

**CHRIS HOLMLUND**

[ 7 ] *When Autobiography Meets Ethnography  
and Girl Meets Girl: The "Dyke Docs"  
of Sadie Benning and Su Friedrich*

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*To what extent can the particular serve as illustration for the general? . . . What generalizations are appropriate? What categories can serve to facilitate understanding and the acceptance of difference rather than diminish our receptivity to the unique in the name of the typical, reducing difference to the measure of otherness . . . ?*

I begin with this quote from Bill Nichols's "Getting to Know You . . .": Power, Knowledge, and the Body"<sup>1</sup> because the questions he raises haunt the terms around which my essay revolves: autobiography, ethnography, and "dyke doc." How are "unique," "typical," "particular," and "general" to be linked to "self"—the basis of autobiography? Or to "subculture" and "culture"—the primary foci of ethnography? What of "lesbian" and the more militant "dyke," especially when they are used as adjectives, as in "lesbian autobiography," "lesbian ethnography," or "dyke documentary"? For me, and also for Nichols, posing such questions has both practical and theoretical implications: as Pierre Bourdieu underlines, aesthetic definition is tightly connected to class distinction, as much a matter of rank as of difference.<sup>2</sup>

To ground my discussion, I ask these questions of three of Sadie Benning's videos and two of Su Friedrich's films. I choose to look at works by these two women primarily for two reasons: because both make creative experimental documentaries that combine autobiographical and ethnographic features and because often, though not always, their work is programmed and distributed as "lesbian."

The better to gauge the impact of Benning's and Friedrich's dyke documentaries as dyke documentaries, I first rehearse how autobiography, ethnography, and lesbian have been theorized with respect to self and

other, culture and subculture, in literature and film. At the end of this section I argue that Benning's videos and Friedrich's films are often described as "lesbian" autobiographies or ethnographies because they articulate concerns about coming out and kinship shared by many lesbians and gays today.

In the two middle sections of this essay I offer close readings of Benning's *Me and Rubyfruit* (1989), *Jollies* (1990), and *Girl Power* (1992), and Friedrich's *First Comes Love* (1991) and *Rules of the Road* (1992). Since one of my goals is to convey in words something of the ingenious composition and flair for storytelling that characterize their work, I do not at this point restrict my discussions to whether and how autobiography meets ethnography and girls meet girls.

In the conclusion I return to the question of disciplinary boundaries, looking at how critics and audiences variously perceive the "dyke" of these "dyke docs." My desire here is to emphasize how much social context determines textual content in contemporary documentaries—like these by Benning and Friedrich—that marry autobiography to ethnography and "dyke" (or "gay" or "queer") to "doc."

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### Of Definition and Distinction

The "classic" definition of literary autobiography might well be that proposed by Philippe Lejeune, for whom autobiography is a "retrospective prose narrative that someone writes concerning his own existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality."<sup>3</sup> In literary autobiographies, author, narrator, and protagonist coincide; the author's signature frequently operates as the guarantee of identity. Defining films and videos as autobiographical is more tricky because, as Elizabeth Bruss cautions, one must distinguish between cinema "eye" (the body behind the camera) and cinema "I" (the body in the film), and differentiate between (usually) single author of a book and (often) collective "auteur" of a film.<sup>4</sup>

Both visual and print autobiographies, however, take the "constitution of identity . . . [to be] the genre's characteristic, even defining, goal."<sup>5</sup> This identity is necessarily fictional, culturally bound, and other-dependent, "grounded in the signs of one's existence that are received from others, as well as from the works of culture by which one is interpreted."<sup>6</sup> Many now argue, therefore, that the "autobiography" label is the result of a "pact" between author and reader or spectator, a pact whose terms are thoroughly mediated by culture.

Ethnography would seem to be a necessary part of studies of why, when, and how literary or cinematic works are categorized as autobiographical. Yet for a long time ethnographers refused to discuss autobiography, in part because they took the “normative subjects of ethnographic inquiry” to be “non-western people doing non-western things.”<sup>7</sup> Ethnographic “truth” was held to reside in “raw data” collected in an apparently “authorless” fashion. Ethnographers working in film advocated a “plain” film style composed of long takes, sync sound, whole acts, whole bodies, no scripts, and little editing.<sup>8</sup>

