

## “Nothing Big. Nothing Small”: Allyson Mitchell’s Video Autobiography

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Allyson Mitchell, Canadian-based filmmaker, videographer, and visual artist, theorizes and practices a re-historicizing and re-membering in her low tech/high concept, small fuss/big story work. In this paper, I discuss one of Mitchell’s videos, *My Life in 5 Minutes* (2000, 7 min), to examine how it produces her life story as the simultaneity of what she calls “nothing big,” (its ordinary everydayness) and as “nothing small,” (the struggles of political, embodied subjectivity). This video autobiography engages the temporal and corporeal as Mitchell thinks the body at its ‘limits,’ materializing the intersections of gender, disability, and sexuality in her history of a life compressed to provisional and perishable moments. The pedagogical implications of Mitchell’s work resonate in her practice of theorizing spectator accountability and power/knowledge relations, particularly as constituted in gender, family, sexuality, fatness, and disability. I analyze the video as a theorizing text and take up its structural practices with a view to understanding how it generates meaning through different registers. While the video may be described as “visual autobiography,” it is not limited to one visual practice. Instead, Mitchell weaves a complex mix of music, photography, painting, and animation.

*My Life in 5 Minutes* is an experimental form of media and can be described as animation, animated documentary, experimental short film, autobiographical video, and video art. In her record of work, Mitchell locates it as “computer animation,” referring to the construction of the video. Like Mitchell’s painting, sculpture, performance work, and installations, the video is constructed in a “DIY” (do-it-yourself) style of art-making. That is, the work is deliberately low-tech, raw, frayed, edgy, and messy. Mitchell’s work is often composed of detritus: scraps of fabric, bits of craft supplies, discarded objects, and derelict materi-

als. Mitchell is known for working with found materials, activist art, alternative media production, DIY, and craft production, as well as for her critical and political cultural practice. Through exhibitions, awards, residencies, and critical writing, she is recognized in national and international contexts. Mitchell, who describes herself as a feminist artist investigating ideas about autobiography, sexuality, and the body, is also an interdisciplinary academic in the areas of women's studies, cultural studies, and the arts. Her artistic and scholarly activities are mutually informing, and her video can be understood, as I will argue in this paper, as theorizing urgent cultural issues.

*My Life in 5 Minutes* traces Mitchell's life from uncomplicated childhood activities through complex and troubled embodiments of youth and adulthood. The visuals are comprised of family album photographs and painted self-portraits. The photographs depict Mitchell alone, with family members, and with friends and lovers. That is, she is present in all the images. Her self-portraits, which interrupt the photographs throughout the video, are flat depictions of a woman's head. They have a cartoon aesthetic and appear child-like in construction. Each portrait, depicted in vivid colours and filling most of the frame, takes up considerable visual space. Print captions accompany the self-portraits, functioning as titles of life chapters or as marked moments in Mitchell's narrative. Music is another significant structural element: throughout the video, Mitchell sings about her life events, conditions, and contexts. In what follows, I will discuss the three strategies, soundscape, photographic montage, and self-portraits with captions, to explore how these expressive and confrontational modalities produce political subjectivity, particularly in terms of queer and disability cultures. While exploring the personal and the local, Mitchell's imaginative work calls for social awareness of the forces that shape the possibilities and impossibilities of a life and of lives. Through the strategic video practices, *My Life in 5 Minutes* intervenes in popular media and offers a counterdiscourse to heteronormative and able-bodied representations of embodiment. I argue that this self-reflexive video provokes critical interrogations about spectatorship, similar to autobiographical writing that produces "critical memory" and that underlines how a witness relates to the testimo-

nial text (Brophy n.pag). I make connections across the three strategies, since they intersect in the visual field. However, I separate the techniques for the sake of clarity. Given the complex imbrication of visual, audio, and print expression, it is difficult to “read” Mitchell’s media text in a straightforward manner, and so, my intent is to assist the readers of this article who cannot “see” the video in its layered entirety.

### **I. Dissonance and Discontinuity**

The soundscape for the video includes a discordant musical track with lyrics organized to suggest a discontinuity of the mundane and the serious. The music for the song is haunting. A dissonant melody and angular rhythms create a jarring affect and disrupt any smooth flow to the life narrative. The rhythms underline the idea of a life composed in atonal fragments, discordant passages, and inharmonious moments. The lyrics, sung by Mitchell in a soft soprano, are sometimes difficult to understand, so the video signals spectator effort, the struggle and complexity of comprehending the “other,” and the necessity of attention and mindfulness. The auditory indistinction or uncertainty is lodged in the musical background, the singing, and the lyrics. As with the visual practices of this video, whereby spectators are made responsible for their methods of looking, so too does the soundtrack make spectators responsible for their approaches to auditory meaning making. I will quote the lyrics in their entirety, to show the tension between the banal and the notable that intertwines throughout.

