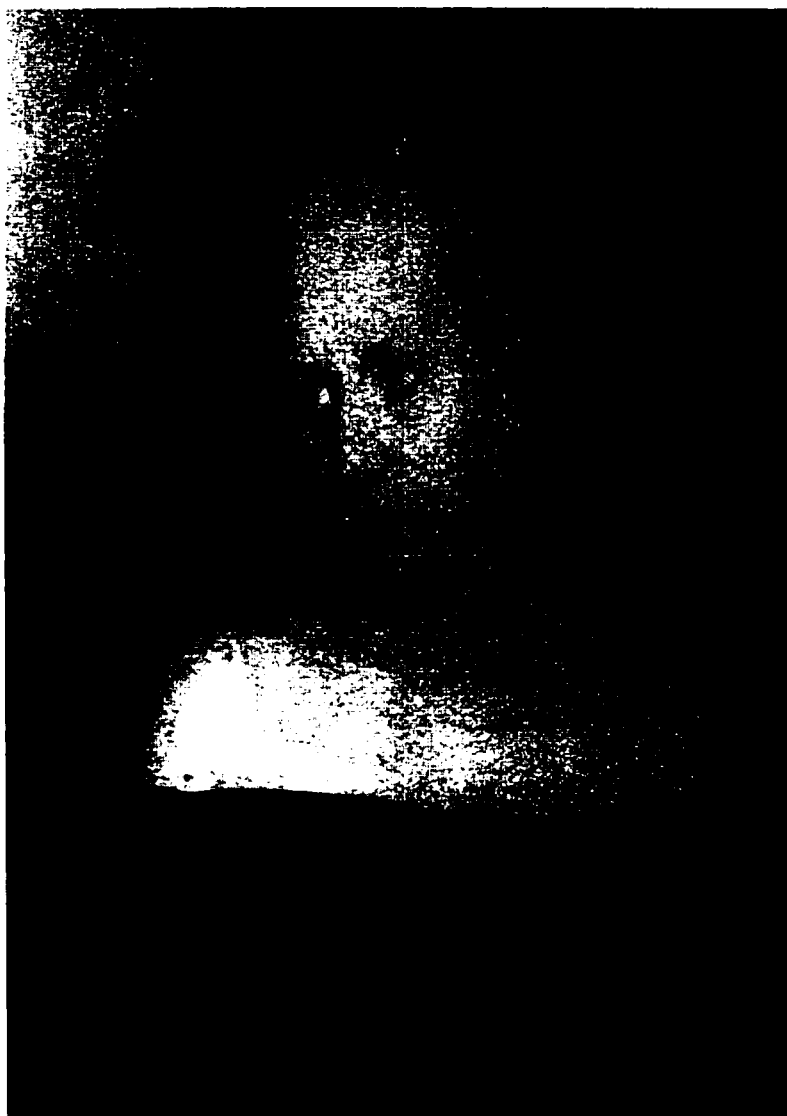


Figure 7

Claude Cahun. Untitled, 1929-30.



Figure 8

Hans Holbein the Younger. *The Ambassadors*, 1533.

