Generations Connecting: Alzheimer's Disease and Changes of Cultural Values

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Abstract:
The emphasis of American culture on the autonomous and independent individual, and on the search for identity in opposition to defined cultural and societal rules, can be seen as a value that is undergoing rapid change. In American Studies, the quest of the individual for a self-determined life in opposition to the norms of society has often been defined as the central cultural narrative, in which the desire of the individual to seek and define an identity within or without the community is the driving force of the plot. In feminist literature, more specifically, the search for a single, private self has often been linked to the daughter's relationship to her mother within the family structure. However, this quest for identity takes on different forms when the daughter is confronted with a mother whose identity, due to Alzheimer's disease, is no longer discernable, and whose memory of whom she is and was has vanished. This loss of memory concerning not only everyday incidents but also one's very relation to others marks a starting point of a new definition of self in relation to others and reverses a mother-daughter to a daughter-mother relationship.

1 The emphasis of American culture on the autonomous and independent individual, and on the search for identity in opposition to defined cultural and societal rules, can be seen as a value that is undergoing rapid change. In American Studies, the quest of the individual for a self-determined life in opposition to the norms of society has often been defined as the central cultural narrative, in which the desire of the individual to seek and define an identity within or without the community is the driving force of the plot. In feminist literature, more specifically, the search for a single, private self has often been linked to the daughter's relationship to her mother within the family structure. However, this quest for identity takes on different forms when the daughter is confronted with a mother whose identity, due to Alzheimer's disease, is no longer discernable, and whose memory of whom she is and was has vanished. This loss of memory concerning not only everyday incidents but also one's very relation to others marks a starting point of a new definition of self in relation to others and reverses a mother-daughter to a daughter-mother relationship. In texts dealing with daughters whose mothers are Alzheimer's disease patients, a re-evaluation of the concepts of independence and autonomy is taking place. The dichotomy of self and other is being supplemented by the concept of "self-in-relation."[1] If the strength of American Studies has been to speak with both the „authority of difference" and the "authority of connection,"

[1] I would like to thank Thomas R. Cole who pointed to the importance of this concept within a discussion of age, identity, and gender.

(Bercovitch 2) both difference and connection can be seen as values of American society. Within a context of individual and social needs – often in conflict with each other – a new value in American Studies can be identified as represented in literature and film: the necessity of mutual and supportive relationships as a key to the development of personal identity.

2 In this essay, I would like to focus on two texts portraying women with Alzheimer's disease and their relationship to their care-giving daughters. In Judith Dothard Simmons' journal article, "Connections. I Am My Mother's Keeper," the narrator asserts her responsibility for her aging mother and thus re-defines values of American society by establishing the importance of family bonding and the necessity of defining oneself in relation to others. In the film *Complaints of a Dutiful Daughter*, Deborah Hoffmann chronicles the various stages of her mother's Alzheimer's disease and the changes in the daughter's response to her mother and to herself. When the daughter finally accepts that her relationship to her mother can no longer rely on the given relationship between mother and daughter, she manages to establish a connection to her mother that liberates both from societal expectations. Because of her mother's lack of memory, every meeting is a negotiation of their relationship, which has to be newly defined continuously in the present moment of their encounter.

3 With a rapidly growing older population, this shift in cultural values calls for a social policy that understands the interdependence of generations. This approach takes a life course perspective to help explain the seeming paradox of the autonomy and interdependence of individuals and age groups as they move through life. This suggests that in an interdependent and aging society, all generations have a common stake in family efforts and public policies or intergenerational transfers that respond to the needs of people of all ages.[2] When talking about family structure and cultural change, the question of life course, personal development and aging are of central concern. The aging individual and the conflicts, passions, and joys, exemplify more than any other stage in life the interplay between the private and the public, the individual and the communal, and stress the importance of relationships and connections. Sally Gadow – looking at aging from a gerontological perspective and emphasizing the cultural and humanistic aspects of aging – comments:

> Historical, legal, and economic interpretations mark aging as an objective phenomenon, open to general, cultural understanding. But aging is only in part a public phenomenon. It is a heart subjective. It has, like all experience, an objective overlay of social meaning, including scientific theory, economic policy, and political/religious ideology. Beyond these, however – in keeping with them, in spite of them, or indifferent to them – the central meaning of aging is individual, subjective. (Gadow 131)

[2] Cf. Eric Kingson, John Cornman, Barbara Hirschorn. "Ties That Bind." Aging. Concepts and Controversies. Ed. Harry R. Moody. London: Pine Forge, 1994, p. 216.

