

EMBODIED NARRATIVES

EMBODIED NARRATIVES:
NUDE PORTRAITS, SPEAKING SUBJECTS AND THE PATRIARCHAL UNCONSCIOUS
IN
FRANK CORDELLE'S *THE CENTURY PROJECT*

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The Century Project, both art exhibit and book, consists of unconventional nude portraits of over one hundred girls and women from the moment of birth to old age. Accompanying each photograph is the subject's written statement detailing instances of abuse, violence, grief, or reflecting moments of humour and joy. In the following pages I endeavor to understand the affect of such an exhibit by engaging the multiple and sometimes contradictory aesthetics exhibited by each photograph. Having both posed and volunteered for *The Century Project*, I mix personal engagement with critical theory, as difficult as it sometimes is to distinguish where one form of engagement ends and the other begins. I understand the bodily expression of both subject and viewer as an active, generative force: potentially both creative and uncooperative in response to authority and discipline. Engaging theories of embodiment, photography and psychoanalysis, I situate *The Century Project* in its various contexts: a corrective to iconic feminine beauty, a model for relational identity, and an expression of unconscious ideologies.

To my parents, my partner, and my supervisor: to each of you I must express my deep gratitude for your creative and unconditional support.

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Introduction

Now, once I feel myself observed by the lens, everything changes: I constitute myself in the process of “posing,” I instantaneously make another body for myself, I transform myself in advance into an image. This transformation is an active one: I feel that the Photograph creates my body or mortifies it, according to its caprice.

—Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*

Eve: Sorry I don't eat bread.

Leah: I forgot. You're American. *90210*. What kind of place is it? In Africa, we are desperate for food, we have so little; in America, where you have all the food, you either eat too much or not at all. Your bodies are just pictures to you. Here we live in our bodies, they serve us, they do our work.

“LEAH: A SEVENTY-FOUR-YEAR-OLD AFRICAN MASAI WOMAN”

—Eve Ensler, *The Good Body*

The Century Project: unconventional nude portraits of over one hundred girls and women from the moment of birth to old age. Accompanying each photograph is a written statement authored by the subject, sometimes anecdotal, sometimes poetic, sometimes tragic, sometimes sharp with wit, and often striking. The photographs are propped up on tables in the centre of a room arranged in chronological order by age. Each portrait is paired with its written statement, printed out and placed on the table in front. The photographs are not meant to be viewed as isolated pieces but as integral components of a larger work that is to be experienced from start to finish – nor are they meant only to be *seen*, in the absence of their written statements. Viewers of the exhibit are to circle the room much like one would in a gallery; each written statement serves to interrupt or forestall a passive consumption of images, demanding a certain slowness as viewers stop to read (Fig. 1). *The Century Project* bodies have something to say, both visually as “othered,” or “ordinary” female bodies unapologetic in their nakedness, and as bodies that have experienced pain, pleasure, joy, suffering. The exhibit, a twenty-year project initiated and compiled by photographer Frank Cordelle, was published as a book, *Bodies and Souls: The Century Project* in November of 2006. As I circle the exhibit for the first time eight months earlier, I am bruised and heartened by what I read and what I see. This affect comes before the ability to put sentiment into words, and is what ultimately compels me to both volunteer to work on and pose for this project.



Fig. 1: Yee, Tim. *The Century Project Exhibit*. Harvest Moon Restaurant.

To engage in dialogue with *The Century Project* is a necessarily personal and appropriately material experience for me. My thoughts in the pages that follow are, I imagine, “ordinary,” and though subject to my faulty memory and no doubt biased by a recuperative retrospective processing of the events as they occurred, they are part of the same cultural, political, and social climate about which I write (not above, nor outside).¹ I am not interested in *commanding* certain truths in the service of an unbiased surveying of culture, nor can I separate my (personal, political, embodied) participation from this discussion. As a situated body like any other, then, I approach this project having been affected by it first, and acquiring intellectual curiosity about the meaning of this affect second.

It is necessary to establish from the outset that the Cartesian division between mind and body that has informed much of Western thought is not

¹ I am encouraged by what Susan Bordo writes in her introduction to *Twilight Zones*: “I come to my criticism of these images from deep inside this house of mirrors, not from the position of detached spectator, wielding high-powered theory to cut like a scythe through my ‘ordinary’ responses, but with respect for those responses (‘incorrect’ as they sometimes are, and angry and embarrassed as they sometimes make me). They keep me honest and they teach me about this culture. I do not think that one can do responsible criticism any other way” (1).

amenable to what I am terming a *corporeal critique*. There is a bodily knowing that remains with me, that comprises the meaning and matter of these words, that is indeed vital to what it means to me to truly *engage* in critique. I want to talk critically about *The Century Project* in relation to its various and contradictory contexts; in so doing I hope to also talk about a body that remembers, intuitively, knows, feels, and becomes affected, especially since the typical representations of female beauty disciplines the desires of the female body and reduces its complexity. An embodied critique emerges from the gut, the heart, and the mind at once, all corporeally constituted; it takes seriously the evaluative processes of the intellect as mutually obliged to “the ‘rabble’ of the senses” (Eagleton 14). While I begin with the metaphor of body as image, and speak of women who survey their own “femininity” and who may well experience their bodies as that which is seen, such analogies and perceptions remain embodied. And deeply so, if we look to the ways in which such ideas and practices affect and are written on the physical body.² *The Century Project* women’s voices and portraits will slip in and out of this analysis – they are with me as I write this, they are what brought me into this project. The particularities of experience and the personal details to which I refer (mine and that of the other subjects) I hope will enrich our understanding of each text or photograph being examined and in turn situate the discussion in relation to corporeal, visceral, social, and political experience. Thus, I begin with my own experience viewing *The Century Project*.

Seeing Bodies

March 2006: as I circle the exhibit for the first time, I am quite uneasy with the photographs of nakedness and vulnerability. In fact, I barely look – I cling to the written statements because I feel at once like a voyeur of these private lives, closed off, protective, and as if I myself am being watched. It is the feeling of having been “‘discovered at the keyhole,’” which is, also, to be “‘discovered as a

² Sandra Lee Bartky employs an astute Foucauldian analysis of the construction, maintenance and regulation of femininity, as timely now as it was when it was written in 1990: “the disciplinary power that is increasingly charged with the production of a properly embodied femininity is dispersed and anonymous; there are no individuals formally empowered to wield it; it is, as we have seen, invested in everyone and in no one in particular. This disciplinary power is peculiarly modern: It does not rely upon violent or public sanctions, nor does it seek to restrain the freedom of the female body to move from place to place. For all that, *its invasion of the body is well-nigh total*: The female body enters ‘a machinery of power that explores it, breaks it down and rearranges it.’ The disciplinary techniques through which the ‘docile bodies’ of women are constructed aim at a regulation which is perpetual and exhaustive—a regulation of the body’s size and contours, its appetite, posture, gestures, and general comportment in space and the appearance of each of its visible parts” (79, emphasis mine).



Fig. 2: Cordelle, Frank. “Marlee, 29.” *Bodies and Souls*.

body” (Krauss qtd. in Silverman 172) – the strange feeling of being an embodied looked-at and looking subject.³ It is an embodied knowledge that intuits that the body is being looked at even as such a look escapes one’s field of vision. Such knowledge brings to consciousness the existence of the body as viewable, discernable from the outside. Suddenly becoming aware of one’s body is, I imagine, the way subject MarLee (Fig. 2) also feels, “barely looking” at the girls and women her first time flipping through Cordelle’s portfolio. She writes: “last I heard, lesbians could get arrested for that kind of thing” as she sifts through the photos and statements “acutely aware” of Cordelle’s presence next to her (Cordelle, *Bodies* 88). For Marlee, as for others, to be an embodied looking

³ Marianne Hirsch writes: “even as I see, I am seen. As Lacan would say, ‘I am a picture... I am *photographed*’” (116).

subject is also to be reminded of her own “othered” (lesbian) identity, to be confronted by one’s relation to a larger social context that looks at and values bodies differently.



Fig. 3: Cordelle, Frank. “Sylvia, 2 ½” *Bodies and Souls*.

My own reaction is to become anxious when almost immediately I come across the photo of a naked child (Fig. 3); I experience a tightening of muscles at the sight of a woman with legs spread in the bathtub revealing the trickling of her menstrual flow (Fig. 4) – social taboos borne out in bodily response. Perhaps my apprehension in looking is a self-policing of sorts. The photographs draw out and confront those aspects of the self in individual and societal terms that have been deemed reprehensible, shameful, or private. I am largely uncomfortable though, because my identity is established through idealized aesthetics governing the representation of women’s bodies and body parts, along with the abjection of

others deemed to be “culturally abnormal, even grotesque” (Smith 268). The scope of my gaze is curtailed by – and my shock at the sight of menstrual blood an expression of – protocols of “decency.” Eventually though, the nakedness, the



Fig. 4: Cordelle, Frank. “Tamara, 23.” *Bodies and Souls*.

“breaking of social protocol,” ceases to be offensive.⁴ The visual rhetoric which signals to me a million sites of “difference” at once is interrupted by the women’s words – chatty, reflective, pained, witty, angry, self-conscious, confrontational, unamused, matter-of-fact, poetic.⁵ I cannot possibly know these women through their statements, but nonetheless they begin to be familiar to me (or at least familiar to my sense of self). The details of their words and pictures are like countless *punctums*, piercing details – the familiar point of one woman’s elbow, the way another protectively hugs her stomach – that prick and prod as they dredge up feelings and memories of my own.⁶

As for their nakedness, it is impossible to know precisely what it means to these women. What I can ask and begin to answer is this: what does the *sight* of another’s nakedness mean? How do I account for the arguably salutary nature of the sight of “ordinary” female naked bodies despite the somewhat obvious connection to a history of nude portraiture in which, as Lynda Nead argues in her historical survey of the female nude in Western art, man is connected to the role of the artist and woman is associated with object, material, the obscene, aesthetic pleasure, passivity, or “other?” John Berger suggests:

... nakedness acts as a confirmation and provokes a very strong sense of *relief*. She is a woman like any other: or he is a man like any other: we are overwhelmed by the marvelous simplicity of the familiar sexual mechanism... In this revelation lies the warm and friendly – as opposed to cold and impersonal – anonymity of nakedness. (*Ways* 59, emphasis mine)

As I begin to understand that I have been invited by these women to look, that they themselves have given me *permission* to look, I look more closely; my eyes veer from their faces, at first cautiously, and then purposefully as I look at the whole of each woman’s body. I see that their bodies are actually more like my own body and the bodies that surround me in my daily life than they are different. This, embarrassingly, is a revelation, and I begin to understand that my habits of seeing have in some ways accustomed me to not readily identify with “real,” everyday bodies. These pictures are, after all, images of naked women, and clothed or not, I have learned to expect something from them, to see reflected in

⁴ It is impossible now, two years later, to flip through the pages of *Bodies and Souls* and feel at all affronted by its nudity. Perhaps its images have themselves become iconic, “more and more unnoticeable and invisible” (Hirsch 114) by virtue of their repetition.

⁵ By “difference” I mean that which both departs from social convention and that which has been deemed abject (see pages 8-9 for further reflection on *The Century Project*’s multiple sites of difference).

⁶ Roland Barthes uses the term *punctum* to describe the accidental and otherwise insignificant photographic detail that pierces him and makes meaningful the photograph before him; the *punctum* is that slant of light, mode of dress, expression of face, etc., which comes into contact with, and brings to surface, Barthes’ personal memories and experiences (27).

them not a glimpse of myself *as is* but as how I *ought* to be⁷ – and, how I ought to *see*. An anonymous male viewer similarly finds it refreshing to, as he writes, “not be expected to regard women as curves and sex as the magazines would tell me to, but instead down [sic] to the same demystified and wonderful humanity that confronts me everyday in the mirror” (Cordelle, “Comments”).⁸ How it is that we come to *see* in a certain fashion is, arguably, in part a product of what is signified to us by various forms of popular representation.⁹ *The Century Project*, on the most basic level, has the *potential* to embody a different way of seeing from that often associated with naked female bodies. The recognition of a shared banality in the simplicity of the unclothed, unremarkable, female body, expressed both by this male viewer and Berger’s comments on the meaning of nakedness, exists precisely because these bodies are without the sort of representational adornment one might expect of a female nude. Without the *punctum*, the moment or detail of recognition, the identification between the “I” and the posing subject, these bodies are not only “other,” but “more or less mysterious” (Berger, *Ways* 59). And, perhaps, more susceptible to dismissal and objectification. I will explore the generative potential of *The Century Project* throughout, arguing that the self-recognition or identification is crucial to the warmth with which the project is received. By contrast, Chapter Three marks a significant shift in my approach to the relationship between subject and viewer, and necessarily views the imagined exchange as mediated by the photographer and larger power dynamics that shape the posing/viewing sessions. I thus engage a double discourse that sees the productive possibilities of the project and resists easy celebration of an alternative aesthetics.

I certainly do not feel a sense of recognition in every photo I encounter, or in every detail of every photo – nor do I sense I am supposed to. “Racialized” bodies, “disabled” bodies, “diseased” and “deformed” bodies (loaded terms dependent on our definitions of health and normality), menstruation, aging, pregnancy, fat, hair around nipples, sagging skin, stretch marks, armpit hair, ingrown hairs around the bikini line, prosthetic limbs (or the absence thereof), varied pubic hair formations, mastectomy scars, breasts and nipples (no two alike), cancer, cellulite – all of these, if we think about iconic feminine beauty, are

⁷ There are, of course, many images which do not facilitate this relation, but nonetheless this explanation is true of my own experience when presented with images of naked women.

⁸ Viewers are invited to comment on the exhibit and are provided with comment cards collected by Cordelle. This is an excerpt from one such comment, left anonymously.

⁹ Susan Bordo writes: “we are no longer given verbal descriptions or exemplars of what a lady is or of what femininity consists. Rather, we learn the rules directly through bodily discourse: through images that tell us what clothes, body shape, facial expression, movements, and behaviour are required” (*Unbearable* 170).

markers of the abnormal, or even the “grotesque.” But they are also, by Julia Kristeva’s account, that which we deem abject: the improper or unclean, that which threatens the coherence of the “I” in relation to the other, “the bodily fluids,” aging and disease that “life withstands hardly and with difficulty” (2-3). My initial feeling of repulsion is the abject borne out in bodily response, “one of those violent, dark revolts of being” (Kristeva 1). I know that this feeling is as much directed inward as it is outward: I reject that which is foreign or different within the self. The “real” or “ordinary” female naked body (which is no longer “The” female naked body but many diverse bodies) collides with dominant perceptions of the female body that want it to be beautiful, coherent, and whole, a point to which I will return in more detail in Chapter One. These disturbances confirm the “otherness” that is already embedded – though often rejected like excrement – within the (cultural, political and individual) body.

By the time I reach the exhibit’s end viewing it for the first time, the bodies of *The Century Project* are no longer reminders of my own bodily shame or embarrassment (that which iconic feminine beauty denies), no longer sites of abjection, but *the warm and friendly anonymity of nakedness*. This is truly a relief. In the absence of the sort of traits that I suppose to constitute a female nude, I feel let off the hook, my own bodily marks and oddities affirmed to a certain extent. I wonder to what degree it is the “I” of the viewer that is composed by these photographs, less so the subject herself. And how these portraits, in the very act of picturing difference, both give that difference permission to be, while at the same time casting difference as visually spectacular.

My experience viewing *The Century Project* is not one between viewer and a factual, photographic record but always, as has been argued, an expression of my way of seeing, in itself not set, but “continually active, continually moving, continually holding things in a circle around itself, constituting what is present” to me as I am (Berger, *Ways* 9). To start I see negation and abjection. As the images settle, the words penetrate, I see women of all sorts. And I want to stand with them.

Picturing/Posing Bodies

If asked at the time why I had decided to pose for *The Century Project*, I would have responded that a longstanding fear of mine, one that has informed many relationships, is to be seen naked. Posing was not, of course, this uncomplicated. It is easy to look at the photographs of myself Cordelle has sent me now with little care or feeling – they have, in a sense, become *things*, lifeless, static images. Initially, when I received the two portraits Cordelle sent me in the mail after I had posed, it took great effort not to judge, not to self-deprecate, but to situate myself back in that space right before I was photographed in which I felt I was actually *in* my naked body, no one, myself included, looking *at* it: “a woman must continually watch herself. She is almost continually accompanied by her own image” (Berger, *Ways* 46). I know this feeling well. When my partner

refuses that mode of vision, that dynamic of power, does not look at my body as some men do (he as the seer, me as the seen), is shy to comment on its appearance, I react strangely: I feel unattractive. It does not occur to him that my femininity, my lovability is supposed to be constituted through his look. His refusal to participate is gentle and quiet. His approach is a reflection of his own (refreshing) upbringing – but also a reflection of the fact that the gendered dynamic between a seer and seen is not prescriptive, determined, or real in any sense, but based on relational and representational ideals of femininity and masculinity to which we more or less adhere. Still, to pose for a project in which I know I will be seen – a mode of interaction I both expect and resent – in order to overcome a fear of being seen (naked), seems a choice at odds with itself.

Both Cordelle and Elizabeth Hoodecheck – the documentary filmmaker traveling with Cordelle and creating her own art based on the women of the project (a film titled “Bare Honesty”) – are in my small one-bedroom apartment adjusting their cameras as I stand disrobed and waiting. I am naked but I cannot see myself, nor is either of them looking at me – a strange moment in between the somewhat erotic act of disrobing in “public” and the photo shoot itself. For a naked person in a room with two strangers, I am surprised at how little concerned I am for the outward appearance of my bare body. I imagine this odd scene in other (possibly Western) contexts in which it is presumably quite usual for subjects of art, pornography and high fashion to be naked and the centre of attention. Cameras ready and pointing in my direction, my body anticipates its composition; like Barthes, *I transform myself in advance into an image*. It takes me a while to pose in any other way than I know how – hands on hips, together, or by my side, forced smile, widened eyes. In his encouragement to just be, Cordelle is mechanical but nice enough; Elizabeth understands. Her questions to me after I pose are gentle, respectful, not probing, her interest (seemingly) genuine, embodied, personal. Her presence makes my experience a much different one, I imagine, from that of the other women who were alone with Cordelle.