When my parents were teens in the centennial year, they  
hatched me into the world  
and I was zero years old.  
My sister, my sister was three. She had red hair.  
This is not poetry, this is my life. Nothing big and nothing  
small.  
Learned to swim when I was three years old. I liked to float,  
but I got a.  
I’m gonna get my badge this year. And if I don’t, maybe next  
year.

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My best friend was Michelle.  
We played Charlie's Angels and Little House on the Prairie. I  
got to be Pa or Bosley.  
I went to school. Made some crafts with styrofoam and glue.  
No big deal, just Brownies, not Guides.  
I'm gonna get my badge this year. And if I don't, maybe next  
year.  
My gut feels like a hole. And I when I planned it, it was cold.  
Weight watchers, 'cause that baby fat wasn't goin' anywhere.  
I sneak snacks with Donahue. Mike Douglas too.  
High school isn't fun in a small town. High school is not fun  
in a small town.  
Pit parties and make-out dares. Chubby little body and bad  
eighties hair.  
Traveled around a lot, and now I'm gay.  
Took a couple of Women Studies courses. Now I'm gay.  
I'm more than three decades old.  
Got a niece and a little monkey that's nice.  
This is not poetry, this is my life. Nothing big. Nothing small.

The lyrics produce a text of simultaneous intimacy and distance, signaling the redundant and the notable, the habitual and the unexpected, the conventional and the nonconforming. Some lyrics assure the reader that not much is going on: "My sister was three. She had red hair," "I went to school. Made some crafts," and "Got a niece." They also suggest that nothing particularly momentous is at stake: "No big deal," "if I don't, maybe next year," and "Nothing big." However, the song text is also infused with the momentous: watershed moments that configure a life in times of crisis and in situations of risk: "High school isn't fun in a small town. High school is not fun in a small town," and "Weight watchers, 'cause that baby fat wasn't going anywhere." At times, these pivotal events that name sites of social control are closely attached to mundane situations and even positioned as a consequence of them: "Traveled around a lot, and now I'm gay." This attachment undercodes the critical centrality of the pivotal events and the radical consequence

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of what it means to step outside of normative positions, which are often marked by marginalization, struggles of subject formation, and social oppression, and which are organized here through sexuality, gender, and disability. The lyrics tell a life story, but they do not map out a linear passage or temporality. In Mitchell's poetic time, the narrative components come together and disengage, connect and cut adrift, in an unraveling composed of specific details rather than a general mapping of the life story. The discontinuous yet attached lyrics and the dissonance of the soundscape construct the material, affective, and psychic spaces that Mitchell inhabits.

The song produces a descriptive specificity of everydayness: television shows, craft activities, swimming, and getting a Brownies badge. In terms of the overall video, a conventional linear structure of a life history in a photographic record is undercut by the interruption of the self-portraits and captions, the irregularly timed editing of the photographs, and the demanding quality of the overall hybrid filmic structure. Similarly, the ordinariness of the everyday practices in the song lyrics is undermined by details that shift the register of the video into more complex and troubled territory. In the narrative of coming out as a lesbian ("Traveled around a lot, and now I'm gay. Took a couple of Women's Studies courses. Now I'm gay."), Mitchell problematizes the processes and practices of coming out in phrases that call up a territory of struggle for understanding subject formation. How do a subject and social world become knowable and recognizable to oneself and to another, including the reader or spectator? Given the irony and wit of the causalities, of queer identity hinging on traveling and Women's Studies courses, Mitchell also interrogates the idea that a "true" identity can be achieved and claimed in such neat, conclusive, and fixed terms. In addition, Mitchell surfaces the heteronormative constructions that seek to explain and define non-heterosexual sexualities through causalities, influences, and social behaviours. The construction of a simplistic analogy of queerness with traveling and courses actually points to the complexity of coming out: It entails "a variety of meanings, acts, and commitments" (Samuels 237). The reference to Women's Studies also surfaces the long history of lesbian theories, politics, desires, and experiences in

