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B.A., The University of Ottawa, 2006

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF ARTS

in

THE COLLEGE OF GRADUATE STUDIES

(Interdisciplinary Studies)

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

(Okanagan)

August 2013

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Abstract

This project works with Virginia Woolf’s *Moments of Being* and Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands: La Frontera* to suggest that the problem of representing material feminisms in relational women’s life writing is located in white feminists’ desire to remain at home in their criticism. Bringing feminist theories on materiality, politics of belonging and affect together, I reflect on the ways my white privilege permits my criticism to haunt the very subjects whom it suggests I am writing for. In doing so, I demonstrate the ways feminism can be used by white feminists to protect the authority of white feminist criticism, and thus reinforce the white feminist’s privileged position as the subject of feminism. In this way, marking whiteness works to maintain white women’s privilege in feminism, rather than disturb their constructions of identity as feminists.

I work with Gloria Anzaldúa’s borderland theory to work through this problem by reflecting on my experiences of being in other women’s criticism. This enables me to work through affective, yet material boundaries between the white feminist self and other feminists. I argue that silence about the affective experiences of the contradictions that characterize white privilege for feminists permits white feminists to lean on the comforts of their knowledge of feminism, and to refuse to acknowledge other women’s writings as criticism.
Preface

This thesis is original, unpublished work by the author, Marcella Coulson.

While this thesis reflects on my experiences of using a material feminist theoretical framework to represent the subversive potential of relational women’s life writing, it is a product of collaboration between my supervisor Ilya Parkins, my committee members Jennifer Gustar and Jasmine Rault, my friends, family and partner, and the other material relationships I share with places, things and others that have come to shape and inform my work in ambiguous, indeterminate yet undeniable ways.
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Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my supervisor Ilya Parkins for sticking with me. Even when I didn’t know where I was going, I always felt that you did. So thanks for agreeing to this journey. This project would not have been possible without your guidance, hard work, knowledge, experience and dedication.

I would also like to thank my committee members, Jennifer Gustar and Jasmine Rault, for their patience and feedback. Your dedication and involvement was instrumental in the making of this project.

I also have to acknowledge my friends. I am indebted to all of you for the always engaging and thought-provoking discussions we had. This was most often the space where I, perhaps indirectly, worked through the problems and arguments in my thesis. Thank you for pushing and challenging me. Without you, so much of what I have written would of remained unexplored and silent. I look forward to many more nights of laughter and critical discussion. Thank you, JL and of course, HC as well.

I am also indebted to the feminists whose works I have had the pleasure of engaging with in this thesis. This thesis would not have been possible without other feminists’ criticism.

Finally I would like to thank the love of my life, my partner Robert Schlesak, who always reminds me of my softer side. Without your patience, encouragement, laughter and love, I would not have been able survive this thesis.
Dedication

This project is dedicated to my mother for all the hard work she did and continues to do that too often goes unnoticed.
Introduction

I wanted to do a project on women’s life writing because as a life writer myself, I have found that the reflections I make in life writing challenge my perception of the present, and ultimately have a prominent effect on the way I live. These reflections articulate a critical theory grounded in material experiences, a theory in practice in which I am never the sole participant. In this way, the theory which emerges from my life writing exceeds me; I am as much a product of my writing, as I am the author of the stories I write. I believe this separates life writing from other more traditional forms of critical theory. While I no doubt play a role in the making of such theory, my position in my life writing reflects the limits of my knowledge (and the presence of other’s knowledge), rather than a demonstration of knowledge. I am vulnerable here. So the theory that emerges in life writing reflects my experiences of being in the knowledge of others, rather than the knowledge I have, for whatever reason, acquired myself.

While life writing is often represented in criticism, life writing is less often recognized as a form of criticism itself. However, in looking back on my own experiences, or more specifically at the knowledge derived from these experiences, I see that my life writing is the site of where tensions, conflicts, difference and contradiction are emphatically explored. My experience of these reflections is a material experience itself; my life writing is the (re)exploration of experiences’ past, which produces something new. In this way, I feel my life writing does not merely reflect my material experiences, but informs and shapes them affectively as well. Seemingly out of nowhere, a thought, feeling (or lost memory,) erupts; feeling my way through the unfamiliarity of
the “new” space I’m in, my writing begins. But my writing exceeds my intentions as I not only write about my experiences, but I begin experiencing my writing as well. It is inaccurate to suggest that I am reliving an experience of the past, because the circumstances at present and my past experience are not the same. No, it is as though I experience the very substance of my writing—the matter of which contains a complex mixture of how I felt and thought then, with how I think and feel now. It is complex. In turn, my writing reflects on my experience of being in the moment of writing myself, while also simultaneously existing as a body beyond the words on the page (and past the moment of writing itself.)²

Something strange occurs in the space of life writing. It is as though one moment I am here, sitting at my desk with pen in hand, writing the thoughts in my head; then the next moment the room where I sit evaporates into the moment of my writing itself. It is not quite magic, but there is something mysterious about it nonetheless. It is a space that is foreign, yet familiar. Perhaps this is not so much a new space, but the more intimately personal experience of the room with the desk and the chair. I am unsure. Here, I appear connected to everything; the space of the room is in myself, I feel. My consciousness spills over, pressing itself against the walls to form a sense of softness towards the floor. I begin to feel. Ceilings bulge with the quiet energy in the room. I am very much alive in here—the space of my life writing. Somewhere, an elusive strangeness lurks in this space. Somewhere between what I know and what I feel may be there, something is there; I am not alone. This moment is the very moment in which life writing occurs for me. It is an intangible, indefinite, elusive, yet intimately real space where memories past are alive and awake, speaking to me about my futures’ past. It is in this liminal space
between what was and what is, where lost or hidden glimpses of the past mix with what has not yet come, to emerge and find themselves in new controversies spilt out on the page before me.

Perhaps it is this sense of experiencing my life as I write that propels me into alternative experiences that would otherwise remain lost and unknown. It is difficult to locate the origin of this force specifically. Its identity escapes me, but this must not be the point. *Something* drives me to write beyond my present knowledge of the past, pushing me against my future desires. What is this? Perhaps this something is nothing but a moment. A moment from which life springs forth and rushes in and through me and out into the page upon which glimpses of myself or who I think myself might be, flood and recede. All that remains is a mark. These markings on the page exceed what I thought or intended to place there, and now remind me of the existence of material realities beyond my knowledge, or what I originally thought, felt and/or desired to be there.

This is what I mean when I say that there is something mysteriously elusive about life writing. Something *strange* about the space in which it occurs. Even though I write alone, there remains a sense that the presence of *something* else is here in the room with me as well. Perhaps it is the room itself. Or perhaps it is the feeling of being in the room, or being in *something* other than myself. Life writing occurs in the space between the world outside and the world within. Here, these words that I write emerge from somewhere deep, dark within—something so deep and so dark that I am moved to believe the words which resound on the page cannot be mine alone, but perhaps express something beyond the self-image I try to represent.
I believe life writing is *relational* in this way. By relational I mean that it emerges from material relationships and exceeds the intention behind the words that I write. Relational life writing does not represent knowledge so much as it reflects the experience of being in the knowledge of someone (or something) else. I explore my self through my reflections on material relationships with places, things and others—but this self exceeds the image I perceive myself to be as well. Something more, something *other* is there. These places, things and others may appear in my life writing, but my life writing is not so much a reflection of them as it is me. In writing about these “things,” my writing uncovers the feelings that shape and inform my experience of them. Yet, my life writing exceeds me as well. It contains traces of things, places and others outside my knowledge of them. These material experiences represent an existence beyond my self-knowledge—a glimpse into something beyond my experience as a singular self, beyond who I think myself to be. So even though I write about my experience, this knowledge is not my own, and even though I may appear to write about others, my writing reveals something that without the other I may never have known. The subject of my life writing, then, is always ambiguous and unclear. Yet, the subject of my life writing is grounded in relationality, because it depends on material relationships for an identity beyond the confines of its own image.

Life writing reminds me of the limits of my knowledge, and that my experiences in the knowledge of others is incomplete. Lost pasts and future possibilities erupt as I feel my way through the dark crevices my writing explores. I may possess some control over the outcome, but I am never in control of what is written. Not completely. Rather, when writing myself the self who emerges never appears the way I intended. Similarly,
my life is lived in spite of what I determined. To say I discover myself through life writing would only be half true; the self I find to be something other than what I desired and/or feared. Perhaps this is why I believe relational life writing is so important. Relational life writing is not the making of the self, but as a reflection of the self in making, it represents the unmaking of the self I once believed to be me. Life writing contradicts the image I hold of myself. Even if writing to prove something true to myself, in writing myself, more than what I held true reveals itself. In errors, do new selves breed. In this way, life writing reconnects me to the materiality of relationships beyond my memory of them, opening me to alternative possibilities of past, future and present. However, this potential depends on my relational rather than hierarchal relationship with places, things and others. So, I would like to suggest that life writing provides a space where once seemingly oppositional relationships (memories otherwise cast in stone) may be complicated to reveal alternative possibilities and/or experiences that reflect the instability, plurality and incompleteness of the subject rather than reinforce the autonomy of their identity.

There is a large body of feminist theory to support this claim. Material feminist work on relational subjectivity commonly highlights the relational subject’s potential to subvert hegemonic representations of identity. Whereas hegemonic representations of identity depict the female subject as passive, weak and mute (or grotesque, disobedient, and dysfunctional) relational women’s life writing destabilizes traditional representations of identity, agency and meaning to re-write the way we understand identity as a whole. Relational women’s life writing reflects a relational subjectivity that subverts hegemonic representations of identity by re-writing the subject as a body whose experience is
grounded in the material world. Whereas hegemonic identities reinforce dualist representations of difference and tend to reflect the subject’s autonomy and/or (hierarchical) authority over the material world, relational identities deconstruct dualisms and express a relational subjectivity that depends on the complexity and plurality of difference and meaning for identity.

Material feminist Karen Barad describes the relational relationships between subjects and the material world as “intra-actions” to more adequately reflect the dynamic interconnectedness between “things” and “non-things” (material and immaterial alike). Intra-actions explain how “relata do not preexist relations; rather, relata-within-phenomena emerge through specific intra-actions… intra-actions enact agential separability- the condition exteriority-within-phenomena.” Unlike hegemonic representations of identity, the relational subject does not experience material differences as an autonomous identity, nor does s/he encounter the material world from a position outside it. Rather the relational subject’s experience with the material world destabilizes his/her position as subject to illuminate other parts of the self, which, working together, translate into alternative experiences at present. Intra-actions disrupt the subject’s gaze to remind them of both the incompleteness of knowledge and the plurality of experience which depends on the indeterminate identity of places, things and others, rather than knowledge. In material feminism, the material world is never a passive object in the subject’s experience that is separate from his/her identity, but rather is always an active agent/actant that influences experience. Material feminist Donna Haraway suggests that relational subjects reflect a subjective objectivity that is grounded in embodied experience. This “situated knowledge” differs from traditional hegemonic
representations of objectivity which enable privileged subjects to observe and represent knowledge as separate from the materiality of experience. This allows them to perform a “god-trick” that permits the privileged subject to speak across difference locations of experience without exerting any influence over their observations. This creates the illusion of knowledge or representations of places, things and others that is indisputable, complete and perhaps most importantly, objective, without accounting for the material conditions and/or location of which the knowledge emerged.

As a woman, I have often found it difficult to express the validity and relevance of my experiences in respect to dominant representations of the female subject. I have learned to regulate and censor the more personal or intimate experiences of my material relationships to protect myself from scrutiny and in my desire to be taken seriously. In order to resist dominant representations of female embodiment, I learned to articulate myself as objectively as possible to refute the image of myself as weak, inauthentic, disobedient and/or dysfunctional like dominant representations of the female subject. This means that for the better part of my academic career, I tried to mimic a more “masculine” construction of identity that enabled me to remove myself from the personal or affective experience of materiality and re-position myself as the subject (rather than object) of knowledge. I learned to be “objective.” This distanced me from hegemonic representations of female subject. Or so I believed. As a woman who could reflect masculine subjectivity I could be taken seriously, but never as seriously as a man simply because I was not recognized as one. Nor did I feel like one, or really desire to be one. I just wanted to make myself legible rather than to appear hysterical. So I embodied a position of masculine objectivity in order to be recognized for my criticism, while
simultaneously distancing myself from other representations of female embodiment that
did not reflect my material experiences as a white woman.

However, my life writing has always been a space where I feel safe to explore the
tensions between my experience and the way I believe I am perceived. Here, I am
afforded the space to tease out the ways in which I have been conditioned to recognize
and perform my identity, while also exploring my alternative experiences as a relational
self. It is in the materiality of relationships that I am reminded of this other version of
myself who, under the scope of the dominant ideal, remains silenced and invisible. The
difference between how I am represented in dominant discourse and the way I write my
experiences in my life writing is that in my life writing this other presence is neither
absent nor silent. S/he commands my attention—possessing it, really, as I come to write
somewhat haphazardly about whatever it is disturbing me. While at first I may project
these feelings on to the places, things, and others I encounter, at some point my intentions
are broken by a sudden arrest in thought--a moment. I am reminded of a missing gap or
blockage in my memory. Whether it is actually something, or perhaps nothing I can
never be sure, although I must admit I spend a terrible amount of time writing about it.
However, as time expires the inevitable comes to pass, I am left with the only thing for
certain I can determine—that I remain uncertain about the matter this gaping hole in my
consciousness obscures. I know little (for certain) of what happens in the space of my
absence, yet I remain certain that I cannot be everywhere at once. Flooded with a range
of possibilities that while seeming endless are rarely ever pointless, a certain darkness
pervaded the room. Knowledge outside my memory of the room dissolves and I am left
with myself in the dark. Struck, I am moved by something I knew never to be there.
Strange, how before the room seemed to possess no existence beyond my memory of it, and now I am nearly swallowed by the sheer magnitude of its existence beyond my knowledge of it.

    Somewhere, in the space of my life writing I am faced with the circumstance of the limits of my knowledge, which always draws me back here. There is no face hidden beneath the ambiguity of the gaping hole with which I am now faced, but rather simply the possibility that in this situation I am not the subject, but the other. The material relationships of which I write, the places, things and others that I know, form reflections of myself that first feel foreign and unfamiliar—but as my writing takes me further, my mind ventures deeper and deeper, until something, something I felt makes me desire to feel more. So under the shroud of darkness I uncover lost and forgotten pasts that perhaps in light of my present knowledge I may be too ashamed or afraid to touch. In some ways, this other me, this other part of me that I thought to have been left behind, represents my experience as an other in spite of myself. Disturbing. This feeling of being possessed by someone, something other than myself, disturbs me, and yet seeks me out and finds me, albeit accidentally, still. So my life writing encompasses different parts of me, lost and forgotten parts, or miscellaneous fragments of my experience which I have otherwise chosen to forget in my pursuit to be recognized for who I pretend I am, or who I am afraid I am not. Yet, the significance of this other presence in my life writing does not lie in it being identifiable and/or knowable, but in the very circumstances of its materiality— the indefinability of identity.

    The ambiguity surrounding identity, its plurality, instability and perpetual incompleteness, actively resists hegemonic representations of identity dominant in
modern society. There is a body of feminist criticism specifically oriented around the potential for relational women’s life writing to represent a counter-hegemonic discourse. This feminist criticism is similar to material feminism in that it illuminates the relationality of the female subject in women’s life writing. Such criticism contend that relational women’s life writing challenges the way we read and write about the female subject, which in turn writes women’s experiences back into discourse by disrupting dominant representations of the female subject. Recognizing relationality in life writing deconstructs binary constructions of difference between male and female identities, which works to disrupt the authority of the masculine (objective) subject. Her embodiment complicates his observations; she exists beyond his gaze, which de-centers his experience. Life writing is not a testament of identity, but contradicts our accounts of experience. Writing the female body back into discourse re-figures the relationship between subject and object; difference is no longer oppositional, but relational.

Nancy Miller has been instrumental in challenging the distinctions between male and female life writing, or more specifically how we read and write about male and female experiences. She argues that in representing the relationality in life writing as a female characteristic we reinforce essential representations of identity that suppress more complex and contradictory and often marginalized experiences of identity. By recognizing the relationality of male and female subjects, the authority of the subject is disrupted and representations of hegemonic identities are disturbed to make room for alternative expressions of identity that are traditionally excluded. In this way, these feminist criticisms on relational women’s life writing suggest that relational life writing resists rather than reproduces dominant representations of identity.
Feminists arguing for the subversive potential in relational women’s life writing tend to demonstrate the ways the subject reflects a relational rather than autonomous identity. Rather than argue the authenticity of the subject’s experience, these feminists explore the way the subject’s identity is affected in and through its embodied experiences. The aim is not to re-present the subject’s material experiences, but rather highlight the way the relationality of the subject subverts the authority of dominant representations in modern society. Interestingly, this is achieved not by representing a new or alternative truth, but illuminating the ways the potential of the relational subject depends on the plurality, instability, and incompleteness of identity, rather than an identity built on a new truth. This represents a shift from representing the subject in its entirety, to illuminating how the relationality of the subject disrupts narrative authority and exceeds the capacity of representation. It also highlights the way women’s life writing is the effect of multiple, contradictory and fragmented narratives rather than the product of a complete, and unified one. On the contrary, the life writing of the relational subject is always the site of multiple and conflicting narratives, which de-centers the subject of life writing by changing the discussion of life writing from questions of authenticity, identity and experience to reflections about the material relationships that shape and influence the subject’s experiences of identity and meaning. Relational life writing does not argue for the truth and/or validity of identity, nor do the stories that unfold in life writing work to justify or rationalize one’s experience. So, while life writing may explore these conflicts and tensions, its relevance is not dependent on solving them. Similarly, feminist criticisms of relational women’s life writing do not argue that such life writing represents a new truth or identity, but rather highlight the
ways this writing reflects the complex embodiment of material experiences that contradict normative and singular representations of identity and truth.\textsuperscript{20}

I would like to suggest that this reflects a relational understanding of materiality similar to material feminisms. Materiality is no longer a thing that is identified and classified as knowable, but rather an indeterminable \textit{effect} of material relationships on identity with material consequences. Rather than represent the material (experiences) in relational women’s life writing, material feminist criticisms illuminate traces of the material in women’s life writing by demonstrating the ways the relational subject subverts hegemonic representations of identity.\textsuperscript{21} Whereas the plurality, instability and incompleteness of the female subject has traditionally been represented as signs of her frivolity, insecurity, and weakness, (or grotesque, disobedient and monstrous,) the feminist criticism I have outlined \textit{re}-presents these qualities as signs of potential subversion and resistance in relational women’s life writing. This re-writing of female subjectivity does not represent the material experiences of the female subject per se, but rather traces the presence of female embodiment in writing to represent a more complex experience of materiality that contradicts hegemonic representations that govern, surveil and restrain the plurality of relational identities.

In this way, relational women’s life writing is refigured as the site of alternative knowledge, and not mere fiction. Where earlier I felt the need to separate my life writing from my criticism (remove my personal experiences from my research), material feminist theories of life writing created a space where I could do both, remaining both a female subject and critical thinker. This allowed me to acknowledge my position “in theory”—that theory emerges in and through \textit{material} experiences and that the integrity of my
criticism depended on these material relationships. As long as my life writing articulated its relationality, and recognized the ways my life writing was shaped by others, it had the potential to disrupt hegemonic representations of identity, and could be recognized as feminist criticism.\textsuperscript{22} Feminism allowed me to write criticism from an embodied position. This meant that I did not have to hide behind my criticism, but that I could \textit{live} it.\textsuperscript{23} Suddenly, the knowledge from my personal experiences was valid and relevant to criticism. My life writing was a site of deep and rigorous theory. I believed it meant something. Feminism also gave me a sense of confidence in my experiences as well.

Of course, at the same time, being someone who had been silenced by white supremacist patriarchy in modern society, I remained conscious about reproducing this silence in others. Asserting the significance of my experience over others would merely be mimicking the type of oppressive and exploitative methods I was writing against. I decided I wouldn’t do this. After all, feminism also acknowledges the partiality of knowledge as well. I touched on this briefly earlier when discussing how Donna Haraway’s concept of “situated knowledge” grounds “objectivity” in the subjectivity of embodied experience.\textsuperscript{24} While feminism recognizes the significance of material experiences, the significance of this recognition depends on the de-centering of the subject and the incompleteness of knowledge. So, while feminist theory could recognize the importance and/or counter-hegemonic potential of my life writing as a discourse, in order for my \textit{criticism} to be valid and legitimate I had to account for the location of my knowledge as well.\textsuperscript{25} While feminism encouraged me to speak, it also required me to pause, reflect and account for the ways I silence others.
Feminism has a long history of being aware of its implication in the silencing of others. The concern of re-universalizing the subject and the problem of representing others remains prevalent and has in many ways shaped (and continues to shape) the way feminists practice criticism today. White feminism’s concern with its implication in reinforcing the marginalization of others emerged partly in response to feminist work by women of colour who suggested that many of the methods employed by white feminism to help other women reinforced their marginalization instead. Over time, the reflexivity in feminism has nurtured a sensitive yet responsible consciousness for its role in reproducing silence in those recognized as marginalized others. Adrienne Rich, Aimee Rowe and Linda Alcoff are just a few of feminists working diligently to expose and challenge universalizing tendencies within feminism. Such criticism is generally encouraged rather than opposed within feminism as a whole. It was in the early 1980s that feminist Adrienne Rich persuasively argued for the need of a politics of location in a feminism that was becoming more and more white. In responding to feminism’s tendency to represent the feminist subject as the white subject, Rich proposed that feminists account for the politics of location by stating their relationship to whiteness and also accounting for the privilege and power of their position before they speak as feminist subjects. For in speaking as a feminist, the feminist critic represents feminism with respect to whiteness rather than represent feminism as a white feminist. The difference, though subtle, is significant in that the latter recognizes feminism as predominantly white and/or reflective of white interests without accounting for their investment or interest in this argument about feminism as white feminists themselves. This affords white feminists the privilege to speak of feminism as feminist subjects without addressing the way their
identity as white feminists affords them the privilege to decide the shape of feminism itself. In universalizing the feminist subject as the white subject, the white subject is afforded the privilege to decide who the subject of feminism is. While this may likely be unintentional or inadvertent, Rich’s theory of politics of location reminds white feminists not only of our responsibility to recognize other feminist criticisms, but to also account for the ways our position as white feminists may silence the criticism of other feminists as well.

As a feminist I try to explore contradictions within feminism with the aim of contributing to its heterogeneity while also trying to ensure it becomes more hospitable towards other feminists as well. Feminism depends very much on the instability and incompleteness of identity for its own identity. Feminism is in a state of constant motion; it is fluid, plural and fleeting. Feminism embodies a perpetually incomplete metamorphosis that blurs boundaries and destabilizes definitions to exist as a powerfully grotesque, yet unstable body, rich in contradiction and rooted deep in complexity.29

However, in wanting my life writing to be recognized as feminist criticism, I started accounting for the politics of my location before I wrote. I wanted to prevent any signs of unmarked privilege or projecting my experience onto others, before writing anything down—before any knowledges in my life writing could emerge. The idea, of course, was that this would encourage (not hinder) more relationality in my life writing. My hope was that I could produce more subversive, robust or even radical feminist criticism by taking control of my whiteness. So I decided to wave a giant white flag before I said or wrote anything, as if to say, “you got me, I’m white. Now this is what I
have to say.” To be honest, I feel I was not only concerned with writing over others’ experiences (misrepresenting them in my life writing), but also worried about how I would be recognized as a feminist. In wanting my life writing to be recognized for its feminist theory, I began to censor what I wrote. But in doing so, I became estranged from the material relationships that shaped and influenced my knowledge. It was as though in internalizing feminist theory, I grew more and more concerned with feminist etiquette, rules and style, rather than the experience of embodiment as a white feminist myself.

This is not to criticize feminism for being conscious of whiteness, nor to deny white feminism’s universalizing tendencies. Nor do I mean to dismiss my role in universalizing others’ experience by representing these experiences with respect to my own. What I mean is to question why I seemed unable to introduce myself as a white feminist without simultaneously inferring that I wasn’t one of those other white feminists who don’t. Or, that I was somehow different, perhaps more sensitive and aware than other whites. Different. So ironically, I began to write as though I was not as white as I appeared, by repeating incessantly that I was white, and noting quite explicitly the privilege I possessed as a white woman. So over time, instead of life writing, I began to write only criticism instead. I say this not to suggest in any way that Rich’s theory of a politics of location or other feminist theories concerned with the universalization of the white subject in feminism are wrong and short-sighted, but instead to make room for discussion of why, in stating my politics of location and acknowledging my contradictory relationship to white privilege, I grew more and more defensive about the way my white privilege informed my identity as a feminist. While my life writing had always been a
space where I could safely explore these kinds of tensions and contradictions, I found myself, more and more, writing to hide from them instead. I preferred to write as though such tension between my life writing and criticism did not exist at all. So, not only did I only now write criticism, but I began to only listen for criticism as well. I no longer felt disturbances ripple through my life writing, but I represented such as others and objects of my criticism instead.

In feminism, the problem of representing others has been tied to the limits of its capacity to listen to others—especially others whose experiences threaten the existing knowledges of feminism. Feminism has developed in awareness of this. Sara Ahmed, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Chandra Talpade Mohanty and Andrea Smith are just some of the feminists who have demonstrated white feminism’s tendency to speak for or on behalf of marginalized others, rather than listen and recognize these women as feminists themselves. Linda Alcoff has suggested that feminism move from the representation of others, to working together towards alternatives to representation instead, while Spivak has become known for the implications her question, “can the subaltern speak?,” imposes on white feminism. Perhaps before white feminists can answer these questions, we must reflect on the reasons or motives for choosing not to listen to the other in the first place. In thinking about how criticism has distanced me from my life writing, I wonder if the question I should ask is why I no longer speak with others, but choose to speak about the need to listen to them instead?

