

BECOMING A BETTER ME: THE CO-EVOLUTION OF CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN
MEMOIR AND BESTSELLING SELF-HELP LITERATURE, 1952-2013

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ABSTRACT

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Literature outlines the sociological hermeneutics of twentieth-century therapeutic discourse and the co-evolution of American life writing, with an emphasis on how bestselling self-help texts provide an interpretive frame for reading the therapeutic organization of contemporary memoir. It argues, via an interrogation of such cultural phenomena as the conversion narrative, talk-show culture, the popular hoax, and (seeming) readerly desire for authenticity--even factuality--within life-writing texts, that self-help, at least of the variety that routinely tops the *New York Times* bestseller list, is gendered, classed, heteronormative, and heterosexist in its very form. In contrast, bestselling examples of memoir from the same period might function as a way to either reify *or* disrupt and challenge beliefs that have come to seem natural, particularly as they appear in self-help.

The major self-help texts that this dissertation interrogates, which range from Norman Vincent Peale's *The Power of Positive Thinking* (1952) to Rhonda Byrne's *The Secret* (2006), illustrate that self-help, as a form of therapeutic discourse, by its very nature calls for certain kinds of norms that such critics as Nikolas Rose and Michael Warner have argued are completely artificial. Bestselling self-help is a site of power/knowledge that reveals and reinforces hegemonic identity construction and performance. Its roots in the New Thought of the nineteenth-century betray its tendency to reduce real problems, both embodied and rhetorical, to questions of "mind over matter," and its calls for authenticity find themselves pressured by the

notion that, within postmodernity, there does not exist a unified, whole subject. The tremendous upsurge in the popularity of both memoir and self-help in the last half of the twentieth century necessitates an examination of the ways in which 1) self-help, as a cultural commodity, demands attention for the kinds of political signification it implies or suggests; and 2) although some examples of popular memoir have flattened into “genre memoir,” which features a relatively predictable narrative arc, others have the potential to reassert the agency of the individual within a starkly biopolitical matrix made up of health, wealth, and the goal of holistic “well-being.”

Contemporary American memoir, though it frequently demonstrates evidence of the ubiquitous influence of self-help, might function as an alternative to self-help for those who have been excluded by the genre. In particular, the works of Mary Karr, Dave Eggers, Lauren Slater, and Cheryl Strayed point to the possibility of subverting the discourse of therapy that one finds embedded in self-help and in popular culture more broadly. Via their encounters with popular therapeutics in several different channels, these writers critically evaluate the possibilities and limitations of the hegemony of therapeutic discourse, thereby providing a way of reading the biopolitical subject as embedded in political, philosophical, and popular rhetoric. By reorganizing these autobiographical texts, this dissertation provides a new hermeneutics for reading contemporary American-authored memoir and autobiography via the rise of self-help and therapeutic discourse.

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Introduction:

Becoming a Better Me:

The Co-Evolution of Contemporary American Memoir and Bestselling Self-Help Literature,
1952-2013

It is up to the recipients of . . . the text to determine, for themselves and on the plane of public discussion, the balance between history and memory.

—P. Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*

The philosophical questions that prompted this project are admittedly difficult to answer in five chapters. They surround the nature of subjectivity, of what it means to ground identity in narrative, of authenticity and nostalgia, of history and historiography, of the push-and-pull between cultural context and textual production and consumption, of performativity, of what it means to experience a conversion—whether that conversion be religious or secular—and of the ethical and political stakes contained within the answers to such questions. There are a lot of moving parts here, to be sure, but all of these aporias find parallel paradoxes embedded within the study of contemporary life narrative, an immensely popular genre that drives the contemporary publishing industry. This dissertation investigates the evolution of bestselling contemporary American memoir—especially as it is informed by self-help literature—in order to illustrate how and why self-help/popular therapeutics ultimately comes to function as a kind of evangelism. In this evangelism, however, the deity is replaced by the notion of a “better” or “best” self.

My use of case studies within the genre and within popular culture more broadly will shed light on a key tenet of contemporary American life: as we advance into late capitalism's ripe old age, we see in myriad examples of popular narrative the troubling ubiquity of personal, individual experience. From publishing to songwriting to how people behave on the Internet, "I" has become an omnipresent (and slippery) signifier. Popular memoir evolved alongside self-help literature (books, advice columns, magazine articles about "how to be a better you") through the latter half of the twentieth century, which gives rise to the first part of my interpretive foundation: there is a mutually causative relationship between the popularity of these two genres. They are frequently rhetorically similar, and the kinds of cultural work that they do differs from the work that, say, fiction does. Significantly, there are ways in which certain kinds of memoir—often outliers in the genre—subvert or transgress the rhetoric of self-help, which is itself steeped in neoliberalism. The individual, within the rhetoric of popular secular self-help texts, is the only entity that can fix the individual. Therefore, as a cultural commodity, self-help demands attention for the kinds of political signification it implies or suggests, especially when read alongside examples of life writing that assert—or challenge—the possibility of individual agency within the matrix.

The central critical question that began this project is deceptively simple. In a culture that has become increasingly "autobiographical"—that is, saturated with so-called "reality television," celebrity confessions, and narrating-I's of all varieties—*and* mediated by therapeutic discourse, what happens when we read examples of life writing through the prism of popular self-help? The answers locate themselves here, in my investigation of the historical and socio-political developments in the late-twentieth and early-twenty-first centuries that have led to the surge in popularity of both life writing and therapeutic discourse: as of the time of this writing,

memoir and autobiography outsell the novel by a substantial margin, and popular self-help is a nearly billion-dollar industry.¹

I therefore root this examination in questions of genre and discourse, the consumption of narrative, the narrative agency of the marginalized, and the fact that, ultimately, various kinds of discourse permeate one another to create new, hybrid genres, which expand possibilities for agency while simultaneously illustrating the cultural impulse for individuals to “be better.” Thus, this project answers Fredric Jameson’s call to “always historicize,” while grappling with Ricoeurian arguments about the nature of historiography, Foucault’s conception of both biopower and autocontrol, and, following Pierre Bourdieu, the sociological implications of a large-scale generic shift into bourgeois consecration and consumption. All of the works we encounter here are versions of identity formation and/or “technologies of the real”: themes of sexuality, family structure, integrity and identity, authenticity, repression, what marks “reality,” and whether the self can ever be “whole” find their way into the chapters that follow. Ultimately, we will see that self-help, as a cultural commodity, demands attention for the kinds of political signification it implies or suggests. And, although some examples of popular memoir have flattened into “genre memoir,” which features a relatively predictable narrative arc, others have the potential to reassert the agency of the individual within a starkly biopolitical matrix made up of health, wealth, and the goal of holistic “well-being.”

Therapeutic discourse, for purposes of my argument, began in earnest the 1950s with the publication of Norman Vincent Peale’s *The Power of Positive Thinking*; it includes self-help texts, advice columns in magazines, women’s magazines of all kinds (*O* magazine is an excellent

¹ Nielsen BookScan figures indicate a dramatic rise in the popularity of memoir and autobiography over the past several years: total sales across reality writing’s subgenres increased more than 400 percent between 2004 and 2008 (Yagoda).

example), websites, and any text that suggests that “self-improvement” is desirable. Sociologist Micki McGee describes the fundamental problem with this type of discourse: “Just as the emergence of consumer advertising fostered social anxiety by focusing on an array of supposedly embarrassing corporeal ‘problems’ . . . problems that could be addressed through the purchase of various toiletries—today’s retinue of self-improvement experts, motivational speakers, and self-help gurus conjure the image of endless insufficiency” (17). Here, McGee’s description comes very close to how Horkheimer and Adorno describe the culture industry in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*: “Something is provided for everyone so that no one can escape; differences are hammered home and propagated” (97). In order to be fixed, one must first be broken; the proliferation of therapeutic discourse since the mid-twentieth century therefore suggests that “brokenness”—and the “differences” such brokenness breeds—is epidemic in American culture. This epidemic has both epistemological and economic effects: in order to assuage the anxiety caused by the loss of economic and/or interpersonal security, one might consume more therapeutic texts, embark on more “personal journeys,” embrace both personal scrutiny and personal affirmation in order to “be better.” Throughout what follows, I call this “the You Industry.”

At the fore of this multifaceted examination is a rhetorical analysis of twentieth-century therapeutic discourse and its relationship to (creation of) the You Industry, with an emphasis on how bestselling secular self-help texts provide a hermeneutic frame for reading the therapeutic organization of contemporary American memoir. Broadly speaking, I interrogate the dual rise of these texts, beginning in 1952, with the publication of Norman Vincent Peale’s *The Power of Positive Thinking*, and ending in 2012, the year after Oprah Winfrey hosted her last syndicated talk show and reincarnated her massively successful Book Club. I provide corresponding

readings of bestselling self-help texts and examples of popular contemporary memoir, in order to illustrate the rhetorical similarities and differences between the two genres. I ground my analysis in the socio-cultural moments that produced the texts, as a way to interpret the genres as institutions that frame the individual as a significant site for change. I interrogate the following hypotheses: the cultural work of memoir, a genre once relegated to the fringes of literary studies as a discipline, is both shaped by and shapes popular self-help discourse; it makes visible the possibility for sites of resistance that are less visible in other genres; it is rooted deeply in the notion that the individual is the primary actor in her own reality; and it simultaneously offers the possibility for both political resistance and for hegemony. Ultimately, we will see that contemporary self-help is how neoliberalism forgets the lessons of postmodernism and its once-familiar reasons of challenging the truth of the self.

The State of the Field

Sometimes called “autobiography and memoir,” sometimes called “creative nonfiction,” and expanded in recent years to include such digital phenomena as online social media and blogs, “life writing” is, simply, the discourse of self-referential narrative. As Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson posit in *Reading Autobiography*, life writing is “a moving target, a set of shifting self-referential practices that, in engaging the past, reflect on identity in the present” (1).² Implicit in the discursive sign “life writing” is a contract between reader and writer, which Philippe Lejeune first described in “The Autobiographical Pact”: “What defines autobiography for the one who is reading is above all a *contract of identity* that is sealed by the proper name. And this is true also for the one who is writing the text” (19, emphasis mine). The very fact that

² See the first chapter of Smith and Watson’s comprehensive text for both the etymology and discursive evolution of various terms, including “autobiography,” “memoir,” and “life narrative.”

such a contract—forged with readers, publishers, and (to a lesser extend) writers themselves—exists is emblematic of what Foucault calls the return to centrality of personal experience; it is both founded in and carried out by individuals making pacts. The tales they will tell are, at least ostensibly, tales of personal experience. In this sense, life writing can function as a kind of micro-historiography; that is, the writer asserts, in Ricoeurian fashion: “I was there. If you don’t believe me, ask someone else.” The key difference between life writing and historiography, however, as we will see, is that life writing is an entirely *subjective* mode of writing; the narrating-I keeps herself at the center of her story.

The horizon of expectations for readers of life writing is, as Smith and Watson describe, relatively simple: “autobiographical narrators establish for their readers a different set of expectations from those established in either the verisimilitude or suspension of disbelief of the novel or the verifiable evidence and professional norms of biography and history writing” (14). These expectations ultimately harken back to Lejeune’s notion of a pact/contract: by calling work “autobiography” or “memoir” or “life writing,” a writer suggests that she will narrate events as they occurred, at least within her subjective purview, and that she is who she says she is. However, because the discursive structure of the genre relies so heavily on intersubjectivity—“I cannot know who I am without knowing someone else, the other”—the binary mode of “true/false” cannot hold. Subjective truths and objective truth are not the same thing, and we will see a return to the idea of *authenticity* and the fact that it is, in fact, distinguishable from *factuality*. After all, who is to say what is true for another?

One of the primary problems of autobiographical narrative, if we might call it a problem, is that memory is a deeply flawed human faculty. Memory is itself an interpretation of the past; we might recall the experiment in which several eyewitnesses to an event are asked to recall an

event, at which point they give myriad different descriptions of what took place.³ Individual recollections are often shaped by expectation, by misinformation, and by time: the more time that passes, the less reliable the memory might be.⁴ Memory is fundamentally temporal; James Olney describes this temporal faculty using the metaphor of weaving in *Memory and Narrative*: “[I]f the operation of memory is, like weaving, not archaeological but processual, then it will bring forth ever different memorial configurations and an ever newly shaped self” (20). But we are not on an archaeological dig, even in the Foucaultian sense; when we read life narrative, we encounter a series of processes that begin with memory and end in writing. It stands to reason that an autobiographical narrator may, at different points and in different circumstances, remember the same subjective event differently; she may even narrate the same event differently. Ultimately, as Smith and Watson tell us, “how people remember, what they remember, and who does the remembering are historically specific,” and I operate under that premise and its myriad implications in what follows (23).

Most recently within life writing studies, there has been a philosophical-political turn within critical investigations of the genre. Since the mid-1990s, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson have focused their attention on questions of embodiment and agency in all kinds of autobiographical narrative, and on the “everyday work” that contemporary memoir has the potential to do.⁵ Leigh Gilmore—whose seminal *Autobiographics* (1994) forced scholars to

³ See, for example, Frederic Bartlett’s 1932 “Remembering: A Study in Experimental and Social Psychology.”

⁴ See, for example, Elizabeth Loftus’s “Human Learning and Memory,” in which she describes a series of psychological experiments which suggest that memory can be rewritten.