Women's Studies' contexts and the significance of lesbian contributions to critical and cultural theories. Furthermore, Mitchell's lyrics produce the reminder that conservative forces have positioned Women's Studies as a hotbed of lesbian lore and man-hating perspectives, with the intent to dismiss both feminist and queer perspectives, reinforce homophobic and sexist discourses, and secure justification of practices of oppression. The Women's Studies reference calls up and questions the popular trope of the feminist as extreme, as excess, as well as alluding to how a fat woman and a lesbian are also positioned as excessive. Heteronormative and able-bodied disciplinarity is also referenced in the refrain, "High school isn't fun in a small town. High school is not fun in a small town." With the repetition that emphasizes the *not* fun of marginalizing social conditions, Mitchell comments on the potential of education and geography as painful sites of social order and harassment for a fat and queer embodied subject. The lyric also speaks to contexts of teenage governance and self-governance with regard to gender, sexuality, disability, and class.

When Mitchell sings, "Weight Watchers, 'cause that baby fat wasn't going anywhere," the implications embed with what the lyric about high school generates. Both phrases speak to contexts of disciplinarity and self-disciplinarity. "The fat body is discursively constructed as a failed body project" (Murray 155), and Weight Watchers is one of the weight-loss industry organizations designed to regulate, and to teach members how to self-regulate, that failure. It provides rules and modes of control for working on the self: a body labour of minute details of food and weight measurement. A number of feminist authors have utilized Foucault's theories to examine the surveillance and self-mastery practices that produce docile bodies through diet and exercise (see for example, Bordo, and Heyes). Mitchell's gesture to Weight Watchers and to other indicators of fat phobia ("baby fat wasn't going anywhere," "I sneak snacks," and "chubby little body") recognizes that the appropriate body must be worked for and worked on within the social organization of normative embodiments. The video uncovers how technologies of power produce discourses of the "good" thin self and the "bad" fat self. Cressida J. Heyes suggests that Weight Watchers not only constructs

docile bodies, but the weight-loss organization also offers the potential for changing embodied patterns and for enabling transformative practices. In making this argument, she works with Foucault's understandings about power as productive, as enabling possibility as well as constraint. Heyes does not endorse or support weight-loss programs as such and is openly critical of their profit-driven and manipulative structures. Nevertheless, she seeks to investigate Weight Watchers through a power-as-productive theory and to determine what self-caring practices may be mobilized. This focus on the simultaneity of normalizing and disciplinary social forces with the potential of "uncoupling new capacities from docility" (146) has some resonance with Mitchell's approach. Mitchell combines unlikely subjects and mismatched practices to interrogate the idea of immobilization in a discourse of fatness. When Mitchell talks about sneaking snacks, she undercuts the directives for women to manage their appetites through a humorous description of resisting docility with iconic media companions. The talk-show hosts she watches on television are her eating buddies: "I sneak snacks with Donahue. Mike Douglas too." A similar approach is at work when Mitchell combines a description of a body defined by too much weight with a notation about another excessive but far less defining physical attribute: "Chubby little body and bad eighties hair."

Before I turn to another video strategy, I want to briefly discuss the lyric—the only one—that Mitchell repeats: "This is not poetry. This is my life. Nothing big. Nothing small." With "nothing big," Mitchell suggests that her life is no big deal: nothing to get excited about or worry about; nothing crucial, solemn, or vital. But with "nothing small," Mitchell shifts an understanding of her self-representation to the idea that this life matters. It is nothing unimportant, inconsequential or insubstantial. Pay attention, she directs the spectator, and don't take up this life as solely and simply a pretty picture or a lyrical, poetic tale. When she claims, "This is my life," Mitchell foregrounds the interconnection of living the trivial as well as the complex power relations at stake as an embodied subject: as a lesbian, an eating-disordered girl, and fat-oppressed woman. The phrase evokes a testimonial, and the spectator is asked to witness the life represented. The "nothing big" and the

“nothing small” moments of her life are neither simple reversals nor contradictions, but, rather evidence of ambiguity. They are produced in relation: a simultaneity that Mitchell deploys throughout *My Life in 5 Minutes* by way of the three strategies I discuss.

## II. The Wide-Eyed Girl: Self-Portraiture and “Seeing For”

In this next section, I describe the practice of self-portraiture with captions and how the strategy produces a critique of art history norms, a call to spectator accountability, and an interrogation of heteronormativity and able-bodiedness. Given my interest in taking up issues of disability as they are organized through the representation of fat embodiment, I use the phrase “seeing for” in this title with a critical consciousness about what it assumes and privileges. Throughout this paper, I am cautious about using language that proposes a sighted reader of “visual” culture, and, consequently, I have chosen to use “spectator” rather than “viewer.” However, with the title for this section of the paper, I hope to signal the complication of a disability studies perspective on what “seeing” means, not solely as normative sighted vision, and to draw from the work of visual culture theorists Jill Bennett and Mieke Bal (“Pain of Images”), who argue the significance of spectator accountability and “seeing for.”