Many contemporary ethnographers, however, find presumptuous the idea that the everyday activities of “non-western people doing non-western things” might somehow contain and even “articulat[e] . . . social meanings,”<sup>9</sup> and preposterous the premise that all cultures can be “understood, on their own terms” or “studied as original wholes.”<sup>10</sup> There is, instead, growing *theoretical* agreement—concrete studies are rare—that one must ask how ethnographic films are used, by whom, and general *theoretical* recognition that, as James Clifford says, “there is no single general type of reader [or spectator].”<sup>11</sup> Many agree, moreover, with Judith Okely that “contrary to the expectation that an autobiography which speaks of the personal and specific should thereby elaborate uniqueness, autobiographies may . . . evoke common aspects.”<sup>12</sup>

To speak of “lesbian” autobiography or “lesbian” ethnography is, of course, only to complicate further the question of what might be considered unique, typical, particular, or general in autobiography or ethnography. As Biddy Martin says:

The *lesbian* in front of *autobiography* reinforces conventional assumptions of the transparency of autobiographical writing. And the *autobiography* that follows *lesbian* suggests that sexual identity not only modifies but essentially defines a life, providing it with predictable content and an identity possessing continuity and universality. . . . It is to suggest that there is something coherently different about lesbians’ lives vis-a-vis other lives and . . . something coherently the same about all lesbians.<sup>13</sup>

Martin does not mean, of course, that it is impossible or undesirable to write, or to write about, “lesbian autobiography” or, I would add, “lesbian ethnography.” But the problems she raises do underline the need for studies that situate themselves geographically and historically with as much precision as possible, while acknowledging that the definitions they proffer are provisional.

At present in the United States, two key concerns emerge from lesbian autobiographies and ethnographies: coming out and kinship.<sup>14</sup> Bonnie

Zimmerman and Martin, for example, both talk about “community,” and Martin explicitly discusses “family” and “home” in autobiographical writing by lesbians of color. Both emphasize the roles that coming out plays, agreeing that, while all autobiography restructures the past, “such re-visioning may be particularly essential to the formation of lesbian identity.”<sup>15</sup> Anthropologist Kath Weston also conceives of coming out as fundamental, arguing that “at this historical moment, a lesbian or gay identity [is] realized as much in the course of the telling as the feeling or the doing.”<sup>16</sup> She contends that coming-out stories restructure the past to accord with the present and reformulate the present as an advancement over the past “to counter the implication that being gay transforms a person into something alien, deviant, or monstrous.”<sup>17</sup>

Crucially, Weston situates current debates about gay marriages and families within, rather than on the margins of, broader historical transformations of kinship. She challenges conventional definitions because “to assert that straight people ‘naturally’ have access to family, while gay people are destined to move toward a future of solitude and loneliness, is not only to tie kinship closely to procreation, but also to treat gay men and lesbians as members of a nonprocreative species set apart from the rest of humanity.”<sup>18</sup>

Sadie Benning and Su Friedrich strike similarly self-assured, “uppity” poses in their “dyke docs.” Like Weston, Zimmerman, and Martin, both reflect, as “out” lesbians, on marriage and family in their work. Both draw on past experiences, somehow inscribe their voices and bodies, and variously position lesbian and other subcultures in relation to a dominant heterosexual culture. To use Bill Nichols’s formulation, both thereby “blur boundaries” between subjectivity and objectivity, autobiography and ethnography, and thus extend how documentary is defined and “queers” are seen.<sup>19</sup>

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### “Benning on Benning”—and Beyond

Several of Benning’s nine videos are overtly presented as coming-out narratives.<sup>20</sup> Though almost half (*New Year*, *Living Inside*, *Me and Rubyfruit*, and *If Every Girl Had a Diary*) are recounted primarily in the present, all contain references to Benning’s past, and three (*Welcome to Normal*, *A Place Called Lovely*, and *Girl Power*) even incorporate home movies of baby Sadie. All are narrated, largely in the first person, by Benning herself. All feature close-ups and extreme close-ups of Benning’s body, and most are shot in her room, literally enacting what Paul John Eakin calls the



*Jollies* (Sadie Benning 1990). Courtesy Video Data Bank

tainly suggest as much: “Why don’t you marry me? I’m not handsome, but I’m pretty.” In comparison with heterosexual marriage, lesbian love is exciting if—or because—illicit. Though lesbian marriage may be limited to “FANTASY,” as Benning proclaims in block letters, it is unquestionably glamorous: “We’ll kiss like in the movies, and then we’ll be engaged.” In a scenario familiar to many lesbians and gays, imagination and, crucially, action “queer” both Hollywood and kinship.

