

“THE SIMPLE CONTAINER OF OUR EXISTENCE”: NARRATIVE AMBIGUITY IN CAROL SHIELDS’S *THE STONE DIARIES*

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William Spengemann asserts that in autobiography, “self-revelation is in fact self-creation” and

the autobiography is not just a manifestation of the self but its very embodiment. As the self becomes identified with the autobiography, moreover, the autobiography becomes the subject of its own allegory; the autobiography becomes a work about itself. (122)

Carol Shields’s *The Stone Diaries* is a work about itself: a study which foregrounds the problems of writing autobiography. As Carolyn Heilbrun articulates, “the plots of women’s literature are not about ‘life’ . . . They are about the plots of literature itself, about the constraints . . . of rendering a female life in fiction” (44-5). Daisy Goodwill, a subject beautifully resonant of the poststructuralist age, challenges the old rules, conformities and requirements of genre to dismantle the humanist concept of identity or the absolute self. Helen Buss explains:

When dealing with issues of identity, the humanist finds a stable, unique, individual self, one which is capable of a separate ego-development aimed at self-assertion and individual accomplishment. For the humanist the expression of that self in written language makes more permanent an already formed entity. The poststructuralist, on the other hand, assumes that the self has no existence outside of language, but rather is a language construct, one constantly shaped by forces of ideology, changing its representation with each situation it faces. Given the slipperiness of language, language’s need to create non-referential figures to construct the self, no real, individual ‘face’ is possible. (2)

Daisy Goodwill in *The Stone Diaries* has no face.

Narrative ambiguity in the text offers the poststructural shifting and/or hollow subject position as a window onto the special problems involved in writing autobiography and in particular those which confront women writers. Helen Buss speaks of woman's task in life writing:

Rather than make the assumption that women are lacking in the ability to fully exploit the patriarchal language because of their own 'lack' as women, I assume that the public uses of language, male shaped by male hegemonic power, were not always suitable to female expression of self. Therefore, like myself, my foremothers had to negotiate as best they could inside an insufficient symbol system. I make the assumption then, that my foremother's language, like my own, was in the process of 'inscriptive social change,' and that in order to read fully what she offers me as literary and female 'ancestress,' I must explore her text for the ways in which she subverts and escapes patriarchal language usages and generic modes in which she had to write. (6)

The manipulation of narrative technique in the text draws attention to the way women are silenced by the restrictive imposition of the modes of certain genres. Buss tells us that "in pioneer women's writing of the self, the writer of the most common form of self-inscription is the journal/letter writer" (6). *The Stone Diaries*, in an odd imitation of this genre form, subverts and challenges its assumptions and restrictions. Hayden White suggests that "every discipline is made up of a set of restrictions on thought and imagination" (126). *The Stone Diaries* acts as a metafictional container for the exploration of the pitfalls and inadequacies entailed in constructing a speaking subject.

The Stone Diaries' ironic self-effacing metafictional narrative techniques emerge as strategies that underscore the process of self-invention and force the "self" in the self-conscious text to stand out in relief against a background of conventions, traditions and roles. Identity can be seen as a site of contesting selves: past self, present self, public self, private self, and the writer must choose and/or invent a speaking self. Buss says that "genre choice can be related to one's sense of identity" (7). Daisy wants to get inside language and make it her own: "to pull herself inside a bag of buried language, to be that language, to be able to utter that unutterable word" (266).

She recognizes the magnitude of the role of language in the creation of a self: "the self is not a thing carved on entablature" (231).

The Stone Diaries' narrative strategies create ambiguities which challenge and unsettle the reader's expectations almost from the opening lines of the text. The idea of the split self is explored while the point of view switches from first person to third person and back so many times the reader's head is set spinning. Twice in the novel the first and third persons converge in a single sentence (61, 75). At first the "I" in the story appears to be Daisy Goodwill; since the book is called a diary we assume the "I"-narration to be hers. But then Daisy appears as a character in the story while the "I"-figure doing the narrating continues to surface. The "I"-narrator knows the details of the events leading up to Daisy Goodwill's birth (1-40) as well as the thoughts that run through Cuyler Goodwill's head as he lies in his backyard dying (271-80). This "I"-narrator has access to the letters Daisy receives between 1955 and 1964 (197-228) as well as the various documents that are found in her possession after she passes away (341-63).

