

## Disability Life Writing and the Problem of Dependency in *The Autobiography of Gaby Brimmer*

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**Abstract** Independence was a core value of the movement for disability rights. People with disabilities did not have to be dependent, advocates claimed; they were robbed of autonomy by poverty, social prejudice, and architectural barriers. Recently, critics have noted that the emphasis on independence equates personhood with autonomy, reason, and self-awareness, thereby excluding those who are incapable of self-determination. The stigma of dependency is communicated to caregivers whose work is devalued and undercompensated. These values are echoed in the life writing of people with disabilities, which tends to present a singular narrative voice, even when the author requires assistance in the physical or intellectual work of composition. The 1979 Mexican memoir-*testimonio* *Gaby Brimmer*, collaboratively authored by the acclaimed journalist Elena Poniatowska, Brimmer, her mother, and her paid caregiver is a notable exception. Consisting of interwoven dialogue among its three informants, *Gaby Brimmer* enacts dependency at the level of form, while exploring the challenges and opportunities of interdependence in societies that devalue the giving and receiving of care.

**Keywords** Disability · Disability rights movement · Autonomy · Dependency · Memoir · *testimonio* · Caregiving · Personhood · Collaborative writing · Gaby Brimmer · Elena Poniatowska · Shame

“I’ve learned over the years and through my own experience that you can only get somewhere in society and with your family by being a rebel, because I’ll always be dependent on other people,” Gaby Brimmer remarks at a telling moment in the book that bears her name. “Legally I don’t exist, at the bank they have me down as ‘incapacitated,’ and even though this lousy money is supposedly mine, I can’t take out a cent without somebody else’s signature. So I don’t have anything of my own” (2009, 57). Brimmer’s disability relegates her to social death whereby, regardless of education or resources, she is denied legal status that would grant her the capacity for political and economic self-determination. The publication of *Gaby Brimmer*

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in 1979 coincided with a moment when people with disabilities were increasingly protesting their exclusion and recognizing themselves as a constituency united by shared experiences of oppression and empowered to demand social and political recognition. They no longer wanted to be seen as passive recipients of care, dependent on the charity of the able-bodied, but rather as rights-bearing consumers entitled to govern their own life circumstances (Charleton 2000; Fleischer 2001; Longmore and Umansky 2001; Pelka 2012; Shapiro 1994; Stroman 2003). The emerging movement thus made independence its foremost goal, one that would shape calls for disability rights in the decades that followed.

Conceived by the acclaimed Mexican author Elena Poniatowska, *Gaby Brimmer* tells the story of a woman with cerebral palsy who communicated by using her foot to type and to spell out words on an alphabet board. In many ways, the narrative affirms the values and goals of the disability rights movement that Brimmer would help to galvanize in her native Mexico. Its calls for autonomy, social inclusion, opportunities to work, and political recognition are consistent with a more widespread international revolt against enforced conditions of dependency. At the same time, the reader who takes seriously Brimmer's acknowledgment that "I'll always be dependent on other people" encounters a more complicated account of *interdependency* among people with disabilities and their caregivers, which also extends to authors and informants, books and the circumstances of their production. The work's innovative narrative form—in which Poniatowska interweaves selections from Brimmer's letters, poetry, and interviews with the words of her mother, Sari, and caregiver, Florencia—recognizes interdependency as a challenge but also as a source of untapped creative possibility.

Reading *Gaby Brimmer* in terms of dependency provides an opportunity to think through the dilemmas raised by what Eva Feder Kittay calls "the global ethic of longterm care" (2005, 443). Kittay's intervention comes at a moment when demographers project a crisis in long-term care as the proportion of the world's workforce shrinks in relation to that of the dependent population. Where once family members were the primary caregivers for children, the disabled, and the elderly, what Kittay calls "dependency work" is now increasingly done by paid caregivers and professionals (2005). Kittay observes that this shift is global, but its impact is uneven. Wealthier regions of the world are ever more reliant on the importation of foreign caregivers who create a vacuum of care when they leave behind dependents in less developed countries. Although all three narrators in *Gaby Brimmer* are Mexican, the relations among Brimmer, her mother, and her paid caregiver bring into focus the questions of distributive justice raised by the problem of long-term care. How to allow people with disabilities to flourish without depriving caregivers and their families? And how to recognize dependency as universal rather than an individual misfortune or an aspect of isolated stages of life? The work's distinctive composition is a vivid illustration of interdependency at the level of form, as well as content. As such, its project of making visible the rewards and burdens of giving and receiving care stands as a defiant rejoinder to a culture that equates personhood with autonomy, self-reliance, and individuality.

