

Making a “Difference” in/with/for “Autobiography”

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Before he begins to write the “I” in his autobiographical text, Roland Barthes offers an important note to the reader. It is on the first page of the book, the first sign, and signed in one line. Barthes makes himself symbol (“I myself am my own symbol”) and signifier (56). This first sign has a double move, and Barthes is fond of double moves: the single line is arranged on the page in both handwritten French and typescript English: “*Tout ceci doit être considéré comme dit par un personnage de roman,*” and “It must all be considered as if spoken by a character in a novel” (1). Through this play of the autographed body written into subjectivity in language(s), in written forms (handwriting and typescript), in the form of writing (the novel), in structure as “the sentenced text,” in grammar, in speech, and in character, Barthes takes the reader into autobiography as fiction (92). This autobiography constructs the self as subject-in-story, as/ in fact-fiction. As bell hooks says about her own autobiographical work, “I was compelled to face the fiction that is a part of all retelling, remembering. I began to think of the work I was doing as both fiction and autobiography” (157). The French introduction and English translation on the first page of Barthes’ work are two sentence fragments that begin the fragments of an autobiographical text. These fragments are the filaments of remembering and partial retellings that the autobiographer selects, discards, translates. They are moments of beginning and beginning-again: between the shards of remembering and forgetting. Thus, to write the autobiographic “I” is necessarily *not* to write a linear, coherent subject but, rather, an ex-centric “I” and a partial, unfixed, and relational self. This is a “shift from imitation (from description) . . . to nomination” and perhaps “an expressly political collocation of a new ‘I’” (Barthes 56; Smith 157).

I begin with this fragment of Barthes as the generative moment for my focus on a feminist poststructural analysis of autobiographical work and particularly of visual autobiography. This theoretical perspective empha-

sizes nominated, negotiated, contested, and contingent subjectivity. Within the arena of autobiographical studies that examine the disruption of conventional approaches and that investigate the politics of self-representation and identity, there is little work on cultural forms other than writing. While there may be references to a range of visual forms or strategies such as film or photography (C. Kaplan), the focus is on written autobiography. As an example, it is interesting to look at analyses of the work of Jo Spence. It is her book with photographs as *part* of the written book form, rather than the photography itself, that is examined (Smith; Watson). Wendy Hesford notes, “Scholars from a range of disciplines are just now becoming more attentive to the historical importance and theoretical complexity of visual auto/biography” (349). In this paper, I offer a feminist poststructural interpretation of an autobiographical film as an attempt to expand the focus on forms addressed by autobiographical theory attending to subjectivity, difference, and a politics of representation. After some brief remarks about autobiography and difference, I theorize a politics of difference and its implications for an understanding of autobiography as culturally and historically situated, as socially inscribed, and as constituted through an imbrication of subjectivities. I examine how these ideas about difference and autobiography are produced in representations of women’s bodies in the film *The Body Beautiful*. Finally, I argue for autobiographical spectatorship and an attention to affective investment in reading film. I am interested in how emotion operates as a viewing apparatus and informs a notion of a politics of difference in autobiography, one that underlines subjectivity and intersubjectivity as discordant and contingent spheres constituted through relations of power.

As a consequence of this understanding, I consider the autobiographical to be constructed rather than an inscription of truths about a self or selves, a body or bodies. Autobiographies usually include reflections on lives other than the self—in other words, they produce biographies (Stanley and Morgan). Consequently, I understand autobiographical work as being as much about the “social” as the “self.”¹ The autobiographical film, *The Body Beautiful*, by the black British filmmaker Ngozi Onwurah, relies on an intersubjective and imbricated construction. Onwurah’s narrative is constituted through a story about her mother and about mother/daughter intersubjectivity. The differences that each woman’s body inscribes are represented in complex relationality.

By drawing on feminist poststructural perspectives and cultural studies approaches, we can understand the autobiographical as being

produced in discursive formations: it does not exist independently of modes of discourse (Foucault, “Masked”). As Judith Butler observes,

My position is mine to the extent that “I”—and I do not shirk from the pronoun—replay and resignify the theoretical positions that have constituted me, working the possibilities of their convergence, and trying to take account of the possibilities that they systematically exclude. But it is clearly not the case that “I” preside over the positions that have constituted me, shuffling through them instrumentally, casting some aside, incorporating others, although some of my activity may take that form. The “I” who would select between them is always already constituted by them. The “I” is the transfer point of that replay, but it is simply not a strong enough claim to say that the “I” is situated; the “I,” this “I,” is *constituted* by these positions, and these “positions” are not merely theoretical products, but fully embedded organizing principles of material practices and institutional arrangements, those matrices of power and discourse that produce me as a viable “subject.” (9)

In producing any autobiographical text, a writer, a filmmaker, or any other cultural worker must select what is to be represented and how. There are omissions and interpretations. There is not one single complete truth of an experience that can be accessed and represented (Scott, “Experience”); the writer has to theorize experience or “stage” it. I am thinking here of Gayatri Spivak’s notion that “experience is a staging of experience” (“Asked” 9). I understand her to mean that experience is constructed or performed—as Barthes constructs his character in the novel that is his autobiography. Experience does not exist as ultimate or fixed truth(s) in a life outside of discursive formations. To write the experience of an “I” is always already an interpretation.²

Although autobiography and the theory of autobiography are contested sites in feminist and cultural studies, it is not my intent in this paper to map out the range of debates (see Probyn). Rather, I am interested in autobiography and the representation of women’s bodies—through relations of difference such as age, sexuality, race, ability, gender, and class—in various forms of cultural work. How do women who work in sites of cultural production represent bodies through relations of difference? How does “difference” make a difference in autobiography? Can autobiographical work depict “states of hybridity” (Griggers 187) or “hyphenated identities and hybrid realities” (Trinh, *Moon* 73)? How might I read an autobiographical text autobiographically? These interrogations emerge from the concatenation of my investments and pleasures in feminist,

poststructuralist, and cultural studies theories; in autobiographical compositions focusing on issues of difference and subjectivity; and in the narrating of these concerns in forms of visual culture. Homi Bhabha points out:

What is theoretically innovative, and politically crucial, is the need to think beyond narratives of originary and initial subjectivities and to focus on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences. These “in-between” spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood—singular or communal—that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself. (*Location* 1-2)

Autobiographical work in this vein textualizes provisional, contingent, and ambivalent “traces” of past/present/future narratives of subjectivities—as historically, socially, culturally, and politically situated. I use the notion of a “trace” to invoke Jacques Derrida’s sense of it in relation to *différance*, the word that Derrida creates to underline concomitant meanings of “to differ” and “to defer”; to suggest the relationship of differences; and to disturb the sense of “difference” by inserting an “a” that cannot be heard. For Derrida, a trace holds on to its past sense while connecting to that which it effects or marks. In *différance* there are always the traces of other meanings. Differences are traced on each other. Autobiography can trace the tracings of difference that provide for ways to re-write the self—politically—in the social. Furthermore, the “pedagogical moment” here is “not just the learning of shared traditions, but, more importantly, the learning of how others do (and have done) their struggles” (Schenke 46).³

In this paper, I attempt cross-complementary tracings. First, I briefly examine the notions of “difference” and “hybridity.” There is little attention to this area of critical theory in current studies of autobiography. My effort here is to complement and extend autobiographical theory that focuses on issues of identity and difference.⁴ In its theorization of subjectivity, intersubjectivity, and difference, the autobiographical film, *The Body Beautiful*, in another cross-complementary tracing, informs critical theories of difference. I offer a textual analysis followed by an autobiographical reading of the film, a form of visual autobiography that I view as an example of cultural production that, as Julia Watson suggests, inscribes autobiography “not as a genre of writing, but as a rhetorical figure of the negotiations around identity and difference” (143). These

negotiations are rendered through the filmmaker’s representations of her body in relation to her mother’s body. In the final section of this article, I turn to a focus on the reader/spectator’s affective investments in autobiographical works and highlight a politics of difference in an autobiographical reading of the film.