Sara Ahmed has suggested that while white feminism has been tolerant and accepting of other non-white feminists, often this acceptance depends on the incorporation of other feminists’ writing into the canon of white feminism. While I
don’t feel this is the intention of white feminism, I would certainly be lying to myself if I said I’d be happy to leave the comforts of being at home in white feminism, and enter the space of other, non-white feminism instead. Of course, this contradicts my statement suggesting my desire to account for the politics of location and white privilege. But, I think it is important to explore my motivations for being transparent about my white privilege. What am I afraid of? Why do I hide behind my criticism? What is it that my criticism tries to disguise? How has my familiarity with white feminism as a white privileged subject of feminism estranged me not only from other non-white feminists, but from myself as well?

Some feminists suggest we shift away from a politics of location and move instead towards a feminist theory that explores whiteness as a mode of belonging. Recognizing whiteness as a mode of belonging allows white feminists to reflect on the ways their identities as feminists are not only informed by whiteness, but depend on white privilege as well. Refiguring whiteness as a mode of belonging identifies whiteness as an inclusive membership that depends on the exclusion of others, but while the rights to this privileged membership feel as though it is always in contestation and undefined. White women are privileged as white subjects, yet subordinated by their gender in hegemonic society, where white masculinity is normalized as the dominant identity. So despite the way whiteness is represented as homogenous, the material experience of white identity and privilege is complex. In this way, privilege becomes less a word that can be tossed around and accounted for, and instead a complex, material experience, that perhaps better reflects the white subject’s conflict of interest. On one hand, I want to subvert white culture, yet on the other hand I am invested in my identity
as a white subject as well. The desire to belong to whiteness confines me to my own image, yet in incessantly marking my whiteness I become numb to its effects (on myself and on others). Refiguring whiteness as a mode of belonging permits me to explore the affective experience of whiteness as a white woman feminist whose inclusion depends on the exclusion of others, rather than to domesticate whiteness.

The danger of treating whiteness as a thing is that we become able to speak and write about whiteness as though it exists outside of us. Whiteness, or marking (and simultaneously resisting) whiteness, becomes a tool that is used to either protect white feminism from outside dangers, or internal domestic threats. As a white woman, I know that this is not what I intend to do, not knowingly anyhow, but something I continue to do despite knowing better. Where I used to allow myself to explore the contradictions between the image I hold of myself, and the material embodiment of myself, for some reason I insist on using my knowledge and experience of feminism to erase these contradictions and hide such tensions. Perhaps I will never know why, but I feel I should be concerned with my reluctance towards trying to at least explore further and understand why. In speaking of whiteness as though it is something that can be marked and is knowable, I infer that I have control, which places me above whiteness. Somehow, over time, I become less and less accountable. It is although I am removed from the materiality of my experience as a white subject. Over time this creates a silence—an omission or gap in white consciousness where we are permitted to forget how uncomfortable we are without whiteness. It seems that even as I abject it, whiteness grants me privilege and power; the privilege to know whiteness and choose to refuse it; the power to separate myself from the negatives and ugliness of it, while maintaining the
privileges I hold as a white subject. I worry about the illusion of safety this affords me as a feminist. How I feel always at home in the space of others. Do I? Am I? I wonder who I am without my white privilege? I am so afraid and lost without it. Or I am afraid that I will be lost without it. I wonder why I am so concerned about losing something that in all likeliness will always be with me. I am a white woman. I worry that as a white feminist I will come to see only the ways I account for my whiteness, and not the way I depend on the power it affords. I have grown so eager to mention those who pay for my privilege, and yet remain reluctant to speak with them on their terms.

I’m beginning to wonder how I will learn to respond to other whites about their concerns about white privilege and feminism’s accountability for their implication in whiteness. I worry that I’ll turn to those who dare to question further and tell them everything they say has already been said before. There is nothing new here. Their concerns, while valid, are irrelevant in the sense that they merely repeat what we, as feminists (and what I in my experience), already know. I wonder if I already do this, if I already believe it. There is something dark beneath the silence that marking white privilege creates. This silence is disturbing; it disturbs me and yet, I find myself without proper or adequate or politically correct words to articulate the need to speak with other feminists about this. Perhaps it is because I possess no solution or concrete knowledge as to what produces this silence. Nor do I know whether I can illuminate this silence when there appears to be nothing there. I do not know who is responsible, nor in what ways I may be responsible. But in some way, I am. I want to talk about it. I want to talk about how peculiar this silence is. How weird that this silence persists despite all the criticism (especially, white criticism) about white privilege. Perhaps the question should be why
do I choose to remain silent? Why do I willingly contribute to this silence? How am I perpetuating this silence? Why do I as a white feminist feel there is no space to reflect and write about my silence? I wonder what has happened to my life writing? I wonder where the robustness of my writing has fled. I wonder why I have grown so reluctant to pick up the pen and write my life? I am ashamed to admit to myself, but I fear I have forgotten how to write anything other than criticism.

I began this thesis as a student of material feminism who wanted to demonstrate the importance and validity of material feminisms by contributing to conversations in feminist criticism about relational women’s life writing. I chose Virginia Woolf’s *Moments of Being* because I felt it reflected my theory of relationality and, similar to my own life writing, was a deep source of under explored knowledge. I tried to separate my criticism from the criticism of others by demonstrating the ways my theory was different, how it was more material. I did so carefully and meticulously, being ever so careful to avoid speaking outside my position, and tried to diffuse the authority of my criticism over others. I tried to follow the rules. I went to great lengths to assert and defend Woolf’s life writing as if it were my own. But in doing so, and in spite of all my noble intentions and efforts, I displaced Woolf from the life in her writing, as I inevitably lost track of the presence of myself in *Moments of Being*. As a critic of her writing, I lost sight of the potential meaning of her experiences beyond my analysis of her life writing. Even worse, I failed ask myself what my motives were for doing so. In the end, I found myself not in conversation with Woolf, but in an argument with Sidonie Smith as we both tried to locate the real materiality in *Moments of Being*. Yet, Woolf appears to have escaped us both. Ultimately, my criticism effaces the traces of Woolf’s influence on my image of
relationality, and I come to speak of relationality in *Moments of Being* as though I were responsible for it myself.

Avery Gordon refers to this as haunting—that is the ways in which the theory and practice of criticism haunts the representations (or representations of our experiences) of others. Gordon’s theory of haunting provoked me to take a closer look and investigate the ways feminism haunted the life writing of others. However, in trying to deconstruct the oppressive methods of white feminism, I removed myself from my responsibility for hauntings as well. I came to see how oppressive feminism could be, without recognizing that the oppressive feminist could be me. In many ways, *it was me*. The second chapter of this thesis is in many ways about me chasing the shadow of my own criticism. In trying to find the words to admit somewhat privately and secretly that I’ve known I need to speak up or do something all along, I chose not to because I wanted to belong. I wanted to belong to feminism because I felt it recognized me not just as a woman, but for my criticism as well. Yet, in trying to be a feminist critic, or in writing criticism, I grew removed from the materiality of my life writing. Not only did I fail to recognize the ways my own criticism haunted my life writing, but I stopped feeling the presence of something other in my life writing as well.

However, in the third chapter, I find myself moved to explore this crisis. I permit myself to temporarily envision myself as the object of another’s criticism. Yet, I find myself shaken by this image of myself as other. I retreat immediately, but this other in myself remains with me. I wonder about the implications this has for my theory of relationality? Why do I feel it necessary to hide behind white constructions of identity despite the privileges my identity as a white woman affords me? Whereas in my first
chapter I sought to demonstrate the ways Woolf’s *Moments of Being* reflected my theory of relationality by using my knowledge of material feminism, in this chapter my encounter with Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands: La Frontera* shattered the illusion that my theory of relationality reflected my affective material experience of living relationally. On the contrary, *Borderlands: La Frontera* subverted not only my theory of relationality, but the image I held of myself as a feminist who was accountable for her white privilege as well. It disturbed my sense of home. I was not at home in Anzaldúa’s criticism at all. However, she did not leave me in the dark either. Rather, I would like to suggest that *Borderlands: La Frontera* not only represents a counter-hegemonic subject of identity, but also a profound and rigorous mestiza methodology. Anzaldúa’s text does not simply contain alternative knowledges, but also teaches the white subject how to learn to listen to women of colour’s criticisms. My encounter with *Borderlands: La Frontera* led me to unwillingly break the silence about my dependence on whiteness. So, I end the chapter trying to respond to Anzaldúa’s criticism directly.

My experience of *Borderlands: La Frontera* reminded me of the materiality that exceeds my vision, and the need to dare to explore what motivates me to forget my responsibility to the other in the first place. Anzaldúa disturbed my construct of home, and provoked me to let go the image I held of myself. Perhaps most importantly, she reminded me that sometimes the stories I tell are just fiction.

This thesis project reflects my journey of becoming aware of the darker and more elusive ways I use feminism to reinforce the authority of my criticism over the writing of others. This is not to infer that my experience reflects the motives and aims of feminism as a whole. Rather, it is my hope that as a piece of life writing, this project reflects my
challenges of living relationally and accounting for my whiteness as a white woman feminist.

1 The authority of criticism over relational women’s life writing is a prominent theme discussed throughout this project.

2 This bears a remarkable resemblance to Hélène Cixous’ theory of writing the body. See Cixous, Rootprints, 56.

3 See Butler, “Giving an Account,” 22.

4 Judith Butler suggests an intrinsic link between vulnerability and agency. See Butler, Precarious Life, 23-26, 49.


6 See Gilmore, “The Mark of Autobiography,” 4; Anderson, Autobiography, 60-61, 87-89; Miller, Subject to Change 4-5; Miller, Enough 5-6.

7 Barad, Meeting the Universe Halfway, 139.

8 Ibid.

9 Haraway, Modest Witness 24, 32, 116; Barad, Meeting the Universe Halfway 137-139.


11 Ibid., 584.

12 I believe what I mean is an “other” to myself.

13 Cixous, Rootprints 56-60; Cixous, “The Laugh of Medusa,” 880; Anderson, Autobiography, 94; Smith, Poetics 14, 49; Miller, Subject to Change 4; Miller, Enough 5-6.

14 See also Cixous theory of bisexuality. Cixous Newly Born Woman, 69.

15 The problematic implications of making this statement as an unmarked white subject with relative privilege are explored throughout this project.


17 Please refer to Miller, Subject to Change, 5-6; Miller, Enough, 6; Cavarero, Relating Narratives, 83-88.

18 Cavarero, Relating Narratives, 43, 83-88.

19 Miller, Subject to Change 5-6.


Or so I thought.

In theory.


While I believed so at the time, I recognize now this is not entirely accurate. On the contrary, I have found myself to be quite reluctant to recognize others’ criticism as feminist criticism when it differs (or contradicts) my own. I explore the problem of defensiveness in white feminist criticism in Chapter 2 and 3.


Clare Hemmings has been critical of feminism’s tendency to represent itself through progress narratives very similar to this one. See Hemmings, “Why Stories Matter,” 31-58.


Spivak, *Can the Subaltern Speak?*, 90.

In some ways, I believe the way white feminism has embraced Spivak for asking this question somewhat ironically answers her question as well.


Ahmed also explores the way the promise of happiness produces a silence in feminism. See Ahmed, *Promise of Happiness*, 21-49.


In hindsight I would suggest that this perhaps infers I liked feminism because it made me feel as though I was more than just a woman—and so in some ways perhaps I felt I possessed knowledge over other (non-feminist) women as well.

By “other” I am referring to the experience of feeling other to myself, and not the becoming the other woman of colour.

(Re)positioning my experience at the centre of Anzaldúa’s text is problematic and requires further examination. I explore the implications of reinforcing my white privilege by making my experience the centre of my reflection on *Borderlands/La Frontera* in the Conclusion.

Anzaldúa is critical of white feminists who appropriate parts of her borderland theory that suit their own interests, yet fail to address Anzaldúa’s criticisms against white feminism as well. See Anzaldúa’s, *Borderlands*, 271-2.
Chapter One:
The Problem of Representing Material Feminisms in Women’s Life Writing

As a life writer myself, I felt it necessary to discuss the potential of the relational subject in reflexive and experimental women’s life writing. I wanted to demonstrate the way these types of women’s life writing destabilized hegemonic representations of the female subject dominant in modern society. I wanted to do for these other women’s life writing what feminist criticism had done for me. I wanted to argue for the legitimacy and relevance of these other women’s life writing. I wanted to demonstrate their subversive potential and show how the material experiences of these other women illustrated an alternative to dominant representations of female embodiment. I felt that feminist criticism made room for me to reflect, write and speak about my own experiences in ways which were otherwise silenced by hegemonic representations dominant in modern society. I wanted to share this with other women. I now wanted not only for my life writing to be taken seriously, but I also wanted to become a feminist critic myself so I could argue for the importance of reflexive and experimental women’s life writing as a whole. I wanted to do something for others. As a feminist I thought I should not only life write, but that I should also produce criticism. As a woman I felt it was my duty to help.

I was not alone. There is a large body of feminist criticism concerned with the subversive potential of relational women’s life writing. These feminists’ criticisms have worked to create a space for women’s life writing where it can be recognized as a source of alternative knowledges. Whereas the female subject has been historically muted and
rendered passive and weak in narrative, feminist criticism sought to explore the ways the
*relational* female subject in women’s life writing represented a counter-hegemonic
identity.¹ In doing so, criticism written by these feminists effectively began to “change
the subject”² about women’s life writing and challenge dominant representations of the
female subject in narrative.³ For example, Nancy Miller suggests feminist criticism must
reclaim women’s space and identity by recognizing the female plot within self-narrative
*as a site of resistance* to the male gaze, rather than a recipient of it. She suggests that
feminist criticism must work to change the subject about women’s life writing from
discussions about its capacity to represent female embodiment, to the subversive potential
of the embodied female subject instead.⁴

However, rather than argue for the authenticity of women’s experience, relational
feminist criticism of women’s life writing illustrates the ways hegemonic representations
of identity are subverted by female embodiment. These feminists use women’s life
writing to demonstrate how the feminine subject was not inept or lacking because her
experiences exceeded representation. Rather, on the contrary, these feminists maintained
that the fluidity, plurality and incompleteness of female embodiment represented her
resistance to hegemonic categories of identity.

Of particular interest to me was women’s life writing that is reflexive and
experimental, because of its tendency to disrupt the authority of narrative. Such types of
women’s life writing reflect more than women’s experience per se, but also resonate with
material influences and effects which shape and affect their experience as well. The
narrative in these types of women’s life writing does not reinforce the subject’s authority
over places, things and others, but is grounded in the materiality of the location of the
subject’s experience. Rather than reflecting an idealized autonomous, whole subject, these types of women’s life writing highlight the relationality of the subject’s experience. Recognizing the relationality of the subject diffuses the authority of the subject, as the subject comes to realize their interdependence upon the other—the other who shapes the self. This complicates hegemonic boundaries separating self/other, male/female, and illuminates the agency of others, especially in narratives about the self. By recognizing the relationality in women’s life writing, the embodied subject is no longer a reproducer of dominant narrative, but rather expresses a plurality of narrative identities that contradict traditional representations of the female body. So, whereas women have historically appeared as the object of a masculine subject, reflecting and reinforcing the masculine subject’s observations of the material world, instead such feminist criticism illuminated how the incompleteness, plurality and fluidity of the female subject destabilized masculine knowledge and disrupted the authority of narrative as a whole.

The reflexivity of women’s life writing reflected traces of the influences and effects of material relationships on female embodiment, rather than the subject’s authority over the material. The experiential character of such women’s life writing subverted dominant representations of singular meanings and truths. There is also an experimental element to these types of women’s life writing that meant her self-narrative always contained more than she intentionally wrote and so in some ways exceeded her knowledge of self. The ambiguity of the female subject—the indeterminable slipperiness of the meaning of her material experiences—resisted representations. In this way,
relational criticisms of women’s life writing contend that women’s life writing has the potential to represent a counter-hegemonic discourse.

According to relational feminist criticism of women’s life writing, my life writing had the potential to disrupt hegemonic representations of meaning and identity. This gave me confidence. However, as a feminist I felt it was now also necessary to illustrate the ways others’ life writing did this as well. This gave me (and my work) greater purpose. So, I began reading other women’s life writing with the aim of representing their potential as a counter-hegemonic discourse and site of alternative knowledge. I was no longer simply reflecting on the way these others shaped my experiences, but rather I was producing criticism. I began to research and analyze these other women’s life writing and work heavily with feminist theory to better represent women and other marginalized groups, just as relational feminist criticism had done for me. I wanted to make a case for other women’s life writing, and not just my own. Yet, I also knew it was problematic to use my life writing as a standard to measure the life writing of others, so I relied heavily on feminist theory and methodology to make my position as feminist critic as transparent as possible.

One piece of women’s life writing that had always struck me as radical and innovative was Virginia Woolf’s *Moments of Being*. In *Moments of Being*, Woolf reflects on her experiences of growing up as a (white) woman during the late Victorian era. She explores the tensions between Victorian representations of the female body with her own experiences as an embodied female subject. Yet, Woolf does not present her embodiment concretely, nor does she represent her experience beyond Victorian representation per se, but rather her reflections contain traces of affective material.
relationships—moments which found their way into her consciousness and resound (somewhat mysteriously) through her body as she reflects on her experiences of the past, at the present moment of writing. So, Virginia Woolf’s life writing does not represent her existence as an autonomous whole individual, but rather reflects a relational subjectivity that is shaped in and through material relationships. Or at least, this is what I felt and wanted so desperately to argue— not only for myself, but for her as well.11

My recent work with material feminisms12 could be put to good work here, I remember thinking. My affinity towards material feminisms led me to identify and introduce myself as a material feminist. Usually not one to concede to categories, I felt the way material feminisms re-figured connections between material and immaterial “things” challenges the parameters of categories and classifications themselves. So, in referring to myself as a “material feminist” I felt secure in knowing that I was not in fact tying myself to one identity, but the possibility of plural identities. Material feminisms, I felt, could be worked into Moments of Being to establish Woolf as a relational subject and demonstrate the ways her life writing subverted hegemonic representations of identity. Material feminisms have a long history of deconstructing representations of autonomous, whole individuals and illustrating the relationality of the subject. That is, they have illuminated the ways incomplete identities are shaped in and through material relationships and not from mastery and/or control (knowledge) over them. Material feminisms allow us to illuminate the “potential” in the past—to locate the presence of the future at present without confining its existence to one singular vision or manifestation of what this future should be.13
It seemed apparent to me that Woolf’s *Moments of Being* was an expression of material feminism in itself as it was indeed a collection of reflections that contained traces of materiality or influences of material relationships without representing them concretely as something. So, to represent the subversive potential of the subject in *Moments of Being* I would use material feminist theory to represent Woolf as the relational subject and illustrate the ways her writing destabilized hegemonic representations of identity by contradicting the authority of narrative over the material world. I’d then work this into other feminist criticism of women’s life writing and work with them to better portray Woolf’s *Moments of Being* as a representation of counter-hegemonic discourse. However, I soon discovered discrepancies between my material feminist analysis of women’s life writing and other feminists’ work on Woolf. I began with the intention of working with Sidonie Smith’s criticism of Woolf, but I soon realized that whereas I argued for the potential of the subject *Moments of Being*, Smith contended that Woolf’s life writing reinforced rather than disrupted hegemonic representations of identity. I found this at once frustrating and confusing because, having grown familiar with Smith’s and other feminists’ criticism of women’s life writing, it seemed to me as though we shared a single position on the importance of relational materiality in women’s life writing. Yet, here I was illuminating the relationality of the subject in *Moments of Being*, while Smith criticized Woolf for the lack of materiality in her life writing. What made this conflict even more intriguing was that both Smith and I were arguing for the importance of materiality in women’s life writing, and yet as the difference between our analyses disclose, our concept of materiality – or what materiality in women’s life writing should be - differed.
Yet, further analysis of the difference between Smith’s criticism and my analysis render the differences between our conceptions of materiality (what counts as the material) unclear. Smith opts to suggest that only the most grotesque and marginal bodies may effectively subvert hegemonic representations of the female body, where I felt that the fluidity, plurality and incompleteness of the subject in *Moments of Being* represented a body that was in fact monstrous in that it disrupted the linear progression of time in narrative. Whereas Smith contends that Woolf fails to mark the specificity of her material experience and does not account for her privilege as a white middle class woman, my material feminist analysis suggests that the potential of the subject is located in material relationships that are specific and particular. However, I believe both of our respective analyses allude to a much larger problem of bringing material feminisms to women’s life writing. While the relational subject disrupts narrative authority and challenges hegemonic representations of identity, what happens when we as feminist critics try to represent the subversive potential of other women’s life writing, without reflecting on the ways these other women’s experiences subvert the knowledge we have of our own?

Does demonstrating the relationality of the relational subject risk replacing representations of the female body with a new dominant ideal of what female experience should be, even if it is fundamentally relational? Whereas at first my intention was to expand on feminist criticisms of women’s life writing with my own material feminist analysis of Woolf’s *Moments of Being*, instead I will contrast Smith’s and my arguments in hopes of articulating the larger problem of representing material feminisms in women’s life writing. My purpose is not to prove Smith wrong, or demonstrate the
potential of material feminist criticism to improve feminist criticisms of women’s life writing. On the contrary, while material feminist criticism strives to contrast dualist representations of materiality that reinforce hegemonic authority, I believe that in demonstrating the potential of the relational subject in Woolf’s life writing, my analysis inadvertently suggests the authority of my criticism over women’s life writing. What is the difference, I wonder, between using material feminist criticism to represent the potential of women’s life writing, and/or reflecting on how material feminisms in women’s life writing challenge my understanding of feminism? While this chapter is unable to answer this question, it is my hope that exploring the differences between Smith’s and my analyses may open up much needed discussion that can more adequately and intentionally explore the problem of representing material feminisms in women’s life writing.

The Missing Woolf in Sidonie Smith’s “Identity’s Body”

Sidonie Smith suggests that women’s life writing has the potential to disrupt hegemonic authority by destabilizing representations of the singular, autonomous subject dominant in modern discourse. Smith contends that women’s life writing that expresses the complexity of embodied experiences, especially the life writing of marginalized others, challenges existing representations that have traditionally relegated these others to the margin. She contends that women’s position on the periphery represents their potential to subvert the authority of dominant representations, rather than reflect a position of inferiority and weakness. According to Smith, the strength of women’s life
writing stems from its deviation from dominant representations of the female body. These types of life writing represent tensions between experiences and discursive representations of the female body, work to deconstruct received representations by highlighting the complexity and plurality of identity. Therefore, according to Smith, in order for women’s life writing to represent a counter-hegemonic discourse, it must not only reflect tensions between representation and embodied experience, but more importantly must subvert the authority of discourse over embodied experience as well.

It is in the latter category that Smith contends the life writing of Virginia Woolf fails. In “Identity’s Body,” Sidonie Smith contrasts Virginia Woolf’s *Moments of Being* and Cherrie Moraga’s *Loving in the War Years* to discuss the potential and limitations of women’s life writing as a counter-hegemonic discourse. Smith argues that despite illuminating the tensions between embodied experience and dominant representations of identity, Woolf’s life writing fails to subvert the authority of narrative over the material body. On the contrary, Smith asserts that Woolf’s *Moments of Being* represents the experiences of a disembodied subject whose self-narrative reflects the authority of narrative over the material world and reinforces dominant representations of women in discourse.

According to Smith, while Woolf’s life writing illustrates the tensions between embodied experience and dominant representations of the female body, Woolf uses *Moments of Being* to write herself out of the body, as opposed to reclaiming the body from dominant representation. Smith suggests that Woolf assumes a disembodied position throughout *Moments of Being*, which enables Woolf to make seemingly objective observations from a position that is unmarked. As a disembodied subject,
Woolf’s life writing mimics the masculine gaze and reinforces the authority of narrative over the material world, including the female body. For example, Smith contends Woolf’s recognition of seeing herself as an other in the Victorian representation provokes her to dissociate herself from body in order to re-establish her presence as a self, thus occupying the site of the male gaze. Smith explains:

As the “I” who looks at the body becomes the observer, the body the observed, that “I” assumes the place of the male subject. Looking at the mirror, the young Virginia gazes at her body as men will later do. Thus, the act of looking in the mirror implicates her in the very practice that she will later so vigorously abjure, the experience of her stepbrother’s creation of her as the object of the public gaze, as a woman in the heterosexual economy…

Smith argues that Woolf reproduces the masculine gaze by re-objectifying her body in the mirror. Upon seeing her reflection, Woolf reflects, “I must have been ashamed or afraid of my own body.” Smith argues that Woolf’s reflection represents the disembodiment of her experience. Woolf seeing herself as other in the mirror reflects the separation of her mind from her body, as she becomes the subject who writes over her body as object, rather than representing the relationality of the subject. Smith suggests that since Woolf’s life writing re-objectifies rather than reclaims her body, *Moments of Being* reinforces representations of the whole, stable and autonomous subject. In reinforcing the authority of representations, Woolf’s life writing writes over the plurality of embodied experience. The material in Woolf appears to reflect her observations. In this way, Smith concludes that Woolf’s life writing fails to effectively contradict representations of the female body in Victorian society because the absence of the materiality of the subject in her writing works to reinforce rather than disrupt the authority of narrative.
Smith also suggests that the lack of materiality in *Moments of Being* reflects Woolf’s isolation and expresses her yearning for the reunion between mind and body—Woolf’s desire to return to the embodied experience(s) of her past before the intrusion of Victorian sensibility. For example, in *Moments of Being* Woolf writes: “the impression of the waves and the acorn on the blind; the feeling, as I describe it sometimes to myself, of lying in a grape and seeing through a film of semi-transparent yellow—it was due partly to the many months we spent in London.” Smith argues that the contrast between Woolf’s past experiences of embodiment and her present self reveals her desire to reconnect with her body at present, but also reveals the way Woolf’s position (or rather lack of position) further removes her from her embodiment. Smith concludes that the subject of Woolf’s life writing is not the complexity of embodied experience, but rather, the text reflects her desire and/or yearning for a return to a more embodied and relational experience.

