Standing Under a Sign to Which One Does Not Belong: Desire and (Dis)identification in Catherine Opie’s Self-Portrait Series

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ABSTRACT. This paper will take a closer look at Catherine Opie’s Self-Portrait series. Spanning a decade, from 1993 to 2004, each self-portrait is both reflective of an important time in Opie’s life, and are emblematic of a particular period in the LGBTQ movement. Traditional interpretations of these images have read them as independent of one another. When read together however, they present a subtle yet powerful statement on identity and desire. Using José Muñoz’ disidentification theory as a critical lens, I plan to unpack these images and offer new insights that will bring them in line with contemporary queer theory. While iconic on their own, when read together they create a dialogue that challenges the very concept of normal vs. abnormal and speaks to the validity an entire spectrum of individual identities.

Introduction
Catherine Opie is an American photographer that rose to prominence during the 1990’s with Portraits, a series depicting fellow members of the San Francisco and Los Angeles queer community set against lush, colorful backgrounds. Since then, Opie has gone on to produce a diverse body of work, photographing everything from American mini-malls to Elizabeth Taylor’s closet. Much like the artist herself, Opie’s work is hard to pin down. If there is one connecting thread, it is a desire to explore communities and how they shape and are shaped by the physical landscape and the individuals that inhabit them. Opie has
also, on several occasions, turned the camera on herself. Her three self-portraits, \emph{Self-Portrait/Cutting}, \emph{Self-Portrait/Pervert}, and \emph{Self-Portrait/Nursing}, show the viewer that she is not only an observer, but often a part of the communities she photographs. Spanning a decade, from 1993 to 2004, each self-portrait is both reflective of an important time in Opie’s life, and are emblematic of a particular period in the LGBTQ movement. Over the course of her career Opie has moved up the art world food-chain. In 2008 the Guggenheim devoted four floors to her mid-career retrospective, she is a tenured professor at UCLA, sits on the board of several museums, and has had several of her early images feature in the opening credits of the popular lesbian drama, “The L Word.” I only mention this last part because a recent article in \emph{The New Yorker} cited it as an example of the ways in which, over the past several decades, Opie’s images have “migrated towards the mainstream” (Levy, 2017).

While much of Opie’s content has to some extent been “normalized,” in part due to the images themselves, her three self-portraits have always retained a quiet subversiveness. Using José Muñoz’ disidentification theory as a critical framework, I plan on reading the works in relation to one another as a means of uncovering a new narrative that brings these images in line with contemporary queer theory. These self-portraits independently depict a particular desire (such as domestic bliss), a reclamation (of a derogatory label on one’s sexuality), or state of being (such as motherhood). When read together however, a dialogue emerges around identity, desire, and rigid ideologies.

**Theoretical framework: Disidentification Theory**

José Muñoz’ disidentification theory provides a useful tool for analyzing Opie’s three self-portraits. Of his theory, Muñoz (1999) writes “Disidentification is meant to offer a lens to elucidate minoritarian politics that is not monocausal or monothematic, one that is calibrated to discern a multiplicity of interlocking identity components and the ways in which they affect the social.” (p. 8). Pulling from a variety of
theoretical paradigms, Muñoz examines identity formation in queer “subjects” of color. Taking an intersectional approach, Muñoz looks at the ways in which varying fault lines of power converge in the lives of minority subjects to make identity formation especially fraught. However, according to Muñoz, rather than reject identification altogether, these subjects are able to disidentify with dominant culture and carve out a space for themselves.

Muñoz’ theory is best illuminated through French linguist Michel Pecheux’s three modes of subject formation. The first mode is “identification,” wherein “good subjects” choose a path of identification with discursive and ideological forms. The second mode, “counteridentification,” is where “bad subjects” attempt to rebel against dominant ideology and turn against the “symbolic system.” Disidentification is the third mode of dealing with dominant ideology, and the one in which Muñoz’ theory does its work. Disidentification “neither opts to assimilate within such a structure nor strictly opposes it; rather disidentification is a strategy that works on and against dominant ideology” (Muñoz, 1999, p. 11). Disidentification becomes a particularly useful tool for resistance because it works from both “within and outside the dominant public sphere simultaneously” (Muñoz, 1999, p. 5). Rather than reaffirming rigid social structures and ideologies by choosing to either agree or disagree, to “identify” or “counteridentify,” disidentification works to dissolve these structures and pave the way for a multiplicity of identities. Opie’s *Self-Portraits* fit particularly well to this theory because the images themselves are flexible and lend themselves to a variety of different meanings and interpretations. Through the lens of Muñoz’ disidentification theory, *Self-Portrait/Cutting, Self-Portrait/Pervert*, and *Self-Portrait/Nursing* are able to be re-worked, re-coded, and re-signified while still remaining a site for change, resistance, and radical possibility even decades after they were first created.
Reimagining Context: A Site for Queer Resistance