Difference is Difficult

Difference cannot be addressed easily or unproblematically (Brah; Giroux). Moreover, there is now a vast literature on the notion of difference, including a journal called *differences* and innumerable books and articles that have “difference” in their titles. The currency of conceptualizing difference is reflected, for example, in the various books in which Cornel West’s article, “The New Cultural Politics of Difference,” was reprinted in the early 1990s.⁵ West himself suggests that the emphasis on difference in a range of cultural texts is reflective of a pressing concern with issues of self-representation in the work of marginalized, subordinated, and terrorized peoples at this particular moment in history (“New”).

The concept of difference can be used to argue for a repressive politics of racism, sexism, classism, and homophobia, or it can serve to emphasize a liberal notion of diversity and pluralism. I want to focus here on a different notion of difference: as a concept for reconfiguring issues of identity, subjectivity, community, and alliance. Engaging with difference in this sense is a key focus in feminist, poststructural, anti-racist, postcolonial, and cultural studies literatures. However, various theories problematize difference differently. Some texts emphasize the dilemma of difference (Di Stefano; Scott, *Gender*), the politics of difference (Giroux; West, “New”), the relations of difference (Brah; Brown; Fanon; Scott, “Experience”), the multiplication of differences (Gatens; Hewitt), or the ethics of difference (Oliver). Avtar Brah argues that the key issue for feminists working across differences “is not about ‘difference’ *per se*, but concerns the question of who defines difference, how different categories of women are represented within the discourses of ‘difference,’ and whether ‘difference’ differentiates laterally or hierarchically. We need greater conceptual clarity in analysing difference” (140).

Similarly, Kamala Visweswaran remarks that with regard to social differences the issue is “not whether to examine such categories, but *how* to do so” (92). In working with theories and discourses of difference in this article, I intend to engage with them not to resolve differences but to engage the possibility of leaving them as Visweswaran suggests, “contentious in order to remain productive” (83). I do so in the spirit of Jane Flax’s

concern that “attempts to discuss social processes like race, sexuality, and gender are highly inadequate and frustrating” (*Disputed* 23).

Difference operates on many axes, including (but not limited to) race, ethnicity, class, gender, religion, sexuality, ability, and age. These categories are not discrete; they interconnect and cannot be reduced to separate coherences. They affect one another but are not coterminous. That is, they are not of the same order, and they operate differently within discourses and social relations. Moreover, as Ruth Frankenberg notes, “While certain kinds of difference or differentiation can be seen and discussed with abandon, others are evaded if at all possible” (152). This evasion, of course, will depend on particular discourses and specific social and historical circumstances. In feminist work, for example, there is a history of evasion and erasure around race; numerous texts, particularly by women of color, challenge the discourse of exclusion and the erasure of difference.⁶ In terms of race and ethnicity, there is also a body of work that emphasizes the importance of analyzing whiteness as a racial category.⁷ Concomitant with the evasion of certain kinds of differences is the problem of privileging one axis of difference over another such that difference can be read as gender, *or* race, *or* class, *or* sexuality, *or* disability. It is important that we not reduce the concept of difference to one discourse or one marker, that we also take account of the mechanisms of power of a particular social difference.

The idea of difference contains a cultural and historical situatedness and a concern with social relations. As such, it is a useful concept for understanding autobiography as social. To tell the (partial) story of a life is to tell the (partial) story of interconnected lives. As Laurel Richardson observes, “The story of a life is also more than the life, the contours and meanings allegorically extending to others, others seeing themselves, knowing themselves through another’s life story, re-visioning their own, arriving where they started, and knowing ‘the place for the first time’” (158). Thus, a concern with difference in an autobiographical text emphasizes this sense of community in self and the partial knowing of the multiple locations that constitute subjectivity and intersubjectivity. Autobiographical film makes public that which tends to be private, and it points to the social and cultural in what is often deemed to be “personal” (Citron). In *The Body Beautiful*, both the autobiographical form and a politics of difference work together to contest assumptions about conventions of autobiography and claims of authenticity and about the idea that a universal knowing and known subject, constituted by reason and science, can be achieved (see also Hesford 351). “Difference” belies the

view from nowhere that erases the effects of relations of power and the interconnections of social differences. Thinking about difference in relation to the autobiographical also signals the complications of representational practices in cultural texts that attempt to narrate the lives of differently positioned subjects.

The Possibility of Imbrication

To further a consideration of the significance of difference for autobiography, I suggest the idea of imbricated subjectivity to signal the significance of both separate and interrelated effects, and I draw on the work of Bhabha to support the idea of multiple and shifting, rather than fixed and essentialized, subject positions. Avtar Brah as well as Bernice Reagon (especially in her important essay “Coalition Politics”) make the point that there is always the danger of any community or group asserting identity as difference in a way that essentializes that group or community.⁸ Brah argues for vigilance about the specific social and historical circumstances in which an essentialist affirmation of identity occurs. Spivak proposes the *risk* of what she calls a “strategic essentialism” that recognizes a group’s need to mobilize around a sense of common or shared goals (*Other Worlds*). As Brah recognizes, essentialism is a difficult issue, and the term needs to be kept alive as a problem. This is “the strategy of using the only available language while not subscribing to its premises” (Spivak, Preface xviii). Denise Riley argues for an “agile” feminism that constantly examines and redefines “women”: “Feminism must ‘speak women,’ while at the same time, an acute awareness of its vagaries is imperative” (113). This is similar to Butler’s argument that while naming an identity such as “woman” might be important for mobilization in specific circumstances, this strategy needs to remain open to continuous/contiguous interrogations. In another context, Butler has called this a “double movement”—that is, both an insistence on “identity” and a questioning of the exclusions that identity-terms establish (see Aronowitz et al. 108).

Questions about identity politics have circulated in feminist theory for some time now, and they continue to be posed. I think there might be a way to conceptualize difference through a movement of imbrication: separate but overlapping layers. This idea might work to resist simplistic notions of insider/outsider and to avoid creating a hierarchy of oppressions (Trinh, “Who is Speaking?”; *Woman*). Imbrication does not mean thinking about difference as operating on a continuum, or as equality across subject locations and within discursive formations. Rather, I use

the word to invoke an understanding of difference operating as the layered “across-ness” of identity categories, or subjectivities, in negotiated social relations: differences mediating in complex, contradictory, and contingent ways depending on social and historical contexts. The emphasis is on the relations, interconnections, and interweavings of difference.

Bhabha’s writings about hybridity, postcolonial identity, boundaries and borderlines, and cultural difference have been influential in various sites of cultural studies and in postcolonial and critical theories. Bhabha is helpful for thinking about differences as negotiated in imbricated processes. I concur with his insistence on the urgency of a politics of difference. He asserts, “The whole nature of the public sphere is changing so that we really do need the notion of a politics which is based on unequal, uneven, multiple and *potentially antagonistic*, political identities” (“Third” 12).

A stated purpose of Bhabha’s *The Location of Culture* is “to provide a form of the writing of cultural difference in the midst of modernity that is inimical to binary boundaries: whether these be between past and present, inside and outside, subject and object, signifier and signified” (251). Bhabha observes that dichotomous oppositions are discursively organized, and he proposes paying attention to the “continual slippage of categories” (140). This practice of disruption is important for a politics of fluctuating and multiple subjectivities and for an ongoing rethinking and reshaping of a politics that underlines the “*articulating world . . . of difference*” (“Third” 14). Bhabha emphasizes cultural difference rather than pluralism and cultural diversity. The latter, lodged in liberalism and relativism, enacts the paradox of emphasizing diversity while lodged in a universalist perspective.