By identifying aging as "a heart subjective," Gadow centers the individual around social objectives and defines the meaning of aging as the interplay between self and other. In a different context, Thomas R. Cole speaks of the fluidity of identity and positions the definition of this self within the political frame of race, class, and gender:

> Identity, loosely defined as a sense of who one is, is not a unitary thing that one simply finds and wears – like overalls, a dashiki, or a pin-striped suit. Identity is rather an unstable, relational process, a story always in flux, negotiated in difference and relationship. Identities […] are historically conferred, subject to redefinition, resistance and change. They are ambiguous, produced through multiple identifications, some of which are salient in certain contexts and hidden in others. These insights are crucial to the future of a democratic culture and to the creation of new cognitive maps of identity which will allow individuals to form selves that are not mutilated by cultural domination of the powerful or by exclusive claims of any group. (Cole 200)

4 This definition of identity is in accordance with the position of contemporary criticism and theory, which has questioned the traditional belief that human identity can be present to the conscious mind as an accessible piece of self-knowledge. The subject is seen as perpetually in flux, pursuing an illusion of wholeness and selfhood that is ultimately unattainable, however necessary it may be to human functioning.[3] In these terms, Alzheimer's disease patients can be seen as extreme paradigms of this postmodern condition, where memories and the past only exist in a unstructured, fluid condition. Like the decentered subject that is in Lacan's term of the mirror stage defined as constituted in and by its language, Alzheimer's disease patients use language without any referential meaning in order to establish relationships and connect to others. The acceptance of these linguistic acts as the only form to establish connection, demands an acceptance of identity that is not only in flux, but defines itself in the interaction with others as the self-in-relation. Alix Kates Shulman describes an incident she encountered when she came to visit her mother afflicted with Alzheimer's disease in a retirement home:

> I was surprised to find Mom perched on her bed listening attentively to an attractive silver-maned man seated in a wheelchair, volubly holding forth. […] The visitor, undeterred, continued his animated talk. After a few minutes, I realized that his words made no sense. The language was English, with its familiar grammar, vocabulary, and inflections, but the sentences lacked all discernible meaning. Still, Mom listened with seemingly rapt attention, nodding periodically and using all her social skills to make the stranger feel at home. (11)

5 In her essay "A Relational Perspective for Understanding Women's Development," the psychologist Judith V. Jordan asserts the limited applicability of traditional Western psychological theories of development to the psychology of women. Instead of seeing the

[3] Cf. Jacques Lacan. Ecrits: A Selection. Trans. Alan Sheridan. New York: Norton, 1977.

"self" as the primary reality separated out from its context as a bounded and contained entity that has both object and subject qualities, she suggests the alternative conceptualization of self as a "relational self" or as a "being in relation." (Jordan 9) The societal paradigm of the sanctity and freedom of the individual overshadows – so Jordan – the compelling reality of the communal and deeply interdependent nature of human beings and ignores the realities and needs of women. Feminist psychologists have voiced their dissatisfaction with this model and offer new models of female development of self that take into account the power of the ethic of caretaking and relationship in women's lives. Thus, Nancy Chodorow re-examines object relations theory to find traditional theory failing to acknowledge the importance of the early and longer lasting bond between the girl and her mother.[4] Other theorists, such as Jean Baker Miller and Carol Gilligan, have also noted the failure of previous theories of "human development" to appreciate the relational nature of women's sense of themselves, and offer explicitly or implicitly a more contextual, relational paradigm for the study of all self experience. As Carol Gilligan notes, women "define themselves in the context of human relationship." (Gilligan 17) In Jordan's words:

> New relational theory of self, perhaps like the "new physics" of quantum theory and uncertainty, emphasizes the contextual, approximate, responsive and process factors in experience. In short, it emphasizes relationship and connection. Rather than a primary perspective based on the formed and contained self, this model stresses the importance of the intersubjective, relationally emergent nature of human experience. (15)