Smith maintains that Woolf remains confined in the image of her own reflection, cut off from the material world beyond her existence at present. While Woolf’s earlier sense of selfhood expresses a sense of “fluidity, of openness to the multiplicity of sensations” that are “always permeable” and reflects a “pre-Oedipal subjectivity,” Woolf’s presence remains cut off from the experience—the feeling of embodiment existing now only as a distant memory that is devoid of any sense of materiality in light of Woolf’s disembodied presence at present. Smith writes, “Woolf’s narrative reveals a nostalgia for the body before cultural construction of identity” which “intrudes and partitions her off in identity’s body. To escape the grotesque body, she imagines herself a disembodied spirit, the transparent eyeball.” Similar to the way Woolf’s recognition of
herself as other symbolized her disembodiment (the separation of mind and body), Smith suggests that Woolf’s memories of her embodied self represent the distance between her experience and the material world. As the disembodied subject, Woolf personifies a nameless, formless figure caught between two worlds (past and present), and is left yearning for a body to call her own. This figure of Woolf emerges as homeless and ghostly. Woolf’s presence haunts the memories in her text, lurking ominously behind the portraits of others she paints, and the sketches of her past she creates, similar to the way she surveyed the reflection of her body in the mirror. In this way, Smith argues that Woolf’s memories of (grape) embodiment reflect her displacement as the female subject at present.

While the disembodied presence of Woolf reflects her displacement, Smith also suggests that Woolf’s life writing confines the material world to her image. Consequently, the material appears to have no further existence beyond Woolf’s recollection. Smith writes, “… the elevation of the disembodied eyeball also supports the very baseness of the body, the very repression of the female body that anchors the bourgeois subject and the practices of traditional autobiography.” Smith is concerned with the authority of Woolf’s disembodied presence over the material world. In short, Woolf’s presence in Moments of Being lacks position. As the “transparent eyeball,” Woolf’s presence pervades and shapes the material world in her image, yet the location of her presence is elusive and impossible to determine. Smith suggests that this removes Woolf from her observations, and Woolf’s descriptions not only represent her experiences of the material world, but also displace the material world by replacing it with her experiences of it. Smith concludes that Woolf’s writing pursues a “narrative
anonymity” that “through its contradictions, sustains the troubled relationship between autobiography and the female body.” Since Woolf reflects the material world in her own image, her life writing not only fails to express the complexity of embodied experience, it risks universalizing the female subject yet again. Woolf is free to observe and describe, and yet as the “transparent eyeball” she appears to exist separately from these observations and descriptions. The implication is that Woolf’s observations and descriptions appear to represent places, things and others, rather than her experience(s) with and of them. In this way, Smith suggests that Woolf remains trapped in her reflections of the material world, which confine her to the limits of her own image. On the other hand, the material world is confined to the boundaries of her recognition and seemingly exists without any past existence beyond her recollection.

In this way, Smith concludes that *Moments of Being* fails to represent a counter-hegemonic discourse. As the representation of a disembodied subject, Woolf’s life writing lacks materiality. Rather, Smith argues that Woolf’s text *writes her out of her body*, affording her the privilege to represent her life, without being subjected to the material conditions of embodiment. She contends that Woolf’s life writing reproduces the masculine gaze, capturing the material world in her reflections, and ultimately severing her from the materiality of experience.

**The Material in Virginia Woolf’s *Moments of Being***

However, what if instead of revealing an absence of materiality in *Moments of Being*, I used material feminist criticism to illuminate the materiality in Woolf’s life
writing instead? How might incorporating theories of material feminism into Smith’s reading of Moments of Being locate the missing subject in Woolf’s life writing? In the following section I will use material feminisms to locate the materiality in Virginia Woolf’s life writing and explore her life writings potential to represent a counter-hegemonic discourse. By refiguring Woolf as a relational subject, I hope to illustrate how her life writing is shaped and affected in and through material relationships, rather than describing the material world from a disembodied position “above.” I will then explore the ways Woolf as the relational subject contradicts hegemonic representations of identity that depict the individual as whole, autonomous subject.

How does the relational subject subvert hegemonic representations of identity? Hélène Cixous contends that representations of the feminine subject as passive, weak and mute depend on the stability of the dualism between activity and passivity. The active subject is traditionally represented as masculine, and the feminine is defined by her lack of agency and associated with passivity. However, Cixous’ theory of bisexuality places the male and female within one body, which contradicts the opposition between activity and passivity. Cixous’ theory of bisexuality refigures “male” and “female” subjects as relational in that a bisexual identity suggests that the male or female subject is shaped in and through masculinity’s and femininity’s material relationships with each other. The notion of the autonomous, whole masculine subject who possesses the agency to shape, change and control the material world is disturbed; by containing the active and passive in one body, the male / female subject is permeable and subject to be shaped and affected by the material world as well. Thus, agency depends on the relationality of material relationships rather than the subject’s control over material places, things and others.
this way, Cixous’ theory of bisexuality can be used to demonstrate the subversive potential of the relational subject to disrupt hegemonic representations of identity.

If we return to the moment where Woolf finds herself disturbed by her own reflection in *Moments of Being*, but refigure Woolf as a relational subject, a strong argument can be made that Woolf’s reflection shatters the illusion of a whole and autonomous self, rather than reinforcing it. Whereas Smith suggested that Woolf’s reflection in the mirror represented the separation of her mind from body, I will work with Cixous’ theory of bisexuality to demonstrate the ways Woolf as the relational subject represents a material embodiment that complicates hegemonic representations of identity.

In *The Newly Born Woman*, Cixous illustrates how the relationality of women’s life writing deconstructs dominant representations of the female subject as passive, weak and mute. She asks:

> Is that me, a phantom doll, the cause of sufferings and wars, the pretext, “because of her beautiful eyes,” for what men do, says Freud, for their divine illusions, their conquests, their favor? Not for the sake of “me” of course. But for my “eyes,” so that I will look at you, so that he will be looked at, so that he will see himself seen as he wants to be. Or as he fears he is not.  

Cixous recognizes her body as both an object of the male gaze and as existing beyond his field of view as well. Whereas Smith suggested that Woolf reproduced the masculine gaze by objectifying her body in her reflection in the mirror, Cixous’ reflection represents her existence as a material body beyond representations of her self as a female subject. Her question, “is that me, a phantom doll,” is rhetorical, reflecting her awareness of the difference between herself and the image he sees. Her recognition of his misrecognition affords her the space to articulate a response that exceeds the reflection of his desire.
Similarly, her refusal to be the woman of his desire represents her rejection of representations of the female body dominant in modern western history.\(^{36}\)

While the female subject disrupts his authority, she continues to exist as a body that touches and/or affects him as well. Despite the seeming continuity of his narrative, their experiences are neither in sync, nor the same. Her body does not represent lack, but excess. The difference between their experiences is not the refutation of one narrative and the affirmation of the other, but is rather, a reminder of the situatedness of experience as a whole.\(^{37}\) The boundary between the active subject (him) and passive object (her) suddenly becomes unclear. Just as Cixous’ theory of bisexuality complicates the oppositional difference between masculine and feminine identities, the identity of the subject and object in this example is ambiguous. Is it the masculine “I” who casts his shadow over her existence,\(^{38}\) or on the contrary is it he who has become trapped in his own image? The “other” subject writes, “not for the sake of ‘me’ of course. But for my ‘eyes’, so that I will look at you, so that he will be looked at, so that he will see himself seen as he wants to be. Or as he fears he is not.”\(^{39}\) Her response exceeds his reflection, complicating the origins of his experience as the integrity of his recollection comes into question. “Was it the male who sought to capture her in his gaze?” Or is it she with “the ever so penetrating eyes”\(^{40}\) who consumes him in hers? While the slippage between their experience(s) makes it difficult to determine who consumes whom, it is precisely because neither he nor she exists separately and distinctly before the other that both he and she simultaneously exist beyond each of their experiences of the other. The agency of the relational subject, then, depends on their capacity to affect and be affected by the other; in order to have an effect, subjects must be vulnerable, not impenetrable.\(^{41}\)
While her experience does not reflect his image of her completely, neither does he remain caught by her image of him; their experiences at present come to be drawn in and through their encounter with each other. However, Cixous flips the position of male as subject with the female’s position as object temporarily to locate the presence of female desire. She explains that, “…‘because of her beautiful eyes’… Not for me ‘me’ of course. But for my ‘eyes’, so that I will look at you, so that he will be looked at, so that he will see himself seen as he wants to be. Or as he fears he is not.”

In reversing male/female subject positions, Cixous reveals the male subject’s desire to be the object of the female’s gaze. He desires her recognition. For it is her, not him, who as other can confirm and reaffirm the image he has of himself. Yet, recognizing the relationality of the subject allows subjects to not solely depend on recognition for identity. Rather, the relational subject depends on the materiality of the other to feel more of itself—to feel beyond its material existence as an individual self rather than remain trapped by its own knowledge.

So, I think it is important to highlight how the material embodiment of the female subject disembodies her from the image of the male gaze (and/or vice versa) and not her own body as a relational subject herself. Or, more specifically, how her disembodiment from his representation does not result in the separation of her mind from body—not completely. On the contrary, her temporary disembodiment removes her from his image of her body and allows her to write from the position of her body, which, though a part of his gaze, remains to exist apart from him as well. This is important because despite distancing herself from his gaze, she continues to exceed his representation, while still having an effect on his image of her, as well. He acts not for her, but for the image he
has of her: “...(W)hat men do, says Freud, for their divine illusions, their conquests, their favor? Not for the sake of ‘me’ of course. But for my ‘eyes...’” But this image, while not representing her experience of him per se, still represents his experience of her as something beyond his own image. She is a part of his image of her; he is moved by the materiality of her presence even though the image he constructs of her (the stories he writes) fails to represent her entirely, nor represent her own desire. The difference between their experiences is not oppositional, but rather relational. As relational subjects there is not one narrative here, but rather the existence of two difference narratives suggests the potential of many multi-vocal narratives within one story simultaneously.

The life writing of the relational subject does not reflect his/her experience as a disembodied presence, but rather represents a more complex and contradictory experience of embodied subjectivity. While the identity of the relational subject remains ambiguous, it emerges in and through the materiality of embodied experience. Similarly, I would like to suggest that Woolf’s body, while ambiguous and at times perhaps fleeting, does not represent her disembodiment, but rather a more fluid, plural and complex material embodiment. Rather than reflect the image of the “transparent eyeball,” I believe Woolf’s life writing symbolizes the taking back of her eyeball. Thus, Woolf remains an embodied subject, but her embodiment is not confined to the image of the female body in Victorian society. So, whereas Smith suggested that the ambiguity of the subject in Woolf’s life writing permits Woolf to hold an omniscient presence in Moments of Being, I suggest that refiguring Woolf as the relational subject illuminates how Woolf not only affects and shapes the identity and meaning of the material, but also how Woolf is shaped and affected by material presences other than her own in her life writing.
For example, Smith suggests Woolf’s dissociation from her reflection in the mirror represented the objectification of her body, and subsequent disembodiment: “(A)s the “I” who looks at the body becomes the observer, the body the observed, that “I” assumes the place of the male subject”. Here, Smith claims that the separation of mind and body leads Woolf to re-objectify her body; Woolf’s body becomes other—an object of her own gaze. Consequently, Woolf’s life writing represents the impenetrability of her own image as she appears to mimic a hegemonic masculine subjectivity. However, refiguring Woolf as the relational subject illuminates both her agency (activity) and her vulnerability (passivity), challenging hegemonic representations of identity as whole and complete. While she is disturbed the image in the mirror, her life writing illuminates the presence of something more than what she sees in the reflection. Just as Cixous’ relational subject questions the recognition in her male counterpart’s eyes (“Is that me, a phantom doll, the cause of sufferings and wars, the pretext”), Woolf’s initial feelings of shame and fear lend themselves to a sense of critical dissonance as she comes to question the capacity for narrative to represent the complexity of material relationships. Woolf asks, “(w)hy is it so difficult to give any account of the person to whom things happen. The person is evidently immensely complicated… In spite of all this, people write what they call “lives” of other people; that is they collect a number of events, and leave the person to whom it happened unknown.” Woolf is reflecting on the limits of representation and self-narrative. She suggests that descriptions of the material world reveal more about the author than the material things he/she (pretends) to write about. In doing so, Woolf not only highlights the limitations of autobiographical writing, but representation as a whole. I believe Woolf’s reflection destabilizes rather than reinforces
the authority of representation because it calls attention to the limits of storytelling. Yet, the implications her reflection resonate beyond the capacity of narrative and interrogates the representation of knowledge as complete as well.

For example, in *Moments of Being*, Woolf discusses the phantasmal reflection in the mirror that haunts her experience. She writes:

> Let me add a dream; for it may refer to the incident of the looking-glass. I dreamt that I was looking in a glass when a horrible face—the face of an animal—suddenly showed over my shoulder. I cannot be sure if this was a dream, or if it happened. Was I looking in the glass one day when something in the background moved, and seemed to me alive? I cannot be sure. But I have always remembered the other face in the glass, whether it was a dream or a fact, and that it frightened me.  

Woolf reflects on the impossibility of fully knowing and on the incompleteness of identity. Who is she? Can she know the truth of what happens? Did she feel the presence of something *other* in the reflection? Was there something *more* there? If her memory of the past remains incomplete, then how can she ever know what is happening at present? While these feelings of uncertainty threaten her knowledge at present, they also free her from the confines of the past. The presence of something other moves her beyond the knowledge she possesses. Yet, Smith suggests that Woolf’s reflection confines her to the image in the mirror. For Smith, Woolf’s encounter in the mirror reflects, “…the feeling of horror she recalls from her knowledge, however conscious or unconscious, of that specular self that encloses her in identity’s body.”

Smith claims that Woolf’s self-recognition represents the abjection of her body, and signifies her disembodiment as the “transparent eyeball.” However, I believe this is not so much Woolf’s abjection of her body, as it is perhaps her reflection on the difficulty of
acknowledging the indeterminacy of identity, especially as a woman socialized and living in Victorian society.

I have already suggested that Woolf’s life writing represents the taking back of her body, rather than her dissonance with it. Furthermore, I believe Woolf’s reflections on the limits of self-knowledge ground her experience, rather than afford her the freedom of omniscience. Woolf’s life writing reflects her experience of material relationships as a relational subject, rather than resembling the objective observations of a transparent eyeball. Earlier I reflected on how Smith’s analogy of Woolf’s disembodied presence as a transparent eyeball reminded me of Donna Haraway’s analogy of the “god trick.” In referring to Woolf as a “transparent eyeball” that narrated her life writing from a disembodied presence from an indeterminable location above and beyond, Woolf performed a “god trick” in *Moments of Being*. However, I would like to suggest that an argument may be made using material feminism that suggests Woolf’s reflections of the limits of her self-knowledge resemble Haraway’s theory of situated knowledges.

Situated knowledge grounds knowledge in experience, challenging the dominant notions of objectivity, which alter traditional representations of identity by refiguring agency. Objectivity is inherently subjective, always. In this way, Haraway’s theory of situated knowledge accounts for the ways one’s knowledge is shaped by location. It highlights the subjectivity of objectivity, and contextualizes knowledge. Knowledge is reshaped as fluid and dynamic—always changing in and through experience(s).53 In reflecting on the limits of narrative to represent the ambiguity of materiality, and the incompleteness of knowledge, I believe Woolf’s reflections represent the situatedness of her knowledge, and not the ubiquity of her experience as transparent eyeball.
Woolf’s reflections open her to experiences beyond the limitations of knowledge as an individual subject. Her encounter with the phantasm reminds her of the incompleteness of her memories of the past, and illuminates the uncertainty of knowing more generally. The animal-other in her reflection is a reminder of something (other) within herself. There remains always something other beyond her knowledge of experience; something beyond her experience at present, yet that disturbs her nonetheless to envision a world that exceeds her presence in it. The question is not whether or not the animal-other in the mirror is real, but, rather, how does it disturb Woolf’s sense of the real? Woolf’s reflection shatters the illusion of the unified, complete and autonomous self because it illuminates the existence of something other than the dominant ideal, rather than reflecting her own image. The apparent horror that unfolds is more in response to her newfound uncertainty, than a reflection of the shame she feels over her body. The disturbing image in the mirror is powerful because of its potential to transform the shame Woolf feels towards her body-as-other, into desire.

The material world is not a passive object in Woolf’s life writing, but rather an active agent that shapes and affects the experiences in her life writing. For example, Woolf’s reflections of the material world depict its agency and affect, not her sense of control over it. Thus the material world is felt inside of her like “the impression of the waves and the acorn on the blind”.54 Moments of Being does not attempt to represent material experience, but rather express the affective feelings of embodiment; feelings which are fragmented, contradictory, fleeting and ephemeral—but material in origin nonetheless. Furthermore, the affective experience of embodiment that Moments of Being attempts to express is the simultaneous recognition of something more than
Woolf’s experience as an individual self—it is to feel more of the world than she could ever possibly experience as a whole, autonomous self. Woolf’s memories of “lying in a grape” reflect her embodied experience in the material world, which she see, “through a film of semi-transparent yellow.” While her presence exceeds her memories of the past at present, her past experiences inform her experience of embodiment at present. Although Woolf imagines herself in the grape, she is unable to see the entirety of her experience; her experience in the grape does not represent the material world, but rather represents a glimpse of the material world in her experience(s) of it. Her experience is not ubiquitous. In this way, Woolf does not represent an omniscient presence, but rather her life writing illuminates the fragmented, yet fluid plurality of material existence which usurps the authority of narrative representation.

Smith contends that the birth of the “I” displaces Woolf from her embodiment (and marks the separation between her embodied experiences before self-recognition and her disembodiment that characterizes her life writing from that moment on after). She states, “…the contradictions of the boundless “I” are inescapable…. The elevation of the disembodied eyeball also supports the very baseness of the body, the very repression of the female body that anchors the bourgeois subject and the practices of traditional autobiography”.

Smith remains suspicious, if not critical, of the ghostly “eye” haunting Woolf’s life writing because it elevates Woolf above the material boundaries of embodiment, allowing her to exist elsewhere (and everywhere) without being subject to the material conditions. Thus, although the subject in Moments of Being is fragmented, fleeting and incomplete, Smith contends that Woolf’s observations threaten to appear as though they represent the material world in its entirety. In the absence of a marked
position, Woolf turns the material world into an object of her knowledge in her life writing.

Yet, it is also necessary to attend to the way in which Smith separates before from after. I will explain. Smith suggests that the birth of the “I” marks the end of Woolf’s unity with the material world; however, I believe that the problem does not begin with Woolf’s self-recognition, but rather lies in the way Smith privileges the past over the present. Smith suggests that Woolf reflects her existence as a disembodied presence who is unable to return to the moment before she recognized her image in the mirror. Smith writes of, “The time of the great, grape eyeball is the moment before the ‘I’ intrudes, before interpretation disrupts the sense of unity, that seamless exchange between the experiencing self and the experienced world…” 56 The moments which follow represent the death of the body; from that point on Woolf is confined to an immaterial existence displaced and devoid of materiality. In doing so it is almost as if Smith is suggesting that the body, like the past, has become something impossible to return to—that can only be returned to in death. It seems as though the only way for Woolf to reunite with her body is to give up her existence as a subject. But how can one return to such an earlier existence without bringing her memories and experiences with her? To do so would erase Woolf’s experiences up until her present. Woolf would have to forget that she existed beyond the moment before she recognized her existence beyond representation. In privileging the moment “before” self-recognition, Smith inadvertently suggests the erasure of the materiality of Woolf’s embodied experience(s) by replacing it with her own idea of what embodiment—the grotesque body—should be.
In contrast, my material feminist analysis of *Moments of Being* suggests that the materiality of Woolf’s life writing is located in moments of experience disrupting the cause-effect linearity of narrative. The relationality in her life writing disrupts the continuity of narrative to illuminate the presence of something *other* in the relational subject *before* her narrative begins. This diffuses the authority of narrative over the material, expressing a different sort of elusive materiality that exceeds representation and yet resonates in and through our experiences nonetheless. Perhaps somewhat ironically, the materiality in Woolf’s life writing lies in a resounding rhythm that cannot be seen, but only felt.

However, Smith’s criticism of *Moments of Being* relies on the presumption that life writing must express the specificity\(^57\) of material experience if it is to diffuse the authority of narrative and contradict hegemonic representations.\(^58\) She contends that women’s life writing must embrace the grotesqueness of the female body and explicitly challenge the marginalization of representation. For example, Smith argues that the life writing of Chicana lesbian feminist Cherríe Moraga contradicts and destabilizes representations of the female body dominant in hegemonic society, because her writing embraces the grotesqueness of embodiment and expresses its complexity through representing material experience in specificity. Smith concludes: “Moraga’s interrogation of identity politics through the theorizing of the very body’s flesh reveals how efficiently the specificities of the body have been erased though Woolf’s comfortably middle-class escape from embodiment. After all, Woolf never mentions the color of the skin that needs escaping.”\(^59\) According to Smith, Woolf’s life writing escapes the marginalization of the female body by relying on the privilege of her white
skin. Whereas Moraga is excluded from the category of woman, Woolf’s position in society allows her to pass easily in and between representations of women because despite the complexity of her experience(s), she looks like them. Similar to the way Smith contends that Woolf’s life writing represents materiality in her own image, failing to mark her position in Victorian society permits Woolf to re-universalize the female body in her own vision without consequence.

However, the question remains, does a material feminist reading of *Moments of Being* complicate Smith’s criticism of Woolf? While I have highlighted the ways the relational subject refigures the relationship between narrative and the material world to suggest a more complex and unstable theory of embodiment, I do not believe that the relationality in Woolf’s life writing represents the specificity of her experience. However, by disrupting the authority of narrative and re-locating knowledge in experience, the relationality in Woolf highlights the impossibility of representation and the incompleteness of experience. The question is not whether Woolf’s writing represents the grotesque body, but rather, does her writing represent the impossibility of representing any body?

The materiality of *Moments of Being* resonates through the embodied experience of Woolf and beyond the borders of her text. It is located in the ways she is touched by places, things and others—these disturbances echo throughout her life writing like mutations on a body. Woolf’s text does not represent the grotesqueness of the body, it represents the presence of something other grotesque in her body of text that threatens to disturb self-knowledge, not reflect it. While I do not mean to suggest the importance of Woolf over Moraga, nor minimize the significance of Moraga’s text, my concern here is
the position of Smith, or rather, the absence of Smith’s position in her critique of Woolf. Smith is critical of Woolf because Woolf’s life writing appears to remove her from the materiality of her observations; she argues that Woolf describes the experience of oppression as a female body, while at the same time fails to account for the ways her writing benefits from white supremacy as well. While I cannot comment on whether or not this is apparent in Woolf’s text, I think it brings up an important critique of feminist criticisms surrounding women’s life writing in general (or simply the authority of criticism over life writing as a whole). In criticizing Woolf for failing to account for her position in her text, the motivation of Smith’s argument remains unclear. However, in using a material feminist approach to highlight the relationality in Woolf’s life writing, my position in Woolf’s text also remains unclear. Both Smith’s and my arguments use Woolf’s experiences in *Moments of Being* to establish our positions and support our claims, yet oddly there remains hardly any account tracing the way Woolf’s life writing has disturbed our knowledge and shaped our positions. Smith is right in tracing the effects of an intangible presence lurking ominously throughout *Moments of Being*, except it is not Woolf. Rather, I would like to suggest the presence haunting *Moments of Being* belongs to the critic overshadowing her revelations of experience and making them into their own. I believe that the presence overshadowing Woolf’s text is not Woolf, but my own.

Secondly, Smith suggests that the feminist critic look to life writing similar to Moraga’s that reflects the experiences of bodies who are clearly marked as abject and not so privileged to pass freely between dominant representations and representations of their own. However, a similar problem remains. What measures are in place to ensure that
these other marginalized voices are heard? Does it again depend on the power of the feminist critic and their ability to recognize the importance of these other voices? Do these voices only become recognizable once they are identified by feminism as valid?

While much of feminism is dedicated to the support and validation of marginalized voices, the question remains: If we are disturbed by the presence of the other, then are we ready to listen to what they have to say?

1 The feminist criticisms of women’s life writing I am referring to are feminist criticisms that locate the subversive potential in the relationality of the subject of women’s life writing in particular. Please see Anderson, *Autobiography*, 60-61, 87-89; Gilmore, *The Mark of Autobiography*, 4-6; Miller, *Enough about Me*, 5-6; Miller, *Subject to Change*, 4-5; Smith, *A Poetics of Women's Autobiography*, 49.

2 Miller, *Subject to Change*, 4-5. Nancy Miller suggests feminist criticism must reclaim women’s space and identity by recognizing the female plot within self-narrative as a site of resistance to the male gaze, rather than a recipient of it. She suggests that feminist criticism must work to change the subject about women’s life writing from discussions about its capacity to represent female embodiment, to the subversive potential of the embodied female subject instead.

3 While women may appear in narrative, their role in constructing narratives is suppressed. Instead, they tend to appear in narrative only to reproduce the authority of narrative over the material world, of which they are a part. Consequently, feminists often suggest that the female body is both present and absent in discourse. For further discussion on the absence and presence of women in narrative see Smith, *Poetics* 14.

4 Miller, *Subject to Change*, 4-5.

5 This type of life writing expresses a subjective objectivity which resembles material feminist Donna Haraway’s theory of situated knowledges. See Haraway, “Situated Knowledges,” 575-599.

6 Cavarero, *Relating Narratives*, 43, 83-88. Adriana Cavarero deconstructs the presumed unity of narrative to suggest that all narratives are fragmented and contradictory. She argues that all texts are the site of many multiple, relating narratives running in and through each other to form the voice of the speaking subject. While narratives commonly tend to express a desire for unity, Cavarero maintains that the voice of one narrative resounds with discordance from the interaction within and between multiple and contradictory narratives of experience, rather than express a solidarity or symmetry between them. Similarly, Hélène Cixous’ theory of “writing the body” identifies writing as an embodied relational practice that is shaped in and through the experience of material relationships. See Cixous, *Rootprints*, 56. Judith Butler discusses the implications the relational subject has on the ethical production of knowledge. See Butler, “Giving an Account,” 22.