## Dependency and the social contract

The slogan "nothing about us without us," voiced by people with disabilities around the world, represented a demand to participate in decisions about their own care and wellbeing.<sup>1</sup> People with disabilities did not *have* to be dependent, advocates argued; they were robbed of autonomy by poverty, social prejudice, and architectural barriers. Inspired by movements for

decolonization and civil rights, people with disabilities insisted on the right to self-determination. Although their agendas varied from region to region given disparities in the built environment, distribution of wealth, social attitudes, and state resources, independence and integration were core values consistently shared by the international movement for disability rights. These values are reflected in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), which declared 1981–1992 the “Decade of Disabled Persons,” and affirmed “the human rights and fundamental freedoms” of persons with disabilities, which include “respect for . . . individual autonomy including the freedom to make one’s own choices” (2007). According to the UN Convention, even the most severely disabled persons should be entitled, to the best of their capacities, to make decisions about their own care.

Given the isolation and voicelessness of people with disabilities throughout much of human history, the collective demand for self-determination represented a radical step forward. But more recently, critics have observed that the emphasis on independence and productivity within the mainstream disability rights movement excludes those who are unable to represent themselves (Berube 2010; Kittay 1999 and 2001; Nussbaum 2007; Silvers, Wasserman and Mahawold 1998). Martha Nussbaum argues that social contract theory, as influentially conceived by John Rawls, assumes an individual who is free, reasonable, and capable of consensual relations with other citizens (2007, 96–154). Those who lack the autonomy and reason to participate in such mutual exchanges are denied full recognition as persons. Even societies that acknowledge their need for care make little provision for them to lead a “dignified and fruitful life” (194). Nussbaum and other critics advocate moving beyond the call for rights as they are currently conceived to rethink fundamental assumptions about the notion of personhood that would account for the severest forms of disability.

And what of caregivers? In societies that place a premium on personal autonomy, Kittay observes, dependency work—which tends to fall to women and people of color—remains unacknowledged and undercompensated (1999, 2000, 2005). The stigma of dependency is communicated, by association, to those who do the labor of caregiving. What Kittay terms “dependency critique” aims “to show that, as long as the bounds of justice are drawn within reciprocal relations among free and equal persons, dependents will continue to remain disenfranchised, and dependency workers who are otherwise fully capable and cooperating members of society will continue to share varying degrees of the dependents’ disenfranchisement” (1999, 76–77). Absent a notion of justice that recognizes the social and political significance of giving and receiving care, dependents and dependency workers will be marginalized and politically powerless. Dependency critics thus call for a revised model of disability rights that would provide social recognition and adequate financial compensation for caregivers as well as their dependents.

## Dependency and disability memoir

The stigma of dependency is perpetuated in the life writing of people with disabilities. Their words matter because memoir is one of the primary tools for bringing public visibility to the stories of people with unconventional bodies and minds. Whereas historically autobiography has been dominated by the most accomplished and able bodied, recent decades have seen the genre transformed by authors who are ill and disabled. Indeed, G. Thomas Couser writes that the “some body memoir”—life writing centered on the vulnerable body—is “the most important development in American life writing in the last three decades or so and thus a

cultural and historical phenomenon of great significance" (2009, 3). Couser argues that some body memoirs assert the political and social value of self-representation as a corrective to the historic silence and marginality of people with disabilities in Western culture.