*Jollies*, Benning’s fifth tape, continues her tongue-in-cheek look at her own sexual “history,” but in this video marriage is not even mentioned. Benning’s deadpan narration begins after a credit sequence performed by naked Barbie dolls. Over extreme close-ups of her eye, ear, nose, and mouth, she says: “It started in 1978 when I was in kindergarten. They were twins and I was a tomboy.” She turns toward the camera and, revealing braces on her teeth, continues: “I always thought of real clever things to say like . . . like . . . I love you.” A shock cut to Diane Arbus’s photo of twin girls, then pans up Benning’s hairy leg and over a Mr. Bubbles bottle ironically underscore her youth and the absurd excitement of childhood crushes, especially of a lesbian crush on twins.

Benning mentions two episodes with boys, but describes both in such distanced, even anticlimactic terms that she highlights how unimportant these heterosexual encounters were—and are—to her. The last part of Ben-

ning's coming-out story is no less parodic, but reconfigures passion in that, like other coming-out narratives, it paints homosexual identity as an underlying "truth." In direct address Benning tells of exchanging phone numbers with another girl. Then a trumpet blast hails a printed text: "THAT NIGHT I FOUND OUT I WAS AS QUEER AS CAN BE." The final credits, "SPECIAL THANKS TO DEBBIE DAVIS," are accompanied by a woman singing "You give me what I want when I want it." Masks and pans create a strobe-light effect over the words "DEBBIE DAVIS." As in *Me and Rubyfruit*, Hollywood glamour is claimed for lesbians and lesbianism, suggesting that Debbie Davis just might be a star on a par with Bette Davis.

Like many of Benning's earlier tapes, *Girl Power* reflects on unhappy childhood and adolescence. Here, however, Benning consciously portrays herself and her (now visible) girlfriend as "out" young lesbians within a riot grrrl subculture. For Benning, *girl* is "a strong word," especially when it is preceded by the adjective *bad*.<sup>26</sup> Not coincidentally, then, the video begins with "thanks to bad girls girls girls everywhere." Images of "bad girls" of all ages follow, including a home movie of Benning as drooling toddler and new footage of Benning as young adult. "MOM" is tattooed on her lower lip; in the penultimate image "GIRL LOVE" is stenciled on her knuckles. Periodically, written texts flash out warnings like "Violent Youth / Fierce and Furious"; "Ashamed / Ridiculed / Denied / Fucked with / Fuck / You / Man / Hear / Me / or Die."

Clips from documentary films and television shows—an atomic bomb blast, rockets firing, the Rodney King beating, a homophobic diatribe delivered by American Nazi Party leader George Lincoln Rockwell—are intercut with footage shot in Benning's room. In voice-over, Benning says, "In my world, in my head, I was never alone. It was at school, with my father, and in my own culture that I felt most alone." Her juxtaposition of imaginary and "real" spaces subtly critiques and redefines both culture and community.

The final printed texts and credits are accompanied by a Bikini Kill song whose beat, mood, and lyrics echo Benning's images, editing, and narration: "We're Bikini Kill, and we want Revolution! . . . All the doves that fly past my eyes, have a stickiness to their wings. . . . HOW DOES IT FEEL? IT FEELS BLIND. . . . WHAT HAVE YOU TAUGHT ME? NOTHING."<sup>27</sup>

Throughout *Girl Power*, however, Benning's connections of individual girls to girl groups testify to the existence of different community and kinship networks. As the tape ends, Benning cautions us that this is only "the end / for now": "this has been a continuing work in progress / beware be alert / watch out / for / girlpower the movie."

Though nowhere more overtly than in *Girl Power*, in all these "dyke



*Girl Power* (Sadie Benning 1992). Courtesy Video Data Bank

docs” refrains common to contemporary lesbian and gay lives emerge from the intricate rhythms Benning composes using her own life, among them portrayals of coming out as culmination and revelation, protests against injustice, and quests for community and kinship. In these videos, girls love girls, autobiography marries ethnography, and personal expression acquires political resonance.

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► **Su Friedrich’s Sidewalk Soliloquies**

Where Benning insists in her videos on the formation/revelation of a visible and audible lesbian “self,” Friedrich does not usually deal directly with the personal and public ramifications of coming out in her work. Several films, including *First Comes Love* and *Rules of the Road*, instead focus on marriage and families, subtly expanding kinship to include lesbians as well as heterosexuals.<sup>28</sup>

Stylistically, too, Friedrich’s films, and especially her latest films, are quite different from Benning’s videos. Shot in 16 mm, both *First Comes Love* and *Rules of the Road* make use of the greater depth of focus, clarity of image, and variety of field that film affords. Although both include popular songs, unlike Friedrich’s earlier films neither makes extensive use

of intertitles or employs excerpts from other films or television shows as a way to distinguish—and link—subcultures and mass culture.

