

**MICHAEL RENOV**

[ 7 ] *Domestic Ethnography and  
the Construction of the “Other” Self*

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*If the West has produced anthropologists, it is because it was tormented by remorse.*

:: Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques*, 1978

The ethnographic project has long been haunted by the legacy of its colonialist past. Over the past fifteen years, critiques have been launched from many quarters against the premises of participant observation, which James Clifford has described as “shorthand for a continuous tacking between the ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ of events,” but which Johannes Fabian has understood more radically as a *disjunction* between experience and science, research and writing, and thus “a festering epistemological sore” in the discipline.<sup>1</sup> Peter Mason has traced the philosophical problem of alterity (and the necessary setting of boundaries between self and other) to the work of Emmanuel Levinas, for whom the construction of the alterity, the absolute exteriority of the other, is a function of Desire.<sup>2</sup> Mason notes Levinas’s concern for understanding the other without recourse to the “violence of comprehension” whereby the other is reduced to self, deprived of the very alterity by which the other *is* other.<sup>3</sup>

Trinh T. Minh-ha has, rather more stringently, declared that anthropology’s romance with the Other is “an outgrowth of a dualistic system of thought peculiar to the Occident (the ‘onto-theology’ which characterizes Western metaphysics)” in which difference becomes a tool of self-defense and conquest. Anthropological discourse, according to Trinh, produces “nothing other than the reconstruction and redistribution of a pretended order of things, the interpretation or even transformation of [information] given and frozen into monuments.”<sup>4</sup> Most recently, Michael Taussig, returning brilliantly to the work of Walter Benjamin, has written of the mimetic faculty as the compulsion to become the Other through the magic



of the signifier. “I call it the mimetic faculty, the nature that culture uses to create second nature, the faculty to copy, imitate, make models, explore difference, yield into and become Other.”<sup>5</sup>

All of these critical perspectives converge around the problems entailed in representing the other. For some, it is representation itself that is the problem. Stephen A. Tyler has called for the practice of what he terms “post-modern ethnography” whereby the inherited mode of scientific rhetoric is jettisoned; “evocation” displaces representation. In Tyler’s view, the ethnographic text, long treated as an “object,” is more appropriately understood as a “meditative vehicle.”<sup>6</sup> George E. Marcus has pointed to the essay form as practiced by Adorno—fragmentary, reflective, final judgment suspended—as a way out of the trap of realist convention. Formal experimentation, attention to the dialogical context of fieldwork, the incorporation of multiple authorial voices, a retreat from an illusory holism—all can contribute to “a particularly appropriate self-conscious posture,” one “well suited to a time such as the present, when paradigms are in disarray, problems intractable, and phenomena only partly understood.”<sup>7</sup>

So many replies to this crisis of ethnographic authority: calls for coevalness, evocation, fragmentation, magic, “understanding” shorn of the violence of comprehension, the unlearning of privilege, even silence.<sup>8</sup> My interest here is in work currently being made by independent film- and videomakers that suggests itself—at least to me—as yet another response to the ethnographic impasse. If indeed participant observation founders in its tacking between “inside” and “outside,” a passage that restages the subject/object dichotomization installed in the post-Enlightenment West, the films and tapes that I term *domestic ethnography* play at the boundaries of inside and outside in a unique way. This work engages in the documentation of family members or, less literally, of people with whom the maker has maintained long-standing everyday relations and has thus achieved a level of casual intimacy. Because the lives of artist and subject are interlaced through communal or blood ties, the documentation of the one tends to implicate the other in complicated ways; indeed, consanguinity and co(i)mplication are domestic ethnography’s defining features. By *co(i)mplication* I mean both complexity and the interpenetration of subject/object identities. To pursue the point yet further, one could say that domestic ethnography is a kind of supplementary autobiographical practice; it functions as a vehicle of self-examination, a means through which to construct self-knowledge through recourse to the familial other.

