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Review of Rachel Gabara, From Split to Screened Selves: French and Francophone Autobiography in the Third Person.

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Rachel Gabara, *From Split to Screened Selves: French and Francophone Autobiography in the Third Person*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006. 232 pp. ISBN 0804753563.

Reviewed by Fazia Aitel, Claremont McKenna College

Rachel Gabara's book, *From Split to Screened Selves: French and Francophone Autobiography in the Third Person*, engages the dilemmas of autobiography in text and film. Gabara examines autobiographical work by six writers and filmmakers, dividing her book into three parts. The first one focuses on texts by Roland Barthes and Nathalie Sarraute, while the second focuses on photography and cinema as key modes of self-representation in Roland Barthes's *Camera Lucida* and Cyril Collard's *Savage Nights*. The third and last part of Gabara's book concerns Francophone autobiography, with one chapter devoted to Assia Djébar's *Fantasia, an Algerian Cavalcade* and another focused on two filmmakers, David Achkar and Raoul Peck, and their respective films, *Allah Tantou* and *Lumumba: Death of the Prophet*.

According to Gabara, these six authors and filmmakers have in common their experimentation with the narrative voice and the unconventional ways in which they narrate or tell their "fragmented" selves. And so, Roland Barthes and Nathalie Sarraute question the very possibility of autobiography, even as they experiment with the form -- through the use of first, second and third-person voices -- while Cyril Collard relates in film and text his internal fight with the HIV virus and his external/social life of love and friendship. Gabara calls Assia Djébar, David Achkar and Raoul Peck "the heroes" of her study. Like Barthes, Sarraute and Collard, these three figures attempt to represent a fragmentary subjectivity; yet, unlike them, they refuse to "locate an interior sublime object to serve as guarantor of uniqueness and coherence" (156). These three writers take the radical project of their antecedents further and open up the genre. They bring other voices into their autobiographical texts, thereby creating a plurality and coexistence of voices, even allowing the reader into the process.

Gabara's book progresses from word to image and from France to Francophone Africa: all the texts and films here employ the French language and the third-person voice. Indeed, each of the authors is aware of the impossibility of a coherent identity and so breaks away from the convention of the first-person voice to try to find new ways to reflect upon his/her life. Gabara delineates the difference between Barthes, Sarraute and Collard, who insist in wanting to reunify this self, and postcolonial autobiography, which rejects this project for a radically new form of the genre. It is true that over the centuries, autobiography as a genre has been associated with the West and with a certain individualism which is not found in African values and cultures, making it an anomaly in an African context. Gabara revisits these dilemmas and problems, and through her attention to the third-person voice develops a new critical paradigm, realized in her discussion of the works of Djébar, Peck, and Achkar. She maintains that these figures mark a new trend in autobiography, hitherto dismissed by scholars, and also makes a strong case for these new forms of autobiography to be part of any study of the genre where to date the norm has been the European "I." These new forms are more flexible and inclusive, contrary to the exclusion of traditional autobiography, incorporating dialogue as a mode, with other first and third-person voices. The result is a text of self wherein stories of other(s) are interwoven. With these forms of autobiography there is even a potential to challenge the way we conceive of

individual subjectivity. Beyond where autobiography is practiced -- Europe or Africa -- Gabara also addresses the medium of autobiography with regard to Cyril Collard's film, *Savage Nights*. Critics have considered autobiographical film conceptually impossible to achieve, a position she vehemently challenges in her discussion of postcolonial film.

Gabara starts by tracing Roland Barthes's struggle with autobiography in *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*. Contrary to the teleology of the form, Barthes resists the portrayal of a coherent self and instead displays a fragmented "Barthes" subject. To this end, Gabara points to the major characteristics of Barthes's anti-genre method: that is, his use of the third-person voice, the inclusion of the voice of the Imaginary, and the enlistment of the reader as a unifier of the subject. Yet she maintains that Barthes fell into the trap that he wanted to avoid, that is, the representation of a self, for, she argues, the problem is not what sort of self to represent but the conception of any self at all. She closes the chapter by claiming that many critics cannot resist the temptation of "pastiche, paraphrase, and quotation, when analyzing Barthes's work," which is ironic given her heavy reliance upon and use of citations in this chapter.

The author moves on to examine Nathalie Sarraute's *Childhood*, a fragmented text where a second-person voice is added to the first person, creating a dialogue which provides for self-analysis, as in the following:

-[...] Did I dream it? is it possible that you burst into tears and told her...
-It's barely believable, but I can see it. (36)

But Gabara argues that, like Barthes's text, the "other" here is internal and does not allow any outside analysis, thereby excluding the reader. She also points to several contradictions in Sarraute's declarations: for instance, that the author denied that *Childhood* is an autobiography, claiming that she wanted to free herself from "subject, characters, and plot" (38). However, as Gabara aptly argues, Sarraute's text has a "central named character, anchored in time and space, with a developing personality" (38); and despite her protests, her text fulfills all the criteria of an autobiography, as defined by Lejeune. In addition, Sarraute claims that she does not believe in identity when she states, "I have no feeling of identity. I think that inside each of us, very deeply, we are all similar" (37). Thus she considers "conventional conceptions of identity to be imposed from outside" (25). Still, Gabara demonstrates the obvious difficulty in finding universality here when the main character has a proper name: Natacha, Sarraute's childhood name as well as the name of the main character in the text. In the end, despite her distrust of autobiographical writing, Sarraute creates "the sense of a whole and discoverable self" (39).