⁵ Memoir and autobiography, as Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson have argued, has seen three distinct waves of criticism. The autobiographical canon, first set in the 1960s, included such texts as Saint Augustine’s *Confessions*, Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Confessions*, Benjamin Franklin’s

consider, at some length, the influence of Foucault on interpretations of life narrative—has begun to investigate both “American neoconfessional” and the role of pain (physical and otherwise) in the construction of the genre.⁶

Gilmore, in both *Autobiographics* and 2001’s *The Limits of Autobiography*, makes a series of claims that are directly relevant here. First and foremost, she insists that the “category of autobiography emerges with other discourses of self-representation” (*Autobiographics* ix), which is at the fulcrum of my investigation. She traces the discursive legacy of “truth” and “lying” in a way that mirrors my own readings of examples of therapeutic discourse; indeed, my own argument focuses on the notion that we’ve moved beyond questions of “truthiness” and into an awareness of the pressing need to investigate the hermeneutic circle of autobiography. Not only is life writing defined by the culture that produces it; the culture that produces it is defined, to some extent, by autobiographical narratives. Gilmore’s work is based in explorations of so-called “stable” categories of identity (namely the universal, white, male, bourgeois, heterosexual subject) alongside “unstable” ones (women, people of color, the poor, and, to a lesser degree,

Autobiography, and Henry David Thoreau’s *Walden*. According to Smith and Watson, “shifts in this canon [in the mid-twentieth century] meant moving beyond a Eurocentric focus and acknowledging significant life narratives in the Americas, especially by Franklin, Thoreau, Whitman, and Adams” (*Reading Autobiography* 198-99). These were the texts upon which early critics focused; the American autobiographical canon—the “high” culture of the period—became completely dominated by narratives of white men’s lives. The “first-wave” critics were “preoccupied with the *bios* of the autobiographer [and] understood autobiography as a subcategory of the biography of great lives and acted as moralists of sorts, evaluating the quality of life lived and the narrator’s telling of that truth” (200). Throughout the rest of the twentieth century, such scholars as James Olney, Elizabeth Bruss, Paul John Eakin, Gillian Whitlock, Leigh Gilmore, and Nancy K. Miller, among others, worked hard to trace this critical history, to be come more inclusive, to incorporate aspects of “low” culture into their analyses.

⁶ See also G. Thomas Couser, whose work on disability narrative helped to pave the way for disability studies as a critical field, has taken up questions of the posthuman, as has Gillian Whitlock, whose impressive *Soft Weapons: Autobiography in Transit* puts life writing studies into conversation with postcolonial theory. Paul John Eakin and James Olney, both concerned with the narratology of the genre, have both recently turned to reading it as identity-construction, and Eakin in particular has begun to focus on the ethics of life writing as a genre.

queer identities). The autobiographical subject, for Gilmore, relies on his or her performative agency, *and on the awareness of this agency*. The “classic features of autobiography,” Gilmore writes, are known to the contemporary autobiographer before he or she sits down to write (31). The writer has an epistemological—and maybe ontological—sense of the genre itself before he or she crafts the text. Additionally, Gilmore’s insistence that “[autobiography] asserts a right to speak rather than be spoken fore” suggests some of the political valences behind and within the construction of the genre. Within my readings of popular self-help texts, we will see a similar epistemological demand: the genre brings with it conventions that are rarely violated and, although on the surface the texts provide simple solutions for quotidian problems, they are fundamentally performative in that their underlying assumption is that the reader is broken/sad/poor/queer, and can thus be “fixed.”

Authenticity: The *Pharmakon*

Textual authenticity, a concept that rears its head multiple times in the pages that follow, has been a hot topic in the study of American life writing since the 1970s, when Lejeune’s definition of the autobiographical pact suggested that writers would seek to maintain what Smith and Watson call “a sincere and responsible relationship to their audiences and to the ethical imperatives of that relationship” (“Rumpled” 10-11).⁷ Bruss’s seminal *Autobiographical Acts* takes this further; Bruss views *authenticity itself* as an illocutionary act: “The excitement and the potential aesthetic ambiguity of autobiography,” she writes, “stem from how closely the literary act borders on the literal, how immediately the decisions of the autobiographer and his reader

⁷ I will abbreviate Smith and Watson’s article titles as follows: “The Rumpled Bed of Autobiography” will be “Rumpled,” and “Witness or False Witness?” will be “Witness.”

reflect traits of an intellectual and social life beyond the pages of the text” (18).⁸ Aesthetic and ethical ambiguity become linked and, as they explore the connections between the two, both Lejeune and Bruss attempt to solidify life writing as a genre worthy of critical interpretation. In 1990, Timothy Dow Adams published his significant *Telling Lies in American Autobiography*, which explores how lying in life writing works rhetorically. Adams calls untruth in these kinds of texts a “highly strategic decision” employed by writers who range in his study from Gertrude Stein to Mary McCarthy. In the past decade, life writing scholars have turned their attention to the limits of life writing (Leigh Gilmore), to the creation of marginalized identity in memoir and what it means to, for example, narrate one’s own cognitive decline (G. Thomas Couser), and to the ethics of life writing as a whole (Paul John Eakin).

Authenticity is the thread that ties these otherwise disparate theoretical approaches together. Textual authenticity is not a new concept: we may recall Lionel Trilling’s famous *Sincerity and Authenticity*, which mapped “authenticity” as a socio-literary outgrowth of earlier “sincerity,” something that only appeared with the birth of societies of individuals, as opposed to

⁸ The study of life writing established its academic legitimacy following Roy Pascal’s 1960 *Design and Truth in Autobiography*. Much of the work in life writing studies in the 1960s and -70s focused on defining the genre, making clear how it differed from genres such as fiction, poetry, and journalism, and working to illustrate the significance of Lejeune’s autobiographical pact. In 1976, Elizabeth Bruss’s *Autobiographical Acts*, which insisted that we must “explain how there can be both change and continuity in autobiographical writing, and frame our explanation in a way that will not distort individual autobiographies,” provided a new method for close-reading individual works of life writing while simultaneously asserting the genre’s academic relevance (2). Indeed, for many years, the critical focus seemed to be on establishing life writing as worthy of the same kinds of critical attention given to other genres, and we might credit Pascal, Lejeune, and Bruss for establishing critical ground upon which we continue to build. This led to a new set of bibliographic essays and monographs that took hold in the early 1980s and precipitated a current of philosophical and philological analyses. William Spengermann’s 1980 *The Forms of Autobiography: Episodes in the History of a Literary Genre* advocated a historical, instead of formal, approach to the genre; James Olney’s *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical* attempts to explain the critical and theoretical possibilities contained within the genre; Estelle C. Jelinek’s edited collection, *Women’s Autobiography: Essays in Criticism* worked to establish female-authored life writing as a topic worthy of study.

monarchies or theological states. For Trilling, authenticity is related to generic conventions such as the villain and the hero, the hero's ultimate epiphany, and how the quotidian affects this epiphany, though Trilling avoids defining the word "authenticity" in a concise manner. For Trilling, authenticity is not a moral concept, whereas sincerity is. We might even consider Theodor Adorno's *The Jargon of Authenticity*, which provides a Marxist critique of Heidegger while establishing what Adorno reads as the mimetic nature of existential philosophy: "Heidegger instituted authenticity," Adorno argues (17). For Heidegger, authenticity is an ontological problem, one grounded in what he calls "an ethical desire for grounding presence" (qtd. in Risser 215). And indeed, especially given the ethical questions that *inauthenticity* raises, both within and outside of contemporary life writing studies, I think it wise to consider examples of memoir that reflect—and, maybe, challenge—some of the ontological concerns that Heidegger and, later, Adorno raise. By logical extension, we might view writing and reading life writing as an ontological exercise.

Authenticity is a buzzword in contemporary popular culture, too, although there is some significant slippage between it and its colloquial synonym, the word "real." In a 2013 *Huffington Post* article, for example, Michael Drew considers how we recognize the authentic. His example of popular music is a good one: "loud and lamenting," he writes, "doesn't equal real and raw." He goes on to describe the authentic in terms that echo Trilling, even some thirty years later: "Sometimes the discussion of whether a song, a movie, a performer—anything—is or is not authentic is a way for a person to dismiss something for not being whatever his or her pre-existing idea of something is supposed to be. That isn't a question of authenticity, but of personal views of culture" (1). When we talk about authenticity, then, we have to consider social conventions and discursive structures that imbue the word with meaning. What makes a pop

song authentic? How about a blog entry? An ethnic restaurant? A memoir? Significantly, I wonder whether subjective experiences themselves can ever be “authentic,” especially as they’re mediated by both memory and language into life-writing.⁹ As a related question, I wonder to what extent the turn, at least among some readers, from a desire for *authenticity* to a desire for *factuality* has been affected by the instability that life writing, especially in its postmodern variants, engenders.

Even the word “authenticity” has a troubled etymology. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines it in a number of ways that, though they jibe on the surface, reveal deep conflicts in the word’s meaning: one denotation suggests *authority*, “as being authoritative or duly authorized.” Another suggests *factuality*, “as being in accordance with fact, as being true in substance.” The third brings in the notion of *genuineness*, “as being what it professes in origin or authorship, as being genuine.” And the fourth takes us back to factuality, “as being real, actual; reality.” Within the world of memoir and autobiography, however, many of us agree that we might forego the notion of Truth in favor of truths—something that Linda Hutcheon proposes in *The Politics of Postmodernism*—and that there is a distinction between “authenticity” and “factuality” that parallels the one that Trilling describes between “sincerity” and authenticity. In short, there has been a widespread move of late to fact-check memoir in much the same way one would a piece of journalistic writing, perhaps indirectly answering Paul de Man’s 1976 demand that critics consider autobiography a “simpler mode of referentiality, of representation, and of diegesis” than fiction, a genre that “may contain lots of phantasms and dreams[,] deviations from reality [that] remain rooted in a single subject whose identity is defined by the uncontested readability of his

⁹ Here we see a blurring of the line between epistemology and ontology. Questioning how we can *know* if something is authentic is an epistemological exercise; contemplating what authenticity *is*, on the other hand, is an ontological one.

proper name” (de Man 920).¹⁰ Throughout this provocative article, de Man simplifies the genre; I, along with myriad other critics, believe that life writing is just as fraught with difficulties of representation; there are as many deviations from reality, and the subject—as we will see—is far from “single.” de Man calls for an investigation of just what kind of authority the then-marginalized genre deserved. In spite of the article’s reductions, de Man is absolutely correct on at least one front: “just as we seem to assert that all texts are autobiographical, we should say that, by the same token, none of them is or can be” (922).

Authenticity is, in both connotation and denotation, linked to authority; that is, the “authentic” piece of creative nonfiction, based on or in verifiable facts, takes on a kind of authority that recedes when fact and fiction mingle. de Man asserts that life writing authors “are obsessed by the need to move from cognition to resolution and to action, from speculative to political and legal authority” (922), something we see from time to time in the genre but that finds itself challenged by several of the examples which I investigate here. Let’s return to Leigh Gilmore, who makes some claims about authenticity and authority upon which I will build:

Authority in autobiography springs from its proximity to the truth claim of the confession, a discourse that insists upon the possibility of telling the whole truth while paradoxically frustrating that goal through the structural demands placed on how one confesses. . . . [T]he legacy of the confession for autobiography can be introduced as a history of valuing and devaluing, of determining and misrecognizing the profoundly political dimension of all discourses of autobiography. (“Policing” 55-6)

Here we find ourselves haunted by another grand narrative: confession. The formula rears its

¹⁰ For an excellent example of this, see John D’Agata’s recent *The Lifespan of a Fact*, which illustrates what happens when an essay is fact-checked to death.

head again and again in examples of contemporary memoir, especially those with a demonstrable connection to popular therapeutic discourse: I was born. I became broken and in need of fixing when bad things happened to me. I worked to make myself better (alternately, someone intervened to help me get better) and thus found a form of secular redemption. I'm sorry for the wrongs I've committed, unless I had to commit them to become better. "When readers of autobiography . . . seek to verify the facts of an autobiography," Gilmore writes, "when they are dubious of an eyewitness account, yet look to the eyewitness for truth, they indicate the extent of the confession's power" (57). If anything, in the twenty years since Gilmore published the article, this has only become more relevant in life writing studies, especially given the recent fact-checking epidemic.¹¹

Generally speaking, memoir contains markers of authenticity that become familiar to a serial reader of the genre. The narrator often writes in first-person and under her own name. There is often a sense of immediacy—of showing, rather than telling—that we also find in other prose narratives such as the novel.¹² Frequently there exists an initial disclaimer about the veracity of a work's truth-claims; less frequently, the writer self-reflexively questions his or her recollections throughout the text itself. We often see a writer's memories as they are mediated by the present, by the narrating-I, but also folded into carefully-constructed narrative that includes formal elements that are nearly impossible to prove, factually, such as dialogue. Fundamentally, though, the impulse to confess, to make good, to share one's sins, is at the heart. Without

¹¹ In addition to James Frey's *A Million Little Pieces*, which I address at length in chapter three, various texts have come under fire in the past decade for their factual fabrications. I'm thinking here of any number of Augusten Burroughs's memoirs, in addition to humor writer David Sedaris, who was "exposed" in Alex Heard's 2007 *New Republic* article as having embellished, and whom Ira Glass has suggested be "fact-checked" on *This American Life*.