7 While my project deals specifically with women’s life writing, this is not to conclude that it is only women’s life writing that may be considered as relational. On the contrary, by recognizing the relationality of the subject in women’s life writing, I believe feminist criticisms suggest the potential for relationality in men, women and transgendered pieces of life writing. For further discussion on the role of gender, relationality and the way we understand identity in life writing see, Miller, “Representing Others: Gender and the Subjects of Autobiography,” 5-6,9.
This perhaps marks a dramatic change in not only the type of writing (or “criticism”) I produced, but also reflects the changes in how I understood my identity and position as a white woman feminist. In hindsight, I believe this reflects a prominent distance between myself and the other women’s writing who I had now come to study rather than reflect upon.

While critical of non-feminist representations of identity, feminism has a long history of being self-conscious about its authority in representing others, and has worked diligently to make itself more accountable for the universalization of the subject, in response to other’s criticisms against feminism’s universalizing tendencies. See Alcoff, “The Problem of Speaking for Others,” 7; Alcoff, “What Should White People DO?,” 8; Rich, “Notes Towards a Politics of Location,” 214; Rowe, “Locating Feminism’s Subject,” 71. The problem of locating white privilege in feminism is discussed further in Chapter Two of this thesis.

It is important to note that there is criticism of Woolf for in fact failing to mark and account for her white privilege and status as a middle class woman in Victorian society. See Smith, “Identity’s Body,” 288. I will discuss Smith’ analysis of Woolf as the disembodied subject later on in this chapter.

I remain unsure and undecided whether or not this is entirely true, or completely false, although experience suggests it is likely both; that I wanted to represent Woolf’s life writing as an important work because I saw parts of myself in it (or I felt it reflected and so legitimized parts in my own), and that I also believed her work had been grossly misrepresented or understated despite the large amount of positive criticism her work has received. I will work through this complex further at a later point in this chapter.

Material feminisms may be characterized as a shift from the bifurcation between theories of social constructivism and essentialism, towards a material relational framework of the material-discursive—a shift which traces the dynamic and complex relationships between and within the material and the discursive, to illuminate and suggest multiple and plural alternative(s) to counter modern hegemonic discourses. Discourse is no longer figured as a representation of the material world, nor are identities solely the effects of discourse; rather, the material-discursive is a dynamic expression of the ever changing inter-connections between material bodies and things, and the immaterial as well. Material feminisms work to reveal alternative, non-binary connections within the material-discursive, refiguring the meaning of connection itself. By demonstrating the inconsistent, plural and unstable qualities of non-human, human, material and immaterial entities, identity is re-conceptualized as inherently relational. Also, material feminisms tend to contest traditional representations of agency that define agency within a masculine context. In material feminism, agency is dependent on relationality which has significant ethical implications on objectivity and the production of knowledge.

For a more thorough discussion about potential and futurity, see Grosz, Becomings: Explorations in Time, Memory, and Futures, 15-28.

21 Ibid., 281.
22 Ibid., 276.
23 Woolf, Moments of Being, 68.
24 Ibid., 65.
26 Ibid., 288.
27 Ibid., 281.
28 It would appear to me here that Smith’s argument resembles a material feminist argument against the discursive technologies of representation which depict the subject as autonomous and separate from the material world. For example, in many ways Smith’s analogy of the “transparent eyeball” reminds me of Donna Haraway’s concept of the “god trick” which describes how subjective experience is often magically transformed in narrative appear as though it is objective and impartial. See Haraway, “Situated Knowledges,” 579-580.
30 This might seems somewhat odd given that I have also suggested Smith’s argument resembles (in some ways) a material feminist theory of identity as well. I explore this contradiction further in the last section of this chapter.
31 Clément and Cixous Newly Born Woman, 64.
32 Ibid., 84.
33 This argument becomes more nuanced if I ground Cixous’ bisexuality theory with Karen Barad’s theory of “intra-action.” The concept of intra-action highlights the relationship between relationality and agency in Cixous’ theory of bisexuality and the relational subject in Woolf’s life writing. Barad’s concept of intra-action illustrates the ways the material-discursive emerges through the complexity of embodied experience. She suggests all things, and non-things, human and non-human do not exist independently as separate things before their relation to each other. Intra-action is a concept that explains how, “relata do not preexist relations; rather, relata-within-phenomena emerge through specific intra-actions. Crucially then, intra-actions enact agential separability- the condition exteriority-within-phenomena.” Barad, Meeting the Universe Halfway, 139. Identity, though inter-connected and related to other entities, remains a process in constant state of becoming that remains perpetually incomplete. Intra-action illustrates how relationality between human and non-human and/or all “phenomena” precedes dualisms. The difference is subtle but significant. Recognizing that identity is relational suggests agency comes from relationships—relationships that are specific, particular and dynamic, never universal.

Since intra-actions disrupt the linear cause-effect progression of narrative, Barad’s theory suggests that the presence of something other is already a part of our experience--- an active agent in our description. Whereas traditionally narrative tends to describe the subject’s interactions with the material world as though subject and object are two different and distinct things separate from each other, Barad’s theory of intra-action illuminates their relationality and suggests the incompleteness of identity. Similar to the way Cixous’ theory of bisexual identity complicated the difference between male and female subjects, Barad’s theory of intra-action collapses the binary difference between subject and object. As subject, Woolf appears behind her observations; a part of what she sees and describes. Yet as object she remains part of something other—the presence of something more than what she knows or sees. As subject, she writes of
her experiences as she recalls them, re-telling her experiences from a position somewhat in the future, yet her recollection of experiences past simultaneously shapes and affects her experience at present; her narrative to reflect the complex intra-action between her past experiences and present.

34 Clément and Cixous *Newly Born Woman* 69.

35 Ibid.

36 See also Cixous, “The Laugh of the Medusa,” 880. Cixous’ theory of *Écriture féminine* suggests women’s writing expresses a feminine desire which contradicts the authority of the male subject. It is important to note that Cixous does not suggest feminine desire is outside or beyond logic and/or recognition, but rather that because feminine desire tends to resist logic and representation it may be located as an active presence in shaping and affecting identity, knowledge and experience. Thus *she* is a part of his experience before his knowledge of her presence in his. Feminine desire is not outside the logic of discourse; her desire subverts his knowledge about her identity. By writing one’s body, women may write their experiences back into discourse to challenge representations of the female subject which have historically been used to dictate, relegate and control the female body. For further reading on *Écriture féminine* or writing the body, see also Cixous, *Rootprints*, 56.

37 Here, one narrative is shaped and affected by the experience of the other’s narrative and yet neither narrative reflects the colonization of the other. This exemplifies the relationality in narrative and represents the way the relational subject in women’s life writing is shaped and affected in and through material relationships. See also, Cixous, *Rootprints*, 56-60; Cavarero, *Relating Narratives*, 43, 83-88; Butler, “Giving an Account,” 22.

38 Clément and Cixous *Newly Born Woman*, 67.

39 Ibid., 69.

40 Ibid.

41 Judith Butler highlights the relationality of identity by suggesting the body is both a private and public domain, thus the site of simultaneous possession and dispossession. Refiguring the body as a relational identity, Butler highlights the transformative potential of loss; agency is revealed as intrinsically tied to vulnerability. See Butler, *Precarious Life*, 23-26, 49; Butler, “Giving an Account,” 22.

42 Clément and Cixous *Newly Born Woman*, 69

43 Ibid.

44 See also Cavarero, *Relating Narratives*, 43, 83-88; Butler, “Giving an Account,” 22.


46 Ibid., 275-76.

47 I am drawing on what I believe to be Judith Butler’s suggestion that vulnerability is a form of agency. See Butler, *Precarious Life*, 23-26, 49. I prefer the terms vulnerability/agency to active(activity)/passive(passivity) because I feel they better reflect the affectivity of material relationships. I further discuss the ways in which affects shape the face of material relationships in Chapter 2.

48 Clément and Cixous *Newly Born Woman*, 69.

Haraway’s theory of situated knowledge re-figures the relationship between knowledge and power to express the relationality between knowledge and experience, rather than the power of knowledge over experience. Authority, power and agency over the material world limits rather than increases the subject’s capacity for knowledge; knowledge is experienced, not possessed. In this way, I believe the theory of situated knowledge suggests that the potential of the relational subject depends on an interdependent relationship with places, things and others, rather than their independence.

The word “specificity” provokes my interest here, and perhaps highlights the much larger problem of marking location and privilege. It is not so much that Woolf’s life writing reflects a more fluid and ephemeral theory of identity, as it is perhaps that Woolf apparently fails to account for the way her white privileges as a middle class woman in Victorian society afford her the opportunity to escape behind her rather abstract and unspecific theory of identity. However, is it possible for Woolf to mark and effectively represent her white privilege if her experience of white privilege exceeds Smith’s observation of privilege in *Moments of Being*? I explore the problem of feminist criticism haunting other women’s life writing in further detail in Chapter 2.
Chapter Two:

Critical Longings and Affective Belongings

In my previous chapter I unsettled the problem of representing material feminisms in women’s life writing. Whereas I intended to demonstrate the potential of the relational subject in *Moments of Being*, I soon realized that (despite my best efforts) my criticism was motivated by my own self-interest and worked to support my construct of the relational subject, rather than the relationality in Woolf’s life writing. I found this particularly disconcerting because of my positive feelings towards feminism. I felt that feminist criticisms of women’s life writing had helped to legitimize and validate my own life writing, and now I was ready to contribute and produce criticism that could recognize the potential of other women’s life writing. Furthermore, whereas I had thought that a material feminist approach would build on feminist criticisms of relational women’s life writing by complicating the relationship between hegemonic representations and material experiences of identity, my analysis of *Moments of Being* functioned to demonstrate the potential of my criticism to represent the material in Woolf’s life writing, rather than represent the potential of *Moments of Being* as a counter-hegemonic discourse. Ironically, while material feminism diffuses the authority of narrative over the material world by refiguring the relationship between the discursive and the material as the material-discursive,¹ and thus illuminates the relationality of the subject, in practice, my material feminist analysis reproduced the authority of my criticism (my narrative) over the material experiences of Woolf in *Moments of Being*.² In using material feminism to
represent the potential of the relational subject, I inadvertently replaced the material feminism in Woolf’s *Moment of Being*, with my own.³

Feminism has long been concerned with the problem of representing others.⁴ In conversation with postcolonial and critical race theory, feminists have been critical of the way women have been represented as *other*, only to appear as objects of knowledge rather than be recognized as active participants in knowledge production. In this way, feminism has worked tirelessly and diligently towards ethical theories and practices of knowledge production that recognize not only the labor and agency of those who have been traditionally as marginalized and othered, but perhaps even more importantly, the privileged subject’s dependence on the other for such knowledge as well.⁵ In addition, there remains a strong self-consciousness of feminism amongst feminists themselves. Since disproportionate distributions of privilege have reinforced unequal lines of power within and across feminisms, the problem of representing the *other*-subject persists in feminism today. In particular, non-white feminists have criticized white feminism for its universalizing the female subject and implication in reinforcing the marginalization of non-white feminists. For example, Chandra Talpade Mohanty has argued that “assumptions of privilege and ethnocentric universality… and inadequate self-consciousness about the effect of Western scholarship on the ‘third world,’”⁶ have resulted in a “‘third world difference’ that Western feminisms appropriate and ‘colonize’ the fundamental complexities and conflicts which colonize the lives of women of difference classes, religions, cultures, races and castes in these countries.”⁷ Consequently, third world women appear powerless with respect to the white western woman, which permits white women to embody a “paternalistic attitude towards women
in the third world.”

This enables white women to remain the “subject” of feminism, while third world women are relegated as “objects” in feminism instead. Thus, in assuming a universal female subject, white western feminisms often reinforce rather than destabilize hegemonic representations of identity.

Andrea Smith argues that Indigenous theory is not recognized for its methodology, but rather exists within feminism as an object of study. Smith investigates queer theory’s capacity to offer an alternative approach to engaging with Indigenous theory by “queering” constructs of Native identity as other. However, Smith concludes that despite queering hegemonic constructions and/or representations of identity and meaning, queer theory tends to commodify the Indigenous subject in the process. Consequently, Indigenous subjects are represented as objects of queer study rather than active agents in the queering of queer theory itself. I find this similar to the limits of my material feminist analysis of relational women’s life writing. Although I aimed to demonstrate the potential of the relational subject to disrupt hegemonic representations of identity, my analysis failed to reflect on the ways in which Woolf’s life writing subverted my construction of the relationality. Ironically, my demonstration of the potential for the relational subject to subvert hegemonic authority not only imposed my own idea of relationality, but placed limitations on the relationality of my experience of Moments of Being.

The face of feminism continues to change in response to concerns about the universalization of the white subject. In the early 1980s, poet and feminist Adrienne Rich proposed the need for a politics of location that would better account for one’s relationship to power, privilege and knowledge. A politics of location strives to mark
the social location of the feminist subject, which grounds knowledge in experience. This prevents feminists with white privilege from speaking and writing unequivocally about other feminist subjects, and/or writing about the feminist subject without accounting for the ways that social location informs such knowledge and speech. In particular, marking white privilege decenters white feminists’ experience, creating space for other, non-white and less privileged feminists to speak and perhaps challenge dominant ideas of subjectivity and experience in feminism.

I wonder, however, whether or not marking my social location and accounting for my white privilege permits speech rather than prohibiting me to speak on behalf of others? I recognize it is certainly proper feminist method to do so, however does marking white privilege de-center the experiences of the white feminist in practice, or only in theory? What I mean is that while accounting for my white privilege certainly marks me as a white subject, I remain suspect of whether or not this discursive move, if you will, actually reflects my acknowledgement of the ways in which my experience as a white subject is challenged and perhaps subverted by non-white feminists speaking from locations of less privilege. At what point does introducing myself as a white subject become repetitive and routine? How might marking myself as a white subject of privilege produce a silence between me and other non-white feminists—or perhaps even between myself and other white feminists as well? If marking ourselves as white feminists is supposed to have de-centered the experience of the white subject and created space for other alternative feminisms, then why has feminism remained a predominantly white space that requires the criticisms of other non-white feminists to be recognized as feminism by white feminists in positions of power and privilege?
What happens when we re-figure the white feminist’s relationship to power and privilege as a contradictory and complicated one? If we are to recognize that as relational subjects, identity is neither complete nor stable, then surely our relationship to location and the positions we hold are contestable and unstable as well; this includes white privilege. As a white feminist my identity as a white woman affords me certain privileges and positions that non-white women may not be entitled to. My criticism may reflect a sense of authority that I as a white woman who belongs to a tradition of feminism, have earned the right to possess; while the non-white woman may have to work hard to prove her criticism even belongs in feminism. Yet despite the power my identity as a white woman affords me, I remain subjugated as well. As a woman, I inherit and continue to endure a long history of subordination under white masculine dominated society and culture. As a feminist I have worked to subvert white masculine authority and support other women in their struggles of resistance as well. Yet, still, I remain a woman who, though white, is simultaneously subordinated by my gender as female as well. So, despite my privilege as a white woman, I am always fighting for a position in white masculine society and culture as well.

Similar to Mohanty’s argument,\(^\text{13}\) when I as a white woman fight for the rights of non-white women, I reinforce (albeit, unintentionally)\(^\text{14}\) the image of the other woman as weak, mute and passive; I as the white woman with privilege am responsible for helping other women with less privilege, especially non-white women; I as a white woman become accountable for my privilege by acknowledging my responsibility to the other and/or those with less privilege and power than me. In this way, (as a white woman) the criticism I write uses the material experiences of other women to support the legitimacy
and relevance of my criticism. While non-white women make appearances in my criticism, my criticism fails to reflect on the ways these other women destabilize and contradict my experiences outside the ways I have marked and accounted for my white privilege.

It would appear that membership to feminism can be somewhat exclusive. Often only women who write criticism that reflects the interests of the white subject of feminism are recognized as feminists. This is not to suggest that all non-white women’s criticism is excluded from feminism, but rather that the inclusion of non-white women criticism in feminism is contingent on the acceptance and approval of white feminists. So, although feminism may appear to reflect a heterogeneous, plural and incomplete identity, despite the appearance of non-white feminist theory, feminism remains a predominantly white space.

I believe Sara Ahmed’s figure of the neighbourhood stranger illustrates the simultaneous inclusion and exclusion of non-white feminists in feminism, while also taking account of how the affective experience of the white woman whose relationship to privilege and power is contradictory and complex may reinforce the exclusionary boundaries of feminism as a whole. The figure of the neighbourhood stranger represents the ways in which the identity of the other becomes associated with negative, hostile feelings. Ahmed suggests that others are in fact recognized not only as something other, but as strangers, something dangerous that represents a potential threat to the freedom and safety of the neighbourhood. Hence, those who belong to the neighbourhood have reason and just cause to decide who is allowed entry and who is permitted to stay. In this way, the figure of the neighbourhood stranger not only
functions to keep strangers out, but acts as a mechanism of surveillance over other neighbours in the neighbourhood as well.\textsuperscript{16} Thus, one is not merely located in the space of the neighbourhood, but one belongs to the neighbourhood as well.

There is a substantial body of feminist criticism that explores the relationship between politics of belonging and identity.\textsuperscript{17} For example, Aimee Carrillo Rowe refigures whiteness as a mode of belonging rather than a fixed, static identity. This opens up a space between white identity and the experience of being recognized as a white body in white society, which allows white individuals to reflect on their experiences of being white subjects, while existing simultaneously as \textit{other} subjects as well. Rowe suggests that this enables the white subject to interrogate his/her relationship to whiteness from a position inside whiteness, rather than mark whiteness as a knowable, controllable and containable thing from the outside.\textsuperscript{18} In this way, reflecting on the ways identity is shaped by the desire to belong articulates a politics of relation, which grounds relationality in the material experience of belonging.

In addition, I think recognizing the politics of belonging to location and/or identity acknowledges not only the embodiment of experience, but that such material experience is also always \textit{affective} as well.\textsuperscript{19} While writing criticism enables me to theorize about the potential of being disturbed, I believe it is important to recognize the ways my affective experiences of this haunting left me feeling insecure, shaken and unsure. In moments of disturbance and distress I have found that I am quite reluctant to acknowledge, let alone accept the “potential” of someone or something that threatens to unravel my knowledge of how things came to be, or the image I see myself to be.\textsuperscript{20} So, I must also (re)consider that in times of such distress I tend to lean on what I hold most
true—what I know or what I believe to have successfully accomplished or done; rather than leaving the foundation of my knowledge behind and exploring this other version of myself that you or someone other has demanded I consider. In such moments I experience anxiety and fear. I become aggressive in the name of my defense. I have worked long and hard. I demand recognition and acceptance. I do not try to listen. I assert my right to speak; I fight. So I think that in some ways my argument for the potential of other women’s writing in feminism is somewhat romantic, unless it reflects on the affective material experiences of being disturbed by others. I am afraid that that I have become so blinded by the optimism I hold about my own feminism that I have grown unable or perhaps reluctant to see how eager I am to have my life writing recognized as criticism; yet at the same time, I find myself less willing, or perhaps even reluctant, to recognize other women’s life as criticisms that threatens my identity as a feminist.

**I Hear Something Upstairs: Is It Just Me, or Am I Haunted?**

In the previous chapter, I ended with the problem of representing material feminisms in women’s life writing. In trying to demonstrate the potential for *Moments of Being* to represent a counter-hegemonic discourse, I used Woolf’s material experiences to represent and reinforce my theory of relationality. My intention was to illustrate how the relational subject disrupted hegemonic representations of identity, and yet my criticism failed to reflect on the ways Woolf subverted my own knowledge and image of relational identity. Ironically, my criticism of relational subjectivity in *Moments of Being* failed to
reflect the relationality between Woolf’s and my experiences. Similarly, Smith’s criticism of Woolf suggested that the absence of materiality in *Moments of Being* limited its capacity to subvert hegemonic representations of identity. However, by representing Moraga’s text as a piece of counter-hegemonic writing, Smith also commits an autobiographical act of her own—she makes a statement about what type of women’s life writing matters. The question remains: Where is Woolf in our respective criticisms? Woolf certainly appears as a body of text that supports my argument, my argument that highlights the subversive potential of the relational subject in her life writing—but how has she shaped my argument? Where in *my* argument is the residue of her influence? How exactly did I come to realize that her life writing mattered? Did her writing move me? Was my image of the relational subject, my idea of who and what a relational subject should be, disturbed by Woolf? If so, where is my struggle to make sense of this in my criticism? Similarly, who does Smith allow Moraga to suddenly become once Smith identifies her as the powerfully subversive and evasive “grotesque subject”? Where is Smith in this image? What does Smith’s relationship to this image mean? Perhaps most importantly, who has the privilege of deciding who can be a grotesque or relational subject in women’s life writing?

Linda Alcoff discusses a similar problem of representation in her essay “The Problem of Speaking for Others.” Alcoff suggests that in speaking about the other, the speaking subject often speaks for the other as well. In doing so, she highlights not only the role of the critical reader in the construction of the other-subject, but the authority of criticism over other narratives as well. I would like to explore what happens when the privileged white feminist critic speaks of another, either in passing or narrative
description. In describing someone, the object of description is regulated to the position and/or identity of someone other. However, as we have seen in material feminist theory, the subject is always a part of the observation. Since objectivity is situated and subjective, the descriptions of the other also contain traces of the subject’s expression as well. Yet, the “subject” of the description appears to be the other; criticism often claims to speak about the other and not the speaking subject. The other is presented as something, while the identity of the speaking subject remains somewhat ambiguous and unclear. Alcoff recognizes this as representative of the speaking subject’s privilege or authority over the other. As an element of the speaking subject’s description, the other appears to be unable to speak for herself.  

Alcoff explains that by speaking about the other, she is, “engaging in the act of representing the other's needs, goals, situation, and in fact, who they are. I am representing them as such and such, or in post-structuralist terms, I am participating in the construction of their subject-positions.”

The difference between speaking about and speaking for remains unclear. In speaking about someone, the speaking subject (perhaps, inadvertently) speaks for the other as well. Whether speaking about or speaking for, both acts reinforce the position of speaking subject over the other, regardless of how favorable or positive one’s criticism of the other may be. In describing the other, the speaking subject reveals something about herself; the other is turned into an object that functions to validate and reinforce the speaking subject’s image of the self. Similarly, in speaking for the other, the speaking subject uses the other to make a statement about what matters.

For example, in many ways, Smith’s Identity’s Body is an exploration of the crisis of representation as it interrogates autobiography’s capacity to represent the complexity
of the female subject. Smith is quite critical not only of Woolf, but of the power
whiteness and middle class status afford white women, provoking her to turn away from
the life writing of women of privilege, towards the potentials of the “grotesque body” of
the marginalized subject.27 Whereas Woolf’s privilege as a white woman enables her to
speak as though she were every woman, Smith maintains that Moraga’s text represents
the material specificity of marginalized experience, and challenges dominant
representations of the female body. In many ways, Smith’s comparison between Woolf
and Moraga highlights differences in power between Woolf and Moraga’s respective
positions. Woolf’s skin colour remains an unspoken materiality in her text. For the
white feminist not concerned with power and privilege associated with whiteness,
Woolf’s whiteness may remain an insignificant matter in relation to the meaning or
relevance of her text. In the eyes of the white feminist who does not recognize a politics
of location, the colour of Woolf’s skin is assumed and irrelevant to the body of her text,
though her whiteness pervades her text nonetheless.28 Yet, unlike Woolf, Moraga is
unable to escape the colour of her skin. Her skin is essential to the meaning of her text.
In the eyes of the white critical reader, Moraga’s life writing represents something
different from herself. Smith, however, appears to be aware of the politics of location.
She argues that because Woolf fails to account for the privileges the colour of her skin
and status in the middle class affords, her text reinforces representations that universalize
the female body and marginalize women like Moraga. According to Smith, even though
Woolf’s life writing expresses her experiences beyond representations of women
dominant in Victorian society, it fails to account for the way her subject position as a
white woman permits her to do so.
However, in criticizing Woolf for failing to account for privilege and power in her life writing, I believe Smith forgets to account for the way power and privilege inform her own criticism of both Woolf and Moraga. Similarly, by incorporating material feminisms to illuminate the relationality in *Moments of Being*, my criticism represents my position outside the boundaries of Woolf’s text, yet I too fail to account for the privileged location of my experience even though my criticism strived to demonstrate the potential and relationality in Woolf’s life writing. Rather, by highlighting the relationality in Woolf’s text, the potential of the relational subject reflects my image of what (or who) a relational subject should be. Similarly, in speaking on behalf of Moraga by encouraging readers to recognize the counter-hegemonic potential of her text, Moraga’s words become accessible through Smith—and yet, Smith’s criticism contains little reflection on the role (and power) of her own subject position in relation to Moraga’s text as well. Both Smith’s and my criticism haunt Woolf’s text, as our presence informs and shapes *Moments of Being* to support our respective arguments, yet in arguing for or against Woolf, our criticisms fail to reflect not only on the privileges of our respective social locations, but our implication in the subjugation of women’s life writing as well. Perhaps the question is not what is missing in Woolf’s life writing, but rather, what remains absent in feminist criticism of women’s life writing?

I remain unsure whether or not my criticism haunts Woolf’s life writing, or if I am haunted by Woolf’s presence in my criticism. Regardless, I find myself haunted by the possibility that something is missing in my criticism of *Moments of Being*. I fear it may be me; or perhaps, more specifically, the reason behind Woolf’s apparent disappearance is (at least partly due to) me. To borrow Avery Gordon’s term, I am “haunted” by my
implication in Woolf’s apparent absence in my criticism. Perhaps “awareness” is too
generous a term or state of mind to grant me here. It would be more correct to say I am
haunted by this *sinking feeling* that I am behind Woolf’s absence—that I have buried
her under my image of the relational subject, that instead of talking about Woolf, I am
merely speaking of the dead!