Returning to Barthes and his *Camera Lucida* (1980), Gabara discusses photography as autobiography. Barthes distinguishes two kinds of photographs, the cultural (*studium*) and the more personal (*punctum*), which cannot be accessed through critique. An example of pure punctum is the picture of Barthes's mother, which captures her essence: "in this voracious photograph, the being I love, whom I had loved, is not separated from itself: at last it coincides" (55). Gabara writes that "Barthes wants to be photo-graphed in order finally to have an autobiography in which "I" and image, Roland Barthes and Roland Barthes, coincide" (63). From photographic autobiography, Gabara moves to film, which is often thought to be a difficult medium for autobiography. However, Gabara argues that "filmic autobiography, with its

multiple authorship and material, visible, split between director or filmmaker and actor or filmed self, stretches our knowledge of the fragmented autobiographical 'I' to an uncomfortable and extremely profitable extent" (71).

Gabara then turns to Cyril Collard's autobiographical movie, *Savage Nights*, based on an earlier autobiographical text. For the film, Collard was writer, director, and sole actor-narrator. Over the course of the film he represents his internal struggle with HIV -- his body -- and his external struggle with others, particularly lovers. Gabara notices that the conclusions of the autobiographical novel and film are "opposite in tone and message" (79). For instance, in the film, he loves women but is attracted to men, while the novel reverses the objects of love and attraction. In the film, the fragmented identity represented in the novel disappears. Gabara concludes that Collard uses the film to heal his split self. But while she argues that Collard's identity is unified in the film, oddly she closes the chapter commenting that "the tensions within his own work subvert the very possibility of a unified identity or self, for he has left too many seams showing ever to convince us completely" (91).

Given the failures of Barthes, Sarraute, and Collard to achieve successful autobiographies, Gabara obviously considers Francophone experimental autobiography, in film and text, to be more interesting. Indeed, her book seems livelier, better documented and more engaged in the last part. It is also quite clear that Gabara considers the Algerian writer, Assia Djébar, a master of the new autobiography, which she argues for and values. Clearly *Fantasia, an Algerian Cavalcade*, illustrates this new trend, one that appeals to Gabara and to which she pays tribute. The author actually decides to replace the English title with *Love, an Algerian Cavalcade*, a substitution which is closer to the original (*L'Amour, la fantasia*). Unfortunately, such accuracy of translation is confusing in the same way that the numerous endnotes -- which are mostly her alternative translations of the French text and whose necessity is never explained to the reader -- are confusing if not superfluous. In this section, Gabara skillfully demonstrates that while Djébar tackles the same issues as the other authors, she places them in the framework of domination based on gender, language, and colonial power that has structured her life. Djébar also moves between first, second and third persons, between the past and the present, the personal and the historical, and between French and Arabic. Moreover, Djébar emphasizes "interconnectedness of selves, histories, and time periods" (99) and also "quotes, paraphrases, invents from her sources [...] frustrates and mocks our expectation of historical reference" (102). Moreover, Gabara rightly denies what many critics claim to be a collective history, with plural subjectivities. She shows that Djébar "cannot return to a communal bond that was broken without her assent" (120) and that her voice is intertwined with her people but "not indistinguishable" (122). In this new autobiography allied to new history, Djébar presents a fragmented self which cannot cohere and which thus allows the coexistence of multiple voices. Gabara claims that unlike Barthes, Sarraute and Collard, Djébar does not fall into the trap of autobiographical introspection, a claim that might be challenged.

Both David Achkar and Raoul Peck's films share similarities with Djébar's novel. They mix documentary and fictional genres, autobiography, biography, and history, as well as first, second, and third-person narrative. Like Djébar, Achkar and Peck look both outward and inward in their exploration of personal identity and narrative form. Achkar uses multiple visual media -- still and moving images, documentary evidence and fictional reenactments -- keeping us off balance,

"nowhere specifying whether, or when, he is citing a source as opposed to extrapolating or imagining" (135). The same is true for Peck's film, where he forces us to see the role of imagination in historical narrative. Thus, both artists challenge the strictures of western autobiography and through film offer an African conception of the genre.

Gabara argues forcefully for the inclusion of the third-person voice in autobiographical studies; her point is well taken, even though many did not wait for novels such as Mouloud Feraoun's *Le fils du pauvre* (1950) to be accepted into the autobiographical canon to read them as such. Also, in this important study on autobiography, the absence of reference to Nancy K. Miller's work is noticeable in that she is a major scholar and critic of the genre. However, Gabara's book eloquently discusses the illusion of an autonomous and omnipotent selfhood and emphasizes the necessity for autobiographies to be more inclusive and liberated from the conventions of writing and history. And that alone is a worthy project.