¹² We might think, for example, about the sense of immediacy that Mary Karr creates at the beginning of *The Liars' Club*, which I address at some length in chapter two.

confession, whether genuine or parody, there cannot exist an “authentic” memoir.

Life writing is an inherently self-conscious genre that is often written in the first-person by the person whose name appears on the title page, which implies a kind of authority over the events that it describes. This marks it as a kind of historiography—we might remember Paul Ricoeur’s explanation of historiography as revolving around one central assertion: “I was there,” it says. “If you don’t believe me, ask someone else.” Asking someone else proves to be difficult when one is reading a subjective account of someone else’s experiences. Memoir often conforms to master narratives in the sense that it either 1) after Rousseau, tells a relatively traditional and highly individualized coming-of-age or conversion story; or 2) after Benjamin Franklin, describes most (if not all) relevant events that have led to the subject’s authority on some matter, whether that matter be the subject herself, something outside of her (such as travel or education), or some combination. As a signifying system, the memoir makes truth-claims even when the author acknowledges the slippage of memory; some examples even make claims of factuality. This seeming willingness to obey the tropes of a variety of master narratives, in spite of its simultaneous existence as a kind of micronarrative, marks the genre itself as fundamentally resisting both literary postmodernism and postmodern subject-positions. There are almost always signs that the fragmented subject wishes to be “whole.” At the end of the day, it functions as a kind of Derridean hauntology, or a call to the past from the future; the narrating “I-now” merges in the narrative with the protagonist, the “I-then.”¹³

These “I-formations” are discursive structures that provoke several questions. If, as

¹³ Here, I refer specifically to Lyotard’s definition of postmodernism as “incredulity toward metanarratives” and his subsequent suggestion that legitimacy might be found in more local narratives. The corresponding thought in communications theory that posits a master narrative as a “transhistorical narrative that is deeply embedded in a particular culture” finds itself, here and throughout this project, in the following formula: “I was born. Bad things happened and I became broken. Then I worked hard to get better and found redemption along the way.”

postmodernism tells us, the subject can never be assembled into a whole, coherent, universal, then what does it mean when so many examples of bestselling memoir suggest the opposite? Could this be a socio-historical force that, in some sense, has *created* the bestselling memoir and, at least partially as a response, its postmodern counterpart? Life writing, as a genre, provokes questions about how one's individual reality is (re)produced in narrative.¹⁴ This kind of thinking ultimately harkens back to Émile Benveniste's *Problems in General Linguistics*, which puts under pressure the nature of the personal pronoun, what it signifies, and what it cannot signify: "Language is possible only because each speaker sets himself up as a *subject* by referring to himself as *I* in his discourse. Because of this, *I* posits another person, the one who, being as he is, completely exterior to 'me,' becomes my echo to whom I say *you* and who says *you* to me" (225, emphasis in original). Language is possible because of the self/other divide; therefore, personal narrative of all kinds, including memoir and autobiography, is only possible because of this divide. Knowing who I am *not* allows me to know more of who I *am*.¹⁵

¹⁴ In his 1999 *How Our Lives Become Stories: Making Selves*, Paul John Eakin explores how "the selves we display in autobiographies are doubly constructed, not only in the act of writing a life story but also in a lifelong process of identity formation of which the writing is usually a comparatively late phase" (ix). Eakin's questions surround the nature of the "two I's": the "I-as-narrator" alongside the "I-as-protagonist." Smith and Watson have performed similar analyses.

¹⁵ There is a significant question, however, of whether epistemology and ontology begin to merge. We might turn, briefly, to Derrida's "Signature, Event, Context," as a way of examining how meaning exists in context: in this case, the meaning of "postmodern memoir" can only exist within a definitional apparatus that includes other genres (such as historiographic metafiction), and in a context of a society intent on preserving confession as a master narrative. Derrida deconstructs the intentionality of Austin's speech-act theory and the metaphysics of presence to illustrate that meaning exists even outside of its given context. He stresses "iterability" which, following Plato, means that any act of language can be placed in a limitless number of contexts regardless of the intention of either the writer/speaker or reader/listener. Contrary to Austin's model, Derrida insists that communication is not merely the transmission of meaning from one subject to another, and the occurrence of an event, which provides context for meaning, is not the primary aspect of communication. Instead, meaning is deferred through an endless chain of signifiers.

Postmodern Authenticity?

Grand narratives are the supposedly universal, absolute or ultimate truths that are used to legitimize various social and political projects. Here, the grand narrative of confession and absolution, the narrative that suggests that with enough hard work, everything will be fine—“becoming a better me”—is used to legitimize the “project” of homogenous bestselling narrative. As I will demonstrate in what follows, Oprah Winfrey et al.—the arbiters of therapeutic discourse—drive this narrative, providing all kinds of means for those *with* means to make themselves the best they can be. Although postmodernism itself offers an emphasis on the local and the particular as opposed to the universal, something that could conceivably mark all such local narratives as postmodern, therapeutic discourse—especially as it is mediated by the bestselling memoir—expects that we manage, transform, contain, and embrace our “authentic” selves, thus assuming the presence of such authentic selves.

Linda Hutcheon has long argued that the postmodern is a “questioning of what reality can mean and how we can come to know it,” which implies that, on some level, we *can* know “reality,” as long as we question how we acquire our knowledge of it—something that life writing frequently does (*Politics* 32). Patricia Waugh contends that we must rethink the self by acknowledging the fact that “[e]veryone agrees that [p]ostmodernism is much concerned with

He takes this a step further and into a realm that directly influences readings of memoir and autobiography, traditionally taken to be context-bound (in the sense that “this happened to me” might precede the way I write my own narrative). The signature, which in this context might mean the author's name on the title page, for Derrida is rooted in the possibility of the failure of the sign behind the signifier, and in the presence of the sign(ed)'s absence. For Derrida, and here I'm thinking also of “The Animal that therefore I Am (More to Follow), “[a]utobiography becomes confession when the discourse on the self does not dissociate truth from an avowal” (390). Truth, then, *is* an avowal, a declaration, a confession. Derrida questions whether there exists a form of autobiography “immune from confession”; the answer is no. In some ways, even the postmodern memoir depends on the *collapse* of the grand narrative in order to work.

fragmentation” but without the “apocalyptic nihilism about the possibility of ethical and imaginative subjective experience” that she believes is a characteristic of “postmodernist writing” (190, 193). As a feminist critic, I appreciate Waugh’s argument that “the goals of agency, personal autonomy, self-expression, and self-determination . . . can neither be taken for granted nor written off as exhausted”; in fact, we will see these very themes at work in both of Slater’s texts. I take issue, however, with Waugh’s conception of “the postmodern” as a monolithic exploration of the loss of Enlightenment autonomy within late capitalism (194). Instead, we might view postmodernism as existing in a variety of ideological and theoretical forms. The very notion of treating it as a single entity—or as a single, albeit fragmented, state-of-being, rather than a conceptual and linguistic tool, contradicts its *oeuvre*.

Authenticity is itself a concept rooted in existentialism.¹⁶ Fredric Jameson writes, in his *New Left Review* article that spawned *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, that the existential crisis between authenticity and inauthenticity is “closely related to that of the great opposition between alienation and disalienation” (qtd. in Docherty 67). Of course, nearly all of the texts that I consider here seem to operate under the umbrella of the latter opposition—the self-help texts describe how to pull oneself out of alienation, and the examples of memoir alternately describe and/or create in their readers feelings of *both* alienation and disalienation. In this sense, claims of authenticity become purely performative in this context. That is, “authenticity” has come to represent a set of cultural standards that find themselves reflected in their moments of textual (re)production. In a world dominated by global capitalism and bourgeois spiritual neoliberalism, personal voices and experiences themselves begin to merge with the industry that sells them—personal voices and experiences become the thing being sold.

¹⁶ Chapters three and five take up the question of authenticity at great length, especially as it relates to the concepts of both factual truth and the postmodern subject.

As Jeffrey Nealon compellingly argues in *Foucault Beyond Foucault*, this has stark biopolitical implications. Foucault himself was famously anti-existentialism, preferring to assign agency, even within the matrix of power, to “those subjects who resist power by means of an aesthetic project of self-authoring” (Nealon 4). I admit to taking this literally: *self-authoring*, in the scope of what follows, means “authoring the self,” or writing life narrative. In terms of biopower, my readings of bestselling American memoir will illustrate Nealon’s explanation of the Foucaultian trajectory in a way that follows Foucault’s assertion that ethics is itself a discourse and a practice of resistance: right now, biopower is the mode of power; the individual is the primary actor; lives are the primary target; governmentality is the primary hinge; norm is the primary practice; sexuality is the most intense form; autocontrol is the desired outcome (45). Along the same lines, I think it prudent to consider the ethical and practical stakes of this form of normalizing discourse, especially given recent allegations that the American government has spied on its own citizens (panopticon), the continuing battle for equal rights for members of the LGBTQ community (sexuality), and the notions of self-authorship and autocontrol that we find embedded in the various forms of social media that permeate our daily lives. And, in Nealon’s words, the “odd relation between economic privatization and cultural privatization leaves us with a series of pressing questions” that I will attempt to answer here. “In short,” Nealon writes, “one might wonder whether the turn to privatized interiority as the privileged locus of *cultural* value is merely a regressive symptom of privatization’s triumph in the *economic* realm” (89, emphasis in original).

Jameson, too, in "Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture," makes a cogent argument about cultural production that becomes strikingly relevant when we consider Horkheimer and Adorno's conception of the culture industry as compelling works of art "to create truth by

impressing [their] unique contours on the socially transmitted," which is both "necessary [and] hypocritical" (103). Jameson writes that

The only *authentic* cultural production today has seemed to be that which can draw on the collective experience of marginal pockets of the social life of the world system: black literature and blues, British working-class rock, women's literature, gay literature, the *roman quebécois*, the literature of the Third World; and this production is possible only to the degree to which these forms of collective life or collective solidarity have not yet been fully penetrated by the market and by the commodity system. (140, emphasis mine)

Any claim of art, of authenticity, or even of difference, is always already ideological. In the 1990s, for example, after nearly sixty years of pop therapeutics, cause-and-effect became a chicken-and-egg question; the kinds of difference espoused in contemporary bestselling memoir contradict the kinds of sameness suggested in corresponding self-improvement texts. We're all different; we're all the same; we all have problems; we all need help. We all confess. We all forgive. We all have private narratives that we might like to write and sell for public consumption.

Therefore, the seeming desire within therapeutic discourse for "whole" self-management and "authentic" transformation represents one of several overlapping paradoxes that I will address throughout this project. Although such contemporary theorists as Jacques Derrida and Paul Ricoeur have disputed the being of subjectivity as self-presence, preferring instead a (violently) intersubjective I-cannot-know-who-I-am-without-the-other model, concurrent developments in the world of pop therapeutics assume this very being. In spite of the fact that the cultural moments and participants in those moments that I analyze here—whether they be

implied (readers of self-help), narrativized (writers of memoir), or actual (guests on daytime television talk shows)—seem to have internalized the very concepts that Derrida and Ricoeur outline (respectively: justice to the other and forgiveness), they also frequently appear to fall back onto the Cartesian *cogito*. However, beneath the surface, as I will argue, the hermeneutics of pop therapeutics and of contemporary bestselling American memoir reveals a desire for a kind of religion, a religion-after-religion, in which the interpretation of the self becomes a form of commodified, regulatory exegesis.

In chapter one, “Making the You Industry: Being Authentic, Thinking Positively,” I provide a brief history of positive thinking in American culture—the history of which, as we will see, is fraught with both religious and subjective difficulties. I briefly trace the phenomenon from the New Thought movement of the late-nineteenth century, through Norman Vincent Peale’s 1952 *The Power of Positive Thinking*, and into Rhonda Byrne’s massively successful *The Secret*. The chapter illustrates the connections between “positive thinking” and bourgeois spiritual neoliberalism, beginning in the late-nineteenth century and ending in 2012, when Oprah Winfrey and Eckhart Tolle collaborated (conspired?) to make Tolle’s *A New Earth* a massive bestseller. It tracks the New Thought roots of Rhonda Byrne’s *The Secret* franchise and ultimately uses Byrne’s franchise and the Tolle/Winfrey pairing to illustrate the biopolitical ramifications of the ubiquity of bourgeois spiritual neoliberalism in contemporary American culture. Nearly every “positive thinking” self-help text since the beginning of the twentieth century follows the same basic structure: general advice is accompanied by personal, individualized anecdotes that illustrate the relative success of the model. In this sense, popular therapeutic discourse is itself an example of life writing, albeit one that promotes Foucaultian autocontrol.

Biopower, itself a term coined by Foucault in the 1970s as a way to explain the human attempt to master life comes as a consequence of economic factors that allow for the effective management of populations. Life itself becomes a facet of the state—and of the market. On a large scale, we might view the “economic factors” at work in the following decades as a combination of the economic optimism of the mid-twentieth century, the American budget surplus of the 1990s, and the subsequent “great recession,” which began in 2007. We might also consider more personal economic factors, such as a desire to escape from poverty or for class ascension to the middle or upper classes. On an individual level, the “management of populations” occurs via the internalization of the rhetoric embedded in both popular self-help texts and genre memoir. The implication throughout contemporary pop-therapeutics is that one must 1) internalize the societal norms present throughout therapeutic discourse, and 2) carefully monitor oneself so as to behave properly, in order to 3) begin to embody the power structures that create the societal norms in the first place. This presents a paradox: the growing ubiquity of therapeutic discourse in the last sixty years suggests the impossibility, at least as it is culturally determined, of *actual* autonomy or wholeness.