A key component of disability memoir is independence of mind and voice, regardless of the subjects' need for support in care, communication, or mobility. Disabled authors like Harriet McBryde Johnson (*Too Late to Die Young*) and Jean-Dominique Bauby (*The Diving Bell and the Butterfly*) needed ongoing assistance with the activities of daily life, yet they wrote in the autonomous, singular voices of traditional autobiography. For example, Bauby, a former editor at *Elle* magazine paralyzed by "locked-in syndrome," composed his memoir by blinking his eyes to direct an assistant spelling out words on an alphabet board. He describes the meticulous mental labor of preparing his words while waiting for an amanuensis to arrive. "In my head I churn over every sentence ten times, delete a word, add an adjective, learn my text by heart, paragraph by paragraph" (1998, 5-6). Bauby asserts that the words on the page are his alone, regardless of the collaborative effort required to get them into print. Similarly, Johnson acknowledges the assistance provided by her caregiver, Geneva, while insisting on her capacity to dictate the circumstances of her own care. Describing her morning routine, she explains, "if it's not Geneva, it's someone else, someone I've chosen, someone following my instructions. It's a daily necessity, entirely practical and matter-of-fact" (Johnson 2005, 251). Here Johnson models the politics of disability rights in representing herself as a consumer entitled to manage the dependency work that allows her to function in the world. Geneva, who cleans, dresses, and maintains Johnson's body, fades to a fungible minor character in a narrative of which Johnson is both the primary subject and sole author.

More challenging still are those autobiographies produced with an assistant who collaborates in the authoring as well as in the physical process of composition. Collaborative writing challenges our assumption that the autobiographer is, by definition, an autonomous individual (Couser 2003, 34-55). As in many ethnographic scenarios, questions about authorship are compounded by power disparities between the disabled subject and her able-bodied facilitator. A good example is *I Raise My Eyes to Say Yes* (1996), the life story of Ruth Sienkiewicz-Mercer who, because of cerebral palsy, could write only with extensive facilitation. In a mode Couser likens to slave narrative, *I Raise My Eyes* tells a story of emancipation. Sienkiewicz-Mercer, who was institutionalized after being wrongly diagnosed as intellectually disabled, secured her release when she found an intermediary who could prove her competence and communicate her thoughts and wishes. In the introduction, her advocate, Steven B. Kaplan, lays out the contradictory process of composition. He characterizes Sienkiewicz-Mercer as "thoughtful, sensitive, and exceptionally bright" (1996, xiii) with a clear sense of what she wants to say. Yet he also acknowledges: "most of the words were not generated by Ruth; she neither spoke them nor transmitted them directly from her creative mind to the written page" (1996, xii). Writing entailed a painstaking collaboration, in which Sienkiewicz-Mercer told her story via multiple communication boards, followed by numerous rounds in which she edited (also via communication board) Kaplan's attempts at transcription. Given this cumbersome process, Sienkiewicz-Mercer's narrative is written in a surprisingly conventional manner, its singular voice seeming to be a direct and unmediated expression of her point of view. The memoir imbues Sienkiewicz-Mercer with selfhood, but, rather ironically, only when Kaplan speaks for her in a voice that is more his than hers. "Representation in the political sense and representation in the mimetic sense seem somehow at odds," Couser writes of this work, noting that readers expect memoir, however mediated the writing process, to serve as a transparent window onto its subject's thoughts and feelings (2003, 39). Those expectations

arise more readily when a collaborative narrative attempts to downplay the evidence of facilitation in order to more closely approximate the conventions of the genre. Of course this tendency makes sense in a culture that places a premium on independence. But as a result, most collaborative autobiographies miss an opportunity to highlight conditions of *interdependency* by drawing attention to the partnership between a disabled subject and the assistants who enable the narration of her life experiences.