Avery Gordon uses the term “haunting” as a metaphor to identify and describe not
only the missing presence of others silenced by criticism, but to remind the critic of
his/her implication in the missing other’s absence as well. Hauntings do not represent
the missing figure per se, but rather remind the critic of his/her responsibility to listen
and explore further what otherwise may lie forgotten there. Thus, there is an affective
dimension to hauntings; a feeling is something that one recognizes and yet at the same
time, exceeds our recognition as well. I know, or rather sense something is there, yet this
sense I experience, this feeling, is not something (not only), but rather a feeling of what
*might* be there. This feeling is something that is beyond me, myself, but not something in
itself. Hauntings have the affective power to lure, to draw us back to the site of our
recognition and knowledge. Hauntings disturb our knowledge of the past, illuminating
the presence of something more at present. Hauntings have the power to compel us to re-
consider representations of what was previously known, or considered matter of fact.
Thus, hauntings do not simply reveal what is missing or lacking in my criticism, but
hauntings remind me of something that exceeds my criticism, of the existence beyond
criticism. In this way, hauntings do not merely remind me of what I’ve forgotten, but
rather how I may have forgotten my decision or choice to represent some traces of my
experience, and not others. Hauntings invite me to look not beneath graves, but behind
doors that, without this sense of discomfort and unrest, I may have kept closed and
locked up. However, the question that remains is whether or not hauntings will lead me
to revisit lost histories of my past, or will I instead freeze up, and bury this unsettling
feeling deep inside of me instead? Will I investigate the source of the hauntings? Or
prefer to keep the door closed and remain safe inside these walls of comfort that certainty
provides by ignoring the sounds upstairs and forgetting that nothing is ever completely
dead?

**Feminist Ghost Towns**

The door represents a boundary that separates past from present, my experience
from yours, or self from other—a space that is not merely temporal, nor spatial, but which
is emotionally charged as well. Though I may be responsible for listening for hauntings
in my criticism, and though I may believe I want to listen to the other, the question
remains of my feelings about responsibility to the other, or accountability for my white
privilege, if I do not like or agree with what the other (or this alternative past) has to say.
This is not to conclude that I will not listen, or cannot. I’d certainly like to believe that I
would not refuse to. But I must also remember that I haven’t always listened, or been
willing to listen to the other, especially when I do not like what they have to say. Not at
first. Not *in* the moment; at least, not always. The problem then becomes not a matter of
listening to the other, or listening for hauntings either, but rather listening for moments
when I would rather *not* listen (or have not listened). This is, of course, to feel my way
through the dark and work through hidden barriers that remove me from materiality of
these alternative pasts buried in my memory. So, before I can transgress into this unknown or rather forgotten territory--- lost memories. I must deconstruct feelings that erect signs of danger and fear, which repel me from this space and which protect and hide me from the presence of the foreign in the familiar.

Sara Ahmed’s theory of affect explores how the affect of emotions can establish, maintain and reinforce affective borders that inform the subject’s material encounters with places, things and others. In *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality*, Ahmed illustrates how the other is not the mere representation of an unknown identity, but rather, as a figure beyond the self, or outside the group to which the self belongs, the “unknown” other is represented as something other that must be feared. The “other” is represented as “stranger” and yet, paradoxically, contrary to the unknowingness of what the term stranger commonly infers, Ahmed demonstrates that in being recognized as stranger, the other becomes a dangerous figure feared by the community to which the subject belongs. Ahmed uses the example of the neighbourhood to demonstrate the ways one’s relationship to place shapes their understanding of the other. In doing so, she highlights both how identities become associated by their shared proximity to location, and how negative emotions become attached to bodies that threaten one’s position as well. Neighbourhoods enforce boundaries around privileged sites of location, by reinforcing the difference between neighbour and outsider, and through the ways subjects in the neighbourhood come to identify each other through their position as neighbours. Neighbourhoods reinforce and regulate differences between bodies through programs like neighbourhood watch, or
simply ideologies of neighbourhood love, which obligate neighbours to protect each other from outsiders by watching over each other.

Such protective methods are also mechanisms of control and regelation, because dominant representations of who or what a neighbour should be are reinforced and reproduced by neighbours looking out for each other. This surveillance reinforces boundaries between the neighbourhood and outsiders, while strengthening the image of the neighbourhood as the dominant representation of what a neighbourhood should be. The neighbourhood resembles a gated community; the boundaries separating the outside from inside regulate and govern both the bodies inside the hood, and the others who, as marked bodies, are not so privileged as to pass freely and relegated to the outside. The neighbourhood does not represent a strong community, but rather threatens the plurality of community by imposing restrictions on the identity of community, thus limiting the types of identities recognizable within the community itself. The promise of safety and mobility reinforces boundaries between the privileged interior and dangerous outside world, but in depending on the neighbourhood (or the idea of the neighbourhood) for security and freedom, the bodies in neighbourhoods are confined to living within the parameters of what a neighbour should be.

Belonging to a community like a neighbourhood is a privilege—the protection of the designated space of the hood enacts power over the potential intruders, allowing neighbours to assert their control over the potential for intrusion itself. Intruders threaten to take the neighbour’s privilege away. Anyone outside the neighbourhood who is unknown to the neighbourhood is a potential threat or danger to the neighbourhood. Ahmed explains:
The projection of danger onto the figure of the stranger allows violence to be figured as exceptional and extraordinary—coming from outside the protective walls of the home, family, community or nation. As a result, the discourse of stranger danger involves a refusal to recognize how violence is structured by, and legitimated through, the formation of home and community as such.\textsuperscript{43}

The neighbours’ right to protect their property and the property of other neighbours renders violence against strangers as acts of defense that are justified, if not obligated, by one’s responsibility as a neighbour in the first place. Violence towards strangers is represented as a protective act; it is not only permitted, but it becomes the neighbour’s duty to defend his/her neighbours as well. Thus, membership within the community is \textit{unstable}—it must be protected and renewed. The neighbour who fails to live up to this sense of neighbourly love and devotion, or fails to adequately represent who a neighbour should be, is recognized as a bad neighbour. Nobody wants to be a bad neighbour. Bad neighbours are associated with the \textit{outside}. While permitted inside the gates, he/she resembles an outsider, an example of what a neighbour should not be. They are looked down upon, or even despised. No one wants to be associated with a bad neighbour. Bad neighbours make the community look bad, and bring everyone down. Similar to the threat of the stranger who threatens the safety of the community from the outside, the neighbour as \textit{other} threatens the coherence of the neighbourhood from the inside.

In this way, Ahmed’s example of the neighbourhood demonstrates how performing acts of belonging to a group (identity) or space (neighbourhood) implicates subjects in acts of violence towards others. In claiming a space as something that belongs to them (neighbourhood property), the subject’s sense of identity comes from their attachment or belonging to this space. The space is particular to them; over time, this space becomes home. Home is a place of entitlement, privilege, power and position. The
experience of space becomes representative of something one belongs to. The neighbourhood is not only a place, but home. Subsequently, individuals who share this sense of home have not only the right to protect the neighbourhood, but the image of the neighbourhood as well. I believe that the problem of representing and listening to others is located in such emotionally charged spaces where the unknown is recognized as something strange—other. In the domestic space, this other represents the existence of a foreign threat; a threat to the safety and security the idea of home provides.

The analogy of the neighbourhood stranger can be applied to the problem of representation in feminism. Listening to the other not only entails a sense of intimacy or shared space between self and other, but appears to also require the other-subject to cross over and meet the conditions of belonging to the neighbourhood in order to be recognized as a subject. Yet, in order to be recognized as subject in the neighbourhood of feminism, the other must prove his/her identity as feminist; they must behave like a good neighbour, support fellow neighbours and protect the image of the neighbourhood. Once one is inaugurated into the neighbourhood and recognized as a fellow feminist, the newly appointed feminist must continue to work to gain his/her neighbours’ trust by protecting the neighbourhood from outside intruders, which includes ensuring he/she is not recognized as something other than his/herself. To be a good neighbour, the new feminist must be sure to keep her feelings of discomfort to herself, and refrain from letting these other more unruly parts of her identity out. This leads me to wonder, then, must I feel at home in order to hear the other? Or perhaps, am I only willing to listen to the other when and if I see this other as a member of my household—a part of my construct of home? Can someone ever feel at home if they are confined to playing the
part of other in someone else’s house? And what if they disobey or betray my trust, and threaten the foundation of my house? Do I kick them out, and risk future intrusion now that the secret to my safety is out? Or keep them locked upstairs, safely kept inside? 

Of course, there is an alternative history of the not-so neighbourly encounter with the other as well. What if listening to the other required the subject to leave the safety of their position inside the neighbourhood and cross over to the other side and listen to the other-subject as an other themselves? What would this sort of narrative of encounter sound like? How might this change what dominant representations of the neighbour should look like? Rather than listen to the other-subject behind the safety of our own terms, what if listening to the other requires the privileged subject to embody the position of other themselves? This is not to suggest that the white subject becomes the other she is trying to understand, but rather comes to be an other to herself. Perhaps the privileged feminist cannot listen to the other without leaving the comfort and familiarity of our social location—yet, as Ahmed’s analogy of the stranger demonstrates, without the security and comfort of the feminist’s position in feminism, the feminist critic risks losing his/her privilege to speak about spaces of experiences where they would be recognized as strangers out of place. In spaces outside the neighborhood of feminism, feminist criticism risks being regulated to the periphery-- lost, unheard, unrecognizable, or perhaps even worse, represented as something other, like fiction.

Perhaps the limitation of stating one’s subject position in an effort to account for privilege lies in the assumption that relationships to location are fixed, stable and knowable. The subject appears to possess agency over their relationship to location, and control the way their subject position affects others as well. This presumes a stable,
unchangeable, un-affective relationship to location, which reinforces the subject’s position over the other because of the subject’s distance from the other’s account. In *Belonging: Toward a Politics of Relation*, Aimee Carrillo Rowe explores the speaking subject’s contradictory relationship to location. By “render(ing) transparent the political conditions and effects of our belonging”, Rowe proposes a new theory of the politics of relation to complicate the politics of location, and aims to “interrogate the conditions and effects of inclusion within various sites of belonging”. Rather than state subject position as an attempt to authorize the validity of one’s speech by marking the politics of their location, a politics of relation deconstructs the conditions of inclusion that grant some identities the privilege to belong (power), at the expense of the exclusion of others (marginalization). Over time, privileged identities become invested in the politics of belonging; to lose white privilege would mean one is at risk of not belonging as well. Or at least, this is perhaps how it feels. The fear of not belonging reinforces white privilege. This is not to infer that the white subject can be excluded from whiteness, but rather to illuminate some motivations for not wanting to give up one’s privilege.

The other does not threaten my identity as a white subject—I am (and remain) the white subject; the other represents an alternative history that calls my privileges as a white subject into question. Rowe’s theory of a politics of relation builds on Adrienne Rich’s theory of a politics of location, because it does not ask the white subject to mark their privilege, but rather calls on the white subject to interrogate the conditions that entitle him/her to a privileged sense of belonging at the expense of others. Whereas addressing the politics of location risks distancing the feminist from his/her implication in the other’s exclusion by failing to adequately account for the benefits of the white
feminist’s inclusion, a politics of relation performs a “reverse interpellation” which encourages the white subject to “call attention to the politics at stake in our belonging and to envision an alternative.” Rather than reinforce the subject’s sense of identity, reverse interpellation transforms it. By revealing the ways one’s position depends on the exclusion of others, location is refigured as a site of contestation. Privilege over others must constantly be renewed; the instability of power requires it to be reinforced.

In this way, a politics of relation highlights the instability of both identity and power. As a mode of belonging, whiteness may be characterized as a privileged identity that depends on the exclusion of others. Belonging to whiteness is motivated by longings for the privileged inclusion and safety, freedom and power that one enjoys as a white subject over others. The fear or anxiety of not belonging reinforces the subject’s dependence on being identified with whiteness, for without white privilege the subject’s right to belong (as a white subject) is contestable.

For those of us who are recognized by our proximity to whiteness (as white-subjects), a theory of politics of relation provokes us to interrogate whiteness not from a position outside of whiteness, but from the untenability of our position in whiteness. While we can renounce constructions of whiteness and try to subvert and resist whiteness as self-consciously responsible white subjects, we remain implicated in them. So, my experience of white privilege is quite complex; I cannot contain my whiteness by distancing myself from the body marked by whiteness by marking myself as the white subject. However, by recognizing whiteness as a mode of belonging rather than as an essentially fixed identity, I can question the conditions that afford me a privileged sense of belonging. That is, by interrogating the conditions of belonging, the white feminist is
faced not only with their implication in the exclusion of others, but the question of what they as white subjects have to lose.\textsuperscript{55} In this way, Rowe’s politics of relation encourages a more intimate reflection into the white feminist’s motivation for maintaining their privilege as white subjects over others. By reflecting on what motivates us to forget our implication in the exclusion of the other, the white feminist steps outside of the familiarity of her neighbourhood and is one step closer to entering the space of non-white feminist criticism.\textsuperscript{56}

**Belonging to Great Expectations**

In “Belonging to Race, Gender, and Place Beneath Clouds,” Rosalyn Diprose contrasts the ontological and political experiences of belonging to illuminate the ways the sharing of experience (at the material level) can affect political identities and refigure social relations. In doing so, Diprose suggests that communities based on a shared identity (similar to the neighbourhood community in Ahmed’s text) reinforce representations of fixed, stable and autonomous identities.\textsuperscript{57} Thus, by grounding relationality in the material experience of belonging, Diprose suggests the plurality, fluidity and incompleteness of identity is illuminated and shared. Similarly, Elspeth Probyn suggests that by placing the subject outside of belonging (refiguring the state of belonging as the desire to belong) one remains open to multiple (and even conflicting) identities without being confined to one.\textsuperscript{58} This illuminates the relationality of identity and suggests that the potential of identity lies in not only the instability of identity but the mobility of identity as well. One must desire to belong to other modes of belonging, and
enter the spaces of other identity categories as well. In addition, according to Diprose, refiguring identity as sharing experiences of belonging allows feminists to explore the ways the “lived, affective and ethical dimensions of community” shape and affect identities through their encounters/experiences with each other.\textsuperscript{59} Whereas communities based on shared identity relegate and restrict the plurality of identity (as demonstrated in Ahmed’s analogy of the neighbourhood stranger), Diprose, Rowe and Probyn’s writings explore the sharing of identities at the ontological level of belonging, to illustrate the ways subjects depend on others for growth.\textsuperscript{60} By recognizing the instability of belonging, communities are not characterized by a shared identity; the strength and potential of a community is located in the sharing of identity. That is, the interactions between individuals are not confined to one type or mode of belonging, but rather those identities emerge in and through multiple sites of belongings.

This is interesting because by celebrating the instability of identity, I feel white feminists risk romanticizing the experience(s) of not \textit{quite} belonging. What I mean is that in celebrating the instability of belonging, and the incompleteness of identity, I believe feminism celebrates the privilege of belonging-- even if stating that belonging is characterized by \textit{not} belonging. As white subjects, white feminists enjoy the privilege of belonging (at least in some ways) to power, whereas non-white feminists do not. Thus in speaking of the potential of not belonging, I feel white feminists risk neglecting the pain and hardship of exclusion that is in fact the material experience for many non-white women of less privilege. It is necessary to also note that despite the pain and suffering that results from marginalization and exclusion, the location of being on the margins is often a position of subversive strength for non-white women as well. I fear that stating
the potential of not belonging risks usurping this position of strength from other women of colour while also minimizing if not omitting the material hardships these other women endure. Perhaps we should start with disclosing our fear of being recognized as outsiders as white subjects, while also recognizing the material differences between our experience of the margins as privileged subjects, and the experience of others with less privilege who have little choice but to occupy this space of marginality.\(^61\)

I will explain. In *Outside Belongings*, Probyn uses the term “outside belonging” to better describe the relationship between politics of belonging and identity. Outside belonging suggests that the desire to belong always locates the self outside belonging, and that identity emerges from the movement between multiple modes of belonging. In this way, identity depends on the mobility of belonging\(^62\) and not fixed belonging. In this way, Probyn suggests that outside belonging represents a “relations of proximity” between modes of belonging.\(^63\) This means that the more one identifies with one sense of belonging, the more distanced they are from alternative types of belonging. By stating that one is always outside belonging, Probyn suggests that one may belong to multiple modes of belonging at the same time, but belong to no category fully. Similar to both Rowe and Diprose’s arguments, the potential of identity depends in part on the mobility between multiple types of belonging.\(^64\) Difference and instability are celebrated. Encountering different modes or experiences of belonging disturbs one’s sense of belonging, as people come to desire other modes of belonging, different from their “own”.\(^65\) In this way, Probyn’s outside belonging *welcomes the strange in the familiar.*

Home is no longer a fixed place: the desire to be at home illuminates the plurality and infiniteness of (what otherwise would be) a familiar and known space.
However, it is this tension between “fixed” and “plural”, “finite” and “infinite,” that I would like to highlight here—or more specifically, the way the experience of the tension between plurality and knowingness tends to be represented as potential or as a progressive movement in feminism. Is the experience of not belonging always such a celebratory experience? Similar to the problem of representing the other, I feel that celebrating the subversive strength of unstable identities from a position of privilege, ignores the difficulty of living through the pain and struggles of living as other. In fact, it threatens to usurp the materiality of the other’s experience, yet again. In addition, I think that even in the case of the white subject, this risks romanticizing the often difficult experience of being disturbed by others as well. I am certainly not quite at home with the idea of having no home. The materiality of this scenario is also unlikely, and forgets, if not dismisses, my privileges as a white woman. While I am by no means suggesting that the instability of identity and/or plurality of experience are not sites of strength and resistance, I am concerned with how we speak of these locations, as white subjects.

I am more likely to find non-white feminists writing about the struggle of losing their sense of losing home (writing which portrays a sense of vulnerability and pain). I find little room in my own criticism as a white woman to reflect on my reluctance to leave my idea of home. I am either at home in my criticism, or patting myself not so discreetly on the back for my counter-hegemonic act of leaving this home behind; rarely am I reflecting on the challenges of leaving the comfort my construct of home affords me. Time and time again my criticism reflects my selective omission what challenges me most—the difficultly of living relationally as an incomplete, instable other-subject that is also the white subject of privilege. Perhaps more importantly, it also allows for a sort of
selective relationality—relationality that is contingent on the white subject maintaining privilege. While this perhaps contradicts the concept of relationality itself, it no less enables me to write and theorize about relationality without living relationally in practice.

It would certainly appear then, that my construct of relationality lacks materiality, and that my argument supporting the subversive potential of material experience writes over the affective experience of these material relationships. The other is not only an object in my criticism, but a means to support my image of myself as a feminist. This contradicts my theory of relationality, yet reflects much of my material experience of (trying) to live relationally nonetheless. I am perhaps reluctant to admit the way the other informs my position because deep down I know that their words do not always support my argument.

I speak often of the potential of disturbances in my criticism (how disturbances destabilize hegemonic representations of identity) yet the selective omission of the difficultly of my experiences with such disturbing emotions tends to suggest otherwise.

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1 Barad, “Meeting the Universe Halfway,” 139.

2 Perhaps this illuminates a certain degree of romanticism in material feminism or highlights the romantic nature of my relationship with material feminism. Whereas I was drawn to material feminism because it appeared to embrace (and celebrate) the potential and plurality of identity and experience, I now find some material feminist theory to lack a thorough discussion of the significance of the relationship between material experience and affect. In speaking of futurities, potential and plurality, I wonder if we have become estranged from the affective experiences from which these “alternative” knowledges emerge. That is, while identity and experience remain perpetually complete, and our experience of the material, partial and subjective, sometimes our encounters with difference—futurities, potentials and plurality—is disturbing and not at all a positive experience. At least, not in the moment of such encounter. Not always. Most especially, I suspect, for the white subject who, like myself, socialized and privileged by white western culture, may find encounters that remind him/her of the indeterminacy of identity and experience, result in extreme pain, discomfort and stress. This is not to suggest that being disturbed by an other or alternative past is a bad thing, but rather, on the contrary, my purpose here is illuminate and explore what I find to be an odd silence in some feminists’ criticisms. That for some of us, including myself, the experience of being disturbed by the potential of the material is not always a pleasant one (at least, not initially). Much of this chapter is concerned with the silence created by the absence of these types of stories, (or life writing), in white women’s feminist criticism. I ask, in what ways has white feminist criticism written over the affective experience female embodiment? How has my position of a white woman feminist distanced me from the materiality of my life writing? And in what ways does this reinforce
unequal distributions of power and privilege across feminism as a whole? While this chapter is unable to answer these questions, it endeavors to tease more out of these questions, and explore matters behind this silence further.

3 In referring to the material experiences of other women’s life writing as material feminisms in themselves, I am suggesting that these other women’s experience are a source of deep theory that is grounded in the materiality of their location (and in practice) in themselves.


6 Mohanty, “Under Western Eyes,” 335.

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid., 352.

9 Ibid., 351.

10 Smith, “Queer Theory and Native Studies,” 43.


12 Ibid.

13 See also Spivak, *Can the Subaltern Speak?*, 66-111; Smith, “Queer Theory and Native Studies,” 42-68.

14 In hindsight, I remain unsure whether or not it is adequate to claim this as unintentional because I possess some degree of awareness of my motivations for doing so, even though such reasons remain unarticulated and unexplored in my criticism. I reflect further on this apparent silence in my criticism in chapter 3.

15 Sara Ahmed’s theory of attachment illustrates the way feelings become *attached* to bodies, and objects. She suggests that affects circulate in society and “stick” to bodies and objects, to form an identity that reflects our emotional attachment (positive or negative) to *other* bodies and things. The subject may find themselves to feel a certain way towards some objects and not others. Ahmed suggests these feelings do not originate from inside the subject, but rather are the product of the socialization of emotion. Ahmed uses her theory of attachment to explain how *others*, especially non-white others become attached to negative feelings associated with fear and anxiety. The attachment of affects shape our experience of these others, and their actions appear to reinforce these stereotypes and validate our negative feelings towards them. Ahmed’s theory of affect calls on the reader to not only recognize the sociology of emotion, but also reflect on our role in attaching negative affects to non-white individuals with less privilege. See Ahmed, “Affective Economies,” 120; Ibid, *The Promise of Happiness*, 29; Ibid, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 1-3, 7-8.

16 Ahmed, *Strange Encounters*, 26-7

Affect has traditionally been feminized and represented as an obstacle that hinders the production of knowledge, rather than recognized as an important element in the shaping of knowledge that informs our experience of material relationships. However, material feminist theories of affect and emotion highlight the affects of emotions. For example, Sara Ahmed explores the sociology of emotion and affect to theorize about how the sociology of emotion shapes our relationship to places, others and things. See Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 1-4.

I believe this may be more readily recognized as times when I, in light of my own ignorance, have acted defensive. I explore my tendency to forget moments of defensiveness and aggression further in chapter 3.

This is also an example of my white privilege.

I wish to clarify the use of the term “disturbed” here to distinguish my meaning from the context in which “disturbance” is often used in feminism. I mean to emphasize the affective feeling of being disturbed, rather than the theoretical abstraction of disturbance that often leads to a celebration of the potential found in such disturbances in theory. I do not mean to suggest that the affective experience of being disturbed does not open one up to future potentials. On the contrary I believe disturbances do lead one to consider alternative pasts and futures which open the subject up to multiple conflicting experiences at present. However, I wish to clarify the distinction between the “affective experience of being disturbed”, and “disturbance” as a theoretical concept linked to futurity and potential. I wonder if conflating the affective experience of being disturbed with disturbance as a theoretical construct has contributed to a rather odd silence in white feminisms about the challenges of living relationally? For example, where I often explored the feeling of being disturbed in my life writing, the disturbances in my criticism tend to exist as abstractions and means to support my argument about the potential of relationality. Consequently, the material in my criticism represents relationality as a theoretical concept, rather than reflecting on the challenging experiences of this theory in practice.


Ibid., 11.

Ibid., 9.

Representing others is in many ways a romantic ideal.


This was a particular concern for me as material feminism suggests that all materiality (human, non-human, material and immaterial) are active agents or actants in identity formation. See Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 137-39; Haraway, *Modest Witness*, 7, 126-127. While I was able to comprehend the material agency of places, things and others in theory (and demonstrate this theoretically) I failed miserably in practice. This moment represents my disenchantment with not only material feminism, but my identity as a feminist critic as well. I used to reflect the affectivity of material relationships—others and objects were not mere things in my life writing, but rather came alive to move me and shape the content of my life writing itself. No such materiality existed in my criticism; my criticism wrote over and replaced materiality with its own argument for the material as I saw it. So, while my criticism demonstrated my knowledge of material feminism, and in some ways perhaps validated my experiences of the material world (as a feminist I was becoming quite knowledgeable and confident), writing criticism also forged a distance between my knowledge of my self (as a feminist) and my experience as a white woman.
I believe this “image” has come to haunt my experience—separating me not only from the material world, but from my own materiality as well. For a more complex understanding of material experience, see Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, 4. Gordon de-romanticizes the concept of “complexity” to suggest that the complex is the vulnerable, imperfect, contradictive individual who may be characterized as one who makes mistakes, rather than live in denial of them.

For further reading on haunting as a metaphor for the critic’s implication in the disappearance of the speaking other in research and criticism, see Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, 10.

Gordon uses the metaphor of “haunting” as a theoretical tool to illuminate other and often ambiguous presences in research that otherwise go unmentioned, unheard, and unseen. In some ways, narratives are like ghost stories that continue to haunt history and representation, despite being denied a materiality of their own. These haunting figures are not only missing figures, but “social figures” that represent alternative histories that reveal alternative pasts within our own histories as well. See Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, 8, 167-68. Hauntings exceed the limits of representation by affecting the critical reader in ways that “exceed the parameters of the known, the rational and causative,” Ferreday and Kuntsman, “Haunted Futurities,” 7. Similarly, relational women’s life writing threatens to disturb dominant representations of the real. The absence of women in history demands a re-imagination of the real. The immateriality of the ghost is particularly disturbing to the observer or reader of the text as they may find themselves suddenly disturbed by the uncertainty of not knowing what might or might not be there. Disturbances represent the way unspeakable experiences of ghosts are felt and become real. Thus, Gordon’s theory suggests that listening for hauntings may eliminate the conditions responsible for creating them. In this way, hauntings may provoke an interrogation into the method and practice of representing others, rather than merely deconstruct such representations themselves.