The identity of the narrator is alternately obscured and suggested. Based on the knowledge the narrator possesses one might take him/her to be omniscient if it were not for the decidedly involved stance the narrator takes: "That's my opinion, my humble opinion, as I long ago learned to say" (121). The suggestion of the diary genre also points away from the instrument of an omniscient narrator. But the text itself strains against the genre of diary-writing by erasing Daisy Goodwill from the writing of her life directly after she is born.

The plurality of diaries in the title *The Stone Diaries* suggests that there is not only one story and not only one teller. The word "diaries" refers to the stories of others, the versions through the eyes of others (including the narrator) of Daisy's life. Daisy's own version of her life, like her journal, is lost (156). There is a section called, "The Things People Had To Say About the Goodwill-Flett Liaison" (155), and when Daisy falls into a depression there is a long section detailing other people's theories about what is actually wrong with her (231-61). No one seems to want Daisy's own version: "Surely no one would expect Mrs. Flett to come up with a theory about her own suffering" (261). When Nicole Brossard answers her own question, what is necessary in order to write?, her requirements include: "have a captivating and positive self-image" (133). It is safe to say *The Stone Diaries'* Daisy Goodwill does not have a captivating and positive self-image.

One of the great ironies of the text is that while Daisy is imagined to be the speaking subject of the text, the main character of her own life, she rarely speaks. She has been given a story to tell, but she has not been given a voice. In *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf emphasizes the necessity of portraying women's lives from the woman's point of view (89). Gail Scott says "Women's fiction is often highly autobiographical. Why not? When what is called 'real' (the female figure in *their* stories, in *their* legal, educational and other institutions) seems like a fiction to us" (68-69 emphasis Scott's).

The conspiratorial relationship between the anonymous "I"-narrator and the reader disables Daisy, decentres and eventually deconstructs her. Rather than being at the apex of her own life story, Daisy becomes a mute hollow structure that deflects meaning and points relentlessly away from her. The "I"-narrator cautions the reader against believing Daisy's story—the story that she is created to tell, but rarely allowed to tell: "Daisy Goodwill has a little trouble with getting things straight; with the truth, that is, . . . Much of what she has to say is speculative, exaggerated, wildly unlikely, . . . Daisy Goodwill's perspective is off" (148). While this undermining of Daisy's credibility and authority works to destabilize her subject position, it also calls into question all narrative authority, and by extension undermines everything the "I"-narrator (and the author) says as well.

Gail Scott says, of how her concept of the writing self has changed, that she thinks of "not the 'self' as a . . . predetermined figure, but a complex tissue of texts, experience, evolving in the very act of writing" (11). William Spengemann says the way the writing of autobiography has changed because of the way perception of self has changed:

We must view autobiography historically, not as one thing that writers have done again and again, but as the pattern described by the various things they have done in response to changing ideas about the nature of the self, the ways in which the self may be apprehended, and the proper method of reporting those apprehensions. (xiii)

Phyllis Rose says, "creativity can scarcely exist without a substantial sense of self and a conviction, at least for the moment one is writing, that what one can produce is worthwhile" (199). The "self" in a text is a tenuous and ambiguous device, overshadowed by the

power of narrative: "Wherever she goes, her story marches ahead of her. Announces her. Declares and cancels her true self" (122).

By investigating the problems of the constructed self/subject in literature, *The Stone Diaries* also illuminates many of the obstacles that face women in their struggle to cease being viewed as objects constructed by men. When Cuyler Goodwill meets his daughter Daisy for the first time, he "talked to fill the frightening silence" (91), and this may well be the impulse that motivates writing, but while Cuyler fills the space with his words, Daisy is still engulfed in the "frightening silence."