The contradictions inherent in collaborative autobiography underscore the problematic status of dependency within disability studies and activism. At the level of disability politics, there is deep discomfort with acknowledging the need for care and the work of those who administer it. Far more energy has gone into demanding independence than into devising models of justice that include those who will never attain independence, no matter how changed the environment. So long as independence is the goal, the most dependent subjects will remain politically and socially marginalized. So too life writing by people with disabilities typically upholds the values of autonomy and self-determination at the level of form. Instead of using the interdependent writing process as an occasion to push the limits of genre, collaborative life writing continues to employ the singular voice of traditional autobiography. As a result, the stigma of dependency is implicitly reinforced and the labor of dependency workers is obscured.

## Rescripting dependency in *Gaby Brimmer*

*Gaby Brimmer* offers creative alternatives to the autobiographical form that has dominated the literature of disability rights. The subtitle provided by the English-language translation, *An Autobiography in Three Voices*, is no doubt intended to make the book legible to Anglophone readers and to capitalize on the popularity of disability memoir. However, *Gaby Brimmer* resists prevailing generic conventions in its polyvocal structure and in its persistent linkage of an individual story to the problems of people with disabilities as a class. Thus, as Susan Antebi (2009) and Beth Jorgensen (2014) have argued, it more rightly merits classification as *testimonio*, a genre that, as John Beverly describes, ties the story of personal growth and transformation to “a group or class situation marked by marginalization, oppression, and struggle” (2004, 103).<sup>2</sup> As such, *Gaby Brimmer* connects a life story to broader concerns with rights and social justice, and it explicitly aligns Brimmer’s cause with other political struggles such as the student protests of 1968. When Brimmer recounts her own experiences, she also understands herself to be speaking on behalf of people with disabilities as a constituency. As she puts it playfully, “Life’s no fun if you live just for yourself, there’s no point to it at all. That’s why I decided I’d take on our cause, the cause of all handicapped people everywhere. That I’d show them and the world what could be done” (2009, 88). True to her word, in the decades following the book’s publication, Brimmer used her newfound celebrity to become a leading figure in the Mexican movement for disability rights.

The distinctive, tripartite narrative structure of *Gaby Brimmer* resists the singular voice of autobiography, instead articulating a collective experience of disability. While Poniatowska had already experimented with polyvocality in her work about the Mexican student uprising of 1968, *La Noche de Tlatelolco*, such a technique is unprecedented in disability literature of its time or thereafter.<sup>3</sup> The dialogic form of *Gaby Brimmer* largely avoids the problem of a work like *I Raise My Eyes to Say Yes* in which a collaborative process is streamlined into a monologic narrative. Instead, the speakers—whose voices are marked by class, generation,

and individual temperament—relate shared experiences, while often drawing contradictory conclusions about their meaning. An example of this conflicted polyvocality surfaces around a failed plan to send Brimmer to a nursing facility in Cuernavaca. According to Brimmer: “We [Brimmer and Florencia] protested over and over, but adults never listen to young people. There they were, stubborn as mules, building an apartment in Cuernavaca, taking me out of the university, and moving me and Nana into a depressing environment where you could smell death at every step” (119). Florencia: “I liked Cuernavaca but just to go for a day or a weekend, not to live there for good” (119). Sari: “I pinned all my hopes on Cuernavaca! I thought the climate was lovely. The Home was surrounded by flowers and plants, and it looked like an oasis—at least that’s how I saw it—and I thought, since I’m always looking for a permanent roof over Gaby’s head if I die, ‘Here she will be safe’” (120). We can value none of these statements more than another, since each is clearly a legitimate expression of the speaker’s desires and needs. No one voice stands in as representative of a collective experience or claims to articulate an authentic truth. Instead these women bespeak the contradictory status of disability in their time and place: in the event of Sari’s death, Cuernavaca might offer a secure environment for Brimmer’s care, but it might also be a lonely and boring place for her to live. Together, these voices disclose anxiety about the burdens of giving and receiving care in the absence of state-sponsored provisions to support dependent citizens.