Bhabha uses the terms *hybridity* and *hybridization* to advance his ideas about contested and shifting subjectivities and intersubjectivities and to displace notions of coherent and authoritative identities (Hassan and Bhabha; Bhabha, *Location*, “Third”). As the in-between and the “agonistic,” hybridity disrupts binary divisions: it “breaks down the symmetry and duality of self/other, inside/outside” (*Location* 108, 116). Bhabha writes about hybridity as a “space of double inscription” (108), a phrase that resonates with Derrida’s sense of trace and *différance*: “whenever any writing both marks and goes back over its mark with an undecidable stroke . . . [t]his double mark escapes the pertinence or authority of truth. . . . This dis-location (is what) writes/is written” (*Dissemination* 193). “Space” and “trace” do not refer to a separate or fixed third space produced out of two originary sites; rather, they signal

“fluctuation and undecidability” (Hassan and Bhabha). Hybridity is “the ‘third space’ which enables other positions to emerge” (Bhabha, “Third” 13). Bhabha describes this terrain as “interstitial spaces” where “cultures in-between” are articulated and meanings and forms of authority are negotiated: “incommensurable cultural edges put in contentious and productive dialogue” (Hassan and Bhabha). According to Bhabha,

Hybridity is the name of this displacement of value from symbol to sign that causes the dominant discourse to split along the axis of its power to be representative, authoritative. Hybridity represents that ambivalent “turn” of the discriminated subject into the terrifying, exorbitant object of paranoid classification—a disturbing questioning of the images and presences of authority. (*Location* 113)

More recently, Bhabha has emphasized hybridization rather than hybridity (Hassan and Bhabha 25). Working from the verb “hybridize” instead of the adjective “hybrid,” he seems to be emphasizing movement, process, and indeterminacy as a means to counter the idea of hybridity as referencing two cultures coming together and producing a third. Hybridization suggests the contentiousness of discourses and subject positions and the fluctuating boundaries where knowledges and forms of authority are negotiated and renegotiated (Hassan and Bhabha). I understand Bhabha to be further emphasizing his insistence on the inevitability of negotiation in moments of antagonism and conditions of political strategies and alliances (Bhabha, “Third”). Negotiation is formulated as “subversion,” “transgression,” “translation,” and “reformulation” in incommensurable activities of struggle (“Third”). Bhabha’s problematization of terminology is similar to Flax’s use of “gendering,” her “still-unsatisfactory attempt,” as she calls it, to rewrite the idea of gender as verb rather than noun: “not a fixed or simple identity or set of social relations” but shifting, contingent, and contradictory socio-historic processes (23).

Previously, I put forward “imbrication” (a still-unsatisfactory term, as Flax would say) as an attempt to language a notion of difference. I introduce this term with the thought that it might catch some of the sense of in-betweenness and interstitial process that Bhabha underscores. I hope to suggest, following Sherene Razack, “a more complex mapping of our differences than we have ever tried before” (68), a nonreductionist way of thinking about categories such as race and class (Hall, “Gramsci’s” 24), and a critique of subjectivity as fixed, unified, and/or pre-given. “Imbrication” signals subjectivities as fluctuating, shifting, and *moving across* axes of difference and suggests identities as

constituted in complex and layered processes. Signifiers of identity must be understood as contestable (Donald and Rattansi 5). Moreover, as Trinh suggests, “Difference does not annul identity. It is beyond and alongside identity” (*Woman* 104).

The Body Beautiful is an autobiographical work that writes “I” and women’s bodies in the context of these notions of difference and hybridization. Onwurah’s representation of herself and her mother produces subjectivities that contest fixed boundaries. The film could be described as problematizing truth claims about gendered and racialized subjects, as interrogating the authority of “experience” and “autobiography,” and as invoking Bhabha’s idea of “cultures in-between.” In the multiplicity and contentiousness of the representation of each woman and of their relationality, the film illustrates my notion of imbricated subjectivity and intersubjectivity. In the following sections of this article, I turn to my readings about representations of bodies of difference in *The Body Beautiful*.

Imbricated Subjectivity and *The Body Beautiful*

The Body Beautiful emerges from a particular socio-historic context in Britain. It was produced in 1990. Throughout the 1980s, film collectives (such as Black Audio and Sankofa) and theorists (such as Stuart Hall and Kobena Mercer) were addressing issues of race, representation, and the mobilization of “Black” (Bailey; Brah; Grossberg, “Bringin’”; Hall, “Identities”; Mercer). Filmmakers and videographers producing cultural work in this context were concerned with contestations about the representation of racialized identities concomitant with challenges to modernist notions of a realist form (Bailey).⁹ Onwurah’s work, like that of other new black British filmmakers, foregrounds pleasures, desires, fears, contested bodies, subjectivity, and difference. Lush images, color saturation, fantasies, sensuality, and corporeal topographies offer spectator pleasures in *The Body Beautiful*. Cameron Bailey observes that along with “rigorous interrogation of film form, the best of Black British new wave have (thankfully) not neglected the element of pleasure. Rejecting the severity of the theory film, these filmmakers see no reason why being politically and theoretically sound should rule out sensuous visuals . . .” (3). In addition to exuberant visuality, Onwurah’s film troubles spectator identifications by interrogating the disciplinary codes by which women’s bodies are normalized and constructed as “beautiful” according to discourses of disability, race, sexuality, class, and age. These normalizing regimes produce standards based on white-

ness, youth, class advantage, heterosexuality, slimness, able-bodiedness, and wellness. With an emotionally compelling story and images, Onwurah examines these relations of power through her own and her mother’s subjectivity and their complex relationality. In terms of racialized differences, Onwurah is a mixed-race child who, by all appearances, is black but who is the daughter of a black Nigerian father and a white British mother. In her voice-over narration, she observes that she and her mother are constituted as subjects in a world that “sees only in black and white,” and she suggests that the construction of whiteness and blackness are interdependent (also see Fanon).

The film is about Onwurah’s relationship to her mother, particularly the complex relationship of her body to her mother’s body. Although the story is historied, so to speak, through the filmmaker’s telling, both women provide narration about their individual and interrelated lives. Thus, the film disrupts unmediated access to historical reality, a filmic and autobiographical convention whereby a single commentator would authenticate experience and a narrative truth (see Hesford 371). After giving birth to her son and while Ngozi is a young child, Onwurah’s mother, Madge, discovers that she has breast cancer. Following a mastectomy, she develops rheumatoid arthritis. As a young woman, the daughter becomes a fashion model. Both the daughter’s and mother’s bodies are constituted in a discourse of “the body beautiful,” but the daughter is represented through accepted norms of beauty in the fashion world, while the mother is represented through lack and abjection. However, as a black model, the daughter also represents resistance to the beauty norms of whiteness. The mother’s body (white, disabled, scarred, aged) and the daughter’s (mixed-race, able-bodied, beautified, young) are constructed as discursive sites and sites of interpellation. Onwurah’s film is significant for the ways in which it explores multiple differences in their imbrication. Differences of age, race, gender, ability, and sexuality are interwoven with issues of desire, pleasure, longing, femininity, masculinity, embodiment, health and disease. Because no axis of difference is viewed as containing an essential truth, the film challenges transparent, singular, and fixed understandings of subjectivity. Hesford’s description of *Delirium* is an equally apt description of *The Body Beautiful*: it “furthers the reflexive turn and prompts the viewer to become even more self-conscious about the performativity of auto/biographical filmmaking” (371).

