Establishing an Elsewhere in Contemporary American Women's Autobiography

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ESTABLISHING AN ELSEWHERE IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN WOMEN’S AUTOBIOGRAPHY

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In
English

by

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Department of______________________________________

______________________________________________
Dean of the Graduate College
ABSTRACT

"ESTABLISHING AN ELSEWHERE IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN WOMEN’S AUTOBIOGRAPHY"

By Jennifer Alena Gingerich

“Establishing an Elsewhere in Contemporary American Women’s Autobiography” explores women’s self-writing and the ways in which it offers another story or an elsewhere in the genre of autobiography. This elsewhere is distinct from traditional or conventional autobiography or, more specifically, how traditional autobiography has come to be understood. The project outlines various ways contemporary American women autobiographers deal with the issues of fragmentation (the lack of a coherent self), truth and lying (the self as a construction), and interconnectedness with others (the self as communal) when they write about themselves. It is both an analytical and creative thesis in which the author weaves her own creative memoirs into her discussion of other women’s memoirs, positioning them so that the two parts dialogue with one another over some of the major topics in contemporary women’s autobiography.
DEDICATION

I wish to dedicate this project to

my mother, Joanie Walker,
for her perseverance during the “Locust Years,”
her encouragement,
and her friendship,

my father, John Maynard,
for the richness and wonder of dysfunction
and for stories worth writing about,

my Great-Uncle Steve
for his passion for knowledge,
his wit,
his abundance of stories and memories,
and his willingness to share them,

and my husband, Matt Gingerich,
for his support, patience,
kindness, love, and
most of all companionship.
You inspire and amaze me.
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My thesis director, Dr. Janet Badia,
for investing her knowledge and time into this project
and for her guidance over the past two years.

My committee members,
Dr. Katharine Rodier and Dr. John Young
for their willingness to read and respond to drafts.
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INTRODUCTION

All the ways of differently thinking the history of power, property, masculine domination, the formation of the State, and the ideological equipment have some effect. But the change that is in process concerns more than just the question of “origin.” There is phallocentrism. History has never produced or recorded anything else—which does not mean that this form is destinal or natural. Phallocentrism is the enemy. Of everyone. Men’s loss in phallocentrism is different from but as serious as women’s. And it is time to change. To invent the other history. There is “destiny” no more than there is “nature” or “essence” as such. Rather, there are living structures that are caught and sometimes rigidly set within historiocultural limits so mixed up with the scene of History that for a long time it has been impossible (and it is still very difficult) to think or even imagine an “elsewhere.” We are presently living in a transitional period—one in which it seems possible that the classic structure might be split.1

This “elsewhere” that French feminist Helene Cixóus discusses is what women writers and critics of autobiography have struggled to find and record. Cixóus suggests that there is hope for an “elsewhere,” but at every turn it collapses because the current history or structure of phallocentrism is too powerful. What I would suggest is that the transitional period that Cixóus speaks of is here. This “elsewhere” exists already. The problem is that it is almost always overlooked and can usually be found in the “ordinary.” This “elsewhere” includes women in history. In fact, it is where women rewrite “history” and tell “her-story” or the “other” side of the story. Traditionally, language and history have excluded women because women’s stories were thought too trivial and personal to be important. Here, men defined what was extraordinary, and, according to conventional autobiographical standards, Augustine and Benjamin Franklin were worthy to write autobiographies. Women, especially those unsuccessful, were not.

Women’s autobiography, from its earliest beginnings, has revised the definitions and standards of the genre. Long before American autobiography’s existence, women autobiographers were writing themselves differently than the white bourgeois man. Furthermore, once American autobiography was born, women and minorities continued writing non-conventionally. What their writing exposed was that

the traditional form of autobiography assumed an essentially white male subject. The fixed or stable identity that most white male autobiographers constructed did not fit for anyone else. The autobiographies of women and minorities deconstruct this inherently white male subject and offer an “elsewhere” that is more culturally constructed than essential. These texts expose how constructed identities, because of their ‘constructedness,’ are illusions. (Although both women and minorities deconstruct the conventional form of autobiography, in this project I will concentrate specifically on women’s autobiography, and more specifically, contemporary American women’s autobiography.) In order to find the elsewhere that Cixóus perhaps doesn’t acknowledge or believe is in existence, we must learn where to look for it. Once we locate and study the elsewhere, our concepts of history will quickly change.

First, though, it may be helpful to discuss where this elsewhere is not in American women’s autobiography. In the introduction to his 1771 autobiography, Benjamin Franklin writes to his son:

> Now imagining it may be equally agreeable to you to know the Circumstances of my Life, many of which you are yet unacquainted with; and expecting a Week’s uninterrupted Leisure in my present Country Retirement, I sit down to write them for you . . . Having emerg’d from the Poverty and Obscurity in which I was born and bred, to a State of Affluence and some Degree of Reputation in the World, and having gone so far thro’ Life with a considerable Share of Felicity, the conducting Means I made use of, which, with the Blessing of God, so well succeeded, my Posterity may like to know, as they may find some of them suitable to their own Situations, and therefore fit to be imitated.²

Franklin’s autobiography is a fitting example of the conventional form. But his was not the first. Traditional male autobiography, as it has been understood, has told a man’s story since as far back as

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Augustine. It often tells the whole story of a man’s life beginning with his birth, taking the reader through the most “significant” stories of that life, and ending with how he came to be so successful or esteemed. In a sense, it is a lesson in achievement. How does one (more specifically, a man) acquire success? The traditional male autobiographer retells his journey, typically a difficult one ending with his birth into the public realm. It is apparent upon observing Franklin’s autobiography that the purpose of the telling is so that others can follow his example. At some point, it is understood that the world would be much better if this man would share his story.

Unfortunately, there was little room for women in this male tradition. Women were excluded because for so long they were rigidly placed in the domestic realm. The undoing of women’s exclusion seemed impossible. Their roles were set by patriarchy. Furthermore, if women were to succeed and emerge into the public realm, they still would have been expected to mimic a male tradition. Even then, their autobiographies in this foreign tradition would be considered only second rate to men’s. “She” remains an imposter. Therefore, in order to create a new tradition, women had to go to their own rooms and write what they knew. This is where the elsewhere is found. By hammering at phallocentrism, women were able to chip away room for themselves—space for their own histories. By demanding space, they deemed their importance despite the fact that the history of autobiography traditionally depicts the importance of successful, public men.

However, demanding space doesn’t change the way that history is defined. Women had to begin questioning the structures of that history. Contemporary American women’s autobiography does just this. Using traditional male autobiography and criticism as fodder for their own works, women question the “conditions and limits of autobiography” and expose how unfitting these restrictions are to their own lives. They question whether or not it is possible for women to escape the role of “other” and gain agency in a world to which they have never been given access. By reclaiming access to this world, they redefine

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“importance” in their own terms. In a sense, they poke fun at the conventional that insists if you are writing an autobiography, you had better be significant. Women declare that they are worth writing about, and in doing so, they demand that they should decide how and what they write. They insist that they are their own agents and that they want to write their histories.

Once attaining the opportunity, women began recording their lives. Interestingly, these histories bore little resemblance to the traditional form of autobiography. What, then, did this “new” tradition look like? How was it different from the conventional style? For starters, conventional men’s autobiography tells the reader who the subject is. It states the identity of a man, which is understood as fixed and solid. On the other hand, women’s autobiography constantly questions who the writer is. It finally comes to the conclusion that there is no such thing as a fixed or stable identity. Rather, women’s autobiography asserts that women are fluid, simultaneously employing various identities. Why is this? What is it about the “other” that either resists confinement or moves between various poles?

The first chapter of this project, “The Self as Extraordinary: ‘She goes on and on infinitely,’”5 outlines the ways in which contemporary American women’s autobiography redefines the term “extraordinary.” Whereas conventional autobiography depicts extraordinary men writing the story of their entire lives, contemporary autobiography portrays often “ordinary” women writing their lives in extraordinary ways. This chapter organizes what I consider key revisions of the genre by form and content. Revisions to the form of conventional autobiography take shape through metaphor, myth, vignettes, communal stories, poetry, photographs, and much more. Mentioning some of the earliest women autobiographers (according to Mary G. Mason these are Julian of Norwich, Margery Kempe, Margaret Cavendish, and Anne Bradstreet6), I suggest that diaries and religious journals occupied some of the first autobiographical women’s writings. Although these forms illustrate the fragmented nature of

women’s lives, the other “contemporary” forms perhaps better portray this fragmentation. Here, Mary McCarthy’s *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood* (1957) revises the conventional autobiographical form by employing both chapters and inter-chapters. Even though McCarthy’s text emerges in the late fifties, its style and self-conscious nature seem to be more consistent with other contemporary women’s autobiographies. She narrates only a short span of her life, her girlhood, distancing herself from conventional autobiography which generally recounts the span of a man’s life. From McCarthy, the chapter then proceeds to discuss Norma Elia Cantú’s *Canícula* (1995) and Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Storyteller* (1981), which both employ vignettes and photographs as autobiographical representations. Cantú’s text is perhaps most fragmented because its vignettes are quite short and mirror her photographs in that they are both mere “snapshots” of her life. Silko’s *Storyteller*, like *Canícula*, narrates her life through vignettes and photographs, but she also adds poetry and storytelling. The reader often wonders where the “I” is in the text because Silko tells the stories of her people (and often fictional ones), thus claiming them as her own story. From here, the chapter discusses the use of myth in Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior* (1975) and metaphor in Lauren Slater’s *Lying* (2000). Both forms employ fiction as its primary mode of narration: Kingston becomes Fa Mu Lan in one of her chapters and Slater’s entire text is based on a metaphor, which she claims is essentially a lie. Fragmentation plays a role in these two texts in that the “real” author can never be located or understood in a “fixed” sense. Both Kingston and Slater deliberately write using fiction as if to suggest that since the self is a fiction, then perhaps the form of writing about the self can be playfully creative. What matters to them is that they are portraying “themselves” as they wish to be understood.

The second aspect of revision that the first chapter outlines are changes to the content of conventional autobiography. Traditional autobiography claims to tackle the facts of an essentially male subject’s life, one that is generally public. Contemporary American women’s autobiography, on the other hand, tends to be more personal and self-conscious in nature. Here, I mention that the personal is often rooted in the domestic, which frequently centers around family. This is one feature of content that the
third chapter discusses in depth, but I mention it here because of the obvious connection to personal content. The remainder of this chapter deals with the self-conscious content of women’s autobiography.

From here, I focus on both the body and the mind as subjects tackled by women. The body is one aspect of self-consciousness that often emerges in texts where the author recounts her adolescence and birth into her sexuality. Constantly aware of her body, she finds it inescapably connected to her “identity.” Therefore, she must write about it. Mary McCarthy relays the misunderstanding of her first period and retells the event in great detail. Because her body (or the nun in the convent) forces her to act a certain way, she is always conscious of it. In *Lying*, Lauren Slater also discusses her body in terms of her sexuality. She narrates the story of her lost virginity to an older man. Here, similar to McCarthy, Slater suggests that her body is closely connected to her “self.” She retells her sexual experiences, implying that they directly influence her understanding of herself.

The mind constitutes the second element that I suggest pertains to the self-conscious nature of contemporary American women’s autobiography. Here, I assert that women’s autobiography is typically self-conscious in that it is often aware of the self under construction. This self-awareness is usually playful and involves the author (or the subject) constantly questioning her own claims and deliberately upholding her own fragmentation. The place where this appears to be most evident is in autobiographies of mental illness, which have become an exceedingly popular trend. Susanna Kaysen’s *Girl, Interrupted* (1993), Lauren Slater’s *Lying*, and Elizabeth Wurtzel’s *Prozac Nation* (1994) fall into this stylish tradition. Each of these women autobiographers writes from a recovered perspective, adding to the fragmentation of the text because the reader hears the narrator’s voice from a “healed” perspective recounting her life when she was “sick.” This seems quite problematic because the narrative sounds so logical, yet we are asked to believe that they were mentally ill. Throughout her memoirs, Kaysen questions her own sickness, cleverly pointing out that her diagnosis is based on her promiscuous behavior. Ironically, though, even when she tries to collapse the notion of her insanity, she reconstructs it by admitting to her own “wrist-banging,” which she argues is a sure sign of mental instability. Perhaps
Slater’s memoir portrays slipperiness more in that she claims to have epilepsy which affects both her mind and body; however, she also admits that “epilepsy” is only acts as a metaphor for her “real” disease. Oddly enough, she never reveals what this disease is, and she maintains her lie in order to keep the slipperiness in the text. Finally, I discuss Elizabeth’s Wurtzel’s *Prozac Nation*, arguing that she is, in fact, so dependent upon her disease that she does not want to give it up. For her, illness not only upholds her own fragmentation, but it gives her an excuse for acting any way she chooses. She fears taking medication because she believes it will force her into constructing a unified self. Clearly, it seems that with Wurtzel, living a life of insanity is often viewed as a privilege even by the patient because less is expected of her. This deliberate “fragmentedness” of contemporary women’s autobiography certainly revises conventional autobiography which forces unity upon men’s lives. The women mentioned in Chapter One attempt to show that this “unity” is quite untruthful and less “real” than the disjointed narratives they choose to write.

The second chapter of this project, “Truth and Lying: ‘. . . ‘truth’ was always the best place to lie,’” focuses on the untruthfulness in autobiography. Whereas the first chapter revolves around the extraordinary nature of women’s fragmented lives, the second chapter deals more specifically with how the notion of an entire self is fictional and shows how women actually employ truth and lying in their autobiographies or memoirs. I begin with Sidonie Smith’s “Construing Truth in Lying Mouths,” which asserts that women’s autobiography redefines truth as a woman’s experience. Women disrupt the conventional standards, arguing that truth in its traditional meaning is a constructed reality.

Furthermore, they argue that they cannot tell the complete ‘truth’ in autobiography because their lives are fragmented. Therefore, in their works, women render false the fact/fiction or non-fiction/fiction binary,

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9 I want to note, here, that this fictional ‘truth’ pertains to everyone and is also observed in contemporary autobiographies by men and minorities; however, my focus here is on women’s exposure of this construction.
showing that the two are not direct opposites and that truth is actually in the construction. In locating a “true” self in autobiography, James Olney claims that it is only found in the actual act of writing, when the “I” appears on the page. However, Sidonie Smith revises Olney and suggests that, for women, the self in autobiography is an “approximation.” So whereas Olney believes that the past self does not correspond to the written self, Smith leaves room for both, claiming that a woman’s past experience is, in fact, important to the self she writes.

From here, I proceed to discuss lying’s role in autobiography. Are the lies regarding facts completely insignificant? In “Conditions and Limits of Autobiography,” Georges Gusdorf suggests that these lies are unimportant and that there is a greater truth at the core of the man. I argue that the problem with Gusdorf’s claim is that he still assumes a stable identity behind the unintentional mistakes. The women autobiographers I look at in this chapter show that this fixed self is constructed and therefore fictional. In addition to this, though, they argue that the lies or mistakes are actually quite significant. For them, lying becomes the mode of telling. Contemporary women’s autobiographies deliberately use lying, arguing that is the only ‘truthful’ way that they can portray themselves. I look closely at Mary McCarthy’s Memories of a Catholic Girlhood and Lauren Slater’s Lying to explore the ways in which both women employ truth and lying.

McCarthy claims that she lies because she must try to piece together her fragmented memories. After the death of her parents, she was left without her complete story. She must create her story alone. She also confesses to lying to gain the approval of other people. Desperately desiring acceptance, she lies to please family members and friends. This eventually becomes a habit and she argues that then lying becomes expected of her. She can’t tell the truth because even when she tries to, no one will believe her. This is a convenient excuse for McCarthy because it exempts her from any responsibility of truth. McCarthy’s purpose throughout her text is to challenge the notion of truth when it is applied to autobiography. We see this most clearly in her inter-chapters where she attempts to correct her many mistakes. She does this cleverly, though, because even as she corrects herself, she still suggests that the

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original narration is perhaps as ‘truthful’ as the corrected one. McCarthy claims that she lies not only because her orphan status demands it, but because she must in order to write at all.

Unlike McCarthy, Lauren Slater never reveals the ‘truth’ in her text. As we can guess from her title, the entire premise of *Lying* is based on a metaphor that is essentially a lie. Slater destroys ‘truth’ altogether, and on every page she plays with the notions of truth and fiction. It is her illness, which affects her memory that keeps her from telling the truth. She implies that ‘truth’ is not found in the facts but in the narrative and how she wishes to be understood in that narrative. Similar to McCarthy, Slater’s lies are also expected of her, and when she tries to confess to them, no one will listen. Her character is defined by the lies she tells. Therefore, she argues that when she lies, she is being truthful to herself. Much of her purpose is to expose the slipperiness of the genre, and she does this by blurring fact and fiction and then attempting to completely destroy them. The discussion of Slater’s memoir ends the chapter on incredibly slippery terms. I conclude with some difficult questions surrounding the genre. Clearly, Slater’s text is the most contemporary one, and given the way she handles both truth and lying, what does the future hold for memoir or autobiography? If the non-fiction/fiction binary is rendered false, what then prevents the genre from erasure? And, is there an essential ‘truth’ to autobiography?

In my third chapter, “Women’s Selves as Connected and Fluid with Others: “Man must be an island unto himself,””¹⁰ I once again take on the false notion of a coherent self. However, here I argue that rather than constructing themselves as fixed identities, women more often recognize and portray their fluidity and ability to simultaneously employ various identities. I begin this chapter by quoting Georges Gusdorf’s list of places where autobiography does not exist. Then, I use Susan Stanford Friedman’s article, “Women’s Autobiographical Selves: Theory and Practice,” to show how she reverses Gusdorf’s claim. She argues that everywhere Gusdorf says autobiography is not, is exactly where autobiography is

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for women (here, she includes minorities and non-Western people). Friedman disagrees with Gusdorf and looks to Lacan’s “Mirror Stage” to illustrate how when looking in the mirror, the image reflected back to us is an illusion, a fiction. Here, Friedman uses theories by Nancy Chodorow and Sheila Rowbotham. According to Chodorow, girls and boys form their identities differently because of the ways they first relate to their mothers. Boys, understanding that they must relate more closely with their fathers, break from their mothers, and therefore develop more rigid egos boundaries like their fathers. On the other hand, girls do not have to undergo this break with their mothers and come to develop more fluid ego boundaries. The problem with this theory, according to Friedman, is that Chodorow assumes a “universal” girl and boy and disregards cultural differences surrounding the construction of identities. Friedman discusses Sheila Rowbotham, who asserts that culture and community are crucial to the construction of women’s identities. She says that rather than looking into one mirror, women look into a “cultural hall of mirrors,” and the image reflected back is multiple. They see themselves in relation to and as fluid with others.

From this point, the chapter covers four different strains of how women position themselves with and against others. These are: “Seeing ourselves through others,” “Seeing ourselves through our mothers,” “Broken chains: seeing ourselves after loss,” and “Seeing ourselves through culture and community.” In the first section, I explore how women position themselves against others, namely members of their families. I look at Nancy K. Miller’s critical autobiography, *Bequest and Betrayal: Memoirs of a Parent’s Death* (1996), which shows the significance of her parents’ lives on her own identity. She argues that she constantly positions herself against her parents as a means of finding herself. Finally, she doubts that her own story could ever be independent from theirs. Mary G. Mason traces this thread in women’s autobiography all the way back to the autobiographies of Julian of Norwich, Margery Kempe, Margaret Cavendish, and Anne Bradstreet. She claims that these women also positioned themselves against “others,” usually God or a husband. Here, I discuss Mason’s work, which illustrates how these women use “others” as a means of writing themselves more clearly. Finally, the last
contemporary autobiography that I discuss in this section is Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior*, specifically looking at the influence of Kingston’s “No Name” aunt. Kingston positions herself against her aunt, often identifying with her. I argue that for these women, family members are perhaps so closely connected to them that they must write their stories in order to tell their own.

In the second section of this chapter I illustrate the ways in which women look to their mothers in order to create their own identities. Here, I discuss Miller’s memoir, suggesting that some women find this identification with their mothers frustrating, especially if they have had strained relationships with their mothers. Miller explores this problem in her own text, finally concluding that both mothers and daughters need to recognize one another for who they are. From Miller, I look again at Mary McCarthy who, unlike Miller, never has the chance to develop a relationship with her mother. Therefore, she looks to her grandmother as a mother-figure and unfortunately is disappointed by this relationship. Finally, Lauren Slater and Maxine Hong Kingston both try to understand their distant mothers, and although Slater is continuously denied by her mother, Kingston seems to be the one who finally relates to and comes to an understanding with hers.

The third section, “Broken Chains: Seeing Ourselves After Loss,” explores the problem that women have after their parents die. How does this loss affect the autobiographer’s identity? Here, I discuss both Mary McCarthy and Nancy K. Miller. Although both women have lost their parents, McCarthy’s parents died when she was only a child and Miller lost her parents as an adult. McCarthy always seems to be looking for her parents in her memoir. Because she was not able to truly get to know them, she wonders how they have affected her sense of self. Miller, on the other hand, did know her parents, and she seems to be looking for closure to their stories. She wonders how this closure will affect her own life and her own story. She perhaps has a more difficult time positioning herself against them because they have greatly influenced her.

In the last section of the chapter, I focus on the influences of culture and community on women’s lives. I look specifically at Norma Elia Cantú’s *Canícula* and Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Storyteller*. 
Borrowing from Françoise Lionnet, I suggest that these texts are “braided” in that both women position themselves with and against entire communities and cultures. Cantú identifies with both Mexican and American cultures and attempts to find her place somewhere between the two. Although she feels pulled by both identities, she seems to find a balance because she is able to actually live in the borderlands. Her text also seems more communal in that she narrates the lives of her extended family and many of her friends. Clearly, her identity appears more shared and fluid with the people surrounding her. Silko’s memoir is similar in that she also writes about her extended family. She tells the stories of her parents, grandparents, and so on as if their stories are her own stories. In fact, she moves beyond just family, asserting that the stories of the Native-American people are shared and communal. Through storytelling, she writes herself into the stories of her people. They become her own stories just as they belong to all Native-American people. Concluding the chapter, I argue that women’s identities do seem to be constructed by looking through, as Rowbotham suggests, a “cultural hall of mirrors.” Rather than seeing themselves as distinctly unique, they establish their identities in relation to others.

Finally, my own memoirs are interspersed throughout this project, forming a work that is both analytical and creative. When I first began writing, I found that every time I went to tell a story about myself, I could not escape talking about my father. I felt that most of my vignettes would include him and his influence in my life. However, I soon realized that beneath the story of my father was my mother’s story, as if she really was the rock in my life, my strength and stability, yet often my strongest opponent. Although on the surface, it may seem that I deal more directly with my father, I would argue that it is my mother whom I ultimately consider at the heart of my story. It is telling her story that led me to her parents and then to my great-grandparents. And, it seemed that the further I moved away from myself, the closer I came to seeing and understanding my own identity. This all seemed to work well with my discussion of women’s fluidity, and when I read Nancy K. Miller’s critical memoir, I realized that it is through her own discussion of other women’s memoirs and then the writing of her own that she seems to find herself.
Just as Miller’s text functions, I wanted the two parts of my project to dialogue with one another. My memoirs are purposefully arranged in the sections where they seemed to align most with the subject matter. And the subject matter for and in the chapters often evolved out of my own creative pieces and what I saw to be a reoccurring thread. I deliberately maintained the fragmented nature of the memoirs, hoping to leave gaps in the story for the reader to interpret. Here, I noticed that using vignettes made it virtually impossible to attempt coherence throughout. Because they are so short and fragmented themselves, these characteristics seemed to reflect onto the entire work. The self-conscious nature of the vignettes is an attempt to constantly question the construction of myself. I wonder now, if I did go back and check off what was “true” or “false” in each of my vignettes, how much of it would align with fact. Much of it is filled with inconsistencies and errors due to the nature of construction and also for the purpose of being playful and creative. But, what I kept coming back to after each piece was that it was ultimately how I wanted to be understood by those reading the text that mattered. The facts didn’t matter. Neither would it matter if my family refused to corroborate my stories. The significance to my memoirs is that I painted a portrait of myself from the only perspective that I ultimately have—my own. And the only real corroboration that I needed would be from my reader.
Let Me Introduce Myself

"I will repay you for the years the locusts have eaten. . ."—Joel 2:25

I was eight when I first remember the locusts coming, swarming—a plague. Their red, beady eyes like protruding balls on the sides of their heads sharply contrasted their thin, black bodies. They appeared as solid as bullets, but they squirted liquid when they were splattered against the school building with a four-square ball. Their thin, transparent wings made them fly clumsily, too fragile to carry their grotesque, awkward bodies. The day they crawled their way out of the tiny holes of the yard, I feared that the world was coming to an end. My mother assured me that it wasn't.

"Every thirteen years," she said, "They'll be back when you're 21."

So far away—surely I wouldn't live that long.

"Why do they come?" I asked my mother, fearing that God was punishing the world for its evils. (I was raised Protestant, Nazarene, to be exact, so guilt played a huge role in my life.)

“It’s nature’s way,” my mother answered to appease me, not knowing herself.

For hours, I sat backwards on the couch looking out the window. My sister and brother sat on either side, and for once, we had no desire to play outdoors.

Despite the presence of the locusts, the grass continued to need mowing. This meant that my sister and I had to pick up any large branches from the yard, so that our father could steer unimpeded across the lawn. We didn't think about the ninety-degree heat that summer. We only thought about
locusts. My father wasn't scared of them, though, and spent the entire day behind the push-mower, chopping them like a food processor. Christy, my older sister, and I ran down the side porch steps, jumping when hit by those bizarre, cigar-like cicadas. We used trashcan lids and two foldout lawn chairs as islands in the yard. We jumped from one to the other so that we wouldn't feel the plague-like insects beneath our feet. Standing on one lid or chair, we would pick up another and lay it out in front of us, throwing the sticks as close as we could to the giant trashcan. We did this until we scoured the entire yard.

When our father came in for a break, our mom stopped him at the screen door and broomed off the locusts that clung to his shirt and pants like leeches trying to suck out bad blood from a diseased man. We believed our father was diseased. Not from any specific illness, but our father was sick with meanness.

We celebrated when the locusts left that summer. Street sweepers cleaned away their life-less carcasses as thousands, millions of them lay in piles along the streets and interstates. Of course, everyone was thankful when the locusts died, but we, we celebrated!

My name is Corinne Kandalesky and I am a survivor of locusts. Twice now I have survived them. I still don’t know their purpose in coming. Maybe someday I will understand. I always liked the name Corinne. It isn't really my name, but I always liked to pretend it was. When my sister and I played school as children, my name never changed.

"My name is Corinne," I announced as if my sister should expect anything different. "Corinne Kandalesky."

“Jennifer, you always pick that name,” she would say annoyed. “Pick another.” My sister was more creative. She thought of a different name each time we played.

