In 1954, a 17-year-old Canadian teenager defied convention, history (or historical precedent) and the Canadian National Exhibition organizers by being the first Canadian (in fact, the first individual) to swim across Lake Ontario. Marilyn Bell, "Canada's sweetheart" as a popular song of that momentous year proclaims, swam her way not only into Canadian history, but also into the representational and psychological terrains explored by Brenda Longfellow in her film Our Marilyn (1987); terrains which are, in part, articulated through the observations and autobiographical ruminations provided by the film's narrator. That the narrator's name is also Marilyn and that she is both visually and aurally counterpointed to and aligned with their Marilyn (Monroe), suggests that this is a film at once concerned with documenting an event in English Canadian history and with negotiating that event through non-traditional means. Longfellow's film is thus more than a documentary, it is an exploration of the interplay between the Marilyns, the overlap between national (in this instance Canadian and American) boundaries, international stars (both in film and sports), women's bodies and women's histories.

That this film is greatly informed by a feminist consciousness is suggested not only by its attention to images of women, but also by its elaboration of the relationship between those women and their representation in the media. Through the juxtaposition of media documentation of Bell and Monroe with either deconstructed versions of that documentation or alternative sounds and images, Longfellow dangles the spectacle of female bodies before the audience, while simultaneously
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denying or dissolving the traditional forms of that spectacle, its status as a familiar patriarchal lure. The women who populate this text are not merely there to be seen (in fact at moments optical printing serves to render them unseen, to remove the discernible contours of their bodies from the viewer's field of vision). They do not function solely as objects of historical discourse, but enter into that discourse as active participants.

Longfellow's women, marked by the similarities in their names, traverse Our Marilyn as bodies, voices and memories which also insist on the profound differences between them. In Alice Doesn't Teresa de Lauretis argues that "the" feminist project entails the interrogation of the contradiction between woman and women. Woman refers to "the configuration of patriarchal ideology" and women to the "historical subjects who live in a tangential relation to that configuration."1 This woman/women distinction, based as it is on the interplay between difference and similarity (that woman and women are at once alike and distinct), suggests that differences between or within women cannot be theorized as absolute. It is this relationship between difference and similarity which serves as de Lauretis' point of entry into Lizzie Borden's Born in Flames (1983), not only in terms of her description of that film's construction, but also as an attribute of the text's positioning of her as a spectator.3 It is this same refusal to posit difference and similarity as an oppositional pair and a similar attention to subjectivity and spectatorship which structures Longfellow's film.

In analyzing the relationship between Our Marilyn and contemporary Canadian feminist filmmaking, Kay Armatage's Speak Body (1979) can be compared to Longfellow's text from a number of perspectives. Although ten years old, Armatage's film, which is centrally concerned with the (impossibility of the) representation of abortion, explores, as does Longfellow's, the interplay between the presence and absence of the female body, the representation (or lack thereof) of an experience which is grounded in that body, and the combination of documentary with experimental film forms. Even at the level of its title Armatage's film begs comparison with Longfellow's since it suggests, as does the title of this article,5 that the female body may not only be spoken (represented), but may also speak for or of itself.

Our Marilyn articulates this tension between the spoken and speaking body most explicitly through its alternations between documentary and experimental film elements. Longfellow confronts the viewer with original newsreel footage of the beginning of Marilyn Bell's swim across Lake Ontario: black and white images of Bell diving into the water amidst a cheering crowd and a flotilla of accompanying vessels. And she reinserts those same images, with variations, throughout the film. The effect therefore of her literal reversal of this inaugural sequence (through the use of a negative image), its repetition within a matter of a few seconds, its passage through the optical printer and processes of step-printing, is
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not only to draw attention to its status as a document of this swim, but also to draw attention to it as a constructed image of the female body and furthermore, a kind of visual pattern.