The photo session takes only about half an hour and it is immensely difficult to forget about the camera so that I may communicate something other than a pose. I do not know how to *act* – to move, to hurt, to feel – in front of a camera, less so on demand. The two portraits that I have received from Cordelle in the mail form a striking contrast – one obviously an earlier frame and the other seemingly less posed, more withdrawn, somewhat indignant to the call of the lens.¹⁰ Both portraits reference a certain mode of picturing the female body communicated through my body language, my insecurity. To be in the body, to be embodied, not just a *seen* body, this is what I wanted. Again, it seems an impossibility of sorts in this context: to want to be in excess of my body’s image in a nude portrait. And what, precisely, does this mean – to want to be in excess of my body’s image? Rita Felski considers the plurality of feminist aesthetics,

¹⁰ Chapter Three accounts for this change in mood.

paying particular attention to the feminist confessional mode which reveals the inherently conflicted nature of self that, in trying to assert itself, can constitute both “radical politics or self-indulgent narcissism” (108). Like Felski’s conception of the autobiographical confession, my choice to pose can be read as a want to be in excess of not only a static image, but of the gender ideologies and *representations* more generally which contain and instruct the female body. It is the image one receives after posing that completes one’s involvement in *The Century Project* and enacts a similar “mechanism of identity constitution” to that of the autobiographical text: “the autobiography reflects back to the author in objectified form a self-image which *purports* to be the most intimate expression of personal identity” (Felski 111). And thus there inevitably exists a dissonance and irrecoverable space between the act of posing or writing and the *object* that is its result.

Further, the act of posing/writing one’s (innermost, traumatic, honest) experiences in order to unburden, is to, in a way, confess the naked self. Like the confession, however, this want for a “free subjectivity” or “authentic self” which challenges existing social norms “is itself very much a social product” (104). Felski warns that this assertion of self “can merely underline its profound dependence upon the cultural and ideological systems through which it is constituted” (104). And to be in excess of representation denotes an impossibility, since my words and image are, like others’, representative. Not only are they representative in the sense that they can never be the thing or body of which they are “copies” or expressions, but representative of experience that is hoped to speak to, in one way or another, “a communal female identity” (Felski 95). Cordelle writes in the conclusion of *Bodies and Souls*: “I still have ideas for which I haven’t found the right people. There are subject matters not present in this volume which need to be included” (220). Cordelle is trying to account for a range of experiences – less so for the uniqueness of the individual women themselves, more so for the representational value with which these stories will be imbued.

Body (As) Image

The excerpt that begins this Introduction from Eve Ensler’s *The Good Body* puts into harsh – if oversimplified – perspective the ways our (read female, Western) bodies have come to be perceived as *disembodied* images, or images-as-objects, not only in print media but in lived practice.¹¹ This is not to say that Eve

¹¹ Marcia Hutchinson argues: “obsession with the body is not the same as embodiment. We can be disembodied while being excruciatingly obsessed” (155). Hutchinson’s argument hinges on the definition of disembodiment as the repression of bodily experiences, and embodiment as “the experience of the body as the center of existence” (155). I argue that embodiment is the beginning of

only *sees* her body as an inadequate version of itself and Leah *lives* in hers unconcerned with appearance, two mutually exclusive ways of living in or relating to the body. Embodiment is a lived inevitability. As Gail Weiss argues, we all possess multiple and necessarily incoherent or contradictory body images that serve to “destabilize the hegemony of any particular body image ideal” (100). Nonetheless, for many women the desire to embody that ideal female form suggests the dominance of a “singularly oppressive body image” (90-100). The disparate perspectives of Eve and Leah do not imply that our bodies have become objects, mere images, but that we have come to understand our bodies *through* images, the power dynamics that construct them, and the convincing visual rhetoric that is their result.

My choice to pose is undeniably fraught with contradiction. My desire to join a community of women is paired with a resistance to what that might suggest about women’s experiences as either homogenous or as always cast in various forms of representation. As reluctant as I am to employ it, the body as image seems to be both a powerful metaphor to describe many people’s conflicted relationship to their bodies and an appropriate starting point for a project comprised of explicitly political nude portraits. Eve’s refusal to eat bread (part of her diet, the ultimate goal of which is to “flatten” her aging stomach) is exemplary of the “surveyed female” incarnate, the internalization of the idea that a woman’s body is one that is, first and foremost, *seen*.¹² As such, women are to “feed an appetite, not to have any of their own” (Berger, *Ways* 55). Many of the subjects’ statements confirm Susan Sontag’s assertion that we have indeed learned “to see ourselves photographically” (*On Photography* 85). And many are uncomfortable, at least initially, with the idea of being photographed, not for fear of being “violated,” but for fear of “the camera’s disapproval” (85). Jemma, 14, writes: “when I first considered being photographed by Frank, I was a bit dubious. Why should I want to immortalize myself on film nude, and showcasing the one thing about myself I hate most?” (Cordelle, *Bodies* 32-33); Jessie, 14: “in my session, I was very nervous. I’m not comfortable with my body, and having it duplicated on film increased my self-consciousness” (34-35); Kelsi, 15: “at first I was completely against doing the photos. I don’t like my body. I’m not at all comfortable with it either” (36-37). Despite the recurrent anxiety of being “looked at” expressed by these particular subjects, the “seen” woman still falls short of providing a complete lens through which to understand the multiple seeing, viewing and posing dynamics and contexts that come into play in *The Century*

experience; to be excruciatingly obsessed with the body is a perception that, though no doubt culturally influenced, originates in, and enacts itself on, the body.

¹² John Berger writes in *Ways of Seeing*: “In the art-form of the European nude the painters and spectator-owners were usually men and the persons treated as objects, usually women. This unequal relationship is so deeply embedded in our culture that it still structures the consciousness of many women. They survey, like men, their own femininity” (63).

Project. Similar to Berger's claim that "the surveyor of woman in herself is male" (*Ways* 47), Paul Messaris notes that the lens through which woman sees herself acts "as a substitute for the eye of an imaginary male onlooker" (41); woman is invited to identify with the position of the seer, to see herself as that which is visible, evaluated by an outsider's eye. To generalize, however, from this point and assert that all images operate in the service of heterosexist regimes would be to deny the possibility of seeing in ways that go beyond the "given-to-be-seen" – and to forget Barthes' *punctum*, which suggests that we also see in ways that are specific to our unique personal histories and sensibilities.¹³ I think we must grant that both Cordelle and the women subjects know this, and to some extent the latter share their bodies and stories as an act of reciprocation, in response to their own moments of recognition while viewing *The Century Project* for the first time.¹⁴

Chapter One understands the anxiety of being photographed as linked to a deeper anxiety about representations of suffering, death and beauty. Death, the mortal body, is always close at hand in representations of beauty and suffering, but also in the nature of the photograph that cannot help but make an object of the person in the image. Using examples from *The Century Project*, I will examine how its photographs respond to the lifeless, iconic feminine ideal of contemporary popular culture, but are nonetheless tied to the failure of photographic representation to exceed its status as image/object. How these photographs are made meaningful is dependent on the viewer. Thus, these images are both difficult and/or affective depending on the extent to which we can imagine their past and futures, engage in cultural meaning making. Chapter Two continues this discussion by considering that bodily and ethical identity is, to start, relational. The incoherence of the self, the emerging relation to the world and to others, is expressed by subjects and viewers of the exhibit who engage in reciprocal engagements and sharings which are both unavoidable and unpredictable. *The Century Project* provides the opportunity for a material, embodied ethics and the sharing/lending of stories. Thus, while I argue that the ways in which women see themselves *can* (and are) very much framed by consistent historical and contemporary constructions of "woman," this does not assume that images of women will necessarily or automatically function in terms of this particular "articulation of power."¹⁵ I contend that context, caption, social function, and the

¹³ Kaja Silverman argues that we look by way of a complex filtering system such that an image comes to mean something specific to us. In effect, "we manage to see in ways that are to varying degrees independent of the given-to-be-seen" (181).

¹⁴ The first women photographed by Cordelle represent an interesting exception to this observation: how did they come into this project? Did they have an conception of what the project would look like in its full diversity?

¹⁵ In *Naked Authority: The Body in Western Painting 1830-1908* Marcia Pointon writes: "an epistemological framework posited on the acceptance of a pre-

conditions of production of each image matters to the extent that by examining them, their relation to systems of power can be determined.

One must keep in mind, however, that autobiographical or confessional aspects of this exhibit do not necessarily challenge normative productions of the self. The subject does not write herself autonomously, nor does she remain free from male influence which Cordelle, try as he might to remain in the background, cannot avoid bringing to each photo session. Moreover, the subject's words and her choice to pose are likely a negotiation of structural influences (cultural beliefs, personal history, a potential partner, family support) and personal agency (the extent to which an individual can act autonomously).¹⁶ Chapter Three delves more closely into the role of the artist and how his choices – inclusions, exclusions, written addendums to subjects' statements, as well as the visual rhetoric he has created with each photograph – work against or in the service of his stated commitment to resistant, intimate and therapeutic portraits. In particular, I argue that *The Century Project* hearkens back to Jean-Martin Charcot's photographs of hysterical women—and to male photographers assuming authority on, and attempting to “document” or observe specifically feminine maladies, whereby the subject is contained by both the frame and diagnostic modes of address.

Philosophical and biological discussions of embodiment must be paired with a concern for how the artistic and critical texts speak to the *material conditions* of the women they purport to portray – “women” here not referring to a falsely homogenous category, but actual women with names and life histories. *The Century Project* provides the anecdotal (mine and that of the other women subjects), a personal way into the theory and ideas and experience of posing.

constructed male viewer in a relationship of opposition and oppression to a female subject is deeply flawed. The ways in which images work in terms of sexual oppression are determined by the relations between the viewing positions of spectators as gendered subjects and the viewing subjects as constructed in images through forms of visual rhetoric which are *not of themselves oppressive* but which may be seen to function *in the articulation of power*. Discussions of the gendered body and its representation must always be acknowledged as shifting, as lacking secure boundaries. It is precisely by examining these unstable boundaries that we can begin to understand how the body in representation works in the formation and exercise of authority” (33-34, emphasis mine).

¹⁶ In Rayna Rapp's sociological analysis of the reasons women accept or refuse prenatal testing, she understands choice as the imbrication of “social history and individual volition, collective position and personal choice – or the intertwined and negotiated workings of structure and agency” (50); similarly, Susan Bordo writes: “to live in our culture is not (despite powerful social mythology to the contrary) to participate equally in some free play of individual diversity. Rather, one always finds oneself located within structures of dominance and subordination – not least important of which have been those organized around gender” (*Unbearable* 234).

Whatever stung me, was poignant to me, about *The Century Project*, is, I think, valid, in the sense that all of our gut reactions are. This is not to say that these responses are divorced from bias or normative productions of self, or to equate a feeling of bodily immediacy with ethical achievement. Still, our visceral responses are worth pursuing, in their own right, as are the reactions of all the men and women who attended the exhibit, and the feelings of the subjects who chose to pose for it. The exhibit is as much about its intended viewer as it is its subject; further, the seeing and posing subjectivities (both of which make apparent the embodied subject) are part of a reciprocal relationship, and for those women who chose to pose, mark a progression from “viewer” to “viewed,” “seer” to “seen.” The writing, posing, naked self then depends on the viewer who will “understand, sympathize, and identify” (Felski 110), the outcome of which is at times resistant, and at other times enabling of current power-relations. I am thus interested in what *The Century Project* initiates by way of a culturally urgent critique, one that does not emerge in binary opposition to male artistry, but engages in a tensive yet productive dialogue with Cordelle’s photography.

Picturing Beauty and Pain: Icons of Femininity and Narratives of Suffering

All those young photographers who are at work in the world, determined upon the capture of actuality, do not know that they are agents of Death.... For Death must be somewhere in a society; if it is no longer (or less intensely) in religion, it must be elsewhere; perhaps in this image which produces Death while trying to preserve life.... *Life / Death*: the paradigm is reduced to a simple click, the one separating the initial pose from the final print.

—Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*

... the production of beautiful images (aesthetics) and the construction of femininity are culturally equated because they are analogously positioned in relation to death. The beauty of Woman and the beauty of the image both give the illusion of intactness and unity, cover the insupportable signs of lack, deficiency, transiency and promise their spectators the impossible – an obliteration of death’s ubiquitous “castrative” threat to the subject.

—Elisabeth Bronfen, *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity and the Aesthetic*

The Century Project combines stunning photographic portraits with often devastating personal narratives. Many of its subjects reference the excessive self-discipline and punishment that accompany an attempt to attain an elusive feminine ideal; others account for profound loss of health, of breasts, of youth, of reproductive freedom (those all powerful signifiers of what it is to be a “woman”). *The Century Project*’s dual focus on beauty and suffering situates it uniquely within the context of two image industries: one which sells an iconic ideal as a symbol of femininity (fashion photography, pornography, magazine and commercial modeling) and another which pictures pain in order to document, inform, shock (photojournalism and photography of suffering more generally). Both have been charged with the misuses of photography: that an image’s connection to real people, real pain, can be obscured by its uses. How do we reconcile this? How do we understand *The Century Project* as an art exhibit that photographs beautifully while the narrations of self register tragically? By drawing on and responding to two popular modes of representation (beauty and suffering), is *The Century Project* similarly situated between irreconcilable narratives: an idealizing technology and lived experience?

The discussions highlighted in this chapter begin with the dilemma posed in my Introduction: the dissonance between *The Century Project*’s objective to let women speak/express their intimate truths and its resultant object, the photographic image. The fashion industry and popular culture make iconic a feminine ideal by obscuring any referent not only to the model’s pain and regulation (if there is any to speak of) in the maintenance of her body, but by expunging all traces of a life and history beyond the photographic frame. Thus I

understand the aesthetic of the project, at its most promising, as a visual corrective to an iconic feminine ideal through its inclusion of bodies deemed “other” or “ordinary,” and through its restoration of a life narrative to the aesthetic front.

To assert, however, that *The Century Project* responds to stereotypical ways of representing women necessitates a closer look at the ideals of feminine beauty of contemporary popular culture, as well as the nature of the photographic medium by which the project makes its response. As the epigraph that opens this chapter illustrates, the photograph itself has been conceived of as death-like in its stillness. Barthes understands the photograph’s most certain mode of expression to be captured in the “that-has-been” of an image: the evidence of a moment past and the eventual death of its subject and the photograph itself (92). If we take seriously Elisabeth Bronfen’s claim that beauty, like the image, translates “an imperfect, animate body, into a perfect inanimate, image, a dead ‘figure’” (*Over* 65), it would *appear* that we are left with a dilemma: *The Century Project* cannot escape the immobility of its medium. I contend that *The Century Project* structures a response to the lifeless “dead-figure” of femininity, however, by refusing to hide the traces of the mortal body in its images. Despite the photograph’s inanimate quality, the photographs reference survival, even if only for a moment. The women of *The Century Project* who reference their own difficult pasts demonstrate that the traces of survival borne by the photograph are also apparent in language. The act of writing loss into language signifies a moment in which one has already grieved, reflected and articulated. A way in which these photographs can be brought to life depends on the imaginary leaps we take in envisioning their past and futures in relation to our own. For whom, then, does the photograph exist? I am interested, ultimately, in the tension between the photograph’s “flatness and its illusion of depth” and I consider, as Marianne Hirsch does, that the photograph acquires its meaning in the interchange between the image and the viewer’s perceptions, between “the imaginary and the symbolic” (119).

Beautiful Bodies

The aesthetic of contemporary popular culture acts as a kind of disciplinary technology that constructs and propagates the normative, suggesting that “female beauty is reproducible, that women might be – and should be – standardized in shape, weight, facial features, and muscle tone” (Kehler). That such a singular, alienating, culturally constituted ideal is freighted with such weight in the definition of self is likely because it promises likeability, control, will. At the



Fig. 5: Cordelle, Frank. “Mondy, 50.” *Bodies and Souls*.

same time, however, it engenders self-hate, suggesting that self-loathing will lead to reformed behaviours, reformed bodies and self-love. It does not take much effort to find a subject in *The Century Project* who has internalized that to be a (wanted, valued, prized) woman is to be beautiful. Mondy, 50 (Fig. 5), observes the equation between beauty and lovability in childhood:

As I was growing up, there was hardly a day that my mother didn't tell me how ugly I was. And not only was I ugly, I was also hateful and arrogant, according to her. She ridiculed my face, my hair, and my body, especially my flat chest and my pouchy tummy. When I cried, she took me to the mirror so I could see just how horrible I looked. She never displayed a photograph of me, nor did she ever touch me except to slap my face. My mother made it clear to me that because I was so ugly, I was unlovable and unloved. (Cordelle, *Bodies* 158)

Mondy's surgical scars as a result of eventual cosmetic surgery reflect her struggle to be, as she writes, "at peace in my own skin" (158). In adulthood her breasts are large, her stomach taut, her makeup perfectly applied. The cultural premium on looks and beauty is not one that exists in the absence of bodies, but one that indeed penetrates the flesh, lives in the body, and the body, in turn, communicates such ideals through the adornment of its skin. Mondy's statement reveals that the social, cultural, familial, and political works on and shapes us in profound ways. Because iconic feminine beauty is itself ideological, it does not express its own relation to the systems of power that shape it, as Mondy is able to. On the most basic level, *The Century Project* attempts to correct representations of feminine beauty that bury the realities of the surveyed/regulated/disordered female and halt acknowledgement of the pain within.

Where bodies are not so easily alterable by exercise and diet, they are, as Mondy illustrates, surgically amenable given an ability to pay for these alterations. After viewing *The Century Project* in its entirety, I find Mondy's body difficult to look at. Like the icon of femininity, it projects an image rather than a body. It is testament to the fact that every anti-aging, smell-absorbing, hair-bleaching, wrinkle-disappearing, waist-thinning product currently marketed to women aims not only to "enhance" the female body in the service of a homogenous feminine ideal, but to freeze it in time. The image that sells, in other words, is a static one, a timeless one.¹⁷ In "real" life my body stretches and sweats and grows old, bearing the attendant marks of age, work and time.

When photographs are airbrushed we are tidying and tucking away the fluids, folds and marks that are not simply "unsightly" or "unlovable," but that act as traces of the living/dying body. As my Introduction articulates, we reject those signs of aging and disease that "life withstands hardly and with difficulty" (Kristeva 2-3). Beauty is so compelling, Bronfen argues, because its perfection "disproves the idea of disintegration, fragmentation and insufficiency" (*Over 62*). Ideals of feminine beauty then are not simply about the regulation of women's bodies, but about our anxieties governing our own mortality. The portrait of Tamara, 23 (Fig. 6), I have observed, is deeply unsettling to many men and women alike. In the face of impossible body types, which have become not only the ideal, but a self-regulating, disciplinary force, this photograph is an obvious affront. I love this portrait: I love the boldness of its expression, the subtle smile on her lips, the way her body sinks slightly into the corner of the tub. I love that she sits as she might if no one else were there, unconcerned with ladylike propriety: legs spread, arms comfortably by her side, blood flowing. An advertisement for the birth control brand Lybrel offers an interesting counter visual. Lybrel's website features a thin, attractive, White woman, arms outstretched behind her, head tilted

¹⁷ A woman's skin should "betray no sign of wear, experience, age, or deep thought" (Bartky 69).