The woman autobiographer is caught in the double bind of submitting and asserting self—"true *writer* signifies assertion while true *woman* signifies submission" (Ostriker 315). After her birth, the rest of her life is told by an ambiguous narrator, sometimes seeming to be Daisy, but mostly referring to her in the third person. Daisy's dominant characteristic is silence. We see her sit by while her future mother-in-law goes on and on about how to be a good wife (102-4) and never once hear her utter a word. We watch as she endures while her father "talked and talked and talked" (87) on the long train ride to Indiana, never making a peep. We read letters from other people, none written by her (197-228). Daisy has kept all the letters Barker wrote her, but "her letters to him have not survived" (145). We are told that her thoughts on marriage are not recorded (156), Daisy having given up the habit of keeping a journal.

One of the few scenes told by Daisy is the chapter "Birth" (1-40). It is narrated in the first person, and this gives it an extraordinary, surrealistic flavour. It brings to mind the vision of the artist-god, and the Blakeian notion of seeing all of time in a single moment. Cynthia Huff has argued that women's accounts of childbirth reveal important truths "about its cultural construction, about the relations that construction enacts between physical and artistic creativity and between ideological and textual constraints on women"¹ (Neuman 8). This narrator sees herself born: "my flattened head and infant arms amid the mess of glistening pulp," "the pulsing, mindless, leaking jelly of my own just-hatched flesh" (23). She has a desire to "place my hand on my own beating heart" (23) as if she is standing outside the scene watching it unfold, yet at the same time participating in the event and wishing to assure herself of her own life.

This unsettling narrative impulse of being both inside and outside of the story characterized by the birth scene is embodied

by the ambiguous narrator whose persona pervades the text. The dextrous shifting between third- and first-person narrative points of view gives the reader that same kaleidoscopic sensation that is created in the birth scene where we witness Daisy appearing to be both participating in and witnessing the event. What is enacted is the paradoxical plight of the writer of autobiography complete with vertiginous bouts of distancing and engulfment. The writer is compelled to create a separate speaking subject to narrate even those events which are "true," "real," or "factual" because the activities of writing history and fiction are so alike: "Viewed simply as verbal artifacts histories and novels are indistinguishable from one another" (White 122). The creation of this other (speaking subject) accounts for the sliding effect between distance (the one speaking is other than me) and engulfment (this is my life I am telling).

Daisy narrates the events of the day of her birth from the first-person perspective to emphasize the fact she possesses knowledge that her so-called creators do not. But this scene is the only time that Daisy is afforded any narrative power. This single instance establishes a contrast between Daisy's narrative power and the powerlessness of her creators.

The separation that occurs during the birth chapter between Daisy, the created subject, and the "I"-narrator who is still somehow Daisy but seeing her life from an inexplicable timeless remove, is reinforced throughout the text by the spotty re-emergence of first-person narration, which both baffles the reader and maintains that tenuous thread of attachment between Daisy and her narrator.

Daisy's role in *The Stone Diaries*, then, is not to tell her own story—for after her birth she is virtually voiceless—but to act as the connecting strand that links the disparate events and characters in the text. Allusions to this thread that Daisy must grasp and pull through the entire narrative appear both at her birth and after her death. It is the "filament of matter" (39) she senses on the day she is born will be out of reach for her and in the words of one of her children, it is the "stray little thought" she goes after "with a needle and thread" (356) all her life.

Once Daisy is born her power is revoked, or at least diminished; she never does catch hold of the filament of matter, never does tack down that ever-elusive thought, because her awareness of what she is prevents her from fulfilling the modernist's desire to "only connect" (epigraph to *Howard's End*).

The undermining of Daisy's authority starts with Daisy herself at her birth. She reports the names of those who have been

"invited to participate in a moment of history" (39) and then immediately scoffs at the notion of her birth as being in any way a momentous occasion: "History indeed! As though this paltry slice of time deserves such a name" (39). This undercutting of her own narrative serves a double purpose. It recognizes the self-aggrandizing impulse in the writer of autobiography and destabilizes it by mocking it, and at the same time it enforces the accepted premise that events become history once they are written down. But further, it also alerts the reader that this kind of birth — the creation of a speaking subject — is not stupendous at all, but commonplace. Though the reader may be tempted to think of this birth as remarkable, it really is only a "paltry" happening in literature.