The alternation of documentary images with experimental reconstructions of those images suggests that this film mediates the historical real according to three main trajectories: (1) a traditional compilation and reproduction of (primarily Canadian) historical events; (2) the exploration of history conceived as public memory; and (3) the re-presentation of history not merely through personal memory, but moreover through women's memories. Our Marilyn arguably suggests an alternative register for negotiating the past and the present, one which addresses the patriarchy's official history while simultaneously transforming it into a single interpretation among the many which circulate through the film. By attending to women's memories, their reconstructions of the past, Longfellow explores a number of issues which are critical to feminist historiographic inquiries. In her discussion of women's history Linda Gordon addresses the two main trends which have developed in that field:

Women's historians have sought to proclaim a truth heretofore denied, disguised, distorted, defamed, and thereby to expose the meretricious lies of earlier mandarins. This goal, of course, presupposed the possibility of truth, achieved through historical objectivity . . . . Another pole, rejecting the possibility of objectivity and accepting the humanistic and story-telling function of history, stimulated us to create new myths to serve our aspirations. I would like to find a method in between.7

While Gordon is referring primarily to written history, I think that the "in between" method which she mentions finds expression in Our Marilyn. One of the primary ways in which the objective and mythological coalesce in the film is in the figure (an auditory spectre never visually represented) of the narrator. In a sense, the relatively constant narrator recalls one of the main conventions of the traditional documentary film. Bill Nichols has noted that the "narrator in direct address often serves to bridge sequences; to make manifest the logical principle that orders the sequence into larger units, segments, and a textual whole."8 While the third Marilyn (the narrator) does serve a minimal bridging function in that the repeated interjection of her voice on the soundtrack introduces it as a continuous element, she by no means serves the kind of logic-rendering role that Nichols describes. On the contrary, her voice oftentimes serves as a marked counterpoint to the "facts" being presented via imagery. For example as the rolling titles note that Bell has "one mile & a half to go," the narrator a split second later reports that she has "only three and a half miles to go."

The narrator's tellings and re-tellings of her relationship to Bell and Monroe can be said to function as a form of oral history in this film; she
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weaves personal and public memories into a complex tapestry of fragments, of partial truths. Marilyn, the narrator, is however more than the storyteller of oral history since she is also a fictional character (played by Linda Griffiths). That she is fictionally informed, that her memories of her own naming are in this sense manufactured and that Bell and Monroe are both oftentimes addressed through her, underscores this film's exploration of the blurring of boundaries among the real, fiction, history and memory (as both reconstruction and imagination).

In its de- and re-constructions of historical events, Our Marilyn can be most readily described according to Deborah Knight's concept of "exquisite nostalgia." In applying this notion to the corpus of Canadian film, Knight notes:

What the films present to the spectator is the image of a lost or almost lost object of desire. Exquisite nostalgia is an aesthetic response to the present image of the endangered object of desire. And if it has been argued that Hollywood cinema's inevitable object of desire is the fetishized, objectified female protagonist, the object of desire in Canadian or Quebecois cinema is more often something conceptual and abstract, something of aesthetic, historical, or humanist significance.

While Knight's comments are noteworthy, they are insufficient to account for the lost objects in Our Marilyn. In Longfellow's film, exquisite nostalgia must refer both to Hollywood's object of desire (i.e., woman) and Canadian film's. Thus, it is Bell, Monroe, the narrator, Longfellow, etc. who are rendered aesthetically, historically or "humanistically" significant. Knight goes on to assert that the Canadian cinemas are "marked by the recognition of incompleteness . . . So not only are [they] . . . marked by their inscription of difference—by the failure or refusal to produce the sense of an 'imaginary unity'—but also profoundly by their inscription of deferral, by delay of pleasure, a pleasure which can only be experienced as it is drawn out in time." Longfellow's painstaking attention to the middle of Bell's swim, its temporal, spatial and auditory exploration, reinforces Knight's assertion, for it is precisely a sense of deferral and (ultimately) incompleteness which characterizes that middle, the portion of the swim which was not documented by the media in 1954.