During my first summer of locusts, my family lived in a shoe box-like house on Wychewood Cove. My mother gave birth to three children: the first two only fourteen months apart, and the third
only eighteen months later. My mother is a fighter, a rock. My father was the family antagonist. He was a plumber and hid beer in the crawl spaces of our house. He was a Vietnam vet and collected unused ammunition for areas where fighting had occurred. He lied about his age when he joined the army, and when he was finally awarded a trip to Vietnam, he got to see some of his friends hanging from trees and some with their faces blown off. To handle the stress, he shot heroin between his toes. His friends who lived did too.

My father was a lot like the locusts. He always found his way back. When my parents were first married, he escaped from a severe car accident unharmed. When the police came, they arrested him for driving without a license. My mom had to borrow my grandparents’ tithe money to bail him out of jail. And then there was the time when we were tiny children, too young for me to remember. We found my father lying in bed one night talking to people floating in the air above him. My mother thought he had dropped acid. We took him to the emergency room and the doctors had no idea what was happening to him. When my father was finally able to tell the doctors that he had found a tick in his hair two days before, he was diagnosed with Rocky Mountain Spotted Fever. He had a fever of 104 for five days. The doctors said that if he lived he would suffer permanently because of this. And, he did.

At age 44, long after my parent’s divorce and during a time where we had gone five years without speaking to him, he had a ski doo accident. He owned two of them. He and a friend were riding on the lake, drunk. My father’s friend was headed toward my father and not paying attention. At the last minute, the friend, realizing he could not escape colliding with my father, bailed his ski doo. The ski doo hit my father square in his face. His eyes popped out of their sockets, and he lay unconscious in the water, his face peeled back. He was life-flighted to a hospital in Columbus where he stayed for eight weeks. The doctors were sure he wasn’t going to make it this time. He did.

Growing up in a house with my father was like watching my parents battle their own Vietnam. Such a senseless war. On one side was my father, a plumber. On the other was my mother, a
schoolteacher. And there were casualties: Christy, myself, and my brother, Matthew. Why we fought him for so long, I will never understand.

As children, we thought our lives were normal. We went to private schools, had Barbies and Tonka trucks. We had expensive Christmases and invited friends over for slumber parties on birthdays. We went to church on Sundays and Wednesdays (without my father). From the outside, people thought we existed like every other family. What they didn’t know is that sometimes we slept in our clothes and shoes at night for fear of having to leave at any moment. My father was a violent man and although he never hit any of us, he made powerful threats toward himself. We knew which evenings we needed to be prepared to leave.

“Wear your clothes to bed tonight,” my mother would whisper to my sister and I in our bunk beds. “Just in case.”

One night our mother told us how sorry she was for allowing us to live like this. She promised that it wouldn’t last much longer. She kept her promise. On a Monday, she picked us up from school and said we wouldn’t be going home, ever. We drove silently in the direction of my aunt’s house; we drove toward safety. My aunts and uncles had helped my mother move all of our belongings that day while Dad was at work. We had no idea; we had been sitting in our classrooms and playing with friends at recess. As my mother drove the car, she told us that God had given her a promise: to restore the years the locusts had eaten. We had no idea what she was talking about. She tried to explain, but we were children. We didn’t understand. We didn’t care. We did not have to be afraid of anything anymore. I sat in the back seat and tried with all of my power not to smile. That was the happiest day of my childhood.

To tell my story, I must tell the story of my father. I will try to be fair.

My earliest memory of my father was in our living room in Columbus, Ohio. I’m not sure how old I was—two, maybe three. I remember him standing on one side of the room and my sister, brother, and I standing on the other. We were in a line. I think we were racing to him. My sister and brother
darted past me and I, scared to be left behind, fell and began crawling to him. It was like one of those
dreams where you are trying to run from the murderer and can’t. Maybe this was a dream, but I don’t
think so. I couldn’t move fast enough and my father was laughing at me. I’m sure he wasn’t being mean,
but I remember being scared of him, of his laugh. That fear of him stuck.

My father’s actions were like a volcano—you never knew when he was going to blow. You
could feel the tension most of the time. Then, you knew to evacuate. However, there were times we
couldn’t or we didn’t do it quickly enough. For some reason I remember arguments always beginning
with the phone bill. “This is fucking ridiculous!” my father yelled at my mother. “What the fuck! I’m
getting rid of this fucking phone!” This would lead to his first act of violence—tearing the phone cord
out of the wall and throwing the phone across the living room. My mom usually responded by continuing
to read her book—usually a trashy romance novel or something by Laverle Spencer. After Dad stormed
into the bedroom and slammed the door so that the entire house shook, she would retrieve the phone from
behind the couch or from where it had bounced off the wall landing on the carpet and plug it back in.
Many times it was broken and we would have to buy a new one. When aunts or friends of my mom
called asking why they couldn’t reach us for two days, Mom would explain, as if a commonality among
families, that Dad had thrown the phone across the room and broken it. “Oh,” they said on the other end.

My father’s name is John Richard Maynard. He was born in Williamson, WV, and shortly
afterwards his family moved to Columbus, Ohio, for better work. The youngest of eight children, my
father would tell us stories of his older brothers throwing him down the laundry chute when he was a two-
year old toddler. We loved these stories. My father always laughed and held his stomach when he told
them. A good-looking man with thick, straight, brown hair, dark eyes, and thick eyebrows, John
Maynard was called “Johnnie” by his parents and siblings. I never understood why only his family
regarded him by this pet name. My mom and all of her side of the family referred to him simply as
“John.” My father began smoking at the early age of ten; he had his first tattoo by age twelve. And
although he attended school, he dropped out his sophomore year of high school. I never understood why
my father, so good at math, dropped out of school when he could have become an architect or a builder,
something he always dreamed of. He probably could have been good at it. “Oh well,” he would say with
a smile. “That’s why I had you kids, so you can take care of your old man when he can’t take care of
himself.” I never liked that idea and decided that my sister or brother could have the job.

My mother and father met after my dad had been back from Vietnam for a couple of years. He
was there for twelve months, returned for thirty days, and then went back for five more months. He came
home in 1972. My parents met in 1974 and married in ’75. My mother had just graduated from high
school and was marrying a twenty-six year old hippie. My maternal grandparents, Silas and Imogene
Church, were not pleased. When my dad asked them for their permission to marry their daughter, they
agreed with the stipulation that he must cut his long hair. He returned the next day fresh from the barber.
He was in love with my mother. I always laughed at this story as well, not understanding then the true
humor in it. Now, I think it hilarious that my grandparents thought that his haircut would magically
change his heart. I remember my mother telling this story to me when I was a teenager. I regretted that
my father agreed to cut his hair, not because I liked long hair, but because he was then given my mother.

For my mother, I understand now that she was escaping from her own turmoil at home. Silas
Church was, ironically, a preacher. Addicted to valium, he was his own family’s antagonist and used
dinner time to pick out each child’s fault. My mother couldn’t do anything right and although she
prepared his meals each week night while my grandmother worked, he complained that her cooking tasted
like shit. No wonder my mother rarely cooked while we were growing up. So, my mother definitely used
her own marriage as an escape, just as her two sisters before her had done. I guess she figured that, at
least in marriage, it would be different than submitting to a parent’s control. So, my parents married in
the city courthouse and seven months later, my sister, Christy, was born. My mother didn’t tell me until I
was a senior in college that she was pregnant when she got married, as if we had never figured the math.
After my parents lived in an apartment for a short while, they moved to our home on Hawks Avenue in the bottoms of Columbus, Ohio. We lived at 50 Hawks until I was six. Our home was a skinny, two story grayish-blue house with a separate garage facing the alley. Today, I would love to go back to that house and ask the people living there if I could look around to see if I remembered everything correctly. The house was enormous in my memory, having four bedrooms upstairs, a den, living room, dining room, and kitchen downstairs, and a full basement. The ceilings were all at least twelve feet; there were fireplaces in almost every room; and the doors in the house were unbelievably heavy. The basement was always the scariest place of all, with its entrance beginning at the pantry on the floor. I remember my sister screaming once that her Woody Woodpecker doll had fallen down there and my father pulled up the door to go retrieve it. This was also the house where my brother threw my roller skate Barbie out on the roof. I cried, and although my mother says I don’t remember correctly, I remember my Barbie sprawled out on the roof until we moved from that house. Hawks was also where my sister and I tried to sneak into the kitchen one day to eat some of the caramels in the kitchen cabinet, only to find out once we opened the golden wrappers and put them in our mouths, that they were not caramels but chicken bouillon cubes.

Most of my memories at 50 Hawks Avenue do not necessarily involve good memories of my father. One evening in particular, our mother was gone and had left us with dad. Dad, probably not wanting to get all of us out of the house, told my sister and I to run up the street to get him a pack of cigarettes. Although it was still light outside, the convenient store was located down our street and across Broad Street, a busy main road in the bottoms. Handing my seven year old sister money and reminding us over and over again what brand he needed, he sent us on our way. Once in the store, I remember us both forgetting which kind of cigarettes Dad requested. The store clerk, probably disgusted with any parents that would send their child to run such an errand, showed us numerous packages of cigarettes trying to help us recall my father’s words. When we saw the package with the tan camel, we agreed that that was the correct package and started home. We chose this package not because we remembered Dad saying the name “Camels,” but more because we like the picture on the front. When we got home, Dad
gasped, “I didn’t say Camels! I wanted Marlboro Reds. Remember? I said, ‘the red package.’ I can’t smoke these things. They’ll kill me.” That was one of the few times I ever remember my father mad at us. Even years later when my sister and I found his cigarettes on top of his dresser and we broke them all in pieces and replaced them with rolled up paper, he didn’t yell at us. Of course he got mad, but he never yelled. How could he be angry after reading all the messages we had written on the pieces of paper? (Cigarettes are bad. Cigarettes will kill you. They smell gross. They cause cancer. We want you to live. And on and on.) After all, we were looking out for him, trying to save his life. No, my father rarely ever yelled at us. He reserved that for my mother. When Christy and I remind Mom about this story, she never believes us. “There is no way that I would forget that,” she says. “Your dad did some pretty dumb things, but he would never let you guys walk all the way to that store by yourselves.” But, he did.

Now that I am an adult, talking to my father is as if I am getting to know him for the first time. It’s like a reunited relationship of child and parent who never knew one another. We spend hours talking on the phone about nothing. Not long ago, my father called to tell me that he got a new tattoo.

“What?” I asked astonished that a man in his fifties still gets tattoos.

“Yeah,” he laughed. “It’s a shark wearing a sombrero, on my arm.”

“Dad!” I cried. “What in the world were you thinking? How much did you pay for that?”

“I got it for free,” he explained. “One of the guys at work owns a tattoo shop down the street from where we used to live. He told me that I needed to cover up these old tattoos of mine.”

“You covered up the cross and your name?” These tattoos, one of a faded cross and one spelling ‘JOHN,’ had been on my father’s forearm since before I was born. Now they were gone, erased.

“Well, just my name,” Dad reassured me.

I couldn’t help but feel sad. Those tattoos, so much a part of the memory of my father, were gone, covered up by a cartoon shark. I hadn’t realized how much I identified my father with the shaky, blue cross and name he and his friends had done with ink and a needle before they were even teenagers.
Those arms were what picked me up as a child and hugged me awkwardly after he fought with my mother. They were what I feared as a child. I had scary dreams as a child of how strong he was, how powerful. Now, he was changed. My father sensed my sadness and agreed that he guessed he shouldn’t have gotten rid of them. Feeling bad for my attachment to his tattoos, I said, “No, that’s funny that you got a new one. I just liked the others. You’ve always had them.” I find myself amazed these days by the things I am attached to: old photographs of my father in basic training, his yearbook from the army, any random story he shares with me, an old music box he gave me in college when he began to try to ease his own guilt. I thought to myself when I opened his gift, “At least he feels guilty.”
CHAPTER I

The Self as Extraordinary: “She goes and goes on infinitely”\(^{11}\)

In her article “Authorizing the Autobiographical,”\(^{12}\) Shari Benstock offers an explanation for the fragmentation in women’s autobiography. She argues that traditional male autobiography denied its fragmentation for the purpose of appearing complete. Perhaps this approach to autobiography was driven by the “values” of Structuralism that demanded unity and organization. However, this does not necessarily mean that these texts did not contain gaps. Benstock asks: “On what authority can we ascribe certain forms of discontinuity to the female rather than to the male, assigning them as functions of gender rather than of social class, race, or sexual preference?”\(^{13}\) Clearly, the male tradition of autobiography portrayed an “untruthful” unity, so this fragmentation cannot be attributed to women only. Benstock argues that, because of Western thinking, this traditional understanding of autobiography later became the “model” for the genre. Here, the gaps in traditional texts were simply overlooked for the purpose of cohesion and to maintain Western values and ideals. Benstock asserts that it was Modernism’s cultural changes and Freud’s “discovery of the unconscious” that exposed this constructed unity.\(^{14}\) In response to this, women were made more aware of their own fragmentation and their need to challenge the traditional model of autobiography.

In their introduction to *Women, Autobiography, Theory*,\(^{15}\) Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson suggest that because patriarchal culture excluded women, “women were compelled to tell their stories


\(^{13}\) Benstock, 152.

\(^{14}\) Benstock, 152.

differently, and had done so, at least since medieval autobiographer Margery Kempe.\textsuperscript{16} Clearly, because of women’s cultural productions, their autobiographies look much different than the traditional male form. Although their subject matter had always been criticized for its “ordinary” and “personal” characteristics, this is exactly what they often chose to write about. What emerged, though, looks not at all ordinary, but quite extraordinary. Rather than telling the history of an “extraordinary” person in an ordinary way, women’s autobiography tells the “ordinary” cultural history of women in an extraordinary way. Women revised both form and content to create a new tradition portraying texts that are fragmented and self-conscious.

THE FORM OF WOMEN’S AUTOBIOGRAPHY

From the first women’s writings, the ways that women recorded themselves were quite different from the traditional male form. Early women’s autobiographies typically employed the forms of the diary and religious journal. In her article “The Other Voice: Autobiographies of Women Writers,” Mary G. Mason credits Julian of Norwich, Margery Kempe, Margaret Cavendish, and Anne Bradstreet with the first autobiographies. She argues that these four women account for the presence of an “other” in their lives: either a higher being or, in Cavendish’s case, a husband. These women do not tell the stories of themselves in any isolated sense, like traditional autobiography typically did at that time. Mason writes:

\begin{quote}
[. . . ] the self discovery of female identity seems to acknowledge the real presence and recognition of another consciousness, and the disclosure of female self is linked to the identification of some ‘other.’ This recognition of another consciousness—and I emphasize recognition rather than deference—this grounding of identity through relation to the chosen other, seems (if we may judge by our four representative cases) to enable women to write openly about themselves.\textsuperscript{17}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{16} Smith and Watson, 12.

It is interesting that as early as the Middle Ages the traditional form of autobiography didn’t fit for women. Why else would women need to develop a different mode of writing? Obviously, one of the many answers to this question is perhaps because women (and I hope not to generalize) see themselves as more communal than men. This is a subject I will discuss at greater length in my third chapter, but that I raise to illustrate the apparent differences between traditional and women’s autobiography.

The early forms of the diary and spiritual journal were followed by so many different ways of writing about the self. Especially in more contemporary women’s autobiographies, which I will discuss here, one wonders if anything could represent a form of autobiography as long as the self creates it. Of course, the diary and journal still have their place in the female tradition because their very forms symbolize women’s fragmentation in that they are short, often un-related entries telling the story of a woman’s life. However, in more contemporary autobiography, metaphor, myth, vignettes, communal stories, poetry, and photographs also reside among these. These forms rarely cater to telling the “whole” story of a woman’s life. Rather, they often cover only a short span of time whether it be a woman’s childhood, adolescence, or a brief event in her life. The forms that women use to represent themselves shed greater light on who they are and how women differ from the traditional writing style.

In her 1957 autobiography, *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood*, Mary McCarthy subverts the traditional form of autobiography by using both chapters and inter-chapters. Her first inter-chapter opens her memoir and is entitled “To the Reader.” It acts as an introduction to her text and we realize that it is written in a different voice as she discusses the “actual” text as the old or first version. Italics and a distinctly different voice characterize the inter-chapters. Other than the introduction to the reader, these inter-chapters follow each chapter of the text and discuss the subject matter in each. They are highly clever and self-reflexive in nature, and they paint a more “accurate” picture of Mary. There appears to be two Marys: an earlier Mary writing the story of her Catholic childhood and the later Mary discussing her

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earlier recordings, adding to them, and clearing up any “mistakes.” Without them, it seems the autobiography would be lacking stylistically. These inter-chapters add to the unique agenda of her autobiography. Whereas the chapters are interesting alone, telling stories of the young Mary’s life, the inter-chapters distance her from those stories, often adding to them, questioning them, and even debunking them. They discuss the writing of her chapters and tell her reader why she must edit or critique them.

In doing this, McCarthy exposes how slippery and subjective writing (and reading) an autobiography can be, and thus she subverts the traditional model. Yet, how does she realize this in order to illustrate her point? Obviously, McCarthy has studied traditional autobiography. After all, she is writing one herself. In fact, this seems to be part of her point: to toss around the “rules” of writing autobiography. Interestingly, her text precedes the English translation of Georges Gusdorf’s “Conditions and Limits of Autobiography” where many of these rules were outlined. In his article, Gusdorf discusses the rules of writing the story of the complete self. He writes, “autobiography properly speaking assumes the task of reconstructing the unity of a life across time . . . The specific intention of autobiography and its anthropological prerogative as a literary genre is clear: it is one of the means to self knowledge thanks to the fact that it recomposes and interprets a life in its totality.”19 Perhaps McCarthy was ahead of her time, because she refrains from doing exactly what Gusdorf demands of autobiography. For example, we learn from the very title of her book that she is concentrating on a specific time period in her life: her Catholic girlhood. Within even this framework, she carefully chooses specific stories to best illustrate that girlhood. These stories, broken up in chapters, do not follow a linear timeline. They do not always directly relate to one another. There are huge gaps. Perhaps this is McCarthy’s point. Because women have been conscious of their lack of subjectivity for some time, it seems that they are able to more easily expose the irony of trying to write the “complete” story of the self. It is impossible. McCarthy realizes

19 Gusdorf, 37-38.
this when, in her own writing, she employs fiction in order to create full stories. She tells how she chooses to omit or add portions of her stories in order to keep her reader interested, completely aware that the story’s wholeness is an illusion—her illusion.

Without McCarthy’s inter-chapters, the text would still fit into the contemporary tradition of women’s autobiography because of its fragmented nature; however, the inter-chapters add a surprising new layer to the text. Not only do we learn so much more about Mary the autobiographer, but we also begin to understand Mary much more as a girl. The text reveals multiple identities of McCarthy. In her chapter “The Tin Butterfly,” we see her childhood reaction to her abusive uncle when he accuses her of stealing a tin butterfly from her brother. However, that same chapter reveals her adult perspective as she is recounting the story. Finally, her inter-chapter directly following this responds to and analyzes her recalled memory. In a sense, then, we experience not two, but three aspects of McCarthy’s identity because of her added inter-chapters. Furthermore, these inter-chapters make it such a groundbreaking text for women’s autobiography because they force us to question our traditional definitions of autobiography. On first reading, the text perhaps shocks readers with its honesty, but it challenges us to see the slipperiness of the genre and to begin redefining and rethinking our preconceptions.

Writing more than thirty years after McCarthy, Norma Elia Cantú chooses not to use long chapters like McCarthy; rather, she writes *Canícula* in very short vignettes, often only a paragraph long, and she intersperses photographs throughout the text. Both the tiny bits of information Cantú shares with her readers and the often problematic photographs and documents included and discussed bear weight on the fragmented nature of Cantú and her autobiography. Because we are given so little detail at times, we may wonder why Cantú has chosen to write her autobiography at all. After all, aren’t you supposed to tell your reader as much about yourself as possible? Why doesn’t Cantú provide more detail in her stories? Perhaps this is characteristic of her culture. Clearly, her culture influences her writing because her

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vignettes are more communal, discussing various members of her family. To an extent she defines herself by others, but this does not necessarily answer why she writes so little. It seems that photographs initiate much of Canícula. These pictures spur Cantú’s memories and then avalanche into new ones, all of which she seemingly shares in no specific order. Much like the pictures, then, her stories are mere snapshots of her life. They provide only a glimpse at who she is and then our attention shifts to something new.

These snapshots are meant to illustrate the fragmented nature of her life. As a woman, she admits to and exposes her failure to remember complete stories. In fact, it is evident that Cantú plays with this idea because her discussions of her photographs often do not corroborate the actual photographs. In the first photograph of the text, which shows Cantú to the right of some family members, we can see by the writing at the bottom of the photograph that the picture has been inverted. Cantú never discusses this obvious “misrepresentation” in her vignette. The “true” picture should depict Cantú to the left of her family, so that the date at the bottom center reads “June 1954.” Rather, because the photograph is backwards, the writing is jumbled. Furthermore, it seems that Cantú purposefully arranges the picture as she does because she titles her vignette “May” rather than “June.” When she does proceed to discuss the photograph in this vignette, she says that her image portrays “a flash of white teeth,” yet we see no sign of teeth on her or a smile, for that matter. Cantú does this throughout the text when she uses photographs. In almost every discussion of them, she suggests that there is something taking place in the photograph that we, as readers, cannot see. In doing this, she questions the use of snapshots or pictures (as autobiography), showing that they, as well as written autobiography, do not do the actual life justice and never can. They are all based on perception and almost always staged.

In addition to her vignettes and photographs, another difference in the form of Cantú’s autobiography is her use of language. She shifts between English and Spanish throughout Canícula. This, too, adds to her fragmented identity because it illustrates her duality of being Mexican-American and living on the border. Throughout the various vignettes and documents, Cantú primarily uses English.

21 Cantú, 4.
but employs Spanish as a secondary language, providing no translations for any Spanish words or phrases. Clearly, this illustrates the influence of her heritage, but it also suggests that Cantú must use both languages to portray herself more clearly. The simultaneous use of both languages paints a truer picture of her life. For the monolingual reader, Canícula is difficult to read. However, even this further affirms Cantú’s problem in completely acclimating to one culture. Perhaps by using both Spanish and English, she is able to better show those readers the effect of her duality. Her lack of distinction between the two languages suggests her fragmentation and confirms that she is attempting to assume the roles of both Mexican and American, seeking to exist between the two cultures.

Similar to Cantú’s Canícula, Leslie Marmon Silko’s Storyteller employs vignettes and photographs. The difference in Silko’s autobiography, written almost fifteen years prior to Canícula, is that Silko uses prose, poetry, and American-Indian storytelling to write her own story. The latter is possibly what makes Silko’s autobiography so extraordinary. She tells the stories of her culture in order to tell her own story. Interestingly, these never tell the story of Silko in any solitary sense, but because Silko is Native-American, the “I” is communal. Therefore, she is telling the story of herself. This is something that Silko expects her reader to grasp from the beginning of the text. The “I” always assumes different roles. It is the individual Silko, it is a group of people, and it is often someone else entirely. The “I” also appears and disappears throughout Storyteller. At one point, when it reappears, we realize that this “I” isn’t really Silko, but the story of Yellow Woman, whom Silko, by writing of her, becomes. Silko is the storyteller and the stories are both the stories of her people as well as her personal stories. By becoming the storyteller, she becomes active in the stories of her culture and keeps them alive for future generations of storytellers. Silko’s identity is very much defined by her culture. Her self is a communal self—a “we.” However, because she is writing an autobiography and writing down the oral tradition of storytelling, this appears to suggest that Silko is somewhat invested in maintaining her own identity.

Perhaps she is saying that she is both “I” and “we,” both an individual and an individual as part of a greater culture and community.

Although the revised forms of the above texts are much more structural, texts such as Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior* and Lauren Slater’s *Lying* employ myth and metaphor as two interesting variances in form. Kingston’s memoir, published in 1975, is perhaps more similar to McCarthy’s autobiography in that Kingston writes in chapter format. What is fascinating about her text and what makes it extraordinary is that in one of her chapters entitled “White Tigers,” Kingston writes herself into the myth of Fa Mu Lan. By embodying this mythical character, Kingston is able to become the woman warrior. Here, Kingston suggests that women are dangerously powerful when they perform at their maximum ability. When she becomes Fa Mu Lan, Kingston becomes heroic. She is powerful and will go to any length to save her family and her village. However, when Kingston finishes writing herself into the myth she says, “[m]y American life has been such a disappointment.” By becoming the woman warrior, Kingston escapes her boring and oppressive life as a female child. Her heritage treats women and girls as inferior to men, and only by writing herself into a myth can she become respected and esteemed as a woman. Interestingly, in the myth, Fa Mu Lan pretends to be a man. However, this doesn’t necessarily suggest that Kingston confirms the patriarchal structure. Rather, she seems to invert it because she reveals her identity as a woman, and this is what makes her so extraordinary—that she is a woman warrior.

Clearly, by employing myth into her autobiography, Kingston raises many issues regarding passing off fiction as autobiography. This could have been said of Silko’s *Storyteller* as well. However, what Kingston suggests is that this could be said of all autobiography. Why can’t she embody a fictive character if it tells herself in a true metaphorical sense? All autobiography employs fiction to some extent, whether it be as simple as retelling a story or making a public story one’s own. Without going in

24 Kingston, 45.
depth about the lines between fact and fiction (because I will discuss this in my second chapter), it remains clear that the lines are blurry. For Kingston, her embodiment of the mythical character, Fa Mu Lan, reveals something about who she is as a Chinese-American female in a patriarchal society. She shows that her only means of escape as a woman is through fiction. If she were to write in the tradition of male autobiography, she might lose much of the agency she had. She must become Fa Mu Lan. Becoming the woman warrior saves her from erasure.

Along similar lines as *Woman Warrior*, Lauren Slater’s 2000 autobiography, *Lying*\(^25\), takes on metaphor as its form. Like Kingston’s use of myth, metaphor has similar problematic issues when applied to autobiography. In his introduction to *Lying*, Hayward Krieger, Professor of Philosophy at the University of Southern California, writes, “[u]sing metaphor as a literary technique is not a new concept in fiction; however, using, or suggesting, the use of metaphor as a valid vehicle to convey autobiographical truths—thus her insistence that the book is, indeed, a nonfiction memoir—is a new and unsettling idea.”\(^26\) Even Slater says that if her text could have a shape, it would be “like a question mark.”\(^27\) The metaphor works in the text in that Slater says she has epilepsy, and then says that she does not have epilepsy, but some other disease that she will call epilepsy. We never do find out what Slater’s true disease is or if she even has one. This is her point. She says it doesn’t matter. Her entire text is based on a metaphor that is essentially a lie, and Slater argues that because she is a liar, this metaphor represents her more closely than the truth. Slater’s point is that her autobiography, just like many other contemporary autobiographies, is slippery. It leaves large gaps in her story, but what we do receive from her is what she feels is the real truth about herself. From her standpoint, her memoir *must* be written as metaphor (if not fiction), because it is the only way that she can “truly” portray herself.