Caren Kaplan suggests that there are autobiographical works that combine “critical accountability” and “autobiography as thing itself”

(119). I understand her to mean that these works examine critical issues in the autobiographical narrative as well as addressing the meaning of autobiography as a textual practice. In *The Body Beautiful*, for example, differences are made sites of crisis and contestation, and issues of power relations and subjectivity are foregrounded. In addition, autobiographical truth, narrative authority, and representations of “self” and “other” are problematized by the ways in which the content is articulated.¹⁰ Onwurah uses a number of strategies to compose this complication. Poses, gestures, body parts, and the gaze are heightened, exaggerated, or brought into close-up through dramatized scenes. In terms of performance, the film combines various mechanics of acting styles, including the work of “actors” with a “real” person playing “herself.” For example, Madge, the filmmaker’s mother, plays herself at her present age, while actors represent mother and daughter at various ages. Similarly, a voice-over narration layers the voice of the “real” Madge Onwurah with an actor speaking the lines of the daughter, Ngozi Onwurah. The film also interplays naturalistic scenes with sequences in which sound, lighting, set design, and camera have an overarching presence. These techniques also subvert the representation of the authority of experience or the authority of the ethnographer of self and the absolute authenticity of an autobiographical subject.

The notion of a true, inner self that can be accessed and represented and that guarantees a sense of stability, authority, and grounding in a turbulent world has been profoundly disturbed—if not effaced—by Marxist, Freudian, Saussurean, feminist, poststructuralist, and post-colonial discourses.¹¹ In what follows, I focus on specific visualities of *The Body Beautiful*: spheres of “gazes,” “fashion,” “heterotopia,” and “mother” that, as Hall suggests, chart a terrain of subjectivity “re-thought and re-lived, in and through difference” (“Identities” 41).

Subjectivity and the Gaze(s)

It is a truism, but nonetheless true, that what you see depends on where you stand and which direction you look in.

—Graham Murdock

There is a scene in the film when Onwurah, as a young woman, and her mother catch the eye of a young black man. They are in a community center drinking tea together while the men are playing pool. The women

overhear the man in conversation with his friend and observe the two in a practice of voyeuristic gazing and objectification: the men regard a photograph of a woman in the newspaper and comment, jokingly, about her breasts. Then the man looks up from the newspaper at the two women; it is the first look in a sequence—and it is a double take. His gaze is centralized through the quick close-up of his face after a long shot. He slowly smiles at the women. The next image, rather than a corresponding close-up of the women, is a shot of both of them. The mother looks, first, in/across the frame to a female viewer, her daughter, and then out of the frame to the man. The daughter stares back at the man. I read the mother’s look as open, acknowledging, friendly; the daughter’s look appears suspicious and angry. The man’s gaze seems warm, receptive, interested. The multiple gazes combined with the audio script of the men’s conversation and the voice-over narration of the mother unsettle any fixed narrative about the who and why of gazing, desire, and identification.

These responses or positions of gazing are layered into the remembering that Onwurah provides earlier in the film about her and her mother’s relations to her black Nigerian father. Earlier in the film, we learn that Onwurah’s mother met her husband in Britain while he was a medical student. After he completed his degree, the family moved to Africa. When civil war broke out in Nigeria, Madge, pregnant with another child, returned to Britain with her daughter. Onwurah’s loss is experienced in the context of familial relations: as the daughter-narrator, she says they “would never live as a family again.” Onwurah connects the history of African struggles and the consequences of race and nation to issues of gender relations, family, and the body as they resonate at a moment of upheaval for herself as a young child, her pregnant mother, and her father who must stay in his country as it is being “ripped apart by civil war.” Onwurah, her father, and her mother are positioned in contradictory and contingent moments of desire, need, commitment, loyalty, politics, struggle, regret, love, and care.

In terms of “gaze(s),” I would suggest that Onwurah works interrogations and complications about the female gaze into this history introduced earlier in the film. She constructs the female gaze as a double-gazing or another double take: a re-viewing, re-thinking, re-positioning. The mother’s and daughter’s relationship to the man at the community center is not configured as a simple identification *or* resistance of either woman. The gaze is made complex by its inscription in this doubleness and this difference between the women in their reception of the male gaze.

The simultaneity of identification and resistance underscores the film's theorization of what Hesford, in relation to pedagogical responses, describes as the ways in which spectators' receptions "are predicated, in part, on presumptions of the 'real' and on auto/biographical conventions and expectations" (370). Desire is not a simple reciprocity: for mother, daughter, and young man, the gaze is constituted by complex and contradictory layers of investments, pleasures, remembrances, hopes, longings, disappointments, identifications, and suspicions. As Jackie Stacey notes, "The rigid distinction between *either* desire *or* identification . . . fails to address the construction of desires which involve a specific interplay of both processes" ("Desperately" 129). The daughter's reaction more obviously corresponds to a look of resistance that characterizes the male gaze as demeaning and oppressive. The mother's gaze, which seems to welcome the man's interest and to reflect her own curiosity, references her relation to another black man: the African man who was her husband and lover and who left Britain and his family because of his engagement in Nigeria's civil war. Her gaze signals desire and identification across differently racialized bodies. Furthermore, the exchanged gaze between the young black man and the older white woman also surfaces histories of colonial relations of Africa and Britain. It underscores the configurations of power that differently entitle and disentitle white bodies and black bodies under particular political conditions—and in everyday relations.

Difference is also produced through these bodies according to gendered discourses of appearance. It is the man's interest in the representation of breasts in the newspaper, before he looks up at the women, that further underscores how heterosexual desire may be produced through the objectification of a woman's body part and how the mother's body interrupts the normalization of women's bodies and their desired representation. Madge's "defect," the absence of a breast, is a form of resistance within the normalizing discourse of corrected and cosmeticized women's bodies (see Bordo). Both the young man and Onwurah's mother are gazing at each other through this politics of the body such that an imbrication of differences of gender, race, ability, and appearance are emphasized. In my view, the scene challenges the idea that there can be only one kind of reception of a male gaze. Furthermore, the women's histories are written in relations of difference: in terms of age, race, class, and ability. Madge is an older, disabled, working-class, white woman, while her daughter is black, young, able-bodied and upwardly mobile through her modeling career. These differences

affect how the women themselves gaze and how they respond to this particular male gaze.

It is significant that when the two women are seen in the community center, which includes an unpretentious café and a pool table and would appear to represent a working-class site, they are dressed identically and are sitting beside each other in the same physical position. As a result, the difference in their subsequent gazes is further heightened and underscored. The identities of mother and daughter are written in difference/sameness in such a way that the film interrogates this dichotomy in a manner similar to Bhabha's unsettling of binary divisions. The film provokes a complicated understanding of subjectivity as mediated by memory and desire and of autobiography as textualizing not simply a self but a self in relation to other and to the social.

The complexity of race and generation is also underscored in this scene in the gaze between young black man, older white woman, and mixed-race child. The centrality of a white, western youthful gaze, prominent on screen and in theory, is subverted. *The Body Beautiful* neither posits a simplistic notion of the male gaze as "determinant of all meaning" nor adopts the construction of the male gaze found in some feminist film theory that ascribes monolithic power to that gaze (see Kipnis 9). The film problematizes the representation and reception of male bodies, female bodies, black bodies, white bodies, young bodies, old bodies, able bodies, and disabled bodies.¹² As Laura Kipnis observes, "A number of women artists and performers—both in the art world and in popular culture—are, in practice, creating a resistant politics of the body that ignores feminist dicta around the issue of the gaze, risking the stereotypical identification of woman and body to counter the grip of misogyny over bodily meaning" (10). The gazes in the film suggest that subjectivity in this autobiographical text is constructed in fluctuating desires, pleasures, and investments and in the difference that difference makes.