This kind of commodified exegesis finds itself reflected in the talk-show culture of the 1990s. “Misery Loves an Audience: Talk Show Culture, Forgiveness, and the 1990s Tell-All Memoir of Abjection,” my second chapter, argues via readings of self-help texts by such gurus as Susan Powter and Dr. Phil McGraw that contemporary self-help is built upon the narrativization of the writers’ pasts, illocutionary acts that illustrate to readers that they, too, were once flawed but were able to transcend their flaws to become the best versions of themselves. Their focus is ostensibly on helping others to become “better.” The immense success of these titles might imply that selling the possibility of both wholeness—something that

postmodernism has taught us is impossible—and forgiveness—whether this means forgiving another or forgiving the self—and the accompanying fame and fortune for the most successful self-help authors is an always-already present example of the reification of the “whole self,” something that is reflected in such examples of bestselling memoir as Elizabeth Wurtzel’s *Prozac Nation* and Mary Karr’s *The Liars’ Club*. The chapter begins with an exploration of existential psychotherapy and transactional analysis, and then interrogates talk-show culture as a context in which to read what I argue is the master narrative of abjection. In this chapter, I introduce two theoretical terms, *active empathy* and the *autobiographical turn*; ultimately, it becomes clear that “broken is perfectly normal,” and that secular redemption—redemption in the form of mental health—is possible, even within postmodernity, if one follows the rhetoric of empowerment espoused by “experts.”

Chapter three, “A Contradictory Assemblage of Self: Authorship, Truthiness, and Oprah’s Book Empire,” is a five-part investigation of the cultural narrative surrounding Winfrey’s status as a publishing pitch-person and the kerfuffle that ensued when James Frey’s *A Million Little Pieces* was revealed to be a novel and not a memoir. It interrogates the term “creative nonfiction,” which falls under the umbrella of life writing in spite of the fact that few can define it, and addresses the question of authorship and authority via Barthes and Foucault. It begins with a detailed description of what occurred between Frey and the media from 2003-2005, and then reads Winfrey’s Book Club as a reinforcement of the “author function” that both Roland Barthes and Foucault theorized in the 1960’s. From there, it moves into three separate readings of the situation itself. The first is based on Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish* and *The History of Sexuality: Volume I*. Hinging on Foucault’s argument that hegemonic discipline resides in the answer to the simple question: “who are you?,” I examine the situation as a

spectacle: Oprah and her Book Club members asked and Frey responded, though not in a way that many people liked, which marked Frey as a guilty man and Oprah's show as a gallows under Foucault's umbrella of power and confession. The penultimate section investigates some of the differences between “hoax” and “fraud,” in order to illustrate the political stakes of each. Finally, I interrogate “creative nonfiction,” a category of life writing that seems to defy definition, as a dangerous supplement to the overly commodified and fragmented media-mediated world of late capitalism.

Chapter four, “A Ludicrous Fairy-Tale Ending’: Health, Wealth, and Bestselling Memoir in the Twenty-First Century,” takes a break from hermeneutics. It focuses on the sociological implications of the consumption of both contemporary self-help and memoir. In it, I provide a concrete historical-materialist reading of what Pierre Bourdieu calls “the field of cultural production” and the axis of assumptions that has led to the commercial success of formulaic memoir. I examine readers’ horizons of expectations and their recurring anxiety, generated by the media, surrounding the question of truth in life writing. Ultimately, the chapter argues that “confessional conversion memoir,” which I argue has risen to ubiquity, exists as an example of genre flattening; that is, in order to be commercially successful, a contemporary example of life writing must adhere to a set of generic and narrative assumptions—a formula that is all too familiar: the person/reader harbors a desire to “be better,” which she learns and internalizes via interpellation. As a way of adhering to the grand narrative of confession, she admits her wrongs and consumes self help. Work on one’s “spirit,” it would seem, will lead to a material return; in this sense, health and wealth become inextricably linked. Overall, I argue that genre memoir suggests a strong, collective reaction by publishers (big business) and the reading public against

the fragmentation implicit within postmodernity, in favor of a nostalgia for the perceived authenticity of an earlier time.

Chapter five, “She Exaggerates: Lauren Slater’s Subversion of Narrative Authority in *Lying* and *Prozac Diary*,” begins with an extended definition of the postmodern memoir. In it, I return to questions of narrative/subjective authenticity, in order to investigate what work a “metaphorical memoir” might do to challenge or subvert the genre hegemony that I describe in the previous chapter. I examine more fully the connections between “authenticity” and “factuality,” and assert that the postmodern memoir poses direct challenges to any notion of textual authenticity. I draw connections between Brian McHale’s insistence that “postmodernist fiction” asks ontological connections, and then provide close-readings of two of Lauren Slater’s texts as a way of testing McHale’s argument. Ultimately, we will see that Slater’s texts pose direct challenges to the discourse of therapy—via a series of twists, turns, and narrative sleights of hand, they undercut the grand narrative that one ought to “be her best (whole) self.”

One thing unites all of these texts, in spite of the fact that they frequently contradict one another: they are deeply influenced by the notion of authenticity, whether they challenge it, appropriate it, or both appropriate and subvert it. As we will see, the postmodern memoir pushes the limits of genre, of discourse, of subjectivity, and of the universal, writing subject. It also violates the rhetorical rules of life writing in ways that disrupt the stabilization-of-self that permeates therapeutic discourse and cultural conceptions of authenticity, thereby illustrating the postmodern memoir itself to be a *pharmakon*, or a dangerous supplement, to the idea that empirical truth can ever be represented in narrative, especially when mediated by a faculty as faulty as memory.

Throughout, I explore the connections between memoir—even what, in chapter four, I call “genre memoir”—and historiography. A series of significant questions remains, however, questions that Paul Ricoeur addresses in the second section of *Memory, History, Forgetting*: how does memory work with history? Is it possible for them to complement one another? Is memoir’s status as a bestselling genre simply a cultural restating of logocentrism? Is there a way to bring “to good ending” the “confrontation between intending the truth of history [and] the intention of being faithful to memory,” or is this confrontation underscored in these examples (Ricoeur 135)? Ricoeur’s explanation/understanding phase of history, to which I refer at some length in chapter three, “has to do with the multiple uses of the connective ‘because’ responding to the question ‘why?’: why did things happen like that and not otherwise? (136). Fundamentally, it strikes me that many explorations of life writing ask this very question; and because here I ask the question of *texts*, I think it prudent to consider in what follows the historiographical stakes of life writing. In order to write a memoir, one must be able to both contextualize and verbalize her experiences; one must approach “the threshold of language that historical knowing has already crossed” and, therefore, distance herself from memory (138). Ultimately, if we bear in mind the difficulties that authenticity—as both a word and a concept—bring to life writing writ large, along with Ricoeur’s notion that writing is an external supplement to memory that directly affects memory, we arrive upon a stark landscape. In Ricoeur’s words, “[testimony] reappears at the end of the epistemological inquiry at the level of representation of the past through narrative” (161). So, here we are, at the beginning of an epistemological inquiry that on some level becomes ontological, considering the ways in which individuals represent their pasts and what it means *that* they represent their pasts.

The problem that we face when we begin to question the authenticity (even factuality) of subjective testimony, is that false testimony threatens the social order. We tell stories in order to communicate with—to bond with—one another; however, when our stories are inconsistent (Slater), overly embellished (Wurtzel), completely predictable and normative (Gilbert), or outright lies (Frey), and yet writers and publishers have labeled them “truthful” or “true stories,” likely in order to sell more copies of them, our conception of the fine line between fact and fiction erodes, leaving us in the uncomfortable position of having to parse out exactly what is happening. We are left with the need to *interpret* both the texts themselves and the cultural situations that produced the texts. Ricoeur writes that “in our historical culture, the archive has assumed authority over those who consult it” (169); the memoir has control over its reader; the text, and the implicit logocentrism contained within, rears its ugly head. There are no facts in the archive, only interpretations. And thus, I provide my interpretations of a series of microhistories that I hope will give us a sense of the current state of affairs in two of the bestselling genres in the United States right now.

Chapter 1:

Making the You Industry: Being Authentic, Thinking Positively

γνῶθι σεαυτόν
Know thyself.
—Delphic maxim

There are three Things extremely hard, Steel, a
Diamond, and to know one's self.
—Benjamin Franklin, *Poor Richard's Almanack*

Ideas efficacious over some people prove
inefficacious over others.
—William James, *The Varieties of Religious
Experience*

This chapter provides a brief history of positive thinking in American culture and theorizes its impact on contemporary therapeutic discourse. It illustrates the connections between “positive thinking” and bourgeois spiritual neoliberalism, beginning in the late-nineteenth century and ending in 2012, with Oprah Winfrey and Eckhart Tolle’s series of “soul to soul” webinars. It traces the phenomenon of positive thinking to its roots in the New Thought movement of the late-nineteenth century, via parallel readings of Norman Vincent Peale’s (1952) *The Power of Positive Thinking*, and Rhonda Byrne’s massively successful (2006) *The Secret*. It explores the New Thought antecedents of *The Secret* franchise and ultimately uses Byrne’s franchise, the Tolle/Winfrey pairing, and Peale’s seminal work on “positive thinking” to illustrate the biopolitical ramifications of the ubiquity of bourgeois spiritual neoliberalism in contemporary American culture.

What we will see is not only the subtle prevalence of therapeutic discourse throughout contemporary American culture, but also the perpetual recycling of ideas that date back to the 1860s. These ideas put the ownership of ills squarely on the *individual* who, it would seem, has

the power to “think positively” in order to cure those ills. It is religion-after-religion, to be sure, in the sense that even bestselling secular self-help these days relies on quasi-religious premises that have at their origin Emersonian transcendentalism, New Thought, Swedenborgianism, and spiritualism.¹⁷ Now, however, following the return to centrality of personal—and individual—experiences, we call it “spirituality,” or what *Eat, Pray, Love* author Elizabeth Gilbert might call a “spazzy free-for-all.” As popular psychology runs rampant in popular culture—and here we might recall magazines with names like *Psychology Today*, the ever-present BuzzFeed “which character are you?” quizzes, or the “health” sections of any major online newspaper—we are expected to manage our *selves* in ways that go beyond what Horkheimer and Adorno describe in their explanation of the culture industry. Instead of buying mouthwash and deodorant, we purchase the promise of happiness that, with a little bit of accompanying hard work, is accessible to anyone with an Amazon account. We have fully realized the “circle of manipulation and retroactive need in which the unity of the system grows ever stronger” (Horkheimer and Adorno 97); we are left with a situation in which “[t]he result is a constant reproduction of the same thing” (101). This comes with one caveat, however. We have gone beyond movies and television, beyond advertising, beyond the homogeneity of popular music. Now, as myriad examples of popular culture tell us, what we constantly reproduce is the desire for a kind of “happy productivity,” in which, to use the clichés, we can work hard, play hard, sleep well, be good spouses and better parents, participate in our local communities, and, ultimately, in Peale’s words, “experience an amazing improvement within [ourselves]” (x).

¹⁷ For an excellent overview of these religious movements in the context of American history, see John S. Haller’s *The History of New Thought: From Mind Cure to Positive Thinking and the Prosperity Gospel*.

For all of its repackaging and repurposing, the ideology embedded in texts such as *The Secret* is quintessentially American and not especially new. In *The History of New Thought: from Mind Cure to Positive Thinking and the Prosperity Gospel*, John S. Haller attributes the linguistic shift from “religious” to “spiritual” to “the metaphysical world of postmodern American society,” a world that has appropriated and updated “the metaphysical world of the early nineteenth century, which accommodated a myriad of scientific, pseudoscientific, spiritual, and occult journeys into self-discovery” (4485). Now, however, this metaphysical world is mediated by late capitalism, with its websites, products, and demands of the marketplace that have recreated and reaffirmed a notion of subjectivity that Fredric Jameson calls “an ideological mirage” (*PM* 15). Not only must we claim individual subjecthood; we must put forth time and effort to be *better*, to strive for *best*. The You Industry has grown out of the culture industry that Horkheimer and Adorno so famously condemned in the mid-twentieth century; by virtue of global capitalism and the fact that “the mind-cure story . . . turns on the avid use of mass media,” it comes as no surprise that the history of this side of the publishing industry hinges on the notion that individuals should practice positive thinking and that, if they are unhappy or unhealthy, the fault is their own (Woodstock 158, 155).¹⁸

“Positive thinking” as a secular concept, though rooted in the new religious movements of the nineteenth century, dates to the period of American culture between 1940 and 1960, when

¹⁸ Haller describes the connection between better-me rhetoric and postmodernism: “With the advent of postmodernism, the medium for New Thought’s messages multiplied as celebrities touted their ‘secrets,’ ‘keys,’ ‘laws,’ and ‘steps’ for health and happiness through books, magazines, CDs, videos, talk shows, infomercials, meetings, courses, workshops, conferences, and the Internet. [Such] books and videos . . . became representative examples of how New Thought’s genre of self-discovery took root in mainstream thinking. The importance of the personal human experience . . . as distinct from modernity’s materialistic and reductionist personhood resonated far beyond Western culture’s more esoteric currents and traditions. Western esotericism, which was once contained in the gnostic currents of Christianity, was now secularized with the addition of quantum physics and its kindred sciences” (4485).

popular psychology positioned science and religion alongside one another, promoting both the belief in the power of thought to construct reality, after the New Thought movement, and the power of the individual to construct her own reality.¹⁹ Over these two decades, pop psychology grew into ubiquity, beginning roughly with the publication of Norman Vincent Peale's 1952 *The Power of Positive Thinking*, the first text of its kind to reach a massive secular audience. Peale's book, which has sold more than 20 million copies in 41 languages, set the tone of—and the market for—nonreligious “better me” rhetoric; in it, Peale collects anecdotes and admonitions that are designed to promote healing among “the plain people of this world” (viii).²⁰ Peale's text, though rooted in New Testament Christianity, functions as the bridge between the New Thought and Mind Cure movements and later examples of work on what Haller calls “the rightness of thinking,” such as Louise Hay's *You Can Heal Your Life* (1984) and, more recently, Rhonda Byrne's massively successful *The Secret* (2006). Put simply, these seemingly secular texts are rooted in many of the same principles: ask and ye shall receive; envision the life you want; work hard to do your best; by pursuing your dreams, you will be successful.²¹

In a remarkably succinct article, sociologist Louise Woodstock describes the evolution of contemporary self-help:

[F]rom 1880 to 1910, self-help books relied on alternative religious notions to argue that individuals should practice positive thinking. From the 1940s through

¹⁹ I would argue that it is no accident that these developments corresponded with “the economic preparation of postmodernism or late capitalism,” which Jameson describes as beginning in the 1950s and culminating in “the absolute break . . . achieved more properly in the 1960s” (PM xx).