THE CONTENT OF WOMEN’S AUTOBIOGRAPHY

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\(^{26}\) Slater, Introduction.

\(^{27}\) Slater, 221.
Now that I have discussed various forms that women employ in autobiography, in this chapter, I will discuss how the content of women’s autobiography is more self-conscious and self-aware than traditional male autobiography. Rather than primarily discussing women’s lives in the public sphere, much of contemporary women’s autobiography depicts women’s private lives and inner-most thoughts. Traditionally, autobiography tells the story of a man who is considered extraordinary due to his service in the public realm. In his article, “Conditions and Limits of Autobiography,” Georges Gusdorf gives criteria for male autobiography, asserting:

Memoirs admirably celebrate the penetrating insight and skill of famous men who, appearances to the contrary notwithstanding, were never wrong . . . The autobiography that is thus devoted exclusively to the defence and glorification of a man, a career, a political cause, or a skillful strategy presents no problems: it is limited almost entirely to the public sector of existence.  

The exceptions to this rule, according to Gusdorf, are spiritual or intellectual men. He names Montaigne and Rousseau, saying that “in spite of their lowly station on the stage of the world, [they] considered their destiny worthy of being given by way of example.” Clearly, Gusdorf’s view is an elitist and phallocentric one. We must, however, credit much of his resistance to the time period he was writing in, given that his article (the original French version) was written in 1956 before all of the memoirs I discuss appeared in the genre. However, it is important to note that resistance to the contemporary form and content of autobiography still exists. Because we exist on the other side of the women’s movement and live in a much more progressive and accepting society, truly believing all of Gusdorf’s views seems silly or ridiculous. What it reveals is that the credibility given to famous men in the past was almost always measured by their involvement in the public realm. Even Gusdorf affirms this. What he and other traditionalists failed to consider were the problems behind exclusion. By extending authority only to men

28 Gusdorf, 36.
29 Gusdorf, 31, emphasis added.
in the public realm, this excluded half of the human race (not to mention another percentage occupied by
minorities). Women were generally not offered access to the public realm, so this kept them from being
considered important. In fact, it set women up for being erased; their histories were ignored and
disregarded as uninteresting and too ordinary. It has only been recently that we have begun breaking
down these restrictions and rethinking our definitions.

First, in order to change our thinking, society had to provide women with access to the public
realm. After all, they never would have been published if this had not happened. By offering women
greater access, this helped, to some extent, to reduce their rigid positions in the private realm. The
assignment to the domestic is problematic because women were not given a choice. Furthermore,
because the public realm was equated with importance, the domestic was considered unimportant and
insignificant. Second, we had to rethink our definitions of the domestic realm and begin telling the
“other” side of the story as equally important to cultural history. This meant that women would need to
write their histories, whether they were centered in the domestic or public. The tradition that emerged
appeared quite creative in its form and not surprisingly private in its content. Because women’s lives
have for so long been grounded in the domestic, their stories often center around the family, body, and a
sense of self-awareness. It is no wonder, then, that their autobiographies would reveal stories based on
these subjects.

Content focused in the domestic often includes women writing about their homes, families, and
especially other women who influenced them. Interestingly, these influential women are often measured
by how much nurture they provide the autobiographer. Mary McCarthy writes about the loss of her
parents, her siblings, and her grandmother, whom she constantly seeks to please. Maxine Hong Kingston
discusses her role in her family and her mother’s treatment of her (more specifically as a female child).
Again, I will discuss the role of “others” in relation to women autobiographers in my third chapter. Yet,
this is the type of content that pertains to the domestic. What we do see many autobiographers doing is
attempting to subvert their positions in the domestic. For example, Kingston becomes Fa Mu Lan and leaves home to fight. In her autobiography, *Girl, Interrupted*, Susanna Kaysen loathes the fact that she is expected to make a good wife some day. In fact, all women autobiographers subvert their ascribed roles simply by choosing to write. Although they are still very much a part of the domestic sphere in various ways, they do not want to be rigidly confined there.

In addition to discussing the domestic in their writing, women’s bodies are another private, yet popular subject. This content often includes women telling stories of how they first got their periods, their opinions on their anatomies, disclosure of their sexualities or sexual relationships, and so on. By doing this, it seems that women break down phallocentrism because they illustrate that their bodies are important to their individual identities. Mary McCarthy tells the story of how she was misunderstood by the nuns in the convent for starting her period in the night, when she really had only cut her leg and bled on her sheet. This humorous story illustrates how McCarthy is forced into lying each month and pretending that she really got her period because the nuns would not listen to the truth. She calls the ordeal a “perfectly absurd situation, which made [her] live, from month to month, in horror of discovery.” Although McCarthy really hadn’t started her period, the inclusion of this story represents more than her propensity to lie. Ironically, this very personal story is important to her girlhood and her transition into womanhood. It shows how women’s lives are quite different. They deal with different things because their bodies force them to. After her incident over her period, McCarthy is made aware of her body and must continue each month to maintain her awareness. Because of this, it is perhaps impossible for her, as well as all women autobiographers, to write about the self without stories that discuss the body.

Lauren Slater’s *Lying* is also deeply personal in that she chooses to narrate the exploration of her sexuality. At times, we almost feel like we are intruding or we know too much about her personal life. However, she tells these stories because they offer the truth of who she really is. The chapter in which

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Slater discusses her sexual history strangely enough is entitled “The Cherry Tree.” Here, she narrates her affair with the married writer, Christopher Marlin, whom she meets at a writer’s conference and to whom she loses her virginity. Their relationship, sustained by sex and their writing, begins at the conference and lasts for months afterwards. She describes their first sexual experience together in detail and confesses to many others that they shared. Slater admits to maintaining the relationship because it gives her a sense of self-worth in that Christopher admires her writing; however, she soon realizes that her words are no different from any other woman that Christopher sleeps with and that he does not love her.

In the midst of this narration, Slater discusses her memory of a cherry tree in the yard of her childhood home, which she fell from; however, when she tells this story to her mother, her mother refuses to corroborate this memory, arguing that they never owned a cherry tree. Her mother’s refusal to validate the story seems to make no difference to Slater, and she writes a nonfiction vignette entitled “The Cherry Tree,” which is accepted for publication. It seems that, much like Slater’s entire memoir, this chapter alone also functions as a metaphor. The cherry tree not only represents her “fall” from virginity, but it represents her seizures and falls from “epilepsy.” Whether or not the actual event ever happened, Slater finds truth in it. She writes:

One day I climbed the cherry tree, and when the wind blew I fell from it, diving with what must have been God’s grace toward the ground. This is my tale, and I have written it over and over again, and, depending on my mood or my auras, the story always seems to change, and yet it always seems true. Perhaps that means it is all false, except that, every time, the words bear witness, and every time I feel love, and then, with a simple snap of an eye, the click of a closing shutter, the tree is gone, the love is gone, the man is gone, the words are gone, Christopher is gone, and I am standing in space, my brain split, my hands held out. If only I could learn to live here, in the chasm he cut, in the void out of which our world was born, if only I could.

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31 McCarthy, 123.
I can.\textsuperscript{32}  

Clearly, the greater story is of Slater’s disease, but her relationship with Christopher definitely has its place in her memoir. She calls the fall from the cherry tree an act of grace—an incident through which meaning was found. Because of her relationship with Christopher and her epilepsy, she feels like she sees the world differently. And, according to her, her perspective in hindsight is much clearer. She wouldn’t change her past, because, if this hadn’t happened, perhaps she would have nothing important to say. Her body is so closely connected to her identity as a woman that she feels that even this most personal information must be told in order to truly reveal her self.

Finally, in women’s autobiography, the subject in the text seems to be much more aware of herself and her own thoughts. One of the most interesting (and definitely most popular) trends of this type of autobiography is the illness memoir. These texts are problematic in that the autobiographer is always aware of herself and her mind, yet her memoir concentrates on mental illness, which certainly distorts the mind. Included in this trend are Susanna Kaysen’s \textit{Girl, Interrupted}, Lauren Slater’s \textit{Lying}, and Elizabeth Wurtzel’s \textit{Prozac Nation}.\textsuperscript{33} These women argue that it is their mental illness that makes them extraordinary and worthy of writing about. They also show the problematic nature of mental illness and of the slipperiness of autobiography when it focuses on mental illness. Like Slater, Susanna Kaysen also reveals her own sexual history in \textit{Girl, Interrupted}. Interestingly, though, it seems that much of Kaysen’s mental illness is based on her sexual promiscuity. Here, body and mind blur; over-indulgence of the body becomes a mental illness rather than a physical problem. In her chapter entitled, “Borderline Personality Disorder,” she outlines the characteristics of her disease, citing from the \textit{Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders}, which states that the sex ratio for Borderline Personality Disorder is “more commonly diagnosed in women.”\textsuperscript{34} In fact, it seems that many of the symptoms of the disorder are gendered. Shopping sprees, casual sex, and binge eating make the list. Kaysen is labeled

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{32} Slater, 158.\\  \textsuperscript{33} Elizabeth Wurtzel. \textit{Prozac Nation}. New York: Riverhead Books: 1994.}
promiscuous, and the female doctor on the ward calls her “compulsively promiscuous” because of Kaysen’s sexual relationship with her high school English teacher. Clearly, there is more to Kaysen’s illness; however, she challenges many of the reasons she is labeled “insane.” She finds it humorous that medical texts continue to equate female promiscuity with insanity. It seems that she sees no correlation between her sexual experiences and her mental illness. She calls attention to the outdated nature of the diagnosis, exposing its sexist generalizations. In doing so, Kaysen very interestingly shows how logical and clever she is in an often insane mind.

Although the blurring of body and mind in Girl, Interrupted is imposed by an institution, Lauren Slater chooses to blur the two purposefully in Lying. She claims to have epilepsy, which affects both the body and the mind. However, we also know that she is lying. Slater never tells us what her true disease is. She provides clues causing us to think she suffers from a mental illness, and she also suggests that it is the mental illness that triggers her “seizures” or body reactions. Perhaps the reason Slater chooses epilepsy as her metaphor is for her own understanding. Just as she lies at the AA meeting about suffering from alcoholism rather than epilepsy, and to us about having epilepsy rather than whatever she really does have, Slater believes that any one of them is the truth. She writes:

I was not an alcoholic, I suffered from a different disease. I had told them I was an alcoholic because in some deep sense it seemed true. Alcoholism can stand in for epilepsy, the same way epilepsy can stand in for depression, for disintegration, for self-hatred, for the unspeakable dirt between a mother and a daughter; sometimes you just don’t know how to say the pain directly—I do not know how to say the pain directly, I never have—and I often tell myself it really doesn’t matter, because either way, any way, the brain shivers and craves, cracked open.

Kaysen, 149.
Kaysen, 85.
Slater, 203-204.
Here, it seems that Slater confesses to lying because by saying that she is an alcoholic or suffering from epilepsy, she can easily attribute her problem to something concrete, a “real” disease. She possibly more easily understands epilepsy and alcoholism than a mental illness. She needs something she can explain. Therefore, by lying about her disease, she is able to create a metaphor for her problem. Although this metaphor is fictional, Slater can use it to find some understanding and healing. Without it, she cannot make sense of herself because there are no words to explain her illness. It is also interesting that Slater’s entire text is based on this lie. As mentioned before, according to Slater, this more clearly and truthfully portrays her “real” self. She confesses to being a liar. Therefore, the metaphor works very cleverly for her. Not only can she finally give a name to her disease, but she can simultaneously maintain her untruthful nature.

All of these illness memoirs are problematic in that they are written from a recovered perspective, so it is perhaps easier for the reader to question whether or not the writer is truly insane because she seems so logical. After all, she is retelling the story of her illness in such a way that it seems that the illness itself vanishes in the writing. Elizabeth Wurtzel’s *Prozac Nation* reveals that it is only through her constant commitment to medication that she is able to maintain a “recovered” status. She often doesn’t want to give up the illness because she feels that her identity is so constructed around it. Even she realizes that it is what makes her extraordinary. Therefore, she refuses to continue her medication and slips further into her illness. It is only much later that she realizes that there is more to her than her disease. There is a person behind the illness, and this person is unique even without the disease. Wurtzel, however, relies on her disease and tells us, even at the end of her autobiography, how difficult it is to let go of her depression:

In a strange way, I had fallen in love with my depression. Dr. Sterling was right about that. I loved it because I thought it was all I had. I thought depression was the part of my character that made me worthwhile . . . I was so scared to give up depression, fearing that somehow the worst part of me was actually all of me. The idea of throwing away my
depression, of having to create a whole personality, a whole way of living and being that did not contain misery as its leitmotif, was daunting. Depression had for so long been a convenient—and honest—explanation for everything that was wrong with me, and it had been a handicap that helped accentuate everything that was right. Now, with the help of a biochemical cure, it was going to go away . . . How would I ever survive as my normal self? And after all these years, who was that person anyway? 

Clearly, Wurtzel’s ability to rationalize her problem and think through it seems paradoxical. If she can logically understand what she is doing, how can she really be mentally unstable? The answer lies in her perspective. She is recalling the events and thoughts of her illness, and from this standpoint, she is better able to make meaning out of the madness of her life. Once she realizes that medication is the only way she will get to this point, she is able to piece together many of the fragments and compose an identity that is no longer founded completely upon her illness.

It is this fragmentation that we have grown to expect of women’s autobiography. When women attempt to force unity upon their lives, it seems that they are relying too heavily upon the traditional male form as a model. Clearly, the mimicking of a separate tradition seems quite untruthful. When we look back at women’s autobiographies, whether it be those mentioned here or any that reside among them, we can see that female autobiographies hold in common a lack of coherence to their stories. As mentioned before, this perhaps occurs because women do not generally see themselves as fixed or stable individuals. Rather, they are fluid, their identities comprising many variables. Therefore, when women write about themselves, their stories may appear disjointed, rarely telling anything that represents completion. Although many might consider this unfortunate for women or think that women may rely too much upon their fragmentation, it is just this that makes their works so extraordinary. Because they are unable to tell a complete story, they can be more creative and are less restricted. In fact, it often seems that they can

37 Wurtzel, 326-327.
write their autobiographies in almost any form they choose, using whatever content they deem their own. The possibilities are infinite. The truths of their lives ironically appear not at all like our original definition of truth. Instead, women show that the form and content of their writing must mirror the nature of their actual lives. It is no wonder, then, why the genre of autobiography has undergone such a transformation. Women were able to create space for themselves in a genre completely dominated by men. Using the traditional form not as a model, but a springboard, they were able to revise it to prove that they are extraordinary and that their histories need to be recorded. By demanding their own voice and refusing to write in a genre that did not fit their identities, women made the genre their own.

Melodramatic Me

Maynard family (left to right): John, me, Joanie, Christy and Matthew

My mother looks irritated with me in the photograph. She peers over my head and the camera captures her annoyance. I feel her gaze through the part in my hair, but I pretend not to notice. Looking back on my childhood, I can recall sensing her disappointment in me. She called me melodramatic, and she would scold me for my tendency to over-exaggerate. It drove her crazy that I would draw attention to myself or to our family. She wanted to pretend nothing was wrong, and I wanted to tell the world that
everything was wrong. Staring at the camera, I smile. No, I laugh, saying, “Look! We are one big happy family.”

My first full-blown panic attack happened my first semester of graduate school. I was to present on an article for a Shakespeare: Histories and Tragedies class when I began feeling anxious an hour before the class. I was at home at my computer when my heart began to pound and my arms and legs went numb. Getting up from my desk, I began pacing up and down the hallway. I felt like I was having a heart attack, and I grabbed the phone in case I needed to call an ambulance. As I reached the end of the hallway, I stopped where a full-length mirror hangs and stared at my reflection. My eyes looked frightened and I knew I needed to pull myself together. Attempting to regain my composure, I repeated to myself, “You are o.k. You are o.k.” I cancelled my presentation that day; it was the first time ever that I couldn’t deliver something that was expected of me. I never told my professor the real reason for my sudden sickness because I feared that he would think I wasn’t ready for graduate school. Luckily, he allowed me to make-up my presentation, which I did the next class meeting minus a panic attack.

On a recent visit to Nashville I told my mother and sister about that episode and the many others that I have experienced since then.

“What are they like?” my sister asked me.

“They usually begin when I am in bed at night. I lie down and begin thinking of how much I have to do. My mind won’t stop so that my body can rest,” I said.

“But what does it feel like?” she asked again.

“My heart begins to race and then it is beating so quickly that I can’t breathe. My arms and legs go numb and I feel like I am having a heart attack. I sit straight up in bed and I have to get up in order to calm myself down.

“Oh my gosh,” Christy replied. “You used to do that all the time when we were kids. Remember?”

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After moving to Nashville, my father worked for a large plumbing company, making decent money to support our family. Mom taught kindergarten at the private school we attended, thus enabling us to attend for free. Sometimes I think she thought we were “too good” for public schools. Or maybe it was that she was too good for us not to be in the private ones. Although I dreaded going home every day for fear of what would happen, my mother acted as if our home life was normal. Even at a young age, I knew that it wasn’t, not particularly because I was given a healthy model by which to compare, but because I felt it in my heart. One evening while living on Wychewood Cove, I was lying in bed while my parents fought in the next room.

“Living like this is crazy,” my mother whispered.

“Fuck this,” my father screamed. “All I do is work and all you do is spend my money.”

“John, if I spend money it is to pay bills or to buy food. Do you want us to go hungry?”

“All you do is talk on the phone and expect me to pay your phone bills,” my father yelled at her.

“I make money, John. I work so that our children can have a good education.”

“You don’t make shit!”

My heart quickened and before I knew it, my mouth was miserably dry and I gasped for air. Sitting straight up in my bed, I whispered to my sister, “Christy, I can’t breathe.”

“Yes you can,” she said. “Your making yourself do this!” She got out of her bunk and went for our mother.

“Mom, Jennifer can’t breathe,” she said and then returned to her bunk to go back to sleep.

Our mother came into the bedroom and stood beside the bunk beds.

“What’s wrong?” she asked annoyed at my overreacting.

“I can’t breathe.”

“Yes you can. Just calm down and take a breath. Why do you think you can’t breathe?” she asked.

“I don’t know. I just can’t.”
Tears streamed down my cheeks and I didn’t have the heart to tell her that it was because of her. She was fighting with my father rather than letting him have his way. Why didn’t she just realize that he was not going to change? He couldn’t. She stood beside me and I knew that she wanted to return to the living room. Her eyes kept looking in the direction of the door. I hoped she would stay to comfort me. But, she didn’t.

“You’ll be all right,” she said and left the room.

On one summer evening, I was in my bunk again and the fighting in the living room was getting louder and louder.

“God damn it, Joanie. I can’t take it any more! I should just kill myself,” my father threatened.

“Oh, John. Suicide is your excuse for everything. You have serious issues.”

My heart pounded, but this time sharp pains jolted my chest and I thought that I was going to have a heart attack at age nine. Rather than telling my sister to go get Mom, I climbed out of my bunk and slowly walked into the living room. My father paced back and forth and his calloused hands pointed at my mother. She sat on the edge of the couch. I saw the fear in her eyes, but I knew that, in her mind, she needed to pretend to be strong. They did not even notice that I had walked into the room. I stood for a moment near the hall and then went and sat on the organ stool.

“Fuck this,” my father screamed, his face about to explode.

“You are out of control,” my mother said to him.

“You make me feel out of control!” he accused her.

Finally, they realized that I was there in the middle of them and my mother asked, “Jennifer, what is the matter?”

What was the matter? Was it not obvious?

I looked at them both and said, “I can’t stand you fighting anymore. My heart hurts when you fight.”
My parents seemed touched. They thought I meant that my heart was breaking because they were fighting. But that wasn’t what I meant at all. I meant that my heart literally hurt. I don’t think I ever clarified that.

* * * * *

After my sister made the connection between my panic attacks as a child and as an adult, it began to make perfect sense to me.

“Yeah, I had forgotten,” I said to my sister. “The panic attacks feel a lot like when I was a child.” My mother laughed and told me I was melodramatic. Perhaps I am. Or perhaps my mom doesn’t realize that I might possibly deal with stress now the same way I did when I was a nine-year-old girl. But then, for her to realize that would be to admit that she played a large part in the dysfunction of our family.

So, I suppose I am melodramatic. I guess I must do it for attention. I must be selfish and probably do think only of myself. But, someone has to. For my mother, any attention is bad attention. “Don’t draw attention to yourself,” she says. In other words, “Don’t draw attention to our fucked up family.”

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Acting Lessons

We are all crazy; some of us have simply learned to act like we are not. The phrase my mother used most in referencing me as a child and teenager was: ‘You cannot act like that!’ Usually it followed my “acting out” against the rules she had taught me—my script. I heard it frequently as a child and teenager. I was a horrible actor. I questioned all the rules and norms that were acknowledged in most families. I refused to abide by them most of the time. But, I have an excuse, you see, because it was my parents who taught me how to act inappropriately. They gave me my acting lessons—and free of charge.

I was usually the sibling who would chase my sister around the house with butcher knives and fragile glasses poised to throw at her face. (There were a few times when she pursued me.) I would lie in
wait outside the bathroom door for hours knowing that my sister would eventually have to surrender and open the door from her hiding place. If knives were the weapons of choice that day, I would often sling them violently under the doorway at her feet hoping to see blood. I would lie down flat on my stomach in the hallway peering under the space beneath the door to watch for feet. Of course, she learned to sit on top of the vanity, so I could not see her. But, I was patient and I knew that she would eventually have to get down from the vanity, and then, I could attack. These battles were eventually called short because my mother would come home to free Christy from the bathroom and I was usually punished after a loud lecture.

“You cannot act like that!” my mother would try to convince me.

“She started it,” I argued.

“I don’t care. You are the one throwing knives under the doorway.”

If I ever fought with my brother, he would look me in the face and say, “You are psycho. Something is wrong with you.” I always wondered if what he said was true? Was I an evil person? Was I filled with uncontrollable anger? Was I crazy? Did I have a chemical imbalance? Did my temper have the power to kill? I was sincerely worried about this and vowed to show my siblings that I could control myself. I tried to be nice to them. I gave peace offerings. I tried to prove to them that I wasn’t “crazy.” However, the next time something set off my temper, I was the first to grab a weapon and proceed in chase of my siblings.

My mother always rolled her eyes and said that I was overly dramatic and passionate.

“Pull yourself together, Jennifer!” she ordered. “You are acting irrationally.”

During my high school years the battle began between my mother and me. I was angry with her for remarrying, and I hated my stepfather. In fact, he hated us. The evening they told us that they were to be married, my soon-to-be stepfather refused to tell us in our own home. Instead, he made us sit in his car as he and my mother shared their news. I knew even then that he needed to have the home field advantage. I was devastated when they told me. I didn’t trust him, and the following years would reveal
why. Once they were married, we all moved into an apartment while he and my mother looked for a home. They were happy because they were beginning their lives together. We were unhappy because he was now a part of our lives. Once my mother married her new husband, her relationship with us changed dramatically. She no longer spent time with us, but was completely absorbed in her new husband. My mother’s emotional state was beginning to show signs of instability, partly because she now had to choose between her husband and children, but more seriously because she was beginning to suffer a premature menopause. Her decisions and actions were erratic and unpredictable. At one moment she was sobbing and emotional and the next she was screaming at us. I took this as a direct attack that we were intruders in her new life, so I treated her as if I didn’t need her. And, I believed that I didn’t. This began our long battle of wills, which almost cost me my relationship with her.

I was a sophomore in high school when I began to work for my own money and began purchasing my own clothes. I had bought a new dress, which my mother refused to allow me to wear.

“It cuts too low in the front,” she said. “You are taking it back.”

“No I’m not,” I defended myself. “I bought it and it only looks like it is cut low.”

(I was born with a bone defect called “funnel chest,” which caused a large indentation in my chest, and which I later would realize caused my heart murmur, panic attacks, and heart palpitations. I was always proud of this “dip” because it gave the false illusion of cleavage, but my mother hated it and I was not allowed to wear things that my sister could wear without any problem.)

“You are not wearing it and that is final,” my mother affirmed her authority over me.

I did as my mother confessed to doing when she was a teenager with her clothes in high school—I snuck the dress to school in a bag. My mother somehow found me out and confronted me in my bedroom after school.

“Did you wear that dress to school?” my mother asked standing as close to me as possible. She didn’t want my stepfather to hear our argument.

“Yes,” I replied proud that I had pulled it off.
“You deliberately defied me!” she hissed.

“I bought the dress with my own money and nothing is wrong with it!” I yelled at her.

Then, my mother pushed me hard into the corner of my room.

“You will obey me,” she demanded, “or I will send you away.”

“What is the difference from that and what we have now?” I asked sarcastically.

“That is it. I am calling the police. If I can’t handle you, the detention center can.”

“Ha!” I laughed at her.

My mother picked up the phone and began pretending to dial a number. She thought that I believed her, but I didn’t. When I didn’t react to her actions in fear, this made her even more angry. She slammed the phone down and came toward me again.

“If you touch me again, I will call the police,” I threatened her. “You will not treat me like this.”

My mother must have believed my threat because she left my room. I had triumphed over her. She threatened to send me away on her own will, but my threat meant I could be taken away from her against her will. When she left my room, I knew that she had only been bluffing.

To get back at me, she did the only thing she knew that would get my attention. She took things away from me. Usually it was my phone. Of course, as a teenage girl, this was devastating, but when she realized that this wasn’t working as she planned, she took a different approach. She began cutting things away from school. In high school, I was involved in everything I could possibly get involved in: student government, yearbook, clubs, theatre, and so on. I made excellent grades, was highly involved, and I won numerous awards for my work. Secretly, my mother hated it. She hated the fact that I was so well liked at school and I acted so horribly to her at home. She learned quickly to attack me where it really hurt.

As our battle progressed, I found my escape in high school. My junior year, I was chosen for Girl’s State, a high honor for any female student. My sister had been chosen the year before I was, and I was thrilled to be proving myself next to my sister. When my sister was chosen, my mother told everyone. It was a huge affair. It was like the Nobel Peace Prize in my mother’s eyes. Her first-born
daughter (and I believed her favorite) was brilliant and perfect. However, when I was chosen, there was no celebration. My mother said nothing. She didn’t brag about me to anyone. I received no praise or congratulations. Looking back, I think she must have known her plan from the very beginning. As the school year continued and the day for me to go grew nearer, my mother refused to acknowledge my honor. Then, after all plans were made and there were only a few weeks left until the date, my mother revealed her plot. Because she felt that I acted one way at home and another at school, she refused to let me go. Not only was I not allowed to go, but she demanded that I go to my guidance counselor to tell her why I couldn’t go. I was bitterly angry. I believed that my mother’s phase would pass and she would realize her irrational punishment. However, she didn’t. I was forced to tell my guidance counselor and she found an alternate to go in my place. I hated my mother for what she had done. I refused to talk to her. And, she finally felt like she had gotten me back for my threat to her. I could not call the police for her not allowing me to go to Girl’s State. She knew this, and she must have believed that she taught me a lesson. She thought that I was pretending to be something I was not at school; therefore, she wanted to expose my pretense and force me to act the same way at both home and school. This never worked, and it wasn’t until many years later (after her divorce from my step dad) that she apologized for not allowing me to go.