It is impossible for me to adequately represent this sinking feeling in writing. However, it was through writing about this feeling, in trying to unearth the crux behind its meaning or purpose, that uncovered traces of my past experience which otherwise remained latent—unnoticed and/or otherwise dead in my memory of the moment when I recognized this “sinking feeling” first emerge.


This distance reminds me of what Gloria Anzaldúa refers to as a “block” which acts like a blind spot that over time separates us from others. See Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 100. I discuss this in further in chapter 3.

This is often referred to as “potential” in feminism.

Ahmed recognizes emotions as socially constructed which enables her to trace how emotions become attached to bodies and things, rather than emerge from these bodies and things themselves. See Ahmed, *The Culture Politics of Emotion*, 1-3; Ahmed, “Affective Economies,” 120; Ahmed, *Strange Encounters*, 36-7.


Ibid.

Ibid., 26-7.

Ibid., 32-33.
Ibid., 36.

44 This perhaps represents the colonizing tendency of my criticism. As a white subject I maintain the privilege to stay at home in my criticism, where others are permitted only as objects of my criticism that function as tools to support my argument, rather than active participants in the making (or unmaking) of such knowledge. The non-white “subject” of post-colonial studies has been in long contestation with this practice. See Spivak, *Can the Subaltern Speak?*, 66-111; Mohanty, “Under Western Eyes,” 333-358; Smith, “Queer Theory and Native Studies,” 42-68.

45 I remain unsure as to what exactly I am referring to by “them”-- my secrets or the other. I suspect in some ways, I mean both.

46 This has and remains the material experience for many non-white women who are remain silenced as objects in feminist criticism. See Spivak, *Can the Subaltern Speak?*, 66-111.

47 It is important to recognize that accounting for the partiality of knowledge and experience does not necessarily include the affectivity of material experience. I find in my criticism that while I am quick to mark my white privilege, and acknowledge the partiality of my knowledge, I remain silent about the affective experience of not knowing or being able to know for certain. I believe this represents an important difference.


49 Ibid., 28.


52 As a white privileged subject I find myself in constant struggle to maintain my right to privilege, even though I protest (and try to resist) white privilege at the same time. I explore this further in Chapter 3.


54 Ibid., 29, 37.

55 I believe I mean, fear to lose. I cannot remove (or lose) my white identity.

56 I remain unclear whether I am entering an other’s space, or rather realizing that I am already in the space (and knowledge) of another. I think this goes back to Andrea Smith’s argument regarding the way Native/Indigenous others function as objects in white feminist criticism and our tendency to dismiss the methodology of Indigenous/ Native theory. See Smith, “Queer Theory and Native Studies,” 42-68.

57 Diprose, "Belonging to Race, Gender, and Place Beneath Clouds,” 28-29.


59 Diprose, "Belonging to Race, Gender, and Place Beneath Clouds,” 29.

60 Ibid., 28, 37-38, 43, 47.
For example, critical race theorist bell hooks contends that for women of colour, speaking from the margins is an act of resistance in that the non-white subject refuses to locate themselves in the center of white experience. See Hooks, “Marginality as a Site of Resistance,” 341-344.


Ibid., 12-13.

Probyn *Outside Belongings*, 12-13; Diprose “Belonging to Race, Gender, and Place Beneath Clouds,” 46.


Clare Hemmings highlights feminism’s tendency to characterize narratives in terms as stories of progress, and explores the way these “progress narratives” write over the other, more dark and perhaps unsuccessful or repressive experiences that speak for a more accurate account of feminism as a whole. See Hemmings, *Why Stories Matter*, 31-58.


This of course is due to many reasons, including but not limited to, the material reality that women of colour are more likely to be displaced by white culture, and suffer the harsh oppressive material consequences of white western colonization.

I must note that as a white woman, this usually means not leaving my home in the literal sense, but figurative sense. That is, leaving my construct of home. The privilege of always being at home in both a literal and figurative sense is of course, an example of my privilege as a white woman. However, the difficulty I encounter leaving home is in many ways a sign of the way I am subordinated by my gender in white supremacist society. In this sense, I am never completely at “home” in my whiteness. This perhaps represents my contradictory and complicated relationship with whiteness.

Or perhaps that allows me to feel better about my white privilege.

In some ways, I feel I have come to expect, if not anticipate, that we do not agree, and yet, rather than explore this conflict I quickly duck and seek cover by choosing to not listen or simply write over what I anticipate the other to say. I explore this tendency further in chapter 3.
Chapter Three:

There’s No Place Like Home

When I first encountered Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands: La Frontera*, I immediately recognized it as a powerful piece of relational life writing. I was drawn to her concept of *mestiza consciousness*, which reflects a plural, unstable and incomplete relational identity. The mestiza consciousness represents a counter-hegemonic subjectivity that is tolerant of ambiguity, while embracing difference. Anzaldúa explains:

> The work of *mestiza* consciousness is to break down the subject-object duality that keeps her a prisoner and to show in the flesh and through the images in her work how duality is transcended. The answer to the problem between the white race and the colored, between males and females, lies in healing the split that originates in the very foundation of our lives, our culture, our languages our thoughts. A massive uprooting of dualistic thinking in the individual and collective consciousness is the beginning of a long struggle, but one that could, in our best hopes, bring us to the end of rape, of violence, of war.¹

As a queer Indigenous Chicana feminist, Anzaldúa speaks from her own experiences of being marginalized by white western culture. The ambiguity and plurality of her hybrid identity does not comply with hegemonic representations of identity. However, the mestiza consciousness represents an alternative sense of self that refuses to be contained by white, western borders. The *new mestiza* chooses to resist white influence by embracing a mestiza consciousness which transcends dualisms that reinforce hegemonic representations of identity and reproduce the borders separating individuals from their material relationships with places, things and others.

> Of course, as a white feminist I have internalized a sense of self-consciousness about my white privilege, so even though I felt the mestiza consciousness reflected my
image of relationality, I also recognized that my experiences and the experiences of new mestizas were not the same. I was also aware of how the differences between my position and Anzaldúa’s represented a disproportionate distribution of power and privilege that favored and benefited me as a white person, while reinforcing the marginalization of new mestizas who remained as “non-whites,” other people of colour with less privilege. Still, I felt a sense of duty to represent Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands: La Frontera* as a counter-hegemonic text. I felt that someone who had been marginalized by white western culture deserved to be heard. Anzaldúa deserved my respect and highest regard. She had grown up displaced and oppressed by white culture, yet continued to not only resist white western colonization, but established new theories of identity and consciousness that continue to challenge and change feminism’s engagement with women of colour today.

It is necessary that I mention that *Borderlands: La Frontera* is one of many works of Anzaldúa’s. She has authored, co-authored and edited numerous pieces of criticism ranging from life writing, fiction, essays and poetry, such as: *Interviews/ Entrevistas* (Edited by Ana Louise Keating); *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings of Radical Women of Colour* (co-edited with Cherrie Moraga); *This Bridge We Call Home; Radical Visions for Transformation* (co-edited with Ana Louise Keating); *Prietita and the Ghost Woman/ Prietita Y La Llorona* (illustrated by Maya Christina Gonzalez); *Friends from the Other Side/ Amigos del otro lado* (illustrated by Consuelo Mendez.) The above mentioned are but a few of Anzaldúa’s contributions. Anzaldúa’s writing is unique in that it blends creative writing and fiction with radical race theory to produce robust criticism that reflects an ingenious methodology in practice. She was born in south Texas
Rio Grande Valley (1942), later moving to Hargill, Texas, which sits at the physical border separating U.S and Mexico. The death of her father resulted in Anzaldúa having to work on the farm to help support her family, while she also worked on her critical and creative studies. She went on to become a writer, activist and scholar, and have a dramatic influential impact on feminist, critical-race and queer theory. Unfortunately, she died prematurely in 2004 due to complications with diabetes. Her premature death is in some ways reflective of the cultural-structural-material violence and oppression she endured throughout her life as a queer Chicana woman. She had been working towards completing her PhD. in Literature at the time of her death. Anzaldúa’s writing reflects her experiences of white western oppression, living as a queer Chicana woman on the U.S / Mexico border. Living in between cultures as a mixed identity, Anzaldúa was caught between identities; *Borderlands: La Frontera* is both her reflections of the emotional-psychological-cultural-physical of living between borders (nations and identities), and a radical theory of identity that subverts white western hegemonic representations. Yet, rather than create borders, her borderland theory articulates a desire to form new alliances and build new consciousness that reflects the fluidity and plurality of an alternative collective (and relational) identity. Anzaldúa has been the recipient of numerous awards including but not limited to the Before Columbus Foundation American Book Award, and the National Association for Chicano Studies Scholar Award in 2005 (posthumous). There remain numerous scholarships and awards that honour the legacy Anzaldúa began.

Reading and learning about Gloria Anzaldúa led me to conclude that she was an incredible woman who produced some of most robust and radical feminism I had ever
been exposed to. I remember wishing she was still with us today.³ Gloria Anzaldúa grew up in the trenches of the oppression I wanted so desperately to end.⁴ She was a fighter and fought white supremacist oppression from within. She refused to remain silent and subordinate. Not only did I respect that, I felt a sense of camaraderie with her as well. As a trained feminist, I knew not to be so naïve and assume that I as a white woman knew her experiences as if they were my own, or shared similar experiences of white oppression. Yet, I still felt this sense of connection with her. Perhaps it was because I believed we shared a common goal in our respective efforts to diffuse white western influence and subvert hegemonic representations of identity. Perhaps I felt that despite differences between our respective positions, our desire to change modern, white supremacist society was “the same.”⁵ Whether it be that we shared a common goal in our fight to diffuse white western influence and destabilize hegemonic representations of identity, our desire to fight white oppression was mutual. I wanted to meet her. I wanted to tell her that I thought she was right and smart, so smart. I wanted to talk about relationality and counter-hegemonic experiences of identity. I was interested in what she had to say-- I wanted to share with her my own thoughts and feelings about her experiences, not to colonize or control them, but to let her know how wrong I thought it was. I wanted her to know that while I acknowledged my identity as a member of the white culture that was responsible for her oppression and exploitation, I was different than other whites. Looking back, I wonder if on some levels I believed that had I been able to tell her this, if I could convince her of this, if I could demonstrate my awareness of white supremacy and show her I recognized my privileges as a white woman, if I could prove to her my intentions were good, just and honourable; I could not only
convince her that I was not like other whites (or had learned from their mistakes), I could convince myself as well. However, the truth is that for all the ways *Borderlands: La Frontera* reflected my idea of relationality, I could not escape my identity as a white feminist. I could look past it. I could state it and then try to bury it; I could pretend it could be left it behind by telling myself I had done everything that I as a white person could do to undue the effects of the my privilege. By stating my white privilege and remaining mindful of power infused in my speech, I believed that while I remained a white woman, I could also speak as something other than it—something less white. But the fact remained that whiteness followed me everywhere. Every time I went to write about relationality in *Borderlands: La Frontera*, or the subversive potential of the new mestiza, I remained haunted by my white identity. Nothing I could do, it seemed, changed this. No matter what I did, it remained. Which isn’t to say that I was trying to get rid of it per se, but that I was beginning to wonder if marking my white privilege was something that I did for my benefit than for those for whom this practice was intended to protect me from speaking.

I think in some ways white feminists have done a respectable job marking white privilege, but at the same time also tend to be less proactive when it comes to being accountable for the ways in which we benefit or lean on this privilege as feminists. I found myself increasingly likely to relate and discuss the parts of *Borderlands: La Frontera* that speak to me (that reflect my image of the relational subject), and reaffirm my position against racism (or support the image I hold of myself as a white woman who is anti-racist), than the other parts of Anzaldúa’s argument that highlight my reluctance to take responsibility for my implication in marginalized women’s oppression, let alone my
unwillingness to acknowledge how I’ve benefited from the oppression of others (whom I claim to defend) as well. It is almost as if I felt half of Borderlands: La Frontera was directed specifically at me, and acknowledged my sense of awareness (praising me for my resisting whiteness, and helping others resist whiteness), while I heard the other half of Borderlands: La Frontera as though it was either directed towards other whites, and certainly not me (who, despite being privileged by whiteness, was also oppressed by my gender as a woman).

Ironically, I think the fact that I was able to choose which parts of Borderlands: La Frontera to listen and respond to not only reflects my privilege as a white feminist, but reinforces it as well. In my previous chapter, I discussed some of the ways white feminism reinforced its position over other, non-white feminisms by (implicitly) representing the feminist subject as white, which in turn afforded white feminists the privilege to choose and determine which non-white feminist criticisms reflected the interest of feminism as whole. So, even though white feminists were trying to include other non-white feminists and maintain feminism’s plurality and complexity by including disparate and markedly different feminist theories from varying locations, the subject of feminism was still white and so still reflected the interests of white feminists. Yet, here I was, despite knowing this, committing a very similar act. Regardless of whether or not I believed that theoretically I had accounted for my privilege by marking my whiteness, in actuality I was advancing my own image of relationality. My criticism did not reflect on the ways in which the new mestiza subverted my so-called argument for relationality, it made Borderlands: La Frontera the object of my argument instead. So in practice, my theory used Anzaldúa’s life writing to support my own argument.
Instead of reflecting on the challenge of leaving the comforts of my (white) criticism, I had in fact gone nowhere. On the contrary, I had brought parts of *Borderlands: La Frontera* into my criticism and used them to place Anzaldúa inside the neighbourhood of my white feminism.\(^\text{10}\)

I didn’t mean to do this intentionally, of course. Or at least that is not how I remember it.\(^\text{11}\) Rather, my intention was to support Anzaldúa’s theory of mestiza consciousness, by demonstrating how the new mestiza represented a relational subject. Although I drew parallels between her experiences as a mestiza, and my experiences as a white woman, I was careful, if not hyper-conscious, of making sure I was in no way conflating her experiences with mine. I made it clear, very clear, that I was speaking as a white woman. This allowed me to believe that I was supporting Anzaldúa’s argument for mestiza consciousness and in many (recognizable) ways I was. However, in even more (unrecognizable) ways, I was not. Regardless of whether I meant to do this, and regardless of whether I did everything I had been taught by white feminism to account for the privileges of my position as a white woman, the *material* circumstances of my privileged identity (as a recognizably white woman) remained unchanged, unchallenged and undisputed in my criticism.\(^\text{12}\) I used the new mestiza to advance my theory of relationality. So, despite doing what I believed (or wanted to believe) to be the right thing, I was in fact doing a very white thing; in spite of my incessant avowal of my white privilege, I had colonized the new mestiza and made her my own.

Gloria Anzaldúa was aware of white feminist’s tendency to appropriate mestiza consciousness into feminism. In an interview with Karin Ikas, Anzaldúa suggests that
white critics tend to be selectively conscious of their privilege. She refers to this as a form of racism. Anzaldúa explains:

…some of the writing is glossed over as, particularly, white critics and teachers often pick just some parts of Borderlands. For example, they take the passages in which I talk about *metizaje* and borderlands because they can more easily apply them to their own experiences. The angrier parts of Borderlands, however, are often ignored as they seem to be too threatening and too confrontational. In some ways you could call this selective critical interpretation a kind of racism.¹³

When I first read this interview it did not anger or disturb me at all. Not at first. I wasn’t angry because I didn’t think Anzaldúa was referring to me. On the contrary, it seemed quite clear to me that she was talking to *other* whites; perhaps, non-feminist whites or white feminists reluctant to acknowledge white privilege, but not me. While I could not deny my membership in white society that had oppressed and marginalized her, I certainly did not reflect the face of someone whose “selective critical interpretations”¹⁴ were misguided and racist. My analysis of Borderlands: La Frontera supported the argument for a *mestiza* consciousness, while also acknowledging the differences in power, privilege and position between Anzaldúa and myself. My criticism, though the criticism of a white person, was certainly not racist. I was so sure of this that the thought didn’t even cross my mind. Racist? Not me.¹⁵

But, my criticism did omit the “angrier,”¹⁶ “threatening,”¹⁷ and “controversial”¹⁸ parts of Borderlands: La Frontera. Indeed, I glossed over the parts that seemed irrelevant to my experience as a white woman, or which challenged me as a feminist. Yet, the omission of these other, darker parts of Borderlands is blanketed by my admission of white privilege in my criticism. If any of these darker parts of Borderlands: La Frontera found a way into my criticism, I tended to represent it as my accountability
for my white privilege and my responsibility towards others. Always stated in my words, on my terms, and not Anzaldúa’s.

Marking my white privilege enables me to deflect Anzaldúa’s comments toward other whites. Or as though my knowledge of racism, and how I am implicated in racism prevents me from seeing myself in the racism that Anzaldúa describes. Looking back, I wonder if I was using my “marked” whiteness as a shield to protect me not only from the harsh materiality of Anzaldúa’s claims, but from myself as well. In marking my white privilege, my account works to write over material experiences which might otherwise contradict my image of a self-consciously responsible white feminist. So, in marking my whiteness I become not only removed from it, but blind to it as well.

Marking whiteness risks lending a false sense of control over my relationship with whiteness. By marking white privilege, the ways in which my criticism and/or actions reinforce rather than destabilize my privilege are disguised. For example, marking my white privilege failed to account for my privilege to choose which parts of the mestiza consciousness to include in my criticism, which reinforced rather than diffused my authority as a white feminist. Within the privileged space of my criticism, accounting for my privileges as a white removes me from the racist implications of my choice of analysis, allowing me to appear as a white woman who is anti-racist.

But, I still carry my whiteness with me wherever I go. Even when residing in the space of others, I am at home-- or at least, I have the privilege of speaking (and feeling) this way. I am at home with my whiteness, so to speak. In the space of my criticism, whiteness is domesticated, or at least this is how, to me, it appears; within the space of my criticism, I control the way my whiteness appears. So it remains present (I cannot
deny that), while under the guise of how I’d like it to appear. In some ways, my criticism is a testament to this. For example, I used to be ignorant of my white privilege and failed to mark my identity as a white subject. In turn I recognized all peoples under a white blanket of subject-hood. Chandra Mohanty has highlighted white feminism’s tendency to appropriate the knowledge and experience of women of colour and use it to support the interests of white feminist criticism. In many ways, this was exactly what I was doing. However, my experience as a feminist had trained me to recognize disproportionate distributions of privilege across varying lines of power and between different recognizable categories of identity (gender, race, sexuality, dis/ability). And yet, within the space of my feminist criticism, whiteness often only appears under the terms in which it has been marked. Under my roof, whiteness tends to reflect the image of someone who is responsible for her white privilege; my criticism upholds my identity as a feminist who resists white masculine hegemony (or who at least tries to), rather than reflect on the ambiguously slippery ways in which whiteness informs the image I hold of myself instead. Aimee Rowe refers to this as “white mobility”. White mobility suggests “(t)hat which remains unspoken powerfully enables White privilege and its observable effects on the lives of people of colour”. So, I appear to maintain a clean house, so to speak. This sparkling clean image accompanies me wherever I go, and I have the privilege, because I maintain such a clean house, of doing so. Everything I encounter must go through this image I hold of myself first. I choose who I let in. So within the comforts of home, I remain quite tolerant of differences. My criticism reflects this—my criticism argues this. In the space of my criticism I appear unafraid of conflicts,
discrepancies and disturbances; I embrace them. I am always a good white feminist when my house is in order. In my house, everyone and everything appears welcome.

In this way, the image of my criticism maintains my image of white feminism, insulating me from the harsh effects of others’ more negative experiences of my feminist criticism. There are times, of course, when other feminists will bring their issues to my door and complain. But, in my house I retain the right to decide if, how and when I open the door and let these others feminists with their criticisms in. So within my home space I appear to welcome differences and embrace different feminisms, this space is protected by the safety my white skin affords, and permits me the privilege of not only deciding who may come in, but also determining under what conditions non-white feminists are permitted to speak. So, while it looks as though my criticism houses the presences of multiple different and conflicting feminist criticisms, it maintains the order of the house by reinforcing the superiority of my criticism through the domestication of others.

Aimee Rowe suggests that identifying moments of silence about feminists’ complex relationship to white privilege may help illuminate racism within white feminism. While feminism has tried diligently to account for white privilege and take responsibility for the ways in which white feminist criticism’s authority reinforces the marginalization of others, Rowe’s concern also points towards how white feminists’ self-consciousness about their white privilege reproduces silences about privilege and racism in feminism. White feminists speaking about whiteness is always the simultaneous acceptance and denouncement of white privilege. Speaking about whiteness as something that can be contained or controlled, manufactures whiteness into something.
However, since the experience of whiteness is complex and contradictory, it cannot be accounted for by a simple gesture towards one’s physical identity as a white person, or reference about white privilege in general. Whiteness and white privilege are not things. But in marking whiteness, the ambiguity of its presence and effects become knowable. The question remains, what about the complex experience of white privilege embodied in white bodies? What happens when women with white privilege begin to reflect and explore the contradictions of our experience of white privilege? Does this find its way into my criticism? Or is this an example of women’s life writing?

My experience of whiteness is quite complex. As a woman I find myself subordinated by my gender. I hate whiteness for this very reason. Yet, as a white woman I benefit from the exclusion of non-white people. At the same time, as a feminist I fight diligently to deconstruct the barriers that discriminate against other women. As a woman I hate whiteness for the pain it has caused and continues to cause these women. But as a white woman I feel guilty knowing that I benefit from the exploitation and oppression of these other women as well. However, as a white feminist I find myself somewhat defensive about my privilege as well, because I feel I do everything possible to try to mark and account for it. So I don’t like being called out for racism. Racism? What racism? How can I be racist when everything I write is a testament to how conscious I’ve become of unequal differences in power? I cannot change the colour of my skin. I cannot undo what has happened in the past. So I do what I can to prevent and challenge these atrocities in the present. That’s why I’m a feminist.35 I don’t just stand up for white woman; I stand up for all women.36 This includes women of colour. I admit it’s not fair. I know it’s not right. I state this before everything I write. And I mean it.37 I do.
I do it even when so many other whites choose and refuse not to. So many whites don’t even care. At least I care. At least I am trying to do something about it. Why am I the one who is racist? How is that fair? What do you expect me to do about it? Give up everything I have? I won’t. I don’t want too—at least not yet. I need these things. I like this power. I’ve fought for everything I have. We both know I don’t even have that much power. I need what I have. I fear for who I am without my privilege. Who am I underneath this white skin? It’s hard being a white woman in white western culture. I’m afraid if I look deep enough of what I will find. Perhaps in some ways, privilege allows me to be who I am.

Who am I without my privilege? Deep down I feel this is perhaps what I am afraid to explore. So, as a feminist, I don’t ask this question, out of respect for others whom it might offend. I try to stay in compliance with feminism as a whole. I don’t say these things (I don’t even allow myself to think them). I say, “as a white woman with privilege, I feel”, even though, I must admit, I forget the last time I thought critically about what this meant. White woman; white women and who I am. It seems obvious, it sounds rhetorical—but it isn’t. Is it? The identity, white woman washes over who I am. It’s hard to imagine myself without it, but even harder to find words that describe my experiences as a white woman beyond what I know by heart and rehearse. To speak of such things out loud seems unethical, if not impossible. I wouldn’t even know where to start, or how. What does it mean when the unspeakable becomes unimaginable? How does this function to reinforce the authority of white privilege over me? How does this reproduce the whiteness that informs and touches everything I say or do without making a sound?
Rowe suggests that the tensions white feminists experience reflects the material experience of being both subordinated and privileged by whiteness, which inhibits white feminists’ capacity to speak about our experiences, especially if this reveals our dependence or desire for white power. Rowe explains:

Whiteness functions through ‘deflecting’ criticism. The prevalence of White feminists’ guilt and defensiveness that arises when they are confronted with issues of racism and nationalism raises important theoretical questions regarding how whiteness functions to maintain White privilege. Does Whiteness—as a discourse that shapes, informs and privileges the standpoints of White people-- tend to deflect criticism and preclude White self-reflexivity?\(^{39}\)

The internalization of white feminist criticisms about white privilege and white feminists’ implication in the marginalization of others censors white women’s writing, and protects the image they hold of themselves as feminists. She no longer speaks with these other women; she anticipates what they are going to say, and speaks for them. She is defensive. Yet, because she has internalized the rules of speaking as a white privileged subject, she is removed from any reason why. The complex relationship she has to white privilege becomes the unspeakable. The unspeakable prevents her from listening to what the other has to say. When Anzaldúa stated that the “selective interpretation” of *Borderlands: La Frontera* was a form of racism,\(^ {40}\) I did not recognize that her criticism was directed towards *white feminists like myself*. It was unimaginable to me, perhaps because of the way my unspeakable experiences of white privilege informed my experience of *Borderlands: La Frontera* as a white feminist. Instead, I deflected Anzaldúa’s criticism onto other feminists.

