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RETHINKING ETHNOGRAPHY: A WORK FOR THE FEMINIST IMAGINATION

Anne Balsamo

THE PROBLEM

"Nowadays, men often feel that their private lives are a series of traps. . . . What ordinary men are directly aware of and what they try to do are bounded by the private orbits in which they live; their visions and their powers are limited to the close-up scenes of job, family, neighborhood (Mills 1959). Mills goes on to describe quite pointedly, the failure of modern man to "grasp the interplay of man and society, of biography and history, of self and the world" (p. 4). With these comments, Mills introduces the cultural and historical imperative for the development of what he calls "the sociological imagination." The key issue for Mills, that which he called the gap between history and biography, was the ability to make the link between one perspective and another—from the subjective to the political . . . "and the capacity to range from the most impersonal and remote transformations to the most intimate features of the human self—and to see the relations between the two" (p. 7). Through these statements, Mills articulates the epistemological fault line of our contemporary age: how to simultaneously make sense of the relationship between the

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particular and the universal, the local and the general, and the biographical and the historical. It may be argued that this project of the enlightenment has been strategically eclipsed: postmodernism is perhaps only the most recent attempt at rethinking these dichotomous relationships. Yet as the feminist argument details postmodern strategies have often proven ineffective, for they simply replace new binaries for the old (Balsamo 1987): now the operative terms suggest fragmentation versus unity, multiplicity versus the one, the indeterminate versus the assertive. This failure that Mills describes is, I argue, a specific one, an epistemological failure of Western, male, rationalistic hegemony. He rightly identifies the key terms—the cultural necessity to make connections between biography and history—but the feminist point here is that we cannot get there through established routes that construct History as the sanctioned narrative of a collective past and biography as one person's role in that history. As cultural discursive formations, both history and biography employ rhetorical conventions that privilege certain subjects and authors, usually, white (Western) males. This privileged subject has been called into question, most notably by feminist criticism that strives to mark the limits of an epistemology that constructs a universal all-knowing rational subject at its center. Here feminism joins other (antihumanist) perspectives that seek to displace the bourgeois notion of an individual/society dichotomy. Clearly we need to start again—to think of biography and history, not separately as a discourse of the individual in opposition to one of society, nor as discourses of transcendental knowledges, but rather as discourses that are always already implicated and intertwined each with the other; this time, I argue, we must begin with an exercise of the feminist imagination.

In this paper, I am concerned with elaborating how feminism theorizes everyday life as the site for the coming together of biography and history. Diverse feminisms have struggled to articulate “the gap between history and biography,” and through this process have addressed several key issues that I take up: (1) a critique of women's position in historical discourse, (2) a concern with elaborating the appropriate political commitments of feminist research, (3) a description of the relationship between culture and women's biographies, and (4) an elaboration of the practices that *construct* the self and biography. This work, as a collective enterprise conducted in the name of feminism, exemplifies what I mean by the term, the *feminist imagination*. Although none of these projects were directly informed by the others, and indeed were conducted in different historical moments spanning 15 years, the work coalesces around a common set of issues pertaining to the study of everyday life in relation to women's biographies and cultural history. This paper includes a brief review of a critique of the notion of History as a discursive space that is problematic in terms of women's everyday lives. Fixing the notion of everyday life as a working framework, the next section describes how ethnography, as a research tradition and as a set of research practices that

engages the terrain of “the everyday,” have been rethought from within a feminist perspective. The focus here is twofold, to show that although ethnography is an appropriate method for studying everyday life, as it has been traditionally conceptualized within anthropology, it often works against crucial feminist political commitments. Thus, to study women's everyday lives using ethnographic methods, requires not just a retooling of research practices, but a thorough rethinking of the epistemological and political aims of ethnography. I conclude with an explication of two ethnographic projects that specifically address that “gap between History and biography” and in so doing, exemplify the revisionary potential of the feminist imagination. I use the term *feminist imagination* to name an act of theoretical practice that is both a theory of practice—ethnography, and a practice of theory—a history of the present.