Intriguingly, *First Comes Love* and *Rules of the Road* represent divergent points on the autobiographical-ethnographic continuum. *First Comes Love* is the most clearly “ethnographic” of all Friedrich’s films: in it Friedrich studies heterosexual marriage ceremonies from a position literally and figuratively on the sidelines. Thanks to its first-person voice-over narration about personal experience, *Rules of the Road* is, in contrast, Friedrich’s most “autobiographical” work to date.

*First Comes Love* is composed of three elements: (1) intercut black and white footage from four different weddings; (2) fourteen musical selections; and (3) a two-part scrolled text that Friedrich calls “a surprising public service announcement” (the first part lists 120 countries where lesbian and gay marriage is forbidden; the second credits Denmark with being the first country to legalize same-sex ceremonies).<sup>29</sup> In classic ethnographic fashion, Friedrich’s camera chronicles each wedding ceremony from “arrival scene” to departure. Less classic, however, is the way she shoots and edits these ceremonies: hers is clearly not the stance of an “objective” scientist. Studied pans, close-ups on accessories rather than faces, and editing that follows gestures rather than bodies make identification of or with an individual bride or groom difficult. The constant intercutting among limousines, flowers, handshakes, back slaps, hugs, and kisses instead emphasizes how much time, money, energy, and enthusiasm are poured into heterosexual wedding celebrations.

In the midst of such widespread approbation, the “PSAs” about the illegality of lesbian and gay marriages stand out starkly. Whip pans, zooms, and rapid editing register a range of emotions toward a ceremony from which lesbians and gays are excluded. The musical selections—all rock, soul, or country hits—also provide nuanced commentary, thanks to Friedrich’s juxtaposition of each song against the others, and each song against the images. Though all the lyrics are somehow about love, attraction, or sex, many also convey exclusion, loss, and loneliness. The last song, Willie Nelson’s haunting “You Were Always on My Mind,” plays as altar boys sweep up rice from the church steps. The juxtaposition prompts questions: Why do people marry? Will these marriages last? At the very end, Nelson’s ballad still in the background, Friedrich dedicates her film “for Cathy,” adding a personal note to the film’s commentary on the exclusion of lesbians and gays from legally sanctioned marriage ceremonies.

In many ways, of course, *First Comes Love* is more *about* heterosexuals than about lesbians. Nevertheless, it is also a documentary *by* and *for* lesbians; as Friedrich jokingly puts it, her film is about “rites and



panning, tracking, and zooming restlessly. These street scenes are intercut with shots of the hands playing solitaire, moments of black, and a few black and white images of a woman rowing. Gradually they make sense as the spaces within which Friedrich searches for, and flees from, the car and lover she has lost.

Descriptions of road trips are illustrated by images shot from a moving car. Some trips are lyrically depicted: "When I was driving, I felt as though I was carrying her in my arms, away from the relentless, claustrophobic city towards an unpredictable and generous expanse of forest or ocean. I wanted to give her that. And I wanted to be with her when she got there." Others involve horrible fights with her lover, fights much like those Friedrich says she witnessed as a child from the backseat of her family's car.

After the breakup, Friedrich imagines what it would be like to turn the corner and see her ex. Quick cuts of different station wagons moving in different directions, followed by blurred, out-of-focus swish pans visually underline her fear that she will not be able to distinguish her lover's car from other station wagons. The constant zooms in to close-ups on license plates are finally explained: in a world full of beige station wagons "ready to surprise me at every turn," Friedrich protects herself from chance—though not entirely undesired—encounters with her former girlfriend by looking at license plates.

Especially at the beginning of the film, the songs heighten the offbeat humor of Friedrich's descriptions and delivery. Subsequent selections briefly translate Friedrich's confidence in her relationship, but the musical selections in the last half of the film are all about anger, loneliness, and bereavement. The last, Randy Travis's "Hard Rock Bottom of Your Heart," plays as the car carrying Friedrich and her camera heads out of New York City. The lyrics convey the ache and emptiness she feels: "I need your love, I miss it. / I can't go on like this / It hurts too much."