There are forty-seven, painted, self-portraits threaded through Mitchell’s seven-minute video. But while each photograph portrays a different image, all the animated paintings reveal a young girl’s face and a hand-written caption. These faces are very similar in their painted composition: simple, one-dimensional, cartoon-like, and rough. They represent a young girl’s round face with wide eyes, thin turned-down mouth, and pigtails or very short hair. The paintings do differ considerably in their colouration, with eyes and hair that range from the realistic to crayon shades of orange and pink. The captions are produced through child-like, awkward, and messy handwriting, and while the painted and animated portraits are a repetitive theme, each captioned notation offers a different commentary. The sameness of the image in the self-portraits abstracts the autobiographical subject, but she is also made particular through the captions.



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With their direct gaze to the viewer and their forlorn expression, Mitchell's paintings of the saucer-eyed girl with the turned-down mouth appropriate the round-eyed art of the 60s and 70s. The popular prints depicted big-eyed children and animals and were very popular in a genre of art practice and collection that included paint-by-numbers and black-velvet paintings. This art expressed a folk sensibility and sought a predominantly white, working- and middle-class market. The portraits in the video attach Mitchell's self-representation to this historical practice, and they provoke an interrogation of how values about aesthetic desires and affects and art collection and display are organized by class-based norms. The photographs of Mitchell in her white, middle-class family home reference her history in relation to those norms, which typically dismiss popular culture attachments such as wide-eyed art. Furthermore, the self-portrait paintings are deliberately kitschy, and, with the captions, they evoke the construction of exhibited and titled paintings and dismantle the authority of conventional art making and history. The self-portrait constructions are similar to Mitchell's use of craft and detritus materials in her sculpture and installation works where she exaggerates what she references, speaks back to norms of art appreciation, produces a discontinuity about art and craft histories, and generates a counter knowledge about what constitutes appropriate art materials and practice. The approach is more in the way of marauding or ransacking rather than a borrowing of historical accumulation. For example, in the case of the paintings, the eyes are even larger than those in the 70s art, and they often take up half of Mitchell's face. In addition, they are neither painted with the soft prettiness of the historical work nor are they designed for sweet sympathy. Rather, they have an edgy, challenging, perhaps almost threatening quality through the extra-wide, wide-eyed gaze; full-screen effect; odd colour combinations, including a range of skin and hair tones; the quantity of images; and their interruption of the more familiar visuality of the photographs. Furthermore, the self-portraits reference and challenge the racially organized representations of the 70s art, which emphasize whiteness as constituted through wide-eyed purity and innocence. In addition to producing a comment on art history and aesthetic norms, the portraits of the grim-faced woman

could also be understood to comment on a melancholic life or to signal a serious and stern significance for the life moments Mitchell explores in the captions. Moreover, given the ironic, historical, appropriative practice, the self-portraits surface a caution to equating autobiography with nostalgia. Importantly, they also generate critical practice in terms of issues of gazing, responsible looking, and spectator accountability.

Mitchell alters a number of the photographs of herself by animating her eyes into the round-eyed girl of the self-portraits. Given the movement of the animated, enlarging eyes within the stillness of the photographic image, the spectator is directed towards the eyes and what it means to open them to the complications and crises of subjectivity and embodiment and to certain kinds of bodies—queer, fat/disabled—that often fall within the demonized and “unseen.” The alterations to the photographic record, through animation and editing, and the huge-eyed self-portraits suggest the relationship of the self and the social: observing inward to the self and outward to the social. These wide-eyed strategies also surface practices of witnessing and confrontations of histories and memories. Importantly, they emphasize the difficulty of looking, of “the visual grasp” (Bal “Pain of Images” 106), and urge the spectator into responsible or critical spectatorship. Both Mieke Bal (2000, 2007) and Jill Bennett argue that theory emerges from art and the visual and that politically progressive art practice is significant “not in what it is but in what it does” (Bal “Pain of Images” 101–12). This practice, which “‘thinks’ or shapes thought,” can generate theory about unrepresentable subjective knowledges, including painful, troubled, constraining, or traumatic experiences (Bal “Pain of Images” 111). The kind of visual and political art practice that Bal and Bennett discuss functions as a form of witnessing that encourages spectator responsibility or the possibility to “see for,” which in Bal’s terms means seeing *with*. Bal and Bennett argue that the reader or spectator is necessary as a subject who is called to accountability. According to Nancy K. Miller and in relation to autobiography, “the reader ... is the autobiographer’s most necessary other” (545). On Bal’s and Bennett’s terms, the necessity of that autobiographer/reader relationship is constituted in spectator accountability and the potential impact for connectedness, “empathic vision” (Bennett 27), and seeing