A HISTORY OF THE EVERYDAY

Women, as Sheila Rowbotham chronicles in her book by the same name, are “hidden from history” in a particular manner that reveals male cultural hegemony at work. Drawing on a Marxist view of history and working within an overtly socialist feminist political perspective, she joins other feminist historians in showing how women are a structured absence in the canonized discourse of History (with a capital H). She argues, of course, that “women are hidden from most history in the same way as the lives of men of the poor are obscured, because of class.” “But women,” she goes on to remind us, “are also hidden as a sex, and it takes a specifically feminist consciousness to come to terms with the full extent of this” (1976, p. xxxi). Rowbotham commissions a History that works to uncover every aspect of women's experiences, including her ideologically invisible role in major movements and political events, her subjugated role in the development of capitalism and its relations of production and reproduction, and in the privatized realm of everyday life. Thus, Rowbotham seeks to broaden the charge of historical accounting to include not only the public events that serve as the “proper” moments of patriarchal history, but also the stuff of everyday life.¹

In addition to rethinking what counts as properly “historical” moments, recent feminist work in cultural studies questions the temporal dimension of “doing history.” Restoring women to their proper place within received history is predicated upon being able to find them, and finding lost women is a momentous task in light of their circumvented access to (and again, literal invisibility within) cultural discourses. Feminist cultural studies suggest that a project of *recovery* is only *one* tactic of feminist history. Another tactic is to begin writing history *now*, that is, to write a history of the present that weaves the story of woman's historical invisibility in and through the particulars of her contemporary everyday life. This temporal displacement of history as

"something that happened before" in favor of a notion of history as "something that is created now," opens up a space for feminist interventions in the cultural production of the discourse of history at several different levels of abstraction. Feminism intervenes by identifying gaps and silences in History as a received male narrative; it theorizes the project of History differently, as one that involves the study of the interrelatedness of biography and history; it suggests ways to study this articulation; and it demands that we begin these interventions right now with an eye on the future. The goal, then, is not only to fill in the gaps of received history, but to rewrite what "counts" as History for the future.

Let me reiterate this feminist retooling of Mills's sociological imperative. History is an interested discourse; it tells a particular story, one that has been constructed within a model of patriarchal logic that selectively focuses on public events to the exclusion of everyday practices. Women have been systematically excluded from this cultural discourse. The feminist attention to everyday life actively intervenes in the production of history by expanding what counts as properly historical events and by writing history contemporaneously. This implies two related theoretical moves, one to study everyday life as it is simultaneously a site of individual experience and of social and cultural determinations, and another to start with the contemporary moment, the here and now, to work with women's biographies, their personal stories as they continually unfold over, in, and against time. Thus, a feminist imagination places vital importance on the "everyday" as it is *constituted* by the interrelations between biography and history or "self and culture." This feminist imagination aims to write a history of the present that is read through biographies of the everyday.

FROM ETHNOGRAPHY TO BIOGRAPHY

Ethnography plays an important role in the move from a sociology without imagination to the development of a perspective appropriate for the postmodern age because it plays an important role in the development of a feminist strategy that seeks to expand our understandings of everyday life.² Seeking to develop a perspective that could forge links between history and culture and individual women's biographies, but would not reproduce a hierarchical relationship between the ethnographer as one who is in the know and the subject who surrenders herself to this knowing mediator, feminist cultural studies took up the project of rethinking the practices of ethnography as a process of *mutual*, but not equivalent, knowledge construction. For these feminists, ethnography involves the construction of cultural interpretations for all participants, that evoke, on the one hand, stories inherited culturally and constructed personally, and on the other, the local retelling of these stories. This notion of ethnography explicitly focuses on interpretations constructed