In an interesting article that examines "the space of two women together," Lidia Curti suggests that images of women together are particularly plentiful in television domestic dramas, and these images invoke "the movement between sameness and difference" (148). Although Curti's focus is television, I quote at length from her article here since her argument helps to clarify what I am suggesting about the ways in which Onwurah's film problematizes sameness/difference and complicates ideas about self and autobiography through a politics of difference. Curti observes,

This confrontation and closeness between women—whether it is hostility or solidarity—shows the complexity of a relationship that in an earlier moment had seemed clear and “natural.” The complexity is there, inside and outside fiction. It also involves the relation of the woman spectator to the woman on the screen through a series of mirror images: the gaze recreates the difficult relationship to the other woman, in the recurrence of the images of mothers and daughters, sisters and friends, enemies and rivals. The relation to the other becomes relation to the self, autobiography becomes vision and fantasy. The same as other is known and familiar, yet at the same time hidden, mysterious, unknown, “uncanny.” (149-50)

Curti’s reflections illustrate the complexity of gazing, self/other relations, and the self in the gaze of the Other. *The Body Beautiful* also produces this complexity.

The Discourse of Fashion(s)

Which body? We have several.
—Roland Barthes

Curti’s observations about the relation between women on screen and the gaze of women watching—“the same as other” being both “known” and “unknown”—is also reflected in the scene where a young Onwurah, modeling a glamorous red dress, is suddenly re-presented and re-placed as her mother, modeling a red coat. The younger woman is seen standing on a rock in the middle of a river, and she is posed with her arms wide and her body stretched and displayed in the tight-fitting dress. This representation of woman and fashion blurs into the next image, which reveals Madge on the same spot. However, she is heavily concealed by the thick coat and her body is folded in on itself as she curves forward with her hands in her pockets. In the audible the camera shutter, in the shutter’s closing and opening, in the blink of the spectator’s eye, daughter is mother is Barthes’ “woman of Fashion” (*Fashion* 254). The woman in red, in the discourse of fashion, becomes known through the singularity of representation of *this* red, *this* clothing, *this* gesture, *this* hair, *this* beauty, *this* body. As Barthes observes, the woman of fashion

is a collection of tiny, separate essences rather analogous to the character parts played by actors in classical theater; this analogy is not arbitrary, since Fashion presents the woman as a representation, in such a way that

a simple attribute of the person, spoken in the form of an adjective, actually absorbs this person’s entire being. . . . The paradox consists then of maintaining the generality of the characteristics (which alone is compatible with the institution of Fashion) in a strictly analytical state: it is a generality of accumulation, not of synthesis: in Fashion, the *person* is thus simultaneously impossible and yet entirely known. (*Fashion* 254-55)

The person, the individual, the woman is an illusion; she contains, and is contained by, the essences she enacts. In the discourse of fashion, as in Curti’s notion of the gaze between women, a woman is constructed as both “impossible” and “entirely known.” Gender becomes performative: in the eye (“I”) of the camera the older woman “passes” for the younger woman, the able-bodied woman of the modeling world “passes” for the disabled woman, mother and daughter “pass” for each other, and both “pass” as “woman.” “Trespassing. . . . Gender, here, exists only in representation . . . or performance” (Garber 143). As the model, the daughter represents the normalizing regimes of fashion and beauty, but the image of the mother replaces and disrupts fashion’s regulating standard. The idea of fashion in the film interrogates normalizing images of beauty and the body: who counts as attractive, as fashionable, and as a “woman.” The film emphasizes the idea that gender is constructed or performed, and it interrogates the modernist notion that a subject can be fixed and universally known. Thus, as Hesford suggests, “the performative and reflexive aspects of auto/biographical filmmaking” are also underscored through the exchange of the images of each woman (371).

Intersubjectivity and Heterotopia(s)

The sphere of the gaze and fashion point to the intersubjective relations of mother and daughter and to how difference and autobiography interconnect to challenge the idea of unitary and fixed subjectivity. The representation of the women in heterotopic sites also underscores these considerations through an interrogation of the idea that women’s bodies are defined by “defect” or by what they lack. There is an emphasis on the resonances of external space in the film; the playground, the sauna, the mirror, and the bed, for example, are key sites that suggest the complications of mother/child relations in terms of public perceptions of the mother’s body and that question a discourse of women’s bodies that produces a “normalising standard against which all else is judged” (Bordo 452). Furthermore, the heterotopic sites underscore the differences that are marked on the bodies of the daughter and mother. Michel Foucault

suggests that external space is “the anxiety of our era” and that “which draws us out of ourselves, in which the erosion of our lives, our time and our history occurs” (“Other” 23). Drawing on Foucault, I will term the aforementioned sites in the film “heterotopias”: external spaces that “suspect, neutralize, or invert the set of relations that they happen to designate, mirror, or reflect” (24). In the following, I focus on the sauna and the mirror as heterotopias.

A young Onwurah, recently returned from Sweden where “grannies” regularly use saunas, persuades her mother to accompany her to a sauna. “Don’t be so uptight!” she exclaims, when her mother initially hesitates. When Madge falls asleep in the sauna, her body relaxes, and the towel falls from her chest to reveal her mastectomy. As Onwurah turns to each of the other women in the sauna, the camera registers the look of dismay on the women’s faces as they see her mother’s mutilated chest. The daughter-narrator says, “I was forced to see her as others might.” Onwurah is caught off-guard, and, ironically, she is not ready for the actual nakedness that she is exposed to despite her supposed sophistication regarding nudity in the sauna.

The sauna functions as a heterotopic space in which a woman cannot display the prescribed norms of a woman’s body and is, consequently, perceived as *not* a subject. Madge cannot proclaim that she has a body with *two* breasts in the context of “real” two-breasted women, and with her rheumatoid arthritis, she cannot claim able-bodiedness. Her subjectivity is reduced to body parts, to impairment, and “defect.” About the sauna as heterotopia, Foucault observes: “To get in one must have a certain permission and make certain gestures” (26). In *The Body Beautiful*, the sauna suggests that the mother’s body, defined by what it lacks, cannot go through the “rites and purifications” of the heterotopic site (Foucault, “Other” 26). This woman does not have permission; she cannot make the correct physical gestures with her body. She cannot be purified, made hygienic or well, or normalized. For her, the sauna is not a site where she can re-create herself; rather, it is a place of public judgment and suffering. As in the fashion sequence, the gaze (of the camera, the women in the sauna, spectators of the film) constitutes Madge, in Barthes’ terms, as a woman both “impossible” and “entirely known” (*Fashion* 255). In this scene, the mother is both essentialized as “woman” and erased from what counts as “woman.” For the daughter-narrator at this moment of intersubjectivity, her mother cannot be constituted as a subject of multiplicity and differentiation in this heterotopic site. Only later, in a sexual fantasy sequence, is the daughter able to position her mother

as a woman with a complex rather than an essentialized identity and as a desired and desiring subject.

In the fantasy sequence, the young black man of the community center becomes the elderly Madge’s lover. Both are naked. It is a breathtaking scene—startling and unsettling. I cannot think of any love scene in a film where “difference” is inscribed in such complexity. We see the young black man, with a “body beautiful,” entwined with the elderly white woman who has hands misshapen by rheumatoid arthritis and who has a heavily scarred chest. Intercut with their lovemaking are scenes of the daughter at a modeling session being directed by a photographer and having make-up applied to parts of her body, particularly to her breasts.

There is much that might be said about the interplay of these scenes. Earlier in this article, for example, I mentioned the emphasis on theatrical lighting, sound, and set effects used throughout the film. In this context, these elements construct the fantasy sequence in highly dramatized terms and serve to suspend the notion of a transparent and fixed autobiographical subject. At this point, however, it is not my intent to offer an in-depth discussion of the fantasy sequence. I describe it here because I want to emphasize that it is a moment in which the mother’s subjectivity is constituted through multiplicity and desire in contrast to the sauna scene where only an ontology of a correct, fixed, and gendered body can constitute her as a subject. In the sauna scene, the mother’s difference in “gendering” cannot be acknowledged.¹³ At one point in the fantasy sequence, the daughter-narrator yells, “Touch her! Touch her!” to the man as his hand hovers over the mother’s scarred breast. It is in the corporeal touch-of-desire/desire-of-touch, rather than a gaze, that Madge can be constituted as a subject.