That the Canadian cinemas refuse to provide a sense of imaginary unity in their spectators is a point well taken by Knight, since it at one and the same time refers to textual practices, as well as to the wider socio-historical and political context of viewership and more generally identity, in the Canadian milieu. A number of years ago MacLean's magazine ran a fill-in-the-blank contest that read, "As Canadian as (blank)," and it came as no surprise that the winning entry, both witty and telling, was "As Canadian as Possible." This phrase brilliantly encapsulates the popular (as in popularized) problematic of Canadian identity. This identity and thus perhaps Canadian spectatorship, fluctuating between
positions of presence and absence (the presence of some sort of “Canadia
dianness” in the recognition that it is possible and the absence of that
which is deemed possible) is precisely what, according to Knight,
characterizes Canadian films.

Longfellow is aware that her film allows a certain degree of spectatorial
fluctuation when she notes the tension between “the Canadian public
who clasp the swimmer’s victory to [its] psyche as the narcissistic mirror
image of national accomplishment . . . [and] the carnivorous universal
spectator who crosses borders and nations, trailing his proprietorship of
a piece of the blonde bombshell—Monroe.” In its simultaneous embrace
of Bell and Monroe, Canadian spectatorship is at once national and
international, in the sense that being Canadian is already to be both. In
its simplest form, this concept finds expression in Canada’s and by
extension Canadian citizens’ cultural and economic dependence upon
and identification with the United States and to a lesser degree Britain.

The investigation of the fluid passage between national identities and
national boundaries is explored by Longfellow in her representation of
fluid itself, as in a large body of water: Lake Ontario. The lake’s mediation
and dissolution of the Canadian-U.S. border finds expression in the
swimming bodies which traverse it. As the story goes, Marilyn Bell swam
across Lake Ontario in 1954. As the film goes, Longfellow’s body shot in
super 8 and then transferred onto 16mm film, swims the middle part of
that journey, the part situated so and so many miles off-shore from
Youngstown, New York and so and so many other miles away from
Toronto; the part that swims across a border not delineated by a line on
a map or a fence between properties. Instead the water, characterized by
a constant exchange of fluids (both Canadian and American) and the
bodies which travel through it, resist the awareness that a border has
been crossed.

The pivotal role assumed by the lake and its flowing waters in Longfel-
low’s film is reminiscent of Luce Irigaray’s discussion of fluids in This Sex
Which Is Not One. As Carolyn Burke notes of Irigaray’s theory, “‘fluids’
is partly an analogy with female expression, and ‘solids’ with the dry self-
consistency of male logic . . . . Because ‘woman’ speaks ‘fluid,’ her
meanings can not be frozen into static images or metaphors.” While this
description risks falling into an essentialized notion of “feminine fluid-
ity,” it does serve as a potent analogy to the function of water in Our
Marilyn—the means with which to deny fixity and a unified vision of the
women in the film. When Irigaray notes that fluids are characterized by
instability and that “fluid is always in a relation of excess or lack vis-a-vis
unity,” she seems to speak directly to Longfellow’s text and to the
filmmaker’s manipulations of the bodies, voices and images of women as
they travel through the waters of Lake Ontario.

It is precisely in the swimming bodies, the bodies that struggle against
the waves which are at one moment American and at another Canadian,
that this blurring of borders is experienced. While it is Bell’s and
Longfellow's bodies which literally swim through the film, Monroe's is similarly linked to a sense of fluidity (both metonymically and through the narrator's association of her with water), and it is certainly telling that two of the Marilyns who appear in Longfellow's film are explored primarily because it is their status as bodies which brought them fame (Monroe as an abstracted body, an image to be consumed, and Bell as a physically determined body, the athlete who "swam her way into Canadian history"). It is just as significant that the third Marilyn, the narrator, traverses the film as an implied though never visually represented body, one connected to the others by name, by her repeated claim to having grown up between their bodies and by the almost fluid sense of identification fostered by her voice-over which ripples through the text and which repeatedly aligns the Marilyns, folds them into each other.