Brimmer’s spirited, colloquial speech rightly dominates *Gaby Brimmer* since she is the book’s subject. Her portion includes excerpts from her letters, poetry, and interviews with Poniatowska. But even as she recounts her life story, Brimmer shares Poniatowska’s investment in breaking from the autobiographical form. She begins by fashioning a fractured, contradictory narrative persona who first sees herself from without: “There’s a person sitting across from me. I can see her in the windowpane; I know who she is, even though I don’t always recognize her” (29). Her words reveal a divided authorial consciousness. While the autobiographer always jointly inhabits the positions of author (embodied writing self) and subject (remembered past self), Brimmer emphasizes the embodied self even as she resists being reduced to her body. Such strategic duality is necessary for people with disabilities, who are so often defined exclusively by the distinctive features of their bodies. Only after five sentences does Brimmer disclose her disability in the following casual manner: “Oh, and I forgot to tell you she’s in a wheelchair. (I forget this insignificant little detail because she herself forgets it at times)” (29). By attributing disability to the third person “she,” Brimmer refuses to be identified entirely by her wheelchair, figured here as a forgettable aspect of her corporeal presence. The revelation of the wheelchair is followed by a poem about modernity that begins: “I’m a slave to the motor, / the motor in a car, in a blender, / in my TV set.” Calling herself “a product of my time,” Brimmer attests to historical circumstances shared with her able-bodied readers. Again, she waits to disclose the indications of bodily difference. Only in the final lines of the poem does she mention a technology that might identify her as a person with a disability: “I’m thinking of / putting a motor/ in my chair” (29). By portraying herself as divided and in excess of her disabled body, Brimmer rejects the coherent persona of traditional autobiography, providing readers with opportunities for identification even as they recognize her difference.

The grainy photographs distributed throughout the Spanish-language edition (regrettably omitted from the English translation) further complicate the model of selfhood implicit in conventional life writing. In autobiography, photographs typically complement the prose narrative by illustrating significant people and places as well as the subject’s development over time. Sometimes the photos in *Gaby Brimmer* work like this. For example, a portrait of

Brimmer's parents appears on a page facing Brimmer's account of her father. But other photographs relate only indirectly to the surrounding text. Several zero in on Brimmer's feet turning the pages of Christy Brown's *My Left Foot*, using the alphabet board, and typing. Where classic portraiture focuses on the face as an index of personality, these images relocate selfhood and agency to the foot, the only part of her body that Brimmer could control.<sup>4</sup>

*Gaby Brimmer* also attests to the interdependence of its protagonist and her caregivers. Brimmer's mother Sari emerges as a tortured, anxious woman who is a fierce advocate for her daughter's rights and needs, but who never fully accepts Brimmer's disability. "I don't think I've ever forgotten, not even for an instant, that my daughter has cerebral palsy. That thought is with me all the time, like a knife through my heart," she says (31), while also insisting on her daughter's intelligence and her right to flourish. Sari, who ran a successful business outside the home, is aware of the gender expectations surrounding dependency work. Of her late husband she writes: "Miguel was spiritual, I was material. I would be thinking that our money would not stretch far enough, that Gaby would always need to be taken care of" (155). As the patriarch, Miguel has the luxury of concentrating on matters of spirit and intellect, while Sari wrestles with the daily realities of domestic life. Miguel is free to overlook his daughter's disability, imparting his political views and learning to her, while Sari struggles to get her appropriate care, schooling, and social recognition. No one is more aware than Sari that her daughter would be helpless without her family, and the strain of this responsibility is evident throughout the dialogue.

The addition of Florencia—Brimmer's lifelong, paid caregiver—is the book's most innovative contribution. Her significance is emphasized by the photographs in the original Spanish-language edition, where, aside from Brimmer, she is the most frequent subject. Her importance to the story is emphasized by the first photograph, a closeup where she holds a young Brimmer, both gazing solemnly into the camera. We might expect the inaugural image to depict mother and daughter; however, this photograph emphasizes Florencia's status as Brimmer's primary caregiver. The absence of family portraits depicting Brimmer together with her parents and brother further elevates Florencia's significance. The photographs thus lend visual weight to the intimate relationship between Brimmer and her assistant, while negating any necessary connection between biological kinship and care.