It is important to consider how the young, able-bodied, black man may be read as representing blackness through what Hall calls the “tropes of fetishization, the fragmentation of the black image and its objectification” (“New” 256). In reading the representation in this way, how might we understand this inscription to work in competing and converging ways with the representation of the older, disabled, white woman? Following Hall’s questions about readings that tend to stabilize black masculinity, is there a way to read these representations as producing tensions regarding representations of race as complicated by the imbrication of gender, sexuality, disability, and age?

The daughter’s fantasy of her mother as desired and desiring subject is humorously underscored at the end of the sequence. The woman and the

man have stopped making love, and the daughter, at her photo shoot, relaxes with a (post-sex) cigarette. The filmmaker writes herself into her mother's sexual experience by projecting herself into her mother's response. She is both inside and outside her mother's narrative; she is self and other, different and the same. This scene emphasizes the autobiographical as interpretive, fictional, and projective. The filmmaker is creating characters and biographies of these characters; she has to narrate and, to use Barthes' term, "nominate" herself and her mother in order to write the multiplicity of identity, of the autobiographical "I."

The other heterotopic space that I want to consider here is the mirror. It is invoked when the young Onwurah examines her naked body in the mirror and tries to imagine herself without breasts by pressing them flat to her body. In the heterotopic site of the mirror where the young woman's body is imaged without the external markings of fashion, the space of the subject is made both "absolutely real" and "absolutely unreal." Foucault observes,

From the standpoint of the mirror I discover my absence from the place where I am since I see myself over there. Starting from this gaze that is, as it were, directed toward me, from the ground of this virtual space that is on the other side of the glass, I come back toward myself; I begin again to direct my eyes toward myself and to reconstitute myself there where I am. The mirror functions as a heterotopia in this respect: it makes this place that I occupy at the moment when I look at myself in the glass at once absolutely real, connected with all the space that surrounds it, and absolutely unreal, since in order to be perceived it has to pass through this virtual point which is over there. ("Other" 24)

A consideration of *The Body Beautiful* and Foucault's notion of the mirror as a heterotopic site in which one gazes at a real and unreal place suggests that the female autobiographical subject gazing at herself in the mirror is a site of presence and non-presence. In addition, film performs a kind of cultural work by serving as a mirror: film is a projection both technologically and ideologically, and the camera itself is a mirror both as an optical instrument and as the means by which the activities of the performers are duplicated. The image of the woman's body in the mirror suggests that "the performance of the 'real'/reel" (to borrow Hesford's terms) is more about clues than absolute knowledge (351).

Mother(s) and the Terrain of Difference

For seventeen years I had seen her simply as my mother; sexless shapeless, safe. . . . If I hadn't come from inside that body that everyone wanted hidden away, then I, too, would have turned away. . . . I thought I knew something about being a woman: how fantasies were shaped, bodies defined. I know now that these were only clues.

—Ngozi Onwurah

While there is a wide range of theoretical writing about mothers, there is little about their representation. Furthermore, in many popular images, mothers and daughters are in conflict, melodramatically separated, conflated in age, or typically positioned as white (E. Kaplan, *Motherhood* 200). In *The Body Beautiful*, however, the representation of mother/daughter relations is textualized in the complexity of anger, pain, love, desire, and differences such as race, age, and ability.¹⁴ At the end of the film, the daughter-narrator says, "A child is made in its parents' image. But in a world that sees only in black and white, I was made only in the image of my father." Some cultural texts produce discourses that deny the subjectivity of the mother while making her subject to the fetus (E. Kaplan, *Motherhood* 201-10). In *The Body Beautiful*, however, the mother, in all her complexity, is written in rather than written out. She is not determined by her womb or her children. In addition, "mother" is depicted neither as a singular essentialized identity nor as a construct that depends on binary oppositions such as mother/father, mother/child, nurturing/negligent, or pregnant/barren (see Martindale, "Theorizing"). Madge's body—represented as disabled and scarred, as textualized in the complexity of intergenerational and intraracial differences, and as a desiring and desired subject—interrupts ideas of the "'normality' of the 'usual' order of things" (Flax 98).

After Madge undergoes a mastectomy, a male narrator who speaks as a medical official in the discourse of breast cancer recommends the fabric(ation) of a breast with cloth and pins. The medical authority expects the mother to fashion a representative breast and thus "pass" as a woman. This discourse is subverted by the eroticization, in the fantasy love scene, of the very location of the removed breast. Yet, even this moment is ambiguous and complex. The mother desires to be touched but also resists being touched: her subjectivity is fluctuating and contradictory rather than simple and coherent.

At the moment in the film when the words of the medical official are foregrounded, the narrator represents figures such as doctors, whom Foucault describes as “important in the fields of power relations.” As such, the narrator is implicated in “the organization, the implementation, and all the techniques of power” (Foucault, “Space” 247, 248). In this scenario, women’s bodies could be understood as “tablets of social meaning,” as “sites of regulation” (Kipnis 263). However, I think Onwurah is positing a more complex understanding of regulation and resistance. Through the characters of the mother and daughter, women are depicted, in Arlene MacLeod’s words, as both “active subjects and subjects of domination” (534). MacLeod illuminates this issue well:

Women, even as subordinate players, always play an active part that goes beyond the dichotomy of victimization/acceptance, a dichotomy that flattens out a complex and ambiguous agency in which women accept, accommodate, ignore, resist, or protest—sometimes all at the same time. Power relationships should be viewed as an ongoing relationship of struggle, a struggle complicated by women’s own contradictory subjectivity and ambiguous purposes. (534)

I want to conclude this section of the paper with words that evoke the terrain of difference that I have attempted to map out in this reading of *The Body Beautiful*, with words that lead into the concluding section of this article where I address my emotional investment in the film, particularly around notions of “mother,” “daughter” and “the body.” Flax writes,

Being a mother calls upon and evokes a heterogeneous set of capacities and feelings within a multiple subjectivity. While it might conflict with or require the temporary suspension of other capacities (as do many other practices) it does not transport anyone into a unique form of being. We go on hating, thinking, etc., as mothers and otherwise.

Daughterhood also is not the royal road to an understanding of woman, subjectivity, or gender. These are all shaped by heterogeneous forces whose relative power is often undecidable in individual instances. It too is a status overdetermined by many factors including race, class, geography. Daughterhood is not the mirror image of motherhood. We will not exhaust its meanings by analysis of maternity; nor is maternity its necessary end or destination. The daughter’s desire does not originate or terminate in her relations with her mother. (70)

The subjectivities of mother and daughter in *The Body Beautiful* are represented as separately and differently positioned and as importantly interrelated in power relations.

Concluding Autobiographically: A Politics of Feeling

In the first section of this paper, I suggest the importance of “difference” for autobiography. In the discussion of various elements of *The Body Beautiful*, I provide readings of the film that demonstrate the various ways in which the autobiographical text writes a politics of self-representation and inscribes the interplay of differences such as gender, race, age, ability, and the body. My conclusion here attempts to place some emphasis on the importance of affective investment for spectatorship or for thinking about the emotional reception of the autobiographical and on the ways a politics of difference can be constituted in an autobiographical reading. (Non)essentially, I cannot leave out my own selves. This sense of autobiographical spectatorship is both theoretical and pedagogical: a feminist strategy that points to “how transactions are mediated by pedagogical, social, and ideological conditions of viewing” (Hesford 357).

I turn to the possibilities of “a politics of textual pleasure” (Frow 37) and “the elusive dimensions of feeling and memory” to suggest “how we use films and other representations to make our selves, . . . how we construct our own histories through memory, even . . . how we position ourselves within wider, more public, histories” (Kuhn 237, 243). My intent is to avoid an understanding of cultural forms as containing and determining their own meanings and as existing outside of socio-historic contexts (see, for example, Bourdieu; Grossberg, “Teaching”). For me, for this “I,” a turn to a politics of textual pleasure and affective investments requires writing “I.”