6 Jordan argues that from this intersubjective perspective, the movement of relating, of mutual initiative and responsiveness, are the ongoing central organizing dynamics in women's lives, and thus the deepest sense of one's being is continuously formed in connection with others and is inextricably tied to relational movement. Central to this perspective is empathy, the dynamic cognitive-affective process of joining with and understanding another's subjective experience, which profoundly alters the traditional boundaries between subject and object and the sense of separate self. In a true emphatic relationship – so Jordan – each is object and subject, mutually engaged in affecting and being affected, knowing and being known. (ibid. 15) The deep interconnectedness between people is experienced by women at the very concrete and compelling level of feelings and body experience. (ibid. 16) In the theory of separate self our metaphors of "being" is very spatial, and the "self" is conceived of as separate, alone, in control, and of personally achieving and mastering nature. The self perceived as contextual and relational is capable of forming gratifying connections, with creative action becoming possible through connection, and a greater sense of clarity and

[4] Cf. Nancy Chodorow. The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender. Berkeley: U of California P, 1978.

confidence arises within relationship; others are perceived as participating in relational growth in a particular way that contributes to the connected sense of self:

Further, if mutuality prevails, not only will I be influenced, moved, changed by context, and most importantly by my relational context, but I will also be shaping and participating in the development of others' "selves." (ibid. 17)

7 Within our culture, the tendency to objectify and render into "thingdom" is powerful as it is based on the need to control and predict. The material world, the person as discrete body in space, is a compelling reality. Moreover, language is used to both express and create this reality. Jordan suggests leaving a language of structure and dualism for one of process, and looking beyond the polarities of egoism versus altruism, self versus other. (ibid. 19) This language of process would contribute to the growth of something that is of the self, but beyond the self, the relationship. Self, other, and the relationship – no longer clearly separated entities but mutually forming – are interconnected rather than in competition in a model of relational movement. Growth occurs in becoming a part of relationship rather than apart from relationship. Jordan identifies the basic human need as the need to participate in relationship. Central to any discussion of self is the dilemma of process and structure. Our language does impose limits on our ability to delineate modes of being, to trace continuities of intention, memory, energy, and sensation; we quickly resort to reifications, making solid that which is fluid, changing and ongoing. (ibid. 20)

8 Thus, Jordan prefers the term "relational being" to "relational self" or "self-in-relation" as it expresses the process nature of experience. Whereas the metaphor of "voice" is often used to characterize the experience of self, Jordan emphasizes the aspect of listening in this process. (ibid. 20) As the texts show, the mothers with Alzheimer's disease do recognize their daughters as someone they know well, but they cannot define on what basis their relationship is founded and what constitutes their connection. They see their daughters as contemporaries, such as childhood friends, but almost never as blood related. Petirim Sorokin argues that there is no integrative self-process, but that the individual is a separate and new self in each context in which he or she participates. This applies to the depicted Alzheimer's disease patients as well: every meeting between mother and daughter defines a new context and a new relationship. The need of individuals for connection and essential emotional joining is served by empathy, which in authentic relatedness, is characterized by mutuality. A larger paradigm shift from the primacy of separate self to relational being must be considered to further our understanding of all human experience.

9 In American culture, the impact of feminism and multiculturalism has taught us that in recording experience and life stories the important aspect is to let people speak in their own voices and record their own experiences. In the case of fictional representations of Alzheimer's disease patients, however, others take on the task of speaking for them. These texts also reveal a traditional position of speaking for others in order to define one's own self in relation to others. In the feminist tradition, identity is not seen as the goal but the point of departure of any process of self-consciousness, and women writing about the lives of their mothers tried to position their role in history and thus define their own identity. By openly positioning themselves as personally involved, they read the life stories of others through the readings of their own histories.

10 Old people capable of self-expression have given voice to their concerns, often in the form of autobiographical works, encouraging younger generations to participate in the experience of aging. In the case of old people inflicted with Alzheimer's disease, their voices can only be heard indirectly. Based on an understanding that creative expression is a human need, projects such as "timeslips," located at the Center for Twentieth Century Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, uses the power of self-representation for patients with Alzheimer's disease. The web site presents stories told by people with Alzheimer's disease with the intention to improve the quality of their lives by encouraging creative expression, and to increase and deepen public perception of Alzheimer's disease by sharing compelling stories with extended communities in which they emerge. The aim of this site is to establish connection within the isolated, and to battle existing stereotypes about the quality of life with Alzheimer's disease.[5] This concept is in keeping with the intention to, on the one hand, oppose the reduction of a person to the status of an object through an emphasis upon individuality, and on the other, to establish the relationship to others on the basis of interdependence and reciprocity. In both the short article "Connections. I am My Mother's Keeper," and the documentary film *Complaints of a Dutiful Daughter*, it is the narrating act as such that establishes mutuality between daughter and mother and presents the relationship as the story of two selves in an authentic relatedness.