Though Friedrich's chosen family has dissolved, and though she has lost her access to the quintessential family car, her lover's station wagon, she *is* leaving town again, together with another woman whose hands we see on the steering wheel. Over the course of the film, moreover, cars, not just queers, have come to seem like family members.<sup>32</sup> While station wagons may temporarily have become metaphors of mourning, they—and every other vehicle—now hold out the promise of a "family" open to all, a family of used car owners:

The first time I laid eyes on the car, I was disappointed by its homeliness but consoled by the thought that it was unique. . . . Consequently I was surprised to find that there are many thousands of them on the streets of New York. Almost overnight I went from barely noticing their existence to realizing that

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*Rules of the Road* (Su Friedrich 1993). Courtesy filmmaker

I lived in a world swarming with station wagons. By becoming the owner of one, she seemed to have been initiated into a special clan. And by sharing the car with her, I felt I had become an honorary member of that same family.

The film ends on a hopeful note, with Friedrich making plans to buy her own used car. Retrospectively, we realize that the very first images of the film display the choices she now sees: a pink Vespa, a little red sedan, a dark blue jeep. As *Rules of the Road* closes, “girl” may thus have lost “girl,” but Friedrich will soon be back in the driver’s seat, following the same “rules of the road” as everyone else. Though *Rules of the Road* is more clearly autobiographical than *First Comes Love*, they share the ethnographic conviction that “self,” “love,” “kinship,” and “culture” should not, cannot be construed as solely, or exclusively, heterosexual.



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### **For Fun and Fantasy**

Friedrich and Benning both began making experimental films and videos, respectively, because as women and as lesbians they felt excluded from mainstream movies.<sup>39</sup> Now successful independent artists, both feel keenly the responsibility of representation. Both therefore seek to make their work accessible, but not just to lesbian and gay audiences. Reversing the liberal heterosexual line on queers, Benning says of *Girl Power*: “Most of my

friends are straight. We can't, like, shut people out because some girls like men. So what? That's what makes them happy. As long as nobody's being abused or hurt, why exclude anyone?"<sup>34</sup> Friedrich describes *First Comes Love* in terms that are similarly inclusive, yet transformative: "The film doesn't attempt to defend—or discredit—the institution of marriage. Instead, it . . . raises questions about how the double standard regarding marriage affects both gay and straight couples."<sup>35</sup>

But authorial intent does not sufficiently answer the questions of definition and distinction with which I began this essay. How, when, and by whom are the "dykes" of Benning's and Friedrich's "dyke docs" perceived as unique, as typical, as particular, or as general? Who describes their works as autobiographical or ethnographic? Why? Do critics and audiences acknowledge Benning's and Friedrich's openness to others?

Over fifteen years ago, Annette Kuhn signaled the need to take into account "the institutional contexts within which documentaries are produced" in discussing questions of reception and representativeness.<sup>36</sup> Certainly exhibition, marketing, and distribution are key to how lesbian and gay experimental documentaries are seen. Unlike, for example, the gay male experimental documentaries of the 1950s and 1960s, which were usually labeled "experimental" rather than "gay" because they were addressed to and received within art world contexts, Benning's and Friedrich's work is explicitly programmed and billed as "lesbian" at many festivals and in most catalogs, though it is also exhibited and distributed without that label. Not surprisingly, therefore, of the twenty-two reviews of *Me and Rubyfruit*, *Jollies*, *Girl Power*, *First Comes Love*, and *Rules of the Road* indexed as of January 1995, two-thirds are based on screenings at lesbian and gay festivals.<sup>37</sup> Moreover, since Benning and Friedrich refer at length to lesbian issues, include their own bodies or voices or both as markers of lesbian "authenticity" and "identity," and speak openly of and to other lesbians in their work, all twenty-two reviews at some point describe this work as lesbian. In contrast, most critics of Friedrich's earlier films did not usually write about their lesbian content, imagery, and address "except when a veritable constellation of features [were] present, among them: 1) verbal and/or visual representations of lesbian sexual acts, combined with 2) a simultaneous if not necessarily synchronous representation of lesbian issues on both image and sound tracks, for 3) the bulk of narrative time."<sup>38</sup>

Nevertheless, though critics acknowledge the "dykes" of Benning and Friedrich's "dyke docs," *how* they are seen varies a great deal. Most critics as well as most students to whom I have shown these works easily label them autobiographies, diaries, or confessions. Occasionally critics place both women's work in a tradition of personal films, diary films, or psycho-

dramas.<sup>39</sup> Except in the case of *First Comes Love*, however, almost no one discusses these works as ethnographies. In twelve of fifteen interviews and reviews, moreover, no mention is made of Benning's consistent condemnation of homophobia, racism, and sexism, and no recognition is given to her general concern with young people and women. It is as if "autobiography" were understood solely as the inscription of a self-absorbed subjectivity uninvolved with others.<sup>40</sup> Only in the case of *First Comes Love* do critics applaud Friedrich's even-handedness and openness, perhaps because they view the film as "ethnographic" and therefore as "objective."