through conversational interactions and storytelling. Here the connection between history and biography is theoretically elaborated; ethnographic interpretations rely upon *both* the personal biography and cultural history of those who are traditionally positioned as ethnographers, and those who are positioned as subjects. Ethnography involves two sets of interpretations that are constantly in play against and off each other: one of the subjects as they make sense of their everyday lives and of the "ethnographic encounter," and another of the ethnographer as she makes sense of cultural symbols, myths, "wisdom," and of personal stories, biographical texts, and the act of doing ethnography. To this end, feminist ethnographies often focus on the collection of stories from different participants. Indeed, recent feminist ethnography will often include the ethnographer's personal and autobiographical narratives as part of the ethnographic account.³ This elaboration of the dual nature of ethnographic "interpretation" suggests two important issues: the first concerns the politics of representing women's talk, and the second addresses the proper role of ethnographer subjectivity.

Articulating a concern with the role of personal experience in feminist research, McRobbie (1982) identifies a key tension inherent in "doing" research on women, in representing those who are usually denied self-representation. She describes how ethnography includes social relations and practices which, left unexamined and mystified, threaten to undermine feminist political commitments. For her, a very sensitive issue is the nature of the relationship between the researcher and the researched, an overdetermined relationship of unequal power. Although some feminists have been aware of the exploitive or patronizing propensity of these relationships, and have sought to subvert rampant academicism by criticizing their own objectification of women as research objects, the traditional casting of the academic as "ethnographer" and subject as "informant" works against feminist aims to be empowering, multivocal and nonreductive. Here it is not the ethnographer's lack of self-reflexivity that casts doubt on the integrity of the ethnographic project, but the inherent representationalness of ethnographic description.

For McRobbie, ethnographic accounts highlight the tensions between the "anarchy of talk and the order and formality of written work" (1982, p. 50). Feminist ethnography relies upon the proliferation of women's talk and their willingness to share personal experiences. The researcher interviews, listens in, asks questions, all in the attempt to generate more talk. From there though, the ethnographer orders the talk, summarizes it, selects from it, rephrases it, surrounds it with theory, and finally, but never simply, represents it. In writing a representation of talk, the ethnographer necessarily constructs an interpretation. And from a feminist perspective every interpretation is necessarily partial and political because of the talk that was left out, ignored, or transformed through the process of transcription and transcoding.⁴ In this

sense, the best ethnography can only produce partial truths that are always politically constructed. Far from closing off ethnography for feminist cultural studies, this insight supports the view that all knowledge is culturally constructed and politically motivated. To focus more directly on how ethnographic knowledge is constructed by cultural interpretations, feminist ethnographers turned to psychoanalysis, poststructuralism, and other interpretive perspectives to investigate how subjectivity, biography, and history are culturally constructed through discursive practices.

RESEARCHER SUBJECTIVITY

Founded on a feminist critique of male epistemology, the deployment of feminist self-reflexivity is not to replace the "self" for the "other" as the focal object of the ethnographic enterprise, but rather to show how knowledge is interactionally constructed. As an extended example, consider how Walkerdine (1986) describes her ethnographic field study. Through participant observation she investigates the way in which adults and children are discursively inscribed into family interactional patterns. Informed by a feminist political sensibility, she questions her act of watching a working-class family (the Coles) watch the film *Rocky II*. Simply, she asks: How is one to make sense of this situation? The issue of scopophilia comes up in two respects in this study, on the one hand, in terms of the family's activity of "watching" films and television, and on the other hand, in terms of Walkerdine's activity of "watching" the family watch a video. She critically describes her research activity in the following way:

Traditionally, of course, observation—like all research methods in the human and social sciences—has been understood as, at worst, minimally intrusive on the dynamics and interactions unfolding before the eyes of the observer, who is herself outside the dynamic. My argument is that such observation, like all scientific activity constitutes a voyeurism in its will to truth, which invests the observer with "the knowledge," indeed the logos (Walkerdine 1986, p. 167).