Fig. 6: Cordelle, Frank. "Tamara, 23." *Bodies and Souls*.

upwards toward the sun, hair and clothing flapping in the wind.¹⁸ Lybrel's symbolism relies on the belief that a woman's body is inherently burdensome,

¹⁸ Lybrel, no doubt meant to conjure the word "liberty," is a low dose combination pill that you take every day warding off unwanted pregnancy while also eliminating your monthly period.

something one must, and can, overcome.¹⁹ Lybrel and other birth control brands involved in the commercialization of menstrual suppression are part pharmaceutical company, part technology involved in the gendered socialization of behaviour (Oudshoorn 353). We learn from a young age that period blood is the worst kind (smelly, messy, inconvenient) and that we deal with it by literally blocking its passage to the outside world until we can neatly dispose of its traces. An excerpt from the poem Tamara has included in her statement reads: “It flows wide / spilling, furiously, / red” (Cordelle, *Bodies* 70). Tamara’s body transgresses disciplinary boundaries: rich and furious her blood seeps out of her despite every commercial message that communicates that its proper place is hidden.

Surviving the Traces

The boundaries made malleable by portraits such as Tamara are those that pertain not only to notions of female beauty, but to the body’s intactness or integrity. Tamara’s portrait is perhaps unsettling because it provides evidence of the body’s unseemly spillage and connection to (and contamination of?) an outside world. We are less familiar with the sight of a woman’s menstrual blood than we are with images of violated bodies. Subject Desiree, 19 (Fig. 7) bears a scar that spans her entire chest and right arm as a result of a brutal assault. Her statement details instance after instance of horrific abuse, the last of which landed her very near to death. She writes of her abuser:

One summer evening, he attacked me. He stabbed my chest, going in two inches deep, starting from the left, and dragged it right over my chest, puncturing a lung and an artery. In total shock, I felt my life slipping away. (Cordelle, *Bodies* 52)

The scars on Desiree’s body then are a result of a culture that not only regulates, but imposes on female bodies. Her portrait often came up in conversation while I was volunteering for *The Century Project Team*.²⁰ When discussing how we

¹⁹ Commercial messages as such herald the “self-determination and creative self-fashioning” (Bordo, *Unbearable* 296) that supposedly mark today’s young woman, appealing to notions of choice and freedom while masking the inherent risk in taking preventative, hormone-based drugs.

²⁰ The Century Project Team (CPT) was comprised of a group of individuals (primarily women) with skills and interests that included filmmaking, publishing, photography, professional fundraising, and academic analysis. After a few meetings, the CPT’s projected annual plan involved securing funds for a traveling exhibit, broadening the experiences and backgrounds reflected in the photographs (volume two of *The Century Project* book is currently under way), organizing a kick-off exhibit for potential donors and partners, and compiling a database of volunteer skill sets needed to continue this project. Each of us also shared in the structural and directional decisions of the group. I spoke alongside Cordelle at a



Fig. 7: Cordelle, Frank. “Desiree, 19.” *Bodies and Souls*.

might use funds raised from the exhibit, someone suggested that we donate it to a subject like Desiree so that she might have her scars surgically “fixed.” On this point I feel completely divided, not least because this decision should be hers to

community event, and reorganized the project’s website (including revamping the layout, writing the copy, composing CPT’s vision, mission and values, and eventually hiring a web designer for the final changes). The CPT was started in November of 2006 and broke up in May of 2007. The revised website layout remains but much of the copy was deleted or altered to reflect its original content. Most CPT members left because the volunteer work was too demanding or because Cordelle’s resistance to outside help made for a difficult group effort. Cordelle regained control of the project in the sense that he no longer has a team of support to help in his fundraising efforts.

make. On the one hand the message this sends to Desiree and those viewing the exhibit is completely opposite the point of the project: that we can and should make the body (visually) whole again. On the other hand, if such an occasion were to help rid Desiree of her scar's associative emotional and physical abuse, why should she not have that option? Why should she have to bear the marks of an attack both gruesome and deeply misogynistic? It is unsurprising that Desiree's portrait makes a lasting impression on those who have attended the exhibit. And while Desiree's statement tells the story of repeated victimhood, her portrait, nakedly bearing the marks of her abuser, locates her as the survivor. Butler argues



Fig. 8: Cordelle, Frank. "Kerry, 41." *Bodies and Souls*.

(via Derrida) that the relationship between language, life and death is an insuperable one. She argues that in language "there is a surviving that takes place, spectral, haunted, in and through the trace:" the traces in language of those before

us, and the traces in language we leave to be inherited ("On Never" 32). Much as her portrait is expressive of a singular moment, her words look forward, as language itself does: "I believe there's hope for my future" (Cordelle, *Bodies* 52).

Bodies that have lived through and bear the marks of disease are also unlikely to be included in popular representation of female beauty, and provide the most obvious example of the illusion of the body's intactness and immunity to death. Kerry, 41 (Fig. 8), has undergone a double mastectomy. She is also blind and diabetic; she has had both legs partially amputated and will never be able to see her portrait. I understand her choice to be part of *The Century Project* as a sort of challenge to, and affirmation of the value we place on the visual. I remember finding her choice to pose initially puzzling: why should she offer herself, blindly, to be looked at? What significance does the visual hold for her? Her portrait confirms that the visual extends beyond the capacity for sight, shaping our learned responses to "different" bodies (a point to which I will return in Chapter Two). None of the project's subjects are actually being looked at as viewers peruse its portraits. Kerry's portrait more so than the others, calls attention to the fact that the subject does not have the opportunity to return the viewer's gaze. Her lack of sight reminds me of the extent to which my own gaze can be complicit in creating "othered" bodies. Her contribution to an aesthetic project unseen to her is, ironically, the permission given to *The Century Project's* public to look, even as she herself is unable to. We see her amputations, we see her prosthetic limbs, we see her mastectomy scars, we see that her eyes are closed and are unsurprised to learn that she is blind. And we see her laughing. In spite of death's inscriptions which make their mark all over her body, she survives, she laughs, and she renders somewhat ridiculous the condition of visibility upon which iconic feminine beauty is based.

Chris, 52 (Fig. 9), has also undergone a double mastectomy. She writes: "Our pictures go beyond the scars and the stories; they shout about more than survival; they roar of strength and of hope that the next sunrise won't be as difficult as the last" (Cordelle, *Bodies* 162). Even as the bodies and images of Kerry and Chris articulate a relationship to death, do not hide the inevitability of aging, cancer, disease, their written and visual narrations also speak survival. By survival I do not mean a courageous "choice" to continue on in the face of adversity.²¹ Chris does not conflate the "choice" to survive (as if one simply chooses to survive cancer) with the hope to; so many "survival" narratives make heroes of the cancer patient that lives to tell the story. And to be sure, the bodies of Kerry and Chris are not alone: all bodies articulate a relationship to death. I do

²¹ I will never forget a conversation with an old high school teacher at the time of my brother's suicide. Of the many people that remarked on my apparent "bravery" in dealing with my brother's death, she was the only one to say to me: "there is no brave choice, you just go on." And you do because the alternative is worse. You go on in the way that we ever go on, always because the alternative is worse. This seems less a choice of bravery than of necessity.

not mean to render these portraits spectacular in ways that might objectify them or privilege their obvious history of pain, or to value their smiles and laughter in proportion to hardship. What is unique about these photographs is that they are entirely *not* unique in terms of the every day, ordinary bodies that populate our culture, dealing with difficult and sometimes devastating obstacles. Iconic beauty, on the other hand, makes no room for such bodies, such narratives.



Fig. 9: Cordelle, Frank. "Chris, 52." *Bodies and Souls*.

Death of the Subject

Many of *The Century Project*'s subjects express a hopefulness in their statements that is oriented toward both a finite death and an interim unknown future. Included within these are portraits of women who have already passed. How do we read these portraits of women who have not survived, in which the

senselessness of death is immediately apparent? The photograph of Widdie, 41 (Fig. 10), provides one such example. To me Widdie's stance is as nonchalant as it is direct, intentional: the "no-bullshit" attitude I see in her eyes is offset by the warmth of her smile (Cordelle, *Bodies* 129). The composition is simple, bold, much as she is in stance, one hand on hip, the other holding a cigarette. Widdie writes no statement of her own but Cordelle's postscript reveals to us first that she has cancer, and then, presumably written sometime after the first statement, that she has passed away. Her photograph on its own is quite remarkable. When read in conjunction with the written statement that accompanies it, its meaning changes quite drastically:



Fig. 10: Cordelle, Frank. "Widdie, 41." *Bodies and Souls*.

What appears to be merely acne on Widdie's right breast is, in fact, an advanced case of cancer which has been growing for almost two years and

had by now spread throughout her body. Her hair is just beginning to grow back after several chemotherapy treatments.

Widdie passed away a couple years after I made this photograph. (Bodies 128).

Her photograph, along with a few others, clearly aligns with the nature of an image: “every photograph presents us with two messages: a message concerning the event photographed and another concerning a shock of discontinuity” (Berger, *Another* 86).²² The photograph itself is without future. No sooner do we feel a false sense of hope in reading that Widdie’s hair has begun to grow back after several chemotherapy treatments then that sense of a possible future is shattered. This is the pain in seeing the photograph of another’s suffering: the shock of discontinuity is also the shock of death. The pain before my eyes will always be (arrested in time) and never be (a part of real time), and is therefore without past or future.²³ We are powerless to change this fact. Widdie’s photograph, now tied to two events, her cancer and her death, confirms – or articulates – our helplessness in the meaning or making of *her* future. (How she shapes *ours* might more so be the point.) We cannot wish her well, we cannot ease her pain, we cannot respond in any way, but to acknowledge that she was here, she existed once, she was photographed, and she lived and died with cancer (among the many other narratives that accompany her life to which this photograph bears no witness). But even illness demonstrates the body’s orientation toward the future. Because the cancer narrative is not a linear one, the narrative must be rewritten at each stage: “the body becomes the site of a narrative teleology that demands a retelling” (Stacey 5). While Cordelle’s postscripts alert us to the shock of her death, they also alert us to the fact that the body is by the moment changing, as is its relationship to life and death. And though we are frustrated and overwhelmed by the knowledge of Widdie’s death, such a reaction confirms the affective force of the photographic object and its subject.

An Ethical Response?

Susan Sontag is wholly frustrated with the ethical incapacity of photography, that most of the response it elicits (she is talking here of atrocity photographs) – moral indignation, sympathy, shock, deferral – do not provide a course of action. In other words, when confronted with the “photographic

²² See also Barthes’ *Camera Lucida* (Chapters 33 to 36).

²³ In *Camera Lucida*, Barthes writes: “Like the real world, the filmic world is sustained by the presumption that, as Husserl says, ‘the experience will constantly continue to flow by in the same constitutive style’ but the Photograph breaks the ‘constitutive style’ (this is its astonishment); it is *without future* (this is its pathos, its melancholy)” (89-90).

inventory of ultimate horror" (Sontag, *On Photography* 19) there arises a dilemma: we are struck, cut, bruised, broken by these images of suffering but completely unable to act; we are wounded and without adequate words. For Sontag, it is not enough (ethically) for these images simply to exist. And worse so when such photographs are formally beautiful or otherwise aesthetically pleasing. Sontag writes: "a beautiful photograph drains attention from the sobering subject and turns it toward the medium itself, thereby compromising the picture's status as document.... Stop this, it urges. But it also exclaims, What a spectacle!" (*Regarding* 77). Like Sontag, I am uneasy looking at the photographs of another's suffering in the absence of some kind of recourse. *The Century Project*'s narratives frustrate for a different reason: we would not necessarily know of their pain were it not for the accompanying text. Amanda Jean, 18 (Fig. 11), for example, announces, "I have an eating disorder":

I can not do the things that I love to do, because of anorexia. There are walls, both physical and mental, built up resisting my passions. I have set up my own little protective bubble to keep myself from being hurt, but in the end, this bubble keeps me in a constant state of anguish. ... I just wish that I had someone to go cry on tonight, and in all honesty I don't. I'm very lonely. (Cordelle, *Bodies* 48-49)

Did she find someone that night? Does she still struggle with loneliness? The picture comes to signify her words, but also fails to do so insofar as it is impossible to tell the moment of her loneliness. She is noticeably thin, but we would not know she is anorexic without her statement (she is not unlike most fashion models in shape and size). In fact, it would be impossible to know of her loneliness, her isolation, without her written statement – at least not specifically. Her photo is still quite suggestive in pose and tone. She stands behind a tree no thicker than two inches in diameter. While she uses it to hide herself, her arms held tight to her side, she also clings to it, grasping the barren, slender stem with both hands. Is her stance meant to be a mimesis of something? The fruitless tree her own body's disordered condition, its hold on her, her hold on it, fulfilling her need for control and self-protection while also the source of her pain and anguish?²⁴ The context out of which Sontag writes is quite different than that presented by *The Century Project*, and yet, I do not know what to *do* with these words – or with the stunning picture that accompanies them. I know what is being signaled to me, that I can feel, but I am ultimately helpless to relieve Amanda Jean of her pain – or to really understand the extent of it for that matter. But it is offered to me (and others), nonetheless, willingly so.

The definitive question evoked by this discussion is for me: who are we trying to address in responding to the photograph, the "I" or the "Other?" Barthes

²⁴ Those with anorexia are generally at risk of emaciation, depression, social isolation, hypotension, hypothermia, stunted development, amenorrhoea (cessation of menstruation), and in severe cases osteoporosis, heart, liver, kidney or brain damage, death or suicide.

writes: “the photograph itself is in no way animated (I do not believe in ‘lifelike’ photographs), but it *animates me*: this is what creates every adventure” (19-20).



Fig. 11: Cordelle, Frank. “Amanda Jean, 18.” *Bodies and Souls*.

Sontag does not deny that there is beauty in devastation – “in the sublime or awesome or tragic register of the beautiful” (*Regarding* 75) – but she is disturbed by the transformative power of such photography to render scenes or subjects beautiful, “or terrifying, or unbearable, or quite bearable” as they are *not* in real life (*Regarding* 76). With this assertion, I agree; *The Century Project* does not

adequately address this fear. No doubt many of the subjects and their stories appear differently in their photographs or as expressed by their words than as they are in real life – or at least in the full diversity of their lives. Many of the subjects' images and words will also likely come to stand in as metanarratives, when, as Toni, 24 (Fig. 12) aptly points out: "This picture is only a moment. I have a whole life that came before this picture and a whole future in front of me" (Cordelle, *Bodies* 76-77). What the beautiful portraits do (as they are, after all,

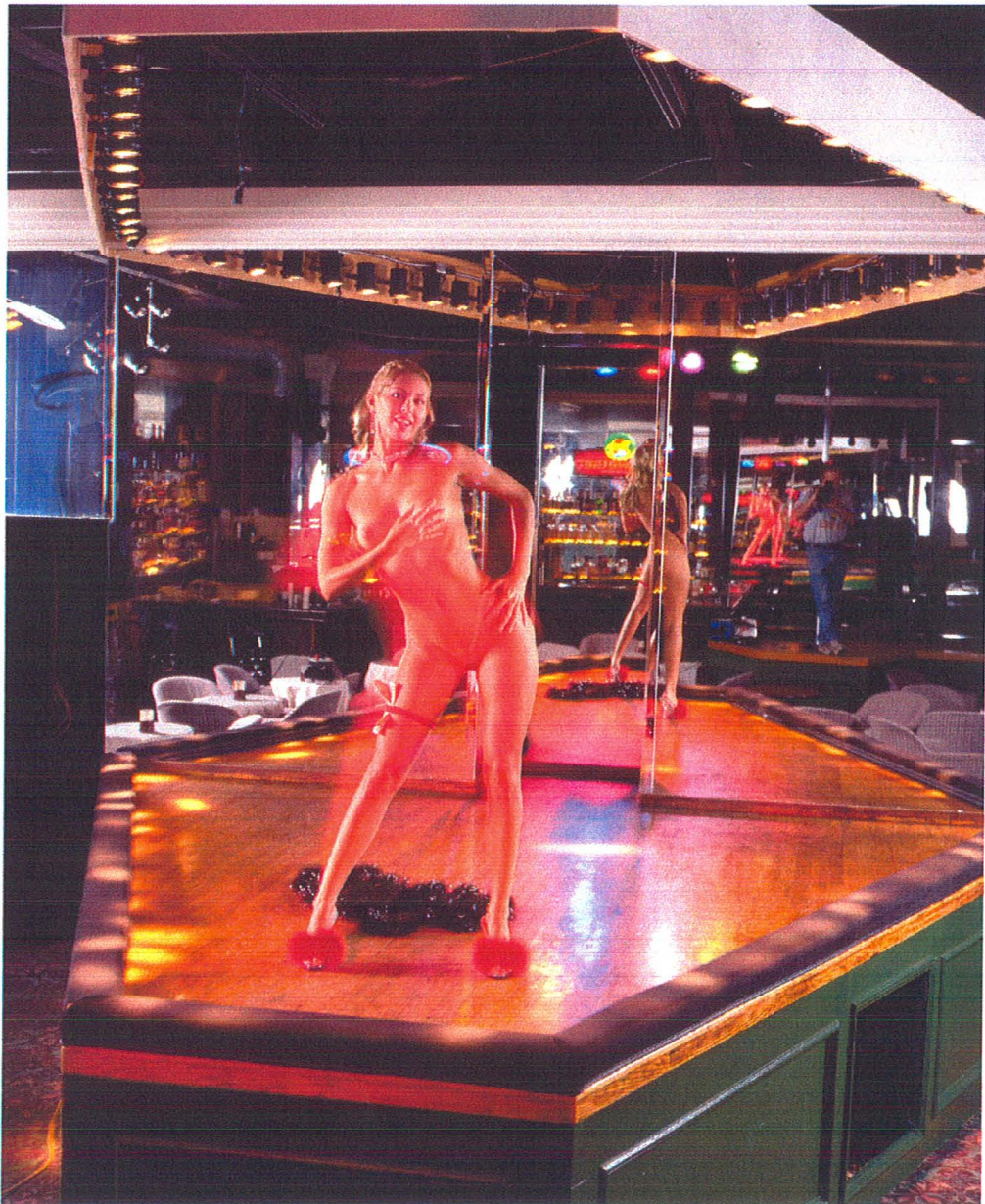


Fig. 12: Cordelle, Frank. "Toni, 24." *Bodies and Souls*.

aesthetically pleasing photographs bearing the marks of abuse, cancer, disfigurement, and disability) in their capacity to stun, is act as conduit for the affective or other relational ways of experiencing a photograph and its subject matter. Having read Amanda Jean's statement, knowing now of her suffering, I no more derive pleasure from the image's composition than I did in my state of ignorance. The piercing quality of the photograph does not blunt critical engagement but has elicited my attention; her written pain makes her photograph (and its beauty) register differently – tragically – but also relationally.