As my textual analyses show, however, neither Benning nor Friedrich presents lesbian identities as singular, unchanging, or exclusionary. Necessarily, therefore, lesbian and gay spectators are not automatically or as a block "better" spectators of their works. As Benning points out, although lesbian and gay teens devour her work, in part because they recognize in it their own experiences, thoughts, and feelings, "the gay community is just as anti-youth, sexist, and racist as any group; sometimes they're even more scary and conservative, trying even harder than straight people to fit in."<sup>41</sup> That these "dyke docs" are experimental works of course only complicates matters: as Friedrich says, "being a lesbian doesn't automatically make a woman more sophisticated about art, or less desirous of the big-screen-color-love-story-with-a-happy-ending."<sup>42</sup>

When I teach and program these works as autobiographies, ethnographies, or "dyke docs," I worry, I confess. Will describing them as autobiographical induce some viewers to think of the unique solely as singular or exceptional? Will labeling them ethnographic diminish "our receptivity to the unique . . . in the name of the typical?"<sup>43</sup> As a critic and a teacher, I try not to assume that what is said or written afterward equals all that is seen. But because gays are so often excluded from families and so invisible unless they come out, I do insist (especially if no one else does) in post-screening discussions on the impossibility of simple definition or clear-cut distinction where both "dykes" and "docs" are concerned, and I stress the crucial roles production, distribution, and exhibition play in shaping reception.

Because Benning and Friedrich so skillfully mix humor and pathos, imagination and advocacy in their work, however, many audience members become "queer readers," able, willing, even eager to savor erotic desires and acknowledge family resemblances that may or may not be part of their own experiences.<sup>44</sup> For these spectators, fun and fantasy help loosen strict definitions and nuance sharp distinctions. There are times, after all, when lexical precision matters less than shared emotion, as Sadie Benning demonstrates at the end of *It Wasn't Love*:

And yet, in that parking lot, I felt like I had seen the whole world. She had this way of making me feel like I was the goddamn Nile River or something. We didn't need Hollywood. We were Hollywood. . . . It wasn't love, but it was *something*.

## NOTES

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1. Bill Nichols, "Getting to Know You . . .": Knowledge, Power, and the Body," in *Theorizing Documentary*, ed. Michael Renov (New York: Routledge, 1993), 176.
2. Bourdieu is not concerned with autobiography or ethnography per se, but is broadly interested in the connections among class, educational background, and aesthetic perception. See Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1984).
3. Philippe Lejeune, "The Autobiographical Pact," in *On Autobiography*, trans. Katherine Leary (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 14. The question of time is in many ways crucial to autobiography. Lejeune, for example, maintains that autobiography plays at creating the illusion that producer-work-consumer exist at the same time (126).
4. Bruss goes so far as to claim that "there is no real cinematic equivalent for autobiography." See Elizabeth Bruss, "Eye for I: Making and Unmaking Autobiography in Film," in *Autobiography: Essays Critical and Theoretical*, ed. James Olney (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1980), 296-97. For a critique of Bruss, see Michael Renov, "The Subject in History," *Afterimage* 17.1 (1989): 4.
5. Paul John Eakin, *Touching the World: Reference in Autobiography* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1992), 67.
6. Janet Varner Gunn, *Autobiography: Toward a Poetics of Experience* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982), 31.
7. Marcus Banks, "Which Films Are the Ethnographic Films?" in *Film as Ethnography*, ed. Peter Ian Crawford and David Turton (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992), 120.
8. Other prescriptions include a minimum of voice-over narration, the use of subtitles for indigenous dialogue, the employment of a wide-angle lens, an avoidance of close-ups, and a preference for in-camera editing. See, for example, Banks, "Which Films Are the Ethnographic Films?," 122-24; Peter Ian Crawford, "Film as Discourse: The Invention of Anthropological Realities," in *Film as Ethnography*, 77; and David MacDougall, "Complicities of Style," in *Film as Ethnography*, 93-94.
9. Dai Vaughan, "The Aesthetics of Ambiguity," in *Film as Ethnography*, 107.
10. Asen Balikci, "Anthropologists and Ethnographic Filmmaking," in *Anthropological Filmmaking: Anthropological Perspectives on the Production of Film and Video for General Public Audiences*, ed. Jack R. Rollwagen (Chur: Harwood, 1988), 33.
11. James Clifford, "On Ethnographic Authority," in *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988), 37. For a succinct discussion of contemporary debates and silences around ethnographic film, see Bill Nichols, "The Ethnographer's Tale," in *Blurred Boundaries: Questions of Meaning in Contemporary Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 63-91.
12. Judith Okely, "Anthropology and Autobiography: Participatory Experience and Embodied Knowledge," in *Anthropology and Autobiography*, ed. Judith Okely and Helen Callaway (London: Routledge, 1992), 7.
13. Biddy Martin, "Lesbian Identity and Autobiographical Difference[s]," in *Life/Lines: Theorizing Women's Autobiography*, ed. Bella Brodski and Celeste Schenck (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1988), 78.
14. Coming out was, of course, also a crucial component of 1960s and 1970s activism. Weston argues that kinship has emerged as a political concern in the 1980s and 1990s as a result of the number of lesbians having children, the rise in gay marriages, and the horrifying percentage of gay men living with and dying of AIDS. See Kath Weston, *Families We Choose: Lesbians, Gays, Kinship* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991).
15. Bonnie Zimmerman, "The Politics of Transliteration: Lesbian Personal Narratives," *Signs* 9.4 (Summer 1984): 667.
16. Weston, *Families We Choose*, 66.
17. *Ibid.*, 79.
18. *Ibid.*, 22-23. For further discussions of lesbian and gay marriage, see Becky Butler, *Ceremonies of the Heart: Celebrating Lesbian*