But domestic ethnography is more than simply another variant of autobiographical discourse given its explicitly outward gaze. Nominally, at least, this mode of documentation takes as its object the father, mother,



grandparent, child, or sibling who is genetically linked to the authorial subject. Care must be taken in defining the particular relations that obtain between the domestic ethnographer and her subject. There is a peculiar sort of reciprocity (which might equally be termed self-interest) built into the construction of Other subjectivities in this para-ethnographic mode. There can be no pretense of objectivity for an investigation of a now-dead mother whose alcoholism has helped give rise to the eating disorder of the videomaker in Vanalyne Green's *Trick or Drink* (1984), just as there is little doubt that Kidlat Tahimik's eldest son (also named Kidlat), with whom the filmmaker travels and to whom he frequently addresses his insights and admonitions throughout *The Rainbow Diary* (1994), functions both as heir apparent and as autobiographical foil. Familial investigation in these recent films and tapes is, on one level, a kind of identity sleuthing in which family-bound figures—progenitors and progeny—are mined for clues to the artist's vocation, sensibility, or pathology. Domestic ethnographies tend to be highly charged investigations brimming with a curious brand of epistophilia, a brew of affection, resentment, even self-loathing. The point to stress is that for this mode of ethnography the Desire for the Other is, at every moment, embroiled with the question of self-knowledge; it is the all-too-familiar rather than the exotic that holds sway.

I do not wish to suggest, however, that domestic ethnography of the sort I am outlining is exclusively an exercise in self-inscription. Put another way, these works could be said to enact a kind of participant observation that illumines the familial other while simultaneously refracting a self-image; indeed, the domestic ethnographic subject exists only on condition of its constitutive relations with the maker. Here there is little sense of a tacking back and forth between insider and outsider positions, the ethnographic norm. For the domestic ethnographer, there is no fully outside position available. Blood ties effect linkages of shared memory, physical resemblance, temperament, and, of course, family-forged behavioral or attitudinal dysfunction toward which the artist—through her work—can fashion accommodation but no escape.

In a limited way, domestic ethnography occasions a kind of intersubjective reciprocity in which the representations of self and other are simultaneously if unequally at stake. This kind of work is all but indemnified against the charges often made against the pseudopositivism of the anthropologist, who treats the human subject as scientific datum or statistical proof, for the domestic ethnographer qua social scientist can never wholly elude her analytic scene. It has of course been argued that this is ever so and from several perspectives: Clifford Geertz has addressed the "signature issue," the ways in which the authorial voice necessarily enters into ethno-



graphic discourse, echoing Hayden White's notion of the "tropic" dimension of scholarly discourse (the play of language) as "inexpungeable" from the human sciences.<sup>9</sup> For its part, psychoanalytic criticism assumes that authorial desire is figured in all texts, never more so than when the Other is the subject of representation. With domestic ethnography, authorial subjectivity is explicitly in question or on display. There exists a reciprocity between subject and object, a play of mutual determination, a condition of consubstantiality. The Desire (figurable as dread or longing) of the domestic ethnographer is for the Other self.

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### Fathers and Daughters

Desire is always destabilizing and delirium inducing, and instability is particularly inscribed in discourses of domestic ethnography. Su Friedrich's remarkable *Sink or Swim* (1990) evokes the artist's family history through a succession of twenty-six titled segments, each beginning with a one-word chapter heading framed against black leader, one for each letter of the alphabet displayed in reverse order, beginning with "z" for "zygote" and the artist's conception. The sound track is composed of what seem to be memory fragments, voiced by a younger Friedrich surrogate, in relation to which the accompanying images (all of them black-and-white and asynchronous, some of them drawn from Friedrich family home-movie footage) seem at times illustrative, at times responsive to the previous narration, at times linked only through an associational logic. Despite the elliptical (though chronological) character of the narrated segments, the viewer is lured toward a thematically coherent reading of the text through the chapter titles, which function as a semic reservoir for the family romance: "virginity," "temptation," "seduction," "pedagogy," "kinship," "bigamy."

The film's textual coherence is uneven despite the fact that *Sink or Swim*'s narrative continuity remains more or less intact: the "zygote" section properly launches the film's autobiographical trajectory, and each fragment supports the "life story" trajectory. The sense of linearity is undermined by the thematic discontinuities among the lexia as well as by the frequently oblique character of the sound/image relations, but these tactics are altogether consistent with the dream logic of recovered memory. As the meaning of the piece gathers force, the film's focus increasingly becomes the identity-defining relations between the father (accomplished, demanding yet remote) and the artist/daughter. "Sink or swim" is the dictum that defines the father's philosophy of parenting; his is a world of maleness and action, aloof from the reactive feminine, which tends toward lamentation



