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

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

The question turns for an answer in two directions: to its generic base—"What is autobiography?"—and to a question posed in increasingly sophisticated ways by feminists: "What are 'women'?"


2 See especially Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*; and Denise Riley, *"Am I That Name?" Feminism and the Category of "Women" in History* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), for discussions of the conceptual, historical, and political instabilities in the categories "woman" and "women."
recently achieved the kind of critical respect and interest indicated by university press publications and panels at professional conferences, and it seems to have done so rather suddenly. In a recent book, one critic claims that suddenly everyone is interested in autobiography. Yet, what it is up for grabs. The struggle for the meaning of both gender and genre, a category autobiography still strays, is being waged, as it long has been, in the practice and criticism of autobiography. The following illustration of differing theoretical positions indicates one interpretive contest. At one end of the spectrum of interpretation, a poststructuralist position developed through deconstruction reads autobiography tropologically and construes the self as an effect of language, a textual construction, the figuration of what we call identity. At the other, a feminist position grounds autobiographical form and meaning in the experiences of the women who write autobiography and looks to women’s lives for the framework to understand self-representational texts. But the analogy to a spectrum supports only one version of the debate, for feminist and poststructuralist critical positions refuse to delimit even this single controversy in autobiography studies. They form, rather, open sets with some shared, or partially shared, figures. What is significant here is how both feminism and poststructuralism become involved in producing the discourse of identity when both address the definitional questions related to autobiography.

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

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

Here I would assert with Foucault that “what is at issue” in autobiography, broadly, is the overall “discursive fact” (History of Sexuality 1:11), and what is at stake is the relation between discourses of power and identity. For the autobiographers I study here, whose subjectivities and truths reveal the limits of dominant notions of identity, the “discursive fact” of being interpolated or not interpolated as a subject had (and continues to have) a rippling effect throughout the historically varied technologies of autobiography. That these autobiographers’ identities could not be inscribed in relation to dominant forms of truth telling—or, when they were, were not interpreted so—broadens our notion of “discursive fact” to include the material consequences that precede, coincide with, and follow self-representation. In order to emphasize this discursivity and its effect on the interpretation of autobiography, one could pursue Foucault’s strategy of “locating the forms of power, the channels it takes, and the discourses it permeates...in short, the polymorphous techniques of power.”5 (11.) For de Lauretis, whose work both challenges and extends Foucault’s “technological” inquiry into the category of gender, power is exercised over and through representations of gender. One critical aspect of de Lauretis’s method is an understanding of gender as (self-) representation, drawn from Louis Althusser’s influential theory of ideological interpellation.6 De Lauretis wishes to theorize a “female-


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

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

able” through gender. But the history of such refusal, a history indicated through absences in traditional studies of autobiography, is written against the grain of a powerful technology of identity.

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


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

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

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

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

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

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

Much autobiography criticism acknowledges an interpretive division between those who take autobiography as a factual document and those who view it as much more closely, and less damningly, aligned with fiction. This very division, however, results from premises about autobiography’s relation to “truth” in conjunction with premises about the “truthful” and “authentic” subject position that autobiography itself constructs. The ethical and political meanings of this subject position contain powerful contradictions: whereas “truth” is the neutral term toward which all persons strive (this is, by human-
exercise in nostalgia for a distant island that Audre the child knows as little and with as much longing as she knows her mother's body. Reinventing the island home, a "home" Lorde never knew, becomes a central feature of her mythmaking project in which what is not yet visible propels the autobiographer into a textualization of invention as well as documentation. The tropes of autobiography—self/life/writing—is exchanged for the terrain of biomythography. Lorde's name for her form of writing. In a self-representational text subtitled A New Spelling of My Name Lorde's renaming of her text and her self creates a representational space where homes, identities, and names have mythic qualities.

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

In the transposition of autobiography to biomythography, the self,

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


10 Audre Lorde, Zami: A New Spelling of My Name (Trumansburg, N.Y.: Crossing, 1988), acknowledgments.