What was interesting to me in all of this between my mother and me is that I felt that she was the one who was acting. All my childhood I grew up in a home where we chased each other with butcher knives, threatened to commit suicide, and all the while yelled at the top of our lungs. None of us acted “normal.” But when my mother remarried she wanted to leave all of that behind and pretend that none of it had happened. She wanted us to forget our father and to act correctly for our stepfather. The irony in all of this is that she was the one who taught us to act a certain way despite the reality of our home lives. It was her constant fear of exposing our family for who we really were. She fought for years to hold the illusion (her illusion) together, and I finally felt victorious when it all shattered before her eyes.
(Birth)motherhood

Whenever I tell someone that I am a birthmother, I get the stare. Huh? They either have no clue what it means or they look at me as if I have an incurable disease. ‘A birthmother? What is that?’ In this age of pro-choice, the third choice, and perhaps most unpopular one, is still perceived as the unthinkable. “How could you give your child to someone else?” “Why did you do that?” “Don’t you regret doing it?” Or, my personal favorite: “I could never do that!” Upon signing our rights away, birthmothers should be given tazer guns, and anytime someone says something completely ignorant, we should reserve the right to zap them. So, I get the stare often, and I can usually always guess what people are thinking: “But, she looks so normal. She doesn’t look like a birthmother at all.” What does a birthmother look like anyway?

I’ve heard (from people like Rosie O’Donnell) that birthmothers typically are drug addicts, alcoholics or people living in extreme poverty who are already raising seven kids and can’t afford another one. You see, I am told that birthmothers are unfortunate girls that need the help of people better capable of raising children. Although there are birthmothers that are in adverse situations, I could provide a line-up of birthmothers that would debunk this stereotype: midwives, nurses, doctors, accountants, public speakers, business-owners, and the list goes on. Nevertheless, I am one of those birthmothers, those women that could at any time “snap and steal back their babies in the middle of the night.”

When I was around seven months pregnant, my mother and I were shopping for clothes at a maternity store when the cashier asked me if I would be breastfeeding or not. (I think they were passing out literature on the benefits of breastfeeding). So, I simply replied ‘No’ because, first of all, it was none of her business, and second, because I wanted to avoid the stare. When the woman recommended that I at least take the literature to read at home, my mother icily replied, “My daughter has chosen to place her child for adoption.” The woman’s mouth dropped. She said nothing and quickly handed our bags to us. I was humiliated, both because the woman had no way of knowing and because my mother was treating me like a child, as if I was unable to make my own decision in how to answer. My mother, on the other hand, was in protection-mode and was prepared to attack anyone who said anything to hurt me. After we
left the store that evening, my mom called back to talk to the manager, which ironically was the same woman. My mother told her that she shouldn’t assume that every woman is planning to parent and that there are some women, regardless of age, that choose adoption. When my mother confessed to the phone call, I was mortified. Certainly to me, this verified that not only my mother, but the woman in the store, were treating me as a child and disregarding me from any conversation about my decision. The poor woman simply told my mother that she had never heard that response before and was in shock. After that incident, I vowed never to deny my decision or my son.

My promise didn’t stick, however. Weeks pass where I feel that I deny my son on a daily basis. Any time I meet someone and they ask me if I have any children, my answer is usually “No.” It takes too much energy to explain the entire situation. On the rare occasion that I do share my son with someone, my explanation usually takes the form of:

I have a son. I am not parenting him, but I have a son. He is adopted. I am a birthmother. I became pregnant my senior year of college and gave birth the following November. I didn’t want to marry his father and wasn’t ready to parent him, so I placed him in an open adoption. I spent three days with him in the hospital and he went home on the third day after his birth. I chose his parents. I get letters and pictures regularly and talk to my son on the phone every few months, sometimes more often. I saw him three times the first year of his life and have seen him once at Christmas every year since. I am completely in love with him and his parents. Our relationship is built on trust. I trust them to raise my child and they trust me to be a part of his life. I am active with a group of birthmothers who have all placed children in open adoptions and I have found that through openness, I am better able to deal with my choice. Seeing him (even in pictures) affirms my decision to place him and eases my pain.

The spill usually follows this format, sometimes altered in minor places. I have it down to a fairly small speech, less than a minute long, simple and listener-friendly. Sometimes I wish I could have it tattooed
on my forehead so I would simply have to point at it rather than say it. I must admit that my heart is usually not in the telling. I’m sure this comes across to so many people as regret. And, of course many of us regret. But, usually it is that I am just so tired of explaining. Why can’t I simply say ‘No’ when people ask and move on? For me I think it means more than simply denying my son. The more detrimental result is denying myself. So, each time I deny him, I lose a sense of pride in who I am as a woman.

This idea is further complicated by motherhood. Yes, I am a birthmother, but am I a mother.? Technically, yes I am. But, am I a parenting mother? No, I am not. So, am I a mother or aren’t I? If I am not parenting my son, can I still be a mother to him? The tradition of Mother’s Day proves that I am not. If I go to church with my mom on Mother’s Day and the pastor asks for all the mothers in the congregation to stand up, do I stand? I gave birth. I have the three-inch scar and stretch marks to prove it. But, can everyone else (other than my family) in the congregation affirm my motherhood? No. They do not consider me a mother. Mothers stay up all hours of the night with crying babies. They change diapers, give endless feedings, burp, discipline, and nurture their children. I have done none of these for my son. Yet, I call him my son. Birthmothers reclaimed their place as mothers to their children by adopting Birthmother’s Day. Chosen as the day before Mother’s Day, this day proves that we are first-mothers and that other women are mothering because of us. In this environment alone are we completely understood. Outside of these walls, we are told that “Time will heal” or that “We can always have other kids.” Suppose time will heal and suppose we will have other kids. But when someone asks, “So, how many kids do you have?” should we answer only for the children we are parenting or should we include our birth children?

Being a birthmother is a complicated issue. Once you begin to pass through one phase, another more challenging one awaits you. There has been the rare occasion that I meet someone and tell them about my son and they praise me. I am always leery of these people. “You are the most unselfish person I have ever met,” they say. “Birthmothers are complete angels.” Depending on the person, I try my
hardest not to reveal that “unselfish” and “angel” never entered my mind when either conceiving my child
or choosing his adoption. Much of my decision was selfish. I was not ready to mother a child. I chose
not to marry his father. These are decisions that I chose thinking of how they would affect my life, not
someone else’s. I have found that these types of people tend to romanticize human beings. These are the
same types of people that call dead people saints, no matter how un-saintly they were. I am a woman. I
conceived my son knowing the consequences of failed protection. I thought first about abortion. I knew
that despite the help from family and friends, this was ultimately my life. I knew the hardships of single-
motherhood. I saw it in many of my friends and did not desire it for myself. My responsibility upon
choosing adoption then was to take excellent care of my body and to find a home for my son.

This is not to say that my decision to place was not difficult. It was terribly challenging. I cried
non-stop for two years. Two years of weekly counseling was the only reason that I made it through the
grief-work. For a year after placement, I felt like I was walking through a fog. It was much like going
under for surgery and losing time. The night I placed my son in his adoptive mother’s arms, I began
losing time. I lost an entire year of it. The depression was so intense, I didn’t want to live. I hoped for
cars to hit me as I walked across streets. I prayed that someone would break into my apartment and
murder me. Knowing the great burden this was taking on my body (my hair finally began turning a
perfect white), I wished that my heart would finally give up and I would have a heart attack. Although I
knew that my decision would come at a great cost to my emotional state, I had no idea how great that cost
would be. Numerous times I have wondered if it was worth what I go through on a daily basis. I am still
not sure. Birthmotherhood is like a ghost. It follows you around no matter how much you may try to
forget it. There is no forgetting. Every time you watch the news, speak to a friend, read a book, see a
sign . . . you are reminded that you are a birthmother. And in the new age of open adoption, even
openness has all sorts of problematic issues. When I see my son on visits and we are playing with his
trains or Hotwheels, I look at him and have to remind myself, “That is my son. That is my son.” It is a
surreal experience to touch him and to internalize the fact that I gave birth to him. I don’t think it ever completely sinks in for me. And, I wonder if it ever will.
CHAPTER II

Truth and Lying: “. . . ‘truth’ was always the best place to lie.”

TRUTH IN AUTOBIOGRAPHY

In her article, “Construing Truth in Lying Mouths: Truth-telling in Women’s Autobiography,” Sidonie Smith asserts that women have redefined truth. When applied to women’s autobiography, truth no longer maintains its traditional meanings. Smith writes:

At its simplest perhaps the question of truth telling asks us to ponder the relationship of the autobiographer’s text to her experience . . . This experience is of two kinds, the specific lived experience of the actual woman, the autobiographer whose name appears on the title page, as well as the shared experience of a commonality termed “women.” Since that experience has been culturally silenced in patriarchal culture the task of the autobiographer is to give voice to the “truth” of that great unspoken through the text. “Experience” is the “truth.” And sexual “difference” itself is the core of that “experience.”

Clearly, the fact that “she” is a woman creates a distinctly different experience. Women’s autobiography no longer upholds the traditional definition of truth (telling the whole truth about a man’s life); rather, truth becomes a woman’s experience. Conventional autobiography only offered one version of the ‘truth’—an androcentric version that was essentially false because it suggested a coherent self. Revisions of the traditional form expose this “whole” self (either male or female) as a myth and an impossibility.

40 Smith, 37.
Contemporary women’s autobiography does much of this revision work, disrupting the norms of traditional autobiography and exposing truth as a construction. This new mode of writing seems to question all theories of truth. It shows the impossibility of telling the truth about a “whole” self, because, for women especially, this is impossible given that their subjectivities are fragmented. This fragmentation makes it impossible to write the whole self because women do not see themselves as rigidly defined. There is no one “I” for women. Rather, there are various roles and identities subscribed to and claimed by them. Throughout history, men have had the privilege of creating their own identities. In contrast, women were forced to accept the identities subscribed to them, and only recently in our cultural history have they been given space to form their own. If women were to attempt to write a whole self, that self would surely appear even more false. They must make the concept of truth their own, rewriting it to fit their own identities and histories. For women, truth appears when their and the genre’s ‘constructedness’ is revealed.

Rethinking our definitions of truth brings us to the problematic binary of fact/ fiction or non-fiction/ fiction. Women writing their own autobiographies render this binary false because they expose the underlying problems of truth. The binary functions by placing both non-fiction and fiction as opposites. Therefore, non-fiction cannot be fiction, and fiction cannot be non-fiction. Non-fiction, traditionally speaking, can be found in memoir or autobiography, a place where the “entire” truth is told and no lies appear. Fiction, on the other hand, usually emerges in literary texts that employ narration and contain fictional characters. Here, lies are expected and are not even considered lies because truth isn’t demanded of fictional characters. When we look at women’s autobiography, we realize that women attempt to blur the distinctions, showing that it is impossible for autobiography to maintain its traditional definitions of truth because autobiography’s very nature requires construction. In fact, women argue that truth is in the construction.
In his article “Autobiography and the Cultural Moment,” James Olney acknowledges the findings of the French critics Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Roland Barthes, Jacques Lacan, and American critics Jeffrey Mehlman and Michael Ryan, who state that it is the discursive act itself that is important. Olney reports that in the act of writing:

. . . [T]he text takes on a life of its own, and the self that was not really in existence in the beginning is in the end merely a matter of text and has nothing whatever to do with the authorizing author. The self, then, is a fiction and so is the life, and behind the text of an autobiography lies the text of an “autobiography”: all that is left are characters on a page, and they too can be “deconstructed” to demonstrate the shadowiness of even their existence. Olney suggests that it is in writing that the life (that the autobiographer is writing about) and the self take form. It is in this discursive practice that the “true” self exists; therefore, for Olney, the actual writing of experience is the truth. Olney would argue that the “I” on the page is the self and that the self did not exist prior to the writing. Perhaps his claim is too extreme. It seems that for women (or any marginalized people) there must be some importance given to the author as well as the self she creates in her writing.

Sidonie Smith attempts to find this balance. She revises Olney’s claims, suggesting that the written self is an approximation:

The autobiographer is the self-historian, autobiography representation. Purporting to reflect upon or re-create the past through the processes of memory, autobiography is always, multiply, storytelling: memory leaves only a trace of an earlier experience that we adjust into story; experience itself is mediated by the ways we describe and interpret it to others and ourselves; cultural tropes and metaphors which structure autobiographical

42 Olney, 22.
narrative are themselves fictive; and narrative is driven by its own fictive conventions about beginnings, middles, and ends. Even more fundamentally, the language we use to “capture” memory and experience can never “fix” the “real” experience but only approximate it, yielding up its own surplus of meaning or revealing its own artificial closures.43

According to Smith, the “I” in the writing and the self from the past do correspond. Unlike Olney, she believes that the experience of the past self is important to the written self. Truth, for Smith, lies in a woman’s experience and in how she chooses to interpret and understand that experience. Rather than keeping with Olney’s views, which does not acknowledge the autobiographer’s past experiences, Smith is able to find a middle ground.

LYING IN AUTOBIOGRAPHY

If problems lie in locating a “true” self in autobiography, surely locating the “true” story is just as problematic. The text itself is bound to be untruthful. I may suggest, however, that the written story may represent a ‘greater truth’ despite numerous inconsistencies, errors, or lies. I do not mean this in the same sense as Georges Gusdorf who believes that truth lies at the core of every man:

The significance of autobiography should therefore be sought beyond truth and falsity . . .

It is unquestionably a document about a life, and the historian has a perfect right to check out its testimony and verify its accuracy. But it is also a work of art, and the literary devotee, for his part, will be aware of its stylistic harmony and the beauty of its images.

It is therefore of little consequence that the Mémoires d’outretombe should be full of errors, omissions, and lies, and of little consequence also that Chateaubriand made up most of his Voyage en Amérique: the recollection of landscapes that he never saw and the description of the traveler’s moods nevertheless remain excellent. We may call it fiction or fraud, but its artistic value is real: there is a truth affirmed beyond the

43 Olney, 34-35.
fraudulent itinerary and chronology, a truth of the man, images of himself and of the world, reveries of a man of genius, who, for his own enchantment and that of his readers, realizes himself in the unreal.44

Certainly, Gusdorf’s position on truth in autobiography is more closely aligned with traditional autobiography, which typically claims to tell the whole truth about a man. Of course, he recognizes that, in telling one’s story, a person must rely on memory, which is slippery and inevitably requires construction in order to recreate. However, it seems that he still clings to a notion of the self that is, in a sense, whole. Gusdorf wants to show the insignificance of the facts, not that the entire recreation of the man is false. He asserts that men are capable of reshaping themselves as unified beings:

The author of an autobiography gives himself the job of narrating his own history; what he sets out to do is to reassemble the scattered elements of his individual life and to regroup them in a comprehensive sketch. The historian of himself wishes to produce his own portrait, but while the painter captures only a moment of external appearance, the autobiographer strains toward a complete and coherent expression of his entire destiny.45

Contemporary women’s autobiography, on the other hand, exposes the impossibility of a unified being or a unified story. Women tend to illustrate both that the self and the story are constructions. The autobiographer disrupts the facts of the life, sabotaging any possibility for a “true” life story. Women’s autobiographies, then, more closely represent that of the painter’s portrait, a fragmented sketch of numerous brush strokes. Women do not see themselves as unified beings; therefore, they cannot write themselves as such. Furthermore, often when women write autobiography, they reveal that non-fiction must use construction and that construction often employs lying. Thus, women confess their lies as a means of showing the impracticality of telling the complete truth. Lying is a means of exposing the slipperiness of the genre and showing that the non-fiction/fiction binary is not rigidly set.

44 Gusdorf, 43.
45 Gusdorf, 35.
For women, lying becomes the mode of telling, so autobiographies are purposefully crafted with lies. We cannot say this of traditional autobiography. Even Gusdorf questions whether these lies really matter, wondering how they affect the “truth”? He claims that “. . . in autobiography the truth of facts is subordinate to the truth of the man, for it is the first of all the man who is in question. The narrative offers us the testimony of a man about himself, the contest of a being in dialogue with itself, seeking its innermost fidelity.”46 Although Gusdorf argues that these unintentional errors are not of primary importance to the autobiography, women autobiographers show that these inconsistencies are quite significant. They are consistent with truth in that they depict reality more truthfully than any claim of a “complete” self. This is why many women intentionally lie in their own writing. For them, the concepts of truth and lying are not always taken so literally. Women attempt to redefine them in their own ways. While some women lie because they feel they must in order to create a good story, others feel that lying is the only way they can truly portray themselves.

Truth, then, becomes something metaphorical. For some women it is how they wish to be understood in their narrative; it can be the shared experience or the experience shared; or it can be the truth they find in uncovering the slipperiness of truth. Lying, in its plural sense, is connected to truth because it is often considered its opposite. Women wish to blur the two and disrupt their placements on opposite ends of the spectrum. Mary McCarthy and Lauren Slater are two female autobiographers who do just this. They question the ways in which both truth and lies surface in autobiography. Finally, they reveal that it is impossible to tell the “truth” (in the traditional sense of the term) in autobiography because it requires construction.

TRUTH AND LYING IN MEMORIES OF A CATHOLIC GIRLHOOD

In her autobiography Memories of a Catholic Girlhood, Mary McCarthy claims to lie primarily to fill the gaps in her memory. Her lack of memories is due to the premature death of her parents that left her without her complete story. McCarthy is unable to recreate her early life with her parents. She writes

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46 Gusdorf, 43.
in the first few pages of her autobiography of her failure to recall memories because she is an orphan: “The chain of recollection—the collective memory of a family—has been broken.” From the start, McCarthy confesses the impossibility of telling a complete story due to the fact that she has so few memories and because her parents cannot confirm those memories. Leigh Gilmore discusses this problem in her article “Policing Truth: Confession, Gender, and Autobiographical Authority.” She uses the example of the game “Truth or Dare,” claiming that, for her, “truth” was always “the easier choice” because “in the absence of witnesses who could deny or corroborate my answer, ‘truth’ was always the best place to lie.” This analogy is especially interesting in light of McCarthy because certainly she has no one to validate her memories. Essentially, she could tell us anything she wanted and we would have no choice but to believe her. There is no one to hold her accountable to a “true” story. Her orphan-hood makes her fragmented, and she tries to piece together the few memories that she has. Realizing the impracticality of creating a coherent self, McCarthy creates her narrative by lying and by fusing together memories. Both are an effort, in some way, to get at her self; however, she also calls into question what the true self is. For example, in fusing memories she suggests that she can at least construct something, yet she also admits that her fused stories are only related because she has connected them. Certainly, because she has no one to corroborate her memories, the “real” story is left ambiguous or unclear.

Recalling her childhood practice of lying, McCarthy confesses that she lied to gain the approval of other people. She argues that it was her Uncle Myers’s erratic behavior that taught her this: “We knew not when we would offend, and what I learned from this, in the main, was a policy of lying and concealment; for several years after we were finally liberated, I was a problem liar.” McCarthy refers to the years she spent at her grandparent’s house after she is taken from her Aunt Margaret and Uncle Myers. It is then that McCarthy’s problem lying begins:

47 McCarthy, 10.
48 Gilmore, 54.
49 McCarthy, 62.
Whatever I told them was usually so blurred and glossed, in the effort to meet their approval . . . I hardly know whether what I was saying was true or false. I really tried, or so I thought, to avoid lying, but it seemed to me that they forced it on me . . . my whole life was a lie, it often appeared to me, from beginning to end . . .

Clearly, the pressure of winning her grandparent’s approval is the most important thing at stake for the young McCarthy. Perhaps her status as an orphan compounds this problem. To the young McCarthy, lying is connected to acceptance. The fact *that* she lies is important to her identity, but what is most important is that she lies *well*.

Her need for approval can also be seen when McCarthy desires the friendships of the two most popular girls in her Catholic school. She wants more than anything to be recognized by her classmates, so she pretends to lose her faith. However, when the priest discusses her doubts with her, it is through this conversation that she really *does* begin to doubt her faith. McCarthy writes, “The awesome thought struck me that perhaps I had lost my faith. Could it have slipped away without my knowing it? ‘Help me, Father,’ I implored meekly, aware that this was the right thing to say but meaning it nevertheless.”

It is through her pretense and need for attention that McCarthy finally loses her faith for good even though she had not intended it in the beginning. Then, although she no longer believes, she must pretend to get her faith back in order to stay in school at the convent. McCarthy never considers the consequences of lying beforehand. Rather, her first concern is acceptance. This experience, prompted only by her wish to gain friends, ironically causes her to lose her faith, which, as we can clearly see from her title, she recognizes as an influence on her identity.

Interestingly, even when McCarthy attempts to tell the truth, she is often forced into telling lies. They become expected of her. We can see this when she cuts her leg during the night and one of the nuns in the convent mistakes her for starting her period. When McCarthy tries to correct the nun to tell her that

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50 McCarthy, 161.
51 McCarthy, 110.
it was simply a cut, the nun will not listen to her. McCarthy writes, “[s]he appeared to have grown deaf, as the nuns had a habit of doing when what you were saying did not fit in with their ideas.” Then every month afterwards McCarthy was forced into pretending that she really had begun her period. She would reopen her scar in order to draw enough blood to convince the nuns that she really had her period, and at this point there was no way for her to confess her lie to the nuns because the lie was too advanced. McCarthy comments on her predicament, “[t]here I was, a walking mass of lies, pretending to be a Catholic and going to confession while really I had lost my faith, and pretending to have monthly periods by cutting myself with nail scissors; yet all this had come about without my volition and even contrary to it.” Although McCarthy claims that she doesn’t necessarily want to lie and hates living the lie from month to month, she feels the convent has forced the lie upon her. She “fears” that confessing her lie would have far greater consequences, so she simply lives in it because it is what the nuns want to believe. In his book, *Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography*, Timothy Dow Adams suggests that when McCarthy excuses herself of lying, she “implies that a truthful confession is not acceptable and that lying for the sake of others’ expectations is preferable.” This excuse is convenient for McCarthy because she is exempt from telling the “truth,” and she, ironically, pleases everyone in the process.

McCarthy’s purpose in lying throughout *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood* is to challenge the ideas of truth within the genre of autobiography. She questions whether or not autobiography can tell the complete truth of a person’s life. McCarthy’s autobiography seems to launch what we now know as the more playful and slippery contemporary women’s autobiographies. Certainly, McCarthy calls the genre of autobiography into question and reveals its problematic nature by using both chapters and inter-chapters. Writing her autobiography over approximately an eleven-year period, McCarthy first writes her

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52 McCarthy, 124.
53 McCarthy, 127.
55 Adams, 103.
chapters as narrative accounts. However, she later goes back to write inter-chapters that respond to all but one of the main chapters in the text. These inter-chapters, which confess to lies told in the regular chapters, illustrate that memory itself is slippery, especially when that memory cannot be corroborated by someone in authority. In her inter-chapter following “The Blackguard,” McCarthy writes, “This account is highly fictionalized . . . In short, the story is true in substance, but the details have been invented or guessed at.”

McCarthy’s unabashed honesty suggests the impossibility of retelling a memory without fictionalizing parts of the true or complete story. She guesses at the details of many of her stories because her memory fails her and because she is unable to narrate without lying. In her writing, partly because she wants to embellish and partly because she needs to embellish to write a good story, McCarthy admits to lying by adding pieces to the story that she doesn’t remember happening. In her inter-chapter following “The Figures in the Clock,” McCarthy discusses her inability to tell the “truth” by saying, “[t]his is an example of ‘storytelling’; I arranged actual events so as to make ‘a good story’ out of them. It is hard to overcome this temptation if you are in the habit of writing fiction; one does it almost automatically.”

McCarthy questions the possibility of creating a complete story in the form of autobiography, and, as an orphan, she is able to see that memory itself is unable to be recreated unless it is partly fictionalized. For her, truth is in her fragmentation. Because she is an orphan she is unable to tell the truth. Therefore, truth is found in saying that she cannot not lie.

In McCarthy’s search for truth she meticulous corrects or points out her narrative lies in her inter-chapters. The reader wonders why she spends so much time confessing them when she wants us to question whether the narrative is any less true than the factual story. Possibly because of her ex-Catholic guilt, she feels the need to confess that she has been unfaithful to her reader. Leigh Gilmore asserts that these inter-chapters are a “direct address to the reader” where McCarthy “challenges her own account, finds it accurate, and thereby preserves the structure of confession, with the self of the interchapters

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56 McCarthy, 92.
57 McCarthy, 153.
playing confessor to the self of the sketches.” McCarthy confesses her numerous mistakes to her readers, hoping that they will understand why she tells the stories the way she does. One example occurs when she realizes that she fuses two memories to fill the gaps in her memory and narrative. When she does this, she “appears” or pretends to become self-deprecating. In her chapter, “The Tin Butterfly,” she confesses, “The most likely thing, I fear, is that I fused two memories.” McCarthy “fears” that she has not been completely truthful. Her tone, here, seems quite facetious. She pretends to worry over her fictionalizations in the narrative. Comically, her inter-chapters can be looked upon as Catholic confessions in which she must retract from her lying to confess and be absolved of her sins. She acts as if she needs to set things right with her readers in the inter-chapters as if to gain their approval and understanding. However, even if she is teasing her readers, her inter-chapters still attempt to get back to a sense of truth. She illustrates the problematic nature of truth telling, yet she attempts to get at the “real” story through confessing her mistakes. Thus, her girlhood seems to best be understood by the influence of Catholicism. Her childhood and adulthood are both influenced by confession. She feels the need to confess; therefore, she must go back and tell where she has lied or misled the reader. In a sense, then, it seems that McCarthy can’t or hasn’t let go of her faith. Her life is still controlled by the ritual of confession. In his chapter on McCarthy, Adams suggests that her autobiography is “particularly complicated” because “she is working in a confessional form that she also wishes to mock. She is simultaneously trying to confess and to undercut the act of confession.” When we realize this, it makes sense that McCarthy titles her autobiography as she does. The truth for her is the impact of Catholicism on her girlhood. Perhaps McCarthy’s purpose is in showing how the act of confession forces one to get back to truth or attempt a coherent narrative. Although McCarthy tries this, her tone suggests that she

58 Gilmore, 70.
59 McCarthy, 79.
60 Adams, 88.
believes this is impossible. Her life and her religion do not agree. She cannot find coherence in her life because she is an orphan, fragmented and lacking her complete story.