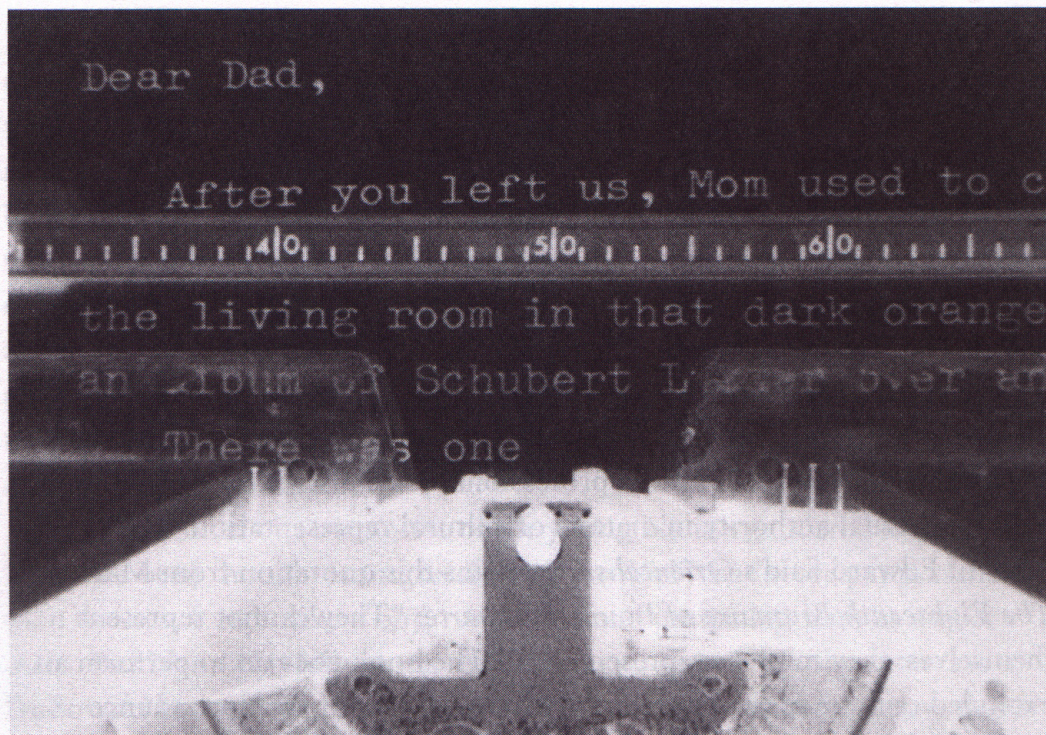


This dreamlike image of the female bodybuilders from *Sink or Swim* accompanies a story about “temptation.” Photo courtesy of Su Friedrich/Downstream Productions.

and numbing resentment. After the father’s departure from home and family, Friedrich’s mother spends her evenings weeping to obsessively played Schubert lieder while the filmmaker resorts to consulting her anthropologist father’s academic tomes, vainly searching—long after the fact—for the emotions he refused to share with the family he was abandoning at the time of their writing.

By the film’s close, Friedrich has assembled a cumulative portrait of a father whose once-unassailable authority has begun to unravel. Always the source of judgment, the father is now himself exposed to the collective appraisal of the film’s audience, who, in one notable example, are led to intuit the father’s sense of sexual rivalry toward his adolescent daughter’s admirers during a trip to Mexico. The film is, in part, her delayed revenge for his having unceremoniously sent her home for her transgressions against his incestuous authority. Hers cannot be an outright victory, however. Recall that the defining characteristics of domestic ethnography are consanguinity and co(i)mplication. Even as *Sink or Swim* moves toward its conclusion and a sense of the artist’s vindication through a willful act of historiographic revisionism, the final roundelay of acoustic elements and the double printing of the home-movie footage in the film’s coda return us to the instability of the domestic ethnographic locus. Over home-movie





From *Sink or Swim*, filmmaker Su Friedrich types the letter she'll never send to the father who abandoned her. Photo courtesy of Su Friedrich/Downstream Productions.

images of the artist as “the girl,” clad in swimsuit, ready to sink or swim, Friedrich sings the “ABC Song” in a round of overlapping voices that rhyme with the ghostly doubling of the image. The final and fateful words of her song are, of course, “tell me what you think of me.” Only on that concluding, deeply other-directed phrase do the discrepant voices and images coalesce.