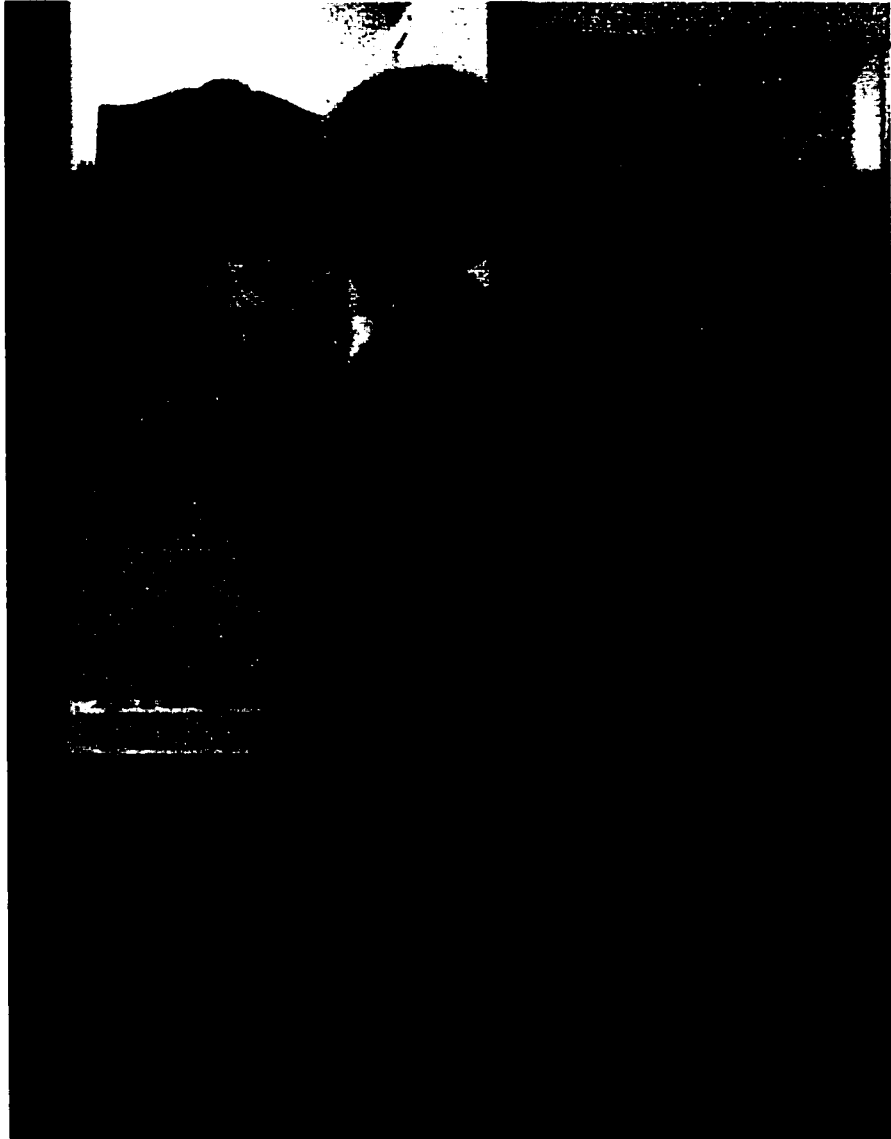


Figure 9

Cindy Sherman. *Untitled Film Still #2*, 1977

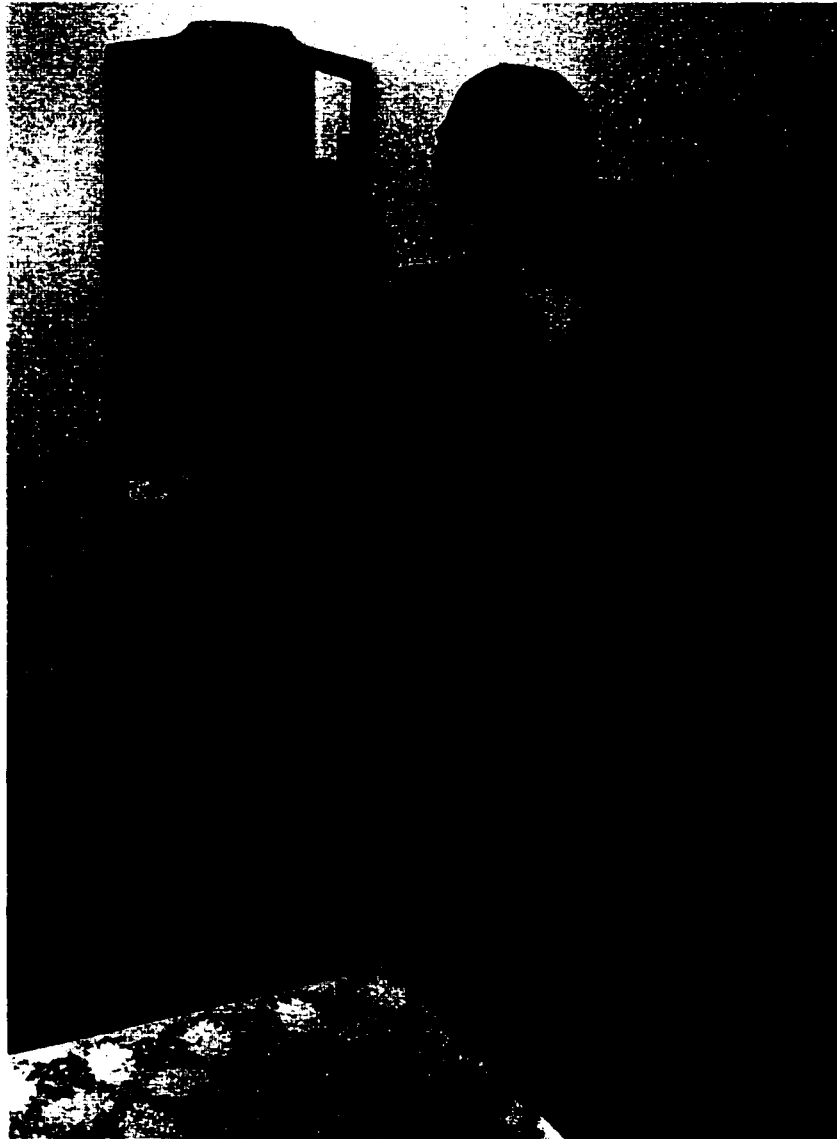


Figure 10

Cindy Sherman. *Untitled Film Still #14*, 1978.