Fig. 13: Cordelle, Frank. "Christina, 44." *Bodies and Souls*.

A viewer of the exhibit responds to the portrait and statement of Christina,

44 (Fig. 13), illustrating our complex relation to the visual and the process by which meaning is made. Christina writes of an on-going struggle with an eating disorder. Christina's portrait is especially significant to this discussion because she looks herself in the mirror and illustrates the very difficulty of self-acknowledgement; "naked and alone, and for the first time in years, I had to *see* myself. It was terrifying!" (Cordelle, *Bodies* 138). Though the photograph cannot actually mirror our life experiences, it engenders looking that is self-referential much as is the act of facing one's self in the mirror. The anonymous viewer responds:

This picture. I see me. She's Christina, she's 44 years old, I'm 21. She's successful, she's well educated and she has money. But ... she has this rage and self hate inside. ... it's the same thing that I feel. And the binging and the purging ... you start out maybe thinking that you could do it enough to get rid of this hate. But you can't, and like she says, you can't. It's a day by day struggle and ... you know looking yourself in the mirror after you've committed the act, you just hate yourself and ... you feel like you can't stop. (*Bare Honesty*)²⁵

This response is not an uncommon one to the exhibit. As Mark Reindhardt, author of *Beautiful Suffering* aptly points out, Sontag's lament that "photographs do not explain [but only] acknowledge" (*On Photography* 111) suggests that she expects photographs of suffering to do or tell more than they are capable of, when in fact, acknowledgement is precisely a form of ethical response. Acknowledgement is an expression of understanding to the extent that the "I" can relate to the "other" (which is *always* limited).²⁶ The viewer's immediate response is to see herself in Christina's statement, but to necessarily differentiate between herself and Christina, the "I" and the "other." Her first words are telling: "I see me. She's Christina, she's 44 years old, I'm 21." What registers first is a reflection of the self in someone she understands to be similar but distinct. She is saying: we are different, but we share this pain. She acknowledges the pain of another *because* of its relation to her own.

The production of a static, timeless, mess-less icon is constructed so as to be without past, present or future. But it is also orients one's focus toward an object: to be collected, dismissed, coveted, idealized. *The Century Project*, on the other hand, animates the object by visually underscoring, and not shying away from traces of life and death. This act alone cannot make the project or its textual and written narratives meaningful or affective. The images and statements still miss their mark and are inadequate representations of a person and a life. As Annette Kuhn argues, the "image itself figures largely as a trace, a clue: necessary

²⁵ This woman's response is part of the trailer for Elizabeth Hoodecheck's documentary (currently in progress): <http://www.barehonesty.com/>

²⁶ Chapter Two focuses more closely on this ethical relation.

but not sufficient to the activity of meaning making” (14).²⁷ Thus we return to the *punctum*, that which strikes or bruises us in the looking thereby making affective or meaningful a photograph for the viewer, if not the subject. Familial memories of abuse, joy, suffering, happiness evoked by the photographs “do not simply spring out of the image itself, but are generated in a network, an intertext of discourses that shift between past and present, spectator and image” (Kuhn 14). We create or attribute our own meaning to the photograph, much as I have done throughout this chapter interpreting the visuals and written statements of *The Century Project* in the only way that makes sense to us.

The Century Project illustrates the way in which the photographic mode of representation *can* fail as document – in the absence of captions we are ignorant to the pain or history of the project’s subjects much as we are in popular representations of feminine beauty. As Rita Felski argues and Amanda Jean’s narration suggests, “the more emphatically [the autobiographical text and photograph] defines its function as the communication of the real, the more clearly the unbridgeable gap between word and referent is exposed” (112). But the project’s powerful combination of portraiture and self-narration demonstrates the affective force of its objects. *The Century Project* presents the unseemly spillage of messy female bodies, but also of life narrations that many rather be kept private, and that, by virtue of the act of sharing, of speaking private, bodily experiences in public, represent a discursive spillage. Despite the photograph’s status as a thing, these particular portraits and statements make visible or discernable permeable boundaries of the physical and psychic self. As Chapter Three will demonstrate, the interruption of self-authorship – the way Cordelle’s own words and conventions of photography overwrite the subject’s words and silences – potentially robs the photographs of their affect, highlighting instead of bodily self-expression, the *use* to which narrations and portraits can be put. Throughout the following chapters I am interested in an understanding of the self as part of a larger continuum of human experience. How else might we form an ethical response to the narrations and portraits of *The Century Project*? We come into relationship with these women through careful, imaginative leaps. *The Century Project* is as much, if not more so, about its viewers than its subjects. Most photography is. It is through such an exchange and lending of stories, that presupposes bodies and matter can never fully be known, in which the ethical makes its entrance.

²⁷ Along the same lines, Berger believes that “when we find a photograph meaningful, we are lending to it a past and a future” (*Another* 89).

Bruisings and Becomings: Mutual Vulnerabilities

[The aesthetic encompasses] nothing less than the whole of our sensate life together – the business of affections and aversions, of how the world strikes the body on its sensory surfaces, of that which takes root in the gaze and the guts and all that arises from our most banal, biological insertion into the world.

—Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*

What Merleau-Ponty grasped toward, throughout his writings, was a way of understanding our relation to the world, not as one of merger or oneness, or of control and mastery, but a relation of belonging to and of not quite fitting, a never-easy kinship, a given tension that makes our relations to the world hungry, avid, desiring, needy, that makes us need a world as well as desire to make one, that makes us riven through with the very nature, materiality, worldliness that our conception of ourselves as pure consciousness, as a for-itself, daily belies.

—Elizabeth Grosz, *Time Travels: Feminism, Nature, Power*

The unease with which contemporary Western society regards the naked body barely needs to be stated.²⁸ Nudity – or rather, exposure of “private parts” – is associated with either extreme vulnerability or an affront to our collective sense of propriety. What, again, are the ethics of *The Century Project*, which pictures and displays nudity alongside narratives of trauma? What role does nudity or vulnerability play in the exchange between subject and viewer when the nature of the exhibit is such that viewers are required, and encouraged, to look directly at the project’s naked bodies?²⁹

It is precisely the combination of the nude body and direct look borne by so many of *The Century Project*’s subjects that, for me, halts any sort of unwitting objectification, that reminds me of the woman who at least precedes, if not

²⁸ Fredric Jameson understands the visual as encouraging “rapt, mindless fascination,” which asks us to “stare at the world as though it were a naked body” (1) – that is, as an object both obscene and collectable. To assert that the visual promotes some sort of bodily stupor, or else, want for possession, suggests a pure interiority/exteriority of bodies and the things that surround them. More importantly, Jameson’s statement also seems to hinge on the idea of the naked body as particularly vulnerable or amenable to colonial appetite. The naked body *in pain* then might seem the worst kind of visual representation, according to this statement. Mark Reinhardt in “Picturing Violence: Aesthetics and The Anxiety of Critique” accounts for a pervasive concern for nudity in the documenting of human torture expressed by mainstream newspapers and magazines – routinely, genitalia in these photographs are blurred, while faces require “no such digital drapery” (17).

²⁹ Stella, 20 writes: “Look at me” (*Cordelle, Bodies* 56); Kana, 52: “Look at us” (*Cordelle, Bodies* 164).

outlives, the image. I find the gaze of each woman piercing, as is her self-narration. Her look is not passive, inert, but an active mode of address that demands attention. As we have seen in Chapter One, the narrations of self are expressive of both everyday bodily experiences and exquisite trauma – as is the photographed bare body. Wrinkles, laugh lines, scars, sun spots, are all testament to the living body that collects with time, on the surface of its skin, evidence of its existence in the world. How do we read such bodies/photographs? How do we interpret photographs that imply the existence of a viewer, perhaps the subject herself, for which the portrait has meaning, and bodies that express both their separateness and their necessary relation to the outside world?

The Century Project's bodies extend beyond the status of readable object or text and facilitate the sharing of stories, both those hinted at by the marks that are etched onto the surface of the skin and those communicated through language. This chapter argues that the portraits and self-narrations locate the female body, first, as a generative site of storytelling; second, as implicated in a relationship to the viewer or the "other," and thus the source by which an ethical relation can emerge; and third, as mutually indebted to nature and culture. The dual tensions that structure both *The Century Project* and this chapter are that between self and other, and self and world. How do the written and textual narrations of self implicate the body in a relationship to the other? How does the self develop in relation to nature and culture? Following Judith Butler's question, what, politically, might be made of vulnerability (*Precarious Life* and *Giving An Account of Oneself*); how might the spoken words of pain and loss in *The Century Project* provide a supplement to rights-based discourses? *The Century Project* encourages inclusion and acknowledgement of both our specific insertion into the world and a mutual becoming that is never easy, but never isolated. I argue, therefore, that the embodied aesthetic of *The Century Project* reveals the relational nature of bodily and ethical identity.

Bodies, Nature and Culture

I begin this discussion with Ana, 45 (Fig. 14), whose portrait and statement reveal that embodiment is constituted through dynamics of power and knowledge, along with flesh and tissue and cells and other biological "facts." Ana demonstrates that a woman's response to her own devalued body may well take the form of denial and even gender erasure. Following the legacy left by her mother of hatred for anything feminine, Ana resists and represses all "cultural symbols of femininity" in order that she be allowed the leisure and confidence and reckless abandon of boyhood (Cordelle, *Bodies* 146). She understands as a young child that gender is not what you "are," but what you "do" (Neimanis), and it is the doing that assigns us more or less cultural value and advantage:



Fig. 14: Cordelle, Frank. "Ana, 45." *Bodies and Souls*.

Part of my mother's legacy was her loathing of the feminine, within herself and also in her three daughters. My mother, a pretty, doe-like woman, despised herself in many ways: her tears, her scent, her face, her sexuality, her body – full hips, softness, curves. It was impossible to grow up in my family and be a whole, healthy female. My sisters turned to overeating, anger, drugs, and sexual promiscuity. I wanted boyhood... I got my hair cut as short as my mother would allow and walked out into the world with the confidence of a boy: strong and self-assured. Every time I was mistaken for a boy, which was often, I felt a sense of triumph. I climbed trees, rode my pony, shot my rifle, paddled my raft, built forts, played catch, fished,

and rode my bike with abandon. In junior high, my body held fast to its androgynous shape. I secretly believed that I was being spared the burdensome life of a woman. (Cordelle, *Bodies* 146).

Ana understands that cultural symbols have meaning for particular biological bodies; to reject and disown what is decidedly “female,” culturally and biologically, is about escaping the constraints that accompany such a body. Hence Ana feels that her body has “betrayed” her when she discovers “breasts at 15 and menstruation at 16” (Cordelle, *Bodies* 146). Her biological body, in the end, does not defeat or confine her in any sense, despite the lessons observed in childhood that taught her girls’ bodies are “inherently” less worthy than boys’, and she inhabits and adorns her body in her own way, on her own terms. Further, Ana’s female body is not solely determined by the cultural and familial meaning attached to it. Such meanings and associations do not define what her body is capable of, nor, however, do they completely evade her as she learns to cloak herself in masculine privilege. As an adult she becomes more comfortable with her gender, never yearning to be a man, but never adopting symbolically feminine attire or behaviour: she refuses “adornment, makeup, pink dresses, allowance for chivalry” (Cordelle, *Bodies* 146). She retains her “boyish” sensibility still, as in childhood, riding her bike with “abandon.” She asserts, I “feel practically invincible when I’m gliding along on it, strong and fast and independent” (Cordelle, *Bodies* 146).

Perhaps unknown to Ana, the particular popular culture commodity to which she attributes a sense of abandon has its own emancipatory history. In “Horses, Bikes and Automobiles,” Sarah Wintle writes of “the freedom, physical independence and sense of personal control offered literally and symbolically” to the “New Women” of the late-nineteenth century in the riding of horses, bicycles and automobiles (66). American suffragist Francis Willard in her 1895 book *A Wheel within a Wheel*, part celebratory, part reflective of the glories of the bicycle, begins her narrative as follows:

Living in the country, far from the artificial restraints and conventions by which most girls are hedged from the activities that would develop a good physique, and endowed with the companionship of a mother who let me have my own sweet will, I “ran wild” until my sixteenth birthday, when the hampering long skirts were brought, with their accompanying corset and high heels; my hair was clubbed up with pins, and I remember writing in my journal, in the first heartbreak of a young human colt taken from its pleasant pasture, “Altogether, I recognize that my occupation is gone.” From that time on I always realized and was obedient to the limitations thus imposed, though in my heart of hearts I felt their unwisdom even more than their injustice. (10)

Unlike Ana, Willard experiences her mother’s support as a young girl, but her dress imposes upon her cultural restraints similar to those experienced by Ana’s biological body at the same age. Adorning “skirts that impeded every footstep,” Francis begins to detest walking, feeling “with a certain noble disdain that the

conventions of life had cut [her] off" from "one of life's sweetest joys" (72). So, at fifty-three, she learns to ride a bicycle. She does so in "obedience to the laws of health," on the one hand, and on the other, to "help women to a wider world" (73). While Francis does not liken her discontent to a body that is biologically female, she certainly can recognize how culture lays claim to a body, literally restricting its movements and capabilities with uncomfortably long skirts and tight corsets. Unfettered in dress and social expectation while riding their bicycles, Ana and Francis are two examples that illustrate "the tensions between the physical and free and the social and bound" (Wintle 72).

That the bicycle figures prominently in their respective experiences of freedom is significant. To cycle unaccompanied through space entails physical exertion, agility and independence. Certainly for Francis, and arguably for Ana as well, the bicycle requires an alternate way of moving and dressing the body to that which is stereotypically feminine, and thus "potentially enables or even necessitates the breach of conventional gender expectations" (74). But the bicycle as commodity is also significant as an invention of culture. The biological and cultural demands on the bodies of Ana and Francis, respectively, both at sixteen and into Ana's forties and Francis' fifties, serve to highlight a relationship to culture and nature that is ever emerging. Most importantly, the potential for creativity materializes out of this never easy relation. The individual's potential to create the body anew takes place not in spite of but in relationship to nature and culture. Most delightful about these two narratives, a century apart, is that they gesture unknowingly to one another and illustrate how the claims of biology and culture on the body persist over time. They also reveal something shared in the experience of abandon. Their narrations, which neither consciously anticipate or recall the other, signal the relationship bodies have to a partially knowable past and unknown future. The vulnerabilities framed in *The Century Project* are not necessarily unique, as made obvious by the shared experiences of Ana and Francis, but reflective of the fact that being is always, already attended by confusion, agony, grief. Our vulnerabilities are also not separate from nature or culture, but arise out of our "never-easy kinship" with the world, a "relation of belonging to and of not quite fitting" (Grosz, *Time Travels* 128).

The portraits to which I turn next, Jin Sook, 41 (Fig. 15) and Eloisa, 45 (Fig. 16), situate the women subjects within and as inherently part of nature. The limbs of Jin Sook are entangled in the tree's roots. Her body is visually distinct from the nature that surrounds and at the same time intertwined: her hair hangs vine-like from her head, and the folds of her skin mimic the coiled roots of the tree. The fingers of her right hand are indistinguishable from the branch they are wrapped around. Eloisa stands looking up at the expanse of a "sandstone canyon in southern California called Fat Man's Misery" (Cordelle, *Bodies* 144). The subtle dimples of Eloisa's stomach, the lines of her lower abdomen that denote wear, are reflected also in the gorge walls, marked by random strokes and cavities. These portraits are quite simply stunning. More so than any of the other portraits of *The Century Project* they foreground the body as materially

constituted and indebted to nature. The bodies of Jin Sook and Eloisa are in my



Fig. 15: Cordelle, Frank. “Jin Sook, 41.” *Bodies and Souls*.

estimation, beautiful, though of course, entirely inadequate according to popular ideals of femininity which would rather the breasts be lifted, the fat deposits airbrushed, the folds toned. Jin Sook writes, “I *am* the essence of nature” (Cordelle, *Bodies* 132), arguably playing to the suspicion that women – especially racialized women – “are somehow *more* biological, *more* corporeal, and *more* natural than men” (Grosz, *Volatile* 14). Many women may have in the past recoiled (and still might) at the association between woman and nature. Adrienne Rich, writing in the early 80s on the experience and institution of motherhood, predicted a shift in the way women and feminists would approach the body, many of whom were glad to disassociate with an undervalued feminine physique, as was Ana. Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman in *Material Feminisms* cite this



Fig. 16: Cordelle, Frank. “Eloisa, 45.” *Bodies and Souls*.

shift as a “‘material turn’ in feminist theory, a wave of feminist theory that is taking matter seriously” (6). Rich’s writing came two decades after personal experience had been proclaimed as necessarily and inescapably political: the realm and concern of not just the private but also the public sphere. Still, many women were wary of the *body* as integrally linked to any utterance or articulation of the personal – as if the two were mutually exclusive. Rich understands such caution as an attempt to distance oneself from the female body in order that women be taken seriously for their aesthetic, intellectual creations (which surely come from a loftier place than one’s material existence). Such an attempt at distance likely originates from a fear similar to Ana’s at a young age that too close a connection to the body would constrain women’s opportunities to those already decided on by patriarchy. Rich writes:

Patriarchal thought has limited female biology to its own narrow specifications. The feminist vision has recoiled from female biology for these reasons; it will, I believe, come to view our physicality as a resource, rather than a destiny. (40)

Acknowledging that there exists a “corporeal ground” (40) to intellect, and not, rather, a separation between, and unequal valuation of, corporeality and intellect, is vital to the process of breaking down hierarchical binaries that have traditionally disadvantaged women and other marginalized groups, such as those between mind/body, culture/nature, public/private, spirit/matter, self/other, rational/non-rational. The anxiety with which some women might respond to the ways Jin Sook and Eloisa lay bodily claim to nature calls attention to the difficult or uneasy relation we have to these binaries – that we will likely always have to these binaries. The photographs themselves do not absorb woman into nature, but capture how the human frame is both slight and similar in comparison to the undergrowth of a tree or the rock face of a canyon. I would argue that Jin Sook and Eloisa identify with the rooted or the sedimented in ways that underscore the materiality of intellect, the rootedness of the physical. Their portraits demonstrate that bodies and natural matter generate meaning in relation to one another.