²⁰ I retrieved this information from Peale's website, which uses these kinds of numbers to establish authority. Consumption, it would seem, is a sign of Peale's texts' ethos. See <http://normanvincentpeale.wwwhubs.com/>.

²¹ For an excellent overview of the lineage of positive thinking, see Mitch Horowitz's recent (2014) *One Simple Idea: How Positive Thinking Reshaped Modern Life*.

the 1960s, as psychology entered popular culture, some self-help encouraged readers to explore ‘negative’ root causes of ill health and unhappiness. By the 1980s and ‘90s, positive thinking had incorporated popular psychology into a hybrid ‘spirituality,’ a concept that encouraged readers to place negative thoughts in the past and envision only a positive future. (155)

This kind of “spirituality,” which ranges from Peale’s positive thinking (“read this book and change your life!” [n.p.]) to the Prosperity Gospel (God wants you to be rich) to *You Can Heal Your Life* (the Universe wants you to be healthy and “we are each responsible for all of our experiences” [xiii]) to *The Secret* (“the Secret gives you anything you want: happiness, health, and wealth” [1]), takes as a given that thoughts shape reality. Woodstock describes how this connects to the concept of bourgeois spiritual neoliberalism, or the notion that health and wealth are both connected to radical individual agency—or at least to the idea of such agency: “This notion endows the mental processes of the isolated individual with . . . curative capital. . . . Simply put, this belief in the power of thought holds that individuals can change their lives, their relationships, their jobs, and their personalities by thinking differently, through the power of thought alone” (156). The power to change rests firmly on the individual; only the individual can make her circumstances—and her self—better.

“When boiled to its essence,” Woodstock writes, “positive thinking holds that thoughts shape reality. This notion endows the mental processes of the isolated individual with the curative capital . . . [of] social interaction” (156). If, however, individuals can change nearly every aspect of their lives just by altering their thoughts, this shifts *both empowerment and blame* to those very individuals; that is, an individual can be proud of her successes, but she also must be held accountable for her own failures since, following this line of thinking, she must not have

had positive enough thoughts. This is part of the more sinister side of something that, on its surface, appears to be relatively benevolent. There are additional menacing complications, including the homogenization of the publishing industry, the totality of media spectacle, and a growing focus on personal outcomes as a measure of success. In a way that mirrors American culture more broadly, a shift has occurred from production to consumption, and from process to outcomes; it requires both time and money to achieve the kind of “success” espoused in many of these texts. And, in spite of recent psychological research that demonstrates the fact that positive thinking might not be the most psychologically “healthy” way to approach life, nearly every bestselling example of popular therapeutics promises personal transformation of the kind that mirrors a religious conversion experience.²² Simply put, the You Industry is the branch of popular culture that demands that an individual work on her *self* in much the same way that she might work at a job. Failure to achieve personal goals, following this rhetoric, is much like failing to complete a project on time, and there are consequences. This is the New Thought of late capitalism: individuals can heal themselves by practicing a prescribed set of guidelines; “the ideas put forth by these writers, lecturers, and publishers [confirm] the dominant ideology of American capitalism by blaming any weaknesses on personal failure” (Haller 3991).

The (Biopolitical) Promise of Positive Thinking

Other than its growing pervasiveness as a master narrative, positive thinking is nothing new in American popular culture; in fact, it has its roots in several of the religious movements of the late-nineteenth century, namely in New Thought, Swedenborgianism, and Christian Science.

²² See any one of several articles, including Srikumar Rau’s “Why Positive Thinking is Bad for You” from *Psychology Today* and Jan Bruce’s “How Positive Thinking Creates More Problems than it Solves,” from *Forbes*.

What has happened over the past 150 years, however, is that positive thinking itself has become a bourgeois master narrative, one that directly relates to the economic period of late capitalism. Journalist-critic Barbara Ehrenreich, in *Bright-Sided: How the Relentless Promotion of Positive Thinking Has Undermined America*, describes the covert connection between positive self-help and consumer capitalism this way: "The consumer culture encourages individuals to want more . . . and positive thinking is ready at hand to tell them they deserve more and can have it if they really want it and are willing to make an effort to get it" (8). In order to *have* more, we must *do* more; and, by logical extension and in order to be better, it might be a good idea to embark upon a literal journey that we hope will lead to some kind of spiritual enlightenment and material gain.

Ehrenreich suggests that this is a quintessentially American grand narrative that, though rooted in the "grim and punitive outlook of Calvinist Protestantism" that Max Weber describes in *The Protestant Work Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, has changed within late capitalism to depend "on the individual's hunger for *more* and the . . . imperative of *growth*" (8). Puritan Protestantism, she (after Weber) argues, was inhospitable to positive thinking. Now, such works as *The Secret*, along with various leaders of Evangelical megachurches, suggest that God wants you to be rich. The connection, Ehrenreich suggests, lies within a "common insistence on *work*—the constant internal work of self-monitoring." Whereas "the Calvinist monitored his or her thoughts and feelings for signs of laxness, sin, and self-indulgence," the positive thinker "is ever on the lookout for 'negative thoughts' charged with anxiety or doubt" (90). Ehrenreich describes the ways in which positive thinking affect and infect nearly every aspect of American late-capitalist culture: from the workplace to the home to the church, there is a hegemonic expectation that one will police and eliminate "negative thoughts" to avoid becoming a drain on others and the inevitable lack of material success that accompanies such thoughts.

Positive thinking has overt links to biopower and -politics. Nikolas Rose puts what he calls the "psy disciplines" into terms of self-regulation, which has evolved from simple self-surveillance.²³ He writes that

The citizens of a liberal democracy are to regulate themselves; government mechanisms construe them as active participants in their lives. No longer is the political subject thought to be motivated merely by a calculus of pleasures and pains. No longer is the individual, as far as the authorities are concerned, merely the possessor of physical capacities to be organized and dominated through the inculcation of moral standards and behavioral habits. . . . [T]he citizen is actively thinking, wanting, feeling, and doing, relating to others in terms of these psychological forces and affected by the relations that others have with them. Such a citizen subject is not to be dominated in the interests of power, but to be educated and solicited into a kind of alliance between personal objectives and ambitions and institutionally or socially prized goals or activities. (*Governing* 10)

The societal norms that one must internalize, here, become tied up with bourgeois consecration and popular principles of legitimacy of the kind that sociologist Pierre Bourdieu describes; if one isn't actively working on herself, she isn't obeying cultural norms. This leads to what Foucault would describe as an embodiment of the power structures that create the societal norms in the first place. However, Rose suggests that "personal objectives" align with "institutionally or socially prized goals or activities": bourgeois principles of legitimacy.

²³ There is a significant difference between "psy disciplines" and psychoanalysis—a difference that dates back to the 1920s and 30s. Haller explains it this way: "While Freud and his disciples had chosen to isolate the psychological problems with certain periods and residual feelings within the life cycle, [William] James was content to place his bet on the creative energy, luminosity, and moral helpfulness of the religious experience" (2428).

Biopower, itself a term coined by Foucault in the 1970s as a way to explain the human attempt to master life, comes as a consequence of economic factors that allow for the effective management of populations. Life itself becomes a facet of the state, and of the market. On a large scale, we might view the "economic factors" here as a combination of the economic optimism of the mid-twentieth-century, the American budget surplus of the 1990s, and the subsequent recession that began in 2007. We might also consider more personal economic factors, such as a desire to escape from poverty or for class ascension to the bourgeoisie or upper classes. On an individual level, the "management of populations" occurs via the internalization of the rhetoric embedded in both popular self-help texts and genre memoir. Within the context of what he calls "American neoliberalism," Foucault describes "[l]iberalism in America" as "a whole way of being and thinking" that has a "foothold in both the right and the left." It provides a "utopian focus which is always being revived"; in fact, Foucault argues, liberalism *requires* utopia to survive (*Biopolitics* 218-9). This is relevant here because the simulacrum of the "best self" is absolutely a utopian ideal, one that an individual likely cannot achieve, though she may attempt to do so by following the tenets of self-help or by emulating the narrative patterns within bestselling memoir (or by writing one of her own). The "abstraction of labor" that Foucault describes has led to the birth of "human capital," or the basis for biopolitics (225-27). One of the key questions, at least in Foucault's exploration of biopolitics, is "What does it mean to form human capital, and so to form these . . . abilities-machines which will produce income?" (229). Income is key to the market; the cycle continues. This comes together at the intersection of popular self-help and bestselling memoir, where biopolitics "promises to make it possible for us all to make a project of our biography, create a style for our lives, shape our everyday existences in terms of an ethic of autonomy" (Rose *Governing* 254). It has the unfortunate side effect,

however, of encouraging unattainable results, thereby creating a collective sense of disharmony and unhappiness, which leads to more consumption of texts that promise the key to being better.

Rose describes how biopolitical hegemony of the kind Foucault describes works as a kind of interpellation:

Through self-inspection, self-problematization, self-monitoring, and confession, we evaluate ourselves according to the criteria provided for us by others. Through self-reformation, therapy, conditions of body alteration, and the calculated reshaping of speech and emotion, we adjust ourselves by means of the techniques propounded by the experts of the soul. The government of the soul depends upon our recognition of ourselves as ideally and potentially certain sorts of person, the unease generated by a normative judgement of what we are and could become, and the incitement offered to overcome this discrepancy by following the advice of experts in the management of the self. (11).

Jeffrey Nealon, in *Foucault beyond Foucault*, simplifies this: biopower is the form of power; the individual is the primary actor; lives are the primary target; governmentality is the primary hinge; norm is the primary practice; sexuality is the most intense form; autocontrol is the desired outcome (45). And, indeed, *autocontrol* is exactly what popular secular self-help demands, expects, and cultivates: work on yourself, it says, and you will be a better version of yourself. It is, in some ways, the ultimate form of power “centered not upon the body, but upon life”; it reifies norms; it includes both everyone and nothing in its subtle condemnation of “subjects who may or may not have done anything illegal or transgressive, but [whose] lives are nonetheless outside the slippery slope of biopolitical normativity” (47). Thus, an individual who does not or

cannot participate in the pervasive positive thinking-and-doing campaign is assumed to be cynical, nihilistic, antisocial.

This matrix of power reveals itself in nearly all of the self-help texts that I analyze, here and in subsequent chapters. The suggestion, throughout the texts, is that readers ought to "adjust [themselves]" in order to achieve health and wealth, which might help a reader to avoid normative judgment or to transcend normality by way of being her "best self." The technologies of the self that Foucault describes become linked with health, which, with enough positive thinking, will lead to wealth.

The kind of personal maintenance espoused in pop-therapeutics, beginning with a discursive shift from *self-help* to *self-improvement* and including the demands placed on readers to both internalize and utilize its rhetoric, begs for a Foucaultian interpretation. To a degree, Rose begins this project in his 1989 *Governing the Soul: The Shaping of the Private Self*, in which he coins the term "norm of autonomy," a notion, reflected in self-help, that promises individual successes in spite of one's myriad problems. The implication throughout contemporary pop-therapeutics follows Rose and, by extension, Foucault nearly perfectly: one must 1) internalize the societal norms present throughout therapeutic discourse, and 2) carefully monitor oneself so as to behave properly, in order to 3) begin to embody the power structures that create the societal norms in the first place. This presents another paradox: the ubiquity of therapeutic discourse in the last sixty years suggests the impossibility, at least as it is culturally determined, of *actual* autonomy or wholeness. The suggestion is that one might require some kind of expert assistance in order to "heal," "change," or "transcend." What it begets, however, is the *perception* of autonomy and wholeness, a kind of illusion of the neoliberal self as "in charge," "together," or "empowered."