On the heels of this blatant act of undermining Daisy's authority comes an abrupt shift in the narrative tone. Daisy's confident, assured recounting of the day of her birth lapses suddenly into uncertainty. After she gives a detailed account of the witnesses and her own newborn self: "dragged wet from my fetal world, tiny, bundled, blind" (38-9), her rhetoric collapses into vagueness: "I am almost certain that the room offers no suggestion to its inhabitants of what should happen next" (39). Why should the narrator, who has been nothing if not certain thus far, suddenly be merely "almost certain"? Her power has already begun to slip away. Daisy in the first chapter remarks on the "squirming foolishness of birth" (40). The "I"-narrator, who will shortly separate herself from the first-person-presumably-Daisy-narrator, seems to intrude here and declare that birth of this kind of a story-teller — a story-teller without a tongue — is foolish.

When Daisy re-emerges in the story she is no longer "I," but Barker Flett's "young niece, a girl of eleven years old" (43). Occasionally the first-person point of view reappears as in the description of Daisy's illness which includes not only references to Daisy as "she" ("She must have slept a good deal"), but also: "it was doubtless the fever that disoriented me, and it is true I suffered strange delusions in that dark place, and that my swollen eyes in the twilight room invited frightening visions" (75). Here the reader is forced to submit that the "I"-narrator and the sick Daisy are one and the same. And in the very next sentence, the two are merged, in double-naming: "The long days of isolation, of silence, the torment of boredom — all these pressed down on me, on young Daisy Goodwill and emptied her out" (75). "Me" and "Daisy Goodwill" are conflated into one person. The instances of uniting and separating the two keep the reader ever-aware that s/he is reading a text

and encountering the problems in the writing of texts, one of which is, as Hayden White says of writing history, "What is at issue here is not, What are the facts? but rather, How are the facts to be described in order to sanction one mode of explaining them rather than another?" (134). Attention is continuously pulled to the function of the speaker/writer as ideologically and textually conditioned.

The novel's undermining of Daisy's authority to tell her own story shows how the voices of women have perpetually been silenced and how this silencing is so deeply woven into the fabric of society that nobody recognizes it as horrific. Further, it makes evident Mikhail Bakhtin's contention that all discourse is "over populated with the intentions of others" (294). In "Discourse in the Novel," Bakhtin argues that "language . . . is never unitary" (288), and that "language has been completely taken over, shot through with intentions and accents . . . each word tastes of the context and contexts in which it has lived its socially charged life" (293). Roland Barthes also notes that, "the text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture" (211). In *The Stone Dairies* the notion of uniqueness of voice is shown to be an illusion. Finally, the text calls attention to the old modernist fascination with the artist as god and exaggerates the power of the assumed author in order to hold it up as an effigy of a dying tradition and ridicule it, and finally destroy it at the end of the book with the death of Daisy.

The birth scene is important because it chronicles how a constructed subject comes to be: unwittingly. *The Stone Diaries'* Daisy Goodwill is created in an environment where her ostensible creators (textual parents) are unaware of her creation, her existence, her coming to be: neither Cuyler nor Mercy Goodwill know that Mercy is pregnant.

The reader's traditional expectations of a speaking subject are vexed from the outset upon encountering Daisy's report of her own birth. The narrator muses about eighty-year-old Daisy, "Just how is it that she finds the energy to lift her powder puff, knowing what she knows?" (336) This is what she knows: that she is a textual creation.

As a self-aware textual construct Daisy knows herself to be displaced, vacant, constantly deferring. Daisy refers to herself as empty, hollowed-out, vacant. She senses a "vacuum. . . in the middle of her life. Something was missing" (75). She considers she lacks a "kernel of authenticity" (75). She sees herself as "blinded, throttled, erased from the record of her own existence" (76). So powerful is the knowledge that she is lacking some essential centre that "she

could only stare at this absence within herself for a few minutes at a time. It was like looking at the sun" (75). The narrator tells us she has "a great talent for self-obliteration" (124), and that she is "powerless, anchorless, soft-tissued — a woman" (150). She finds things in her life "lacking in weight" (280). She acknowledges that she "belongs to no one", and "even her dreams release the potent fumes of absence" (281). She notices "how insubstantial she is, has always been — an envelope of flesh" (310). Near death she gets a "new sense of her own hollowness" (330). After death she sees her brain as "purest mica, you can hold it up to the window and the light shines through. Empty" (359).