Florencia's dialogue echoes and enhances the message conveyed by the photographs, even as it articulates many of the concerns Kittay raises about caregiving on a global scale. Although Florencia is also Mexican, her position in the Brimmer household attests to the extreme disparities of wealth and opportunity Kittay describes. Florencia's parents were *campesinos* who sent her to work in Mexico City at age thirteen because they could not afford to care for her. As she grew up, her position in the Brimmer household made her unavailable to care for dependents in her biological family. Although it was not uncommon for middle-class Mexican families to have a household staff, it was highly unusual for a woman of Florencia's class and race to have the kind of narrative authority granted her by *Gaby Brimmer*. Her opinions are given equal weight; her account of the labor of feeding, clothing, cleaning Brimmer, as well as the sacrifices it entailed, is an essential aspect of the narrative. As Florencia explains,

She can't do anything without somebody's help. I get her out of bed, I take her to the bathroom, and get her dressed.

I'm always carrying her to do everything.

That's right, today I carried her to get her out of bed, give her a bath, get her into the wheelchair, everything. (151)

In a city where nothing is wheelchair accessible and people with disabilities are not welcome in public, Brimmer's mobility depends entirely on Florencia's capacity to push, pull, and lift her chair. It is Florencia's physical labor that enables Brimmer to attend university. There "we had to climb up two stories from the parking lot to the Faculty of Political Science and Sociology," Florencia relates.

[I]f the kids saw I was alone with Gaby, trying to get her out of the car, trying to get the wheelchair up the stairs, well, they might come over and offer to help. But they'd only help if I asked. Otherwise, they didn't even lift a finger. They'd stay sitting on the railing while I was struggling. (68)

As this passage makes clear, the effort of moving Brimmer from place to place strains Florencia's dignity, as well as her body.

At such moments, *Gaby Brimmer* offers a perceptive account of the affective as well as the physical dimensions of giving and receiving care. As Brimmer's intermediary, Florencia shares the stigma of her disability. Often Brimmer survives by displacing her own shame onto Florencia. As Brimmer describes it,

They'd ask Nana if I could hear, if I could see okay, if I could understand, and I'd listen to her curt, irritated answers, about how did I write, what did I write with, what did I have, what, what, what, and I'd sense Nana was humiliated at being exposed to everybody's curiosity. But we didn't let them get to us. She went up and down stairs, carrying me from here to there. (63)

Here Brimmer exhibits the coping mechanisms she has developed to manage the strain of being positioned as a physical and emotional burden. Her insistence that "we didn't let them get to us" is far too easy. Instead of taking such statements at face value, we must see them as evidence of a strategic self-fashioning that belies a far more complex and ambivalent set of responses. While Florencia responds to rudeness and insensitivity by shutting down, Brimmer projects her own humiliation onto her caregiver. Drawing from queer theory, Robert McRuer has suggested that it is important for people with disabilities to acknowledge feelings of shame (2009). Because shame has to do with awareness that one has violated cultural or social (as opposed to internal) values, it may be key to recognizing those aspects of disability that are produced by environmental factors rather than deficits of the body. In other words, the shame Brimmer experiences has less to do with her body than with the responses it elicits in others and the difficulty of navigating an inaccessible environment. Whereas elsewhere in her narrative Brimmer is able to turn humiliating experiences into calls for social justice, here she engages in a mutually detrimental transfer of her own shame onto her caregiver.

The speakers in *Gaby Brimmer* demystify the naturalization of caregiving as "women's work" by talking frankly about the emotional tolls of dependency and dependency work. Brimmer is all too aware that Florencia is sometimes overwhelmed. "It wasn't just that she was physically exhausted from carrying me around," Brimmer says. "She'd get depressed, and on top of that she had to deal with my mother's depressions and, of course, mine" (63). Sometimes the relationship became pathological. "She didn't do anything to help me out of my loneliness," Brimmer recalls. "I even got to the point of hating her because of this. I felt like I was too tied to her, and the more I clung, the happier she looked. In me she found a

substitute for her life without friends, where her only interest was devoting herself to me and making herself indispensable in my life" (65). There is a doubleness to Brimmer's position, since she is both the source of, and witness to, Florencia's suffering. Here her cruel observations offer insight about the full affective range of caregiving, which may encompass pathological interdependence as well as willing generosity and self-sacrifice.