TRUTH AND LYING IN *LYING*

Whereas Mary McCarthy carefully confesses to her skewed narrative, Lauren Slater never reveals the “truth” behind her lies in her fascinating yet problematic memoir, *Lying*. She is much less apologetic about her lies. Of course, we suspect immediately that she is lying because of the title of her memoir, but we are shocked when we realize Slater’s ease in playing with the conventions of autobiography. She destroys any pure notion of truth altogether, and she never offers answers to her story. Whereas McCarthy attempts to clean up after her mischievous self in the text, Slater allows her “self” to have her own way in the story. She begins her text with two words: “I exaggerate,” which stand alone to represent the entire first chapter.61 It is as if Slater forewarns us of the impending fictitious nature of the text. She explains her approach in *Lying* in the final words of the last chapter: “there is only one kind of illness memoir I can see to write, and that’s a slippery, playful, impish, exasperating text, shaped, if it could be, like a question mark.”62 Throughout the text, Slater’s confessed exaggeration and slipperiness force us to not only question her reliability as an autobiographer, but to question the reliability of the text itself in the genre of memoir. If she destroys the notion of truth in her text and if her text is completely dependent upon its slipperiness, can it still be considered memoir? After all, Slater never makes it quite clear what it is that she suffers from, whether it is epilepsy, schizophrenia, alcoholism, or some untold disease. In her second chapter, she states, “I have epilepsy. Or I feel I have epilepsy. Or I wish I had epilepsy . . . or . . . I am just confusing fact with fiction, and there is no epilepsy, just a clenched metaphor, a way of telling you what I have to tell you: my *tale*.”63 Clearly, Slater gives her reader no clear understanding of how to read her within the memoir, but perhaps this is exactly her purpose.

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61 Slater, 3.
62 Slater, 221.
63 Slater, 5-6, emphasis added.
Throughout *Lying*, she explains her “illness” as epilepsy, but from her confession in both chapter one and her contradictions in chapter two, we know not to take her story literally. In fact, she offers the hint that her epilepsy is simply a metaphor for something else. In her eighth chapter entitled “Amazing Grace,” she quotes Sally McFague’s *Models of God* in which McFague writes, “What a metaphor expresses cannot be said directly or apart from it, for if it could be, one would have said it directly. Here, metaphor is a strategy of desperation, not decoration.”\(^{64}\) That Slater chooses to include this suggests that she is unable to and has no intention of telling us what her metaphor of epilepsy alludes to in her text. Therefore, those readers who read to the end hoping for “the answer” to Slater’s illness are disappointed and perhaps confused. We never learn the “truth” about her disease, only that she claims to suffer from something. Even this claim could be a lie. However, readers experienced in the genre of autobiography understand that if the answer was told, the necessary gaps in the text would perhaps disappear and the text would lose its effect in contemporary women’s autobiography because part of its purpose is its slipperiness. So, rather than pinpointing her illness, Slater leaves the text open and incredibly problematic because, first, she *must* lie in order for the metaphor to work, but also because she both attempts to question the idea of truth and because she claims that she cannot help but lie due to her illness.

Throughout *Lying*, Slater exposes the problem of truth when illness is present. She writes, “Epilepsy shoots your memory to hell, so you take what I say, or don’t.”\(^{65}\) Here, similar to McCarthy’s loss of her parents and incomplete memory, Slater suggests that an *illness* has impaired her ability to tell memory truthfully; therefore, she should be exempt from the expectation of truth-telling. Furthermore, in this passage Slater poses the question: “What is truth?” She warns us that her memory is fallible, but she teases us by giving us a choice whether or not to believe her. Of course, we aren’t sure if we should trust her memory, but we desperately want to believe her because, at this point, we really like her and we wish to think that her illness is to blame. Clearly, we are unsure what to believe when she tells her reader

\(^{64}\) Slater, 169.

\(^{65}\) Slater, 24.
outright that the truth she tells may not necessarily imply fact. This ambiguity seems to be just what Slater wants, though. In offering us the choice to take her memories as truth or not, she suggests that either way it doesn’t necessarily matter.

Timothy Dow Adams discusses “truth” in autobiography, citing psychoanalyst Donald Spence who reports: “[n]arrative truth has a special significance in its own right . . . Making contact with the actual past may be of far less significance than creating a coherent and consistent account of a particular set of events.” Furthermore, he goes on to quote Janet Varner Gunn who says:

Truth lies in the story’s sufficiency: in its capacity to make sense of experience told, shared, and even made newly possible for both the teller and the hearer of the story. Just as the authorship of autobiography is tacitly plural, so the truth of autobiography is to be found, not in the ‘facts’ of the story itself, but in the relational space between the story and its reader.

It seems that what both Spence and Varner Gunn wish to relay is that the “real” truth in autobiography is found in the story and in the reader’s understanding of that story. This truth holds true for Slater. Whether we take her literally or figuratively, there is a “greater truth” of the self that hovers above the fragmented tales of her story, and this truth isn’t contingent upon the numerous inconsistencies of the text. This greater truth is how she wishes to be understood. I do not suggest, here, that the greater truth represents Slater in a unified sense. Rather, Slater writes in such a way that we never really find her at all. According to her, she cannot explain in words what it is she suffers from; therefore, she must use a metaphor that more truthfully portrays her self—a metaphor that ironically is a complete lie. Clearly, her purpose is in her playful ambiguity and in her slipperiness.

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66 Adams, 12.
67 Adams, 12.
According to Slater, her lies come more easily and should be expected because her ‘disease’ makes lying unavoidable. She confesses, yet gives reasoning for some of her lies in her sixth chapter, “The Cherry Tree”:

I told people my epilepsy had been caused by a rabid raccoon bite in my tenth year, how by the time they discovered the rabies it was too late for shots, and so they had split open my skull, let my infected brain swell to twice its normal size, Jesus, I don’t even remember the rest of that one . . . I told people more and more . . . And I felt bad, because, finally, lying is lonely . . . I told myself I could not help my lies, (a) because I was a genius, and (b) because I had the epileptic personality style, my brain more myth than matter.68

Although Slater admits her lies and seems to realize their negative effects upon her, she tells us that she simply can’t help herself. She must lie. Conveniently, her personality depends upon it.

Moreover, lying is expected of her. When she lies in order to attend Alcoholics Anonymous meetings, everyone in her group believes that she is truly an alcoholic. Because her illness is so closely related to those of an alcoholic, Slater attends the meeting hoping to find understanding. She finds her way into the group by discussing her disease in an abstract and metaphorical sense, so no one will find out that she is really not an alcoholic. Relating her illness to the life of an alcoholic, she says in one AA meeting:

I hid . . . through lies, but at the same time, every tale I told expressed a truth . . . You don’t need the details . . . You don’t need all the niggling facts. You don’t need to know that I drank this on one night, that on another, because those facts are irrelevant. The only thing that’s relevant is that I have a disease—no, that I have the disease, and I am here to be healed.69

68 Slater, 133.
69 Slater, 208.
However, Slater feels guilty for lying and for continuing to attend the meetings, so when she returns home, she drinks in order to ease her guilt for lying about being an alcoholic. She excuses her “lying” by saying that she didn’t literally tell a lie: “I’d spoken 99.9 percent correctly, except that I was describing another disease . . . But I still felt bad. I felt like a liar.”\textsuperscript{70} Then, at the next meeting when she attempts to tell the truth about her epilepsy and admit to the group that she is not, in fact, an alcoholic, they do not believe her. “‘Denial,’” a woman from the group says. “‘Denial always kicks in when we get too close to the truth.’”\textsuperscript{71} Therefore, Slater is held to her lie because even the “real” truth (that she is an epileptic and not an alcoholic) appears to the group as if she is diverting the truth that they know or Slater’s made-up truth (that she is an alcoholic). Whether she lies metaphorically or factually doesn’t matter here, because either way she is still a liar. And, this is exactly what Slater attempts to show.

For Slater, the lies are who she is. Therefore, by lying, she tells the truth. In her last chapter, Slater shows us the irony in her disease as she discusses her guilt from lying with her doctor. He replies, “Okay . . . You lied. But really, Lauren, I don’t want you to feel guilty. In one sense you lied, but in another sense you didn’t, because trickery is so hinged to your personality style, and, therefore, you were only being true to yourself.”\textsuperscript{72} It seems, then, that she “captures” herself in the truest sense possible. Sidonie Smith suggests that: “[w]hat pertains to something called ‘truthful’ might be the deployment of subjectivity in and through the text, the self-conscious elaboration of the only ‘truth,’ that is the ‘truth’ of ficticity of the ‘self’ and ‘identity,’ of the very ‘I’ that marks the page of autobiography.”\textsuperscript{73} Certainly, Slater’s truth is in her experience—that she suffers from a disease, a disease that keeps her from the truth. She suggests that it may not matter what the disease is. Her writing is an attempt to find meaning in her suffering. It is an attempt, not a goal, to make some sense out of a seemingly senseless life.

\textsuperscript{70} Slater, 208.
\textsuperscript{71} Slater, 212.
\textsuperscript{72} Slater, 202.
\textsuperscript{73} Smith, 39.
Before we can understand the use of metaphor as truth, Slater suggests that we must begin to reevaluate our traditional definitions of autobiographical truth. To do this, she purposefully exposes autobiography’s slipperiness as a genre. In her humorous chapter, “How To Market This Book,” Slater writes a memo to the Random House Marketing Department suggesting that they market her memoir as nonfiction although it contains non-truths, and so she attempts to disrupt the rigid distinctions between fiction and non-fiction. She writes in one of her numerous points in the memo, “For marketing purposes, we have to decide. We have to call it fiction or we have to call it fact, because there’s no bookstore term for something in between, gray matter. If you called it faction you would confuse the bookstore people.” In the same memo, she also claims that her purpose is “to ponder the blurry line between novels and memoirs” and she asks, “[s]o how do we decide what’s what, and does it even matter?”

Certainly, Slater’s tone is quite lighthearted; however, in a broader sense, she is also quite serious. She wishes to examine the standards of truth in autobiography in order to expose their paradoxical nature. Slater believes that constructing a story must employ fiction, and therefore it is impossible for her autobiography to remain literally truthful.

In fact, Slater deliberately plays with the characteristics of fiction throughout her memoir as if to show the blurred lines between the two genres. In her third chapter, it appears that she ends on one page with “the end” (clearly a characteristic of fiction); however, when you turn the page, she continues the chapter writing, “not quite. This is a work of nonfiction. Everything in it is supposed to be true . . . The real truth is . . .” When she picks up the chapter again, she attempts to clarify, or make more truthful, the story she narrates. Interestingly, though, is that even when she continues the story, she finally concludes the chapter by telling her reader how the story happened in her mind rather than in real life. This suggests that Slater expects her reader to ask which is more true: the version of the story as she

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74 Slater, 159.
75 Slater, 160.
76 Slater, 59-60.
wanted it to happen or the version which is perhaps more “factual.” Certainly, for Slater, it seems that the ambiguities are needed in order to tell herself more correctly.

Slater uses these ambiguities and lies throughout *Lying* in order to create gaps within the text and to reveal the impossibility of *not* lying in autobiography. She explores this idea in her memo to the publisher: “The neural mechanism that undergirds the lie is the same neural mechanism that helps us make narrative. Thus, all stories, even those journalists swear up and down are ‘true,’ are at least physiologically linked to deception.”

In her “Afterword,” although we might wonder if she will give the reader some insight into her real problems, she does not, but rather keeps the uncertainty in place. She writes, “In *Lying* I have written a book in which in some cases I cannot and in other cases I will not say the facts . . . What matters in knowing and telling yourself is not the historical truth, which fades as our neurons decay and stutter, but the narrative truth, which is delightfully bendable and politically powerful.”

Clearly, lying is crucial to Slater’s autobiography in both unavoidable and purposeful ways. She alludes to the greater truth within the narrative rather than the truth found in the factual or historical. Therefore, the insignificant lies embedded in the narrative are needed for the sake of telling a truthful story overall rather than in relaying facts exactly as they happened. Furthermore, the greater truth never fully locates the author. Rather, it simply stands as a metaphor for the way the author wishes to be read and understood. Slater could never reveal what her metaphor stands for because if she did, the text would lose its slipperiness. She is dependent upon the uncertainty of the text because it symbolizes who she is.

For both McCarthy and Slater, uncertainty and ambiguity appear to be the only “true” aspect of their works. They expose the lie of a true self and a true narrative. However, this seems incredibly problematic for the genre. If there is no such thing as truth, and it is decided that all narrative (and therefore autobiography) employs lying, what does the future hold for autobiography and memoir? What, then, keeps the genre from falling out of existence? This question is one that remains at the very heart of

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77 Slater, 164.
78 Slater, 219.
autobiography. Is there something essential to autobiography? For McCarthy and Slater, exposing the “untruth” of “truth” and writing themselves as they wish to be understood deem their works autobiographical. They also wish that their works be read as such. Even more than this, though, is that they see themselves as different. Their “truth” is unique. If they were to write in the traditional form, always trying to get at a unified or coherent self, it seems that they would only be mimicking that form. In fact, any coherence they create would be artificial. By rendering the non-fiction/fiction binary false, these women seek to write “truth” as they see it. They wish to expose the slipperiness and uncertainty of truth itself, themselves, and the genre of autobiography, always dodging confinement and striving for autonomy.

The Truth in Lying

From left to right: Christy, Jennifer, Joanie, Matthew, and John Maynard

My family taught me to lie, not in any specific or precise fashion, but in our very existence as a family. Our life was a lie. We lived one way at home and another in public. It was no wonder then that I learned this behavior and mirrored it in my own life. In fact, it must have been because of my parents that
I became such a habitual liar. Their lifestyle was my only model. Watching them taught me to live a contradictory existence. It also taught me that lying was expected and normal behavior. And, although my mother would never agree with me, it is what I saw at home that affirmed this. My habitual lying surfaced in every area of my life: with my siblings, parents, friends, teachers, and myself. And, I soon realized that although it got me into a lot of trouble, for the most part, it also got me out of a lot of trouble. I could lie better than any of my friends. Not that we had contests, but I could lie to them and carry the lie so far that even I didn’t know what was truth and what was fiction. I was a wonder when it came to lying—a lying prodigy. I would lie to my mother for hours, days, and even when she knew that I was lying, I would never give up my story. Once I had created my story, it got the stamp of “fact.” It became more true than reality.

Once I became a teenager, however, I chose to confess my lying to my mother during our arguments for the purpose of making her more angry. Usually, it was to show her that I could do something behind her back without her knowing it. It was like “rubbing it in her face,” so to speak. It drove my mother crazy, and, of course, I was punished for whatever I had done. For most of my high school years, I stayed grounded. This confused and angered me because I felt that, at least, I was honest about my lying. Shouldn’t I get a lighter sentence if I confess to the crime? My mother didn’t think so. She supported real lying—lies that she never found out about. Finally, after one of my confessions, my sister came to me and advised me to “keep my big mouth closed.”

“You wouldn’t get in nearly as much trouble if you would just shut up,” my sister advised me. “Your problem is that you announce your misbehavior for the whole world to see. How do you think I stay out of trouble?”

I had always thought my sister was my mother’s favorite, but my sister’s words revealed to me that she simply lied well and therefore looked innocent. I was overjoyed to find out that I wasn’t the only liar among my siblings. I had begun to think that I was the defective one. My sister’s words showed me that I needed to go back to my childhood ways of remaining faithful to my lies. Although I had to fight
the urge to confess them, for the most part, I picked up my old ways again pretty quickly. The problem, though, was that by this time, lying was expected of me. In fact, it seemed that my mother’s mission was to prove that I was a liar.

When we were still living in our apartment after my mother’s second marriage, I invited my cousin over to swim in the pool. There were three different pools in our apartment complex, all in separate locations on the grounds. There was a pool near our building that was designated as a family pool (this is where most kids swam), a pool for teenagers and adults at the far end of the complex, and an adult pool which was the farthest from our building on the other side of the complex. I had been to all of the pools numerous times and liked least of all the family pool, which, of course, was where my mother asked that I swim. Given that my cousin was spending the day with me, I planned for us to go to the adult pool where there were plenty of lounge chairs so that we could lay in the sun. My mother, however, had a slightly different plan in mind. She demanded before we left the apartment donned in our swim suits, sandals, and beach towels, that we go straight to the family pool and stay there the entire time. We did what I thought was fair to do. We went by the family pool and decided that there weren’t any chairs left for us, so we then went on to the adult pool. We swam for a few hours when my brother came through the iron gate of the adult pool to tell me that Mom wanted me home, “Now!” My cousin and I gathered our things and walked back home ready to defend ourselves.

When we walked through the front door, my mother’s expression implied disgust. She had checked to see if we had gone to the family pool and then sent my brother to find us. I felt betrayed. She didn’t say that she was checking on us to make sure we were alright; she said that she wanted to make sure we were where we said we would be. She must have walked back from the family pool with a smile on her face, knowing that she could then punish me.

“Jennifer, go to my room immediately,” my mother said calmly, not wanting to give herself away to my cousin.
I walked to the master bedroom and she followed, closing the door behind her. She grabbed a blanket from the bed and began stuffing it under the door to block the sound. Then, she made me walk back through the walk-in closet which had a separate door. Once through, she took a towel from the shelf and also stuffed it underneath the door. Then, she began looking through my step-father’s belts and chose a black leather one with a dingy, tarnished buckle. She told me to go through the door that led to the bathroom, and once we were both inside the bathroom, she shut the third door that separated me from my listening cousin. Jerking my towel off me, she placed it at the base of the door, situating it with her foot. I was standing only in my swim suit and sandals, still wet from the pool.

“You lied to me,” my mother whispered.

“Mom, there were no more chairs at the other pool,” I argued. “Jill and I wanted to lay out on the chairs.”

“You are a liar,” she said. “You knew that you were not going to go to that pool.”

I couldn’t say anything more. She threw back her arm and began beating me with the buckle end of the belt, from the top of my back to my knees.

“Mom! What are you doing?” I yelled, trying to break the dazed look on her face.

But she kept beating me, and with each sting of the leather on my wet skin, the buckle would finish off with a bruising pain. Once she had finished, she opened the door and then the door to the closet and sat down on her bed. With her eyes focused on the cream carpet, she began crying. I walked stiffly, clenching every muscle in my body through the doors and into her room.

“I’m so sorry, Jennifer. I shouldn’t have done that.”

I didn’t acknowledge her and walked out of her bedroom and into my own. My cousin saw the red marks that finally drew blood on my back and legs and called her mother to come pick her up. I went with her without asking permission from my mother.

Over the next few days the only other person I showed my bruises and welts to was another of my girlfriends, but within that same week I was called to the guidance office at my school. My sister and
The brother who were attending the same high school at the time were also called to the office. We were taken into a separate room where a woman sat at a round table. She asked us to sit down and began asking questions about our mother. My sister and brother were crying.

“They are going to take us away from her because of you,” my sister whispered, glaring at me.

“I really don’t care,” I said. “You aren’t the one with bruises all over your back.”

My sister and brother told the woman that I had disobeyed and deserved the punishment. They promised that my mother had never done this before. Then, they confessed that a few times our mother had slapped me across the face, but only when I deserved it. The woman thanked my sister and brother for their help and asked them to leave. I was left alone with her. She asked me to tell her what happened between my mother and me. I told her my version of the story as she sat with a puzzled look on her face. She asked me how many times I had been beaten in the past few months.

“This was the first time this has ever happened,” I told her.

“Well, what other things has your mother done to you?” she probed for more information, information that wasn’t really there.

“She slaps me in the face sometimes when I talk back to her,” I confessed.

“How often?”

“I don’t know. Not very often. She has probably only done it four times,” I said.

The woman began getting frustrated with me. Clearly, she thought that I was not telling her the full story. She finally stood up from the table and told me I was free to go. She seemed let down, like I had been a waste of her time. When I got home from school, my mother called me into her bedroom.

“I got a call today from Children Services. Do you know how serious this is?” she asked.

I said nothing.

“They could take you all away from me,” she said, tears rolling down her cheeks.

I stood staring at her.
“Jennifer, I promise you. What I did was so wrong and it will never, ever happen again. I don’t know why I did it. I was so mad at you for lying to me and I wanted to teach you a lesson. I promise you that I will never touch you again.”

“O.K.,” I said and walked out of her room.

We never heard from the woman again after that day at school. And my mother never touched me again. The woman from Children Services must have realized that mine wasn’t a serious case and that although my mother had beat welts and bruises into my entire backside, it probably wouldn’t happen again. Also, with my sister and brother affirming that I was a problem child, it was two against one. I was defeated by my two siblings who never experienced a violent touch from my mother. I must have simply deserved it. After all, the idea that it was a beating is all relative. Was it a beating or was it a punishment? And even if both my mother and I agree that it was a beating, would it have been a beating if she hadn’t gotten caught?

After this incident I often wondered if it was really as serious as my mother wanted me to think it was. Was she simply threatening me in order to keep me quiet? Would I really have been taken away from her? Should I have been? It seemed to me that my mother realized the seriousness of her actions because this incident exposed her. She could no longer pretend to be someone she was not. Through my one small lie, I exposed her lie of pretense, the pretense of our entire family. By showing my one girlfriend my wounds, I invited the world to take a real look at my family. “Look!” I screamed. “Look at our lie!”

Silent Treatment

Sex was a forbidden subject in our home. My mother never sat me down to explain what sex meant, and she never discussed it openly with me until the night I told her I was pregnant. In fact, this was the same evening that she finally told me that she became pregnant with my sister and thus married
my father. Obviously, we had all figured the math years ago, but it was the unspoken secret in our family. She had never even spoken those words to my sister. Sex didn’t happen in our family. It was something “other people” did, not us. It was dirty and sinful. Clearly, this stemmed from my mother’s own issues with sex. Only days after she had an emergency hysterectomy, my father forced my mother to have intercourse with him. She told me this many years later, but she never would have told me this when I was young because she would have had to talk about sex to do it. No, I learned about the act from my sister, whom my mother also never sat down to talk about the subject. In fact, I learned about sex after church one evening. My sister told me and a few of our girlfriends all about how the process worked. I was amazed. It was like nothing I ever imagined it to be. I was disturbed.

“When did Mom tell you?” I asked my sister.

“She didn’t. She laid this book on my bed and told me to read it and told me I could ask questions.”

The book was by James Dobson, a Christian counselor, and, if I remember correctly, the book was “How to Tell Your Kids About Sex.” So, the book was written to teach my mother how to talk to us about sex. The only problem was that she could never discuss it with us. Even she knew her own limits. She had been taught by her parents that sex was “dark” and “secretive” and now she was teaching this to us. So, she set a book, meant for herself, on my sister’s bed and left it for her to read alone. I guess my mother expected my sister to pass the knowledge on to me because I never received a book. Given my mother’s embarrassment and shame of the silent subject, we found other outlets to explore sex.

For me, this exploration came in having sex. I lived the lie of virginity. I’m sure my mother must have known, but as long as it was kept a secret, it was as if the lie didn’t exist. This was true in most cases. If you lived a “sinful” life and no one knew about it or discussed it, then it was as if the “sin” or lie didn’t exist. So, I lived a silently promiscuous life. Throughout high school and college, my mother still never mentioned sex in my presence, even after she told me that her second husband was cheating on her. Even when she told me about the pictures she found of my step-dad and his girlfriend,
this never led into a discussion about sex. Perhaps I could have initiated it, but I think I realized then that she was more uncomfortable than I was about the subject. I continued my lifestyle of silence. Then, I got caught—I got pregnant. My lie was exposed and I couldn’t keep silent any longer. After the initial shock wore off, I let out a deep ‘Aaaaah.’ I sighed because, boy, it felt good not to pretend any longer. I could be an “out of the closet” bonafide non-virgin, and it was great! I could get away with so much more now that I was impure. Nothing was expected of me. I was defiled! Now the burden would ride on my sister’s shoulders. I could pretty much get away with anything now.

However, after every high point, a low one usually follows. I chose not to get married and began making an adoption plan for my son. During all of this, I began to see a counselor. She recommended books on adoption, so I could “educate myself.” I read these and knew that I was supposed to be suffering from severe shame. That is exactly what I decided to feel. I would experience shame, although truthfully I really didn’t feel anything. Sure, shame surrounded my plan for adoption, but I didn’t feel guilty for having sex. Still, I knew what the books said, and so I decided that my case would proceed according to the books. Each week that I visited my counselor, I drove to the large Victorian home that held her office, and on the way there I decided what it was that I was “feeling” that week.

“How are you?” she would ask trying to read beneath my surface.

“I feel so much shame,” I said and burst into tears. Going through the grief that I had, I didn’t even have to force myself to cry. I just thought about it and the tears came. I used it to my advantage in my counseling sessions.

“I don’t know how I am going to gain the trust of my family again,” I lied to my counselor. She must have bought it all because we would spend the entire hour discussing how I could move past the shame into acceptance. I was amazed at my ability to ask questions that occupied the entire hour. Some weeks I would revert back to an old “feeling” because I knew that the stages of grief did not necessarily proceed in a progressive manner. Sometimes you had to repeat processes. I knew all of this and the books were my lifesavers. I couldn’t bear to tell my counselor who was spending so much of her time on
me that I felt nothing—absolutely nothing, zilch, nada. I was dead. This went on for my entire nine
months of pregnancy. Of course, there were occasional visits when I would work through my grief, but
for the most part I did that by myself, alone in my own apartment.

Then, after my son’s placement, my lying became much worse. Now I was referred to as a saint,
an angel. I had done something that was so “selfless.” My counselor told me this and, although I knew at
the time that she was simply trying to build up my self-worth, it had a far worse effect upon me. It was as
if everyone was looking at me like a saint—a Mother Teresa, reverted back to a “virginal” state. I was
mortified! Just when I began feeling a sense of freedom, I was captured again. And, even though the
chastity belt didn’t fit as tightly this time, it was still wrapped around me. So, I did what I had done
before. I began to live the lie of virginity again.

About four months after I placed my son for adoption, I met a guy. We’ll call him “Heath.” Heath was successful, good looking, and had a great sense of humor. We dated casually for about a
month before I realized he was a drug addict and an alcoholic. Within the next four months he sold all of
his belongings for crack, lost his riverfront apartment, and moved into a halfway house. By this time, I
was trapped. Although I knew that I could walk away, Heath gave me someone to think about other than
myself. I drove him to rehab; he called a cab and walked out. I went to AA meetings with him; he would
leave and relapse. Although I knew I couldn’t save him, I just wasn’t up to working on myself, so I
stayed.

Meanwhile, I still continued my counseling appointments like clockwork. I never told my
counselor about Heath. How could I? She now believed I was angelic. And, of course, I never told her
about our physical relationship. Doing that would have ruined my cover. It would have exposed my
silent lie. Instead, I continued to make up reasons for needing more counseling. At this point I was
growing tired from discussing adoption related problems, and it seemed that she was as well, so we began
discussing my family. I was in a complete fog in my grief. Again, I felt nothing, and it became difficult
trying to think of things on a weekly basis to discuss. I suggested we move on to my family. Now, this was much more interesting for me. This was fun!