Michel Foucault maintains that "language . . . is hollowed by absence" (*Archeology of Knowledge* 111). Wholly constituted by language, Daisy is hollowed by absence. She is a textual construct, a speaking subject created for the purpose of giving a story, telling a tale. She acknowledges that she was given emptiness at birth. She is a placeholder, an empty signifier that points continually to something else. She embodies the representational nature of language: a vehicle constantly referring away from itself to that other, that referent, that thing that holds meaning, that exists, that is.

The reason Daisy feels happy when she is standing by "God's Gate" on the Orkney Islands is because she recognizes herself in this structure. It is a "natural archway through which every seventh or eighth wave came loudly crashing" (300). She sees a hollowed out edifice subjected to the whims and buffeting of the language of others and feels affinity. Hayden White believes that "great works of fiction will usually . . . not only be *about* their putative subject matter, but also *about* language itself and the problematic relation between language consciousness and reality — including the writer's own language" (127 emphasis White's).

The eroding archway, like the monuments constructed by Cuyler Goodwill, is like Daisy (her life is called a monument in the epigraph) as it crumbles and decays under the endless attack of weather and time. God's Gate is like the humanist's concept of identity as embodied in the authority of a writer of autobiography: disintegrating. In "What is an Author?" Michel Foucault states that the writing of our day "is primarily concerned with creating an opening where the writing subject endlessly disappears" (116) and "if we wish to know the writer of today, it will be through the singularity of his absence and his link to death" (117).

Daisy's "resignation belongs to the phylum of exhaustion, the problem of how to get through a thousand ordinary days" (263):

the speaking subject as authentic or authoritative is depleted, ailing, worn thin by the buffeting storms of poststructural theory. Increasingly, she "feels her own terrifying inauthenticity gnawing at her heart's membrane" (267). She acknowledges the "slippage her body has undergone, the spoilage" (337). Like the tower and the pyramid, the traditional speaking subject begins to disintegrate and Daisy, too, must be extinguished as faith in the authority of the textual and/or writing subject diminishes with the eroding tides of contemporary literary theory, and the text itself achieves her inherent uselessness, obsolescence and eventual demise.

Authority of the writing subject can be seen as dying at the hands of the contemporary currents in critical theory: "writing is the destruction of every voice, of every point of origin" (Barthes 208). Roland Barthes says that "the whole of enunciation is an empty process, functioning perfectly without there being any need for it to be filled with the person of the interlocutor" (210). Barthes argues further, "To give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing" (212). Barthes contends: "We know now that a text is not a line of words releasing a single 'theological' meaning (the 'message' of the Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash" (211).

The multi-dimensional space of this text enacts a clever intersection of celebratory acknowledgement of women's creative artistry in self-invention (i.e. Mercy Goodwill's cooking, Clarentine Flett's gardening, Victoria's studies, Daisy's writing) and a serious attack on the narrowness of the accepted arenas of women's art. Estelle Jelinek explains that "the multidimensionality of women's socially conditioned roles seems to have established a pattern of diffusion and diversity when they write their autobiographies as well" (17). *The Stone Dairies* mocks constraining social boundaries by figuring these boundaries as ridiculous: Daisy "wants to want something but she doesn't know what she is allowed" (117). Young women about to marry know nothing about sex (106-07); Daisy loses her newspaper column to the whim of an employee protected by rigid patriarchal rules (226-28). On the brink of Daisy's marriage, Mrs. Hoard warns her not to "parade" her knowledge in front of her husband (102), and adjures her that she must no longer think only of herself (104). Barker Flett sends Daisy a wedding present and the narrator intimates that Barker presumes a woman's life begins when she marries (113).