All the while, of course, Foucault himself provokes an(other) interrogation of the notion that self-surveillance is in fact part of a network he describes as “very specific ‘truth games’ related to specific techniques that human beings use to understand themselves” (*Technologies* 18). In *Technologies of the Self*, Foucault describes a series of four technologies, including technologies of production, technologies of sign systems, technologies of power, and technologies of the self; for purposes of this analysis, I focus on the latter, which “permit individuals to [affect] by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality” (18-20). All of these technologies concern one's understanding of herself; they all suggest that agency is possible, even within the power matrix. Foucault traces the emergence of a hermeneutic self back to early Christian confessional practices: “The subjects speak the truth about themselves *to another* and then understand who they are in relation to the public/expert interpretation of their confession/narrative,” Foucault scholar Kim Atkins writes (209).

However, this impetus to study oneself also has secular roots. Foucault traces the evolution of “know yourself,” an adage that first appeared as *gnothi seauton* (γνώθι σεαυτόν) in Delphic principle and was taken up by Plato in both the *Phaedrus* and the *Apology*. This “secular tradition,” Foucault posits, is something that we have inherited, something that “respects external laws as the basis for morality” and leads to the kinds of self-policing that permeate twentieth-century therapeutic discourse and culminate in the kind of “self-knowledge” generated by both pop therapeutics and the bestselling popular memoir.²⁴ This category of memoir provides a

²⁴ As we will see in the next chapter, the beginning of the next millennium brought a new set of concerns, namely truth-in-narrative, to memoir. Self-knowledge, as a grand narrative, continued to proliferate as the notion of knowing-the-other seemed to deteriorate.

(postmodern) counterbalance to the question of "knowing myself" in some respects, at least from an authorial perspective: via their respective examples of intersubjective webs, such authors as Elizabeth Wurtzel, Mary Karr, Cheryl Strayed, and Lauren Slater all acknowledge, with varying degrees of directness, the impossibility of wholeness. These examples of memoir thereby provide a counterbalance to pop therapeutics' insistence that the "whole self" can exist.

Enter the Postmodern Evangelist

Because Oprah Winfrey has so deeply affected the cultural climate in the United States, with her focus on identity and self-help, because she functions as a sovereign in the Foucaultian sense, and because she shapes history by asking the Ricoeurian "why?" that leads to the inevitable "because," she has come to occupy an iconic position as the instigator and arbiter of "be your best self." She thus begins to inhabit the positions of both a bourgeois consecrator (following Pierre Bourdieu) and a postmodern evangelist.²⁵ I mean this term literally: the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines "evangelist" as both "one who preaches the Gospel" (3a), and as "one who evangelizes or brings the gospel to (a heathen nation, etc.)" (3b). It also describes an evangelist as "a zealous advocate of a cause or promulgator of a doctrine" (3d). Winfrey, in all of her incarnations, has come to represent all three of these definitions.²⁶

An inherent paradox exists, however, within the popular notion of "better/best self": it represents a simulacrum, or an exact copy for which an original does not (yet) exist. The *ordinary* self of these texts searches for her *better* self because of the You Industry, or the version of the culture industry that has appropriated the very idea of (bourgeois) subjective

²⁵ See chapter four for a more extensive reading of Bourdieu's notions of bourgeois consecration and how they operate here.

²⁶ In her impressive *Oprah: The Gospel of an Icon*, Kathryn Lofton explores this in great depth.

agency into something to be repackaged and sold. Bestselling popular memoir and self-help texts of the twenty-first century have, thus far, demonstrated themselves to be mediated by this industry, evidenced by the very fact of their existence and how they came to be. The two most recent examples of memoir that I address in this dissertation provide ample evidence for this: Elizabeth Gilbert, author of *Eat, Pray, Love: One Woman's Search for Everything Across Italy, India and Indonesia*, received a massive advance to undertake the travels that ultimately led to her conversion memoir. Cheryl Strayed, whose *Wild: From Lost to Found on the Pacific Crest Trail* became Winfrey's first selection for her reinvigorated Book Club 2.0,²⁷ sold the book based on fifty pages of the manuscript; once sold, she finished it. Rhonda Byrne's *The Secret* only appeared in book form after the DVD of the same name became a surprise hit within New Age circles—it moved up in the market, successfully navigating the shift (following Bourdieu) from "industrial art" to "bourgeois self-help." And Eckhart Tolle became a featured co-host for a series of ten "webinars" with Winfrey, for which the internet-based audience was expected to read his *A New Earth: Awakening to Your Life's Purpose* in advance. The simulated academic setting, with Tolle as the teacher and Winfrey as the teacher's assistant, complete with personal anecdotes from both, blurs the edges between two traditionally disparate categories, bourgeois and academic consecration.

Following the autobiographical turn of the 1990s and the truth-in-nonfiction controversy generated by James Frey's infamous lies, three things happened in the world of Oprah Winfrey,

²⁷ Book Club 2.0 is much like the first two versions, which I describe in chapter three, with one significant difference: it is based on readerly participation, via online social networking and e-books. Once one signs up to be a member, she is given access to "popular highlights and notes" from other readers. There are also several active forums for online discussion of the texts. See Oprah.com. In chapter four, I provide extended readings of *Eat, Pray, Love* and *Wild*.

our postmodern evangelist and bourgeois consecrator.²⁸ One, she put her Book Club on hold and left network television to focus on her magazine and to establish the Oprah Winfrey Network (OWN), which thus far has been fiscally disappointing—it is estimated that it lost over \$100 million in its first two years alone—before resurrecting the Club in 2011.²⁹ Two, in the wake of the Frey scandal, writers of popular memoir became much more careful about how they explain what is "true" or not in their texts, often including author's notes that explain their research and writing processes, along with extensive acknowledgements that precede or follow the texts themselves.³⁰ Three, the self-help industry continued to grow with alarming speed, eclipsing previous sales with titles such as Byrne's and Tolle's.³¹

All four of the aforementioned bestselling texts, which combined make up a significant percentage of the overall book market share of the period between 2005 and 2012, come to represent what Horkheimer and Adorno describe as "the conspicuous unity of macrocosm and microcosm [which] confronts human beings with a model of their culture: the false identity of

²⁸ See the following chapter for an extended analysis of the autobiographical turn of the 1990s; cf. chapter two for an analysis of the autobiographical turn in the context of television talk shows; cf. chapter three for my reading of the Winfrey/Frey debacle; cf. chapter four for close readings of *Eat, Pray, Love* and *Wild*.

²⁹ As of this writing, Winfrey seems poised for a media comeback: her interview with cyclist Lance Armstrong, in which she forced him to confess to using performance-enhancing drugs, was one of the most-viewed interviews of 2012-13.

³⁰ We might cite Dave Eggers's *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* as being influential here.

³¹ James Frey faded from public view after writing a much-maligned novel, *Bright Shiny Morning*, for which he received a seven-figure advance from HarperCollins. He dubbed himself the "American James Joyce," and went on to begin his own publishing/screenwriting company, Full Fathom Five. This company allegedly employs ghostwriters who make a flat fee for writing a range of works. At the time of this writing, Frey received another large advance from HarperCollins for a series of YA novels, which are slated to be adapted for the screen and into video games.

universal and particular" (95).³² The "universal," in this sense, is epitomized by Winfrey's suggestion that *everyone* could stand to "be [her] best self": no one is left out of Winfrey's utopian paradigm, whether she be a single mother in the slums or an affluent professional. The "particular," within the context of popular self-help and memoir, is symbolized by the inveterate influx of personal narrative onto the bestseller lists. One's "particular" narrative merges with the "universal," however, via the machine that is big publishing—the market.³³

Bestselling popular memoir, at this moment in time, carries immense cultural capital; it is a mark of the bourgeoisie, in both subject matter and by virtue of its very existence. Oprah Winfrey, given her foray into both literacy (the Book Club in all of its incarnations) and salespersonship—her "O List" is something upon which producers of goods desire to be, and her magazine reads much like a catalog of goods to purchase and consume—has made a transition from her role as talk-show-host to arbiter of "good taste." Kathryn Lofton describes Winfrey's metamorphosis this way:

The talk show market [of the 1990s] was flooded with hosts offering carnivals of absurdity: encounters between incestuous relations and criminals consorting with their victims. Violence and mayhem seemed to be the visual intent, a blending of professional wrestling and soap opera, dressed as therapy in drag. . . . [As the market changed and she changed with it, she had] a product tie-in . . . a mass-distributed print culture twist. . . . Harpo, Inc., doesn't understand *sellout* as an epithet. It just sells more, more ardently, under the banner of self-love. (3)

³² See *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*.

³³ All four of these texts were published by big-name houses: Gilbert found a home at Viking/Penguin, Strayed at Knopf, Tolle at Plume/Penguin, and Byrne at Beyond Words, a massive self-help publisher. All bear Winfrey's seal of approval, the "O."

And, indeed, the magazine describes itself like this: "*O, The Oprah Magazine* provides information and inspiration on everything from lasting love to luscious food, from getting healthy to getting dressed, from the joys of reading to the rush of learning how to do everything a little better." Its mission is "to make a real mark. To speak and connect to women in a way that no other publication ever has. To help women see every experience and challenge as an opportunity to grow and discover *their best self* [sic]. To convince women that the real goal is *becoming more of who they really are*."³⁴

At the same time that popular memoirs by Elizabeth Gilbert (*Eat, Pray, Love*) and Cheryl Strayed (*Wild*) were swiftly flying off of shelves (2006 and 2012, respectively), a similar shift was occurring in the world of self-improvement texts. The two examples that I address here, Rhonda Byrne's *The Secret* and Eckhart Tolle's *A New Earth*, both simultaneously represent the ideology of positive thinking and a quest for self-confidence that, the promise is, will lead to material success for its readers and a popular name for its authors.³⁵ The reality, however, is that this is not a twenty-first century phenomenon.

William James, who coined the term "mind-cure" in 1901 to describe the New Thought movement, described it as "an optimistic scheme of life, with both a speculative and a practical side." James's primary interest was in the fact that both New Thought and Christian Science

³⁴ This is taken verbatim from the *O Magazine's* Facebook page; I have added emphasis.

Winfrey herself has become a bourgeois icon; if one can purchase the products she recommends—which range from \$15 lipstick to \$350 "jeans for your body type!"—one likely has enough disposable income to 1) buy the magazine itself, which has a list price of \$4.99, and 2) afford the goods the magazine peddles. According to the *O Magazine's* media kit, it is directed towards a median age of 47.9, median home value of \$214,281, median household income of \$68,911, and median personal income of \$38,756. These are solidly middle-class numbers.

Or not. According to David Francis of *US News and World Report*, the median household income in the United States in 2012 was \$50,054.

³⁵ See chapter four for my analysis of Gilbert's and Strayed's texts.

appeared to “work,” at least pragmatically speaking; “as a physician and psychologist, he was quick to appreciate the importance of the role the mind played in relation to health and disease” (Haller 2368). In *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, James explains the disparities between science and religion. His pattern is straightforward; he provides a pragmatic overview of the psychology behind various “religious experiences.” In each lecture, he gives a general philosophical account of how each experience works, quoting from sources and providing personal anecdotes—in this sense, it’s a kind of early ethnography. In his preface, James explains this rhetorical pattern as stemming from his “belief that a larger acquaintance with particulars often makes us wiser than the possession of abstract formulas” (n.p.).

Lectures IV and V, titled “The Religion of Healthy Mindedness,” explore the “mind-cure movement” through the prism of pragmatism.³⁶ In his longer discussion of happiness, James discusses the notion of “healthy-mindedness,” calling it “a current . . . important and interesting” (38). He argues that, by virtue of its ideology, the mind-cure movement falls within a larger category of “systemic ways of being healthy-minded,” to be distinguished from their “involuntary varieties”:

If . . . we give the name of healthy-mindedness to the tendency which looks on all things and sees that they are good, we find that we must distinguish between a more involuntary and a more voluntary or systemic way of being healthy-minded. In its involuntary variety, healthy-mindedness is a way of feeling happy about things immediately. In its systematical variety, it is an abstract way of conceiving things as good. Every abstract way of conceiving things selects some aspect of them as their essence for the time being, and disregards the other aspects. (36)

³⁶ *Varieties* could be classified as an early version of his pragmatic philosophy; James did not write *Pragmatism* until 1907, though overlapping ideas exist in both.

Worth underscoring here is the distinction between “involuntary” and “voluntary or systemic.” If we trace this thinking through contemporary incarnations of the mind-cure movement, we see that “involuntary healthy-mindedness” is, according to more recent texts, nearly impossible: one must set out with strong (and positive) intentions in order to achieve the health that she seeks. This “cultivation of healthy-mindedness,” for James, is “consonant with important currents in human nature,” and should be regarded as such. Key, however, is his notion that this “cultivation” functions as a *diversion* away from “attention from disease and death”; it is a kind of *avoidance* for James, and not necessarily a prophylactic (37).

These two lectures from his longer text illustrate several ideological and therapeutic commitments. First, they serve to illuminate his larger point that “the spread of the movement has been due to practical fruits, and the extremely practical turn of character of the American people has never been better shown by the fact that this, their only decidedly original contribution to the systematic philosophy of life, should be so intimately knit up with concrete therapeutics” (39). In 1901, James made the point that this kind of thinking was distinctly, profoundly American—something that, in the century since, has only become more relevant. Perhaps most significantly in the context of this argument, it is clear that nearly every “positive thinking” self-help text since the beginning of the twentieth century follows the same basic structure: general advice (or, in James’s case, philosophy) is accompanied by personal anecdotes that illustrate the relative success of the model. James is careful not to suggest that mind-cure might work for everyone, unlike such contemporary authors as Peale and Byrne, who insinuate that by following simple principles, one’s life can—and *will*—change in a dramatic way. Then again, James wrote the lectures with the intention of delivering them to a live audience for the purpose of educating them—which he did—and not with the goal of selling millions of books.