But I don’t sound defensive. At least I don’t sound defensive to me. Not at first. My anxiety about our encounter resolves itself as I become more reliant on my privilege
to decide what parts of her criticism I am going to recognize. However, at first I’m a bit of a mess. I feel guilty and lost. Those hidden feelings of being white, and being inherently attached to something associated with so much darkness, are difficult to bear. I don’t know what to do, or who to go to for help. I am afraid to ask the woman of colour for help. Why? Because I know what she is going to say. So instead I bury it. I try to work with women of colour and help fight against whiteness instead. Whiteness becomes our common enemy. I go to great lengths for her to know I am on her side. I mean it. I know her oppression and exploitation are not right. We are on the same side. But there remains this unspoken silence between us that circulates in the air we breathe. Is that even possible? An unspoken silence? It’s difficult to know for certain, but I can feel something there. I’m anxious-- noticeably, but not so much that I feel like I’ve lost control. Then at the last second it comes up. I panic. Racism. I hate that word. I know she feels that it is there. I tune it out. She is angry. Of course she is. I would be too. Before this goes on any longer, I quickly jump in. “There, there”, I say to myself. I’m reassuring her. I want her to know that I am here. That she is right. That I know she is right. Of course I agree with her. I speak before she can finish. “They’re so unaware.” She looks at me. We agree. She’s still mad. I look at her. “They should know better,” I say. I feel reassured. The awkwardness between us dissipates. Or so it appears. I feel better. We both do. I feel better knowing that we are connected; the feelings we share. What separates me from my whiteness and makes me different than the other whites with privilege, is that like the woman of colour, I know better. I may be white, but whiteness does not fool me. As a white woman feminist, I am aware.
In this way, I deflect Anzaldúa’s criticism onto other whites, and in turn, Anzaldúa appears to reflect what I want to hear. I feel we agree. Some white criticisms about *Borderlands: La Frontera* are racist. I see that. But I can’t see mine as that. Not yet. Not unless I allow myself to imagine the unspeakable. Not unless I dare to explore the effects of my white privilege outside the comforts of home. But if I do not allow myself to reflect on my motivations for staying here, or deconstructing my desire to only work with feminists who (appear to) share my idea of home, then how will I ever find reason to willfully step outside my construct of home and be in the (sometimes uncomfortable) space of another feminist’s criticism? If I am going to truly work with women of colour, then I have no choice but to get out of my comfort zone and meet them outside of my own criticism.⁴⁴

**Leaving the Idea of Home Behind**

Some feminists have recognized how *Borderlands: La Frontera* challenges white privilege as well. For example, Eve Wiederhold argues that *Borderlands: La Frontera* challenges the reader by using the inaccessibility of her text (to white readers) to force the western white reader from the comforts of their privileged affiliation to white western knowledge.⁴⁵ Since *Borderlands: La Frontera* is a multi-language text, the intermixing of languages is challenging to the white western reader. Part of white privilege derives from being a native speaker of the English language. The white feminist who was socialized within the meanings and values of North American discourse has the privilege of navigating through texts written in the *native* English language with far greater ease.
than non-native English-speaking feminists. Similarly, the white feminist’s ability to grasp white western meanings and concepts quickly allows them to speak articulately about their objects of study and present these arguments in a fluent, concise and recognizable manner with ease. Belonging to white, western culture as a white person affords white feminists an advantage in feminism. The non-white feminist (who may be less familiar with the English language or new to white, western meanings and knowledge) must work hard to learn the idiosyncrasies of English-speaking white culture in order to participate in feminism.

However, *Borderlands: La Frontera* requires the white feminist to cross over into the space of the unfamiliar, where meaning, identity and context are often ambiguous and unclear. Strings of English sentences are interrupted with Mexican, Indigenous, and Tex-Mex words and paragraphs in both prose and poetry. This not only frustrates the white, English-speaking reader, but it also disrupts their authority over the text as well. In this way, *Borderlands: La Frontera* becomes not an object to be deciphered, but a piece of criticism that challenges white, western methods and practices of interpretation. *Borderlands: La Frontera* actively resists western meaning. Rather than be at the center of white feminist debates concerning the ethics of representation and knowledge production, *Borderlands: La Frontera* shifts the conversation toward the limits of western white knowledge instead. While this of course has implications for the ethics of knowledge production in this space, the white feminist no longer leads the conversation, but instead is an object of discussion. Personally, I found *Borderlands: La Frontera* rather difficult to discuss confidently in part because its multi-faceted meanings and numerous layers of content alluded and escaped me. I didn’t feel comfortable speaking
about it. I still don’t. There is little to hold on to in the space of the borderlands for the white feminist. Everything is slippery, ambiguous and unclear. No wonder so many white feminists choose to hold onto the softer, more familiar parts of Borderlands: La Frontera. No wonder I wanted to discuss the mestiza consciousness abstractly rather than engage with the new mestiza herself. While I felt comfortable and willing to discuss the mestiza consciousness in my criticism, in the space of the Borderlands: La Frontera the new mestiza scared me. She provoked a re-consideration of myself.

The difference between my identity as a white woman and the new mestiza identity is not an oppositional one. However, this is not to infer that our experiences of identity are the same. I cannot become a new mestiza. Yet, my experience of identity is complicated by our encounter nonetheless. So, we are neither the same, nor in opposition to each other, and yet something about the new mestiza identity reminds me of a presence beyond the confines of myself. Looking back, it makes much more sense for me to try to learn from the new mestiza, rather than foolishly try to represent her experiences in feminism for her. And yet, why do I find myself so preoccupied with trying to represent her? Is it because I am afraid of what she is going to say? Will her words undermine my own? Will she call me out? Will she question the legitimacy of my criticism because it came from a white woman who (all this time) benefits from her oppression? I suppose this is true—but I have worked hard to get where I am. This white identity of mine, how quickly it spoils into something rotten—a heavy, white burden. Of course, what does that say about me as a white woman who speaks of her privilege as though it were something she wished she could give away? I don’t want to give it up. I don’t want to be tied to the negative consequences others endure. Maybe I do want to give it up, or at least some
of it. But it doesn’t work that way. I don’t think. It’s complicated and difficult. I
don’t want to benefit from the oppression of others (I really do not), but I’m afraid of
who I am, or where I’ll end up without my privilege. That’s the thing. Some might call
it an impasse. I’m confused as to where I should turn. If I cannot remove myself from
whiteness—if I cannot leave my white identity behind then what can I make of the
contradictions of my white privilege? Is there something I can do here? Perhaps this is
where I need to work with the woman of colour, rather than hide and pretend my
intentions are noble and just in trying to represent her—in refusing to listen and speak for
her.

Ironically, had I spent less time trying solve the problem of representing the new
mestiza and more time reflecting on the ways she complicates my self-image, I too might
be more likely to accept whiteness as part of my identity-- as part of who I am. This is
not to suggest that the new mestiza identity condones the oppressive violence and
marginalization imposed by white, western culture, but rather, to highlight that as a
mixed identity, the new mestiza contains traces of whiteness in her blood as well. Again,
I do not mean to infer that the new mestiza is white like me, or that my experience as a
white woman is the same as new mestiza’s. Clearly there are material differences
between us, which include difference experiences of privilege, power and position.
These cannot be ignored. However, there remains much more that I can learn from the
new mestiza as well. Perhaps learn is the wrong word. What I mean is that not only can
I learn from the new mestiza, but that there is something about her embodiment--- my
experience of her-- that allows me to see beyond the knowledge of myself. She does
something—something that in many ways undoes me. It’s difficult to explain. First, I
will discuss this potential in theory. Secondly, I will attempt to move beyond the
theorizing of this potential and into the space of being subject to this potential. I am not
endorsing this strategy as a method for decolonization. Only, having written criticism for
so long, I find myself lost as to how to start any other way.

The new mestiza is a mixed identity that is located on the borders of recognizable
categories of identity and experiences. Anzaldúa refers to this space as the borderlands.
By borderlands she is not only referring to a physical space, but also the cultural,
psychological and emotional experience of living on the borders. Anzaldúa writes:

to lives in the borderlands means you
are neither hispana india negra española
ni gabacha, eres mestiza, mulata, half-breed
caught in the cross fire between camps
while carrying all five races on your back
not knowing which side to turn to, run from; 49

Anzaldúa suggests that in order, “to survive the Borderlands/ you must live sin fronteras/
be a crossroads.” 50 The new mestiza must live “sin fronteras” 51 or without borders.
New mestizas must work to see beneath the surface-- to look past dualisms and embrace
the plurality of mestiza identity, meaning and existence. They must allow themselves to
be embraced by mestiza consciousness. Anzaldúa refers to this deeper sense of meaning
and higher consciousness as la facultad. La facultad is “an acute awareness mediated by
the part of the psyche that does not speak, that communicates in images and symbols
which are the faces of feelings.” 52 The new mestiza is not a self-determining identity per
se, but rather the embodiment of something more than the singular, autonomous
experience of identity.

However, as an inhabitant of the borderlands, the new mestiza carries a history of
oppression and exploitation with her as well. She has witnessed the violence of the white
supremacist Western culture. She has endured it. She has persisted through it. Yet, this history of violence and oppression remains a part of her identity as well. She cannot rid herself of the marks ingrained on her skin from her experience of white subjugation. Yet, Anzaldúa suggests that the plurality of the new mestiza identity is not dependent on removing the stains from her experience of whiteness. Rather, the plurality of the new mestiza identity includes whiteness. In order to live with a mestiza consciousness, the new mestiza must accept the white parts of her identity, rather than expel them.

Whiteness is not antithetical to her identity; whiteness is a part of her identity as a new mestiza. Yet, as a plural, fluid and incomplete identity, the new mestiza does not reinforce the supremacy of whiteness, but rather diffuses it by embodying multiple identities at the same time. This means that rather than exist as a singular identity that separates itself apart from other identities, the new mestiza identity is an identity that, “includes rather than excludes.”

Paradoxically, to resist whiteness is not to eradicate it, but to transcend the limitations of hegemonic representations of identity and accept whiteness as but a part of many multi-faceted components of identity. Anzaldúa explains:

The work of mestiza consciousness is to break down the subject-object duality that keeps her a prisoner and to show in the flesh and through the images in her work how duality is transcended. The answer to the problem between the white race and the colored, between males and females, lies in healing the split that originates in the very foundation of our lives, our culture, our languages, our thoughts.

To embrace the plurality, fluidity and incompleteness of identity, the new mestiza must become tolerant of difference and contradiction. She contains elements of Mexican, white and Indigenous identities. These are not components which exist as separate entities inside her, but rather elements which mix to embody a new mestiza identity. This
queers categories of identity; the difference between them becomes blurred, unstable and unclear. As a part of all of these identities she exists as neither one, fully. So, the new mestiza’s experience of white western categories defining race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality and class is quite complex. Her experience of identity resists classification and categorization; she refuses to categorize and classify as well. Otherwise, to rid signs of whiteness from her body would be to be at war with herself; to be at war with difference is to embody a purely white subjectivity. The new mestiza exceeds white objectivity, by embodying a different objective.

In doing so, Anzaldúa is encouraging her new mestizas to resist a position of counterstance.\textsuperscript{55} Anzaldúa writes: “within us and within la cultura chicana, commonly held beliefs of the white culture attack commonly held beliefs of the Mexican culture, and both attack commonly held beliefs of the indigenous culture. Subconsciously, we see an attack on ourselves and our beliefs as a threat and we attempt to block with a counterstance.”\textsuperscript{56} To “block”\textsuperscript{57} with a counter-stance” is to react to difference rather than respond; to recognize difference as oppositional (you are in opposition to me,) is to always be under threat (you want to dominate me). This creates borders rather than destabilizing them. In this way, a counter-stance position “blocks” new mestizas off from others, and estranges them from themselves as well. Anzaldúa explains:

The counterstance refutes the dominant culture’s views and beliefs, and, for this, it is proudly defiant. All reaction is limited by, and dependent on, what it is reacting against. Because the counterstance stems from a problem with authority—outer as well as inner—it’s a step towards liberation from cultural domination. But it is not a way of life. At some point, on our way to a new consciousness, we will have to leave the opposite bank, the split between two mortal combatants somehow healed so that we are on both shores at once and, at once, see through serpent and the eagle eyes…The possibilities are numerous once we decide to act and not react.\textsuperscript{58}
Anzaldúa suggests that new mestizas develop a tolerance for difference—to be at home with ambiguity. To react against whiteness confines one to a position where they are always on the defense. These “blocks” crystalize to form blind spots, such that in trying resist the oppressor, one becomes more entangled in the oppressor/oppressed stalemate. However, it is important to acknowledge that Anzaldúa is not suggesting that new mestizas forget the material consequences of being oppressed by white supremacist Western culture, nor ignore the pain and suffering of having to live with this history either. Rather, she encourages new mestizas to remain a part of this past, yet exist beyond the confines of being “the oppressed” and cross over into the space of the borderlands. Here, the borderlands becomes a space where new mestizas can create new identities and new meanings based on plurality and contradictiveness of identity, meaning and difference. Looking inward requires one to step out of the oppressor-oppressed binary and embody a position that does not merely counter oppression, but rather alter the dynamics of the relationship instead.

The new mestiza is a difference maker, rather than marker of difference. As a game changer she is no mere object; she changes the object of the game. In order to end oppression, Anzaldúa suggests new mestizas work with white subjects. Anzaldúa writes, “I think we need to allow whites to be our allies…they will come to see that they are not helping us but following our lead.” By encouraging new mestizas to work with whites who are willing to leave the comforts of their privilege and meet the new mestiza in a neutral space, the space of the borderlands, I believe Anzaldúa’s concept of the new mestiza identity introduces the white subject to an alternative objective of identity as a whole. She encourages new mestizas to accept and acknowledge the plurality of their
identities, by stepping away from a counter-stance position against whiteness themselves. However, if white subjects are going to work with new mestizas, then we will have to leave the comforts of our homes and cross over into the space of the borderlands. We must come to terms with the fact that it is not they who need us, but we who need them; to teach us a new objective that, while including “white” identity (such as it is), is not defined by whiteness either.

**Feeling My Way Through the Dark**

As a white woman of relative privilege, my experience of whiteness differs from Anzaldúa’s. Clearly our respective criticisms come from different locations as well. Navigating through *Borderlands: La Frontera* as a white woman can be tricky, because I relate to so much of what she has to say. But this sense of common ground, sisterhood or sameness is twisted, so to speak. The material circumstances of our experiences, while related, remain drastically different indeed. I do not think that *Borderlands: La Frontera* seeks to change this, nor do I feel that transcending our material differences is even possible either. However, I believe what *Borderlands: La Frontera* does is encourage feminists to talk about our differences so that we can learn from them. Or at least, this is what it did for me. Yet, since there is a disproportionate distribution of power and privilege within feminism, working together means not only recognizing those differences, but also recognizing how white feminists have depended on white privilege to establish their criticism and reinforce their position over other, non-white feminist critics. But *Borderlands: La Frontera* goes deeper than simply declaring white
westerners “oppressors,” demanding their apologies and being done with it. Of course, recognizing our dependence on white privilege is easier said then done. I have tried to highlight my reluctance to leave the authority of my criticism at home. To this day, I remain haunted by it. But, I think a lot can be said for reflecting on the difficulty I have living relationally, rather than just suggesting or theoretically proposing that we should live relationally instead. As a white woman, part of my privilege depends on the continued oppression of marginalized others. Yet, as a feminist I am committed to working diligently to end this oppression as well. Earlier I referred to the implications of the contradiction of my experiences as a white woman feminist as a sort of impasse. But, I wonder if the way past this border is not to explore the problem of white privilege from the outside, but to reflect on my experience of white privilege by writing from within?

Anzaldúa’s borderland theory provoked me to consider that rather than deconstruct borders from a position outside, I might acknowledge that if I am going to destabilize boundaries that confine and oppress identities, I must recognize my location inside borders as well. While home is a privileged and secure place, for women with white privilege, the construct of home can confine one in their own image. So in order to dismantle borders and resist hegemonic representations of identity, I must look inward, decolonize my mind, reconnect with my heart and body, rather than look towards the future in the distant horizon.

Although I know this, I find myself reluctant to commit to action. While I may do so in theory, in practice I hide behind the authority of my theoretical assumptions. As far as I am concerned, Anzaldúa was right. I am reluctant to commit to her. My idea of relationality is one where working together is our only solution, until my authority is
called into question. Then I’m not so sure, and less willing. So, with one hand I reach out to others and call for the inclusion of marginalized individuals, while at the same time my other hand draws up an argument to support my own criticism. In some ways, I feel I secretly want others to recognize why I deserve to be in the privileged position I am in. I recognize that sounds horrible and wrong, but at the same time why am I afraid or reluctant to say it out loud? What does this silence do? Perhaps in some ways it creates an absence in my criticism. Despite all my so-called efforts and knowledge of feminism as a discipline, am I one of those other white women who are either too ignorant of their privilege to acknowledge, or so arrogant to believe they deserved the privileges they’ve earned? What is more disconcerting, however, is that I am more worried about how this may sound, rather than what, if true, I’ll find if I look further deep down inside. While I am in many ways incapable of providing an answer to these questions, these questions lead me to consider that in saying nothing, in keeping these feelings of discomfort and ugly thoughts inside, am I reproducing a silence that enables me as a woman with white privilege to hide?

Unable to keep still, I find my mind begins to wander. I think about Borderlands: La Frontera and what a coward I am. I am the oppressor. Worse, I am the oppressor who is in denial that she is an oppressor, which I’m sure is ten times worse. Even when I’m not the one doing the oppressing, I still benefit from the other’s oppression. So I find little comfort in that. Not now. I begin to wonder if I am going to get kicked out of academia for being a bad feminist. Is that selfish? Very self-centered. Am I the most cowardly white feminist there is? Am I the only white feminist who doesn’t want to let
go of her privilege? Whether I am lucky or unlucky that there is no one to answer, I remain unsure. My discomfort festers in the silence.

I think about Anzaldúa and what she might say if she were to meet me, but then I remember that she is dead. We’ll never meet. I think about how I am a part of the structural violence that may in fact have contributed to her diabetes and death. Now I feel responsible for my own defeat. I’m left feeling like I’m missing something or someone who I never even met. Flustered, I try to remember *Borderlands: La Frontera* as best I can. I flip through the book, which from my research is now littered with notes. I try to look past the words I’ve marked on the page. Somewhat embarrassed by my miscomprehension, I try to re-work my way through the text. I remember. I remember what she said about fear and ambiguity. I remember what she said about being disturbed, coming into new knowledge suddenly, and then struggling to bury it deep; deep, very deep to hide from it; to protect my self from being disturbed by it. I remember how despite this, during all the time spent hiding or pretending nothing was there, it reaches up and pulls all of you down with it. I remember—something. The Coatlicue state.66 The Coatlicue state disrupts one’s self-narrative by drawing one’s consciousness towards the unseen, which has the potential to open the self up to change (despite the pain and discomfort this process may cause the subject). It is a dark time characterized by ambiguity, uncertainty, pain and fear, which Anzaldúa suggests are necessary to move past the comforts of pretending to be at home in the present.67 *Is that what she said? Is this what she meant?* Confused and rattled, I grow unsure of the state my mind is in.

Our circumstances, of course, are not the same. She has been oppressed by white culture, and I am a white woman who has benefited from her oppression. But I am also a
woman. So, we have that in common, and in some ways I suppose this makes me
oppressed by the white culture as well. Not in the same way as Anzaldúa, of course, but
as a white woman, perhaps. That’s terrible, I think to myself. I try to push it away.
Terrible. I feel a bit better. I may be reluctant to acknowledge privilege, but I do
maintain the sense of knowing what I can and can’t say. I’m still a feminist.

A moment of silence, I notice. There is no one here. I’m sitting here holding
Anzaldúa’s Borderlands: La Frontera in my clammy hands and I can’t let go the thought
of my own oppression. It’s not the same. Of course it’s not. It’s not the same.
Instinctively, I repeat and reiterate, repeat and reiterate again. Still, I persist. I think. I
think hard. I think hard to myself about what it would be like if I were the one on the
other side of the border. Her side. I think about growing up over there. I shudder.
Horrible. Inhumane. Unfair. I think about the feeling of being displaced from my home.
But I am dismayed, because I don’t really know that feeling. As a white woman, I’m
always at home, in a sense. I think about living as though I was in someone else’s body,
but I have problems imagining that as well. I think about what it would feel like to be a
nobody, wanting to be somebody, secretly knowing that I was a somebody and that the
whole world and this god forsaken white western system was complete bullshit. I’m
angry now. I’m familiar with that feeling. I’m growing more angry now. It festers.
Deep. Somewhere deep.

I begin to look down before I look up, and when I look up it is with a mixture of
disdain and suspicion. What are you looking at? I can see myself saying that. To whom,
I’m not so sure. About what, I don’t know either. But I can see myself saying it, and I
can feel the way it sounds. It sounds mean and angry. Of course it sounds angry. It
sounds as though it came from someone living in hell. I find myself a bit startled by the sound of my own voice. This doesn’t sound like me. It sounds mean and violent. That’s not me. Not usually. Not ever, really—unless, of course, I am threatened. Is this me? Is this what I sound like? I don’t remember sounding like that. But this feeling is familiar. Is this what I sound like to others on the other side? Is this what I would sound like if I were from the other side? Is this what life is like on the borderlands?

Had I grown up between the borders of U.S/Mexico as a Chicana woman, I know I’d be mad as hell. I don’t know if I’d even be able to look at whites in the face. I think white feminism would annoy me because it would constantly be telling me how much potential I have, but also always trying to remind me that I need white feminists to reach this potential of mine as well. As if I cannot see. I’d think they were scared of me. That they weren’t so much trying to help me, as much as they were trying to control me. I’d think that they don’t really want to hear what I say, just have me around as a symbol of the legitimacy of their own projects. It’s like I were a trophy. That’s what I’d think. But I don’t need representation. I want engagement! Their desire to help would feel like they were patronizing me. That makes me angry. I want you to let me help myself. I want you to listen to me, not tell me what my anger says about me! I would be so angry. I’m angry right now. Growing up in the borderlands would be hell. No wonder I’m reluctant to acknowledge, let alone give up, some of my privilege. I don’t want to be treated like shit. No one deserves to put up with that garbage.

I have this weird look on my face. I haven’t seen it before. I look unfamiliar. I try to rub it off, but despite this, the muscles in my face won’t relax. I think about Anzaldúa’s borderland theory and the new mestiza. I remember writing about the
potential of relational identity and how lovely it was or could be if we’d just recognize our dependence on each other. I begin to wonder about whether or not I’d be willing to put my trust in someone who I perceived as a threat. Have I? I wonder if I’d even survive in the borderlands. I don’t always do well with blank spots. I tend to like ambiguity only when it suits me. I’m afraid of dark spaces. I sleep with a night light. I don’t like not knowing where I’m going. I tend to get lost easily. If I can’t distinguish your space from mine, or the difference between us—what separates me from you— I grow wary and anxious. It’s uncomfortable not being able to control how others perceive you. At least in the borderlands it would be. For me. I’m used to people having a sense of who I am beforehand. In my house, I know where everything is and who everyone is. I don’t need the lights on. I know where I am.

I am reminded of what Anzaldúa said about crossing over and how the new mestiza could learn to recognize the borderlands as a space of neutrality. The truth is, I don’t always feel safe or friendly when lost or wary of the fact I might be wrong. I tend to get defensive. I’ve noticed this about myself. I know it’s not very academic of me, but I do. Sometimes I’m territorial if I feel like you think it’s your right to criticize me. You are speaking out of turn. That’s what I tend think to myself. You act like you are omniscient, speaking as though you are in two spaces at once. That’s what I say. I don’t appreciate being an object in someone else’s story, let alone being subject to their criticism. Not if they don’t know me. Not if they have the wrong idea about me.

Unless I was forced to visit the borderlands, I probably wouldn’t go there. This just dawned on me now, but I think it is true. I laugh a bit as I glance at the margins of the pages with my previous notes about how wonderful and full of potential the
borderlands are. I’m suddenly repulsed by all this potential. I just don’t see myself wanting to go there unless I had to, now that I think about it. I just don’t. *I don’t want to go.* I’ve decided. No one can force me go, anyways. It’s my choice. It dawns on me, perhaps this was one of the privileges I might have to hold on to.

So, on my side of the border, I thought more about the problem of listening to others. I thought again about my two hands: one that was reaching out to include others, and the other that was writing the terms of their inclusion. *The contradiction of the impasse,* I said. I thought about my power to exclude others and my fear of being excluded if I were ever “outed” as an other.\(^71\) I remembered Anzaldúa and what she said about resisting a position of counter-stance.\(^72\)\(^73\) I can’t rid myself of whiteness, I thought. I can mark my whiteness, but I think this mostly works to make me feel better about my white privilege, rather than deconstruct it. But at the same time I can’t erase whiteness from me either. So where does this leave me then? I thought again of what Anzaldúa said about getting trapped in the confines of the oppressor/ oppressed stalemate. As a feminist, I hate dualisms. Dualisms are oppressive and I fight to deconstruct them. But as a white woman, I tend to depend on dualisms as well. I lean on dualisms when I need them, and transcend dualisms when they are in my way. I thought again about my two hands and the way each countered the other’s actions. Anzaldúa would hate me. *Would she?* It’s difficult to say because we are neither the same nor oppositional to each other. The answer to the question remains ambiguous. I sigh. Frustrated, I appear to be getting nowhere. Wait. *Is this me embodying a position of counterstance?* Slowly, I begin to catch on.
The truth is, I wanted Anzaldúa to like me. I thought she was intelligent and strong. She was accomplished, and had overcome the material disadvantages of living in the borderlands to produce great works. She also lived her theory of the borderlands, rather than simply theorize and write about it. The truth is I couldn’t even represent her if I tried. I understand my position of privilege as a white feminist, but I’m not nearly as accomplished as Anzaldúa, and that’s an understatement. So I felt quite indebted to her. Even though there were parts of her borderlands theory that did not suit me, the rest of it blew my mind. She would have been someone who I would’ve wanted to be a friend of mine. Her perspective surely would have helped mine.

However, then I came across this:

We need to say to the white society: We need you to accept the fact that Chicanos are different, to acknowledge your rejection and negation of us. We need you to own the fact that you looked upon us as less than human, that you stole our lands, our personhood, our self-respect. We need you to make public restitution: to say that, to compensate for you own sense of defectiveness, you strive for power over us, you erase our history and our experience because it makes you feel guilty—you’d rather forget your brutish acts. To say you’ve split yourself from minority groups, that you disown us, that your dual consciousness splits off parts of yourself, transferring the “negative” parts onto us. (Where there is persecution of minorities, there is shadow projection. Where there is violence and war, there is repression of shadow.) To say that you are afraid of us, that to put distance between us, you wear the mask of contempt. Admit that Mexico is your double, that she exists in the shadow of this country, that we are irrevocably tied to her. Gringo, accept the doppelganger in your psyche. By taking back your collective shadow the intra-cultural split will heal. And finally, tell us what you need from us.74

I felt sick to my stomach. I remembered reading this the first time and distinctly telling myself that I would not be one of those white people that refused to acknowledge their role in her exploitation, nor recognize the way they benefited from her oppression. I remember thinking Anzaldúa was right to call these other white people out. I still
thought she was right. But this time I wouldn’t be spared the stomachache. I felt this
depth discomfort with myself—with how I saw myself. I couldn’t shake it. My image of
feminism and myself could no longer be separated from the image of Anzaldúa. *Is this
what the borderlands is like?* I couldn’t be sure. Uncomfortable, but needing to do
something, I thought about what I should do. I felt I owed it to her to at least spare her
the bullshit.