Then, one day my counselor asked me who I had been seeing. How had she found me out? I had been so secretive. How could she dissect me when I was so overly-conscious of the dissecting process? I knew when she looked at me with a half-smile on her face that she thought she could see through me, and I knew that I had fooled her week after week. Now, my lie was exposed. She knew about Heath, and she knew that we had been seeing each other for quite a few months. However, I refused to give up the entire secret. Sure, we were casually dating, but nothing beyond that. That lasted a few weeks until I finally gave up the whole truth. Then, she knew that I was a real liar.

“Have you really been working through your grief?” she asked me as if she knew all along.

“Sure.”

“Hmmm. . .” she leaned back in her chair, her eyes squinting as if to tell me it was alright to be honest.

“You know, those adoption books are a bunch of bullshit,” I said to her. “Do you know that not one of those writers is a birthmother? One of them is even a man. And he is trying to tell me what is ‘normal.’ They are all full of shit.”

“They are licensed professionals, and they have spent their lives researching adoption triads,” she said wanting me to respond.

“How do you think they learn the information in their books, though? They listen to people like me who lie every week so we don’t have to tell them that we feel nothing—just blank space.”

My counselor was impressed. We were finally moving somewhere. I was breaking my silence. She had finally cracked me open and could see what was inside.
CHAPTER III

Women’s Selves as Connected and Fluid with Others: “Man must be an island unto himself.”79

[Autobiography] does not exist [in cultures where] the individual does not oppose himself to all others; [where] he does not feel himself to exist outside of others, and still less against others, but very much with others in an interdependent existence that asserts its rhythms everywhere in the community . . . [where] lives are so thoroughly entangled that each of them has its center everywhere and its circumference nowhere. The important unit is thus never the isolated being.80

In her article, “Women’s Autobiographical Selves: Theory and Practice,” Susan Stanford Friedman disagrees with this statement by Georges Gusdorf and, in fact, reverses his claims when they are applied to women, minorities, and non-western people. Using Lacan’s “Mirror Stage” in which a child first sees his reflection in the mirror and mistakes that false image for his/her real identity, Stanford Friedman argues against both Gusdorf and Olney who claim that once the child sees his reflection, he then sees himself as distinct from others. Stanford Friedman says that, in terms of women, minorities, and non-Western people, the self is not a separate or distinct identity. She further purports that everywhere Gusdorf claims autobiography does not exist, is precisely where it exists. She says, “[t]he very sense of identification, interdependence, and community that Gusdorf dismisses from autobiographical selves are key elements in the development of a woman’s identity, according to theorists like Rowbotham and Chodorow.”81


80 Stanford Friedman, 73. Here, Stanford Friedman quotes Georges Gusdorf.

81 Stanford Friedman, 75.
Citing both Nancy Chodorow and Sheila Rowbotham, Stanford Friedman shows how this interdependence works for women’s autobiography. According to the psychoanalytic approach of Chodorow, boys and girls form their identities differently because of the way they first relate to their mothers. Boys must break with their mothers and learn to look to their fathers (whose identities are more set and rigid) for their identities, while girls do not have to go through this break. Therefore, Stanford Friedman quotes Chodorow as saying, “growing girls come to define themselves a continuous with others; their experience of self contains more flexible or permeable ego boundaries. Boys come to define themselves as more separate and distinct, with a greater sense of rigid ego boundaries and differentiation.”

In their critical reader, *Women, Autobiography, Theory*, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson assert that according to Chodorow, “feminine personality comes to define itself in relation and connection to other people more than masculine personality does.” However, Smith and Watson expose the essentialism behind Chodorow’s claims, arguing that she assumes that there is a “universal girl” and a “universal boy” and she “ignor[es] the differences within communities.”

According to Stanford Friedman as well as Smith and Watson, Rowbotham does a better job of illustrating the importance of community in constructing women’s identities. Stanford Friedman quotes Rowbotham when she says, “A woman cannot . . . experience herself as an entirely unique entity because she is always aware of how she is being defined as woman, that is, as a member of a group, whose identity has been defined by the dominant male culture.” Rowbotham, like Lacan, also uses the metaphor of mirrors, only Stanford Friedman calls Rowbotham’s mirrors a “cultural hall of mirrors,” which act as the “reflecting surface of cultural representation.” When a woman looks at her image, it does not give

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82 Stanford Friedman, 77.
83 Stanford Friedman, 77.
85 Smith and Watson, 17.
86 Stanford Friedman, 75.
87 Stanford Friedman, 75.
her a sense of individual identity. Rather, the image she sees confirms that “isolate individualism is an illusion.”

Stanford Friedman claims that, according to Rowbotham:

[. . .] women can move beyond alienation through a collective solidarity with other women—that is, a recognition that women as a group can develop an alternative way of seeing themselves by constructing a group identity based on their historical experience . . . In taking the power of words, of representation, into their own hands, women project onto history an identity that is not purely individualistic. Nor is it purely collective.

Instead, this new identity merges the shared and the unique.

Clearly, Rowbotham’s theories seem to be more culturally relevant to both women and minorities. Based on her ideas, women’s identities are, in fact, constructed around their cultural communities, and these constructions are a response to culture rather than because “she” is “essentially” woman. Surely, then, when women write their histories through autobiography or memoir, they are bound to write themselves as more fluid than traditional male autobiographers. The history of women’s autobiography (even in the most contemporary women’s memoirs) depicts women’s interconnectedness by telling their stories through others (particularly family members), through their mothers (or mother-figures), through the lack or loss of others (in particular, the loss of parents), and through their communities and cultures.

SEEING OURSELVES THROUGH OTHERS

Having experienced the loss of both of her parents and attempting to write about them, Nancy K. Miller discusses women’s identities as being relational in her autobiography Bequest and Betrayal: Memoirs of a Parent’s Death. She writes, “As a reader of autobiography, I perform an awkward dance of embrace and rejection: He’s just like me, she’s not like me at all. As I write myself into and out of other stories . . . scenes from my personal history take on new significance. Can my story—or yours—

88 Stanford Friedman, 75.
89 Stanford Friedman, 76.
ever be more than that: a dialogue enacted with other selves?"91 Certainly, Miller is asking this question of many women autobiographers or women writing about their lives. Women’s autobiography is different from the understanding of traditional men’s autobiography in that women do seem to pose themselves with and against others to find their own identities. In her own text, Miller attempts to collapse the distinctions between autobiography (typically written about the self) and memoir(s) (typically written about others), arguing that there is no way to write about yourself unless you write about others. For her, both her parents are crucial to her understanding of herself. She cannot attempt to guess at her own self without first looking to them. She argues, “. . . memoirs are documents about building an identity—how we come to be who we are as individuals—and a crucial piece of that development takes place in the family.”92 This interconnectedness is obviously true for Miller. But, she conceives this for all women’s autobiography. Because women are more relational and maintain more fluid egos, their autobiographical writing is going to employ different means than the traditional form. In fact, according to Miller, it means that many women must write others into their works in order to write themselves in. She goes on to question how this “other-writing” affects the genre:

Every autobiography requires a coming to terms with the past and a revision of family history. Are these memoirs of a parent’s death autobiography? Producing an account of another’s life normally belongs to the domain of biography . . . But when the biographical subject is a member of one’s own family, the line between the genres blurs.93 Miller doesn’t seem to suggest that writing about others threatens women’s writing in the genre. Rather, she implies that when these “others” are members of the autobiographer’s family, perhaps they are so closely connected to her that she must position them with and against herself in order to write about herself.

91 Miller, x.
92 Miller, xi.
93 Miller, 2.
In her article “The Other Voice: Autobiographies of Women Writers,” Mary G. Mason discusses the autobiographies of Julian of Norwich, Margery Kempe, Margaret Cavendish, and Anne Bradstreet, asserting that:

. . . the self discovery of female identity seems to acknowledge the real presence and recognition of another consciousness, and the disclosure of female self is linked to the identification of some “other.” This recognition of another consciousness—and I emphasize recognition rather than deference—this grounding of identity through relation to the chosen other, seems (if we may judge by our four representative cases) to enable women to write openly about themselves.94

Mason suggests that this “other” may be God or a husband. Tracing the lives and works of these women, she claims that they write themselves by looking at others. This does not imply that this is the only means of self-identification these women have. Rather, by looking at others, they seem to more clearly represent themselves. Mason credits Margaret Cavendish’s True Relation for being the “first important secular autobiography by a woman,” and she shows how Cavendish identifies herself by discussing her husband, the Duke of Newcastle.95 Mason writes:

Yet, for all her singularity, for all her strong individuality and distinctiveness of personality, for all her fantasticalness, Margaret Cavendish required a substitute figure or other—an alter ego really—with and through whom she might identify herself . . . [she] found in the Duke . . . both her husband and her Lord, but remarkably enough she succeeds in making this of him without ever dimming the bright light of her own personality. . . [her] gaze is directed neither up nor down but dead level: he is the warrior of an epic, but his wife is beside him—in all ways equal to him—as a poet.96

95 Mason, 211.
96 Mason, 222.
Perhaps if Cavendish hadn’t considered herself a writer, her gaze would not have remained eye level with her husband. Even though she “needs” him to write her own identity, she does not position him above her, instead, she values herself and her writing as much as her husband.

Interestingly, for some women, the “others” they choose to write about do not necessarily have to be people with whom they have ever had direct contact. Women may use “others” who have influenced them in various ways. Maxine Hong Kingston writes about her aunt, “No Name Woman,” although she has never met her and knows very little about her. For Kingston, this is an attempt to expose the secrets of her family. Kingston’s aunt commits suicide by drowning herself along with her newborn baby in the drinking well in China. She does this because she becomes pregnant by a man other than her husband. Her village punishes her and her family by raiding their home once they find out she is pregnant. Perhaps to escape a life of guilt and blame, she drowns herself and her baby the day after she gives birth. The reason that Kingston is so intrigued by her aunt is quite possibly because of the secrecy surrounding her. No one in their family talks about her and will never even utter her name. “You must not tell anyone,” her mother tells Kingston before relaying the story to her.97 Her mother pretends her secrecy is a means of protecting her husband; however, Kingston suggests that it is out of shame for their family. Her mother tells her, “Don’t tell anyone you had an aunt. Your father does not want to hear her name. She has never been born.”98 Speaking of her family’s perpetual silence, Kingston writes, “But there is more to this silence: they want me to participate in her punishment. And I have . . . The real punishment was . . . The family’s deliberately forgetting her.”99 Kingston recognizes the family’s secrecy as destructive. Ironically, too, she suggests that her parent’s silence only makes her aunt that much more interesting.

Attempting to break the silence and speak for her aunt, Kingston says, “My aunt haunts me—her ghost drawn to me because now, after fifty years of neglect, I alone devote pages of paper to her . . . I do

98 Kingston, 15.
99 Kingston, 16.
not think she always means me well. I am telling on her . . .”\textsuperscript{100} And, although Kingston is telling on her aunt, in a sense, she is also speaking for her. She breaks the secrecy surrounding her and gives her a voice. Kingston does this by adding to her mother’s story and giving her aunt characteristics that she wishes her to have. She imagines that her aunt really loves the man who fathers her child. She pictures her aunt getting ready to see him and fixing her hair to get his attention: “At the mirror my aunt combed individuality into her bob.”\textsuperscript{101} She wants to remember her aunt as someone who represented danger in her own subtle way. Clearly, Kingston wishes to see herself in her deceased aunt. She is “my forerunner,” she says.\textsuperscript{102} This statement suggests that Kingston sees her aunt as the first woman warrior in the text. And although Kingston surely finds her identity outside of her aunt, her aunt is also an extension of herself, leading her towards freedom and understanding. From these examples, Nancy K. Miller’s argument that women must write about others in order to write about themselves seems to hold true. This isn’t to suggest that women also do not see themselves apart from others; rather, as Mary G. Mason suggests, writing about others allows women to see themselves more clearly.

**SEEING OURSELVES THROUGH OUR MOTHERS**

The struggle, represented by each narrator’s/protagonist’s linguistic disability or instability and cultural disorientation, pivots on one figure or object: her mother . . . the mother in each text hovers from within and without. Still powerful and now inaccessible (literally or figuratively), she is the pre-text for the daughter’s autobiographical project. Indeed, these autobiographical narratives are generated out of a compelling need to enter into discourse with the absent or distant mother. As the child’s first significant Other, the mother engenders subjectivity through language; she is the primary source of speech and love. And part of the maternal legacy is the conflation of the two. Thereafter, implicated

\textsuperscript{100} Kingston, 16.

\textsuperscript{101} Kingston, 9.

\textsuperscript{102} Kingston, 8.
in and overlaid with other modes of discourse, the maternal legacy of language becomes charged with ambiguity and fraught with ambivalence. In response (however deferred), the daughter’s text, variously, seeks to reject, reconstruct, and reclaim—to locate and recontextualize—the mother’s message.103

In her article “Mothers, Displacement, and Language,” Bella Brodski discusses Nathalie Sarraute’s Childhood and Christa Wolf’s Patterns of Childhood, asserting the importance of our mothers on our constructions of ourselves. How does a daughter, writing autobiography, find her identity, and, how is that identity dependent upon and independent of her mother? In her critical memoir, Bequest and Betrayal: Memoirs of a Parent’s Death, Nancy K. Miller quotes Virginia Woolf’s A Room of One’s Own: “For we think back through our mothers if we are women.”104 One of Miller’s aims in her own autobiography is to understand the application of Woolf’s statement to a broken relationship between a mother and daughter, in particular, her own. In her chapter “Mothers and Daughters: The Price of Separation,” Miller reveals her strained relationship with her mother, trying to come to terms with it. Unfortunately, this never happens for Miller, for her mother dies too soon. They never reconcile their relationship. In fact, they argue up to Miller’s mother’s death. Miller tries to make sense out of the tension in her relationship with her mother, and she wonders why she feels compelled to write about her. Discussing various memoirs in this same chapter, she writes, “. . . a woman writes her life through a dream of her mother’s frustrated desire. What happens to your own longing when it is passed through the mesh of a mother’s wish that at least some of the time, you didn’t exist? The mother’s disappointment, the naked want, the longings unsatisfied, become a daughter’s legacy.”105 The question remains as to how much a woman finds her own identity in her mother. For Miller, this is incredibly problematic because she wishes not to find her identity through her mother. Believing her own mother never really loved her

104 Miller, 76.
105 Miller, 76.
and wondering if she even loved her mother in return, Miller wants to develop a self apart from her distant mother. She asks, “Are our mothers ourselves?” Discussing Adrienne Rich’s idea of “matrophobia,” Miller writes, “In response to that overidentification [with the mother], and wanting to resist [her] power, the daughter strikes out against her mother for—but also against—herself.” Clearly, according to Rich, women are closely connected to their mothers. Yet this connection is an ambivalent one. Miller, finally asks, then, “What does a daughter want from a mother, what does a mother want from a daughter?” She answers, “One and the same thing: recognition. To see the other for—not in—herself.” For Miller, it seems that she needs to find herself outside of her mother, rather than closely connected to her.

Mary McCarthy, on the other hand, searches for her identity and constantly longs to find it in a mother-figure. Throughout *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood*, her mother remains a mystery to her. McCarthy attempts to locate her mother or find answers about her through her grandmother. McCarthy dedicates her entire last chapter, entitled “Ask Me No Questions,” to the writing of her grandmother’s life. Although McCarthy discusses her throughout her memoir, it is not until the final chapter that we understand why her grandmother refuses to show love to McCarthy and why she seems to hold so many secrets. Throughout the text, McCarthy can be seen trying to please her grandmother. Having spent much of her childhood in her grandmother’s home, McCarthy attempts to understand her. She believes that her grandmother favors her in an odd way because she is her mother’s daughter, and she wants to believe that her grandmother secretly loves McCarthy’s deceased mother more than anyone. She writes, “My mother had been my grandmother’s darling. The fact that we did not entertain, I was given to understand was related to my mother’s death.” Longing for a mother figure, it seems that McCarthy hopes that her grandmother sees her daughter in her granddaughter. However, McCarthy confesses that

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106 Miller, 58.
107 Miller 58.
108 Miller, 58.
her grandmother sometimes acts indifferent to her. Her reason, McCarthy suggests, is that McCarthy may have “reminded her painfully of [her] mother.”

It is only at the end of the text that her grandmother’s secret is revealed. When she tells her grandmother of her great-aunt’s death and sees the tremendous grief her grandmother suffers, it is then that McCarthy realizes that it isn’t her mother that her grandmother loves the most. She writes, “It seemed clear to me that night, as I sat stroking her hair, that she had never really cared for anyone but her sister; that was her secret.” At this point, McCarthy realizes that her grandmother must never have loved her. This comes as a blow to her. Her whole life has been an attempt to please her grandmother, and she finally realizes that she is truly left without a “real” connection to her mother.

Similar to McCarthy’s need to please her grandmother, Lauren Slater also wishes to find acceptance with her own mother. Borrowing from Brodski’s term, Slater’s mother always “hovers from within and without” Slater’s text. Throughout Lying, Slater’s ambivalence for her mother is profound. She longs to please her, yet she realizes that this is impossible. She writes, “I wanted to make my mother happy, that should come as no surprise . . . She was a woman of grand gestures and high standards and she rarely spoke the truth . . . From my mother I learned that truth is bendable, that what you wish is every bit as real as what you are.” Her mother, an alcoholic, was also a compulsive liar. Slater soon realizes that her illness fascinates her mother, and in an odd sense, pleases her because it makes them different. Slater recalls her mother discussing Slater’s disease with a friend: “She has epilepsy, but so did van Gogh, you know.” Slater suggests that her mother’s fascination with her illness exists because she wishes that she, too, could act out of control. Slater writes:

[. . .] I saw her looking at me with wishes in her eyes, as though she, too, might like to drop and thrash, to break the brittle caul of cleanliness and artifice . . . She touched my

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110 McCarthy, 219.

111 McCarthy, 223.


113 Slater, 23.
head gently now, like it was hot, like it was cold, like it was warm, like it was whatever she was not, a wild and totally true world in there, a place she had forsaken for artifice, etiquette, marriage, mediocre love, and which I had returned to her; here, Mom; have my head.\textsuperscript{114}

In an effort to please her mother, Slater seems willing, in the beginning of her illness, to offer her disease as a present to her mother. Unfortunately, Slater’s mother uses her daughter’s epilepsy to fill her own void. This leaves Slater often feeling that her illness is not hers, but her mother’s. She writes, “When a seizure rolled through me, it didn’t feel like mine; it felt like hers—her ramrod body sweetening into spasm. She gave it all to me, and I returned it all to her, this wild, rollicking, hopeful life . . .”\textsuperscript{115}

Slater’s need to feel connected to her mother is always denied. Slater attempts to parallel her mother’s rejections from publishers to her own falls from epilepsy:

Over and over again, my mother and I crashed, and in some essential way, we were graceless. Eventually, she would get a reply, a rejection of course, after which she would lie in a darkened room for hours . . . When she cried it was for things so utterly separate from me that her tears were personal insults. I told myself I didn’t care. But sometimes I think all the corruption that followed had to do with the fact that there was a space between us . . . I needed to fill that space with something, and it would not be her. I told myself I didn’t care, but my dreams were full of women; women lifting me, women treading toward me, while above the moon burned in a beautiful way.\textsuperscript{116}

Clearly, the connection is broken. Her mother’s own desire for acceptance overshadows that of Slater’s. This leaves Slater feeling empty and completely detached from her mother. Time and time again, throughout her memoirs, Slater reaches out to her mother and is denied love in return.

\textsuperscript{114} Slater, 23.
\textsuperscript{115} Slater, 24.
\textsuperscript{116} Slater, 64.
This same longing for acceptance can be seen in Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior*. The chasm that Kingston observes between her and her mother is primarily triggered by cultural differences. Kingston’s mother clings to Chinese tradition, and Kingston, being raised in America, doesn’t always understand her mother’s ways. Kingston claims that her mother’s heritage has caused her to become so mechanical. In Kingston’s opinion, her mother treats her terribly because she is a girl and not a boy. Kingston explores the mistreatment of women in Chinese culture by saying, “There is a Chinese word for the female I—which is ‘slave.’ Break the women with their own tongues!” Kingston claims that her parents would have treated her better had she been a boy. Even when Kingston receives a degree from Berkeley, it is considered worthless to her parents, especially her mother. She writes, “I went away to college—Berkeley in the sixties—and I studied, and I marched to change the world, but I did not turn into a boy. I would have liked to bring myself back as a boy for my parents to welcome with chickens and pigs. That was for my brother…”

Despite her mother’s coldness towards her, Kingston still longs for her acceptance. Kingston devotes an entire chapter, “Shaman,” to her mother. She discusses her mother’s years spent in medical school learning midwifery. Here, Kingston seems to respect and hold her mother in high esteem. She depicts her mother as heroic. One of the stories that her mother “talks” to her tells of her mother being in school and how she fought ghosts that many of the other students were afraid of. Her mother becomes Brave Orchid, “who has fought the ghosts and won.” For Kingston, the fact that her mother has been through so much and aspired to be successful makes Kingston want to connect even more with her. Even after her mother ‘talks story’ to Kingston, her mother remains cold and detached. Interestingly, though, at the end of the chapter, Kingston receives the affection from her mother that she desires. Recalling a visit to her parent’s house, Kingston says that while in bed one evening, her mother comes into her room.

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117 Kingston, 47.
118 Kingston, 47.
119 Kingston, 71.
Thinking her daughter is asleep, Kingston’s mother gives her an extra blanket and sits to watch her. Kingston reveals that she is not asleep and has a conversation with her mother. When her mother leaves, she calls her “Little Dog.” Kingston writes, “A weight lifted from me. The quilts must be filling the air. The world is somehow lighter. She has not called me that endearment for years . . .”\(^{120}\) It is here that Kingston realizes that her mother does love her and can show affection for her.

Complete understanding of her mother doesn’t come until the end of the text, however. Kingston continues to struggle with understanding her mother’s Chinese customs. Kingston accuses her mother of not sharing herself or her culture with her children. When her mother sets the table for a Chinese tradition, Kingston is confused by it because her mother never explains it to her. She writes, “[h]ow can Chinese keep any traditions at all? They don’t even make you pay attention, slipping in a ceremony and clearing the table before the children notice specialness. The adults get mad, evasive, and shut you up if you ask . . . I don’t see how they kept up a continuous culture for five thousand years.”\(^{121}\) Because her mother identifies more with Chinese culture and Kingston attempts to balance both American and Chinese cultures, tension exists in their understanding of one another. In the end, though, when Kingston tells her mother that she has started to ‘talk story,’ her mother shares one last story with her. Kingston relays it to her reader saying, “[t]he beginning is hers, the ending mine.”\(^{122}\) The story discusses a mother, Ts’ai Yen, who is captured by barbarians and has children by them. Her children do not understand her when she speaks Chinese because they have been raised with the barbarians; however, one night when Ts’ai Yen sings, they understand her perfectly and begin to sing with her. Kingston closes this story as well as her memoir discussing the song. She writes, “It translated well,” suggesting that her and her mother’s stories merge into one. Her mother’s culture finally translates, and Kingston understands.

Therefore, *The Woman Warrior* ends on a hopeful note, showing that Kingston finds a balance between

\(^{120}\) Kingston, 108-109.

\(^{121}\) Kingston, 185.

\(^{122}\) Kingston, 206.
her two cultures and that she and her mother finally offer each other the recognition they need and deserve.

BROKEN CHAINS: SEEING OURSELVES AFTER LOSS

For some women, writing their autobiographies proves problematic because they do not have the “other” to look to for answers. For Mary McCarthy this break in her family chain happened when she was a child. Having been an orphan for most of her life, she never had the chance to really get to know her parents. Therefore, it is especially difficult for her to create an identity when she does not remember them. She constantly searches for who she is, yet never gets answers to any of her questions. She writes, “One great handicap in [the] task of recalling has been the fact of being an orphan. The chain of recollection—the collective memory of a family—has been broken. It is our parents, normally, who not only teach us our family history but who set us straight on our own childhood recollections . . .”123 As McCarthy attempts to create her narrative, there are huge gaps that she is unable to fill because she has no one to verify any of her memories or corroborate her stories.

Furthermore, McCarthy argues that her other family members (who generally would be able to provide answers) are either deceased as she is writing or untrustworthy:

As an orphan, I was brought up between two sets of grandparents, all of whom are now dead, beyond questioning, and who know very little, in any case, of the daily facts of our childhood, either before or after the death of our parents . . . For events of my early childhood, I have had to depend on my own sometimes blurry recollections, on the vague and contradictory testimony of uncles and aunts, on a few idle remarks of my grandmother’s, made before she became senile, and on some letters written me by a girlhood friend of my mother’s.124

123 McCarthy, 10-11.
124 McCarthy, 11.
Ironically, this lack of authentication from family members is surely convenient for her. Without anyone to confirm her story, she is free to write as she pleases. She can bend or distort the facts of her life and there is no one to hold her “accountable.” On the other hand, McCarthy admits that her memory is slippery and confesses that there is no way for her not to distort the facts without the presence of her parents or family members.

This lack of a family unit and a complete story is precisely what keeps her searching for answers, though. It is as if her parents held the secret to her entire life, and in their death, the secret was lost. She writes:

[. . .] it is our whole family history that exercises a fascination on most people who hear even a little of it. They want to know more, which is precisely our situation; we want to know more than we shall ever find out. But why? What inspires this curiosity, beyond sheer contagion? Our family was not remarkable . . . They were ordinary people who behaved quite oddly, to each other and to us four children; that, I think, is the source of the fascination . . . It puzzles them—the ones who survive—that anyone else should puzzle over them, and this, surely, is a mark of mediocrity. And it is just this mediocrity, this lack of self-awareness, that leaves one pounding at a closed door.125

Although McCarthy realizes that she is never going to find all the answers to her life, she is still compelled to guess at many of them in an attempt to find herself among the brokenness.

For Nancy K. Miller, her parents’ deaths come much later in life, when she is an adult. However, this perhaps does not leave her any less affected by her loss. In her prologue “Writing a Parent’s Death,” Miller writes, “[w]e expect our parents to die, especially when they are old and we are well into middle age. But despite our knowledge, their death comes as a surprise. The manner of death always seems to feel unexpected, a desolating blow.”126 Certainly, even though Miller recognizes her parents’ deaths as a

125 McCarthy, 13.
126 Miller, xii.
part of life, she still struggles with the loss. Through writing her memoirs, she seems to be trying to get at her parents or to bring some sort of closure to their lives. She says that in the writing of lost parents, “[a]n urgency creates these memoirs, sometimes completed within the months following a parent’s death, sometimes reworked for years, but always under its sign: a narrative of mourning that gives grief a story, loss a semblance of closure.”