Walkerdine describes her construction as the "surveillant other" within the ethnographic situation. At one point, Mr. Cole identified her as his daughter's psychiatrist—an inaccurate, but telling identity. For Walkerdine the ethnographic field encounter is fraught with a "disciplinary" tendency:

The observer then should be seen as the third term, the law which claims to impose a reading on the interaction . . . In addition, the observer becomes the silent Other who is present in, while apparently absent from, the text (1986, p. 167).

Here Walkerdine echoes McRobbie's concern about the inherent inequality of the ethnographic encounter. The ethnographer disciplines—lays down the

law—by virtue of the dynamics of interpretation in which she selects, presents, and re-orders the ethnographic talk to support her own reading of the encounter. But Walkerdine takes this insight further by suggesting that the observer's alliance in the ethnographic account is actually more problematic than her inescapable presence. To this end, Walkerdine self-reflexively seeks to reinscribe herself back into the text by addressing her own identification with the film that the family watched.

Yet it is not this account that marks Walkerdine's important contribution to feminist ethnography. Of greater interest is the way her reflexive interrogation refuses the construction of a unified "self" in opposition to the Coles as "exotic other"; rather, she considers how she is multiply positioned as "both middle-class academic and working-class child." In her words:

[O]ften when interviewing the participants I felt that I "knew what they meant," that I recognized how the practices were regulated or that I understood what it was like to be a participant. Using this recognition to explore the positivity of how domestic relations are lived seems to me an important step beyond assertions that academics should side with the oppressed, that film-makers should see themselves as workers or that teachers should side with students (Walkerdine 1986, p. 191).

In her account, Walkerdine describes how, in the privacy of her office, watching the film *Rocky II* alone, she encountered memories of pain and class struggle from her own life as a working-class child. "I cried with grief for what was lost and for the terrifying desire to be somewhere and someone else" (Walkerdine 1986, p. 169). In an attempt to elaborate this process of "recognition" that allows her to assert her knowledge of the meaning of the family's interactions, Walkerdine includes an autobiographical passage in her ethnographic account that addresses the domestic practice of family nicknames and the construction of female identity.

For example, to explicate her "recognition" of the family's nickname for the eldest daughter, "DoDo," Walkerdine recounts at length a similar representational event from her own history. Her article includes a photograph of herself as a small girl dressed as Tinkerbell. Evidently, this event christened Valerie with the nickname, "Tinky."

Let me take this further by taking as an example a number of representations from my own history. The first image is of Valerie Walkerdine, dressed as a bluebell fairy in a local carnival . . . my father had a nickname for me, itself clearly related to the fairy fantasy. This was "Tinky," abbreviated from Tinkerbell (Walkerdine 1986, p. 185).

Walkerdine, the adult, the researcher, continues her personal narrative by interrogating how the fantasy of Tinky designated her and encouraged her to live out a fantasy set of relations:

By examining the regime of representations in which Tinkerbell enters as a relation, we can therefore begin to understand the constitution of Tinky and the bluebell fairy as fictions, representations constructed in the fantasized image of the Other (1986, p. 186).

Similarly, Walkerdine reflects on how Joanne, the daughter called "DoDo," is socially constructed and discursively positioned by the father's nickname for her. Here the turn to psychoanalysis is quite specific. The name designates the object "Tinky" and "DoDo" in that these two girls are inserted into socially constructed subject positions that are constituted by the gaze of an Other (their fathers). "The important point," Walkerdine reminds us, "is that such fantasies have a psychical reality which has positive and material effects when its significations are inscribed in actual practices" (Walkerdine 1986, p. 188).

Walkerdine ranges between multiple subjectivities that position her outside of the working-class family as researcher and voyeur, and yet within one, biographically. She uses autobiography, not to tell the story of the construction of her "self" as the dominant ethnographic narrative, but to show how her biography was involved in the production of knowledge in the ethnographic encounter. Her account describes how the multiple positionings of the researcher due in part to personal biography and in part to the received tradition of ethnography, structure the interactional process of knowledge construction inherent in the ethnographic enterprise. Walkerdine contributes a sustained reflection on how knowledge is constructed through the interaction of personal biography and ethnographic practice.