While I would not describe *The Body Beautiful* as a popular cultural text, my relationship to it (and to some other autobiographical texts in which I have a range of investments)¹⁵ shares similar echoes of my investment in more readily recognizable texts of popular culture.¹⁶ As a female spectator, I read/view a range of popular cultural forms (such as magazines, sports, and television) with emotions that are layered in longing, excitement, tenderness, anger, frustration, embarrassment, euphoria, despondency, peacefulness, and bitterness. Many of these emotions are present when I watch *The Body Beautiful*, and thus my interest in the film is not simply a matter of rational analysis.

Diane Shoos and Jackie Stacey have pointed to the limits in reading visual representations solely through textual analysis and, in terms of

films, with a reliance on the psychoanalytic model of textual analysis that has so influenced film theory. An attention to my investments, pleasures, and emotions in watching *The Body Beautiful*—an act of auto(bio)graphics—offers a focus on spectatorship and reception processes. Furthermore, there is the pedagogical possibility of understanding “lived social differences” (Giroux and Simon 19).

I am interested in how my investment operates on multiple levels (intellectual, affective, sensory, kinetic), how it might intersect with feminist, poststructuralist, and cultural studies theories, and how I understand myself as a feminist cultural worker. Feminism, for example, is a discursive field of power relations; my relationship to feminism(s) is continually shifting. I am persuaded by Shoos and Butler, who argue for the importance of understanding “feminism” as a term of ongoing debate, contingency, and rupture. I am persuaded that therein lies its strengths, politics, and possibilities.

A range of literature examines the complex interplay of visual texts and their consumption and reception by women viewers.¹⁷ Less attention has been paid to the constitution of affect and women’s affective investments in relation to the representation of women in particular visual culture forms and to how emotional spectatorship informs political and ideological positions (Kuhn; Moffat; Stacey).¹⁸ Emotion as a viewing apparatus can point to different cultural norms and values regarding emotional attachments and expressions. As Megan Boler indicates, emotions are socially organized and regulated, and they are sites of power relations. However, emotions associated with the autobiographical may be constructed as private, individual, and experiential.¹⁹ Boler argues for paying attention to emotion as a discursive terrain and to the potentiality of “testimonial reading” whereby “the reader accepts a commitment to rethink her own assumptions, and to confront the internal obstacles encountered as one’s views are challenged” (164). In an attempt to map some issues about working with autobiography and autobiographical film, I turn to some of the emotions generated in my viewings of *The Body Beautiful*.

I first saw *The Body Beautiful* at the 1991 Toronto International Festival of Festivals. Since that initial viewing, I have screened the film, or parts of it, for conference presentations and in courses I teach. Most recently, I have viewed it in private for the writing of this paper. Although the contexts and conditions of these screenings vary, at each viewing I have felt sad, fragile, and disturbed. It is the character Madge and the mother/daughter relationship that trigger the greatest

intensity of my feelings. Other elements of the film generate different emotions.

Why do I want to return to this film? Why do I continue to look for screenings of the film in various festivals? Why do I recommend it to friends and colleagues? Why have I worked with it in my research and included it as a course “reading”? Some answers to these questions are provided by my earlier discussion of the film in that the textual analysis suggests some of the complexities of the film that make it a highly watchable, provocative, and important political and cultural text. Furthermore—and this is important—thinking about and writing textual analysis is also rich with a range of emotions. Intellectual and affective investments are not binary oppositions. Yet, there are other responses that circulate outside of, but in relation to, a critical analysis of the film. Additional questions include: Why do I continue to feel emotionally unsettled when I view the film? Why does the representation of Madge fill me with longing, dread, and anger? How are my affective investments connected to issues of identity and difference? For example, I am an educated white woman who is heterosexual, was raised working-class, and who has an “invisible” disability. How are these subject locations implicated in my readings of, and emotional responses to, the film? What identifications and mis-identifications do they construct? To some of these interrogations, I simply want to say, “I don’t know.” I neither choose to investigate my emotional responses to all cultural texts nor insist on the intellectualization of fantasy, pleasure, and feeling (see Walkerdine). I will say something here, however, about the dread and anger I mentioned above.

Breast cancer came close to home two years ago. After a mammogram, my mother was booked for surgery. The doctors did not have a diagnosis, but they were sufficiently concerned by “abnormalities” in the screening results to press for surgery. Some small amount of tissue was removed from my mother’s right breast and found to be benign. The period of time bounded by my mother’s phone call to inform me of her test results and her return home from the hospital was marked by fear for my mother and also for myself. If my mother had breast cancer, then the odds would increase dramatically for me. During my mother’s time in the hospital, I also found myself reflecting on the complex needs, desires, and longings in my mother’s life and mine and the differences that shape our relationship particularly around age, the body, and disability, including, for example, her arthritis and deteriorating spinal stenosis and my chronic cervico-thoracic dysfunction. I had a sense of joy and regret, hope and

disappointment, and I wondered what autobiographical text I might produce about her body and mine. The dread of breast cancer is present in other ways as well, especially through my connection to the bodies of other women. Each month I do a breast check for lumps. With various female friends, I discuss the “latest” findings on the advantages of early mammograms. My breasts have the potential to be sites of pain, medical negligence, spreading cancer, chemotherapy, sliced flesh as well as the cause of death.²⁰ Anger: What fears are generated by the knowledge that breast cancer is a kind of epidemic? Who decides who will be treated and in what ways? Why are so many women dying? Who gets to be named a “survivor”?

Various discourses determine the ideal breast cancer patient, position women in particular ways, and privilege white, middle-class, heterosexual women who can be positioned as the heroines who fight back (see Martindale, “Witness”). For example, an issue of *Life* magazine (May 1994) with a breast cancer narrative on the front cover depicts fourteen smiling women looking up toward the viewer in an overhead shot. Beside the image, the cover reads: “Fighting Back Against the Breast Cancer Epidemic: What Science is Doing to Stop it, and What Women are Doing to Help Themselves.” Only science has the power to “stop” the disease; women, as they are represented in this image, must hug and hold each other, smile, get dressed up, and “help” (that is, “give,” “oblige,” “nourish,” “lend support,” “give courage,” “cooperate”). They must be good girls. There are four women of color in the back of the shot; the camera angle makes them much smaller. All the women are beautifully coiffed, made-up, and dressed elegantly in shades of white. The angelic, beatific, and childlike construction of the women is overwhelming. They are smiling heavenward to the doctors and scientists who have made them “survivors,” and they are smiling to me, saying, “Hey, this is easy!” They urge me, if I have or develop breast cancer, to join them in this exclusive club of women who have managed to survive the disease. The erasure of struggle and the erasure of difference in the representation of the women is clearly evident.

I write the various reflections above to suggest one of the ways in which my body is written in my mother’s, how hers echoes mine, and how my body is a political site that generates affective responses as I watch *The Body Beautiful*. This is not to emphasize sameness. I do not write this body-text of fear and anger out of a kind of “empathy” for the character of Madge, an act that would erase the specificity of differences. Rather, I have wanted to trace an autobiographical response to the film as an

“embodied account” (Giroux and Simon 19) and to consider, briefly, how emotion as a viewing apparatus can point to different norms and values, discursive frameworks, and political positions. My affective investment suggests one of the ways I mediate the film and how it shapes me.