Part of Miller’s need for closure is to understand why her parents were so important to her and how they affected her concept of self. Where does she fit into their story and where do they fit into hers? She writes, “Now that both my parents are dead, whose daughter am I? Their war lives on in me. I sometimes think they are me, I am them. But which one of them? I’m still trying to sort this out.”

What does it mean for her identity now that her parents are gone? She attempts to guess at this through her writing:

> The death of parents—dreaded or wished for—is a trauma that causes an invisible tear in our self-identity. In the aftermath of a parent’s death, which forces the acknowledgment of our shared mortality, loss and mourning take complex paths, since our earliest acts of identity are intimately bound up with our relation to the dead parent. But the closure produced by the end of their plot does not signal the end of ours. With the loss of the second parent, the child/parent dialogue moves into the space of memory and writing. When we become adult orphans of whatever age, our stories continue—sometimes on paper—now authored by us, with others listening. We don’t choose our families, but we get to revise their myths.

Here, Miller claims that her parents are inextricably important to her writing of herself. Although she seeks closure for their lives, she doesn’t necessarily seek closure for her own. On one hand, this is

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127 Miller, 14.

128 Miller, 185.

129 Miller, x.
challenging for Miller because she looks to them for her own identity. However, on the other hand, their loss also allows her to revise their, as well as her own, story. Similar to McCarthy, she has the convenience of loss in that she has no one to hold her accountable. This seems to be where the autobiographer truly begins to experience a sense of autonomy. Miller writes, “. . . If not explicitly, the memoirs devoted to a dead parent are almost always meditations on a writer’s authority, her right to tell this story, the path she followed to telling it . . .”\(^{130}\) The autobiographer takes on the job of recording her family’s history in her own voice. Although the story will always include her parents, it also becomes her own.

SEEING OURSELVES THROUGH CULTURE AND COMMUNITY

Although parents, for most of our lives, act as our immediate community, around which we create our own identities, cultural communities offer a larger and more extensive grounds for creating identity. Certainly, women employ “others” in the writing of themselves, but what happens when these women are non-Western? It seems that for them there exists a double differing. Not only have they been overshadowed by patriarchal culture, but they have also been silenced by Western culture. In the introduction to their text, Smith and Watson discuss the work of Françoise Lionnet, who, according to them, “argues that as historically silenced subjects, women and colonized peoples create ‘braided’ texts of many voices that speak their cultural locations dialogically, *Metissage*, viewing autobiography as a multi-voiced act, emphasized orality and the irreducible hybridity, and identity.”\(^{131}\) These “braided” texts perhaps appear most complex in non-Western women’s autobiographies. Norma Elia Cantú’s *Canícula* and Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Storyteller* are two examples that utilize what Smith and Watson call “complex collective identifications” in their writings.\(^{132}\)

\(^{130}\) Miller, 3.

\(^{131}\) Smith and Watson, 12.

\(^{132}\) Smith and Watson, 26.
Cantú, as Mexican-American, describes her identification with both Mexican and American cultures in her memoir, dedicating her text to her family “on both sides of the border.” At times she struggles with this identification and wonders which side she should identify with more. Cantú illustrates this conflict of loyalties between her heritage and her home by using flags. Discussing a parade she attends as a child, she recalls how the crowd responds to flags: “The flags go by, the men take off their hats, and everyone places a hand over their heart—the same for the U.S. or the Mexican flag, but when the Mexican flag goes by someone in the crowd shouts ‘Viva Mexico!’ and everyone answers ‘Viva!’” Clearly, Cantú writes this passage to illustrate the blurring of allegiances for Mexican-Americans. While it suggests the Mexican crowd’s respect for the U.S., it also shows how tightly they want to adhere to their heritage as Mexicans. Lourdes Torres portrays this conflict of loyalties as a “tug of war” in her article “The Construction of the Self in U.S. Latina Autobiographies,” and she suggests that it is especially difficult for Mexican-Americans “to identify exclusively with either Mexican or Anglo-American culture” because they always have the feeling “of being pulled by both identities.” For Cantú, it is perhaps easier to find a balance between these two cultures because of her placement on the border. Living in the borderlands offers her a feeling of connection to both sides of her identity.

Cantú also shows her connection to both her Mexican and American cultures by “braiding” her family’s, friend’s and her own stories together. Discussing herself in third person in her Prologue, Cantú writes, “The stories of her girlhood in that land in-between, la frontera, are shared; her story and the stories of the people who lived that life with her is one.” The stories in her memoir tell not only of herself, but of her mother, father, siblings, grandparents, cousins, and friends. Because of the closeness to

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134 Cantú, 37.
136 Cantú, 2.
her extended family and her community, it seems that Cantú describes herself best when she tells the stories of those close to her. In the eighty-five vignettes that make up her memoir, the majority of them discuss her family and friends. In fact, many of them are titled with their names. Cantú considers her identity and the writing of it something that is shared. Living so closely with many of the people she writes of, their lives blur into one to become a communal story.

Similar to Cantú, Leslie Marmon Silko also considers her identity communal in that she is Native-American. Her memoir also tells the story of her people. However, her approach is quite different from Cantú’s because she uses storytelling to preserve her culture. In *Storyteller*, Silko chooses to write down the oral traditions of her people, thus telling their story. In her second vignette, she writes of the tradition of storytelling:

> As with any generation
> the oral tradition depends upon each person
> listening and remembering a portion.
> and it is together—
> all of us remembering what we have heard together—
> that creates the whole story
> the long story of the people
> I remember only a small part.
> But this is what I remember.¹³⁷

Clearly, Silko believes it part of her responsibility to carry on the tradition of storytelling. It is around the storytellers and the stories themselves that she constructs her identity. She feels deeply connected to both,

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and she writes at the beginning of her text, “This book is dedicated to the storytellers as far back as memory goes and to the telling which continues and through which they all live and we with them.”

Much like Cantú, Silko discusses family members in her text. She includes her mother, siblings, aunts and uncles, grandparents, great-grandparents, and so on. She shows how storytelling, in many ways, works to tell their own stories. Silko recounts one of her great-aunt Susie’s stories, which tells of a mother and daughter. At the end of the story, Silko writes, “Aunt Susie always spoke the words of the mother to her daughter with great tenderness, with great feeling as if Aunt Susie herself were the mother addressing her little child.” It is as if through the storytelling, her aunt identifies with and, in a sense, becomes the mother in the story. This is also true of Silko when she tells the story of Yellow Woman. Although she is clearly telling the story of another woman here, she uses first-person narration. Silko does this purposefully, suggesting that she is Yellow Woman, who at the end of the story, discovers she has a story to tell. The stories, then, become her own through the act of storytelling. She writes herself into the collected stories of her people.

Clearly, Gusdorf’s belief, according to Stanford Friedman, that “[m]an must be an island unto himself,” reveals the privileged position of individuality for men. Unfortunately, women and minorities have not had this same privilege (and still do not). Unlike men, who consider their identities distinct and separate, women and minorities are more communal and fluid due to the way they respond to their given cultures. Consequently, they write these “plural lives” into their autobiographies, employing various “others” as a means of telling their own stories. Women, in particular, look to their families and immediate families to begin guessing at their own identities. And, when there is a break in their family chains, their understanding of themselves is deeply affected and altered. By searching for the lost pieces of their stories and piecing the fragments together, they attempt to answer the question of the self.

139 Silko, 15.
140 Stanford Friedman, 73.
Outside of their immediate families, they may also look to their communities and cultures as mirrors, reflecting an image back to them that is never completely themselves in an individual sense, but an image that is a part to the whole.

My Sick Father

According to my mother, the early years with my father were actually quite good. Although he worked long hours, he would come home and play with me and my siblings for hours. I don’t remember this, but I am sure that he attempted to be a good father. In many photographs (usually on Christmases) he is shown playing with us, showing us how our new toys worked. I have one picture of my father and me playing with a boxing bear game. It was one of those games where each opponent had a handle in which to fight the other bear. Although I don’t remember playing that game with my father, or any game for that matter, I like the picture. It portrays my father’s early involvement with us, when he seemed comfortable and happy.

My father’s physical and mental illnesses often blurred his parental skills, however, and these are the majority of our memories of him. When my brother was only six or seven, his room was the first bedroom along the hallway. Many nights my brother would cry to my mother because he was afraid.
From his bedroom, he could see the back door and was terrified that someone would come steal him. My mother assured him that he was safe and that if he got scared he could come to her bedroom. My father’s idea of making my brother feel safe was quite different from my mother’s. My dad, thinking that he was helping my six year old brother, placed a loaded hunting rifle in the corner of my brother’s bedroom so he could defend himself if he needed to. My brother was terrified, and although he begged for my dad to remove it from his room, my father said that it was his son’s job to protect the family. It seemed that my father was trying to give my brother a sense of empowerment; however, this only invoked greater fear in my brother. With the gun in his room, he was terrified that he was having to look at the weapon that would kill him.

My mother argues that it was after my father’s battle with Rocky Mountain Spotted Fever that he began to decline. She said he grew paranoid and became a hypochondriac. I was sure that there really was something wrong with him, but no one would believe him. One night when I was four or five, I remember my mother screaming from upstairs, “Oh, God! Oh, God!” Dad was throwing up blood in the claw-foot bathtub upstairs and moaning, “I’m dying; I’m dying.” The ambulance came and the paramedics carried my father to the couch downstairs and attached wires to his body. I’m not sure what brought on that incident, but there were many more similar events afterwards. Dad was always sick; that was another reason that we slept in our clothes at night. Not only were we prepared to escape from him, but we had to prepare to save him as well.

One evening while living on Wychewood Cove, my sister, brother and I were playing in the living room as dad sat in a chair. My mother had gone to the store. As we were sitting there, I laughed at something my sister said and then glanced at my father to see if he was watching us. My father was not watching us but was having a seizure in the chair. He shook uncontrollably, his eyes rolled back in his head. I felt as if I had momentarily left my body. My heart pounded and I couldn’t move from my place on the floor. My sister was the only one to get up. She quickly ran for the phone to call the ambulance. When the ambulance arrived, my father’s seizure had passed and he kept telling us that he was alright and
didn’t need an ambulance. However, we knew not to believe him. He was always so good at lying, especially when it involved his health or life.

Among other illnesses, my father had ulcers that eventually caused a hole in his esophagus. He had to have surgery on his esophagus, where the doctors tied it in a knot, reducing the size of his food passage considerably. Because of this, there were too many instances to count of my father almost choking to death. One memorable event took place during dinner. We were having pizza. My mother was standing in the kitchen talking on the telephone. The three of us were sitting with my dad at the dining room table. As my father began chewing a piece of pizza, he swallowed too soon and began choking. We screamed for my mother, but she kept waiving us away with her hand as if we were interrupting her call. My father’s face slowly turned blue and he kept trying to cough up the pizza. My sister jumped up from her chair and began trying to do the Heimlich maneuver on my father, but her tiny arms couldn’t help him. We continued to scream for my mother, who ignored our callings. I jumped up, followed by my brother, and ran through the kitchen and through the back door. Standing on the back porch, I began waving my arms in the air and screaming for help. My brother joined me. Christy remained inside trying to help my dying father when finally my mother realized what was going on and ran to my father. Using the Heimlich, my mother forced the pizza out of my father and he gasped for air. “What did you think you were going to do out there?” my sister asked me. “I don’t know,” I said. “I didn’t know what to do, so I ran.” We laughed that evening over my mother almost letting my father die and at my brother and me for attempting to leave the scene of the accident. I lost track of how many times my mother saved my father’s life with the Heimlich maneuver and for years I believed that my father would die by choking when she wasn’t around to save him. This was the recurring pattern for my father. He would get sick or come close to dying, and despite my mother’s threats to leave for good, he knew that she would not leave him when he was sick. Throughout my childhood, he used this to his advantage, and although I agree that he was sick both physically and mentally, I often wonder to what extent.
The day of my father’s first suicide attempt, my Aunt Kathy and her daughters were with us as we walked up to our house. My cousin and I skipped from stepping stone to stepping stone and I remember watching in envy as she swung her new white purse back and forth. My mother was the first inside and she walked back to her bedroom. She tried to open her bedroom door, but my father had the dresser blocking the entry. When she pushed it, he said in a crazed voice that he was killing himself. He had taken pills and was trying to go to sleep. We were barely inside when I heard my mother scream for us to get out of the house. As we ran, confused, back outside, my best cousin, Jill, dropped her new white purse on the stepping stones to the front gate. She couldn’t stop to pick it up and I felt bad for her because it was such a nice purse. We drove to the nearest telephone and called the police. They arrested my father and took him to the emergency room where they pumped his stomach.

My father’s second suicide attempt happened when he threatened his life with a knife to his stomach. My mother called her pastor who attempted to talk my father out of it. We were not at home at the time and I don’t remember the details of this attempt. Once the pastor and my dad’s boss talked him out of it, my father agreed to be placed in Vanderbilt Psychiatric for six weeks. Throughout my father’s illnesses, hospitals were a break for our family. I remember the doctors and nurses appearing so “in control.” I liked that. Control. It was something we didn’t feel at home. I liked how safe and clean the hospital was. It was like an enormous mansion where people took care of you and where people didn’t yell. We spent many nights in hospitals in both Ohio and Tennessee. Despite the fact that our mother always told us that our father was sick and therefore he had to be kept in the hospital, she never told us that his sickness wasn’t always physical. While he was hospitalized at Vanderbilt, I remember feeling relieved. We slept entire nights peacefully. During my father’s stay, the doctors asked him if he was having Vietnam flashbacks. My father said no. He didn’t think about Vietnam. He was only afraid of losing his family: his wife and kids. This was the cause of his fear and insanity: his own loss of control. It is amazing to me now that he wanted so much to keep his family together, yet did so much to tear it apart.
Money Problems

Most days, my father forced my mother to beg for money, money not for herself, but for her children. My father did not understand that it required money to live and to raise children. Many of the most heated arguments between my parents occurred on evenings when my mother needed to go grocery shopping. For some reason, this always digressed into an argument over the telephone bill and ended with my father yanking the telephone cord out of the wall and throwing the telephone across the room. (My father has not had a landline since his and my mom’s divorce.)

“Those phone companies are out to fuck everybody,” he said. “They charge you just to have the god damn phone in your house. And then they punish you for using it.”

Perhaps it is surprising, then, that I did not grow up believing that AT&T was a government conspiracy to keep the lower and middle classes in their places. Instead, my father’s obsession with money subsequently fostered the same obsession in his children, for we all have issues concerning money. In fact, I experience extreme anxiety over making, spending, receiving, and budgeting money.

I was young when I partially realized the impact of money on our family. I was eight years old and in the second grade. My teacher, Mrs. Pitzer, sent a note home to my parents concerning my eyesight. I could no longer read the board and needed glasses. My mother didn’t think this odd. Both she and my father wore glasses, therefore she didn’t consider it out of the ordinary that one of her children should inherit poor eyesight.

So my mother scheduled an appointment for me, my father and herself, and the entire family made a trip to the eye doctor. Everything was going fine. We had our eye exams, picked out frames and lenses, and decided to get something to eat while we waited the hour for the glasses to be ready for pick-up. Now, keep in mind that my father thought everything was a conspiracy regarding money, so of course banks couldn’t be trusted. He didn’t keep his money in the bank. He carried cash, usually at least a couple hundred dollars and up to a thousand dollars, with him at all times.
Picture the scene: Here we are standing in the parking lot of what I think was Lenscrafters, and my father begins to look at the bill. Quickly his mood changes from the friendly, humorous tone he displayed inside to a violently enraged one outside. He pulls his wallet out of his pocket and begins counting his money. (Note: My father always counted his money and usually always in public.)

Now, this is when things go bad.

My mother says something like, “John, this is a necessity. She just can’t go without the glasses.”

Then, in one quick movement, an instant really, my father pulls the money from his wallet and sends it, all of it, soaring into the air. Money flies everywhere; twenties, fifties, and hundreds sail beneath parked cars, skate along buildings, and not one of the bills rests anywhere near where we are standing. At first, we all stand in shock.

My mother screams, “John!” and looks around to see if anyone has observed what just happened. Following this, my sister and brother instinctively run after the money, gathering it in their small hands. It becomes a game for them, like hunting Easter eggs. They scream and jump from one flying bill to the next. I stand there frozen next to the car, trying not to cry. But I can’t control it and so I begin sobbing, guilt-ridden. After all, it was me who needed glasses.

My father regretfully says, “I’m sorry, honey. I didn’t mean to do that. I shouldn’t have done that.”

I was confused. If only I hadn’t needed glasses none of this would have happened. My sister and brother didn’t need glasses, so why did I? And, why was my father angry over something I needed anyway? I was so angry at Mrs. Pitzer for sending that note home to my parents. Damn her for this, I thought. She clearly didn’t understand my family.

We never found all of my dad’s money that day. I don’t remember how much of it my sister and brother finally recovered. But something did happen to me. I learned to despise money.
My grandparents’ home on Bellows Avenue in Columbus, Ohio, was like the wardrobe to Narnia for me and my cousins. Their home and yard were filled with hidden passageways, tiny crevices, gardens, magic switches, trap doors, and so much more to excite our imaginations. Their house sat about fifty feet from the garage, but to us it was the largest backyard we had ever seen. From the back door, there was a vegetable garden to the left and an open lawn to the right. On the lawn was a bird bath and a wooden porch swing that was arched with grape vines. My grandfather was an excellent carpenter and made their home into the secret garden that we so loved. We spent hours chewing grape vines in the backyard and launching our big wheels off the ramp leading out of the garage. My grandparent’s bedroom was downstairs and upstairs, there were three bedrooms for us to choose from. The stairs led directly into the gold room where the bed spread, curtains, lamps and accessories were gold. To the left from the stairs was the blue room which had blue and white curtains, a cedar chest that smelled of moth balls, and a white ceramic vanity set. Finally, the room that we all fought over was the little room, which was essentially attic space transformed into an extra bedroom. The little room (my mother’s room when
she was a child) was attached to the blue room and one could reach it by simply stepping down into it from the blue room. With its triangular shape and tiny wooden door, it was our secret haven. There were two single beds and two small desks in the little room and any time the cousins spent time at our grandparent’s house, we drew straws over who got to sleep in the little room first.

There were so many unique things about their home that kept our childhood imaginations active. In my grandparents’ room, my grandmother kept a button drawer filled with all kinds and colors of buttons that we could string with giant needles onto red yarn. There were boxes of music instruments beneath my grandparents’ bed, which my grandmother would get out for us to play church. There was a switch in the kitchen that when flipped would alert my grandfather in the garage that he was needed back in the house. On the back porch was a trap door which led to the basement. Here we could find my grandmother’s canned foods and toys stored for us to play with. This house was the highlight of my childhood, the place where our grandmother fueled our dreams and imaginations.

My cousins and I (usually boys separate from girls) spent weeks out of the summers with our grandparents as they took us all over Ohio to the Columbus Zoo, COSI (The Center of Science and Industry), the Indian Caverns, Amish villages, and many other places. These weeks were the highlights of our childhoods. After specific visits I remember returning home having learned the Ten Commandments, various Bible verses, and stories about great men from the Bible. My grandmother was a talented chalk artist and would draw scenes of Moses parting the red sea or of Jesus being tempted in the desert as we sat enthralled by the creativity of her hands. On one visit she forced us to attend church with her and to march around the sanctuary with tambourines, maracas, bells, chimes and cymbals as the organist played “Onward Christian Soldiers.” We thought this was a great adventure! Often upon returning home and telling our parents about our visit, my mother would grow angry at my grandparents. It wasn’t apparent to me then that my mother took my grandmother’s teachings as a slap in the face. My grandmother believed that her daughters were raising us to be heathen children and so felt she needed to “pack in” as much Christianity as possible on our visits. My parents often thought that we were being
brainwashed and would refuse to let us go again. However, their minds were usually changed, often by us, and we would visit again.

My grandparents, Silas and Imogene Church, were quite Puritanical in their thinking. My grandmother has never had her hair cut since her acceptance of Christianity. She also refuses to wear make-up or jewelry because she believes they suggest prostitution. My female cousins and I were expected to wear dresses on visits to their home and the boys were expected to wear “long pants.” When I was ten and allowed to get my ears pierced, my grandmother scolded my mother and tried to convince me that God would have made me with holes in my ears if he would have wanted them there. I loved my newly pierced ears and began to loathe wearing dresses to my grandparent’s home. Once we began to grow out of childhood and began to think for ourselves, our grandparents began to hate us. My grandmother would sigh when we would visit with a short haircut or when we didn’t sit lady-like enough in our dresses. I believe she was the one who prompted my shame of sexuality. She gasped if she walked in on us pulling shorts on beneath our dresses, and she warned us to not allow boys (our cousins and even my grandfather) into our bedrooms while we were visiting.

This thinking supposedly began early in their marriage when the Churches left West Virginia to find work in Detroit. While there, they were saved and left their former ways of drinking and partying. At some point in their early marriage, they heard a radio evangelist calling for people to send him their jewelry, including wedding bands, claiming that they represented false idols. So my grandparents sent their gold bands to the evangelist who claimed they would be destroyed with all the others. This story always made me laugh because I could imagine that evangelist making a fortune off the ignorance of other people. Returning to West Virginia, my grandfather began preaching while also working in the coal mines. After the birth of their first daughter, they eventually moved to Columbus to escape the mines. Here, my grandfather preached for much of my mother’s childhood. My mother claims that her parents were not considered ultra-conservative in comparison to many of her friends’ parents. For the most part, most families were quite conservative. However, my mother complained that there were phases when her
parents refused to allow her to wear pants to school, so she would sneak them in her bag. Also, there were times when the Churches would get rid of their television after feeling guilty for having one, only to have it return to the living room a few months later.

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When my mother was in junior high, my grandfather injured his back at work and was prescribed valium for his pain. This led to a serious addiction to the drug which lasted throughout my mother’s high school years. My grandfather’s addiction cost him his position as a preacher. He was also considered disabled because of his back injury. This forced my grandmother to get a job at an insurance company to support the family. My mother describes her teenage years with a drug addicted father as hell. Her father was delusional and unpredictable. His demeanor became violent and abusive. Standing in the kitchen one evening, my mother recalls him slapping her mother hard across the face for something she said. Dinnertime was particularly painful because my grandfather would refuse to let anyone else talk. He would make his rounds at the table, finding faults in each of his daughters and in his wife. My mother retells these events with extreme bitterness toward her father and her mother. It was her mother who allowed him to verbally and physically abuse their daughters as well as herself. When my mother was a sophomore in high school and her two older sisters were married and out of the house, she came home from school one day and escaped past her father to her room. My mother’s job in the evening, before my grandmother came home, was to begin dinner after she finished her homework. On this particular evening, my mother went to her room to begin her homework and was sitting at her desk when her father entered her room. (It is important to note here that my grandfather was forbidden to enter his daughters’ rooms by my grandmother. My grandmother made this very clear to her daughters as soon as they began to mature.) As my mother sat at her desk, she turned around to see her father standing in the doorway. She asked him what he wanted and he demanded to know what she was doing. Telling him that she was working on homework, she watched as he entered the room and sat in the middle of the floor with his legs crossed. My mother asked him again what he wanted and he finally replied that he was going to punish
her. “For what?” my mother asked. “Because you are not doing what you are supposed to do,” he said.

My mother began to argue with him that she was doing her homework and would begin dinner in an hour. However, my grandfather grew angry and told her that he was going to beat her. He pulled off his belt and began to beat my mother’s back and legs. Finally, he stopped, put his belt on, and walked downstairs. My mother called her older sister who picked her up for the weekend. When my mother showed my grandmother the welts and bruises, she said nothing. The beating was never mentioned again, and my mother often wonders if my grandmother thought that my grandfather’s intent was to rape my mother. This might explain why my grandmother was so adamant about my grandfather keeping his distance from his daughters’ rooms. Although my mother believes that this was his intent, she cannot recall anything other than the beating.

It is obvious that from her teenage years my mother understood the contradictions of her parents’ lives. Although they decried evil, their very lives exuded it. Trying to make sense of my grandparent’s extreme legalism, my Uncle Steve, my grandmother’s brother, narrates an experience he had with my grandmother after her acceptance of Christianity:


. . . Imogene eventually graduated from high school, Mom died, Imogene and Silas married and moved to Detroit but returned and lived, for a while, back in Baileysville. It was the summer that Uncle Bill committed suicide . . . Kathy was born and she was their only child, and I was visiting them during the summer at their home. It was a three-room railroad style frame known as the "last house in Baileysville" because it was on a road leading out of town. I slept in the middle room on a couch. There was a bedroom with a crib for the baby and a kitchen. The kitchen was the center of the house because of room and warmth. After moving to Detroit to find work, Imogene and Silas ‘FOUND GOD AND GOT SAVED’ while there. They will tell you of drinking parties in Detroit with their friends and the guilt and agony this caused them. They clearly experienced a revelation and returned to West Virginia as changed people. All of these changes happened away from me and it was that summer that I realized my old goodtime, fun-time sister was not the same. The radio was on one hot, humid summer day (the road ran parallel to the Wyandot River) and I asked Imogene to dance. This was not an unusual request because we had been dancing together for as long as I could remember. She was hesitant but I insisted and she finally agreed. We danced the jitterbug for one song in the kitchen (the radio was playing from the middle or living room) and I remember she seemed so tight and uncomfortable. I think we cut the dance short (for sure, there was no repeat or second dance) and I felt hurt because, clearly, she was not enjoying the jitterbug.

I didn't question the situation and let it go. Later that week, or perhaps on Sunday, we went to church. During 'testimony' (which is equivalent to 'confession' in the Roman Catholic faith except it is public rather than private) she stood up in front of the congregation with me at her side and said and I quote her verbatim "I have sinned because I danced the jitterbug with my little brother in the kitchen and I ask God
to forgive me”. I was embarrassed and mortified but also perplexed that such a seemingly fun and wholesome activity which we had been doing for years and years was suddenly and without warning "a sin". This was, for me, my first realization of her adoption of the legalism and conservatism which now, is the dominant force in her married life. Even then, I knew she was changed . . .

All In The Family

My first experience with death occurred while living on Hawks Avenue in Columbus, Ohio. I must have been four or five years old. Jason, a delinquent teenager on our block, killed himself in the alley behind our house. Jason was probably seventeen or eighteen and lived a few doors down from us with his family. My only real experience with him was the night my parents asked him to baby-sit us. That night was one of the most terrifying events of our childhood. Jason ordered that we stay downstairs while he ran upstairs for something. At the time, my brother had much of the Star Wars action figures and accessories, among which was a Yoda mask. And, as the three of us sat in front of the television, Jason descended the stairs into the living room wrapped in a white sheet with the Yoda mask covering his face. Even after Jason realized his mistake and removed the mask, he could not calm us down until our parents returned home. We were terrified and we sobbed until our mother walked through the front door. Later that night my father stormed about the house over some three hundred dollars that had been stolen from the closet in their bedroom. In the same closet the sheets had been disheveled where Jason had chosen the white one that he wore. My father was convinced that Jason had stolen the money and vowed that he would never allow him to baby-sit us again.