Rather than portraying the negative affect surrounding caregiving as a symptom of individual weakness, *Gaby Brimmer* acknowledges that it is caused by structural inequalities. In a society that devalues dependency work, it is no wonder that the recipients of care feel shame at their dependency or project their humiliation onto their caregivers. Nor is it any wonder that caregivers compensate by imagining themselves as irreplaceable or feeling gratified by their dependents' neediness. Kittay describes the state of "secondary dependency" entered by the caregiver when "her energies are channeled into the preservation and fruition of another" (1999, 46). Like her charge, the caregiver departs from the model of autonomous, self-interested individuality idealized by liberal society. In doing so, she acquires the stigma of dependency. *Gaby Brimmer* shows that even Florencia, the most capable and selfless of caregivers, is affected by the burden of dependency work. Rather than attempting to conceal these more negative feelings, *Gaby Brimmer* gives voice to the often grueling physical and psychological work of giving and receiving care.

*Gaby Brimmer* also attests to the reverberating effects of the unequal distribution of dependency work. Florencia is available to care for Brimmer because she is not caring for her biological family or developing a network of friends to nurture and sustain her. Such disparities become all the more glaring when Brimmer adopts a child, also to be cared for by Florencia. On the one hand, it is a courageous and radical act for a woman with Brimmer's disabilities to insist on her right to be a mother. On the other, Brimmer's ability to be a mother is contingent on having Florencia do the physical work of raising her child. I do not mean to suggest that having a biological child is the only means to Florencia's fulfillment. Indeed, we have already seen how *Gaby Brimmer* refuses such essentialisms with visual images that position Florencia as surrogate mother. Rather, I want to draw attention to the inequalities whereby one woman's experience of motherhood is subsidized by the curtailed opportunities of another.

The relationship between Brimmer and her two primary caregivers in *Gaby Brimmer* thus offers a considerably more complicated version of dependence than that expressed by disability rights slogans at the time. The book portrays Brimmer as well-educated, decisive, and filled with political and intellectual conviction. But Florencia's voice reminds us that the independence of Brimmer and other middle-class people with disabilities relies on the work of less privileged others whose own kin may acutely feel their absence. *Gaby Brimmer* anticipates the growing migration of workers like Florencia across Mexico's northern border where many would find jobs as caregivers in the United States in the later twentieth and twenty-first centuries. It attests to the fact that, in a society that undervalues the work of caregiving, Florencia becomes as vulnerable and dependent as her charge, sacrificing her own autonomy and well-being to ensure that Brimmer will thrive. At the same time that it celebrates Brimmer's optimism and energy, *Gaby Brimmer* thus does not shy away from the pathological side of dependency relations, giving voice to the shame, resentment, and animosity that arise when the labor of caregiving is unrecognized and undercompensated.

The relationship between Brimmer and her collaborator, Elena Poniatowska, took a pathological turn of its own in the years following the publication of *Gaby Brimmer*. As the guiding presence who elicits and organizes her informants' stories, Poniatowska manages an

artful negotiation between their independence and her own authority. The introduction lays out her personal and professional stakes in the project as she describes being captivated by the parallels between Brimmer and her nephew, Alejandro, who faced similar prejudice after being permanently disabled in a car accident. She also recounts her determination to continue the project in the face of her friends' criticism that the work had no literary merit. Having established her investment in Brimmer's story, Poniatowska vanishes from the narrative proper. Her disappearance might seem disingenuous, since she is so clearly the book's architect. Yet we can also see it as a form of narrative modesty that allows her informants' voices to take center stage.