for. Mitchell's work can definitely be described as political art, and the intersection of particular strategies, including the wide-eyed art, photographic montage, and photographic alteration of the eyes, with the attention to political and troubled subjectivity, activate an attention to the seeing-for practices that Bal and Bennett emphasize.

Mitchell sings: "This is my poetry. This is my life. Nothing big. Nothing small." The events that unfold in the telling of this life, through the hand-written captions or subtitles that appear below the self-portraits, are the "nothing big" of family relations ("pinchy sister"), childhood events ("snarly dog," "thumb sucking," "caught in a lie"), teen concerns ("white pant period," "first period"), and adult incidents ("lost keys," "bad video rental choice," "extra sharp crumbs in bed"). They are the "nothing small" of fat embodiment ("cellulite," "always hungry," "teen diets," "too much"), an eating disorder ("bulimia," "self loathing," "my gut feels like a hole"), sexuality and heteronormativity ("wet diary," "sad break up," "pervy man stare," "homophobic homos"), economic struggle ("scholarship denied," "insufficient funds," "grant applications," "bouncing rent cheque"), and health stress ("explosive diarrhea," "grandma cancer," "herpes scare"). The big and the small intertwine in a productive tension, with the serious concerns or crises interrupting the everyday banalities in a technique similar to the organization of the song lyrics. In the erratic and incongruous movements through the trivial and the weighty, the predictable and the unexpected, the absurd and the serious, and the pleasurable and the difficult, the subtitle strategy generates comic affect. It would seem to confer lightness to the narrative about this life. However, coupled with the image of the grim-faced girl, the ordinary everydayness takes on troubled overtones, and the traumas are agitated rather than relieved by the banal. Furthermore, even the apparently trivial occurrences are shaded within emotional tensions and social anxieties. Captions such as "ego blow," "ill wishers," "hurt feelings," "harsh words," "irretractable criticism," and "mean teens," thread through the other subtitles. They render the "nothing big" captions as edgy and potentially traumatic and underline the gravity of the "nothing small" contexts. With regard to the soundscape, I have explored how the song lyrics shift between the trite and the troubled and how

the music also combines an easy and light quality with discomfort and discord. Mitchell sings in a soft, “nothing big” way, but while the instrumentation is also soft, the dissonant and repetitive tones are unsettling. With the self-portraits and captions, Mitchell mobilizes a humour that soothes while it pierces. On one hand, Mitchell suggests that lives inevitably consist of the sorts of mixed events she names, but on the other hand, she draws the spectator into recognizing a social world shaped by relations of power, including those organized by race, class, and gender privilege; heteronormativity; able-bodiedness; and health and wellness. Smooth everydayness is interrogated: For whose bodies, Mitchell asks, are the habitual and the monotonous, the safe and the easy, actually possible? The stakes of “this is my life” take on a troubled complexity.

### III. Photographic Disturbance

Mitchell’s early life is produced as an archive of family relations and as a “quest to understand the self in relation to family and place” (Miller 544). The photographs in the early part of the video depict Mitchell as a baby and young girl: participating in seasonal events, such as Hallowe’en and Christmas; posing and playing with her sister; and being embraced by her mother and father. It is evident that the photographs are designed and shot by parents who are engaged in the practice of family photography and the recording of kinship lives. Mitchell also represents herself as contained within norms of a two-parent, two-children, white, middle-class family through the repetition of images where she is often carefully postured and unmoving. Later photographs in the video, when Mitchell is older and independent, suggest a similar, learned investment in historical testimony as they map out life events. However, these photographs portray a corporeal self that fleshes out of the frame, gestures broadly, dresses extravagantly, dances, and embraces a lover. For example, Mitchell lounges at the corner of Castro Street, an iconic gay site in San Francisco; thrusts out her hips in her pink underwear; and performs bathing-beauty poses at the beach and the lake. She celebrates her corporeal and sexual self. These images disrupt the white, middle-class, heterosexual norms and stiff performativity of the earlier, nuclear family images. They also represent a woman “out of bounds,” both in

terms of an over-size body and lesbian sexuality, a woman who might be described as “out of control, outside the social, a monster, a grotesque, threatening the male order” (Kuppers 277). The images of the adult Mitchell depict a woman who embraces her flesh and what/how it challenges.