But even as we gaze at the now-unified semblance of an achingly fragile young girl, we are filled with the knowledge that Friedrich can never entirely elude her father's grasp. Their histories are forever intertwined, their pathologies are enmeshed in one another's. Filmmaking as therapeutic discourse, like analysis, remains interminable, always unfinished. Equally germane to this discussion, the particularity of this instance of domestic ethnography—*Sink or Swim* as Su Friedrich's family history—is counter-vailed by the familiarity of the dynamic displayed. It is on this account that identification (more with dynamic than with character or situation) is engendered.

It is the depth and indelibility of familial attachment that makes the domestic subject such a special ethnographic case. And I would argue that *Sink or Swim* functions as a kind of ethnography—instructive and generalizable—for the way in which it exceeds the bounds of family portraiture. The film is structured by a series of generic elements that reinforce the universality of the subject matter: the use of the alphabet as structuring device,



the elemental chapter headings, the constant use of the third person (“the girl,” later “the woman”) rather than first person, the generic home-movie images, the concluding childhood anthem. The specificity of the narration is sustained in tension with the universality of these elements, and through that tension domestic ethnography is forged.<sup>10</sup>

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### Sharing Textual Authority

The growing attention being accorded indigenous media making at film festivals and conferences and in professional journals speaks to the desire to share textual authority in matters of cultural representation. The frontispiece of Edward Said’s *Orientalism* contains this quotation from Marx’s *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*: “They cannot represent themselves; they must be represented.”<sup>11</sup> The book goes on to perform an extended critique of the epistemological arrogance of such pronouncements. More than thirty years ago, Paul Ricoeur could write about the dawning of a “universal world civilization” and the disorientation it would bring to the waning colonial enterprise: “When we discover that there are several cultures instead of just one and consequently at the time when we acknowledge the end of a sort of cultural monopoly, be it illusory or real, we are threatened with the destruction of our own discovery. Suddenly it becomes possible that there are just *others*, that we ourselves are an ‘other’ among others.”<sup>12</sup> To that sense of aborted cultural monopolies must be added the tremendous growth of access to the representational tools. What once might have occasioned the bewilderment or disdain of social scientists—this vision of ethnography as a free-for-all—is now routinely reinforced by the camcorder documentation of police abuse in Compton or crumbling Giotto frescoes at Assisi. Given the explosive growth and curious coalescence of travel and surveillance technologies, representational authority no longer resides solely with the professional classes of scholars, journalists, and state functionaries.

In this context, I propose to consider a particular textual gesture, what amounts to a moment of authorial crisis occurring in certain of the domestic ethnographies. I am referring to moments at which the maker hands over the camera to his subject, at the subject’s request, moments at which filial obligation outpaces directorial control. This sharing of textual authority is born not of egalitarianism nor of a penchant for the hyper-reflexive; instead, it is an outgrowth of the domestic ethnographer’s intimate relations with her subject. When, in *Tomboychik* (1993), Sandi DuBowski’s grandmother takes his video camera, then rolling, she intends only to



“snap a picture” of her “adorable grandson.” The camera is a mysterious toy to the erstwhile subject of the piece. We, on the other hand, know the game and strain to see a face already described in detail by the grandmother. *Tomboychik* is a search for the roots of DuBowski’s sexual identity by way of the memories of his forebear—reminiscences of the grandmother’s gender-blending childhood and of the mannish strength of her mother before her, who routinely lifted hundred-pound sacks of sugar unaided while making chocolate. The presumption may be that DuBowski’s gayness can be explained genetically; the tape may also function as an unspoken reply to Nana’s occasional references to a wished-for wedding and great-grandchildren.

DuBowski elicits memories of the young Nana’s gendered identity. She had once been thought transgressive, a “boy/girl”: she wore pants rather than dresses, fought like a boy, ran as fast and jumped as high as any of them. But Nana playfully turns the discussion—as well as the camera—to DuBowski himself. She can do this because she is Nana and because this is her dear grandson toward whom there can be no barriers. Such an exchange would not be possible with an “outsider,” but this is “insider” discourse. If *Tomboychik* is ethnography, it is all but absent of the sort of description or explanation we associate with that mode of discourse. But the piece is about shopping for sexual identity in grandma’s closet and about the performance of an intergenerational family masquerade (complete with wigs). The point I wish to stress is that the trope of the “shared camera,” which effects an erosion of textual authority or directorial control, is endemic to domestic ethnography, one measure of the intersubjective reciprocity I have previously described.