In life, Poniatowska was less successful at managing this balance between controlling her subject and granting her autonomy. After the success of *Gaby Brimmer*, Brimmer would publish two books of her own—a chapbook, *Gaby, un año después* (1981) and a collection of letters, *Cartas de Gaby* (1982)—and become a vocal leader in the movement for disability rights in Mexico and abroad. Poniatowska gave her blessing to her collaborator's newfound independence. But disputes arose when the director Luis Mandoki decided to make a film about Brimmer's life (Epple 1990; Vega 1996). Initially, Poniatowska declined offers to participate, stating that Brimmer should have opportunities to speak for herself. Once production began, however, Poniatowska complained of not being invited to the set and demanded that her work be mentioned in the credits. Through a lawyer, she argued that no film would have been possible without *Gaby Brimmer*. She asserted that Brimmer was merely the book's coauthor and thus had only partial authority over the use of her story, half of which rightly belonged to Poniatowska. This conflict revealed the limits of Poniatowska's willingness to grant Brimmer's autonomy or to relinquish ownership of her story. For their part, Mandoki and Brimmer asserted the independence of *Gaby, A True Story* (1987) from Poniatowska's authorial hand. They claimed that the film—which tells a more conventional story of love, loss, and personal growth—is based on Brimmer's own account of her life. These differences of opinion are understandable, given the extent to which *Gaby Brimmer* deliberately complicates the model of authorial autonomy and ownership established by traditional autobiography. They lead to conflict in the context of culture that values individual accomplishment over collaboration.

Since the publication of *Gaby Brimmer*, the problems of dependency it exposes have been unevenly addressed. A year after Brimmer's death in 2000, the Mexican constitution was amended to include protection of persons with "different abilities," and Mexico later submitted the proposal for the UNCRPD, which was adopted in 2008. Nonetheless, Mexico still has no national law specifically guaranteeing the rights of people with disabilities. Despite the emphasis on independence within the UNCRPD and the international movement for disability rights, Mexico still tends to distribute assistance for people with disabilities as a form of charity, and unemployment is pervasive (Courtis 2003; Brogna 2009). There is no requirement that schools be physically accessible, and accommodations for students with learning disabilities are often inadequate. In 2010, news stories documented the abysmal treatment of people with mental illness and intellectual disabilities in Mexican institutions (Archibald 2010). The predicament of dependency work so vividly illustrated by *Gaby Brimmer* has only increased in the decades since the book appeared, as the demand for paid caregivers increases among more affluent consumers, while their labor continues to be devalued and undercompensated. Despite this mounting crisis, *Gaby Brimmer* is still virtually unique in giving equal voice to the caregiver who made Brimmer's work as an author, parent, and activist possible. While advances in adaptive technology have improved communication and mobility for people in

Brimmer's condition, many still rely on family members or paid dependency workers whose needs and concerns go largely unheard.

This inequity is a literary, as well as a social, problem. The past two decades have seen an explosion in the quantity and variety of disability life writing. People with disabilities are now telling their stories in many different media, including film, video, dance, blogs, and performance art, which make narrative accessible to a wider range of authors and audiences. Nonetheless, the popularity of the literary memoir persists, and written narratives continue to be a powerful source for giving voice to disabled lives. It is thus significant that the genre so stubbornly upholds the primacy of a single author, banishing the traces of dependency to the margins. Our continued political and aesthetic antipathy to dependency and dependency work ensures that *Gaby Brimmer* continues to stand out nearly forty years after its publication.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> See Charlton 2000 (3-4) on international origins of this slogan.

<sup>2</sup> In this respect, *testimonio* escapes the problem Davis identifies in which the narrative structure of autobiography can link disability to "the bourgeois sensibility of individualism," thus diffusing its political potential (1997, 4).

<sup>3</sup> Gardner claims Gaby Brimmer is the first *testimonio* to feature a disabled protagonist (2009, 102).

<sup>4</sup> On the primacy of the face in portraiture, see Brilliant (2004) and Garland-Thomson (2009, 97-118).

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