When we retell this story with my mother present, she argues that she would have never left us alone with Jason for an entire evening. She tries to convince us that she must have stepped out for only a few minutes to run to the store and asked him to sit with us until she got back. My father’s memory, on the other hand, is always centered around the stolen money. Despite the discrepancies, my siblings and I can only think of Jason in terms of his suicide. It must have been only a short time later that this occurred, stunning our neighborhood. As a child I remember fusing these two memories so that the story

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I remember was that Jason had shot himself after leaving our house that evening. Feeling so bad for
scaring the three of us, he could not live with himself and committed suicide. After much discouragement
from my mother over that version of the story, I later agreed that he was running from the police through
the alley and, knowing that he would not escape them, shot himself in the head. However, I am still
unsure if this is a more factual account than my imagined scenario.

I believe that Jason’s suicide was a blow to our neighborhood more because of his age rather than
the fact that it was a suicide. If he had been shot by someone else, it would have been just as horrifying.
I never remember asking my parents how suicide was different from any other death. Growing up with
my father, suicide was in no way a foreign subject. I don’t remember my mother sitting us down after
Jason’s death to explain what suicide was. She didn’t have to. We knew from the first time we met our
father’s eyes. Suicide threatened our family from the time we were born and still haunts us today. My
father attempted it twice that I know of and threatened his life on a regular basis. Now that I am an adult,
my mother laughs over a story that she and my father shared many years ago. They were in a counseling
session attempting to uncover the dysfunction of their marriage. My mother says that she and my father
were sitting on opposite ends of a couch in the counselor’s office. Mom was expressing her anger toward
my dad for constantly threatening suicide. (He had recently been released from Vanderbilt Psychiatric for
his second suicide attempt). My mother glared at my father and said, “I wish you would just get it over
with rather than constantly saying your going to and never going through with it.” My father began
laughing. Then, he laughed hysterically. Finally, the counselor said to my father, “I don’t think your
wife is kidding. I think if you don’t kill yourself. She is going to kill you.” Now surely the counselor
wasn’t being serious; he was trying to show my father that his threats were only pushing my mother
further away and making her more angry at him. Luckily for my mother, she finally walked away from
the dysfunction of this relationship. But, as for my father, he still does not understand what happened to
his marriage.
When I was in the second grade, suicide visited our family for the second time. My mother got a call one morning from her sister, Kathy, still living in Ohio. Her husband, a high ranking police officer in Columbus, had threatened to kill her before he went to work. He backed her up into the corner of their bedroom with a piece of metal to her throat. He told her that he already had her death planned out and that he was going to make it look like an accident. Because he was a police officer, he would never be convicted of murder, he told her. Knowing that my Uncle Grady was serious about his threat, my mother begged my Aunt Kathy to get in the car, pick up her four daughters at school, and head to the airport. After they hung up, my mother’s other sister, Cindy, (living in Nashville) got on a flight to Columbus to drive with them back to Nashville. Meanwhile, my youngest cousin, only in preschool, came home around lunchtime, followed by my Uncle Grady. It was then that my aunt realized that he would keep his promise. He forced my aunt and cousin outside and said they were going for a walk around their pond. My aunt promised him that she would do anything he asked as long as he left them alone. After walking around the pond, he returned them to the house and left again for work. Immediately my aunt threw clothes and belongings into bags and put them in her car. She picked up her other daughters from school and met my aunt Cindy at the airport. For months afterward, my aunt and cousins lived in the spare bedroom of my aunt Cindy’s house in Nashville. Then, one night when all the girls were asleep, my Uncle Grady called his wife. Realizing that she was not coming back to him after months of begging, he told her that he placed all the important papers on top of the microwave. And, with her on the phone, he said, “When you hear the bang, I’ll be dead.” My uncle shot himself lying on the sofa in their beautiful, newly built home with his wife on the other end of the line. My mother woke us up when she heard the news and we drove to my aunt’s house. Then, at the age of eight, I sat beside my best cousin as her mother told her that her dad was dead.

To this day, our extended family does not discuss my Uncle Grady or his death. Although I know some about the horrible things he was involved in, I am forbidden to tell my cousins. My family believes strongly in secrets. We burn our histories or tear them in tiny pieces to throw away hoping that they will
disappear. If there is someone in our past that haunts us, we choose to forget about that person and act as if they never existed. We never mention their names again.

One of the things I remember most about my Uncle Grady’s death is not the stories of the hundreds of police officers who came to his funeral, but the “important documents” that he left for my aunt. For a long time, I wondered what these “important documents” were. As an eight year old, I imagined that they were top secret pictures or certificates proving his involvement in the mafia. And for years I was certain that he placed them in rather than on the microwave. I would ask my mother why he placed them in the microwave, and she, not hearing my misunderstanding, would say, “I guess that is where he knew she would look first.” In the microwave? I was sincerely confused and confounded. Did he want to burn them? I was utterly disappointed when I later realized that he was only placing birth certificates and insurance information on top of the microwave. The second thing that creeps into my mind about his death is the couch on which he was lying. I remember my parents saying to one another, once my aunt went back to pick up all of her furniture and sell the house, that the couch was soaked in his blood. This was always interesting to me. And, I am almost positive that my mother said that he removed the cushions from the couch before he shot himself. I could picture him in my mind as he prepared all of this almost as if I was standing in the kitchen of that great castle-like house. I could never share this openly to my family, though, because they would call me irreverent or gruesome. We can only think these things in our deepest thoughts, hidden from watchful eyes.

As a child, I must have believed that everyone had a family member that had committed suicide. And, although for years I questioned my own genetic make-up and worried that I had been inflicted with suicidal tendencies, I could always reason my way out of it because my father and my uncle were two men who had simply married my mother and her sister. Feeling more connected with my mother’s side of the family, I felt that these men simply contributed to our existence. So, I blamed the dysfunction on a few women’s poor choices in choosing men. However, it wasn’t until years later that I realized that suicide was a trend in my mother’s side of the family as well. In 1946, long before my Uncle Grady or
my neighbor, Jason, committed suicide and before my father was even thought of, my great-grandmother shot herself in the heart with a rifle, leaving her four children to be raised by the oldest child, my maternal grandmother. I never once recall my grandmother mention her mother’s name. She spoke of her father as a saint, a true man, but she never had a mother. Florence Centers, my great-grandmother, living with her family in Southern West Virginia, went through an early menopause. Thinking that she was having a mental breakdown, my great-grandfather, James (Pop) Centers, offered to send her to a mental hospital in Kentucky. However, Florence believed he wanted to send her to an insane asylum, so refused. Meanwhile, she became addicted to painkillers and was bed-ridden most of the time. Eventually, this began to wear on her. Prior to this, her husband also had an illegitimate child in Belgium while serving in World War II. A letter from this woman arrived at the Centers’s home demanding money and this pushed my great-grandmother further into her depressed state. Finally, it was the death of her mother that caused the final blow to Florence and a week to the day of her mother’s death, Florence locked herself in her bedroom and shot herself. My great-grandfather purchased the rifle in the height of his wife’s depression and brought it home after her first suicide attempt. He taught her how to use it (practicing with targets in their yard) with full knowledge of her instability and threat to herself. In a letter from my great-uncle Steve (Florence’s youngest son), he retells the events of his mother’s death.

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Great-grandparents James and Florence Centers

Dear Jennifer,

... I will try to tell you, as best as I can remember, FACTUALLY, what happened with the death of your maternal great-grandmother. Your great-grandmother, Florence Ethel Cummings was born in Tennessee near Chattanooga and married your great-grandfather, James Charley (Pop) Centers who was born in Kentucky. They married in the early 20's and moved to West Virginia to find work in the coal mines. Their combined ethnic background was Scotch/Irish, German and Eastern Cherokee Indian. You need only to look at their photos to see the dark eyes, dark hair and high cheekbones which, my dear darling Jennifer, you have inherited ... In 1946, the year of my Mom's death, we were living in Brenton, West Virginia (formerly Red Jacket) near Baileysville in Wyoming County. Mom went through an early menopause and became addicted to pain-killers (Phenobarbital). Imogene [my maternal grandmother] became the caretaker and caregiver (an awesome responsibility for someone so young) and managed the house seeing to the meals, housework and laundry. Mom took to her bed and drifted in and out of reality. The situation was further complicated by the news of the illegitimate child born in Belgium (this was at the end of World War II) and Pop Centers's womanizing. Pop was good-looking and popular with the ladies. Mom was an accomplished organist ... but was unable to escape a world of depression. Hormonal treatment was unknown in those days, and drug addiction was unspeakable along with other social situations. Divorced women were called "monkey widows" which was a highly insulting and derogatory term.

Imogene was dating Silas [my grandfather] who lived next door and was freshly mustered out of the Navy. I knew his parents (your paternal great-grandparents) very well and remember your great-aunt Glynna [Silas's sister] . Glynna put me and Inez to bed in her room in her house (next door) the night of my Mother's death. It was a great concern to Mom if Imogene married Silas because then who would take care of the house and me and Nez (we were 9 and 7 years old, respectively). You can understand why Imogene and Silas are, in many ways, parent figures for me and Inez. Brother Chuck was pretty much on his own and Pop Centers would drift from job to job subject availability. He was very active in the United Mineworkers and was involved in organizing and strikes. His idol was John L. Lewis. I remember going
to meetings with Dad, taking his lunch to the mine during the summer and thinking, even at that tender age, that there must be a better life. I was right. I found a much better life after great, great struggles. Pop Centers was a veteran and was eligible for government health care along with his dependents. He attempted to convince Mom to take advantage of a drug rehabilitation program in Kentucky. I believe it was a Veterans Hospital in Louisville or Lexington. She refused to go since she firmly believed and equated the hospital with an insane asylum. With Imogene's impending marriage and departure, Chuck's coming and going, Pop Center's womanizing, and two small children to look after, plus drug addiction, early menopause and depression SHE WAS TRULY TRAPPED. There was no solution and recourse for her and she could not see her way clear. She was very sick and was not receiving the help she needed. She began to get worse and took to her bed most of the time. She attempted suicide with an overdose of iodine. She was taking iodine supplement for a goiter and iodine in large quantities is toxic. She failed in this attempt but I remember it well.

In the meantime, Pop Centers brought a gun (a 22 rifle) into the house and taught my Mom how to shoot. I remember them doing target practice in the backyard and, again, at that tender age, I could not understand why. I knew the gun was dangerous, however, and I remember my fright at the time. There was another terrible blow to my Mom, also. Her mother, Ma Cummings (your great, great grandmother) passed away in Davy (McDowell County). This was my grandmother and I remember learning about it in school from my teacher. Remember, in those days, families were related, clans existed and most people lived within short driving distance. News traveled fast but often by word of mouth. I came home from school and confronted my Mom and Dad about the death of Ma Cummings. This was a devastating blow to my Mom and she committed suicide shortly after this. She was unable to attend the funeral and her own funeral was held in the same Baptist Church in Davy. On a Sunday, Mom appeared to rally and sent me and Inez to the store to buy ice cream. Imogene and Silas were home making dinner, Dad was away and Chuck was living in Columbus. I remember that as we were walking down that country road I was looking back as my Mom waved goodbye and she was crying. I could not understand why. This memory is clear as a bell. We picked up the ice cream and returned home. Imogene and Silas were in the kitchen. We tried to wake Mom for dinner but the door was locked. Silas went around the house and looked in the window and saw Mom lying on the bed with a rifle lying on her and a bullet in her heart. She was clearly dead. Inez and I were hustled next door to be with Glynna. I remember seeing the ambulance and police arrive and the next morning we were told by Pop Centers that Mom was dead. I remember attending the funeral in Davy along with many, many relatives. She is buried in Asco Hollow near Davy beside Ma Cummings. . .
Discussing my great-grandmother’s death with my Great-Uncle Steve opened my eyes to the resentment my grandmother holds for her mother. Obviously my grandmother was forced to raise her siblings when she was ready to begin her own family, but this resentment and anger runs far deeper. My grandmother is hard on her mother because she believes that suicide is a sin. The psychology or mental state behind it doesn’t matter. To her, it is simply wrong. And if my grandmother believes that someone sins against God, then she refuses to acknowledge their existence. This is why my grandmother never told her own daughters about the lives or suicides of her mother’s two brothers (or my great-great-uncles). Their suicides were told of in another letter, along with responses to my questions about the presence of the gun and why my grandmother did not hear her mother kill herself while cooking dinner in the very next room.
Dear Jennifer,

. . . Back to Mom and Pop Centers. I have always wondered, and at times the original four brothers and sisters (Imogene, Chuck, Steve and Inez) would discuss Mom's death and speculate on how it could have been prevented. Dad was a womanizer and he used to slap Mom around. He was emotionally and physically abusive. Mom not only threatened but actually tried to and did, finally, commit suicide. Pop was at his wits end because he was unable to help her. It would be awful to believe that he brought the gun into the house and taught her how to shoot hoping she would take her life (which she eventually did) but the coincidence is there . . . On the other hand, the men in those days and those times always hunted (Silas was a big hunter and still has guns in his house in Tennessee Ridge) but Dad was not a hunter. He was not at home when Mom died and I wonder if he viewed her as a millstone around his neck and really wanted to get rid of her. However, the other explanation was suicide runs in that side of the family as Uncle Joker (Mom's brother and your great-uncle from Baileysville) killed himself by jumping into the river and his body washed up on the banks three weeks later . . . Or, the death of Uncle Bill (Mom's brother and your great-uncle from Davy) who jumped in front of and was killed by a train. The train tracks run right through the middle and split the town of Davy. That side of the family has the reputation of being emotionally unstable and subject to fits and depression which border on insanity. Remember, I told you Mom doubted her sanity and believed Dad was trying to put her in an insane asylum rather than a hospital with a drug rehab program. I really remember all of this very well and none of these comments are fabricated but they are, nonetheless, OPINION . . . The presence of the gun was not a concern to small children in the house, as best as I can remember. Guns were always put away, out of sight, not loaded and reasonable safety precautions were taken. None of us have an explanation as to why Imogene and Silas did not hear the rifle shot and they are not forthcoming in detail. I believe they were in the house one room away from Mom's bedroom in the kitchen and the radio was on. We had a brand new console (floor model) in the living room (it was a simple four room frame house, with a living room, kitchen, and two bedrooms. The radio was very popular, for obvious reasons, and we spent many hours listening to news broadcasts, mystery theater, story serials and music. I believe the radio was playing loudly when Nez and I left the day of Mom's death for the store but is this just my mind playing tricks on me? Maybe!

There was no running water, central heating nor indoor plumbing. Water came from a well, heat from a coal stove and the outhouse was in the backyard. I cannot definitely answer why Pop brought the gun into the house but I would like to believe it was for family protection since he was away from home often.
rather than an attempt to make suicide easier for my Mother. Will we ever know for sure? No, we won't but we can think about it. If family protection was the reason why weren't Imogene and Chuck taught how to use and handle the rifle? In short, one speculation seems to lead to and, in fact, open up another. And, finally, I just really don't know the truth. I am absolutely certain, however, that Pop has implicit, if not explicit, responsibility for Mom's demise and death . . .

Great-Uncle Steve as a baby

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It is no wonder that growing up Appalachian has affected my grandmother’s view of her mother. Despite the fact that my great-grandfather was abusive to his wife and perhaps made his wife’s suicide possible, my grandmother continues to blame her mother. In my grandmother’s eyes, Florence abandoned her children and her husband, which is an abominable action for a woman to take. Regardless, this view of my grandmother’s has contributed greatly to her outlook of women in general. Women were not allowed to escape marriage via suicide, divorce or abandonment. They were to support their husband despite his abuse, affairs or abandonment. And this is evident in her own marriage. When her husband slapped her or beat my mother, she simply turned her cheek and considered it her position to try harder. Submissiveness is her policy.
Uncovering the story of my great-grandmother has opened the Pandora’s Box of our family. It has revealed our history of contempt for women and our disabling refusal to hold men accountable for their actions. I would love to travel back and know my great-grandmother. My great-uncle says that when she died there were four cut-out pictures of movie stars taped above the bed where she killed herself. A lover of music and movie stars, she must have been a fascinating woman longing for a fantasy life outside of her harsh reality. Recently at my mother’s home, I sat down at my great-grandmother’s organ and for the first time realized that she sat on that same stool to play that same instrument. My great-uncle calls her “an accomplished organist” and a musician. Perhaps it is fortunate that she refused to allow my great-grandfather to kill her any more than he already had, and so chose for herself suicide. Knowing that she could neither divorce her husband nor gain support for separation, she provided her own means of escape by taking her own life. It seems to me that she began to realize, even as an Appalachian woman in the 1930s and 40s, that there was more to life than marriage and children.
SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Autobiography has undergone numerous revisions since the way it came to be traditionally understood. In this project I have focused on those revisions made by women in contemporary American autobiography. From the earliest to the most contemporary autobiographies, many women resist the conventional form created by Western “values” and “ideals.” I suggest that this resistance is initiated by their early exclusion from the public realm. Once women were included in and granted access to history, they redefined importance in terms of experience. Interestingly, their experience (due to their placement in the private) was different from the conventional story, which recounted a life of success rooted in the public world. What women’s experiences did portray were lives always searching for completion, but never finding it. Although Lacan had rendered this theory of a coherent identity false in his “mirror stage” (and critics such as Mehlman, Gusdorf, and Olney supported and revised his claims), he failed when he suggested that people then differentiate themselves from all others in order to form their individual identities. In essence, although the completely coherent self was recognized as an illusion, that self went on to differentiate through individualism. The problem with this was that most women (and also minorities) did not see themselves as separate and distinct individuals. Their lives were much more fragmented and more fluid than distinct. Therefore, women’s texts recorded an “elsewhere” that portrayed a lack of coherence, the construction of the self, and themselves as fluid with others.

The first chapter of this project focuses on the lack of coherence in women’s autobiography. Here, I look at both form and content, showing how women portray their fragmentation, which is almost always self-conscious and deliberate. From the earliest women’s autobiographies which were diaries and religious journals, women illustrate their fragmentation, writing entries that are short, disjointed and often unrelated to one another. These same characteristics are evident in the most contemporary autobiographies. Among these forms are vignettes, poetry, photographs, storytelling, inter-chapters, myth and metaphor. In most of these forms, the autobiographer leaves large gaps, forcing the reader to do
much of the work. These stories rarely tell an “entire” story of a woman’s life, and, in fact, they challenge that possibility altogether. Fragmentation still has its place in the content of women’s autobiography in that women are generally self-conscious of their own fragmentation. This self-consciousness usually reveals the most private aspects of a woman’s life: often her body and mind. In this section, I first outline the ways in which women discuss their bodies. Recognizing that their bodies are closely connected to their identities, women often tell of their first periods or their sexual experiences. Although these subjects may appear too personal and even unimportant to their overall stories, this is another way women attempt to subvert the public/private binary. By discussing subjects that are generally intimate, they argue that their bodies are important to the understanding of themselves. Along similar lines, women’s minds share this same intimacy. A trend of autobiography that exposes the most private thoughts of a woman’s mind is the mental illness memoir. These are perhaps some of the most fragmented of memoirs because they often question the autobiographer’s “insanity.” The problematic nature of these lies in the woman’s perspective. Whereas she writes from a recovered perspective, we are expected to believe that she was really mentally ill. This proves difficult for the reader because the autobiographer seems so logical as she tells of her experience. Her awareness of herself and her own illness allows her more room for playing with the conventions of autobiography.

Whereas the first chapter questions the notion of a stable identity in autobiography, the second chapter deals more closely with the notions of a true self or a true text. Here, I look at the ways in which women, specifically Mary McCarthy and Lauren Slater, employ truth and lying in their autobiographies. In finding the self in autobiography, James Olney argues that the true self can only be found in the act of writing and that the life from the past and the “I” in the writing do not correspond. However, Sidonie Smith wants to hold onto the notion of difference and suggests that these two elements, in fact, do correspond in what she calls an “approximation” of the self. Therefore, she leaves room for the importance of a woman’s past experience, suggesting that it does relate to and affect the construction of the self in the writing. The second aspect of this chapter deals with the construction of the text, and it
shows how women employ lying and construction in their works. Georges Gusdorf suggests that the lies in autobiography are insignificant, believing that the real “truth” lies at the core of the man. However, what both McCarthy and Slater illustrate in their autobiographies is that the lies do matter. McCarthy suggests that, for her, these “lies” are crucial. Because she is left without a complete family story, she sees them as the only means of constructing herself. Similarly, Lauren Slater argues that lies are essential to her personality; therefore, she must lie in order to be true to herself. Obviously, both women cleverly play with these notions, but they also show that autobiography itself is slippery, and especially when you are dealing with truth and lying, the text is almost always left ambiguous and unclear.

The last and final chapter looks to the ways in which women autobiographers move away from an individualistic notion of the self to a more fluid and relational concept. According to Susan Stanford Friedman, Gusdorf’s notion of a distinct self does not fit for women (she extends this to include minorities and non-Western people). Friedman uses Sheila Rowbotham’s theory to suggest that women see themselves as multiple, as if they are looking through a “cultural hall of mirrors.” These multiple images reflected back to the woman occur because she positions herself with and against others in culture. Contemporary women autobiographers illustrate this multiplicity in various ways: through others, through mothers, through the loss of others, and through communities and cultures. Through any of these modes, women are then able to see and write themselves more clearly. Whether it be through their immediate or extended family members, parents, mothers, or entire communities and cultures, women’s lives come into sharper focus.

As I went to write my own memoirs and then positioned them beside an analytical work, this fluidity became especially interesting. Nancy K. Miller, in her own critical memoir, questions whether or not any story can “ever be more than . . . a dialogue enacted with other selves.”141 Clearly, she refers to her own writing of her parents and their importance in her life, but she also suggests that as her own memoirs are positioned against the discussions of other women’s memoirs, the two dialogue with one

141 Nancy K. Miller. Bequest & Betrayal, x.
another. By reading other works, she is able to better understand her own life and loss of her parents. This was my own goal in creating both a creative and analytical work. I wished for the two pieces to weave into one another and to provide a better understanding of the genre altogether. My vignettes are positioned next to the chapters where they seemed to more closely align with the themes discussed. In the first section, I argue that however ordinary my life may seem, it is my experiences that I consider extraordinary. It is also my fragmentedness that adds to rather than detracts from my uniqueness. For example, although I feel incomplete without my son and less of a mother because I am not parenting him (hence the parentheses around the “birth” in Birthmotherhood), it is my being a birthmother that makes me different from other mothers. This fragmentation continues through the second section when I discuss truth and lying. Here, though, it is getting at a true self and story that I find problematic. When an autobiographer admits to lying, what makes her believable? For me, it is my experience. Because my family lived a lie, I argue that I developed that same pattern. The “lies” that surface in the vignettes perhaps fall under “construction” rather than outright lying. Although I realize that my family may not corroborate my construction of memories, I suggest that is ultimately my reader from whom I need corroboration. Finally, in the final section of this project, my vignettes pivot to the themes of fluidity and relationality. Although these may portray my identity as even more fragmented, considering I am discussing my mother, father, and extended family (and then these are positioned next to other women’s works), I suggest that it is here that I really begin to see myself most clearly. By looking at other people (whether it be my own family or other women autobiographers) and observing their experiences, I am better able to understand and then write my own.

Finally, this leads me to discuss the future of autobiography. Although in this project I have focused on the fragmentedness, constructedness, and fluidity of contemporary American women’s autobiography, how do these themes apply to other lives, to minorities, non-Western people, and to men? For future work on this project, it would be interesting to go back to those texts that we have come to understand as “traditional” to examine them from a new perspective? What specific characteristics of
them remain more traditional? But, more importantly, where might they depart from conventional standards?

Also, it will be important to look again at women’s autobiographies to see where, even they, diverge from being fragmented. Surely, it would be harmful to assume that all women’s autobiography must contain fragmentation. Perhaps demanding it of all women’s autobiographies would only revert back to greater confinement and restrictions. It would also seem to mimic how autobiography came to be understood in the first place because we would impose our own ideas onto those texts when there may be other qualities there that we have missed.

For the future of construction, it will be interesting to see how women (and all autobiographers) continue to deal with the issues of truth and lying. Clearly, Lauren Slater seems to have taken an original approach to her own memoir, but where else can we go? If she is attempting to disrupt “truth” altogether, how will this affect a genre that is based on some sort of “truth” about the self? What other forms other than metaphor will surface, and how will these continue to claim the truth of one’s experience? Then, how do other autobiographers attempt to construct themselves? It will be helpful to look at all contemporary autobiography to see how this theme is dealt with differently. How do different cultures deal with truth and lying? And, does any one culture lend to the conventional modes like Western cultures do? How might the concepts of truth and lying get redefined by people other than American women?

Moving on, it will also be interesting to look at how fluidity works with all autobiography. In keeping with women’s autobiographies, what happens to relationality when we look at different ages of autobiographers or social classes? Does fluidity seem to be more evident in the lower and middle classes than in the upper class? What about generations? Are older generations more likely to feel an interconnection to others than newer generations? If so, why? What happens when we apply these ideas to men and minorities? Do the same things occur? And, is all autobiography relational? What differences occur when you cross races and cultures?
Perhaps the final and most interesting exploration for me would be the future of critical memoir. What does it mean for an autobiography to contain both the creative and the critical? Other than an attempt at fluidity, what else might an endeavor like this suggest? Will we see more texts like Miller’s, and will there be a separate study of those works? How might we read these texts differently than we may read solely the story of a person’s life? How does the dialogue between critical and creative work? Is it successful and in what ways? In doing this, we might discover how reading other autobiographies helps autobiographers to better understand themselves and write themselves more clearly.
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Fall 2001- 2003 Marshall University (Huntington, WV)
M.A., English

Spring 1996-1999 Trevecca University (Nashville, TN)
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2001-2003 Graduate Teaching Assistantship, Marshall University

2002 Maier Writing Award - First Place Graduate Fiction, Marshall University

1999 First Place Fiction Award, Legacy, Trevecca University

PUBLICATIONS


2002 Excerpt from Locust Years: An Autobiography, Et Cetera, Marshall University

1999 “Amazing Grace,” Legacy, Trevecca University

PRESENTATIONS


TEACHING EXPERIENCE

English 102: Composition II (Spring 2003), Marshall University
English 101: Composition I (Spring and Fall of 2002), Marshall University
English 101: Teaching Assistant (Fall 2001), Marshall University
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Writing Workshop: Ironton High School (Spring 2002 & 2003)

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Web Designer, Agentweb.net (Web Design Company for Real Estate Agents and Firms), (Nashville, TN), 2000-2001

Traffic Coordinator, The Tennessean (newspaper with circulation of 250,000), (Nashville, TN), 1999-2000

ACADEMIC SERVICE

Fiction (prose) Editor, 2002 Et Cetera, Marshall University

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