This elaboration of this particular feminist engagement with ethnography suggests that it is a useful, albeit tension-riddled framework for the study of everyday life as a site for the coming together of history and biography. A significant portion of feminist work has addressed itself directly to the political implications of ethnography by arguing that the ethnographer cannot simply replace self for other as the object of investigation, nor can she avoid issues pertaining to the politics of representation. Yet other feminists have taken up the project to rethink research tactics that would provide a framework for studying the interconnectedness between biography and history in such a way as to displace these criticisms of ethnography. Perhaps a more useful way to consider the value of ethnography for feminism and elaborate the feminist imagination is by describing how feminists "do" ethnography mindful of these political criticisms. To this end, I describe a feminist project that engages the political implications of ethnographic research by developing a method that articulates the connection between memory, culture, and everyday life in a process called "Collective Memory Work."

COLLECTIVE MEMORY WORK

This project, edited by Haug (1987) and the Frauenformen Collective, investigates the social processes of female sexualization. It elaborates quite

specifically how culture (history) and personal experiences (biography) are in complex relation at the level of the everyday. The Frauenformen Collective elaborates a method of collective work that they call "memory work"—a process whereby each member of the Collective contributed a written account of a memory that focused on the body in some way. From here, the Collective selected themes to explore which structure the report of their work: legs, hair, stomach, and height. The political/theoretical critique that frames this project decries the "cultural logic which anesthetizes history, reducing it to a synchronic assemblage of aesthetic objects," (Haug 1987, p. 15) which leaves little room for socialist and feminist interventions. The Collective's method—"memory work"—explicitly strives to "bridge the gap between theory and experience"; here the Millsian echo is quite strong:

In our research . . . we were concerned precisely with the ways in which individuals construct their identity, the things that become subjectively significant to them. We were interested in the "how" and the "why" of the individual's relationship to the "givens" of her everyday life, in the way in which she grows into the structures of society (Haug 1987, p. 40).

This feminist project clearly concerns itself with the rough weave of women's everyday life. The multiple strands of this fabric are identified as the specificity of a woman's life that includes personal experiences—body memories—and cultural determinations—body advice and clichés. Although the focus of the Haug book—the Collective's project—is the practices of gender socialization, they start with a broad empirical question: "What are the processes whereby individuals construct themselves into existing social relations?" Their concern is with the "process that produces the insertion of women into, and their subordination within, determinate social practices" (Haug 1987, p. 40). From the beginning the Collective asserted two feminist political commitments: that the process of the work to be done (writing, reading, editing, interviewing, and production) would be collective and collaborative, and that the group was the proper site for the intervention into biographical and cultural interpretations. Here they eschew the traditional ethnographic division of labor; the researchers are the researched and the subjects of their own collective investigation.

Each woman in the Collective recorded in third-person essay form one or more body stories. Writing became a central interventionist tactic:

Writing is a transgression of boundaries, an exploration of new territory. It involves making public the events of our lives, wriggling free of the constraints of purely private and individual experiences . . . Writing also transports us across another boundary; it begins to break down the division of labour between literature as creative writing and everyday language as a means of communication (Haug 1987, pp. 37-38).

Every woman read every essay; every essay was reworked and rewritten through the act of collective criticism and interrogation. Through this laborious process

of remembering, writing, reading, and rewriting, the Collective began to identify ways in which women as individuals construct themselves into already existing/determined social structures, cultural narratives, and power relations. Simultaneously, they were uncovering the production of individual consciousness out of the stuff of culture and everyday life. By their own account, the way was not easy going. Many women got tired of reading and rereading; feelings of defensiveness and judgmentalness were hard to dispel. But their goal was, again to echo Mills, "to find ways of articulating the personal sphere in political terms" (1959, p. 43). This united the women through a shared commitment to the interventionist possibilities of collective memory work.