The photographic record underscores the racial privilege that accompanies whiteness and surfaces the cultural contexts and social orders that produce racialized relations of power. The images of Mitchell as a happy baby and child in her family home and with her parents and younger sister construct a living space of white, middle-class calm and comfort and intersect the constitution of whiteness as purity and innocence with heteronormativity, able-bodiedness, and middle-class femininity. However, the images, paintings, and captions move carefully from those of Mitchell in the comfortable bosom of her family to ones in which she is a subject in struggle and crisis, one who troubles normative positions of sexuality, femininity, health, and corporeality. With these forms of rebellion, interrogation, and upheaval in subject formation, the innocence of white girlhood is made dubious and debatable, and embodiments of whiteness are rendered multiple and complex. In addition, Mitchell's life writing is composed of intricate editing and skewering of the visual record, including image alterations, speedy image changes, and the interruption of the photographs with the peculiar self-portraits. These strategies agitate a normative recording and mapping of life passages and underline the historical and temporal construction of a life. In terms of racialization, they suggest that whiteness is “historically framed and situated” (Ellsworth 261). Writing about an autobiographical essay that produces cultural analysis of racialized relations of power, Elizabeth Ellsworth suggests that the author “demonstrates that enactments and relations of whiteness are learned social and cultural performances” (260). *My Life in Five Minutes* can also be read as producing this theorization. Mitchell images herself costumed as a pioneer woman (with her sister), as a ballerina (with other girls), and a Brownie (alone). These representations are examples of the learned performances of whiteness that Ellsworth discusses, and they point to cultural practices organized in colonial and imperial relations. The Brownie photo is

particularly resonant, since the image is one which is held longer than most. In addition, Mitchell is alone and framed by a family garden, and as a single figure uniformed in a Girl Guide culture created out of British colonialism, with her brown dress, knee-socks, and beret, she appears contained in the indoctrinating world of the Brownies. Computer animation makes the Brownie badges on her uniform flash and twinkle, and given that the badges are earned through the achievement of skills that underline heteronormative, white femininity, Mitchell highlights the learned performances of whiteness. The Brownies, a group geared to young girls, functions to train them within imperial belief systems and white cultural values (Young). The image of Mitchell and her sister costumed as pioneers underscores colonial histories of oppression against Indigenous peoples, and both this image and the one of Mitchell as a Brownie signal how gender and whiteness come together in social and cultural practices that are organized by racialized relations of power and that seek to secure Canada as nation defined by whiteness. The song lyrics combine with the images to underscore how racialized frames of learning and knowing produce whiteness, including the references to how media shaped Mitchell's social practices ("we played Charlie's Angels and Little House on the Prairie"; "I sneak snacks with Donahue. Mike Douglas too.") and the lyric that refers to the Brownies: "just Brownies, not Guides." Perhaps the "not Guides" suggests that as Mitchell ages, she does not fit the Girl Guide culture, particularly in terms of heteronormative femininity.

In addition to the disturbance of subjectivity in representation, Mitchell also produces photographic disturbance through a visual technique known as "montage" practice, which is "the selection, editing or altering of existing images" (Hamilton 159). With the movement of images from Mitchell's life as a baby to her life as an adult, the photographs follow norms of family-record documentation and temporality. However, *My Life in 5 Minutes* represents a disrupted autobiographic archive. The opening images vary at an easy pace, but then the photographic record changes: Images begin to move very rapidly, some photos appear for a second, and others shift across the screen bumping a previous image out of view. In one sequence, the photos flash from one to

another so quickly only glimpses of the representations are available. In addition, and as I have noted, many of the photographs are altered by widening eyes. Some are disordered by other animations, including a cat that moves out of the image frame, hair that expands, Brownie-uniform badges that flicker, and animal toys that dance. The photographs seem to have a life of their own, and they agitate the boundary of the image, disturb its steadiness as family record, and problematize unshakeable/unshifting memory. With the method of montage, Mitchell makes a fragmented patchwork of the family album and interrupts the history of harmonious family relations and the stability of a life narrative. Montage, “as a practice of composition, production, and signification,” operates as critique of “not only dominant modes of production ... but [also] dominant social conventions” (Hamilton 161). Within the framework of conventional uses of photography in dominant media and in visual autobiographies, Mitchell’s use of photographic disruptions situate *My Life in 5 Minutes* as a challenge to dominant practices, and her montage methods generate social and cultural critique. Moreover, like the practice of the self-portraits with the wide-eyes, montage in Mitchell’s video also functions to foreground practices of looking and to create another instance of the interrogation of spectatorship. In discussing the pedagogical implications of montage, James Hamilton argues that the practice is a “form of participatory alternative media” (159) and a means “of teaching a way of seeing” (167) into the social and political.