As visually and aurally represented figures, the Marilyns suggest a sort of multiplication or folding over of proper names, bodies and pronouns. Susan Suleiman in her article "(Re)Writing the Body: The Politics and Poetics of Female Eroticism," notes:

What seemed, at first, an unproblematic desideratum—let woman speak her own body, assume her own subjecthood—has become problematized, complicated by the increasingly difficult questions: what exactly do we mean when we speak of woman as subject, whether of speech or writing or of her own body? ... Is there such a thing as woman's body, woman's sexuality? Is there such a thing as woman ...?17

For the purposes of this discussion, instead of asking "can woman write her own body?", I prefer Longfellow's suggestion that "a form of representation could be imagined as a writing with, and not against, the body"18—a writing which situates itself somewhere between representation and materiality, between the body and the discourses which circumscribe it.

To return to the concept of "folding over" is thus to return both to female corporeality and its representation. Irigaray in her description of female sexuality asserts:

A woman 'touches herself' constantly without anyone being able to forbid her to do so, for her sex is composed of two lips which embrace her continually. Thus, within herself she is already two—but not divisible into one—who stimulate each other.19

Instead of being characterized as singular and unified, female sexuality is doubled or as Irigaray notes later in the same article, plural. While our two lips may indeed fold over to embrace each other, they are not identical, and it is here that I find a useful comparison with Longfellow's film. For just as the Marilyns are constantly engaged in a process of doubling and tripling, that process is characterized by the interplay between
difference and similarity. In applying Irigaray’s notion of autoeroticism to *Our Marilyn*, I do not mean to imply that a unisexual or a distinctively lesbian aesthetic is at work, but rather to suggest that in the folding of names, bodies and pronouns, the Marilyns (and Longfellow) engage in a kind of circulation of identities which coalesce and cross throughout the text. For example, when the narrator notes that she was named after Marilyn Bell, her voice forms a counterpoint to and extension of the images of Bell and then Monroe which appear on the screen. A few moments later, a sense of difference is interjected when the narrator states: “Your body against the flag. . . . hers against the red satin sheet of a playboy centerfold”—pronouns seem to serve as distancing devices not only between the narrator and Bell, but also between Monroe and the other Marilyns. However, later the narrator again interjects: “Growing up between your bodies, I could never decide what was the difference, I’m trying to remember.” The three Marilyns are thus aligned, the second person pronoun collapses Monroe and Bell and situates the narrator between them.

Irigaray in attempting to describe the characteristics of a feminine syntax states that “there would no longer be either subject or object, ‘oneness’ would no longer be privileged, there would no longer be proper meanings, proper names . . . . Instead, that ‘syntax’ would involve nearness, proximity, but in such an extreme form that it would preclude . . . any establishment of ownership, thus any form of appropriation.” It is precisely this kind of syntax which orders (or refuses to order) the women in *Our Marilyn*, refusing a singular identity, multiplying the proper name in an almost dizzying fashion, circulating bodies and national boundaries in a text that defies naming as a form of ownership. Thus, as the filmmaker notes of the images of herself, “this figure subjected to the relentless weathering of the optical printer, tends increasingly toward an abstraction of form, of colour, of movement, toward the final dissolution of a figural identity and the boundaries between body and water.” The body as image is dissolved, it is indiscernible.

The breathing, singing and whispering which often accompany the abstract (optically printed) images of a woman’s swimming body in *Our Marilyn*, suggest that the audio level is at once disembodied (in the sense that it is never tied to a single body and that the body which visually accompanies it cannot be discerned as such), while it is also a sort of embodiment. Stephen Heath has noted that the “voice is a moment of the body in its sense and history, a grain, a weight, an existence of the body and of me across the body . . . .” and thus although it may be unrepresented, a body is implied by a voice. In her article “The Voice in the Cinema: The Articulation of Body and Space,” Mary Ann Doane distinguishes between voice-off and voice-over. For her, voice-off is inevitably anchored in a body, it is ideologically embodied in that it functions to render the illusion that off-screen space is an extension of on-
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denies the extension of screen space, it is a "disembodied voice . . . [it] is necessarily presented as outside of that space. It is its radical otherness with respect to the diegesis which endows this voice with a certain authenticity." In Longfellow's film, this distinction disappears—the narrator's (absent) body is not only referred to extensively in the film, but those bodies which do appear are often situated in a space which is never fully established.