I felt a bit lighter. Oddly, my feelings of shame and guilt for being a bad feminist
began to evaporate. I wasn’t answering to *white* feminism anymore. I was speaking to
Anzaldúa. Or at least, trying to respond. I thought about everything that she had written
that I had read or could remember, and then again about what I uncovered here. I decided
to respond as if she was sitting right next to me here. I wanted her to know that she was
right. She was right. I wanted her to know that I knew she was right and that I knew she
didn’t need me to say that, I needed me to let her know I knew that. She was write, and I
wanted her to know that I knew that I’ve been afraid to admit it all along. I was afraid
because of how it might sound, what it might mean, what it might make me look like.
So I didn’t say it. I wrote a lot of criticism. I said a lot of things. But on that, I remained
silent.

The truth is, I care about what you think about me. I do, and I was trying to be
one of those other feminists who get it, you know, who understand *Borderlands: La
Frontera*. I didn’t want to admit this was a form of colonialism. I didn’t want to see it
that way. I didn’t necessarily mean it that way. I wanted to cross over into the
borderlands and meet you, but it was much easier to stay where I was and talk about you
from afar. So that’s what I did. But, at the same time, I also wanted you to think I was
one of the good whites that got it. Not to deceive you, but to deceive myself. I have this thing, this deep desire to always look good. It’s about writing effective criticism. I did it to protect myself. By masquerading as an accountable feminist I was avoiding this difficult conversation. I could maintain the privilege of feeling comfortable and secure around you. In pretending, I thought I could spare myself the embarrassment. You know? I know that’s more how I think then what you think, but for some reason I’m uncomfortable when I’m not in the position to determine what an other is thinking. I get anxious. Maybe it’s just me, but I like the power that comes with not needing recognition, or not letting other people know that I secretly want them to recognize me.

I may not have stolen your land with my own hands, but I perpetuate that violence every time I act as though we are in my home. I react. Recognizing the history of violence you endured from the white culture not only fails to account for the way I benefit from it, it makes it appear as though I am being accountable. While I was not materially present to witness the “brutish acts,” you endured, you couldn’t be more correct, I’d much rather forget the times I’ve acted as though I know more about you than you do. Deep down, I need to think I am better than you. Otherwise I’m lost. I can’t find my way or make sense of who I am, where I stand. Or at least, this is what I fear. This is what keeps me from allowing myself to be more than who I think I am. So, I project my insecurities onto you because it helps me live as though I possess few. I do this. I have. I continue to.

I suppose in some ways I use my knowledge of material feminism to demonstrate how knowledgeable I am. To make me feel good, which, though ironic, remains in many ways true. My knowledge is a crutch. It affords me mobility. But leaning on it just gets
me by. I hide behind my knowledge to disguise the problems I have living relationally. Not just from you, but from myself. It’s so hard to live relationally. It’s easier to be comfortable in a group of others if you appear knowledgeable. This is a privilege my identity as a white woman feminist affords. I don’t even know if it’s fair to say I do this on purpose. But living in fear that I do this on purpose is part of what “block(s)” me from recognizing myself when I do it. Your borderland theory helps me in this respect, because it reminds me that I am more than the product of my intention. This permits me to take responsibility for things that are not necessarily my intention, but a by-product of my actions nonetheless. If I allowed myself to listen to you more, I could probably get past this fear— the anxiety I have when faced with an impasse. I think I’m more afraid of myself than you. Maybe that’s what you mean when I say I transfer the negative parts of myself on to your skin. I’m afraid of losing my privilege because I’ve grown so unfamiliar with who I am without it. Maybe I am afraid that this other part of myself is no longer there. It’s hard. Hard for me anyways; I grew up with this privilege. Born white, I inherited this privilege. It’s hard to allow myself to be someone other than this image I’ve reserved for myself. I know all this, but it still haunts me. How do you live in the borderlands? How do you continue to survive? I’m chased by this perception of who I should be and even though I know this and know otherwise, in times of fear or doubt, this potential scares me.

I do need you. You exceed me; you remind me of the existence of something beyond myself. But you are so much more than this as well. You mentioned you wanted us whites to ask what I need from you? I need you to forgive me. I need you to be patient with me, but I also know I need you to keep me accountable. I need you to love
me enough to be hard on me. But more importantly, I need to be accountable for my
words. I need to commit to live in the borderlands. This is not something you can give
me, but rather what I must try to do for you. I need to commit to living in the
borderlands, but my whole life has been in a denial of this fact, and I have benefited from
watching you struggle for a long, long time while I lived in denial. I need to remember
this. I want to promise you I won’t forget this, but at the same time I must admit that
know I have forgotten before.

I decided to end this chapter on *Borderlands: La Frontera* with a piece of life
writing because I felt it reflected my experience, my sometimes troubling experience,
with Anzaldúa’s text. I recognize this is not the intention of Anzaldúa’s text, nor does it
encompass the meaning of *Borderlands* as a whole. But it reflects the way in which
Anzaldúa’s writing moved me to reconsider the way I imagine myself as a feminist
nonetheless. Secondly, I am not attempting to represent her text, but rather represent the
ways her writing challenged my criticism on the relational subject in women’s life
writing. Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands: La Frontera* is a piece of life writing that does not try
to represent her material experiences of living on the borderlands to her readers, but
rather reflects her borderland theory of the new mestiza and mestiza consciousness *in
practice*. In doing so, I believe the significance of her text does not only lie in the
meaning of her words, but partly in the way she problematizes the white western critical
reader’s access to (and authority over) meaning. The ambiguity of the text disrupts the
authority of the reader’s criticism, and their position as critic is destabilized. I believe
this creates a space between reader and their position as critic. Their identity as critic is
temporarily suspended as they become immersed in the undefined space of the
borderlands. While perhaps threatening at first, this shift in power moves the reader to look into the hidden, perhaps darker, parts of their identity. The discoveries s/he makes are not the products of their own knowledge, but rather reflections of their experiences in the knowledge of others. In this way, the relationship between criticism and text is redrawn and the boundaries between the critical and creative undefined. Theory emerges from the materiality of embodied experience; life writing is the practice of this theory.

1 Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 102.

2 This represents the way the significance of my criticism depends on the promise of change it will be. By looking towards the future, I write over the present and represent other’s experiences as objects that reflect the need and importance of my white feminist criticism. For more comprehensive analysis of the way the desire for a utopian vision of feminism reinforces boundaries between white and other feminists of colour, see Ahmed, *Promise of Happiness*, 21-87. See also Clare Hemmings work on the implications of progress narratives in feminism. Hemmings, *Why Stories Matter*, 1-31.

3 Gloria Anzaldúa died in 2004 due to complications from diabetes.

4 Oppression that not only did I want to end, but was very much implicated in at the same time as well.

5 In hindsight, I doubt that is even possible; or at least, not in the way I envisioned it when writing these words for the first time. While my efforts to resist and subvert white oppression may have appeared to me to share some resemblance with Anzaldúa’s, I fail to account for my complex relationship to white privilege. Do Anzaldúa and I share the same desire to dismantle white supremacy? I’d be inclined to say yes, if not readily support this claim, until, of course, I consider the potential material consequences of losing my white privilege. While I am unprepared to suggest that I support white supremacy, I no doubt benefit (as a white woman) from it. If anything, I think my statement suggesting Anzaldúa and I share a similar desire to usurp white power is indicative of my complex and contradictory relationship to whiteness.

6 On the contrary, I feel that I did want to rid myself of the negative parts of whiteness, while keeping the benefits. This of course, leaves me with what appears to be a conflict of interest since the oppressive colonizing tendencies of white society reinforce my privilege as a white woman.


8 Linda Alcoff suggests, “part of white privilege has been precisely whites’ ability to ignore the ways white identity has benefitted them.” Alcoff, “What Should White People Do?,” 8.

9 It must be noted that I do not escape the problem of representing Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands* as an object in this chapter either. In some ways, this chapter functions to do the opposite of what is intended, and re-centers my experience as the subject in *Borderlands* and represents Anzaldúa as an object of study. Please refer to the Conclusion, where I reflect on the problem of re-positing my experience at the center of the texts discussed.
It seems somewhat absurd to suggest someone of Anzaldúa’s significance to feminism could find their work occupied by my criticism, however this is what my criticism (unintentionally and inadvertently) worked to accomplish on some levels. I do not mean to suggest or reinforce the notion that *Borderlands* is dependent on white feminism for recognition. Only that my argument for the potential of the mestiza consciousness to represent a relational, rather than hegemonic identity, reinforces the authority of my criticism over Anzaldúa’s life writing, and fails to acknowledge *Borderlands* as a piece of robust criticism (the importance of which exceeds my discussion of her text here).

Or perhaps choose to remember it.

*Borderlands* is often quite critical of whiteness and white women in particular. Yet, interestingly these parts of *Borderlands* were absent in my initial criticism, or at best, represented as evidence that I had accounted for my position as a white feminist.


Ibid.

Aimee Rowe suggests that in acknowledging the harmful effects of racism, white feminists may still fail to recognize the ways their own actions towards women of colour are racist as well. Rowe, “Locating Feminism’s Subject,” 72.


Ibid.

Ibid.

Aimee Rowe explores the way whiteness deflects criticism by using the white feminist’s position of privilege to pass blame or project problems onto the other in an attempt to escape the other’s criticism. Rowe, “Locating Feminism’s Subject,” 65, 69, 71-74.

It should be notes that these “claims” are in fact material experiences of violence and oppression.

See Rowe, “Locating Feminism’s Subject” 69, 71-74; Alcoff, “What Should White People Do?,” 17.

The mobility I am afforded as a white subject is another example of my white privilege. Yet, interestingly, my defensiveness here seems to operate to reinforce my right to (and dependency on) white privilege as well. See also, Rowe, “Locating Feminism’s Subject,” 72.

I am at home in my whiteness, yet I possess this incessant need to defend my right to be at home as a white feminist as well. In doing so I reinforce the colonial project, rather than subvert it.

It remains unclear to me the degree of control I possess over how my whiteness appears, or whether I am in fact controlled in part by the illusion that I possess this control.

Mohanty, “Under Western Eyes,” 335. See also Smith, “Queer Theory and Native Studies,” 42-68.

While accounting for my white privilege marks me as a white subject, it does not necessarily suggest that upon doing so I am no longer at home in my location. On the contrary, I suggest marking myself as white in some ways permits me to be at home with my whiteness, allowing me to carry it with me wherever I go—to feel as though at I always at home (even when in the space of the other).
Rowe, “Locating Feminism’s Subject,” 67.

Ibid.

The white woman who as a feminist has taken responsibility for her whiteness.

These “complaints” are in fact counter-hegemonic criticisms. Or simply, criticisms which, under the authority of my criticism, I am permitted to reduce to mere claims and complaints, rather than criticism that subverts my own arguments.

In some ways the fact that I work to subvert white culture and deconstruct hegemonic representations of identity which marginalize and oppress others, has afforded me the privilege to gain (unrightfully so) a sense of entitlement that permits me to speak more, rather than less.

See also Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?,” 66-111.

Rowe, “Locating Feminism’s Subject,” 69.

Aimee Rowe suggests, “the prevalence of White feminisms guilt and defensiveness that arises when they are confronted with issues of racism and nationalism raises important theoretical questions regarding how whiteness functions to maintain White privilege.” Rowe, “Locating Feminism’s Subject,” 71.

It should be noted that I was drawn to feminism out of self-interest also. Feminism challenges oppressive hegemonic representations of identity which oppressed my experience of identity as a white woman as well.

The ability to choose which women I stand up for is another example of my white privilege.

Linda Alcoff has been critical of white guilt, and explored the problem of disavowing whiteness. White guilt risks fixating the white subject as the uncontested subject, while disavowing whiteness functions to distance the white subject from their implication in whiteness, and allows them to live more freely as white subjects. Alcoff suggests that white subjects develop a “double consciousness”. She explains that a “double consciousness requires an everpresent acknowledgement of the historical legacy of white identity constructions in the persistent structures of inequality and exploitations, as well as a newly awakened memory of the many white traitors to white privilege who have struggled to contributed to the building of an inclusive human community”. See Alcoff, “What should White Peop[e] Do?,” 24-25. In doing so, Alcoff complicates the image of whiteness. In (re)presenting whiteness as a plural, fluid and incomplete identity, she highlights its heterogeneity, which diffuses the authority of whiteness as a homogenous and universalizing construct as a whole. However, by including the negative and oppressive effects of white colonial history and violence at present, the white subject remains implicated in whiteness, rather than absolved in their position outside and removed from the privileges of belonging to whiteness as a white subject.

Or the illusion of having power; the power of illusion whiteness affords me as a white subject.

Rowe, “Locating Feminism’s Subject,” 71.

Anzaldúa, Borderlands, 271-2.

I have recently noticed that I especially hate the word *racism* when it is directed towards me.

I am speaking to her.

While I am directing this towards others, figuratively I am speaking to (and about) myself.
Beth Berila reflects on her experiences of teaching *Borderlands* to students with white privilege to highlight how *Borderlands* subverts dominant white western constructions of home. She documents her students’ reactions to the text, tracing the process of decolonization that *Borderlands* triggers in her white students. Working with Chandra Mohanty and Biddy Martin’s “Feminist Politics: What’s Home Got to Do With It?” Berila notes that students the students with white privilege tended to be quite defensive to *Borderlands*, and initially did not relate to the text. However, over time, this repulsion turned to affection, where students of privilege began to relate with the new mestiza and in particular, drew on their own accounts of being oppressed, despite their privilege as white subjects. However, in working further with these students, Berila was able to encourage her students to recognize the implications of their privilege as white subjects. In this way, Berila contends that *Borderlands* encourages a reflexive criticism that has the potential to make room for lesser privileged and marginalized identities to speak in the classroom. Ironically, this space is created in part by encouraging the white subjects in the class to work through their feelings of discomfort with the text, and to openly explore their implication in the other’s oppression, with other non-white members of the class. In doing so Berila suggests *Borderlands* breaks the silence that exists across different experiences of power. In this way, Berila suggests that *Borderlands* encourages a new dialogue by disrupting the subject’s comfort of feeling at home in their white privilege.


Simona Hill teaches *Borderlands* to her students with the aim of highlighting and problematizing their relationship to privilege and the way their privilege positions them as readers. She explains that having her students struggle to read through or make sense of *Borderlands* “de-normalized the privilege of using English in all forms of communication.” See Hill, “Teaching la Coniencia de la Mestiza in the Midst of White Privilege,” 132. Similarly, Eve Wiederhold discusses how *Borderlands* challenges the white western conceptions of representation and democracy in modern society. Wiederhold suggests that in supposing all bodies are free to participate equally, modern western institutions of knowledge ignore the way knowledge and the familiarity of language and information privilege some participants over others. Wiederhold highlights the way the style of writing in *Borderlands* disrupts the authority of the white reader as well. By intermixing prose and poetry and interrupting the English language with mixtures of languages, phases and slang that are unfamiliar (if not unknowable) to the average white reader, many parts of *Borderlands* are ambiguous and/or indecipherable to the white reader. The white reader must continually stop, to either translate or make sense of the unfamiliar markings on the page. This disturbs the white reader’s privileged access to meaning and actively resists white western interpretation. See Wiederhold, “What do You Learn from What You See,” 110-116. In many ways this demonstrates the ways *Borderlands* refuses to be the object of white western study and represents an alternative methodology.

Of course, whiteness is a part of my material identity as well, and cannot be given away. Similarly, I continue to benefit from my white privilege despite my renouncement of it. Linda Alcoff is critical of whites who claim to “disavow whiteness”. She states that, “One’s appearance of being white will still operate to confer privilege in numerous and significant ways.” Alcoff, “What Should White People Do?,” 17. In exploring my reluctance to give up my white privilege I do not mean to suggest that it is something that I can simply give away. Rather, I am suggesting that in order for change to occur, I must acknowledge and explore my dependence on white privilege, rather than simply mark it and/or wish it away. In fact, the conflict in desire to either give my privilege away, or depend on it, expresses the complexity of my relationship with white privilege and suggests the need to talk about it.

This highlights the contradiction of my experience with white privilege as a white feminist. While I desire to work towards ending the oppressive effects of whiteness, there are some benefits of whiteness that I find myself wanting to keep as well. I believe this conflict represents an impasse upon which I remain stuck, trapped in my image of the identity as the white woman I want to be.

*Anzaldúa, Borderlands*, 216.
Later in this chapter I will explore how in the matter of the white subject, s/he risks turning blind to the ways in which they oppress others.

Maria Lugones suggests that the way in which the new mestiza in *Borderlands* resists borders and turns away from dualisms, represents her “active subjectivity,” which contradicts traditional white western figurations of agency. She suggests that the new mestiza does not determine identity, but rather challenges western constructions of identity by remaining open to multiple figurations and transformations of identity. See Lugones, “From Within Germinative Stasis: Creating Active Subjectivity, Resistant Agency,” 86, 88.

It is necessary to stress the limitations of my engagement with *Borderlands* in this chapter. I have attempted to reflect on my implication as a white woman in the historical and continual material oppression of woman of colour. While I feel this is an inner exploration that in some ways *Borderlands* demands from the white reader, I in no way wish to infer that this encompasses the meaning and significance of *Borderlands* as a whole. For further reflection on the problem of centering my experience in Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands*, please refer to the Conclusion.

Maria Lugones provides a more comprehensive analysis of the Coatlicue State in Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands*. According to Lugones, “(i)n the Coatlicue state the fear is provoked by the very prospect of liberation. She is not yet living up to her potentialities; rather, she is fomenting her potential self, the creation of a counter-universe of sense in which she can engage her potential fully. This self and this counter-universe of sense are what the germination in the Coatlicue State is all about.” Lugones, “From Within Germinative Stasis: Creating Active Subjectivity, Resistant Agency, 95. Here it appears that when faced with the image of her self (and other selves) the new mestiza returns to her past self where she is immersed in other alternative pasts of her unexplored (other) self. The Coatlicue State is characterized by fear and stasis; Lugones effectively refers to this as germination, which suggests that the potential is not the product of agency or one’s action, but rather the presence of the Coatlicue (something other) herself.
Or rather, perhaps what I mean here is “feel” threatened. For further reading, see Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 63-74; Lugones, “From Within Germinative Stasis: Creating Active Subjectivity, Resistant Agency,” 92-95.

It appears I have more of a problem with this when I am the one on the receiving end. This is another example of my white privilege.

Anzaldúa describes the plurality of the new mestiza’s identity depends on her tolerance of difference. She writes: “La mestiza constantly has to shift out of habitual formations; from convergent thinking, analytical reasoning that tends to use rationality to move toward a single goal (a Western mode), to divergent thinking, characterized by movement away from set patterns and goals and toward a more whole perspective, one that includes rather than excludes.” Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 101. When I first read *Borderlands*, I recognized the plurality, fluidity and incompleteness of new mestiza as a relational identity. However, upon further examination of Anzaldúa’s description, I notice that the new mestiza needs to be comfortable away from home. She must bend and adapt to others’ thinking. However, perhaps unlike me (the white woman), it is not so much that she must resist the comforts of staying at home in her own image, as it is that she must resist being confined to the image of someone else’s home. This is an important distinction, one that until recently I missed—one that in hindsight, I continue to miss as my privilege affords me.

Upon writing this I immediately resolved to burn this part of my essay in fear I would no longer be a feminist.

Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 100.

I recognize I am at risk (if not guilty) of equating my experience with Anzaldúa’s here. However, my intention is to highlight the ways Anzaldúa challenged my image of relationality, but also to illuminate an existence beyond the image I have of myself. However, reflecting on what I have learnt, I also represent *Borderlands* according to my experience, and as I have reiterated numerous times in this project, marking my identity as the white subject does not account for all the ways in which I benefit from the privileges this position affords. I do not believe I can solve this problem. In fact, on the contrary, I hold reservations about whether or not this problem can be “solved” per se. However, regardless, positioning my experience of *Borderlands* at the center of Anzaldúa’s texts has numerous implications and demands re-consideration and reflection. Please refer to the Conclusion for further discussion on the problem of centering my experience of *Borderlands* in Anzaldúa’s text.


Ibid., 100.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Again, I realize this is not the purpose of your project, nor does it encompass the meaning of *Borderlands*. But it reflects the way in which your writing moved me nonetheless.


Ibid.

This entire section attempts to formulate a response to Anzaldúa’s request to white people. Please refer to Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 107-8.
Conclusion

I began this project with the purpose of using material feminist theory to demonstrate the subversive potential of relational women’s life writing to represent a counter-hegemonic discourse. I wanted to contribute to existing feminist criticism on relational women’s life writing by representing such writing as a form of material feminism itself. In doing so, I hoped to establish other women’s life writing as a source of robust critical theory that could contribute to feminist criticism as a whole. I believed that putting feminism in conversation with relational women’s life writing could encourage new dialogue between white feminists and feminists of colour and ultimately contribute to a more dynamically diverse and heterogeneous feminism as a whole.

However, in trying to distance myself from hegemonic practices of representational feminism, I became estranged from my implication in (re)universalizing the relational subject of women’s life writing as the white subject. In trying to illuminate the material theory of relational women’s life writing, I failed to account for the ways my argument used the materiality in life writing to support my theory of relationality. Consequently, my criticism uses Virginia Woolf’s *Moments of Being* to represent the need for a relational theory of identity grounded in material feminist theory, rather than reflect on how Woolf’s life writing subverted my knowledge about relational identity.

This led me to consider in what ways I am at home in my criticism, and to ask how I use feminism to protect myself from the criticism of others. While I remain tolerant of difference in the comfort of my knowledge of feminist theory, outside the space of my familiarity with feminism, I grow threatened by criticism questioning my
authority as a white feminist subject. I believe this articulates an important limitation of marking whiteness in feminist research because it illuminates how white privilege is reinforced by allowing white subjects to be at home in the privilege afforded by their white skin. By introducing myself as a white woman, and acknowledging the way the politics of my location colour and inform my knowledge, I remain safe behind my knowledge, and secure in my position in feminism so long as I do not conflate my experience with the material experience(s) of others—but, if I am permitted to remain in the space of the familiar, then how am I to recognize that this is indeed a benefit of my white privilege and not necessarily evidence that supports my argument for being there?

If white feminists are to be reflexive, they must recognize that the presence of other non-white feminist criticisms disturbs the white feminist’s comfortable position of being at home in feminism as well. However, representing one’s knowledge of the potential of the foreign in the familiar is not the same as living this theory in practice. In looking forward before I looked inward, my dependence on my knowledge of feminism continued to hold me back. While I wrote of the need to listen and work with rather than represent and speak for others in the material practice of this theory, my criticism did not follow this guideline. While I ensured my criticism did not sound like colonialism, the stain of colonial desire remained. Despite stating the privileges of my subject position, my criticism remained a product of the white empire.

I find it necessary to suggest that in some ways, white feminist criticism, like relational women’s life writing, will never be able to fully account for its implication in white privilege. However, in suggesting this, I am not inferring that white feminists should no longer be accountable, nor am I implying that white feminists should no longer
work towards a more relational ethics of responsibility. Rather, I am suggesting that white feminists should continue to write about the contradiction of being subjects with white privilege and feminists. In fact, I believe white feminists should write more about their complex relationship with whiteness. Feminism’s tendency to look towards the future of what feminism may bring produces a silence among white feminists about the difficulty of living relationally as white privileged subjects. In writing criticism that argues for the potential of feminism, the significance of my criticism hinges on the promise of delivering what other women need.¹ This reinforces barriers between white feminists and feminists of colour, rather than transcending them. If I am going to work with feminists of colour, then I must explore what motivates me to assert the authority of my criticism over what I have to learn from these other women.

In writing about my encounter with Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands: La Frontera*, I tried to highlight the methodology of her borderland theory by reflecting on the way it disrupted my authority by interrupting my interpretation and actively resisting my narrative. I wrote about the ways Anzaldúa challenged my theory of relationality and contradicted the image I project of myself as a feminist. I explored the anxiety and fear I experienced at the mere thought of losing my privilege. I reflected on the complexity of my relationship with whiteness, on how I’ve come to depend on the security that comes from wrapping myself in a soft white blanket, yet grown to resent myself choosing to not let go as well. I ended with trying to respond to Anzaldúa’s criticism rather than write criticism about her.

However, in doing so I (re)positioned myself at the center of *Borderlands: La Frontera*. I wrote little about the content of her life writing, and more about how it made
me feel. I wrote more about how I feel about my white privilege than the way her material experiences of white western violence and oppression made me feel. In many ways there remains little of Anzaldúa’s experience of the borderlands in my reflection, and a very long account of my own. This is in part a reflection of the limitations of my approach towards her life writing. But it is also the offspring of the same problem that this project emerged from. In refraining from representing Anzaldúa, I represented *Borderlands: La Frontera* according to my own experience, which included very little of Anzaldúa in it. So, in many ways I become the subject of my own feminism again by marginalizing Anzaldúa’s material experiences of white western violence and oppression.

Perhaps this project is best read as the beginning of a conversation about the implications of white privilege in feminist research, but that also reflects on the ways our dependence on whiteness shrouds a blanket of silence over our difficulty as white feminists in admitting our failure to live up to our theories of relationality in practice, that not only includes other women of colour, but needs their criticism as well.

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1 For further discussion on the way happiness in feminism is end oriented, please see Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, 21-87.
Bibliography