Mitchell’s self-portraits and musical soundtrack disrupt the realism and transparency of photography. As Bal observes, a photograph both exposes and withholds: It is “both real and distant, both private and utterly public” (“Pain of Images” 93). Mitchell’s control over the photographic images and how they become available to the spectator, through the montage techniques, shift the terms of how photographs of the self are conventionally presented in popular discourse. The interruptions generated by the self-portraits, captions, and soundscape probe the idea that figurative photography and family history are made evident or real through a photographic record. This interruption of the attachment of realism to photography is not solely and simply about questioning what “really happened” in a life or about a problematization of aesthetic form.

Mitchell's strategies also require a spectator practice of critical interrogation about memory, time, history, and what is revealed and what is concealed. The photographs do trace a life from childhood to adulthood, but Mitchell's techniques provide an aesthetic and narrative alteration to the idea of a life mapped out in naturalness, transparency, and temporal linearity. As I have discussed, the eyes begin to widen and enlarge in a number of the photographs and, with this animation strategy of an exaggerated gaze, Mitchell produces a critical reflexivity about self-gazing or self-representational practices.

Mitchell emerges as an eating-disordered girl ("bulimia") and a fat embodied woman in the captions to the self-portraits, in the song lyrics, and in the photographs that represent her as an adult. As several disability researchers note, theories of disability culture need to include an attention to fat embodiments (Brazier & LeBesco; Herndon; LeBesco; Murray). Disability theory interrogations, such as those focusing on marginalization, normativity, regulation, and "alternative" corporealities, are central to examinations of fat phobia and fat oppression, the relationship and disciplining of fatness and thinness in social and health practices, particular bodies and abilities, and the constitution of people of size in discursive formations. Popular discourses typically position fat bodies as unruly, unhealthy, undesirable, uncontrolled, and immoral, and these constructions are central to normative representations of disability. In visual culture, fat women are "frequently figures of fun, occasionally villainesses, often 'bad examples' of people with no self-control or low self-esteem" (Notkin qtd in LeBesco 41). Women's bodies are also "sites at which subjectivity and signification proliferate, subversive sites of visual and linguistic impropriety" (Brazier 232). I agree with April Herndon that "the social positioning of fat women demands careful and thoughtful analysis within the framework of disability studies" (130).

In *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability*, Robert McRuer suggests that "crip theory might function - like the term 'queer' itself—oppositionally and relationally ... not as a positivity but as a positionality" (31) Mitchell's video offers a "counterdiscourse to the prevailing discourse of disability" (Couser 109) and interrelates an interrogation of compulsory able-bodiedness with compulsory hetero-



sexuality. Mitchell's positioning in lesbian subjectivity is made evident through images of herself with lovers and through the song lyrics where Mitchell names herself as "gay." Although "disability" identity is not named as such at any point in the video, and Mitchell does not locate herself as "disabled," *My Life in 5 Minutes* is a disability story: an unmarked disability story. In the song lyrics and subtitles for the self-portraits, thinness and wellness are the desirable commodities of the body. I have examined how Mitchell mobilizes the captions to position herself as constituted in practices constructed by fat oppression and by heteronormativity. The video maps out the demanding practices and damaging consequences for those bodies that do not meet normative constructions of sexuality and able-bodiedness and that are demonized for (excessive) food and sexual appetites.

Feminist theorists have discussed eating disorders, such as bulimia, which Mitchell names, as constructed by women's social oppression and as produced by forces that insist on normative body shapes and sizes within patriarchal emphases on women's appearance (Shilling 56–58). Mitchell is a fat activist who has performed with the performance group "Pretty, Porky, and Pissed Off," and she is an academic researcher who investigates gendered, queer, and fat subjectivities. She is well aware of the idea of "the tyranny of slenderness" and the systemic structures that regulate correct body size. However, her video autobiography neither argues that women internalize social oppression nor sets up an opposition of the natural and unnatural. As Chris Shilling notes, feminist theories of "the distorted body," problematically propose fatness as either a distortion or a natural state. Mitchell's video interrogates the dichotomy in a number of ways and complicates understandings of fatness. First, she links queer and fat subjectivities in coming-out stories and explores their intersection with gender and class. Fat embodiment is made complex by scrutinizing how it is inseparable from other social differences while also working as a distinct site of social formation. Second, through the attention to social contexts and conditions in her life writing, she addresses the disciplinary systems and relations of power that produce the idea of the docile body. However, *My Life in 5 Minutes* does not construct an opposition of the discursive and the material. That is, while she