In much the same way that a voice speaks of or from a body, so too is a represented body always "spoken" in being represented. The image of Monroe is perhaps the most extreme example of a spoken-body, a body whose mythical weight extends far beyond the level of once living flesh and blood. For Longfellow, Monroe, like the ornamental swimmers who appear in the film, most often must "assume a pre-determined position within a symbolic order whose specific routine antedates and anticipates the participation of any (always substitutable and reproducible) individual." Monroe's fate, her story that is "all too well known" in the narrator's words, is that of a body who is most frequently spoken for and spoken of.

Gloria Steinem has recently asked, "Could we have helped Marilyn survive?" and others have asked, "Can Marilyn Monroe be saved for feminism?" I'd like to add the question asked by the narrator of Our Marilyn: namely "if you had lived, grown old, swum the distance, would we have loved you still?" While the narrator does not explicitly state it, one interpretation of her query is that in imagining Monroe growing old, in imagining her physical longevity, one also imagines a space from which she could speak—an impossible future space in which Monroe, the static and yet malleable locus of phantasy, speaks herself, speaks her own aging body. And yet this is of course a phantasy of another kind, a feminist hallucination of Monroe deconstructing or destroying herself. But if that moment will never come, when Norma Jean refuses her other proper name, refuses to be "always already spoken," can we not locate a space in which she challenges representation?

There is a sequence in Longfellow's film in which Monroe in Korea, draped in army fatigues, saunters slowly (since the images are step-printed) past the camera, almost swaggering as she makes her way and turns to smile fatuously, it seems, at us. While it may be difficult to imagine this as a distinct moment of Monroe's rebellion, the step-printed exploration of this sequence suggests Longfellow's subversion—an attempt to provide Monroe with a space in which to retroactively defy her absolute commodification.

That Bell's body in this film (and in Canadian history) is similarly beyond absolute appropriation is suggested both by Longfellow's representation of it (through original footage and her own body's re-enactment of the swim) and by its "Canadianness." Whereas Monroe's potential for subversion seems to most readily reside in Longfellow's manipu-
lation of her image, Bell's body itself as Longfellow notes, marks a "space of resistance." It is perhaps easier to find in Bell's swimming body the seeds of subversion since the task she is engaged in implicitly signifies resistance—of the waves, the fatigue, the cold, the odds, the cultural baggage which incited this teenager to defy the Canadian National Exhibition organizers who asked an American to perform the swim.

But how can this resistance, this act of physical endurance, this woman's swimming body be recuperated in relation to "Canadianness," in relation to the English Canadian spectator? It is precisely the problematic of this recuperation that Longfellow's film compellingly addresses. For in tracing Bell's swimming body alongside Monroe's parading body, the Canadian spectator or perhaps this Canadian feminist spectator is confronted with a familiar dilemma; i.e., which woman most speaks to me, which national icon is to be embraced, is there a difference between them? That the options are limited to women is of course no less telling, since the inability to assume a unified spectatorial position and the impossibility of a coherent and singular national identity both suggest an alignment with femininity in Irigaray's and patriarchy's senses; an alignment with a perspective that cannot access a logic of sameness, with a framework which cannot accommodate a rationale for absolute difference and, in its most stereotypical sense, with a psyche that just can't make up its mind. That this notion is strikingly Canadian can be argued from an explicitly political perspective as well, especially in the Canadian government's penchant for middle-of-the-road politics in national and international affairs (e.g., a fondness for abstentions from United Nations' votes). When a lack of fixity is articulated as indecisiveness, it often manifests itself in a politically regressive or stagnant manner. However, in the context of the film, it is a radical technique which refuses closure and the lures of historical objectivity.