Through their process of collective writing and interrogation, they critically questioned the locus of truth and authenticity that operate in women's worlds of experience by focusing on how cultural narratives get "taken up" in the construction of "self-narratives."

We wrote stories, analyzed a small number of proverbs and sayings, studied the changing images of women in the Fine Arts, examined a number of ways in which the insertion of women into social structures of authority and power occurs across the body (Haug 1987, p. 75).

In an excerpt of a body essay titled "Legs," the following lines of a biographical story are recounted:

... When I was 14, I had a boyfriend, and we went swimming together, me, him and my girlfriend. It would be the first time he's seen me as I really was. I was scared that from now on he'd prefer my friend to me. Though she was just as fat around the waist as me, her legs were nothing short of gorgeous... (Haug 1987, p. 170).

This quotation expresses a familiar theme of the female body, its construction by women through the internalized gaze of a man. Yet, the Collective's account strives to move beyond simple "thematic" readings such as this one to examine the cultural determinations of the story. Although their explicit emphasis is not on elaborating cultural theory, they implicitly address the questions: How do cultural conceptions organize the text's specific understanding of reality; What attitudes to the world do they delineate? In response to the leg essay, they focused their attention on an analysis of the fashion "tips in *Brigitte* magazine on how to make legs look longer and slimmer" (Haug 1987, p. 171). This back and forth movement marks their analytical process: from body essays to cultural texts and back again. Through this process they identify how a "subject-effect" is produced within cultural discourse; or stated another way, they identify the site at which the subject is created through cultural discourse. In short, the Collective's work describes the process whereby self-knowledge and cultural knowledge are complexly interrelated and inseparable.

Although Walkerdine and the Collective focus on different feminist issues, they both address the relationship between cultural knowledge and personal biography. They both intervene in the continued reification of notions of history and biography by working to deconstruct their seemingly stable meaning as opposite terms. Memory is a key construct within each project. For Walkerdine the relationship between biography and culture becomes apparent through the process of "recognition." By reflecting on how knowledge is constructed, she describes the ways in which her subjectivity is constructed through personal memories and current events. For the Frauenformen Collective the relationship between biography and culture emerges in writing about the linkages between body memories and cultural concepts.

Of particular importance is the way in which the Collective addresses the relationship between the general and the particular or the universal and the singular. Drawing theoretical support from diverse feminist traditions, the notion of woman as an individual is the starting point of their empirical investigation, but it is not an essentialized category. Rather, they investigate how body experiences are socially organized to produce an individualized gender identity. Although every woman has personal ways of negotiating social structures and cultural expectations that are influenced by local social pressures and natural/physical limitations, those social structures and cultural imperatives are not hers alone. The process of "becoming" woman highlights the dialectical relationship between the unique and the universal and forms a key organizing question in the analysis of body essays. The body, for them, is a focal issue around which the stuff of personal experience and cultural determination must coalesce, in this sense the body is the center of everyday life, biography, and history.

CONCLUSION

I have illustrated how several key works in feminist cultural studies have responded to the spirit of Mills's manifesto by elaborating a specifically feminist imagination that critically examines the notions of history and biography through an engagement with ethnographic practices. Many feminists have demonstrated women's structured absence from the high discourse of History. Similarly, women's biographies are a submerged genre of nonfictional narrative. The problem, then, from a feminist perspective, is how to intervene in the ongoing creation of history and biography and of cultural understanding. I argue that it is of crucial importance, in developing a social and cultural imagination adequate to the postmodern age, to rethink this relationship of biography, history, and everyday life. To this end, feminist work on the politics and practices of ethnography delineates ways in which we can think anew the simultaneous construction of the personal and the cultural, the one and the

many. It is this feminist work on ethnography that explicitly demonstrates how "the everyday" is a site for the coming together of history, culture, biography, and personal experience. Feminism argues that all interpretive practices, including those inherent in ethnographic research and writing, are political acts that forge links between history and biographies for all participants. Recognizing this, for me, is the first step toward a properly sociological, cultural, and feminist imagination.