The sharing of the apparatus with the subject packs a particular wallop in Mindy Faber’s *Delirium* (1993), an essayistic investigation of her mother’s madness and, more broadly, of the history of women and madness and of the link between depression and domesticity. Faber made the tape at the moment of her own motherhood, presumably to break the cycle of family horrors. We learn about the mother’s symptoms, the threat she had posed to her children, as well as the mother’s own memory of childhood abuse at the hands of her mother, through a series of intensely framed interview sequences. Faber’s voice—pressing for details, unsatisfied by partial explanations—is never long absent from the sound track. We learn of the husband/father’s paternalism, the mother’s repeated institutionalizations and escapes, her suicide fantasies, her inability or unwillingness to recall her children’s fright. These on-camera recitations, prompted and in dialogue with the videomaker, are interspersed with other registers of material: archival footage of madwomen, vignettes from Faber’s imagined





Mother and daughter share textual authority in Mindy Faber's *Delirium*. Photos courtesy of Video Data Bank.

sitcom about her mother's middle-class doldrums, printed excerpts from the clinical diagnoses of hysteria as female malady, a discursus on the career of Jean Martin Charcot and his famous clinic at Salpêtrière, a music video-like performance sequence of a nude woman as a puppet controlled by and for the pleasure of men.

Near the end of the piece, as Faber—with intentionality but little aggressivity—presses her mother to remember the details of her abusive behavior toward the young Mindy, the mother says, “Here, give me the camera.” Unprepared for the turnabout, the now-imaged videomaker struggles to hold her ground against her mother's version of their past. The authorial subject now objectified speaks to the camera at point-blank range about the terrors of returning from school to a Mom who threw pots and pans at her head. But equally terrifying is the sense of Faber's loss of control in the present tense interaction. As with Su Friedrich's treatise on her father but with greater empathy, Faber's task is, at least in part, a therapeutic one—a setting to rights of a painful family history in which the daughter has the last word. It is precisely this power to shape discourse that is temporarily ceded along with the camera. Of course, the footage need not have been included in the final tape. It is to Faber's credit that she recognized the sequence as consistent with her theme: the delirium-inducing potency of family-forged relations across lines of gender and generation. When the





videomaker recovers the camera, it is because she has her own idea for an ending for the tape: a staged scene in which the mother's revenge (a slow-motion stabbing of the father with a banana) is enacted from the point of view of the daughter, a primal scene of retribution.

*Delirium* offers striking illustration of domestic ethnography's potential to mine cultural memory with a level of intensity unavailable to outsiders. Afforded a depth of access to its subjects, domestic ethnography discloses secrets, performs masquerades of identity, and, temporarily at least, rearranges familial hierarchies. Its sleight of hand is the rendering public of private-sphere material, but not, I would argue, as spectacle.

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### **Families We Choose**

Despite the attention given here to the biological family as the nexus within which identity is constructed, in which self-inscription and the representation of the familial other are reciprocally determined, it is important to note that our understanding of "the domestic" has undergone significant change in recent decades. In contrast to the family as ascribed or inherited, Kath Weston has drawn attention to an ascendent paradigm, namely, "families we choose." Weston's specific reference is to the emergence of gay and lesbian families and the reconfiguration of the inherited model



they have enacted. "Chosen families do not directly oppose genealogical modes of reckoning kinship. Instead, they undercut procreation's status as a master term imagined to provide the template for all possible kinship relations."<sup>13</sup> Far from aligning themselves with the conservative rhetoric of "family endangerment," many commentators see the "chosen family" paradigm as pluralizing (rather than destroying) the received model of kinship structure: "The more recent forms of alternative life styles have now become part of the official fiber of society, because they are now being tolerated much more than in the past. In short, what we are witnessing is not a fragmentation of traditional family patterns, but, rather, the emergence of a pluralism in family ways."<sup>14</sup>

This pluralization of the familial is dramatically rendered in Thomas Allen Harris's recent tape *Vintage: Families of Value* (1995), in which the artist explores issues of influence and identity among three sets of African American gay siblings. Harris announces his interest in a tactics of pluralized family identities with the utmost directness; his voice-over, accompanied by black leader, precedes the first image:

In 1990, I wanted to celebrate the intensity of my relationship with my brother Lyle. I was 28 years old and just beginning to explore feelings of ambivalence, fear and hope regarding my family. I recruited two other groups of siblings, members of my community who are also queer, to join me in taking a critical look at their own families. This film is a family album created over the course of five years.