11 The narrating voices in the texts by Simmons and Hoffmann belong to women who are young, healthy and capable of recounting their life stories and as such part of a dominant cultural group, but they can also be seen as envisioning life stories from a position from the margins. The lesbian filmmaker and the Afro-American poet, and journalist, are aware that their own positions are in opposition to the dominant culture. Feminist literary theorists argue

[5] Cf. www.timeslips.org.

that the representation of the voice in literature by women writers is a textual strategy used by writers to deconstruct images of women inherited from male literature.[6] In this sense, the female authorial voice is the essence of feminism.[7] What then does the representation of individuals no longer capable of self-expression through others mean? Based on the assumption that the individual's relationship to the self has already developed as aging advances, the meaning of aging involves the meaning of the past, of time, and memory. The daughters' stories and their relationship to their mothers are presented as specific and personal, but at the same time, they represent the dilemma of the traditional cultural narrative of American culture: the emphasis of individualism. Although the texts reveal the difficulty and the necessity of accepting the separate and related selves, maintaining a relationship and negotiating difference is the task of the future, especially when the language of negotiation is not shared. Within the interplay between the fields of sciences and humanities, autobiographical and biographical texts are important sources that contribute towards understanding both individual and shared aspects of aging over the life course.

> Examining reactions to personal crises and turning points could provide researchers with unique insights into the way individuals construct their lives. Equally, however, studying lives provides a perspective on the influence of social institutions such as work and the family. (Phillipson 23)

12 Sociologists have suggested that narratives or stories play a central part in the construction of lives, as what is meaningful about our selves is expressed through the telling of stories. Whereas on the public level these stories communicate the significance of particular lives and communities for society as a whole, on the individual level the telling of stories is a medium for the integration of lives, for explaining discontinuities as well as continuities. (Phillipson 24) The fluidity of identity opens up possibilities to move beyond the defined position of self and makes it not only possible but also necessary to view family structure and relationships in new ways:

> A potentially optimistic feature of viewing human ageing biographically is that there is an openness or flexibility to the human journey […]. While there is continuity, there is also change and the possibility of change. In other words, there may be no necessary connection between the events of our lives, our number of years, and the meaning ascribed to those events; stories can be re-written, plots altered, and the metaphors traded in and traded up […] according to the needs of the self. (Ruth and Kenyon 6)

[6] Cf. S. Gilbert, S. Gubar. The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth Century Literary Imagination. New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 1979.
[7] Cf. Maggie Humm. The Dictionary of Feminist Theory. New York: Harvester, 1989, p.232.

However – as the social gerontologist Phillipson has stated when discussing Jaber Gubrium's work on how the meaning of Alzheimer's disease is derived and communicated[8] – aspects of aging always remain uncharted and ambiguous and many situations that affect older individuals and their caregivers are literally beyond their experience, thus creating complexities in terms of naming and identifying feelings and beliefs. (Phillipson 25) The title of a collaborative essay by the cultural historian and medical humanist Thomas R. Cole, "In Whose Voice? Composing an Ethics Case as a Song of Life," points to the dilemma of giving a voice to a person without a voice who can neither sing her own song of life – in Cole's metaphor – nor can evaluate and consent to others intoning the song. In this essay, Cole describes the case of a patient with Alzheimer's disease in which two colleagues, Dr. Barbara Thompson, a family physician, and Dr. Linda Rounds, a geriatric nurse practitioner, asked him for his opinion about the moral factors involved. The 90-year-old patient, Mrs. Green, was strapped to the bed to prevent her from pulling out a feeding tube that sustained her life. Cole approaches the case not from an academic and formal philosophical position, but from his own personal involvement with his 87-year old grandmother, for whom he was then legally responsible, who was also suffering from advanced Alzheimer's disease. Cole's interest in narrative and phenomenological dimensions of both aging and ethics leads him to an approach to the "case" of Mrs. Green as a "multivoiced narrative" (Cole 23):

> Mrs. Green could not tell us what she wanted, but perhaps if we thought of her voice as the silent melody in a larger musical composition, we could hear the voices of others who provide the harmonies and descant lines. Perhaps we could even hear the silent melody by listening closely to the other voices singing together, each contributing something important to the song of Mrs. Green's life, no one voice drowning out any of the others. (ibid. 24)