Health, Wealth, and the Pursuit of Happiness

Byrne's *The Secret* and Tolle's *A New Earth: Awakening to Your Life's Purpose* have a lot in common. They both spent upwards of a year on the *New York Times* bestseller list; they both promise physical and mental health and, to varying degrees, material wealth; both texts reintroduce concepts with which serial self-help readers will be familiar (positive thinking, "letting go," visualization); both texts are absolutely intertextual in their references and even in their promises; they've both been selected by Oprah Winfrey as texts that might change a reader's life or, at the very least, bolster her "spirit." Both texts reappropriate and repackage other, older models of self-help (American New Thought, in the case of Byrne; Christianity-meets-Buddhism, in the case of Tolle) for a media-mediated twenty-first-century American audience that has come to desire a (series of) quasi-religious experience(s) in its search for better selves. Significantly, they both require audience members that can recognize themselves as subjects, so that they can obey normative judgments in order to become experts—of a kind—in self-management.

Byrne's *The Secret* is a self-help text that is, by her own admission, at least partially inspired by her own travails. She provides a form of autobiographical confession within the book itself, and once Byrne stepped onto Winfrey's stage in 2006: "[E]verything in Rhonda's life had fallen apart—physically, emotionally, and financially," Winfrey's website proclaims, "she was in 'total despair'" until her daughter gave her a copy of Wallace D. Wattles's 1910 *The Science of Getting Rich*. This, Byrne claims, "gave [her] a glimpse of The Secret," which led her to "read hundreds of books . . . and [scour] the Internet for more information." Pseudo-historian Byrne alleges that she traced the book's central idea, which she calls the "law of attraction," backwards

through history; she ultimately realized that the principle—"the most powerful law in the universe"—can be found in texts and ideas from as early as 3500 B.C. Her role is merely to bring this law to the masses.³⁷

The Secret, available only in hardcover or for Kindle, aesthetically presents itself as an ancient text. Its cover features a facsimile of a handwritten document that appears to be on parchment paper; the only discernable passages in the document are repeated phrases: "You have the key" alternates with "You hold the key in your hands" and "May the joy be with you." On the back cover, which provides a plain-black-text blurb about the book that claims that this key "has been understood by some of the most prominent people in history: Plato, Galileo, Beethoven, Edison, Carnegie, [and] Einstein," and is only now "being revealed to the world"; this appears in the text itself multiple times—Byrne, near the beginning of the text, expands this list and invokes Socrates, Emerson, Pythagoras, Sir Francis Bacon, Sir Isaac Newton, Goethe, and Victor Hugo, as well as "religions" that "delivered it through their writings and stories" (4). This, of course, is a logical fallacy: nowhere in the text does Byrne show us exactly how any of these big names have employed *The Secret*, which leaves us with a faulty argument from authority, augmented by the fact that the "modern-day teachers" whom Byrne has selected are already a part of the self-help world at the time of the book's publication.

Above the back-cover blurb, in the same handwriting as what appears on the document, is a phrase in white: "You hold in your hands a Great Secret. . . ," it reads. The white-on-dark forces the eye to the statement; the only other light color on the back of the book jacket is the bar code and, above it, the heading "body, mind, and spirit."³⁸ The front cover features the title, in

³⁷ I retrieved this information from Oprah.com.

³⁸ Body-Mind-Spirit is also the triumvirate of health preached by Winfrey.

white, and the author's name, both in the same handwriting. Under the title is an embossed red simulation of a wax seal of the kind used for important documents and letters; right away, this suggests the connection to the "ancient wisdom" that Byrne describes in the book, and to both Eastern and Western spiritual practices. From behind the seal, a white light radiates at several angles, which also connotes spirituality; we might "see the light" beneath the seal, which we can access by opening the book and reading it. This aesthetic provokes a kind of nostalgia, in addition to representing a Bourdieuan habitus of a kind: we have internalized social norms that suggest that "ancient" might be equated with "wisdom"; the book's promise, too, is that it delivers a combination of ancient and contemporary advice.

The book jacket's inside flaps tell us that

Fragments of a Great Secret have been found in the oral traditions, in literature, in religions and philosophies throughout the centuries. For the first time, all the pieces of The Secret come together in an incredible revelation that will be life-transforming for all who experience it. . . . The Secret contains wisdom from modern-day teachers—men and women who have used it to achieve health, wealth, and happiness. By applying the knowledge of The Secret, they bring to light compelling stories of eradicating disease, acquiring massive wealth, overcoming obstacles, and achieving what many would regard as impossible.
(n.p.)

The first interesting part of this passage comes with the use of the passive voice in the first sentence. Ostensibly, fragments "have been found" by Rhonda Byrne, though "wisdom from modern-day teachers" hints at the fact that, in reality, the text is an assemblage of thoughts from her twenty-four "featured co-authors" (xiii). These featured authors include such big names in

the self-help business as Jack Canfield (*Chicken Soup for the Soul* series), Bob Doyle (Wealth Beyond Reason), and John Gray (*Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus*), whose "teachings" sit alongside those of deceased New Thought authors and teachers such as Genevieve Behrend, Robert Collier, Charles Haanel, Prentice Mulford, and Wallace Wattles.³⁹ Again: this argument from authority is Byrne's *modus operandi*, evidenced by the fact that only about 60% of the text itself was written by her—the rest is an assemblage of quotations by other, ostensibly more authoritative, "experts."

Perhaps the most compelling part of the book jacket blurb, at least in the context of this analysis, is the seemingly seamless equation of "health, wealth, and happiness," especially when paired with the disclaimer on the publisher's imprint page: "The information contained in this book is intended to be educational and not for diagnosis, prescription, or treatment of any health disorder whatsoever. . . . The content of the book is intended to be used as an adjunct to a rational and responsible healthcare program prescribed by a healthcare practitioner" (n.p.). Given that there is an entire chapter ("The Secret to Health") in the text, the inference here is that this disclaimer exists purely to prevent legal action, should someone "use" the book and fail to "get better."

The book's inner layout is similar to its exterior. It begins with a quotation from *The Emerald Tablet*, which Byrne dates to "circa 3000 BC." This establishes a kind of historical

³⁹ Genevieve Behrend wrote *Your Invisible Power* after studying with New Thought practitioner Thomas Troward; Robert Collier's 1926 *The Secret of the Ages* was one of the first bestselling self-help texts; Charles Haanel's *The Master Key System* (1912) was based on a series of exercises that one might follow; Prentice Mulford, one of the founders of American New Thought, wrote *Thoughts are Things* among other titles; and Wallace Wattles's *The Science of Getting Rich* (1910) was one of Byrne's key inspirations for *The Secret*.

authenticity: "As above, so below. / As within, so without" (n.p.).⁴⁰ On the next page is the dedication, which appears opposite the table of contents. The book is dedicated—no surprise here—to "You," and Byrne invokes the law of attraction even here, claiming that "love and joy for your entire existence" is her "intention for you, and for the world." "You" is the subject of this text, in spite of Byrne's semi-autobiographical foreword, in which she describes her life "collaps[ing] around [her]," and the subsequent great revelation of "The Secret to life"—"life" here meaning Your Life, including Your money, relationships, health, "world," and personhood. An astute reader will recognize that Byrne sometimes, but not always, capitalizes the pronoun; she counters this seeming oversight with a direct acknowledgment: "You will notice throughout the book that in certain places I have capitalized the word 'You.' The reason I did this is because I want you, the reader, to feel and know that I created this book for you. I am speaking to you personally when I say You," she writes, in a rhetorical sleight-of-hand that betrays slippage between a *specific* "You" and a universal "you."

From there, the text becomes formulaic. In addition to frequent claims to its own authenticity—"The Secret has inspired. . . " and "The Secret has been used. . . " begin several sentences in the foreword—the concept of gratitude, itself a grand narrative that is one of the key tenets of The Secret, appears at regular intervals, beginning in the Acknowledgements section: "With the deepest gratitude I wish to thank every person who has come into my life and inspired, touched, and illuminated me through their presence," Byrne writes. "For generously sharing their wisdom, love, and divinity, I pay homage to the featured co-authors of *The Secret*" (ix). The key word here is *divinity*. This book is about getting "anything you want," not finding a sense of

⁴⁰ The Emerald Tablet, a 13-verse poem, has been a source of inspiration for several new-age self-help authors. In a Google search for "emerald tablet" on 20 Feb 2013, Google automatically equated it with *The Secret*.

spirituality. The tenets here are health and wealth, not a deity. *Divinity*, however, means "a divine being" or "divine quality, virtue, or power; god-likeness, divineness," when one applies it to a person. More broadly, *divinity* means "the science of divine things; the science that deals with the nature and attributes of God, His relations with mankind, etc.; theology" (*OED*). Byrne's use of this seemingly small—insignificant to some readers—word reveals an underlying ideology: either she regards these co-authors as having access to the divine, or she is less concerned with the denotation of *divinity* than its connotations: The Secret is itself a divine notion, and that anyone who reads the book can access it. By employing these simple principles, anyone can become divine by acknowledging that The Secret "is the law that determines the complete order in the Universe, every moment of your life, and every single thing you experience in your life. . . . You are the one who calls the law of attraction into action, and you do it through your thoughts" (5).

Each chapter is about twenty pages long and has a relatively straightforward title, which appears, in the same handwriting-font as the cover, on the right side of the spread, opposite an enlarged version of the wax seal that also adorns the cover. Each "expert" weighs in on the question at hand; his or her name is accompanied by an icon that looks like clip art, along with his or her signature. Interspersed with the experts' quotations, which appear in italic typeface, are Byrne's own suggestions, contentions, and admonitions, in regular type. At the end of each chapter, perhaps for those who prefer not to read the whole thing, is a section called "Secret Summaries," which breaks the ideas of the chapter into digestible bullet points. Byrne claims in the foreword that the "twenty-four amazing teachers . . . featured in this book . . . speak as one voice," but the layout of the book does not support this; instead it feels choppy and disorganized,

as if one could just pick it up, flip to a page (ideally a "Secret Summaries" page), and begin reading.

If one does that, however, she might miss the stark examples of pseudoscience that exist within the text, examples that lead to an ideology of blaming the victim. The text has been criticized for its invocation of quantum physics, too; let's recall that *The Secret*, according to Byrne, "gives you anything you want: happiness, health, and wealth" (1). If one "[d]ecide[s] right now that [she] is only going to think good thoughts," the text's primary suggestion is that "anything [she] want[s]" will appear, as if by magic. However, it's not magic; it's "the Universe" responding *molecularly* to her thoughts, since "time is just an illusion" and "what quantum physicists and Einstein tell us is that everything is happening simultaneously," which means that "the parallel version of you with what you want *already* exists!" (62). Of course, this means that "any time delay you experience is due to your delay in getting to the place of believing, knowing, and feeling that you already have it" (63). While this implies agency, at least to a degree, it also strips the reader of agency; she may control her thoughts, but her thoughts merely call into being versions of herself that already exist in the "Universe." Her freedom to act is limited by this amorphous "Universe," which goes beyond space and matter. Here, the Universe can be "leveraged," by visualization and positive thinking. Health, wealth, and the perfect relationship await, brought into being by thoughts and intended actions alone (82). Even in spite of the invocation of the physical sciences that a term such as "the Universe" suggests, it's clear here that Byrne is not reading the Universe as a physical system *or* as a creation of the gods. Here, it is an amorphous thing that can be made to respond, via the use of *Secret*, to an individual's desires.