It is a family album constructed through recourse to both heredity and choice, affirmed at every turn by the active participation of all three sets of siblings: Harris and his brother Lyle Ashton Harris; sisters Adrian Jones, Anita Jones, and Anni Cammett; and a brother-sister pair, Paul and Vanessa Eaddy. If domestic ethnography's defining features are consanguinity and co(i)mplication, *Vintage* pushes the latter term to new ends.

Harris rarely backs off from the heat of the relationships he shows us, least of all his own complex interaction with his brother, fellow artist Lyle Ashton Harris. But, in a manner consistent with the pluralization of the family model described above, *Vintage* chooses to focus on *queer siblings*, three groups of individuals each of which is linked internally by blood ties and, across the biological family groupings, by affinity. Although this is not the precise "families we choose" template discussed in the recent sociological literature (i.e., gay or lesbian couple plus adoptive child[ren]), the horizontalizing emphasis on multiple sets of queer siblings positions community alongside biological family grouping and introduces the element of choice. Harris's editing scheme establishes the mutuality of horizontal *and*



vertical family investigation throughout the tape's seventy-two minutes. We are never allowed to settle in on any of the three family narratives; just as we become thoroughly engrossed in the hermeneutic tensions of one sibling set, we find ourselves elsewhere. Harris consistently reminds us of the resonances and overlappings of sexual fantasies, family secrets, and shifting alliances narrated and performed—within and across families. We thus see for ourselves the complex, multilayered character of sexual identities, for, while the siblings define themselves with, against, and through one another at the level of the biological family, they are also defined, at the level of the text, by a shared identification of queerness that links each to all.<sup>15</sup>

Moreover, all of the tape's participants share another sort of community affiliation: all are African American. Yet each challenges stereotypical gender roles recognizable within the black community: Thomas and Lyle celebrate their masculinity—baring sinewy bodies for the camera—yet identify with their mother; Vanessa Eaddy, not her brother Paul, talks of having idolized her father, tagging after him and his pals; Anni Cammett



Filmmaker  
Thomas  
Allen Harris  
with brother  
Lyle Ashton  
Harris, from  
*Vintage:  
Families of  
Value*. Photo  
courtesy  
of Thomas  
Allen Harris.



shares a passionate commitment to basketball and her young daughter. Yet it is to *Vintage*'s credit that neither "blackness" nor "queerness" is accorded primacy of influence in the work of identity formation. They are all queer, all black, but it is a queerness and a blackness that never ceases to mutate despite the "family resemblances." Difference and repetition, self and community, race and sexuality are experienced as interpenetrating categories, mutually determining (indeed undecidable) rather than contradictory or self-canceling.<sup>16</sup>

What we see and hear are three sets of siblings—mobile in their affinities, desires, and familial identifications—narrating their life stories, interrogating the discrepancies of family histories, questioning the hierarchies and psychosexual dependencies that formed each of them. This interrogation of the past, at times singular and introspective (here the expository mode is decidedly interactive, with Harris focusing his camera and attention on one or another sibling),<sup>17</sup> can also be undertaken sibling to sibling. In the latter instances, brothers or sisters exchange versions of their shared histories, at times firing questions at one another from behind the camera. At such times, the trope of shared textual authority discussed above comes into play, reminding us that the operation of the camera is also always a wielding of power. "Were you ashamed of the way I acted?" Vanessa Eaddy asks her brother Paul. Vanessa, though younger, had been out as a dyke while Paul was still closeting his sexuality. Pressing a momentary advantage, a camera-wielding Vanessa suggests that "Mommy is gonna want to talk to you!" The brother hesitates to reply, shifting uneasily beneath his sister's and the camera's gaze. He rises first to grab a cigarette then returns to his perch only to pop up again, demanding, in an attempt to regain control of the situation, that Vanessa "move the camera! Where's Thomas?" The younger, female sibling is now asking the questions of the elder brother, unsettling his inherited authority, overturning the hierarchies. In other sequences between them, it is also clear that Paul and Vanessa (two among eight siblings) are in fact quite close. Their relationship, like that of the other sibling sets, is intense, shifting, co(i)mplicated.