13 When dealing with dementia and loss of memory, we as individuals are challenged to recognize our own feelings of worth and identity and define them in the interaction and connection with others. Based on her very practical and concrete experience of working with patients, the nurse's aide, Mrs. Brooks, comes to the same conclusion as the feminist theorists defining her identity grounded in an interaction with others:

> I just have this feeling that maybe getting old is different. I think it's a blessing. I feel like when you're old, you should be treated with respect, not put out to pasture, or sent to the glue factory like they do horses. I'd like somebody, even if I'm demented to treat me like a person and talk to me. This might be the happiest time of my life. I wouldn't have any bills to pay, I wouldn't have the mental capacity to worry. I just might be *happy*. *I have this feeling* about being old. (ibid. 29)

[8] Cf. Jaber F. Gubrium. „Voices and Context in a New Gerontology." Thomas R. Cole, et.al. Eds. Voices and Visions of Aging : Toward a Critical Gerontology. New York: Springer, 1993.

14 When Cole one day comes to take pictures of Mrs. Green, she is alert and responsive and the nurses had her ready for the occasion by bathing, dressing and stimulating her. Comparing her to a loving child, Cole reaches the conclusion that Mrs. Green was "fully human in that her capacity for relationships remained intact." (ibid. 30)

15 The text "Connections. I Am My Mother's Keeper" by Judy Dothard Simmons published in 1996, uses autobiographical details to define identity within the interrelation of self and the other. When the New York based writer and poet Simmons decides to return to the South to take care of her mother who suffers from Alzheimer's disease, she has to confront her ambivalence to live up to her decision of giving up her life of autonomy, and come to terms with an existence that links her in an absolute way to another person. Initially, she experiences her identity linked to another person as lack of control and this leads to frustration and resentment. The title with the biblical reference proudly asserts the daughter's responsibility for her mother: "I am My Mother's Keeper" blurs the boundaries between self and other and defines both her mother's and her own self in their interaction. Although the term "keeper" implies control and authority, within the text the meaning is used to express the caring, protecting and sustaining quality that the daughter assumes when caring for her mother, and the authority of voice with which she recounts both her mother's and her own situation. The emphasis, however, is not on the narrative authority, but on the relational identity she attains through her care giving function. Although mocking what Simmons calls the "Reader's Digest-like version of our heartwarming story" (86), where she would be depicted as "the family-values heroine who gives up a high-powered New York media career and discovers the true meaning of life wiping feces off her feisty, 70-something mother" (86), it is exactly her care giving and nurturing that makes Simmons life meaningful and fulfilling:

> I am being gentled and healed by living in a loving relationship - with my mom. Being around her is instructive. Watching her improvise around the gaps that Alzheimer's gouges into her brain humbles and shames me. She is aware of being changed, impaired, but she doesn't despair and she doesn't complain. (90)

16 Simmons speaks of the forgetfulness of an Alzheimer patient as "the terrible engagement between a human and the impersonal poetics of life, existence, being." (90) Alzheimer's disease is to Simmons the stripping away of pretense and socially and culturally learned behavior, and a movement from the asserting of "I am" to the "you are." Both patient and caregiver in the relational interaction are forced to achieve a form of understanding, and thus the disease is linked to a poem and stands as a metaphor for life in its crude form:

> Each of us can be viewed as trying to distill our own poem, to make our own sense of existence take on shape and structure out of the indifferent elemental processes we call life. (90)

Simmons interprets her own text "Poems" as an expression of how the disease forces both mother and daughter to an understanding of their existence on a pure level without the possibility of expression. Thus her mother is identified as being "driven by the poem of her particular spirit, and committed to it." (90)

> poems are cruel
> to poets, people
> weak and strong
>
> their birth is labor
> women scream
> their sense, bone terror
> in a soldier
>
> poems lack tact and secrets
> they are innocent of mercy
> with a tyranny to kill
> all arrogant defiance
>
> pity, then, we humans
> born in ignorance, and finite:
> deprived of sight and sound and tongue
> driven by a poem (90)

17 In the absence of tact and secrets, Simmons learns to establish identity in the present moment, in the immediate interaction between daughter and mother, which is negotiated each time as a meeting of selves without recurrence. The daughter can now view her well-educated, capable and intelligent mother in her purest form, as the "skeleton of a personality, of a soul:"