I look to the biological here not to privilege the bare autonomic facts of living over that of culture, or to ignore that the biological is differentiated to a certain degree by our experiences with race, gender, class, location, sexual orientation, personal history, and so on. But one need not toss physicality aside and “travel as a disembodied spirit” (Rich 40) – i.e. the equal of man – or, as in Ana’s case, hide and deny the budding female body so that one may be “spared the burdensome life of a woman.” My purpose then in focusing on the materiality of the body is to properly acknowledge it, as Rich eloquently puts it, and to which the portraits and narrations of Ana, Jin Sook and Eloisa are testimony, as *resource* rather than destiny.

Material-Discursive Bodies³⁰

Exchanges between human bodies are equally important to the assessment of an inherently relational model of identity. Such exchanges will also help to formulate theories that begin to account for “how the discursive *and* the material interact in the constitution of bodies” (Alaimo and Hekman 7, emphasis mine). Take for example, the experience of Patricia, 44 (Fig. 17), viewing the *The Century Project* for the first time. She writes:

³⁰ I owe credit of this phrasing to Karen Barad’s article “Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter” in *Material Feminisms*.

When I first saw Century, I was deeply moved by the photographs of women with physical differences. Felt myself reacting, then softening. The reacting a mirror for my own experience: how I have internalized what it



Fig. 17: Cordelle, Frank. "Patricia, 44." *Bodies and Souls*.

means to look different, or be different (as a lesbian); all those double-takes and averted eyes and yanked-away children stored and indelible, like my birthmark. And then the softening: the beauty and complexity and soul of a woman that shines out of her skin, of the life she's made within and without. (Cordelle, *Bodies* 136)

Patricia's visceral, gut response to the exhibit is to cling to the familiar and normative, mirroring the very way others have responded to her. In this case, the very real and material consequences of heterosexist thought are the ways in which such discourse can characterize our relationship to our own bodies and the bodies of those around us; the unspoken words and gestures of intolerance and disgust

have marked Patricia, indelibly, and inform her own response to sites of difference. Like Patricia, the negation and abjection that I saw in the images of naked women was a reflection of both a learned response to difference and internalized feelings of inadequacy and shame. I get the sense that other women circling the exhibit experience this dissonance.³¹

Heterosexist, sexist, ableist, classist, and racist ideology deeply affect the biological, parsing and ordering bodies according to normative definitions of self and worth. Patricia's internalization of those valuations of difference illustrates that the body indeed becomes a product of certain regimes of thought. A concept of biology as purely discursive product, however, understands corporeality only in relation to discourse and in isolation from the everyday corporeal realities of women which are sites of wisdom, knowledge and resistance (Bordo, *Unbearable* 292).³² The body and narrations of *The Century Project* that are marked by difference – perhaps even *because* they are marked by difference – also have the capacity to inspire us to look again, this time a little more self-reflexively, a little more critically. And while indelibly marked, and sometimes even objectified by others, our bodies are still sentient, moving entities, and cannot really be pinned down or determined by discourse alone – the unpredictable, living quality of the body evades this. The more lasting impression of the corpus of images for Patricia is not woman as object, but the woman “that shines out of her skin” in spite of the ways in which we have come to understand the body's fleshy surface as *the* site of visible difference, the midpoint (and barrier) between self and other. The flesh proves to be the divide between what is within and what is without, an inner subjectivity and outer objectivity. But the flesh also makes communicable those sites of difference/familiarity that might otherwise be invisible or left unspoken. *The Century Project* encourages us to see, through the visibility of the naked body and through our multiple and conflicting reactions to the exhibit, that each of us is, as Merleau-Ponty points out, neither subject nor object, but both (qtd. in Grosz, *Volatile* 87).

Following the question “must the life of the body be given up on, as the sheer unthinkable other of thought,” Terry Eagleton asks “or are its mysterious ways somehow mappable by intellection in what would then prove a wholly novel science, the science of sensibility itself?” (14). It seems that both Patricia and Ana

³¹ An anonymous viewer comments: “At first, I was affected by my society that says it is gross to see nakedness. My society says it is wrong, in line with pedophilia or pornography. Then, I started to notice that it was okay to accept. I KNEW it wasn't pornography or the like, but it takes a bit of time to leave your society at the door” (Cordelle, “Comments”).

³² The introduction to *Material Feminisms* similarly reads: “We need a way to talk about the materiality of the body as itself an active, sometimes recalcitrant, force. ... Focusing exclusively on representations, ideology, and discourse excludes lived experience, corporeal practice, and biological substance from consideration” (4).

“map” their bodily intuitions and responses in wonderfully perceptive ways demonstrating a keen, intellectual/corporeal understanding of how discourse and symbols work on and against us. But they also illustrate how the “perceiving mind is an incarnated mind” (Merleau-Ponty, *Primacy* 4). To perceive and be affected by the world around one’s self is to admit that the mind (the site of perception) pervades the whole of one’s body; likewise, things perceived are not entirely separate from the body. Thus the flesh is both a real – in terms of historic, systemic, legalized oppressions – and perceived barrier between self and other, self and world. Ana and Patricia illustrate that the act of seeing, sensing, perceiving, observing is an embodied, corporeal experience. Bodily knowing is therefore oriented both inwards and outwards, and develops out of our interaction with the world.

The affective force of *The Century Project* is perhaps explained by the coupling of text and image: the mutual becoming of the material and the discursive is made explicit. Discursive production emerges from and shapes the material, but the material works on and informs the discursive.³³ The meaning of the material bodies that populate *The Century Project* is not only dependent on the statements that accompany them, which frame and shape our attention in unpredictable ways, but is also dependent on the discourses through which we attempt to understand them. Marianne Hirsch argues that the reproduction of ideology happens through collaboration between the viewer and the photographer:

Eye [viewer] and screen [photographer] are the very elements of ideology: our expectations circumscribe and determine what we show and what we see. If we had different conceptions of beauty, of femininity and masculinity, of whiteness and blackness, of any of our cultural institutions, we would perceive them differently. (7)

As Patricia illustrates, such projections are not determined or incapable of transformation when we refuse to interpret a feeling of bodily immediacy as an ethical response. Those gut feelings require careful, serious contemplation of the ways in which we potentially perpetuate harmful ideologies. On the ethics of looking, Kaja Silverman argues that the “ethical becomes operative not at the moment when unconscious desires and phobias assume possession of our look, but in a subsequent moment, when we take stock of what we have just ‘seen,’ and attempt—with an inevitably limited self-knowledge—to look again, differently” (Silverman 173)

And if our bodies’ responses are crucial to an understanding of how certain

³³ The body then, is not only subject and object, but also, as Karen Barad puts it, “material-discursive” (140). Discourse operates as “boundary-making practices” (140) but never does so without material bodies in sight. Barad argues that materiality is discursive, “just as discourse is always already material (i.e., they are ongoing material (re)configurings of the world)” (140). Neither the material nor the discursive “is articulated/articulable in the absence of the other; matter and meaning are mutually articulated” (140).

regimes of thought inhabit, inform, and mark the body, but also demonstrate resistance, creativity, agency, how, again, do we understand embodiment as knowing, limited and imperfect as such knowledge will be?

Relational Bodies

We need first to develop a theory of the body that does not imagine the body to be whole or knowable in and of itself. Subject Margaret, 62 (Fig. 18), provides one such example. The *Oxford English Dictionary* gives its first



Fig. 18: Cordelle, Frank. “Margaret, 62.” *Bodies and Souls*.

definition of sympathy as a “(real or supposed) affinity between certain things” (“Sympathy,” def. 1a) and second, the physiological definition, a “relation between two bodily organs or parts (or between two persons) such that disorder, or any condition, of the one induces a corresponding condition in the other” (“Sympathy,” def. 1b). Consider Margaret’s statement whose musings

demonstrate her own body's intimate sympathy with other bodies, her hair, full and coarse with grief and the pain of others:

Okay, here's the deal: when I first heard of this project, I didn't know anything about the writing. I thought Frank was simply taking pictures of unclothed females, aged 0 through 100. Right away I asked if he had a 62-year old. He didn't; so then he did.

Three weeks went by before I saw the exhibit and read the stories—so personal, so powerful. And this was on the evening right before my photo shoot the next afternoon. I can tell you truly that if I had known about the writing, I would never have done it, any of it.

But I was already committed and here I am, eczema and all, talking—I talked the whole time. It was great; I love to talk. My life is filled with words. (Writing is different, more personal. Even though I do a lot of it, my writing is private. Putting words out into the world gives them weight, renders me accountable, vulnerable, as if that part of me written about and exposed is now set, forever unchangeable. Words, whether thought, spoken, or written, assume power to shape our realities. Maybe written words most of all. That scares me.)

Anyway, I'm talking here about how I've come to believe that energies and memories and emotions are all held in one's hair. Think how in some settings—religious, military, prison, cult, gang—heads are shaved. Or in others, hair is grown long.

What really got to me, though, was that when I found a reference to this whole hair idea to send to Frank, I read that hair should be washed after time spent in hospitals. Wow—I'm a nurse! Could some of the pain and sorrow and grief inherent in my work be coming home in my hair and out through my skin?

I think I should wash my hair after every shift, but I don't. (Cordelle, *Bodies* 174-175)

Margaret references various societal sects for whom hair represents such things as self-expression, control, punishment, or conformity. Yet Margaret imagines her hair's relationship to the outside world much differently: as a conduit to her skin, conveying the experiences and emotions of the people around her. She wonders, could her hair be bringing home with her the "pain and sorrow and grief inherent in [her] work?" Could her eczema be, not an internal skin condition, but a condition of a body that comes into everyday contact with other people's suffering? Margaret's account of her hair and skin, an expression of sympathy in the physiological sense of the word (a relation between two persons such that a condition in one induces a corresponding condition in the other) does not imagine

that the self can exist in isolation from others. The psychological and the biological are “materially intertwined” in *sympathetic relation* to the people with whom she comes in contact (Wilson 77).³⁴

The statement Margaret offers also bespeaks her accountability and vulnerability to her listener. Her fear of language bespeaks a belief in it; she is less worried about the weight of a photo, also “forever unchangeable,” than she is about the weight of written words. But it seems she is struggling not merely with language but with her own sense of her self – and with the idea that in committing the self to words she must try to say something, definitively. I am drawn again and again to Margaret, because as I am writing this, every word feels like a commitment that I cannot bear to make, or that I struggle to make ethical. Posing for *The Century Project* was, in a sense, easy. Almost two years later I have yet to submit my written statement for fear of being unable to express myself adequately and because I am resistant to committing sentient experience to dead words on a page. As Chapter One alludes to, the photograph too seems to partake in a fiction of coherence, in that the photograph, in its stillness, presents the body as not only frozen in time (unmoving, static) but as whole, and as wholly intelligible to itself and the viewer. By their nature, however, bodies and words are unfinished. They create anew by borrowing from systems of meaning that they are both preceded and survived by. Both the textual and photographic interactions between subject and viewer suggest that looking and reading, like the act of writing, are always in the process of becoming.

To write about this project, I must admit the limits of my own self-knowledge and knowledge of the body before me in the photograph. I must permit that I cannot always know the meaning of my body’s response despite efforts to read it contextually, critically. In *Giving An Account of Oneself* Judith Butler strains to take hold of the reasons that her own account of herself breaks down; she writes: “reasons course through me that I cannot fully recuperate, that remain enigmatic, that abide with me as my own familiar alterity, my own private, or not so private, opacity” (83-84). The body becomes a place of knowing, of intuiting in ways that are not altogether, or not always graspable.³⁵ Multiple reactions from men and women viewing the exhibit communicate this affect: a bodily knowing, and an inability to put sentiment into words. Each of these are excerpts taken from comments submitted anonymously to Cordelle: “I don’t know why this evokes such intense emotion;” “Wow... that’s all I can say;” “I am speechless (for

³⁴ In *Psychosomatic: Feminism and the Neurological Body*, Elizabeth Wilson explores this inventive notion: that physical matter exhibits psychic, sympathetic facility to other people and other bodies because of the ways in which the biogenetic and psychocultural are materially connected.

³⁵ Or, as Elizabeth Wilson argues, not cognitively available: “many psychological events are unconscious or innate or temperamental or affective; in fact, most psychological events are of this kind. Cognitions are simply the most accessible of our psychological capacities” (41).

once);” “There are so many ideas expressed in this exhibit, it’s hard to make sense of it all;” *The Century Project* “touched and moved me in ways that I don’t fully understand intellectually, but which liberated me emotionally;” and “Thank you. I don’t know what else to say” (Cordelle, “Comments”). Recognizing one’s own limited self-knowledge is, perhaps, part of what it means to engage in critique responsibly and ethically – simultaneously acknowledging, as Margaret does, that one’s account renders one both vulnerable to other people and unknowable to one’s self.

Mutual Vulnerabilities and Obligations

That the body provides an occasion for self-scrutiny and social theorizing, both of which arise mutually and never in isolation from the other, suggests that the very materiality of the body has ethical implications.³⁶ Storytelling, then, is a potential form of material ethics, emerging from the very stuff and experience of existence. How do we account for storytelling’s “multiple material consequences” (Alaimo and Hekman 7)? How does *The Century Project* facilitate a material, ethical relation? Do the affective viewer responses alter the constitution of (material, discursive) bodies?

The narratives of *The Century Project* are similar to those stories intended to advance or codify human rights detailed in Kay Schaffer and Sidonie Smith’s *Human Rights and Narrated Lives*. Durga, 66 (Fig. 19) provides one such story, followed by Cordelle’s postscript (marked by an italicized script):

Neither I nor my family gave the hospital permission to perform this thing [an unsanctioned sterilization]; I was put asleep to have an exploratory exam, as I was having discomfort on my right side. When I awoke, he told me that he decided to remove all my female organs. That is what he said to me. He also said to me, “You don’t need to have any more children—are you trying to raise a baseball team?” That to me is genocide. Oh yes, I was 31 years old at the time and only had three children. I had no idea what menopause was; that is what happens due to this type of operation.³⁷

³⁶ Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman argue for a “material ethics,” (7) which allows for an exploration of the material consequences of discourse, but also for ethical *practices*. They write: “practices are, by nature, embodied, situated actions” (7), and as opposed to ethical principles, “do not seek to extend themselves over and above material realities, but instead emerge from them, taking into account multiple material consequences” (7-8). One could argue that human rights begin from inequitable material realities. Once made law, rights enter the realm of ethical principles, which have the *potential* to govern material realities in less than helpful ways, not always anticipating changes to material conditions.

³⁷ Lori Heise, in an article detailing the effects of gender-based violence on women’s reproductive rights, reminds us of the government sanctioned

The above “operation” took place in Harlem hospital in New York City. The doctor was white. (Cordelle, Bodies 176)



Fig. 19: Cordelle, Frank. “Durga, 66.” *Bodies and Souls*.

To my own embarrassment, it was not until I was a teaching assistant for a Women’s Studies course (titled “The Social Aspects of Reproduction”) that I learned of the forced sterilizations and abortions performed by government officials to which Durga’s experience bears witness. The initial response of the undergraduate students enrolled in the class to Durga’s image and statement was that she must be from “elsewhere” and that the reproductive abuses endured must

involuntary sterilization programs of the 70s and 80s in places such as Canada, the United States, Puerto Rico, and India, on the countries’ “poor, minority and mentally retarded” (247).

have been at the hands of “other” doctors. In this (rare) instance, the postscript supplied by Cordelle is quite useful for situating Durga’s experience (namely in Harlem Hospital in New York City). And in this way, Durga’s story functions much like human rights narratives, as an “ethical call to listeners both within and beyond national borders to recognize the disjunction between the values espoused by the community and the actual practices that occur” (Schaffer and Smith 3). Many privileged men and women who view *The Century Project* are reminded of this disjuncture as they come across multiple traumatic stories in which women’s bodies are imposed upon in unimaginable ways. But without Cordelle’s postscript, which firmly grounds Durga’s story in history and place, Durga’s narrative might be less about the particular human rights violation (which actually only takes up a footnote in her statement), and more about willful vulnerability and storytelling; less about naming the exact moment and location of the abuse, and more about the women who will read with recognition; less so about individual (or collective) rights, and more about an assumed or perceived relationship between subject and viewer. Rights-based narratives in particular are constrained by “ongoing critiques of human rights discourse, frameworks, and mechanisms for implementation” (Schaffer and Smith 15), which have the potential to categorize stories deemed more or less effective as a means to an end. Sharing of Durga’s kind is not wrapped up in the messy (but important) business of rights – which is not to say that rights-based stories are not immensely valuable in the formation of ethical practices but that shared stories promote the possibility of connection and collectivity, of affirming subject positions and experiences that have been made historically, systemically, and legally invisible.

A material ethics then might be based on recognition of a shared, mutual (though always differentiated by time, place, location) corporeal vulnerability to grief, loss and violence: “a vulnerability to the other that is part of bodily life, a vulnerability to a sudden address from elsewhere that we cannot preempt” (Butler, *Precarious* 29). In our ceaseless interactions with the world and others, we are bound to experience this sudden address. *The Century Project* provides examples of many such occasions. The subjects’ histories of violence, grief and loss in turn “address” or strike the viewer, also suddenly, unpredictably. One viewer of *The Century Project* writes to Cordelle: “I’m crying. I feel like I’ve been slapped and hugged. Thank you” (Cordelle, “Comments”). The first reaction – having been slapped – is the shock of grief. This is precisely, for me anyway, how grief first registers: the feeling that “one is beside oneself, not at one with oneself,” a dispossessing of the self as one knows it (Butler, *Precarious* 28). Many other viewers write of their sometimes delightful, sometimes painful shock of recognition – as if they were expecting not to be drawn in by images and words, but rather to passively meander through the exhibit, taking in and ignoring images and statements at their leisure. Many even begin to reciprocate – except that the women in the pictures are not present to hear their stories – by detailing their own experiences with rape, violence, self-hate, body image, depression, anorexia, bulimia, and so on. Butler asks, “if we stay with the sense of loss, are we left

feeling only passive and powerless, as some might fear? Or are we, rather, returned to a sense of human vulnerability, to our collective responsibility for the physical lives of one another?" (*Precarious* 30). Viewers are made privy to the subjects' intimate dealings with struggle (life's "sudden addresses") and possibly even experience some of the stories of trauma second-hand or as a reminder of their own histories. Posing for and viewing the project reminds me of the ways in which our lives are implicated in others, the ways in which the body initiates stories and responses, and the ways in which we are mutually (though not always equally) vulnerable to one another.