While the narrator contends that "there are chapters in every

life which are seldom read, and certainly not aloud" (111), the text itself proves that more often than not these unread chapters belong to the lives of women. *The Stone Diaries* offers a reading and/or telling of a woman's history in the manner that Catherine Clement seems to be calling for when she writes in *The Newly Born Woman*:

Somewhere every culture has an imaginary zone for what it excludes, and it is that zone we must try to remember *today* . . . If women begin to want their turn at telling this history, if they take the relay from men by putting myths into words (since that is how historical and cultural evolution will take place, . . . it will necessarily be from other points of view. It will be a history read differently, . . . These narratives, these myths, these fantasies, these fragments of evidence of history do not compose a *true* history . . . Instead, it is a history, taken from what is lost within us of oral tradition, of legends and myths — a history arranged the way tale-telling women tell it. (6 emphasis Clement's)

De Beauvoir and Cixous tell us that woman has always been measured against the traditional masculine standard. Woman's otherness, then, finds no like in this standard and becomes an absence. Apart from being voiceless, Daisy is also invisible as are the other women in the text. Mercy's "look" is one of "being unspotted by the world" (10), and she is characterized as "impassive," "unmoved," and "mute" (84). Clarentine Flett knows that "not one pair of eyes can see through the roof and walls of her house and regard her" (11). Daisy sees her life as a darkened room, herself as "blinded, throttled, erased from the record of her own existence" (76). Carolyn Heilbrun says that "there will be narratives of female lives only when women no longer live their lives isolated in the houses and the stories of men" (47).

As I quoted Helen Buss earlier, explaining identity for the poststructuralist, no real individual "face" is possible. We are told no "photographs of [Daisy] dating from this period [1936]" (145) exist, and when we get to the photographs in the middle of the book, we see that there are no photographs of Daisy at all! Unseen, unheard, this woman occupies a cavern of vacancy at the centre of the text. The only time we hear her voice is when she is in the presence of other women: with her girlfriends (106-07, 130-32), with her grand-niece Victoria in the Orkneys (290-91) and with her daughter Alice when she is elderly and in a home (323-32).

The Stone Diaries investigates the complex architectonics under-

lying all writing. Hayden White explains of the way that history is written:

In the unprocessed historical record . . . the facts exist only as a congeries of contiguously related fragments. These fragments have to be put together to make a whole of a particular, not a general, kind. And they are put together in the same ways that novelists use to put together figments of their imaginations to display an ordered world, a cosmos, where only disorder or chaos might appear. (125)

The text highlights the shifting nature of voice and interrogates the way that existence is textually-conditioned. Shields' novel explores the assumptions of post-Kantian thought and particularly the tenet that while direct unmediated knowledge of the world is impossible, the mind imposes, through language, order, patterns and meaning allowing communication and understanding to take place but at once also creates distance. *The Stone Diaries* figures language as the intelligible, organizing grid that operates to make one's thoughts understood in the external world. The imperfections of language are manifested in the gaps, blemishes, inventions and irregularities of Daisy's biography. White affirms:

[T]here is no value-neutral mode of emplotment, explanation or even description of any field of events, whether imaginary or real, and . . . the very use of language itself implies or entails a specific posture before the world which is ethical, ideological, or more generally political: not only interpretation, but also all language is politically contaminated (129)

The reader of *The Stone Diaries* is informed that: "Biography, even autobiography, is full of systematic error, of holes that connect like a tangle of underground streams" (196).

The Stone Diaries reflects the nature of discourse by repeatedly pointing to the fallibility and instability of life writing. Of Daisy Goodwill, the narrator tells us: "Her autobiography, if such a thing were imaginable, would be, if such a thing were ever written, an assemblage of dark voids and unbridgeable gaps" (75-6).