My various discussions of difference, autobiography, and *The Body Beautiful* constitute an attempt to suggest the theoretical complexity of visual autobiography through a feminist poststructural approach and to demonstrate “the struggle for the power to identify and define a text’s effects” (Grossberg, “Teaching” 187). I would suggest that paying attention to spectators’ desires, pleasures, investments, and emotions—concomitant with what might be termed theoretical, deconstructive, and analytical approaches—is crucial for any project focusing on autobiography in cultural production. This includes understanding how a reader or viewer is engaged on an embodied level: at the complex interplay of eros, longing, the intellect, the senses, feelings, and corporeality. It requires attention to the autobiographical but presupposes neither a reification of experience nor a solipsistic visioning of “I.” Rather, it insists on the presence of biography in autobiography, the Other in the self, and self/other relations; it emphasizes subjectivity and the autobiographical as provisional, contingent, and local; it focuses on the-self-in-the-social and the-social-in-the-self; and it argues for inscribing differences in self, text, and context.²¹

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Notes

1. I want to provide a quick note about terminology here. There is a wide range of terms that circulate in and around autobiography. Some of these include *diary*, *journal*, *testimonial*, *memoir*, *personal narrative*, and *oral histories*. Miller raises the question of how to distinguish between “personal” and “autobiographical” criticism, but de-emphasizes terminology when she suggests that “the distinction is important but the *effects* of the practices . . . matter more than the nomenclature” (1). I choose not to use the notion of the personal since it immediately invokes binaries such as personal/impersonal and private/public. These dichotomous constructions have been central to women’s oppressions and continue to be deconstructed in feminist thought. The term *autobiography* does not necessarily inscribe such a dichotomy. Although as genre, practice, theory, form, and disciplinary context, autobiography may be wide-ranging, I find the extensiveness and slipperiness of its boundaries an advantage.

They leave some openness and flexibility for examining what counts as autobiography, under what conditions, and who decides; the relations of self/other, and self/social; the relations of self to experience; and autobiographical works as productions of knowledge.

2. This is clearly a very different understanding of experience than that of a positivist view which would situate experience as “outside representation to which the autobiographical text refers” (Smith 156).

3. Hall suggests that the political effects and the complications of identity in relation to difference in Derrida’s notion of *différance* have been obscured or erased by a focus on an “endless play of difference” in American philosophical and literary discourses (“Identities” 50). In emphasizing the difficulty of holding on to “positionality and movement” and the socio-historic effects of difference for people’s lives, Hall makes a very important point. It is made tenuous, perhaps, by his conflation of diverse theoretical approaches to deconstruction in American contexts (see Spivak, *Post-Colonial*).

4. See, for example, Gilmore; C. Kaplan; Martin; Miller; Smith; Watson.

5. In addition to the source I use in this paper, West’s article is also found, for example, in a 1990 issue of *October* and in his books, *Keeping Faith: Philosophy and Race in America* and *Race, Identity and Representation in Education*.

6. This literature is extensive. See, for example, Anzaldúa; Brant; hooks; Lorde; Mohanty, Russo, and Torres; Moraga; Moraga and Anzaldúa; Reagon; Trinh.

7. See, for example, Brown; Carty; Fine et al.; Frankenberg; Spelman; Ware; West, “Cultural Politics”; Wray and Newitz; Young.

8. Donna Haraway, adding to a discussion with Paul Gilroy, bell hooks, and Cornel West, suggests that Reagon’s work “is an absolutely canonical text in U.S. feminism and in the constructions of the category, ‘women of color,’ but also of a feminist cultural politics and a vision of a new world cultural politics” (see West, “Postmodern” 703).

9. I am thinking here of films such as Julien’s *Young Soul Rebels* and Blackwood’s *Perfect Image?*

10. This approach provides a different interpretation from that of Probyn’s reading of Walkerdine’s “Video Replay” in her book *Schoolgirl Fictions*. Probyn critiques Walkerdine’s return to the “I,” or a recentring of “the article around herself,” after Walkerdine’s discussion of a British working-class family’s viewing of the film, *Rocky II* (118). Walkerdine’s movement could be read as subverting binary notions of personal/theoretical and researcher/researched in ways that interrupt the shape of an academic research paper. Walkerdine could be understood as “I/eye-ing” herself as well as “eyeing” the family. I offer this alternative reading in the spirit of Trinh’s response to Mulvey’s fixed and fixated reading of Trinh’s film, *Surname Viet Given Name Nam* (“Who is Speaking”). Trinh does not argue *against* Mulvey’s point; she interplays her own very different understanding and suggests that both are valid.

She implies that “meanings cannot deliver the stabilities we hope” (Britzman et al. 199).

11. See, for example, Bhabha, *Location*; Butler; Flax; Hall, “Identities”; Nelson, Treichler, and Grossberg).

12. Kipnis references work that creates an excess of visibility of the body, such as the performance texts of Karen Finley and Annie Sprinkle, and other texts that say, “‘fuck you’ to both the male gaze and its theoreticians” (10). In this context, she also mentions Madonna and comedians such as Roseanne. Kipnis is concerned with the possibility of a “critical aesthetics of the body” and “a way of theorizing the cracks, fissures, the *failures* of the male gaze” (9).

13. Flax writes about “gendering” in this way: “The term ‘gendering’ is my latest, still-unsatisfactory attempt to do justice to the idea that gender is not a fixed or simple identity or set of social relations. I am trying to think of it as a plural verb rather than a single noun. Gendering is constituted by complex, overdetermined, and multiple processes. These processes are historically and socially variable and are often internally contradictory. The processes of gendering are provisional, and must be reproduced and reworked throughout our lives” (23).

14. Mother/daughter relationships have been addressed by numerous feminist writers and from various perspectives from within such fields as sociology, history, and psychoanalysis. Kristeva is, perhaps, the feminist theorist that most quickly comes to mind in terms of theorizing “mother.” Interestingly, however, Kristeva’s work is highly contested and discussions of her theories are situated in strongly dichotomous positions (see Oliver). I want only to gesture to Kristeva here since the range and complexity of her writing and the large and contested body of secondary literature about her work require closer attention than the scope of this paper permits.

15. These include Campion; Friedrich; Lorde; Moraga; Spence; Steedman; Walkerdine; Williams.

16. Having said this, it seems important to note Grossberg’s point: “The boundaries of the popular are fluid; as Tony Bennett argues, culture is a shifting noun and the ‘popular’ is a shifting qualifier” (“Teaching” 183).

17. See, for example, Baehr and Gray; Hesford; E. Kaplan, *Looking*; Pribram; Spigel and Mann.

18. Grossberg, writing about the intensity of fans’ responses to rock and roll, makes a significant point about the need to interrogate categories of “the ideological” and “the affective” (“Teaching”).

19. Rogoff argues that the field of visual culture pertains to a range of spectatorship practices in relation to a range of visual cultural forms. Rogoff also suggests that historical specificity in relation to the reception of cultural texts might best be realized through an attention to the reader/spectator’s historical specificity (23-24). Yet, Rogoff worries about “falling prey to endless anecdotal and autobiographical ruminating which stipulates experience as a basis for knowledge” (24). Autobiography provokes anxieties about claims to authorita-

tive knowledge. I would suggest that the autobiographical may indeed entail a concern with experience but that the idea of experience may, in fact, be useful for exploring the limits and constraints and the possibilities and impossibilities of knowledge production. It may signal epistemological uncertainty, the difficulties and dangers of truth claims, and the effects of difference on knowledge. Questions about experience and the authority of experience have been addressed in feminist poststructural theories in such a way as to consider how subjectivity is produced discursively and how the personal is constituted in/through historical specificity. Scott notes, "Experience is at once always already an interpretation *and* is in need of interpretation. What counts as experience is neither self-evident nor straightforward; it is always contested, always therefore political" ("Experience" 37).

20. Martindale has written an emotional article about the medical negligence that resulted in her unnecessary mastectomies. She politicizes the "multiple stigmatization" that discourses of heterosexism impose upon lesbians with breast cancer ("Witness").

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