If we extrapolate Muñoz’ theory to identity politics, more specifically LGBTQ identity politics, then “identification” could be likened to homonormativity and “counter-identification” to queer radicalism. While “good subjects” will choose to engage in respectability politics as a means of demonstrating that they are “just like everyone else,” radical queers, or “bad subjects,” fight the system by choosing not to engage, to stand outside of the social order. An example of “counter-identification” can be seen in Lee Edelman’s *No Future*, a 2004 polemic in which he argues for a queer ethics that is against reproductive futurism, or the sociopolitical structure organized around “creating a better future for our children.” In this text, Edelman (2004) writes, “queerness names the side of those not ‘fighting for the children,’ the side outside the consensus by which all politics confirms the absolute value of reproductive futurism” (p. 75), or to put it more succinctly, “fuck the Child and the social order in whose names we are all collectively terrorized” (Edelman, 2004, p. 75). While much can be said about both the “normal” and the radical, both end up simply reinforcing the tired binary of good vs. bad subjects. That is why disidentification is so powerful; it seeks to dissolve these rigid social structures by giving people room to work both “on and against” the dominant social order. Muñoz (1999) writes of this “working on and against” as “a strategy that tries to transform a cultural logic from within, always laboring to enact permanent structural change while at the same time valuing the importance of local or everyday struggles of resistance” (p. 12).

While some of Opie’s work has been absorbed into mainstream discourse, it also provides what Foucault calls a “stumbling block.” Taken together, *Self-Portrait/Cutting*, *Self-Portrait/Pervert*, and *Self-Portrait/Nursing* open up a “point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy” (Foucault, 1978, p. 19), by presenting a view of desire and identity that resists binary structures and instead gives way
to an infinite possibility of varied and valid ways of being, having, wanting, and so on.

Before I go into the works in conversation with one another, I would like to examine how context itself, both formal and cultural in Opie’s self-portraits, may be reimagined as a site for queer resistance. One major facet of disidentification is the “recycling and recoding” of images in dominant culture as a means of finding space for oneself in a place not meant for them. Opie’s work often draws upon art history. In her self-portraits she is referencing the work of 16th century artist Hans Holbein the Younger. The rich tapestries draped in the background are meant to mirror those in Holbein’s portraits of noble men and women. She has even likened her Self-Portrait/Pervert to Holbein’s portrait of Henry VIII saying, “Pervert is my Henry VIII. It’s like I’m a warrior king, I’m going to carry on the cause of being a pervert, and I’m going to make it very elegant” (quoted in Getsy, 2016, p. 209). While this juxtaposition is a means for Opie to “soften the blow” of the confrontational content by couching it in formal aesthetics, it can also be viewed as Opie’s way of recycling and recoding the image with her queer body. Opie’s participation in the BDSM community pushes this one step further. While she was shunned from the mainstream LGBTQ rights movement for being too deviant, Opie uses Renaissance portraiture as a site for political power by proudly displaying her “perverted” desire in a space typically reserved for kings and noblemen.

**Self-Portrait/Cutting**

Inspired by the recent break down of Opie’s first long term relationship, Self-Portrait/Cutting is meant to depict the artist’s longing for domesticity at a time when it was both personally and politically unattainable. The drawing, which resembles a child’s drawing of two female figures holding hands in front of a house, was tentatively sketched on Opie’s back by an artist friend so that, much like the emotional trauma over the loss of her partner, the raw wound would eventually heal over. At a time when gay marriage is federally
legal (albeit not fully accepted), and the military has lifted its ban on transgender members, a children’s drawing of two women holding hands no longer seems that subversive. In fact, a longing for domestic bliss, such as in Self-Portrait/Cutting, could even be taken as a somewhat macabre way of promoting homonormativity. In a section of her memoir, The Argonauts, Maggie Nelson likens Opie’s Self-Portrait/Cutting to the Prop-8 signs scattered throughout her neighborhood. Nelson (2016) writes, “I don’t get it, who wants a version of the Prop-8 poster, but with two triangle skirts?” to which her partner, Harry Dodge, pointedly shrugs “Maybe Cathy does” (p. 11). Rather than view this work in terms of normative versus transgressive, one could view this image through Muñoz’ concept of “good” vs. “bad” subjects. Is Opie a “good” citizen for wanting to settle down and start a family? Is she a “bad” lesbian for reinforcing heteronormative ideals? Or is she neither? By choosing not to assimilate into the dominant cultural structure, while not strictly opposing it, Opie is working “on and against” domestic ideologies by refusing to choose a side between assimilationist and radical queer (Muñoz, 1999, p. 11). Rather, Opie is choosing to reflect on how she felt at a particular moment in time.