Figure 11

Cindy Sherman. *Untitled Film Still #11*, 1978

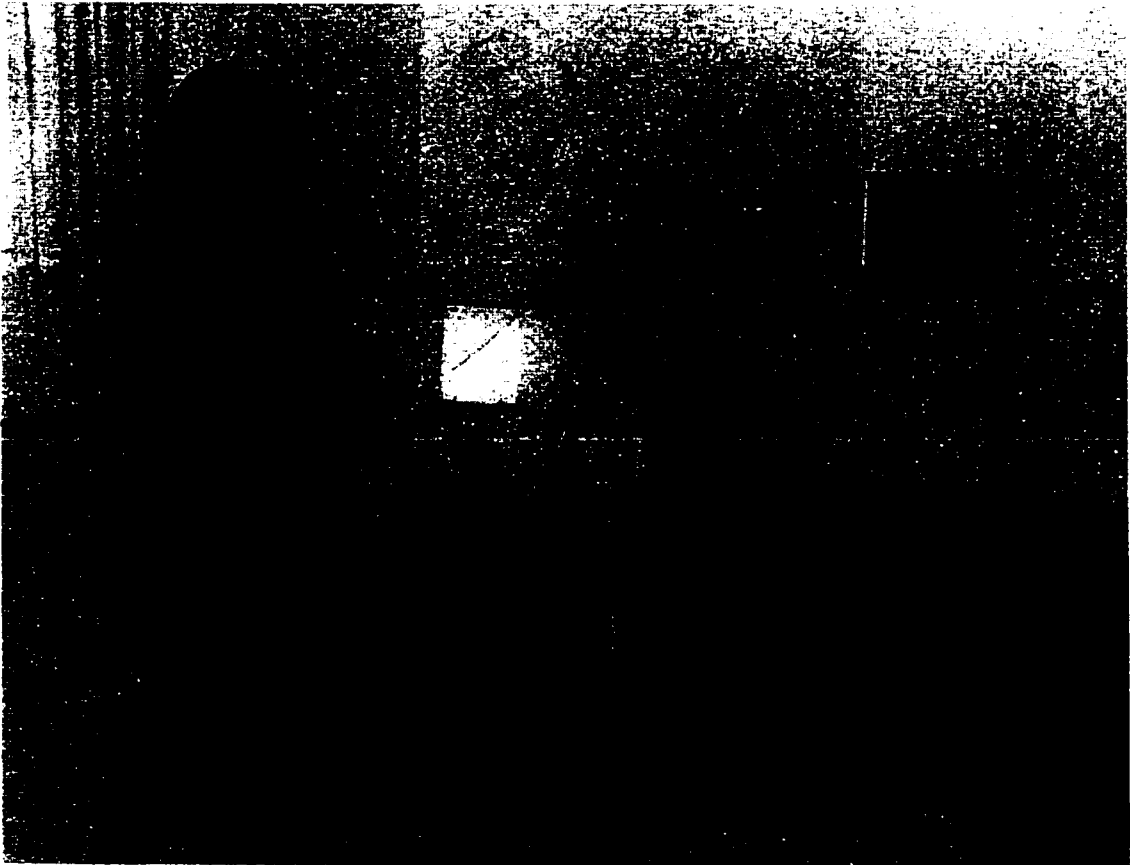


Figure 12

Cindy Sherman. *Untitled Film Still #12*, 1978.