NOTES

1. Rowbotham's argument draws energy from a range of feminist projects that seek to deconstruct the seemingly reliable distinctions between pairs of terms such as *public versus private*, *society versus the individual*, and *culture versus experience*. This use of a deconstructive logic shows how each term of those binaries in fact names no positivity, that there is no meaning for the term *public* without a notion of *private*. This logic constructs the historical necessity of woman by illuminating the role she played in the construction of History as its hidden subject. Although understanding the semiotic presence of woman is an important insight, it fails to restore missing or silent Histories in a positive sense.

2. To be fair, the practices of ethnography have been "rethought" along similar lines in the fields of cultural and "interpretive" anthropology and I especially draw on the recent theoretical work on ethnography as a practice of "writing culture." However, feminism's concern with these issues actually precedes that of the new "literary ethnography" and offers a more critical engagement with postmodernity through its attempts to work out research strategies that can illuminate the processes whereby women are simultaneously "culturally" and "self-" determined. Whereas the anthropology discussions take up the issue of the production of the ethnographer "self" in opposition to an informant "other," from a feminist perspective this issue is still framed within a phallographic system of logic that is, as many have argued, endemic to Western, colonial, patriarchal symbolic orders. The new ethnographic self-reflexivity heralded by the literary ethnographers in this sense ingeniously reproduces the logic of the "one" against the "other" by suggesting that the "real" business of ethnography is *not* the construction of the exotic other, although, as Keya Ganguly argues in her chapter (this volume, pp. 69-79), this persists as an ethnographic trope, but rather the production of the "self" of the ethnographer as he studies or writes culture. This understanding of how the self is created through the act of looking at others is certainly a refinement of what ethnographic theory proposed was going on in the traditional ethnographic encounter, but it is not a rebuttal of the exercise of a phallographic symbolic order in that the ethnographer remains firmly established as the logos of truth, now not of others but of himself. Feminist research tactics seek to intervene in the production of ethnographic knowledge that reestablishes the ethnographer as the final source and arbitrator of "Truth" by addressing more directly the epistemological effects of ethnographic practices.

3. It is important to mention here that "autobiography" is not an entirely innocent speaking position. Indeed, Probyn, working through Spivak's account of the conditions of possibility of "subaltern" knowledge, argues that "autobiography may hold a critical edge if it can be used against the pull to individualism and if it can indeed render the epistemological construction of knowledge more transparent" (1988, p. 21). I respond to this caution by suggesting that a woman's enunciated act of "I am . . ."—given woman's position within and against language—always already disrupts the authoritative epistemology (of autobiography) that so troubles Spivak. Here I would counter with Irigaray's work on "Veiled Lips." Indeed, Probyn works to untangle the ontological from epistemological issues that are conflated in discussions of the role of autobiography in cultural theory.

4. For some, recognizing these boundary conditions of ethnographic interpretation threatens to disqualify ethnography as a viable feminist research practice. For example, Stacey (1988), in her article, "Can There Be a Feminist Ethnography?" argues that elements of inequality, exploitation, and even betrayal, are endemic to ethnography. She considers the unavoidable task of interpretation a taint on the egalitarian aims of feminist research because it undermines the free-play of empathy and identification that she naively thought (by her own admission) grounded feminist ethnography. Although she repairs her dismissal of ethnography by endorsing notions of partial truths and self-reflexivity, she encourages feminist engagements with ethnography rather tentatively, arguing that feminists are still too susceptible to fictions of equality and reciprocity, which remain patently impossible within the cultural dynamics of the ethnographic situation. Strathern argues that any relationship between feminism and anthropology is destined to remain "awkward" because each "has a potential for undermining the other" (1987, p. 289). Although both feminism and anthropology purport to study "experience," this is not at all a common meeting ground, but in fact represents an incompatible set of theoretical commitments involving the different "relationships that feminists and anthropologists have constructed toward the Other" (p. 291).

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