- Unions* (Seattle: Seal Press, 1990), and Suzanne Sherman, ed., *Lesbian and Gay Marriage* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992).
19. See Nichols, *Blurred Boundaries*, especially 1–16 and 63–91.
  20. The expression “Benning on Benning” is taken from Chris Chang, “Up in Sadie’s Room,” *Film Comment* 29.2 (March/April 1993): 8. Benning began making videos at age sixteen when her father, experimental filmmaker James Benning, gave her a Pixelvision camcorder for Christmas. Titles include *A New Year* (1989), *Living Inside* (1989), *Me and Rubyfruit* (1989), *If Every Girl Had a Diary* (1990), *Jollies* (1990), *Welcome to Normal* (1990), *A Place Called Lovely* (1991), *It Wasn’t Love* (1992), and *Girl Power* (1992).
  21. Eakin, *Touching the World*, 101.
  22. In *Welcome to Normal* Benning admits that when she was younger, “I didn’t know I could love women without being a man.” She was known by her middle name, Taylor: “I talked like a boy . . . , dressed like a boy, played with the boys. My best friend . . . a boy . . . was paranoid to tell the rest of the neighborhood his best friend was a girl, so he told everybody I was a boy and I just went along with it.” Benning’s first girlfriend, at age eleven, knew she was a girl. When they broke up, “the whole neighborhood found out I was a girl. I got ridiculed for the next two years, and during high school I was treated so awful.” Cited in Elise Harris, “Baby Butch Video,” *Queer World*, Nov. 15, 1992, 33.
  23. Jonathan Romney, “Honey I Shrunk the Kit,” *New Statesman and Society* 6.278 (Nov. 12, 1993): 34.
  24. Roberta Smith, “A Video Artist Who Talks through a Keyhole,” *New York Times*, March 28, 1993, H33.
  25. One by one, Benning brought her friends into her room and showed them her tape as a way of declaring her sexual identity to them. See Ellen Spiro, “Shooting Star,” *Advocate* 563 (March 26, 1991): 68, and Karl Soehnlein, “Lights, Camera, Lesbian,” *Outweek*, Dec. 12, 1990, 49.
  26. See Kim Masters, “Auteur of Adolescence,” *Washington Post*, Oct. 17, 1992, D7.
  27. Thanks to Chris Cagle for Bikini Kill’s lyrics.
  28. Only *Damned If You Don’t* (1987) deals directly with coming out. Friedrich’s other work includes *Cool Hands*, *Warm Heart* (1979), *Gently Down the Stream* (1981), *The Ties that Bind* (1984), *Sink or Swim* (1990), and *Lesbian Avengers Eat Fire Too* (1993, codirected with Janet Baus). *Scar Tissue* (1980) and *But No One* (1982) are not in distribution.  
For a discussion of autobiographical elements in *Gently Down the Stream*, *The Ties that Bind*, *Damned If You Don’t*, and *Sink or Swim*, see Chris Holmlund, “Fractured Fairytales and Experimental Identities: Looking for Lesbians in and around the Films of Su Friedrich,” *Discourse* 17.1 (Fall 1994): 16–46.
  29. Publicity blurb written by Friedrich.
  30. *Ibid.*
  31. Leslie Kossoff, “History in the Making,” *Gay Community News*, Sept. 1–14, 1991, 7.
  32. I owe this idea to Paige Travis, who argues: “Both visually and through the narration, Friedrich treats cars like a valuable member of the family. In fact it’s possible that the real main character of *Rules of the Road* could be the 1983 Oldsmobile Cutlass Cruiser the narrator comes to love and depend on.” Paige Travis, “The Undeniable Connection between Cars and Family in Su Friedrich’s *Rules of the Road*,” unpublished ms., April 1995.
  33. Friedrich says she used to dislike narrative film “partly because I’m a woman (I saw a lot of films about interesting male characters and stupid female characters) and at times because I couldn’t identify with the romantic line of the films.” Cited in Scott MacDonald, “*Damned If You Don’t*: An Interview with Su Friedrich,” *Afterimage*, May 1988, 10, and *A Critical Cinema*, vol. 2 (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990), 306. Benning describes Hollywood movies as “totally fake and constructed to entertain and oppress at the same time—they’re meaningless to women, and not just to gay women.” Cited in Smith, “A Video Artist Who Talks through a Keyhole,” H33.
  34. Masters, “Auteur of Adolescence,” D7. Elsewhere, however, Benning does say she makes her videos largely for young lesbian and gay audiences. See, for example, Spiro, “Shooting Star,” 68.
  35. Publicity blurb written by Friedrich. Friedrich discusses her approach to experimental film in Su Friedrich, “Radical Form/Radical Content,” *Millennium Film Journal* 22 (1989–90): 118–23.
  36. Annette Kuhn, “The Camera I: Observations on Documentary,” *Screen* 19.2 (1978): 81.
  37. Indexes consulted include *Film Literature Index*, the *General Periodicals Index*, and the *National Newspaper Index*.
  38. Holmlund, “Fractured Fairytales and Experimental Identities,” 33.
  39. Friedrich’s earlier work is sometimes positioned in terms of cinema vérité and structuralist materialist film as well. See Simon Field, “State of Things,” *Monthly Film Bulletin* 54 (Jan. 1987): 4–6; Lindley Hanlon, “Female Rage: The Films of Su Friedrich,” *Millennium Film Journal* 12 (1982–83): 79–86; Bruce Jenkins, “*Gently Down the Stream*,” *Millennium Film Journal* 16–18 (Fall/Winter 1986–87): 195–98; and Scott MacDonald, *Avant-Garde Film: Motion Studies* (Cam-

bridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 102-11.

MTV and, more rarely, Benning's father, James, are cited as influences on her work. Benning herself insists that "people on the street, music, everyday images, my mom, how I was raised, way more influence how I work and think than other artists. . . . People I hate influence me a lot; I'm influenced by people that are just total assholes." Cited in Harris, "Baby Butch Video," 63.

40. Reviews of Friedrich's earlier work contained similar oversights. See Holmlund, "Fractured Fairytales and Experimental Identities," 34.
41. Harris, "Baby Butch Video," 63.
42. Su Friedrich, letters to Chris Holmlund, Dec. 10, 1991, and Oct. 4, 1992. Of course many experimental filmmakers also "ghettoize" lesbian work. Benning describes her father's reaction: "My dad said to me, 'You know, I'm really worried that all your work is just going to be on one subject,' and I was like, 'Yeah, my life.' He makes [experimental] films. What are his films about? They're about his life. It just so happens that his sexuality isn't something that people are going to label or talk about or say, 'He's the heterosexual artist.'" Cited in Harris, "Baby Butch Video," 68. Friedrich says of the experimental film world: "In this old boys' scene there's this assumption that if you're speaking from the point of view of a minority, what you're saying does not have any bearing on their lives, and they can't learn anything from it—which is ridiculous. We spend all our time looking at straight films." Cited in Soehnlein, "Lights, Camera, Lesbian," 48.
43. Nichols, "'Getting to Know You . . .,'" 180. Such misreadings probably occur, as Kath Weston argues, because "homosexuality in the U.S. is now most commonly understood as an identity that infuses the entire self [and, I would add, that distinguishes homosexuals as a group] as opposed to an activity in which any self can participate" (Weston, *Families We Choose*, 24).
44. On "queer readers," see Alexander Doty, *Making Things Perfectly Queer: Interpreting Mass Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), especially 1-16.