Figure 13

Romaine Brooks. *Self-Portrait*, 1923.

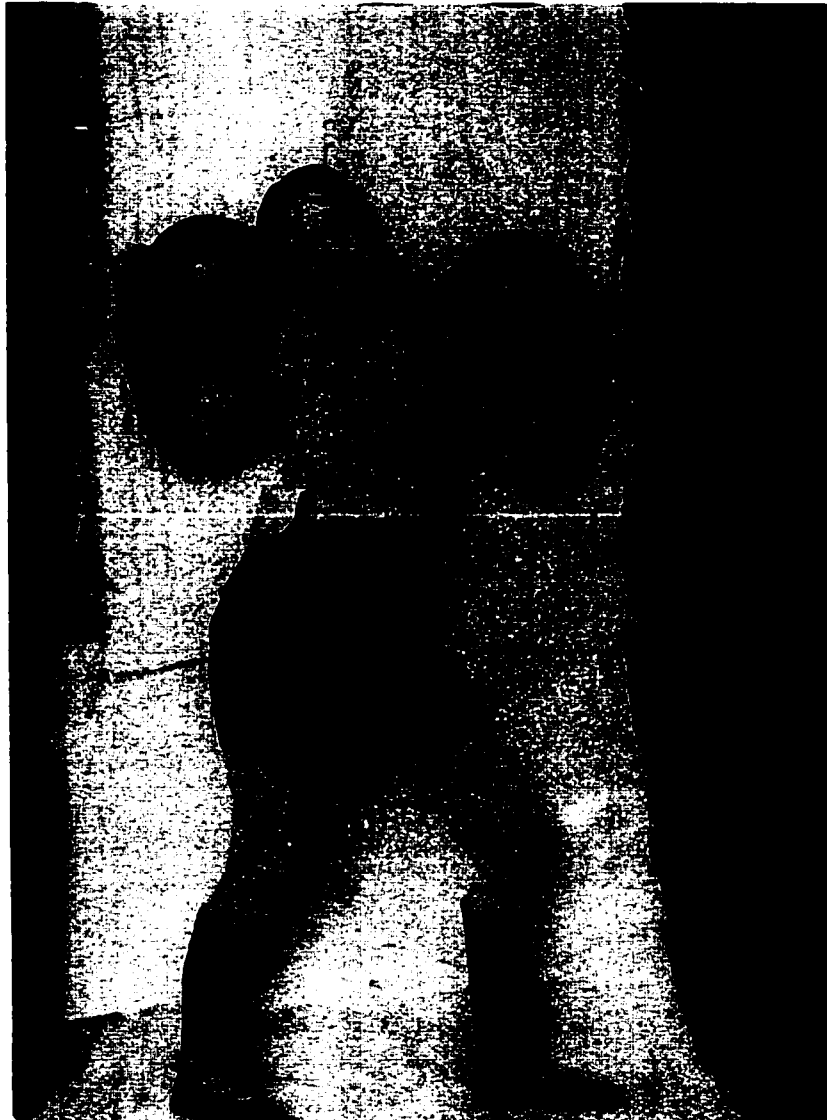


Figure 14

Claude Cahun. Untitled, 1927.