> It is amazing to look at the very skeleton of a personality, of a soul … no, it is awesome and rather terrifying, for it attests to the loss of the basic tool of human intercourse – the mask. Alzheimer's disease is stripping Momma of the ability to dissemble and disguise that creates our private selves and fosters civility. As a result, her communications and actions reveal the bare bones of her character, not the careful image we are generally at pains to present to others. (90)

18 Looking back on her former life, Simmons now finds flaws in having committed herself to the pursuit of her individual happiness, to her emphasis on her individual quest for self-fulfillment, and can now look on her mother's life, one devoted as a school teacher and mother and stepmother of many children to the care and nurturing of others, not as a degrading of self to humility by simply fulfilling "the traditional female role of domestic and body servant," (86) but as a source of determining meaning in life:

> Maybe more so, the humility stems from her awareness of transcendence, of knowing herself to be a span in the generational bridge that brings human beings over to

> something above instinctual life. Perhaps she knows intrinsically the worth of her life's work; therefore no New York ego is required. (90)

Simmons can thus define the caretaking and nurturing of her mother as the caretaking and nurturing of her own self:

> The way she is playing the endgame that she must eventually concede is another of her gifts to me. Plagued by incomprehension and deprived of the intellectual activities that were her calling and pleasure, she continues to synthesize meaning from people and events, and to shape me by her steadfastness into a person more understanding, kinder, than I want to be. (90)

Because of the disconnection of words from concepts, feelings and referents that the Alzheimer's disease causes, the daughter's identity is threatened. Thus Simmons reflects:

> "Daughter," "Love," "Judy" will not add up to anything meaningful for her. Who will I be without my mother? How will I stand it when she doesn't comprehend that I am her baby - "my one little chick" [...] (90)

19 It is her childhood and youth, Simmons mourns, as her mother's lack of memory threatens to wipe out her own memory too ("It's like the whole Alabama experience is a black hole and I'll never again reach escape velocity.") (Simmons 90) Simmons accepts the changes in her life, which she asserts as "one hell of a transition" (90) from "habits, expectations, and hopes no longer appropriate for my location, age, and responsibilities." (90) Referring to the Dylan Thomas' poem "Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night," Simmons can acknowledge that both her mother and she share a form of rage and passion, which is not evident on first sight. At the beginning, patience and acceptance are hard won for Simmons, since she has previously defined her life in terms of competition, success, and control:

> My biggest challenge is emotional control. The sustaining rage of my life is my undoing now. It's my response, my defense, my coping mechanism, my motive power; has been for much of my life. Rage against segregation, injustice, amoral capitalism, against petty greed, lyin', cheatin' hearts, and fundamentalists of all kind. Noble, artistic rage that fueled my ambition to write poems that could change the world. Idealistic, pioneering rage that drove me to hurt myself proving that a woman and black person could cut it in Fortune 500-land. (89)

This rage, however, although a life affirming and life asserting power and the core of her creative drive is basically a self-destructive emotion, as it isolates her and separates her from meaningful relationships. Both Simmons and her mother are, through the focus of their lives in the present state of being, united in a creative act: Simmons by writing the text, her mother by simply living her life. It is – as the title "Connections" suggests – the relationship as such that is meaningful in itself. Within the written word of the text, both "authors" are thus credited with the authority of the "word":

> The “why” of my choice to stay with her is deeper than the forebrain and larger than words – and that is a wondrous statement coming from a wordsmith, especially a poet. Probing now, as at a sore tooth, I loosen a feeling, a concept: connection, and my throat aches, my eyes fill with tears. (88)

20 The film *Complaints of a Dutiful Daughter* eludes in its choice of title to Simone de Beauvoir’s autobiographical text *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter*, published in 1958. In this book, Beauvoir is fascinated with the relationship of identity to time. At age three or so, gazing at her mother's empty armchair, she understood that time would wrench her from the secure world of her mother's body, her presence, and she thought to herself, "I won't be able to sit on her knee any more if I go on growing up. […] Suddenly the future existed; it would turn me into another being, someone who would still be, and yet no longer seem myself." (7)