One could also interpret the impermanence of Cutting as a symbolic way of saying that people cannot be expected “to live a life that is all one thing” (Nelson, 2016, p. 74). While in that particular moment, the wound left by the loss of domesticity was both literally and figuratively fresh; over time it will come to heal and possibly even disappear completely. I think that what Nelson is getting at is the idea that people can, and should be, allowed to change their minds about what they want in life regardless of their sexual identity, gender, race, class, or any other construct foisted upon particular bodies.

**Self-Portrait/Pervert**

Self-Portrait/Pervert was also inspired by a particular moment in the artist’s life. During the 1993 March on
Washington for Gay and Lesbian Rights, Opie and her San Francisco leather community (a queer BDSM community) were asked not to attend because they were considered too deviant. Out of anger at the then current LGBTQ movement and its focus on appearing “normal,” Opie decided to have “pervert” carved in her chest as both a painful reminder and a badge of honor. It is interesting to note that, while Cutting was intended to heal without a scar, Pervert was created precisely so that it would scar. Perhaps Opie did this as a means of reflecting and embodying her sexuality, something that is beautiful to her; but to society, she is literally and figuratively branded a pervert for life. Perhaps she did it as a way of saying that, while some desires are subject to change (such as a desire for domesticity born out of loss), others are here to stay.

**Self-Portrait/Nursing**

*Self-Portrait/Pervert* and *Self-Portrait/Nursing* presents us with a very interesting dichotomy and brings up something that is often overlooked in contemporary queer discussions, which is the intersection of the maternal body and queer identity. Taken together, the two images point to a traversing of roles. Just because Opie is or was a member of a sexually “deviant” group does not mean that she cannot have the desire to be a mother. And while her sexuality is a part of her, as indicated by the scar on her chest, it does not impede her from being a nurturing mother. In a recent interview, Nelson discusses pregnancy and queer identity. She writes, “Historically there’s been this upheld opposition between procreation and queers—think of the image of the queer, childless pervert and the panic about protecting children from queer sexuality. That’s all starting to shift now.” *Self-Portrait/Nursing* sits at the intersection of these ideas and could be taken as a literal depiction of this shift. Here we have pervert, procreator, queer sexuality, queer motherhood, and child all wrapped up in one image. While this shift is hopeful, notions of perversion, the queer body, and children also bring to mind current issues such as the debate around
gender identity and bathrooms and reminds us that, while these fears are starting to give way, there is still much work to be done.

While her participation in the BDSM community could liken her to a “radical queer,” and her depiction of motherhood and domesticity could paint her as an assimilationist, the narrative that emerges from Catherine Opie’s three self-portraits is much more complex. Rather than identifying or counteridentifying with any dominant cultural structure, Opie works within, on, and against structures that are both heteronormative and queer; and presents us with three very different aspects of her identity that are intertwined but not contingent upon one another. When read together, the narrative that emerges is one of transgression, and perhaps the notion that one can in fact live a life that is many different things.

**Conclusion**

Much like the process of disidentification, Opie’s work exists at the intersection between desire, identity, and ideology. Separately, each of Opie’s self-portraits depicts a particular desire (such as domestic bliss), reclamation (of ones sexual identity) or state of being (such as motherhood). Taken together they convey a subtle yet powerful message that one need not be imprisoned by any single aspect of their identity. Opie’s self-portraits can be seen as a challenge to binary thinking because she is working from within dual ideologies as a means to explode them and in doing so reveals the slippages between desire, identity, and ideology. It is within these slippages that Opie works to carve out a space for her own identities, and make way for the identity of others.

Of course, there are still questions that remain. Muñoz’ disidentification theory places heavy emphasis on the intersection of race and sexuality. Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano, Muñoz (1999) writes that, “the lack of attention to race in the work of leading lesbian theorists reaffirms that it is possible to talk about sexuality without talking about race, which reaffirms the belief that it is necessary to talk about
race and sexuality only when discussing people of color and their text” (quoted in Muñoz, 1999, p. 10). How does Opie’s work deal with aspects of class, race, and sexual identity? What, if anything, has Opie done to address her racial privilege? Are her self-portraits helping or hurting queer visibility? All these questions make it difficult to bring her work and disidentification into perfect alignment. There is no doubt her work does not fully address the complex issues of white privilege, capitalism, classicism, and a whole host of other things that are present in today’s queer community. However, her self-portraits do present a subtle yet powerful statement on identity that challenges the very concept of normal vs. abnormal and speaks to the validity of not only an entire spectrum of individual identities but to the spectrum of possibilities within one’s own identity. And that, at least in my mind, is a step in the right direction.

References


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