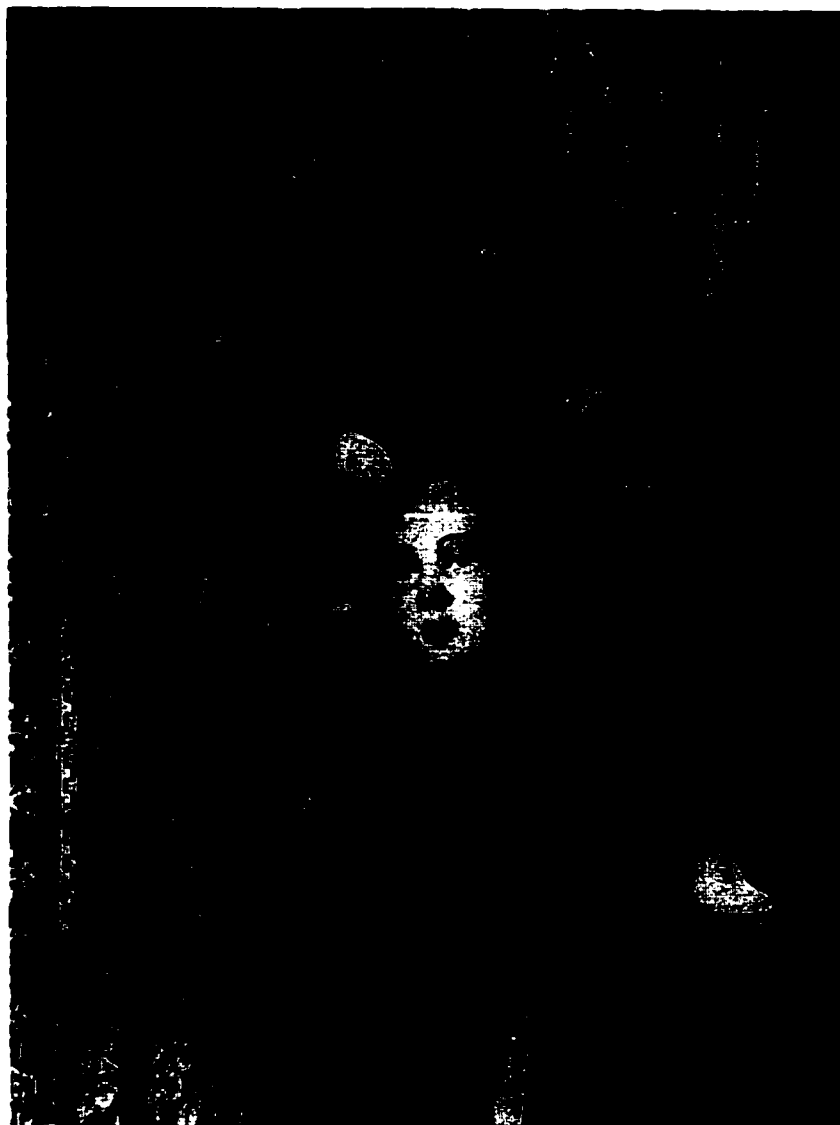


Figure 15

Claude Cahun. Untitled, 1928.



Figure 16

Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore.
Aveux non avenues. Plate X, 1929-30.



Figure 17

Claude Cahun. Untitled, 1928.