In all instances of domestic ethnography, the familial other helps to flesh out the very contours of the enunciating self, offering itself as a precursor, alter ego, double, instigator, spiritual guide, or perpetrator of trauma. Domestic ethnography entails but exceeds autobiography. In Thomas Allen Harris's tape, it is not just Harris who matters—it is also his brother Lyle as well as the other members of an aggressively extended family who perform a shared identity, that of black queer sibling. In so doing, they redefine the family as the crucible of identity and the locus of domestic ethnography.



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## Conclusion

What brings out the “ethnographic” in the domestic ethnography is the way in which the work calls attention to the dynamics of family life as the most fundamental (which is not to say universal) crucible of psychosexual identity. Universality is at odds with the historical, cultural, and psychosocial differences encountered in any examination of family structures, as exemplified by the variations apparent in three recent pieces. Domestic ethnography offers up the maker and her subject locked in a family embrace; indeed, as we have seen, subject/object positions are at times reversed. I have argued for domestic ethnography as an extension of autobiography, a pas de deux of self and other. It is discursively unstable. If it tells us about cultures and societies, as Fabian claims all ethnography must, it does so only in miniature. But by abandoning any pretense to authoritative or generalizable knowledge of the one for the other, domestic ethnography eludes the colonialist remorse to which Lévi-Strauss once referred.<sup>18</sup> Self and other encounter one another at home rather than in the village square, but the dynamics of social and sexual identity formation it rehearses leaves few of us unscathed.

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## NOTES

1. James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), 34; Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 33.
2. “Desire is desire for the absolutely other. . . . A desire without satisfaction which, precisely, *understands* the remoteness, the alterity, and the exteriority of the other. For Desire this alterity, non-adequate to the idea, has a meaning. It is understood as the alterity of the Other and of the Most-High.” Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 2d ed., trans. A. Lingis (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1978), 34.
3. Peter Mason, *Deconstructing America: Representations of the Other* (London: Routledge, 1990), 2. The work of Levinas, called by Tzvetan Todorov “the philosopher of alterity,” has helped to introduce an increasingly influential perspective in debates surrounding the ethical status of research in the social and human sciences. In a deeply radical gesture, Levinas has suggested that it is Reason itself that has functioned to “neutralize and encompass” the other, translating difference into its own terms in the insatiable pursuit of Knowledge. Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1961), 43. The Levinasian view does not so much undercut the potential for knowledge in cross-cultural research as relativize its value within a moral universe: “It is not a question of putting knowledge in doubt. The human being clearly allows himself to be treated as an object, and delivers himself to knowledge in the *truth* of perception and the light of the human sciences. But, treated exclusively as an object, man is also mistreated and misconstrued. . . . We are human before being learned, and remain so after having forgotten much.” Emmanuel Levinas, *Outside the Subject*, trans. Michael B. Smith (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1994), 2–3.
4. Trinh T. Minh-ha, “Difference: ‘A Special Third World Women Issue,’” *Discourse* 8 (fall/winter 1986–87), 27, 14, 16.
5. Michael Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses* (New York: Routledge, 1993), xviii, xiii.
6. Stephen A. Tyler, “Post-modern Ethnography,” in *Writing Culture: The Poetics and*