The strength inherent in being willfully vulnerable, in standing naked, defiant, and unabashed in these narrations and portraits of self, is not simply courageous but strategic. It is a way in which to illustrate and harness what women "know about power, about their daily lives, their experiences, their positions" (Grosz, *Histories* 21). What these embodied knowledges reveal is that the body maintains a complex relationship to discourse, culture and nature. They also reveal that much can be learned from by paying attention to and taking seriously our sensate life. Like Eagleton's aesthetic, *The Century Project's* own embodied aesthetic demonstrates how "the world strikes the body" in unpredictable, not always fully knowable ways. The way Ana reads and embodies her mother's hatred of the feminine, the way Jin Sook and Eloisa's portraits make room for bodily constitutions that are inherently natural as well as cultural, the way Patricia softens at the sight of difference, the way Margaret's hair and skin express the grief and sorrow of those around her, the way the women's stories and images have taken hold of my own body and writing, all demonstrate a being in the world that is never singular. The material ethic upheld by this work then is constitutive of vulnerable bodies, emerging in relation to self, other and the world. *The Century Project* makes explicit how the matter of words and bodies suggest the presence of an unknown "other." It is how we choose to occupy that other space – generously, relationally, ethically – that breaks down or reconstructs dominant ideologies. The driving, generative force behind this project, is thus beyond Cordelle's control. Cordelle's influence in framing these narratives and images, however, should not be left unexamined.

Portraiture and Psychotherapy: Cordelle, Charcot, and the Diseases of Women

Magician and surgeon compare to painter and cameraman. The painter maintains in his work a natural distance from reality, the cameraman penetrates deeply into its web.

—Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”

... there always has been, and there remains, intense fear of the suggestion that women shall have the final say as to how our bodies are to be used.

—Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*

The compressed life histories and nude photographs of *The Century Project* invite an intimate connection between viewer and subject. Similar to the feminist confession or autobiographical text, one could argue that *The Century Project* “encodes an audience” in a self-conscious address to a “community of female readers rather than an undifferentiated general public” (Felski 99).³⁸ The active mode of address referenced in Chapter Two, the direct gaze, bodily exposure and narration of self, is perhaps made possible due to the fact that the implied reader of this exhibit is, if not female, then at least sympathetic. As Rita Felski argues of feminist life-writing, there is a sense of commonality that is “accentuated through a tone of intimacy, shared allusions, and unexplained references with which the reader is assumed to be familiar” (99). Its very force and appeal is in its reciprocal relation between viewer and subject. Many of the project’s subjects come to pose in the very way I did, affected by it, and wanting, in return, to engage in a meaningful, perhaps political, exchange between the “I” and the “other,” the subject of the photograph and the viewer who, though unknown to one another, presumably share life experiences. As Cordelle understands it, the possibility of “both helping and being helped” has brought many women into this project (219). Marlee, 29 (Fig. 20) writes: “sometimes I am lonely for a reflection of myself. I watch for the person, wherever I go, who makes people look twice—‘Was that a man that just came out of the ladies’ room?’—and we smile at each other, and I know that there is a place where I fit” (Cordelle, *Bodies* 88). *The Century Project*, at its best, gestures to its viewer,

³⁸ It is impossible, of course, to anticipate the viewer/reader of this exhibit. Though the narrations of self tend to address a sympathetic public, this is not necessarily a female public – nor an empathetic one. Surely there are those who find this project exotic or erotic, shocking or unpleasant.



Fig. 20: Cordelle, Frank. "Marlee, 29." *Bodies and Souls*.

invites an identification, a traumatic recognition, a shared laugh or smile.³⁹ It provides both an affirmation of the "othered" self and performs a sense of familial belonging – an avowal of the self one cannot bear to claim and the self with which one would like to feel at home.⁴⁰

³⁹ Surely there are also other viewers who are curious, shocked, or repelled.

⁴⁰ "The body is our most material site of potential homelessness," (267) writes Sidonie Smith in "Identity's Body." She understands home as do Biddy Martin and Chandra Talpade Mohanty: "'Being home' refers to the place where one lives within familiar, safe, protected boundaries; 'not being home' is a matter of realizing that home was an illusion of coherence and safety based on the

The subjects, however, much as there is a sense of commonality, imagined or real, did not coalesce around a shared goal; they do not “know” one another, for the most part, but for their images and statements and the shared experience of posing; they were unaware of the women next to whom they would be placed in the project’s chronology; they were welcomed to pose where and how they chose but ultimately were selected and ordered as subjects by Cordelle. I must admit that when I first viewed the exhibit I did not give much thought to who was doing the framing. But herein lies a crucial point: this is Cordelle’s project, his life’s work. What is the role of the photographer in these visual and written autobiographies? To what extent does Cordelle disrupt “the shared bond of gender” (Felski 121) upon which this project is based? *The Century Project* undoubtedly speaks and means in ways that Cordelle as photographer and commentator cannot predict or control. I believe, wholeheartedly, as I have argued in my first two chapters, that the body creates and communicates in ways that are in excess of the varying, contradictory and elusive narratives provided by patriarchy, contemporary culture and the photographic frame. But as much as *The Century Project* and its bodies/beings have a life of their own, the exhibit ultimately starts and ends with Cordelle, much as the book itself does, with women’s photographs and statements embedded within and between a larger master narrative. The following excerpt, taken from a section of the epilogue (“Behind The Century Project”) of *Bodies and Souls* titled “Impact of Being a Male Photographer” makes explicit Cordelle’s perception of the subject position he occupies in relation to his own project, and provides in large part the basis for this chapter’s critique:

Fairly early on, I happened to photograph someone who had been violently raped. As often happens, we became friends in the years afterwards. At one point, she told me that if I were female, she would *not* have volunteered!

I was so taken aback by this revelation that over the course of the next few years, I conducted an informal poll among some of my other subjects, those who had also been violated or experienced similar emotional crises. Without exception, they all agreed: my being male was an important part of their process and decision.

While that is counterintuitive, a metaphor about horseback riding may explain it. Let’s say that one afternoon, you’re out galloping through a field, your horse stumbles, and you’re badly thrown and injured. When the casts finally come off, you’re faced with two choices: # 1, get back on a horse; or #2, stay home and watch a lot of TV. If you chose the former, you will doubtless be sure to pick a fairly gentle horse who, with luck, will not lead to a recurrence of your worst nightmare. For women in this position vis-à-

exclusion of specific histories of oppression and resistance, the repression of differences even within oneself” (qtd. in Smith, “Identity’s Body” 296-297).

vis sexual violence, for example, I play the role of the second horse. Since their attacker was male, my being a man becomes an essential part of their healing process.

Please don't misunderstand: I haven't cured anyone. Much of the work has been done by the women themselves, either before or after our paths crossed. Yet being photographed nude for this project has often been a stepping stone for them.

Realizing this, many hope that they will somehow be helped a little. Just as important: they realize that by putting their image and statement out there, they will also help others with similar experiences. It is this duality, both helping and being helped, which has made it possible for many women—who, let's face it, are on no one's short list of likely nude models—to volunteer to be photographed. Nude. For exhibition and publication. And by a guy, no less. (219)

Later on in another portion of his epilogue, titled "Impact on Me," Cordelle continues:

I have been privy to intimate conversations with quite a few women about a variety of topics ... It would be impossible, however, for any one individual (other than a counselor/therapist) to have been involved with the overwhelming variety which this project has presented to me over the years. (220)

Of the multiple and often contradictory ways in which Cordelle positions himself, explicitly and implicitly, in relation to both the women of the project and the project itself, as photographer, friend, artist, witness, participant, and so on, none are quite as telling as his analogies to the counselor/therapist and "second horse." Ostensibly superficial and harmless comparisons, both provide apt metaphors for Cordelle's authoritative presence as the "unbiased" overseer of women's narratives and "gentler" male partner, respectively. I am interested in what sort of individual power is wielded by Cordelle, someone who is both part of the conversation and outside of it, who exhibits women's vulnerabilities but is not required himself to bare all.

The confessional or autobiographical mode present in *The Century Project* reveals itself to be oriented toward a sympathetic public, but involves a subject and reader positioned variously in relation to webs of knowledge and power. While on the surface the subject engages in an exchange between herself and a viewer, and offers her story to be read by the latter, both Cordelle's language and lens are screens through which the women speak themselves and their stories; he is indeed the primary receiver and interpreter of *The Century Project's* difficult narratives, and has certainly approached some of these much like a counselor or therapist would, as the recipient of intimate and fragmentary truths which he in turn translates into meaningful (and normative) patterns of behaviour. Cordelle writes: "It has been noted many times that all photographs are really a picture of

the relationship between two people. With some photographers, you often see more of the shooter than the subject. To me that's not really portraiture" (215). This chapter will ultimately argue, despite Cordelle's attempted self-effacement, that Cordelle's project of "unburdening" or "liberating" women manifestly fails, and that his insistence on the purportedly therapeutic aspects of his project reveals an arrogation of power similar to that of the psychotherapist. *The Century Project*, then, mimics the practice of psychotherapy by providing an outlet for residual family trauma, simultaneously rescuing subjects from, and asserting the importance of family structures, and providing a sense of both familial belonging and discipline. Elisabeth Bronfen's reading of Jean-Martin Charcot's diagnoses and photographic representations of hysteria lends itself, almost uncannily, to this discussion. When Charcot urged the "removal of his patients from their psychopathogenic family environment" (Bronfen 176), he insisted on the "capital importance" (qtd. in Bronfen 176) of isolation in treating the patient, particularly crucial if there existed an abusive paternal figure in the home. Similarly, Cordelle will not photograph a subject with another man in the room. Cordelle's justification – that "having another man around, even a lover, was counterproductive, because it was harder for the woman to open up" (215) – reinforces his role as a replacement paternal or patriarchal figure of authority who both intervenes as a gentler "second horse," and provides a "safe" space in which women may articulate past traumas. Read in this way, the posing session of *The Century Project* enacts the scene of psychotherapy; we can read the subjects as either compliant or resistant to Cordelle's overarching, nosological structure and interpretations. While many of *The Century Project*'s portraits lend themselves to a critique of Cordelle as father figure or psychotherapist, I will limit my analysis to the following: Jessie, 14, Ginger, 9, Mahogany, 16, Marlee, 29, Cathy, 32, Sylviaette, 46, Gina, 47, and Karen, 50.

I am mindful of the fact that Cordelle's "maleness" cannot be read simply, i.e. as a singular, discernable assertion of patriarchal power and privilege. I grant that Cordelle knows "a thing or two" about his relationship to systems of power and hope to stay attuned to the multiple interactions possible between photographer and subject, project and viewer (Yachnin 38).⁴¹ Nonetheless, his

⁴¹ Paul Yachnin writes: "If Foucault were to allow knowledge truly to rank alongside power, then he might be inclined to present a scene where persons—never completely free but nevertheless knowledgeable about a thing or two in the world they inhabit—have gained some power to negotiate their meanings, values, and conditions of living within the myriad interconstitutive exchanges of power and knowledge" (38). Yachnin means to express the negotiations made by individuals within various webs of power and to suggest that persons are acting, perceiving subjects, oftentimes knowledgeable about the social and political contexts of which they are a part. I must grant this of both the women subjects of *The Century Project* and Cordelle himself so as to not discount his own awareness of, and connection to, systems of power.

photographic frame and the postscripts, addendums and statements of which he is the sole author, reveal an eerie paradigmatic similarity to the simultaneously well-intentioned and appropriative structures of psychotherapy.



Fig. 21: Cordelle, Frank. “Cathy, 32.” *Bodies and Souls*.

In an abbreviated explanation of what happens during a photo session on *The Century Project* website, Cordelle writes: “Sessions tend to be fairly casual and involve a conversation about a woman’s own unique, beautiful/tragic story” (*What happens in a photo session?*). He writes in *Bodies and Souls* that “by its

very nature, nude portraiture involves a degree of intimacy” which “often extends beyond the mere fact of disrobing, into opening up and talking about personal issues” (219).⁴² I more or less knew this beforehand, and yet I distinctly remember being caught off guard when Cordelle asked me about my brother’s suicide while being photographed. To be fair, Cordelle had reason to believe that this particular moment in my life history could be represented in my written statement, that it was indeed the story I wanted to share: my response to other women’s vulnerabilities, my contribution to a complicated aesthetic project, and one of my defining narratives. I must make this allowance, my own reservations aside as to how an individual or society prioritizes one of many stories that make up a life. I knew from portraits such as Cathy’s (Fig. 21) that I might expect posing to be emotional in unpredictable ways, that making oneself vulnerable in front of the lens meant more than simply disrobing – and that *The Century Project* was part corrective to iconic feminine beauty, part autobiographical text. My acute surprise and discomfort during that photo session, whether warranted or not, a result of Cordelle’s attempt at conversation, want for an effective photo, or my own interpretation of that scene, however, deserves further consideration. For one, it prompts me to question the appropriateness or possibility of interlocution between “model” and photographer given the multiple vulnerabilities required only of the posing subject. And to whom am I/is my body speaking: the other women of the project, the viewer, or the photographer? I found myself cut off from the women with whom I had imagined myself in conversation. And while on the surface, and in many of the subjects’ statements, there is an impulse to reciprocate, a desire to give of one’s self in return after viewing *The Century Project*, I find the imagined exchange a false one, as the person with whom I primarily end up sharing has not stood on my side of the lens. I am not in dialogue with viewers or readers – they have no opportunity to respond directly to me or I to them. The only verifiable back and forth takes place between myself and Cordelle, and he cannot possibly know what it is to pose or share in this way, much as the psychotherapist is not required to explore the recesses of his *own* unconscious.

To be reminded of my brother’s suicide while standing naked in front of Cordelle’s lens is to change the dynamic of posing irreparably. I am unable to will myself to feel the grief and sorrow that have accompanied his death; these feelings and memories come to me quietly and unannounced – that stranger’s face with the uncanny resemblance, that silent hurt when asked how many siblings I have, that rare moment of exquisite happiness that quickly checks itself at the thought of his unexpected death. Cordelle’s manipulation of the posing session suggests that grief writes itself on the body in predictable, stereotypical ways (tears and pained looks), and that the body’s expression of grief is readily summoned to be photographed on command. It is also proof Cordelle’s project

⁴² In retrospect, this is neither obvious nor necessary. How should nude portraiture necessarily elicit intimate conversation?

relies on the legibility of the body much like Freud's and Charcot's psychoanalysis did (Wilson, *Psychosomatic* 1); where there is confusion, the therapist or photographer will be sure to provide explanation. As I recall this scene, I am reminded of the epigraph that opens my Introduction and part of a statement authored by one of the other subjects. The photographed subject Cathy, 32, points out that "there is a big difference between being exposed by others and exposing yourself" (Cordelle, *Bodies* 96) – ironically followed by Cordelle's postscript: "Cathy had multiple traumas over a period of time, the memories of which were released through experience and body work" (96). Though Cordelle cannot literally expose the intimate knowledge of my brother's suicide through a photograph, I still *felt* exposed, naked, vulnerable. The critic Barthes writes: "I feel that the Photograph creates my body or mortifies it, according to its caprice" (11). How is the material and imaged body altered according to the photograph's (or photographer's) "caprice?" The sudden change of mood alters my bodily composition, makes me aware of the fact that I am a naked body on display being asked to relive one of the worst moments of my life, and to not mind the man with the camera in the background. It is a reminder that I am the vulnerable one in this exchange as the posing subject. In retrospect, I realize I am being asked to render my brother's death photographically. This I am unable, and unwilling, to do.

It is difficult to remember what exactly coursed through my mind during my posing session, but I remember asking Elizabeth afterwards if she would mind omitting the audio from my posing session should she use that scene in her documentary. She understood and agreed without hesitation. I could not consent to the reproduction of that scene for the viewing curiosity of an unknown public, in which I suddenly discovered myself a naked body in a room with a virtual stranger the moment my brother's death entered the conversation. Cathy's photograph perplexes me because I myself was somewhat uncomfortable being filmed. I do not know whether to marvel at her remarkable openness, her willingness to share such an intimate portrait, or to wonder about the conditions of its productions, and whether she came to this pose naturally or was prompted by Cordelle. It is entirely strange to me that both Cordelle and Charcot assume the photograph to be an appropriate medium of documentation, both defending their choice as suitable and accurate in the representation of women's struggles.

Bronfen argues that

Charcot's innovation, one could say, was that he gave life, or rather body, to a psychosomatic disturbance, and this revivification fed off the aptitude, on the part of the actresses, to perform their deformities, their contortions, paralyzes, and hallucinations—their language of hysteria—as a public spectacle. (182)

One could argue that Cordelle's project also hinges on the extent to which his subjects are willing to perform their traumas and differences. Both therapist and photographer, by virtue of their authoritative presence and the nature of their work, elicit a certain degree of compliance. But I feel I failed at the performance:

my portraits are not particularly striking or emotionally vulnerable.⁴³ That his project relies on the production of affective/effective photographs does not necessarily mean that every session is compromised or shaped by this objective. The posing (and viewing) subjects are not without agency. Narrative resistance can be expressed through written statements and bodily resistance where the subjects refuse to yield to the performance – at testament, perhaps, to the simultaneously contradictory and salutary nature of Cordelle's project.

The Familial Gaze and Patriarchal Unconscious

Even with the possibility of both compliant and resistant narratives and portraits, however, Cordelle's hope to remain largely "unseen" is a futile one; what we "see" of the photographer (aside from that which he authors – which resonates quite loudly and explicitly) is not often readily available to consciousness, but captured by the way in which he restricts and guides bodily movement.⁴⁴ Walter Benjamin writes: "the camera introduces us to unconscious optics as does psychoanalysis to unconscious impulses" (237). The comparison between psychoanalysis and photography is not a new one. While the camera reveals the operatives of the unconscious – minute movements and gestures otherwise invisible to the naked eye – the camera alone cannot create this scenario without a photographer to wield the apparatus. When reading Benjamin, we need to ask the question: *whose* unconscious optics are we looking at? What is revealed of the person taking the picture?

On his own influence during the posing session, Cordelle appears apprehensive and conflicted. The playfulness of Jessie, 14 (Fig. 22) as she blows a bubble with her gum is contrasted by her apparent unease in bodily composure; she faces the camera straight on while her hands are held somewhat stiffly, awkwardly by her side. She writes: "Frank encouraged me to show my body without flaunting it" (34-35), suggesting that Cordelle's presence as an authoritative (albeit it "gentle") male figure asserts itself as a guiding force, directing, to a certain extent, the body's (sexual?) expression. How might the portraits and statements reveal the operatives of *Cordelle's* optical unconscious, which composes photographs and instructs bodies in relation to normative and aesthetic expressions of, among other things, sexuality? I am interested then, for

⁴³ I may feel this way because my own image is inscrutable to me – trying to read it is like trying to feel a patch of my own skin without the dual sensation of touching and being touched. I cannot look at my image without feeling like I am simultaneously being looked at. I cannot will away the feeling of being an embodied subject in the assessment of my own image.