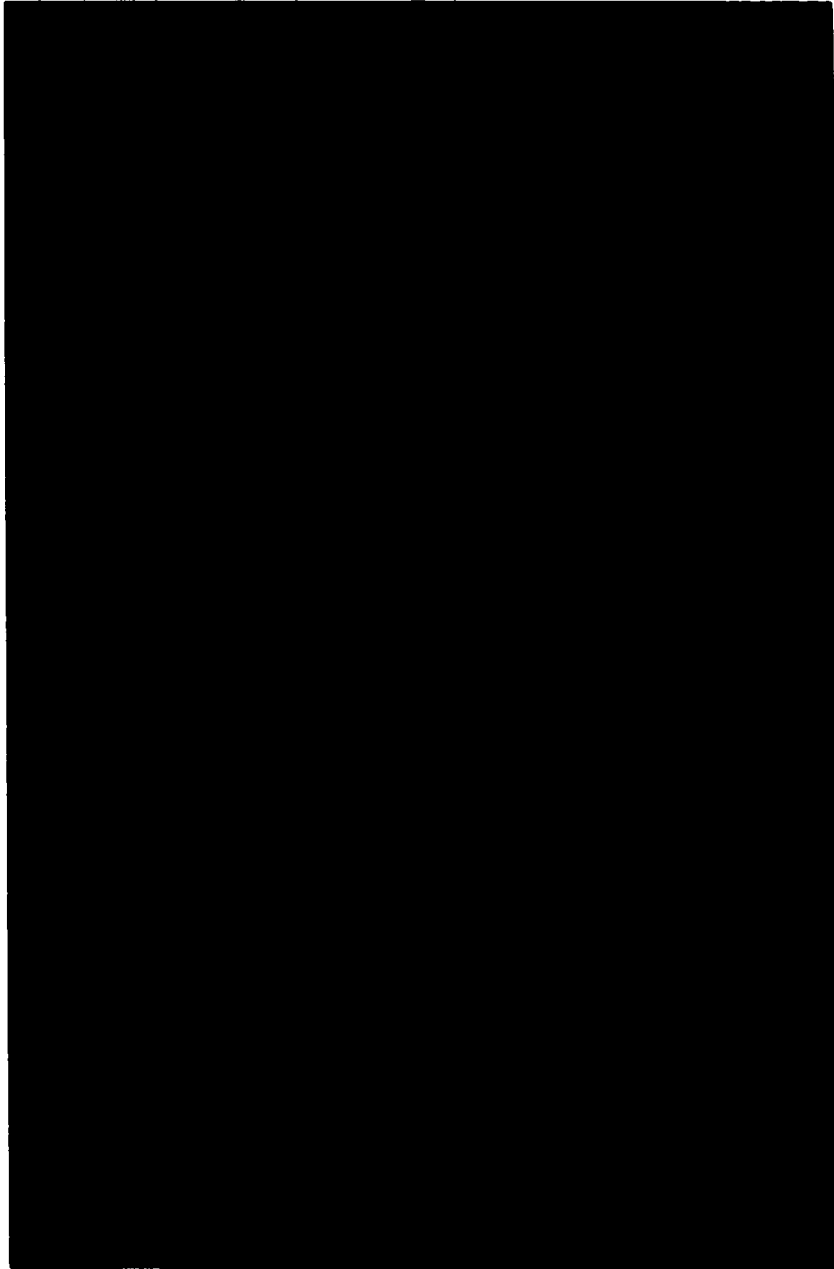


Figure 18

Cindy Sherman. *Untitled #132*, 1984



Figure 19

Cindy Sherman. *Untitled #140*, 1985.