21 In her discussion of fictional representations, Suzanne England and Carol Ganzer speak of the fact that one of the characteristics in dealing with Alzheimer’s patients and their caregivers and relatives is the recurrent theme of loss. It is about loss on many levels, but mainly loss of memory and thus of the quality of the relationship to others, of one’s history and that of other’s, and loss of a visible expression of identity. When in a kind of prologue, the film *Complaints of a Dutiful Daughter* begins with a close-up of an old woman – the mother – who discusses her relationship to her parents and remarks that she was closer to her mother, this passage points to the basic question of the film. Distance and closeness between mother and daughter without being able to build this relationship on shared memories and defined family roles. The daughter, who has so far defined identity on the basis of memory, now has to define her own and her mother’s identity in every encounter anew, and negotiate their relationship within the present moment of experience. Although her mother is able to define a familiarity in their relationship and feels comfortable in her daughter’s presence understanding that she knows her well, she is no longer able to define the nature of their relationship and cannot acknowledge the mother-daughter bond. A photo of the mother as a young girl standing between her parents is juxtaposed with the image of mother and daughter linking arms. Whereas the smiling mother appears relaxed and at ease, the daughter seems worried an preoccupied. The film makes it clear that kinship and past experience can no longer be the basis of the relationship between mother and daughter. Thus, a definition of self through the other has to be overcome by a seeking of a self-in-relation. Although dealing with loss, the film asserts the value of this new defined relationship that is no longer simply based on the given of a mother-daughter bonding, but is defined by two individuals meeting in the presences of the moment. In these opening scenes, Deborah Hoffmann states in the past tense,

> "I was closer to my mother" following-up this statement with the question, "You know who my mother was?" Shaking her head, the daughter responds: "You" and in disbelief that is obvious in the puzzled expression and concentration that the mother's face reveals, she asks incredulously , "I was your mother? " and Deborah Hoffmann laughingly asserts the fact. The mother tries to find explanation for this strange statement by offering levels of interpretation: "You mean your mother liked me and decided I should be something." Reasserting Hoffmann says, "You are my mother." The almost pitying disbelief of the mother to this statement is obvious:
> Mother: "How can I really be your mother? I don't know."
> Daughter: You are.
> Mother: Something went wrong. Well, we did something peculiar, to tell you the least.
> Daughter: Well, I think something went right that's how it worked out.

Hoffmann emphasizes the narrative structure of the film by introducing different themes in the film with chapter-like stills. The film provides a review of the process of the daughter coming to terms with her mother's illness and her learning to define her relationship to her mother in new terms. The daughter's slow realization of her mother's illness and her original reluctance to acknowledge that she as daughter had to take responsibility not only for herself but also for her mother is depicted in the film mostly in a very straight-forward recounting of the immediate past. The film depicts the development of the daughter from slow realization of her mother's illness to an acceptance of the fact, which finally leads the daughter to accept her own inadequacy of taking care of her mother and to finally placing her in a home with Alzheimer's disease patients. The film provides the daughter with the authority of voice, whereas the mother has the visual authority. Dominant are the images that show the mother in the past, as in graduate photos or photos of her mother with her two children. It is Hoffmann's view of her mother as a young woman that is told and she is portrayed as an independent, intelligent, sophisticated, learned and knowledgeable person. As a university graduate, her mother had also been, in Hoffmann's words, "an intellectual snob." When the mother enjoys a trivial show on TV, where a little girl dances in a golden dress, it is the daughter's understanding of her mother that is profoundly shaken:

> This is not my image of my mother and she was watching it, she was gleefully, euphorically watching it and laughing and I was very upset. This is beneath her.

22 The daughter's narrative description of the scene and her sad and troubled view of the situation are followed by a slow motion sequence of her mother dancing joyfully with beads around her neck to music, and throwing her arms in the air as an expression of happiness. Whereas the mother is shown in dynamic images in the present moment and her past is merely visualized in static photos, the daughter is linked to a development process from child

to adulthood through original home video footage emphasizing her dominant presence as the narrator of the film, and the ongoing and open definition of her self.