⁴⁴ The portrait of Toni, 24 (Fig. 12) demonstrates a deliberate self-inclusion: it is the only photograph of *The Century Project* in which Cordelle is visible within the photographic frame.

the purposes of this chapter, less so in the psychology of the posing subject, more so in the psychology of Cordelle which demonstrates an unconscious perpetuation of family ideology. On this last point Marianne Hirsch provides a useful analysis



Fig. 22: Cordelle, Frank. "Jessie, 14." *Bodies and Souls*.

and extension of Benjamin's optical unconscious; she argues that family photographs capture those otherwise invisible, nonverbal negotiations and interactions between family members. Cordelle's portraits, most of which are taken in the home, mimic in pose and gesture the family photos one might see on a dresser or hanging on a wall (save for the nudity). To this end, Cordelle's emphasis on "non-sexual nudity" (217), his insistence that his photography is not, nor should it be, sexual, is an obvious ethical, but arguably paternal, move. As a male photographer, Cordelle is understandably careful to steer clear of photography that might be construed as pornographic, but in so doing, he

compromises his own “socio-political” imperative by attempting to deny any expression of sexuality alongside nudity, most notably with his younger subjects (*Why women?*).⁴⁵ In this instance, Cordelle’s management of the posing session can be seen as a sort of moral regulation. Annette Kuhn understands regulation “not so much as an imposition of rules upon some reconstituted entity, but as an ongoing and always provisional process of constituting objects from and for its own practices” (7). Cordelle has not instructed Jessie as to how she can and cannot pose, but can be held accountable for a certain degree of moral management in his suggestion to “show” the body “without flaunting it.” I can imagine the likelihood of a similar scenario in which a father persuades or instructs his teenage daughter to refrain from overt sexual expression in her dress.

Cordelle’s presence in Jessie’s photographic session, made apparent by her own statement (which indubitably changes the way we read her), is juxtaposed by his contention that he had no influence on the bodily expression of Ginger, 9 (Fig. 23). Cordelle is adamant about the fact that he has *not* instructed Ginger, who appears entirely comfortable, flirtatious even. Her image is evocative, striking – her hip juts out to her left, her head tilts in the same direction, her hands cup the back of her head and neck, and she smiles, playfully. Depending on – among many other factors – whether or not Cordelle is able to get in touch with a subject, he authors postscripts, updates, or whole statements where he deems necessary, with or without permission.⁴⁶ The statement that accompanies Ginger’s photograph is written entirely by Cordelle:

Ginger is a typical pre-adolescent. She is kind of testing the waters here—showing off, if you will. This is quite normal.

People occasionally ask how I got her to pose like this. The truth is that I didn’t—and couldn’t, for that matter. For a while during the photo session, Ginger was just standing there doing nothing, then began acting out this way spontaneously. I made a few pictures.

I asked her to repeat it a little later when we continued shooting at a different location. These latter images weren’t very good, and the reason is simple: this time it was at my suggestion. Her body language in the picture you see here came from within her, thus it “worked.” I could never “get” her to do something like this.

⁴⁵ An Interesting exception to the non-sexual nude is Toni, 24 (Fig. 12). Toni’s portrait very closely approximates the eroticized female nude in which the female body is cast in relation to the male gaze – here quite literally as Cordelle can be seen photographing Toni in the background. Because Toni, like the other subjects, is given a chance to narrate her own portrait, her photograph’s symbolism is in no way inevitably tied to her “pin-up” pose.

⁴⁶ It should be noted that it is Cordelle’s preference to keep the subjects involved in the process should there be something added to their statements.



Fig. 23: Cordelle, Frank. “Ginger, 9.” *Bodies and Souls*.

While Cordelle is clear that he has not forced Ginger to pose in the way she has, his choice of words is telling. When he writes that her picture “worked,” we are to assume he means as an effective, original visual. Despite a lack of active guidance on Cordelle’s part, Ginger still possesses knowledge/awareness of the man with the camera (much like my own uncomfortable knowledge of that fact) that potentially imposes upon her ability, and I would argue, guarantees her inability to remain impartial or immune to his influence. Again Cordelle’s attempted self-effacement only serves to illustrate the opposite. He also seems to believe that unless explicit, i.e., by way of a verbal cue, his presence alone cannot itself be *suggestive*. His understanding of the coterminous workings of knowledge and power is a literal and limited one – that power is a force levied against people’s wishes, repressive rather than constitutive, and that knowledge of the operatives of power is always close at hand, rather than evasive and belated (Bordo, *Unbearable* 167). Susan Bordo argues for a conception of power that speaks to

“the mechanisms that shape and proliferate—rather than repress—desire, generate and focus our energies, construct our conceptions of normalcy and deviance” (Bordo, *Unbearable* 167). The power dynamic between subject and photographer is, indeed, interconstitutive of subject positions. And Cordelle, here more explicitly than elsewhere in *Bodies and Souls*, regardless of whether or not Ginger was affected by the call of Cordelle’s lens or his presence more generally, discursively reframes an image in terms of normative behaviour that might otherwise speak for itself. His tone mimics at once the parental voice that disparages the exhibitionist child as a “show-off” who is spontaneously “acting out,” and the psychotherapist who assures us of the normalcy of this kind of behaviour. In this way, *The Century Project* itself has the potential to be constitutive – of bodies, of practices, and of our conceptions of normalcy and deviance. The posing subject finds her “voice” in *The Century Project*; she is cast as self-representing, speaking, knowing subject. Her picture and statement, however, provide occasion for Cordelle to scrutinize, explain or qualify her words or image – and thus they provide the space in which Cordelle’s *patriarchal* familial unconscious finds its expression.

Photographer as Psychotherapist

Of the most obvious ways in which Cordelle has framed his project in terms of psychopathologies is the foreword that introduces *Bodies and Souls* written by psychiatrist Naomi Weinshenker. She cites the narrations and portraits of *The Century Project* as “powerful psychological statements” (9). Of rape and abuse victims, she informs us: “women in this situation frequently act out their pain, sometimes in self-destructive ways” (10). Alongside her expressions of awe and admiration in slips the judgmental psychiatrist; talking about body image dissatisfaction she remarks, “there are some ‘women of size’ such as Jody (33) who seem to feel good about themselves, sometimes despite health concerns” – this where no such health concerns were alluded to by the subject herself (10). Most tellingly is her assertion that *Bodies and Souls* is a fine piece of art and “valuable addition to the growing literature on body image and its disorders” (10). Very early into the exhibit, Cordelle again defers to other “field experts” when he writes in place of a statement for Sheka, 10 (Fig. 24):

I have been told by women who are professionally familiar with child abuse that the scars you see on Sheka’s leg were almost certainly inflicted on her by others. The small one just above the knee appears to be a classic cigarette burn; i.e. someone stabbed her there with a cigarette. (Cordelle, *Bodies* 24).

The comparison, however, between Cordelle’s portraiture and Charcot’s infamous *Tuesday Lectures*, in which colleagues gathered at psychiatric centre/hospital la Salpêtrière and watched as “hysterical” female patients underwent fits of hysteria



Fig. 24: Cordelle, Frank. “Sheka, 10.” *Bodies and Souls*.

while being photographed in front of the crowd, may seem a more far-fetched one. And yet the statement Cordelle writes for *Ginger* communicates a belief in an accessible interior quality that finds its expression in front of and/or despite the photographic lens. Though the conditions that surround Charcot and Cordelle’s photographs are remarkably different, both photographers, in effect, hope that their subjects will revisit an original trauma so that the body’s response may be captured on film. Elisabeth Bronfen writes:

Though it is undoubtedly true that clinical photography as evidence of organic pathology has become outmoded, art historian Barbara Maria Stafford (1991) suggests that as we are once more becoming a

predominantly visual-based culture, imaging the invisible body interior will again emerge as an increasingly pressing issue. (199)
What this means – the imaging of the invisible body interior – in the context of abuse narratives is particularly unsettling. Karen, 50 (Fig. 25) begins her statement with the sentence “I am a sexual abuse survivor” (Cordelle, *Bodies* 160). She goes on to talk about scenes of abuse that have conditioned her to



Fig. 25: Cordelle, Frank. “Karen, 50.” *Bodies and Souls*.

distrust cameras beginning with an older boy inappropriately fondling and taking nude pictures of her as a young girl. Later on in her statement she writes: “These incidents made my very camera-shy. Getting my picture taken was like being abused again. I did not trust the camera. It was as if the camera could see inside to

my very soul, and all the ugliness was there for the world to see” (160). Karen wears a look of complete distrust in her portrait and remembers the event as a second abuse: if Cordelle is the gentler, second horse, he has positioned himself, unwittingly, in a suggestively sexual relationship with Karen as the other male partner. Karen’s statement reflects a belief in the camera/cameraman as penetrative – deep into the “ugliness” that she has harboured for years. The

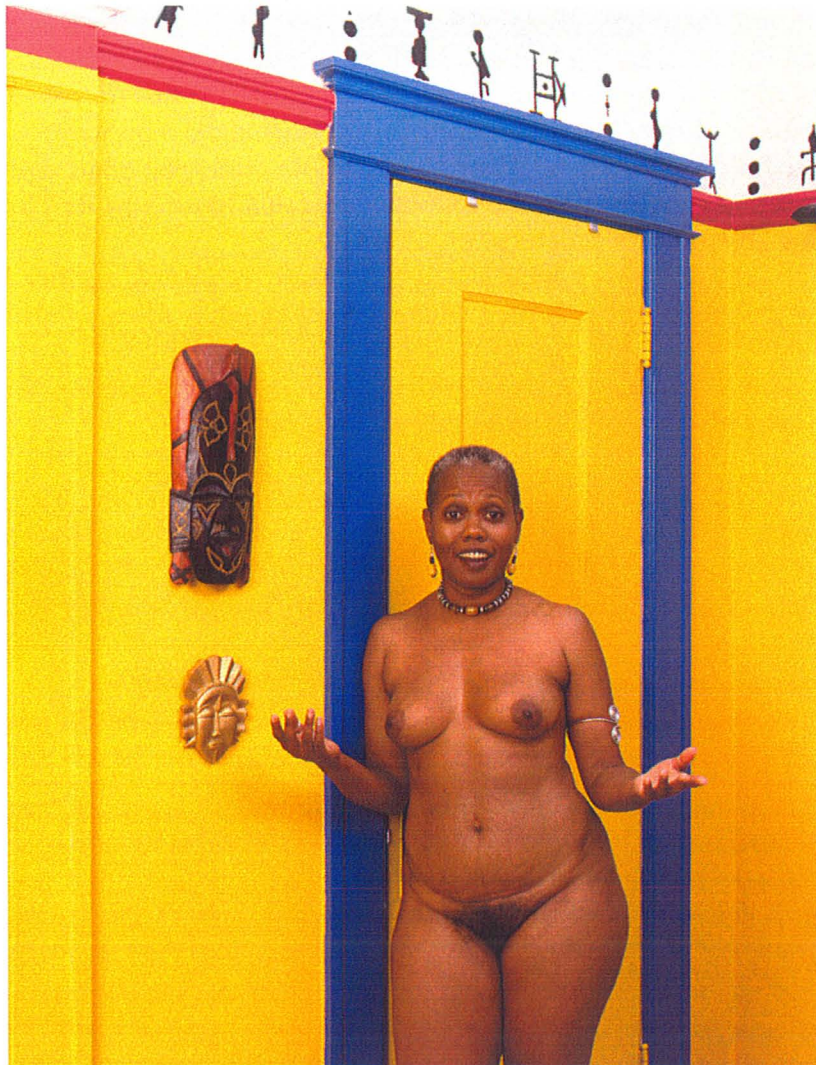


Fig. 26: Cordelle, Frank. “Sylviaette, 46.” *Bodies and Souls*.

expression of intimate life traumas reaffirms and provides a body for the subject position “victim” understood and liberated through a male authority. The very nakedness of the female subject, at times demonstrative of a courageous vulnerability, is at others precisely what imprisons individual narratives within a patriarchal unconscious. Karen’s portrait in particular makes explicit the

“violence contained in the act of experimenting with the body in the service of a nosological *idée fixe*” (Bronfen 190): like the hysteric patient who actually underwent a hysterical fit in front of the camera, Karen experiences a sort of second trauma while being photographed.

Charcot’s quest for a coherent somatic language of hysteria parallels Cordelle’s project of picturing the female life cycle, and in particular those “issues” that predominantly affect women (*Why women?*).⁴⁷ Subjects Sylviaette, 46 (Fig. 26), and daughter Mahogany, 16 (Fig. 27), illustrate Cordelle’s tendency to intervene in *The Century Project* narratives as the expert on specifically feminine vulnerabilities.⁴⁸ Both Sylviaette’s and Mahogany’s portraits conveniently follow portraits of White women of the same age range who have eating disorders. Cordelle offers the following information alongside Mahogany’s picture in the absence of a statement of her own:

Mahogany certainly appears to be a lot more comfortable in her body than does her same-age peer on the preceding page. Much of the reason for this is ethno-cultural: African-Americans (and Hispanics) are often a lot more accepting of heavier body types than are Caucasians, for whom the goal is frequently to be as thin as possible.

Among the results: weight-loss eating disorders such as anorexia and bulimia are largely white women’s diseases, whereas obesity—which may also be an eating disorder and is rampant throughout all segments of our society—is somewhat more prevalent among women of color.

Mahogany is the daughter of Sylviaette, 46. (Bodies 40)

⁴⁷ While Charcot attempts to create a photographic and corporeal language with which to understand and describe hysteria, Cordelle attempts to narrate women’s lives from infancy to old age. Both try, but cannot remain, in the background. Cordelle again contradicts this attempted self-concealment: “I also try to integrate new photos into the existing sequence as much as possible. This may mean avoiding a setting which is similar to an existing one in the same age range, or it may require breaking up a sequence of black and white or color shots. Sometimes I can emphasize a point by juxtaposing photographs with similar situations but switching from one medium to the other. *One picture should flow to the next as meaningfully as possible, like scenes in a movie. But I can’t script everything*” (214, emphasis mine).

⁴⁸ On Cordelle’s website he answers the question *why women?* as follows: “It is also true that a great many of the issues which *The Century Project* depicts are largely women’s issues in our society. Yes, there are some anorexic men, for example, but their numbers pale in comparison to women. Ditto bulimia. Ditto cutting. In general, body image issues are very significant for most women, and substantially less so for men (though this is admittedly changing)” (*Why women?*)



Fig. 27: Cordelle, Frank. “Mahogany, 16.” *Bodies and Souls*.

Sylviaette’s own statement – “Why not? My mother always said I have a mind of my own” (Cordelle, *Bodies* 152) – is juxtaposed by Cordelle’s qualifying postscript:

Continuing the thread about cultural differences re the acceptance of body size—which begins with the picture of Sylviaette’s daughter Mahogany, 16—it is instructive to compare Sylviaette’s body with that of Christina, 44. While their physical proportions are very similar, Sylviaette is much more self-accepting, and therefore happier.

The assumption of expertise on the incidence of eating disorders, its origin (apparently the desire to be as thin as possible), and its manifestations according to race is striking. Cordelle does not simply wonder about Mahogany’s apparent ease in her own body as racially significant, rather he confidently instructs the

reader as to why this is so, as if her bodily acceptance is given by her portrait and their brief meeting to begin with: “much of the reason for this is ethno-cultural,” explains Cordelle. But he also implies that the feminine ideal of slenderness is simply about being fashionably thin. Anorexia, however, is not facilitated “by bedazzlement by cultural images, ‘indoctrination’ by what happens, arbitrarily, to be in fashion,” but rather an “attempt to embody certain values, to create a body that will speak for the self in a meaningful and powerful way” (Bordo, *Unbearable* 67) – the body of representation, the body in representation. Cordelle observes the bodies of Sylviaette and Christina like a physician, going so far as to actually compare physical proportions, or like a therapist, trying to account for similar body sizes and different degrees of self-acceptance. His designation of eating disorders as a White woman’s disease, and obesity as a Black woman’s problem is particularly troublesome. Bordo cautions that to imagine Blacks are immune to ideals of thinness is

to come very close to the racist notion that the art and glamour—the culture—of femininity belong to the white woman alone. The black woman, by contrast, is woman in her earthy, “natural,” state, uncorseted by civilization.” (Bordo, *Unbearable* 63)

Finally, while Cordelle imagines quasi-scientific reasons for the subjects varying degrees of health and pathology, he does so in the context of a mother-daughter relationship. Thus his prognoses, much like the psychotherapist’s, takes on genealogical significance. In trying to make sense of hysteria, Charcot organized the “grotesque and seemingly nonsensical hysteric poses into a coherent graph and narrative of psychosomatic disturbance” (Bronfen, *The Knotted* 184). In light of the above examples, Cordelle’s choice to arrange *The Century Project*’s subjects so that they express a chronological narrative of women’s lives begins to read more like an attempt to educate on the disorders of girls and women, less so a medium in which the subjects themselves are the bearers of their own intimate “truths.”