Figure 20

Cindy Sherman. *Untitled #175, 1987.*

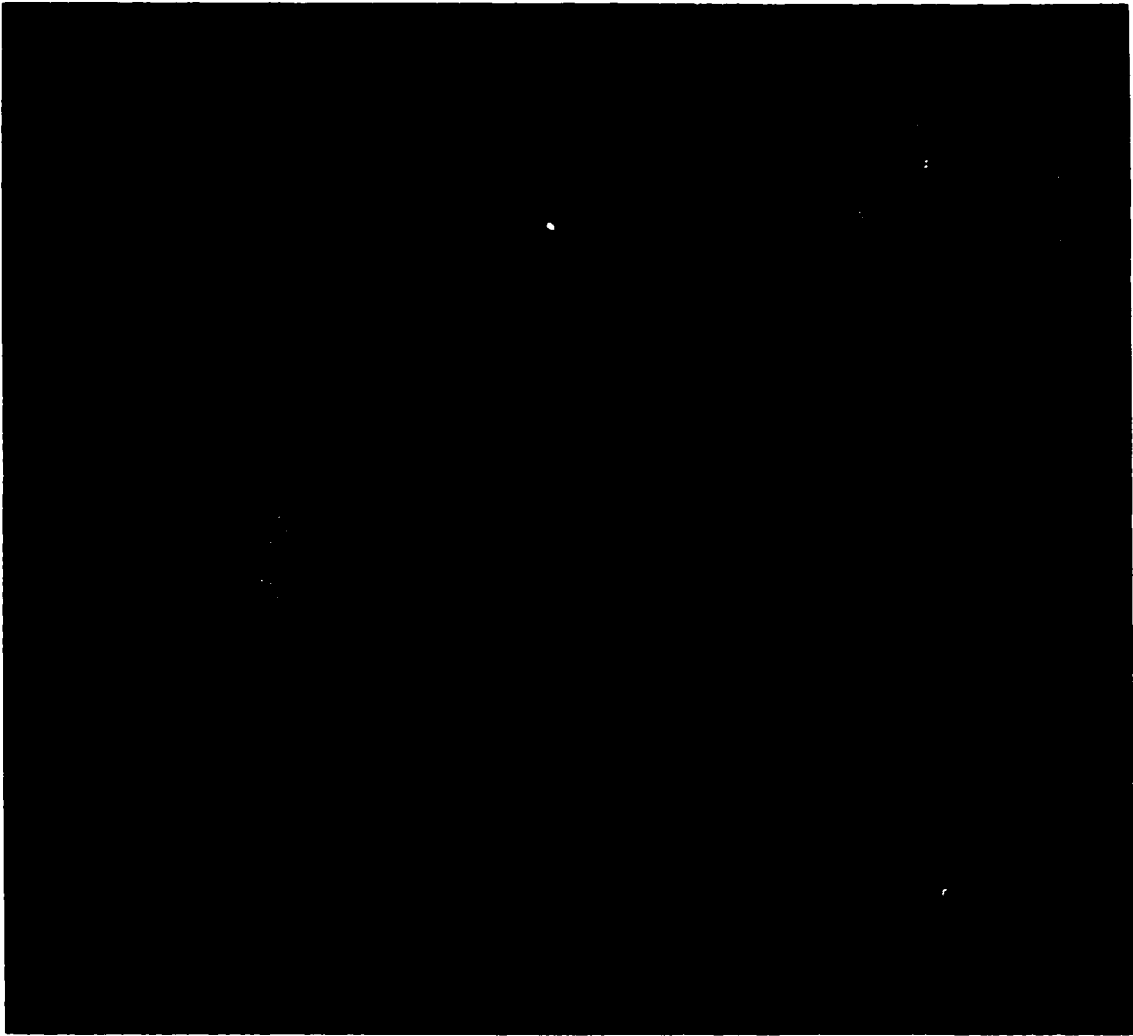


Figure 21

Frida Kahlo. *My Dress Hangs There*, 1933.



Figure 22

Diego Rivera. *Rockefeller Center Mural*, 1934.

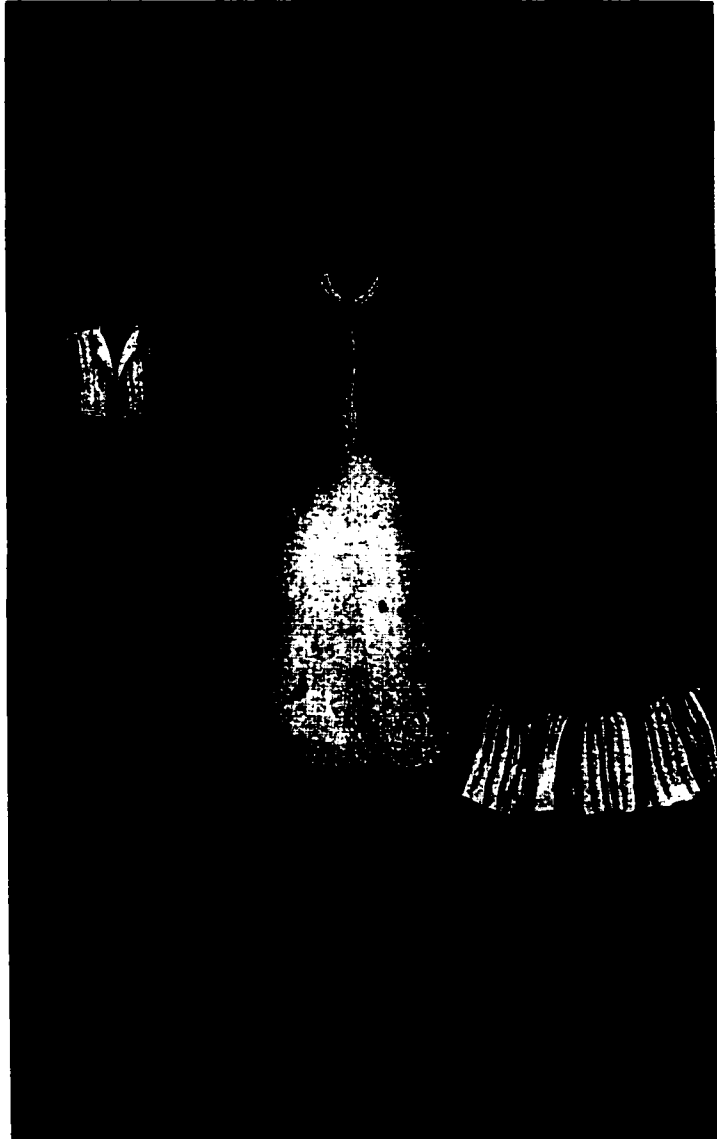


Figure 23

Frida Kahlo. *Memory*, 1937.