Gaps in this life story abound. What happens between the ages of eleven, when Daisy moves to Bloomington with her father, and twenty-two when she is about to get married? And the gap between age thirty-one when Daisy marries Barker Flett and age forty-two when we meet her again, a housewife and mother of three

children? Another gap protrudes between Daisy's 1965 depression and 1977 when she surfaces as a contented retired woman living in Florida who goes on an enjoyable trip to the Orkneys with her grand-niece. Silence intervenes once more between this trip and Daisy's declining state of health at age eighty. Estelle Jelinek tells us that "irregularity rather than orderliness informs the self-portraits of women" (17).

The gaps, like Daisy's silenced voice and the ambiguous role of the narrator and shifting narrative point of view, work to break down rigid genre definitions, especially those prescribed for women's writing. Daisy's ambiguous role gnaws at the protective casing of assumed authority of a speaker/writer of a text. In his book on forms of autobiography William Spengemann laments that "the more the genre gets written about, the less agreement there seems to be on what it properly includes" (xi). Shields's work unravels the tenacity of traditional genre boundaries and while Spengemann acknowledges that for quite some time scholars have quarrelled "over the admissibility of letters, journals, memoirs, and verse-narratives" (xi), *The Stone Diaries* is presented as a pastiche of many types of writing: first-, second- and third-person point of view narration, the use of the past as well as the present tense, letters, newspaper articles, speeches, lists, historical accounts, scientific jargon, definitions, photographs, recipes, conversations, obituaries, wedding announcements, telephone conversations. The inclusion of all these kinds of writing in a novel based on the genre of diary-writing loosens genre boundaries and points to blurring and cross-pollinating between genres as being more useful.

Women have long been relegated to the genres of diaries and letters, but Shields's narrator asserts, "we need attention paid to us" (37). Left in archaic genre categories women's writing remains perpetually unheard, unseen: "The larger loneliness of our lives evolves from our unwillingness to spend ourselves, stir ourselves. We are always dampening down our inner weather, permitting ourselves the comforts of postponements, rehearsals" (297).

Stephen B. Oates accounts for the recent popularity of the genre of biography by saying that "it personalizes events, demonstrates that the individual does count" (ix). However, in this text that points playfully to the genre of biography, the erasure of Daisy from the text of her own life is an uncanny and chilling testament to the invisibility of women in the daily text of male-controlled existence. There are no photographs of Daisy, no articles, letters or diary entries written by her. By the end of the book, her own sense of self

is so diminished that she looks to a hospital band with her name on it as a wonderful secret acknowledgement of her existence (320).

Autobiography is a way of making one's self present in the world. Nicole Brossard says that to write, "one must have the desire, be it conscious or not, to make one's presence known, to declare one's existence in the world" (133). How does one go about manifesting one's self in a world which excludes and erases it? Phylliss Rose says an artist must have a healthy sense of self in order to create; Nicole Brossard also affirms "to write, you must first belong to yourself" (133). If a strong sense of self is necessary in order to write, then it must be absolutely crucial to write autobiography. When women write of self, of what do they write?

The Stone Diaries shines an oblique spotlight on these issues while launching a skilful and sagacious attack on modernist notions of text, genre, character and narration. An undercurrent of self-reflexivity never lets the reader forget that the main site of attention (and contention) in the text is the process of creating a text. The narrator delivers an "assault of unsorted reflections" (90), but tempers it, very self-consciously, with the ordering, systematizing mind of a writer, fully aware that writing itself instantly becomes an artifact, concrete, frozen in time. In the text, Daisy is "caught in a version of her life, pinned there" (147). Though *The Stone Diaries* calls for and celebrates courage through self-expression in all its forms, it also pokes fun at traditional notions of literary genres such as biography and autobiography: "the recounting of a life is a cheat" (28). And while the desire to write autobiography may spring from the same place as the nostalgia that urges the Flett children to sit in a tent and reminisce (174), Carol Shields's novel shows us that life writing attempted with a view to revealing the "true self" is as problematic as deciphering an account "written with imagination's invisible ink" (149).

NOTES

¹ See Huff's essay "Delivery: The Cultural Re-presentation of Childbirth" in *Autobiography and Questions of Gender*. Ed. Shirley Neuman. London: Frank Cass, 1991. 108-21.

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