*Our Marilyn* is a film in which a Canadian historical event and figure resist absolute appropriation (both as images and as national myths) not only in their retention of a degree of corporeal "power," but also in Marilyn Bell's repeated association with an American actress who not only shares her name, but also shares some of the dangers associated with national and international fame. In doubling Bell and Monroe (and in tripling them with the narrator and her explanatory and personalizing voice) the film flows between individuality and collectivity, between discrete nationalities and cross- or inter-nationalities, and between the past and present. If this film can be said to address history, it is precisely in the sense in which it denies the historical real at the moment it articulates it, though it might be more accurate to suggest that it denies notions of patriarchal history which rely upon linearity and objectivity. Instead it is in the cross-national circulation of female names, identities, voices, bodies and images that history articulates itself as an imaginary construct, as a concept engendered in and by the conflation of documentary discourses with public and personal memories.
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Longfellow’s Marilyns swim through this text as figures which are at once alike and unlike, mirror images and discrete personalities. As Marilyn the narrator notes:

I’m still trying to remember the difference, to decipher the loss between the body in perpetual motion and the mortuary stillness of a photograph, these images tracing a memory through my own history, your bodies always moving before me, growing up between your bodies, never one without the other, I kept moving and dreamed of another story.

In attempting to re-present Our Marilyn, I have tried to “speak it” in its complexity and thus to respect that the film itself, flowing as it does through the interstices of discourse and through the waters of Lake Ontario (the lake at whose shores I grew up and against whose waves my story began), must necessarily exceed my representation of it. I have attempted to trace its movements between an image in focus and one which is not, between Canadian identity and its impossibility, between the female body which moves and its frozen counterpart, and finally between my body which moves as I sit im/mobile in front of the screen and these images which have moved me.

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Notes


2. De Lauretis makes what I think is a crucial point when she notes that feminist film theory does not go far enough in a recognition of differences between women (e.g., race, class, sexual orientation, nationality), nor of differences within women; i.e., “a heterogeneity of, as in, the individual spectator.” Teresa de Lauretis, “Aesthetic and Feminist Theory: Re-Thinking Women’s Cinema,” New German Critique 34 (1985) : 17.

3. I have chosen to highlight spectatorship in this discussion since my passion for this film emerges both from how it positions me, as well as from my ability and willingness to position myself in relation to it on the basis of, for example, my gender, politics, theoretical interests, and nationality.

4. I should note that this film can be discussed much more extensively in relation to the Canadian documentary and experimental film traditions. For the purposes of this paper, however, I will limit my discussion to a comparison with Armatage’s film.

5. I would like to briefly mention this paper’s title here. Its source is a variation on a quotation by Mary Ann Doane who notes that “the female body . . . must always be placed within quotation marks.” Mary Ann Doane, “Woman’s Stake: Filming the Female Body,” October 17 (1981) : 24. In “Quoting Women’s Bodies,” I hope to suggest a dual interpretation: i.e. quoting first in Doane’s sense that all women’s bodies which exist in the realm of representation necessarily represent something besides bodies and second, in Brenda Longfellow’s terms, that the body itself can serve as a site of resistance and can thus, to a certain degree, speak of itself and not merely be spoken of.
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9. That this concept may be somewhat reductionistic is true, however, I find Knight’s point to be both suggestive and well-taken and thus choose to include it here with a view to enhancing my analysis of *Our Marilyn* and not limiting it to a transnational or transhistorical reading.


11. Knight 32.

12. For the sake of simplicity, I will use the terms “milieu” and “identity” in their singular forms, although it should come as no surprise that there exists no unified Canadian consensus on national identity and moreover, that wherever discrete identities do exist they are regionally, sub-culturally and linguistically differentiated (that this film centers upon white middle class North American women further reflects the limitations of the notion of Canadian identity). This is especially significant in relation to French Canadian identities and in the context of this film, spectatorship. Since Bell’s swim took place in the heart of Upper Canada, its relationship to French Canadian history is that much more complex and may serve more to reflect national differences than allegiances.


14. Being a woman connotes the same sort of dual identity; i.e. being woman and being not-woman, since woman may be considered the patriarchy’s Other or as explored by a number of French feminists, its negative, its underside, and that which defies representation.


18. Longfellow 17.


20. Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One* 134.


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