Figure 24

Frida Kahlo. *The Two Fridas*, 1939.



Figure 25

Frida Kahlo. *Self-Portrait on the Border Line Between Mexico and the United States, 1932.*

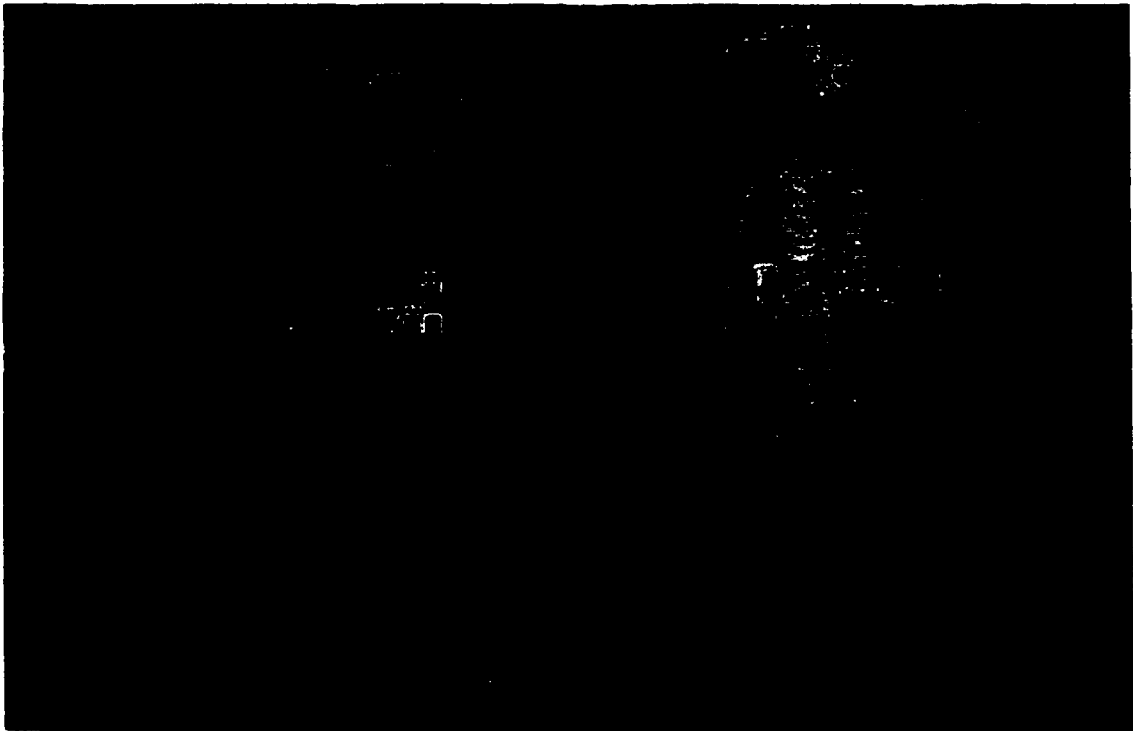


Figure 26

Frida Kahlo. *Four Inhabitants of Mexico*, 1938.



Figure 27

Frida Kahlo. *The Wounded Table*, 1940.



Figure 28

Frida Kahlo. *My Nurse and I*, 1937.

Vita

Corinne Elizabeth Andersen was born in Arlington Heights, Illinois on June 19, 1973. She graduated from Indiana University at Bloomington in 1995 with a degree in Comparative Literature. She relocated to Urbana-Champaign after graduation to pursue her doctorate in Comparative Literature at the University of Illinois. She enjoys traveling and has spent time abroad in Mexico and Europe. Her areas of specialization include twentieth century American, Latin American, and French art and literature.