theorizes the body as produced in discourse, she also, and simultaneously, foregrounds its fleshy forwardness, its materiality. In Mitchell's work, sexuality, disability, gender, and class construct the embodied subject. This is a social body and a material body. Mitchell's repeated references to everyday practices and objects and to the materiality of a life, underline corporeality, affect, and the sensory. Embodiment is not either discursive or material but, rather, and simultaneously, both.

#### **IV. Conclusion: "Big Story" Implications for a "Small Fuss" Project**

In *My Life in 5 Minutes*, Allyson Mitchell problematizes herself as "pedagogical spectacle" (Hesford 355). She performs and exhibits herself as autobiographical object and subject and as a scrutinized site of learning, while she interrogates representational norms that constitute women as spectacle. Wendy Hesford, a visual autobiography theorist, asks: "How can a feminist critique of dominant representations become part of an ethically and politically transformative project that works against the positioning of women as pedagogical spectacles?" (357). *My Life in 5 Minutes* responds in a number of ways. The video invites spectator self-consciousness about the construction of the autobiographical subject. In addition, Mitchell utilizes self-representational practices that interrogate the idea of woman as pedagogical spectacle: by not offering transparency about experience and by utilizing complex representational strategies of layered imagery, print text, and sound. Through the song, family album photographs, and the self-portraits and their captions, Mitchell constructs a narrative of growing up that interrogates the idea of a "real" memory, history, and subjectivity and of a linear and authentic self produced through norms of progress. The dissonant musical refrain, muted lyrics, peculiar self-portraits, bug-eyed girls and women, flash-fast family photos, and the tension between everyday events and difficult crises comprise Mitchell's defamiliarizing strategies. Mitchell's media work matters. *My Life in 5 Minutes* offers critical challenges to representational practices and to conventional modes of media production. Her hybrid video autobiography mobilizes low-budget, visual strategies ("nothing big") to produce a complex ("nothing small") narrative about political, embodied subjectivity and spectator accountability.

Allyson Mitchell's Video Autobiography

The final image of Mitchell in *My Life in 5 Minutes* offers the “Nothing big. Nothing small” provocation, the complication, and ambiguity, I have explored throughout this paper. An overhead shot reveals Mitchell in a blue bathing suit, lying on her back, with her right arm crooked over her face and her hand cupped over her eyes. Mitchell appears to be at rest, as she soaks up the sun and relaxes in her full-figured body. Her white flesh glows in the sunlight; the skin of her face and upper arm is luminous. The bathing suit stretches across her breasts, and the way the light falls, it illuminates their lush shape and size. Since the breasts are located directly in the centre of the frame and occupy much of the image space, they produce an in-your-face visibility for fat sexuality. This kind of representational space for fat women is very rare (Herndon; Kent; Kupperts; LeBesco). The image is quiet and still, and in the containment of self, with her arm across her face, Mitchell does not invite a voyeuristic gaze. She seems posed more for herself than anyone watching. Nevertheless, her position generates a consciousness about gazing. The hidden eyes suggest a control of spectatorial intrusion, as if she is carving out a private, veiled, inviolate territory now that she has made her life public in what has gone before. She underlines a resistance to being consumed, to carrying the burden of representing lesbian and fat embodiments. Her mouth evokes the self-portraits, particularly in terms of the rather severe, turned-down expression, but combined with the covered eyes, this expression underlines a refusal of a spectator. Nevertheless, with the emphasis on eyes, albeit differently from the self-portraits, the photograph also underlines the practice of spectatorship as in the self-portraits. Furthermore, given the perspective of peering down at her body, Mitchell references how women's bodies are made available in particular gazed-upon ways.

The title of the video, *My Life in 5 Minutes*, suggests that lives are fragile and fleeting. It also signals a life moving rapidly, as if it cannot be captured either in representation by the autobiographer or in reception by the spectator. But, pay attention, Mitchell seems to be saying to herself and to her audience, ‘cause “this is my life,” and even tho’ we’ve only got 5 minutes, lots of stuff happens.

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