- Politics of Ethnography*, ed. James Clifford and George E. Marcus (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 122–40.
7. George E. Marcus, "Ethnography in the Modern World System," in *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, ed. James Clifford and George E. Marcus (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 190–93.
  8. Historically, the notion of the "unlearning of privilege" recalls a notable response of feminist theorists to the lure of incrementally shared patriarchal authority and is currently echoed by the growing attention being given indigenous media making around the world. The work of certain progressive scholars becomes a "facilitation" of representation made by and for indigenous peoples.
  9. See Clifford Geertz, *Works and Lives: The Anthropologist as Author* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1988), 1–24; Hayden White, "Introduction: Tropology, Discourse, and the Modes of Human Consciousness," in *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 1–3.
  10. There remains a lacuna that the present commentary cannot adequately address and that pertains to the etiology of the artist's sexual orientation. Given Friedrich's public stance as a lesbian filmmaker, and given the film's inclusion of images alluding to Friedrich's sexuality (mostly water imagery—women showering together, Friedrich bathing alone), the matter of the father's role in the shaping of the daughter's sexual identity seems to be raised, but only indirectly. Such an elliptical treatment of the topic shrewdly sidesteps diagnostics while remaining consistent with the generally oblique approach to the construal of meaning adopted by the work.
  11. Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon, 1978).
  12. Paul Ricouer, "Universal Civilization and National Cultures," in *History and Truth*, trans. Charles A. Kelbley (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1965), 278.
  13. Kath Weston, "The Politics of Gay Families," in *Rethinking the Family: Some Feminist Questions*, rev. ed., ed. Barrie Thorne and Marilyn Yalom (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1992), 137. One proviso is worth adding in this context. The phrase "families we choose" stresses volition, the conscious selection of new family groupings. Although it would be wrong to deny that gays and lesbians have indeed begun to "choose" to reinvent the family more aggressively and in greater numbers, it would be a mistake to focus a discussion of queerness and its interventions solely at the level of consciousness. Such a stance would miss the pertinence of what Judith Butler has called "psychic excess," that which surpasses the domain of the conscious subject in the determination of sexuality. "This psychic excess is precisely what is being systematically denied by the notion of a volitional 'subject' who elects at will which gender and/or sexuality to be at any given time and place. . . . Sexuality may be said to exceed any definitive narrativization. . . . There are no direct expressive or causal lines between sex, gender, gender presentation, sexual practice, fantasy and sexuality. . . . Part of what constitutes sexuality is precisely that which does not appear and that which, to some degree, can never appear." Judith Butler, "Imitation and Gender Insubordination," in *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*, ed. Diana Fuss (New York: Routledge, 1991), 24–25. All of which is to say that sexuality—gay or straight—eludes volition and the regime of the visible in a most fundamental way.
  14. Tamara K. Hareven, "American Families in Transition: Historical Perspectives on Change," in *Family in Transition: Rethinking Marriage, Sexuality, Child Rearing and Family Organization*, 5th ed., ed. Arlene S. Skolnick and Jerome H. Skolnick (Boston: Little, Brown, 1986), 55.
  15. The matter of sexualized identifications is a tremendously complex one, requiring more qualification than can be undertaken here. As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has argued, identifications can be consolidating as well as denegating, structured through a play of idealization and abjection. Sexual identifications can be identifications *with*, *as*, or *against*. Sedgwick elaborates on the sheer profusion of relations implicit in but one subset, *identifying with*, which she describes as potentially "fraught with intensities of incorporation, diminishment, inflation, threat, loss, reparation, and disavowal." Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 61. To its credit, *Vintage: Families of Value* allows for the discussion and performance of an astonishing array of identificatory positions and intensities played out among its three sets of siblings. The tape, for the most part, steers clear of etiology, a search for queer sources, opting instead for an interactive, on-camera interrogation of family dynamics entailing parents, children, spouses, and lovers as well as siblings. If what emerges is a vision of pluralized queer sexualities in which even siblings are unique in their object choices, fantasies, and preferred practices, this can only be a contribution to the overthrow of the discursive rigidities in which queer subjectivity is still closeted.
  16. I am purposely invoking the Derridean notion of undecidability with regard to the



determination of identity. Derived from the critical writing of Jacques Derrida, the deconstructive method of textual analysis challenges binary oppositions, first by acknowledging the often unspoken hierarchy through which one term controls the other (race over sexuality, sexuality over race), then by overthrowing that hierarchy and finally displacing it. Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 41–43. In Derrida's work, apparently conflictual categories are often found to inhabit one another, resisting and disorganizing the binary in such a manner as to betray the boundaries of "inside" and "outside." This may well be the case for the queer black/black queer subject as constructed within *Vintage: Families of Value*, in which blackness, queerness, birth order, and family relations play out unevenly though decisively.

17. The reference here is to Bill Nichols's discussion of the several modes of documentary exposition, among them the interactive mode, which "stresses images of testimony or verbal exchange. . . . Textual authority shifts toward the social actors recruited: their comments and responses provide a central part of the film's argument. Various forms of monologue and dialogue (real or apparent) predominate." Bill Nichols, *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 44. In *Vintage*, Thomas Allen Harris does indeed delegate authority to his interlocutors, who have been quite literally recruited for that task; their experiences supplement his own.
18. Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques*, trans. John Weightman and Doreen Weightman (New York: Atheneum, 1978), 389.