Such pathologization occurs again in Cordelle’s unsanctioned narrative about Gina. Gina, 47 (Fig. 28), writes no statement of her own:

Gina is a Puertorriqueña, with what is unfortunately a common problem for women regardless of where they are from: she has made some lousy decisions around sex, drugs, and men. She understands that and is trying to effect some changes in her life, though it is a continuing struggle. Last I heard, she was in an abusive relationship with a man 25 years her junior. She longs to be on our side of the fence. (154)

To start, Cordelle’s emphasis on Gina’s bad “choices” adds little to a political project meant to document the struggles and lives of women. Cordelle glosses over the complicated socio-political realities of domestic abuse and does not even attempt to account for the role of social circumstance in the making of “bad” decisions – that is, how class, gender, race, family relations, past abuse can differently effect the choices available to women. The “us/them” binary enacted both in the photograph and the accompanying text constructs a clear boundary

between “people like Gina” and the rest of us, re-erecting the separation between the “I” and the “Other.” The chain-linked fence makes explicit this division and renders her imprisoned by her own failings. The flippant and uncertain manner in which Gina’s relationship with a man “25 years her junior” is referenced takes on a tone of both condescension and frivolous gossip – of a shared intimacy and paternalistic disapproval. Finally, there is the implication that it is Gina’s unruly sexuality that has landed her on the “other” side of the fence; in the absence of her own narration, Cordelle references her bad choices around sex and men. Much like the male physician diagnosing the hysteric, Cordelle inserts himself into her imaginary (and subsequently ours), and likens her discontent to an “errant sexuality” (Bronfen 115). Gina’s experience posing, one might argue, reads similarly to a Foucauldian confession, in which any utterance of past trauma or



Fig. 28: Cordelle, Frank. “Gina, 47.” *Bodies and Souls*.

transgression requires the “presence (or virtual presence) of a partner who is not simply the interlocutor but the *authority* who requires the confession, prescribes and appreciates it, and intervenes in order to judge, punish, forgive, console, and reconcile” (Foucault 61-62, emphasis mine). Gina’s portrait is not allowed the opportunity to speak for itself; if we read Gina’s body as defiant or obscene, tragic or disorderly, it is because her portrait is shaped by Cordelle’s words and any bodily articulation is *potentially* mediated and constructed by Cordelle’s judgmental language. In effect, Cordelle has treated the pictured body of Gina as the raw material, the matter, the fleshy substance, onto which his own narrative has been grafted. It is difficult to look at Gina’s body without seeing the ways in which Cordelle has made it into a readable object, which he reads “under the aegis of the phallus, that symbolic [discerning] function” (Bronfen 109). Cordelle, however, imposes a by no means inevitable symbolism onto Gina’s photo. She has presumably – hopefully – *chosen* to pose behind the fence. If I ignore what Cordelle has written as I am entirely apt to do, I see a different photograph.⁴⁹ I see the way I am sure many people feel: at times trapped and at the edge of one’s limits; imprisoned within the walls of the self; clearly visible to the outside world but separate and alone.

Difficult Vulnerabilities

What frustrates most about Cordelle’s postscripts is that he overwrites the subjects’ silences. Could Cordelle’s narratives be expressive of an anxiety to let the subjects’ photographs speak for themselves, an anxiety that their silences might “loosen” the power he otherwise holds (Foucault 101)? I wonder too how the “willful” vulnerability of the naked female subjects both in their photographic portraits and self-narrations (which I previously argued to be resistant), is a way in which to voice the body’s alterity and simultaneously acquiesce to paternal authority. Elisabeth Bronfen suggests some of the female hysterics unable to voice their discontent in the home are willing to “perform” their hysteria to male physicians as would fit the physicians’ diagnoses. This is not to say that the subjects of *The Century Project* knowingly engage in performance so as to please Cordelle, or that Cordelle necessarily demands such a fiction; we must, however, read the analogy of the “second horse” critically and take seriously those women for whom Cordelle’s maleness was a significant factor in their decision to pose. As for my own experience posing, the fact that Cordelle is a man was a significant barrier, at least initially, to my choice. My initial reaction – which mirrors one of the comments on the back cover of *Bodies and Souls* written by an anonymous

⁴⁹ Further, Cordelle alone cannot determine how patriarchal ideology is or is not produced, both because he cannot determine the viewer’s encounters or projections, and because the subject herself has some say, discursively and visually, as to how she will be received.

viewer: “what right had you, a man, to try and help women understand their bodies?” – was quickly followed by the conviction that this was “un-feminist” of me to discount a man’s ability to create meaningful, feminist art. The thought of essentializing was apparently excuse enough to halt any close critical scrutiny of the project before actually posing for a project that had powerfully affected me. In

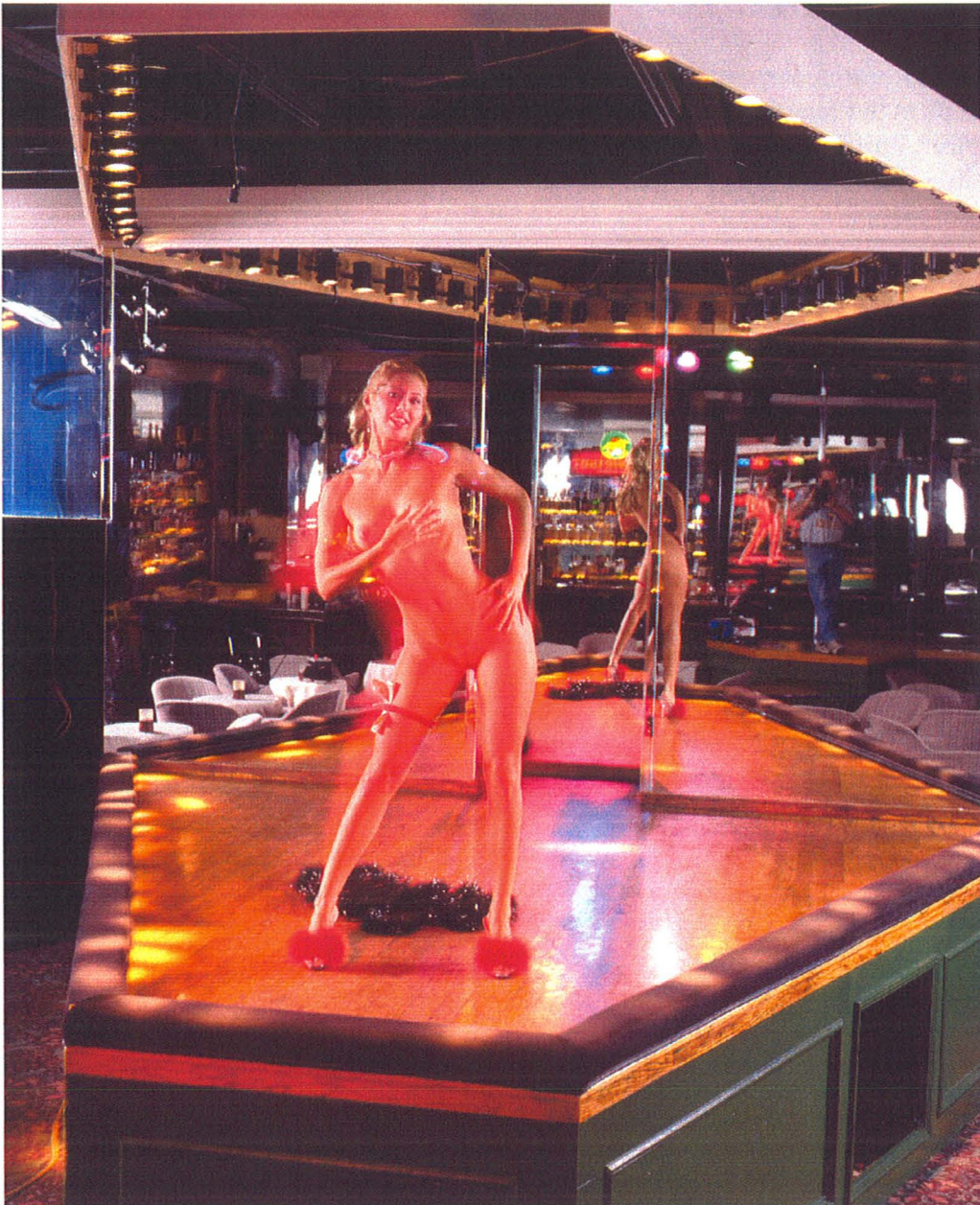


Fig. 29: Cordelle, Frank. “Toni, 24.” *Bodies and Souls*.

effect, a fear of reducing Cordelle to his gender obscured the symbolic role his gender actually plays in the construction of difficult narratives and aesthetics. And while I am no more lacking in a knowledge of historically differentiated dynamics of power between men and women than the average subject, I have to admit that I would (or did?) just as quickly “acquiesce” to a “paternal authority” given the compromised position in which one finds herself during the photo shoot. I would love to claim the subject position that storms out of a room and halts all picture taking at the hint of a manipulation or abuse of power; but I do not think that power, for the most part, works in this way: as easily legible. I think that “the subtle and often unwitting role played by our bodies in the symbolization and reproduction of gender” (Bordo 168) – and power – often goes unnoticed.

I have argued that the images and narratives, as a form of bodily confession, express a want for autonomy but reveal a self that is embroiled in social, ideological and political conditions. I have also argued that Cordelle, like Charcot, “knots together the vicissitudes of traumatic experience with the legacy of received cultural images of the feminine body” (Bronfen 179). The subjectivities constituted by seeing and posing are mediated and framed by Cordelle’s lens – but this does not halt the emergence of multiple meanings and interpretations. Toni’s portrait (Fig. 29) probably best represents the inherently contradictory nature of *The Century Project*. Aside from an obvious connection to “pin-up” or pornographic photography, her reflections on stripping as a job, a viable means to an end, vacillate between an awareness of the objectifying position in which such an occupation potentially places women and a self that cannot escape the ideologies that make it quite usual for women to undress for money. Her advice to women as someone who has observed a thing or two in the stripping world is intended to boost the self-confidence of women viewers but reads more like a conduct manual on how to attract a man. Most importantly, her portrait/statement illustrate that the *The Century Project*’s provocations do not denote an either/or ethics. Both the subjects and Cordelle, as people very much *embroiled in social, ideological and political conditions*, variously express the dominant/oppressive subject positions in which we *all* participate.

By no means then do I discount that Cordelle’s presence and involvement in *The Century Project* express a desire to act generously. Cordelle’s gratitude to the women he has met over the years expressed in the final paragraphs of *Bodies and Souls* acknowledges that the exchanges have indeed been *interconstitutive*.⁵⁰

⁵⁰ “This has been a truly powerful experience whose impact has been greater than anything else in my life: greater than the 20 years I spent in our education system, even greater than the cumulative impact of my parents. To say “Thank you” to all the wonderful women I have met as a result of *The Century Project* seems trivial, like thanking someone for saving your life by pulling you out of a burning house or a churning river and resuscitating you. But “Thank you” it must be, as sincerely

That the *effect* of Cordelle's approach to and involvement in *The Century Project* may differ from his *intent* is another matter altogether. It is with this effect in mind that I revisit my initial reflections on *The Century Project* as autobiographical, reflecting intimate selves for the benefit of subject and viewer. Who are we looking at? When we are affected, touched, moved by these portraits, are we mistaken in our moments of recognition? To my own musings, Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock, authors of *Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology* supply a partial answer:

Art is not a mirror. It mediates and re-presents social relations in a schema of signs which require a receptive and preconditioned reader in order to be meaningful. And it is at the level of what those signs connote, often unconsciously, that patriarchal ideology is reproduced. (119)

I still believe, however, that it is not impossible to see beyond Cordelle's superimposed text. Even if Gina's portrait/statement reads much like a confession, the bodily confession escapes its referent, much as the photograph itself is a mimesis of the thing it attempts – but can never perfectly – represent. The photograph, particularly the autobiographical portrait/confession, is belated, both in the expression of an original trauma and in Cordelle's intervention; even as Gina, or Karen, or Cathy remain “photographically fixed to the field of vision” long enough for us to see them and to read Cordelle's statement and learn of their abuse, the “traumatic knowledge at stake escapes itself” (Bronfen 191). All we can ever see is the trauma's belated performance or reiteration. I also believe that Cordelle's work, borne of multiple aesthetics and contradictions, is still immensely important and deserves credit. As argued at the beginning of this chapter, Cordelle's role as photographer cannot be read simply. The contradictory power of the exhibit has been to produce both compromised and tremendously powerful photographs. Out of an unintentional paternalism, an attempted self-effacement, Cordelle has crafted a project in which he very much has a controlling influence, but that is nonetheless immeasurably, unpredictably meaningful.

To end I would like to return to the portrait which begins this chapter and situates *The Century Project* as a space of familial belonging. Marlee's statement communicates the failure of gendered identity and of its interpellating pronouns (he, she) to adequately address their referents. She exposes the ideological function of normative gender roles: to create orderly, obedient, discernable bodies. In so doing, she calls attention to the performance, the acquiescence to the notion that “ladies' room” means something beyond a label on a door, beyond biology, something abstract, ideological and given. When she longs for recognition of the self in the “other,” she longs for affirmation, for that hint of a shared knowledge or experience outside of the language provided for us. Barthes' punctum performs the same function: it jolts us out of language and gives us

as I can muster. It has been, quite simply, an incredible journey” (Cordelle, *Bodies* 220).

instead a trace of the familiar, the familial, in an otherwise meaningless detail; it is a “detail that pierces the viewer and opens up the image, defying any closure labeling implies” (Bronfen 201). Perhaps then, however mediated or constructed, real or symbolic, the psychic recognition of self gives life to an otherwise static, immobile, dead image and hints at a continuity of experience.

Conclusion

I decided that this disorder and this dilemma, revealed by my desire to write on Photography, corresponded to a discomfort I had always suffered from: the uneasiness of being a subject torn between two languages, one expressive, the other critical; and at the heart of this critical language, between several discourses, those of sociology, of semiology, and of psychoanalysis—but that, by ultimate dissatisfaction with all of them, I was bearing witness to the only sure thing that was in me (however naïve it might be): a desperate resistance to any reductive system.

—Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*

Like Barthes, photography for me demands an articulation of the affective; it evokes a response that bypasses rational scrutiny and lodges itself in the gut. For me, this affect trumps, sometimes ever so slightly, sometimes with profound force, the more critical, theoretical ways of knowing. There is one particular photograph for Barthes, his “essential” photograph, out of which his theoretical and affective musings on the nature of photography begins. His “Winter Garden” photograph, as it is called, is a picture of his diseased mother. My “Winter Garden,” which need not be displayed, is a series of photographs of a young Black man at the moment of his death. These pictures started my contemplation on the meaning and affect of photography, on the ethical implications of looking, and the possibilities for theorizing about photographic embodiment. The photographs are a three-part series displaying the lynching of American Frank Embree in 1899 (Apel 467).⁵¹ The photographs are unbearable to look at because of the unapologetic way in which they celebrate (and now teach, or warn of) the systematic brutalization of Blacks in the Jim Crow days of overt racism. But they haunt me for an entirely different reason. My brother died by hanging. He chose it; there was no mob forcing a noose around his neck for some trivial offense. His death was not racially motivated, but committed at will, his motivations and pain unknown. White, male, and *free*, he completely complicates (for me) these pictures of Black men and women suspended in air, symbolic of a triumphant racist ideology. His suicide was *everything* opposite to these murders. And yet, there is defiance in the face of Frank Embree, even in death, that *screams* my brother, seventeen, proud, and hurting.

My viewing experience of the lynching photographs is fraught with contradiction, riddled by a personal history from which I cannot escape that while threatening to overwhelm or overshadow the photographs’ inherent stories, also helps me to better understand human suffering—not as it is displayed in an image but as it is experienced relationally. They arouse an empathy in me that makes me

⁵¹ The Frank Embree photographs are part of a larger collection of photographed souvenir postcards of lynching in America between 1900 and 1960 titled *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America*.

forget, for the moment, the contexts in which these two young men died, Frank Embree and my brother James, because what is most apparent is the utter and complete senselessness of their deaths. The lynching photographs are shocking in their unthinkability to which we are supposed to respond ethically. But I am stuck on that feeling lodged in my gut. There will always, it seems, be a *force* held by an image that is not always analogous to the truth it is meant to convey. This is photography's failure and its promise.

My initial goal in the completion of this project was to write on both the lynching photographs and *The Century Project*. Both inspire me to ask how photography registers in the body, but suggest that the body must always be positioned alongside of place, class, race, and gender. How do bodies, differently inscribed by power relations, respond to the sight of trauma? For those for whom these photographs are a reminder of their own life histories, how is the trauma replicated in the act of looking, in the vicarious but belated living of the event? In other words, how does photography of pain present itself as an untimely trauma and wound that repeats itself? The lynching photographs beg us not to forget; like *The Century Project*, they ask us to look as an act of political remembrance. But the collections have the potential to elevate the (abused) Black body and (vulnerable) female body as the privileged site of subjectivity and remembrance.

Both collections suggest, then, that ethical looking, responsible viewing, requires work. For *The Century Project*, this entails both taking seriously the body's responses to vulnerability and nakedness, and being critical of them. As we have seen, ideology is oftentimes produced unconsciously, unwittingly. Cordelle's own projections and beliefs have shaped and framed a project that can be read as both harmful and productive. I have to wonder then how my own approach has played an unwitting role in the reproduction of certain dominant ideologies or fictions. Does the way I have imagined the subject's words and images in relation to my life suggest an imposition of my own symbolism? Does the act of viewing *The Century Project*, and the dialectic between viewer and subject reveal a desire to affirm the self through the intimacy and experience of others? As Felski puts it, is the feeling of recognition (my own and that of others) simply a "narcissistic reliance upon others as a means to self-validation" (Felski 109)? Or are we – I must include myself here as a subject of the project – offering our images and stories, our naked bodies and vulnerabilities, in order to avow the subjective and intimate experiences and affectations of the individual too often dismissed by "masculine" sensibilities of the autonomous and unemotional self? Perhaps then *The Century Project* offers a "critique of an instrumental and rationalized public world" (Felski 113), and simultaneously an exploration of the extent to which women continue to be subjected to cultural, political, and institutional oppressions. *The Century Project* has provided the occasion for both self-reflection and cultural theorizing; it is necessary to distinguish between narcissistically locating the import of this project back in the self and productively illustrating that our shared stories and bruises position us on a continuum of human experience.

My hope in posing was to encourage women to experience embodiment (as if they don't all day long), its functionality, its practicality, and its aestheticism without that regulating feminine ideal being its definitive experience, its singular mode of existence. I wanted my body to speak differently for itself. Or, to refuse the hegemony of one particular body image which functions to the detriment of health and self-worth. I sense that I am not alone in wanting a different body for myself – a desire that vacillates between that iconic feminine ideal and a body that just is, engaged in the every day work, joy, frustration, sorrow, contentment of life. I wanted to stand next to the other women who gave me that sense of comfort and relief at the recognition of their nakedness, its simultaneous alterity and familiarity. In the end, these struggles and wishes remain personal. And worry as I will that I have not done these women and their narrations justice, that I have overwritten their stories with my own, I have to remember that these personal reflections embed me within the culture that I critique. However “wrong,” or shortsighted, or embarrassing as they sometimes are, my visceral, gut reactions originate from my “most banal, biological insertion into the world” (Eagleton 13). Such a world implicates the self within it, and necessitates an ongoing reconfiguration of both self and world through these mutual material interactions. Hopefully my reflections serve to articulate one's connection to a wider community, out of which the possibility for creating anew is ever present. As Susan Bordo writes, my embodied responses “keep me honest and they teach me about this culture” (*Twilight* 1). And like Bordo, I do not think that “one can do responsible criticism any other way” (1). The photograph's elastic meaning suggests that it is impossible to determine how any one individual will come into contact with the visual. The photographs of *The Century Project*, while not unproblematic, make socially, politically and *personally* relevant the experiences of the women that comprise the project – as well as those who look at and read with recognition the various instances of struggle and joy.

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