23 In contrast to Simmons, who has to adapt her own position of independence in order to establish a connection to her mother, Hoffman's film shows a daughter, who has to adjust to her mother's turning away and negation of family bonds and blood ties. Through her illness, the mother defines herself in new ways: she enjoys trite shows with little girls' step dancing, accepts without hesitations her daughter's homosexuality, and encounters all experiences without a theoretical or ideological background, but on the trusting and innocent acceptance of the here and now. The daughter's approach to life is determined by her knowledge of the past and understanding based on family traditions, and thus she is the one who has to adjust to the new situation with pain, frustration and denial. On a visual level, in most scenes of the film the mother looks straight at the camera with a broad smile on her face, whereas the daughter is seen staring intently at the mother with a small, reticent smile on her lips and an anxious look in her eyes. Only when the daughter can accept her mother, not as she was but as she is afflicted with Alzheimer's disease, without a memory of the past, is the daughter shown sitting next to her mother in the nursing home smiling at her. The daughter reaches the conclusion that she was the one that had to adjust to this new situation, and she had to find a definition of identity that did not rely on a static definition of self in a linkage to her mother. On a visit to the nursing home, the mother surprises the daughter by voicing this, by throwing out her arms and exclaiming periodically "the joy of me."

> Little by little the only remaining memories are childhood and very early adulthood. She remembers her parents fairly well. But what I always thought of her life, what I knew to be her life, which is me and my brother and my father, and the fifty plus years that she lived in New York that kind of mostly disappeared, has become a sort of puff, that has occasionally some substance, mostly it is kind of a blur, which is a little hard for me to take.
>
> But the daughter learns through her mother's approach to life, to live in the moment and trust the feeling and emotions every encounter brings. Within their meeting in the present the joy of connecting and relating in a mutual appreciation of the other, opens up possibilities of encounter that are no longer defined by any parameters:
>
> For the longest time, I still insisted on truth, reality being important. She would insist on it being April instead on May. What does it matter, if she thinks it's April. Why not? It was a liberating moment, it was kind of light and fun, we were in the moment, the content did not matter, the feeling.

24 When in one scene of the film, the mother takes the camera to take a shot of Debbie and her partner Frances, who is the cinematographer of the film, the out of focus perspective of the camera with the subjects slipping beyond the frame of the finder can be seen as a metaphor of the mother's perspective of the world. The shared laughter and fun of the

moment in the pleasure of each other's company make it possible to move beyond the sorrow and pain of dealing with such a severe illness as Alzheimer's disease. Debbie must learn to integrate a vision of her mother as a independent and strong woman who set an intellectual and social standard, with the person who can meet her in the pleasure of the moment. This act of connecting Debbie links to the interpreting of dreams. Placing her mother in a nursing home was the final acceptance of the changes within her mother's life course, and the realization that against all odds life can still be meaningful and joyful:

> Everybody that is there has a disease that they don't want. There is nothing uplifting about that. But once one accepts the parameters, my mother has Alzheimer's, it can still be a very joyful life. She is the ultimate of living in the moment. She is the ultimate enlightened person. Well, I don't know, I am very attached to my memory. I am very attached to my childhood memory who tells me who I am . But you still have definition of self without a past.

In lucid moments, her mother can even express the joy of living in the moment and acknowledge the fact that her illness no longer allows her the knowledge of explaining and defining, but her ability to express her feelings is still intact:

> That simply hit me today. I am happy it's here and I am not sure where everyone lived and so forth; but there's something close that is still with me.
> Through the mother's joyful definition of living in the moment, the daughter acknowledges a new definition of identity for herself. Although at first viewing, an audience might feel that it is the authority of the daughter that dominates the film and that it is her story that is being told, it becomes evident that we are sharing the mother's story. It might not have a beginning, middle and end, but it affirms the act of telling and focuses on the narrative act. The film itself confirms this focus by emphasizing the spoken: the scenes of the film show either mother and daughter speaking to each other, or the daughter speaks in a very straightforward way to the audience facing the camera directly, thus mimicking a conversation between her and the viewers.

25 This argument might be interpreted not as a movement in American culture from self to self-in-relation, but in Faludi's words as a "backlash," as the definition of "women's sphere" in the domestic as part of a patriarchal ideology. Focussing on relational aspect of identity does not mean confining women to the task of caretaking and presenting homage to female moral superiority in order to defuse the feminist campaign for equality. (Cf. Faludi, 358-366) As women of all generations writing the "traditional family" in the United States have alternately subverted, supported, and put to strategic use received notions of the domestic scene, they will continue to do so in the future in the view of a society growing old. For a culture, permeated as it is with images of youth, our own aging is experienced though the mirror of the family and through the care given to our older relatives. If identity is defined by both continuity and change over a life course, the importance is not only to emphasize the

daughter's position, but also to bring the subject of older women into visibility and to reflect on growing older as women. Growing old will then be seen in the larger context of fundamental human rights for both young and old, women and men.

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