What might happen to someone who follows the tenets of the book and still becomes ill, or does not acquire wealth, or cannot find the "perfect" relationship? In one especially callous part of the chapter entitled "The Secret Made Simple," Byrne writes that

often when people hear [the] first part of the Secret they recall events in history where masses of lives were lost, and they find it incomprehensible that so many people could have attracted themselves to the event. By the law of attraction, they had to be on the same frequency as the event. It doesn't necessarily mean that they thought of that exact event, but the frequency of their thoughts matched the frequency of the event. If people believe that they can be in the wrong place at the wrong time, and they have no control over outside circumstances, those thoughts of fear, separation, and powerlessness, if persistent, can attract them to being in the wrong place at the wrong time. (28)

When I think of "incomprehensible events in history," the first thing that comes to mind is the Holocaust, during which over six million people were annihilated by the Nazis. The second is the 1994 Rwandan genocide, which took the lives of over 500,000 people. Did these people "believe that they [could] be in the wrong place at the wrong time"? Were they "on the same frequency as the event"? In addition to being offensive, this is outrageous. Byrne goes on to tell readers that they might not have to suffer a similar fate at the hands of a merciless dictator:

You have a choice right now. Do you want to believe that it's just the luck of the draw and bad things can happen to you at any time? Do you want to believe that you can be in the wrong place at the wrong time? That you have no control over circumstances? Or do you want to believe and *know* that your life experience is in your hands and that only all *good* can come into your life because that is the way

you think? You have a choice, and whatever you choose to think *will* become your life experience. (28)

So if the person reading this is facing a terrible disease, poverty, the loss of a loved one or her job, domestic violence, a sick child, or even merely a situation in which she feels no control, the implication is clear: *it's her fault*. She had a "choice," and she must have "chosen" to will these things into existence by sheer virtue of her thoughts.⁴¹

A less severe example appears in a short section called "The Secret and Your Body." In this section, Byrne suggests that we "look at using the Creative Process for those who feel they are overweight and who want to lose weight." She claims that if one focuses on losing weight, by counting calories, dieting, or exercising, she "will attract back having to lose more weight. . . . It's the very reason why diets don't work." Instead of weight gain being a process of eating more calories than one expends, for Byrne "the condition of being overweight [is] created through [one's] thought of it." And instead of eating a healthy diet and exercising, to lose weight one should simply stop thinking "fat thoughts." She then breaks this down into what becomes the first concrete example of how the Secret works. It begins with "Step 1: Ask," which requires the reader to "get pictures of the body [she] would like to have and look at those often." Step two is to "Believe": "You must believe you will receive and that the perfect weight is yours already," Byrne writes. By writing, on a piece of paper, "your perfect weight" and buying clothes that might fit once you "attract the perfect weight," it will happen. Step three calls for "perfect thoughts" in which "you feel good about You," which puts "you . . . on the frequency of your perfect weight, [as] you are summoning perfection." Byrne ends this with an autobiographical

⁴¹ Louise Hay, author of the bestselling *You Can Heal Your Life*, was accused by critics of a similar "blame the victim" rhetoric. In particular, she faced scrutiny for blaming "venereal disease"—including HIV—on "perverse sexuality."

note: this is what she did, and she "now maintain[s] the perfect weight of 116 pounds and . . . can eat whatever [she wants]" (60-62). This is a biopolitical move: it calls for self-surveillance, and it reifies the concept of individualization that Foucault outlines in *Discipline and Punish*. Modern power is a form of disciplinary control; here, the power shifts to the individual, whether this is a real or an imagined shift, in a way that Byrne et al. have not even attempted to conceal. The individuals reading *The Secret* have internalized societal norms such as "I want to be healthy and rich" and "obesity is bad," and they subsequently consume texts of this kind as they embody the very power structures that have created this kind of ideology.

The disciplinary apparatus, in this case, is the individual, who judges herself based upon a grand cultural narrative that calls for 1) her health and 2) her wealth in order to be content with her life. The notion that she might be able to make this happen with only her thoughts, which then, according to *The Secret*, provoke "the Universe" into a response, reflects what Christopher Lasch calls "the banality of pseudo-self-awareness," or a kind of textually-mediated propaganda that leads to absolute narcissism. "The narcissist cannot identify with someone else without seeing the other as an extension of [her]self," Lasch writes; *The Secret* promotes the idea that *the entire universe* is somehow an extension of the self (Lasch 86).

We might also compare this with Byrne's own demand for *action*, which comes just pages before the idea that "the perfect body" comes from visualization alone:

Action is a word that can imply 'work' to some people, but inspired action will not feel like work at all. The difference between inspired action and action is this: Inspired action is when you are acting to receive. If you are in action to try and make it happen, you have slipped backward. Inspired action is effortless, and it feels wonderful because you are on the frequency of receiving. (55)

This contradiction reveals that, in fact, thoughts alone will not bring health and wealth into being. It reflects almost perfectly what Nikolas Rose and Paul Rabinow describe as "modes of subjectification, in which individuals can be brought to work on themselves, under certain forms of authority, in relation [to] truth discourses, by means of practices of the self in the name of individual or collective life or health" (Rose and Rabinow 4). If the authority is oneself, one has to have internalized completely the discourses of health and wealth in order to be provoked into action of the kind that Byrne espouses.⁴²

Wealth, too, comes from action. In the chapter entitled "The Secret to Money," it becomes very clear that, at least for Byrne et al., the concept of wealth is tied directly to the kind of mental health promoted here. Positive thinking and behavior, it would seem, will attract all kinds of riches, if only "you . . . focus on wealth" (98). One tactic that the text espouses to "attract abundance" is for one to write a check to herself for the amount of money she desires, and "on the Secret website . . . the blank check is for you, and it is from the Bank of the Universe. You fill in your name, the amount, and details, and place it in a prominent place where you will see it every day" (98). Lastly, "It's a fun game that works!" (99). In order to win at this game, however, one must "[radiate] . . . feelings of joy and happiness" (100). There's no room here for negativity, sadness, or worry; the realities of financial insecurity are completely downplayed by Byrne, in favor of her own success story—which, incidentally, came about because of *The Secret* and its empire. Again, however, this allows for bourgeois judgment of the poor. If an individual doesn't attain financial success, the implication is that she has done something wrong; either she hasn't acted, or she has acted inappropriately. "Everything you want

⁴² See Rose and Rabinow, "Biopower Today," in *Biosocieties* 1 (2006).

is an inside job!" Byrne writes. "The outside world is the world of effects; it's just the result of thoughts" (110).

Is *The Secret* anything more than reappropriated New Thought, mediated by positive thinking and updated for the twenty-first century to include concerns about the book-buying market? Byrne's direct use of quotations from the likes of Genevieve Behrend, Robert Collier, Charles Haanel, Prentice Mulford, and Wallace Wattles—all New Thought practitioners from the late-nineteenth-century—alongside her twenty-first century gurus, suggests that it is not. Barbara Ehrenreich describes it this way: "Byrne was not saying anything new or original. In fact, she had merely packaged the insights of twenty-seven inspirational thinkers, most of them still living and many of them . . . already well known. About half the space in the book is taken up by quotes from these gurus" (61). However, its unique position as a bestseller, something with which authors in the New Thought tradition would not have been familiar, marks an overall shift in the self-help genre that mirrors the one within the world of memoir. Simply put, this kind of thing has become much more mainstream, and Winfrey's sanctioning, acknowledged even by the popular health website WebMD, allowed the text to acquire a form of bourgeois consecration that mirrors what Bourdieu outlines in "The Field of Cultural Production"—and that mirrors the rapid ascent of memoir within the bestseller lists.⁴³

Winfrey's enthusiastic recommendation of this text and of others, and their subsequent mass successes in the market, shows that she has become the arbiter of "bourgeois consecration."

⁴³ WebMD from 3/2/07: "*The Secret* boasts a growing list of disciples including . . . Oprah Winfrey. It basically takes the power of positive thinking to a higher ground." The WebMD article also includes a quotation from Amy Applebaum, "a . . . life coach and certified hypnotherapist, [who] puts it this way: 'The law of attraction is about attracting what you want. . . [Y]ou don't get what you want by just sitting in a room and thinking about [it]. The key to all of this is action.'"

Winfrey's tagline, "Live Your Best Life!," implies a kind of individual sovereignty which, in Rose and Rabinow's words, marks "citizenship [as becoming] defined in terms of rights and obligations to life, health, and cure." In order to be a "citizen," even an enthusiastically individualistic one, one must look out for her own well-being. In a world of diminishing healthcare resources, this often requires self-help, or "the individualization of biopolitical strategies" (13). To be healthy as an individual, one must heal her spiritual core (something we also see in Tolle and in several examples of memoir that I address in the following chapters) in order to attain her wants; a healthy society, by extension, must be comprised of healthy individuals.

One aspect of *The Secret* that is difficult to ignore has nothing to do with the text itself. Since the original movie came out in 2006, Byrne's empire has grown; an Amazon.com search for "The Secret" reveals the original DVD, an "extended edition" of the DVD, the original book in hardcover, the Kindle version of the book, and four follow-up books. The first, 2007's *The Secret Gratitude Book*, is essentially a journal in which one might be "inspired by Rhonda's writings" and record "the things in [her] life [she] is grateful for," to "be amazed at the never-ending list of thoughts that come back to [her] of more things to be grateful for." The second, 2008's *The Secret Daily Teachings*, promises to "[offer] a new way to bring joy and harmony to all aspects of life, every single day." The third, 2010's *The Secret: The Power*, declares that "*The Power*—to have everything good in your life—is inside you. To create anything, to change anything, all it takes is just one thing . . . *The Power*."⁴⁴

Eckhart Tolle's *A New Earth: Awakening to Your Life's Purpose* is, in some ways, less interesting than *The Secret*, in spite of Oprah Winfrey's endorsement and series of "webinars."

⁴⁴ I retrieved this information from Amazon.com by typing "the Secret" into the search box on Feb 2, 2013.

By this I mean that the text itself is a fairly straightforward appropriation of aspects of both Buddhist and Christian thought, brought together in the "egoless self" that Tolle suggests his reader should become. Tolle, who burst upon the self-help market in 2005 with the bestselling *The Power of Now*, swiftly received Winfrey's endorsement for *A New Earth*. The text features chapters such as "The Flowering of Human Consciousness," which describes how individual spiritual evolution is tied to a larger, more globally spiritual transformation; it claims in its second chapter that the "illusory self," the product of ego, "becomes the basis for all . . . interpretations of reality" (28); it describes how people who are "possessed by their mind" require "the conceptual 'other'" in order to function (59, 60). It describes the tricks this mind plays on the person, and suggests that the reader "cease looking to *thought* for an identity" (90). In a chapter entitled "Finding Who You Truly Are," it describes *Gnothi Seauton* (know thyself), which appeared above the entrance of the Delphic temple in ancient Greece, as leading to an uncomfortable rift between "Being" and "mind" (185-86).

Tolle devotes an entire section of the book to dismantling the notion of the *cogito*; instead of finding the "primary truth" of being, Descartes "found the root of the ego, but he didn't know that" (55). Tolle does not use the word "ego" in a Freudian sense. Instead of the awareness of consciousness arising from the ego, as it does according to Freud, for Tolle the ego is what *prevents* this awareness. Tolle's relationship with the ego is fraught with difficulties for this reason: "Egos only differ on the surface," he writes. "Deep down, they are all the same. . . . They live on identification and separation" (60). "Nonreaction" is his prescription for overcoming the evils of ego, and "nonreaction" is the same as "forgiveness" (63). If more of us were "nonreactive," there would be fewer grievances, less complaining, and more love in the world. Tolle links this with being aware of "spiritual truths" as well as "the Truth"—a distinction that

becomes slippery in his text; overall, the purpose of the book seems to be to promote a level of spiritual awareness that transcends rationality and thinking—*pathos* over *logos*. To consider "experience," or even physical objects, as having meaning, suggests the need to consider "the experiencer." This is what Tolle has to say about "experience" and "the experiencer":

So who is the experiencer? You are. And who are you? Consciousness. And what is consciousness? This question cannot be answered. The moment you answer it, you have falsified it, made it into another object. Consciousness, the traditional word for which is *spirit*, cannot be known in the normal sense of the word, and seeking it is futile. All knowing is within the realm of duality—subject and object, the knower and the known. . . . The I has no form. Only forms can be known.

(242)

On the surface, this appears to implore the reader into giving up on trying to know herself—*gnothi seauton* be damned, because "spirit" is unknowable, and "spirit" is what Tolle's reader is trying to find. The only way this can happen, according to Tolle, is via meditation, which he introduces by way of "being aware of your breathing" (244), and which leads to metaphorical travel to "A New Earth."

Like *The Secret*, Tolle's text focuses on the individual, albeit with the goal of "A New Earth," or a more widespread "awakening." The book is "about you. It will change your state of consciousness or it will be meaningless. It can only awaken those who are ready," Tolle writes (7). Although his goal seems to be to assist readers with individual "awakening," he also spends page after page describing the futility of thinking *as* an individual; one must, in Tolle's world, throw her thoughts away in favor of "awareness." In this sense, the text has a much different tone than *The Secret*; it strips agency from its readers by discounting nearly everything their

subjective experiences might tell them (how their bodies feel, what thoughts they have, what their relationship is to "the universe," etc.). However, it continues to reify the notion that work on the self will somehow lead to a better self, and a better world. "Collective ego" is, after all, "the cause of much human suffering," such as "The Spanish Inquisition, the persecution and burning of heretics and 'witches,' the relations between nations leading up to the First and Second World Wars, Communism throughout its history, the 'Cold War,' McCarthyism in America in the 1950s, [and] prolonged violent conflict in the Middle East" (120). Tolle gives no evidence for this; he simply writes it and expects that his readers will agree. If they don't, they're "not ready for enlightenment."

Also like *The Secret*, *A New Earth* relies heavily on big names to make the case for a transformation of the individual that will lead to "a new earth," and ultimately reaches conclusions that are much like Byrne's: "abundance is not outside you. It is part of who you are," Tolle writes (191). At various points, he incorporates quotations from such Western names as Einstein (28, 83), Descartes (54), Sartre (55), Augustine (72), Shakespeare (156), Kafka, Camus, Eliot, and Joyce (131), Nietzsche (246), Jung (277), and Emerson (302). The text also invokes quantum physics:

Physicists have discovered that the apparent solidity of matter is an illusion created by our senses. This includes the physical body, which we perceive and think of as form, but 99.99% of which is actually empty space. . . . The physical body is no more than a misperception of who you are. In many ways, it is a microcosmic version of outer space. (250)

If the physical body is formless "empty space," focusing on it brings a person away from "the limitless and eternal—God" (251). Awareness of this fact might lead a reader to "create space,"

or "align with space" in a way that "leaves room" for "true perspective and balance" (253). This can be found in nature and, in Tolle's reasoning, this alignment is why "no wild animals were killed in the tsunami disaster of 2004"; they were "more in touch with the totality than humans," and therefore knew to escape (277). The eschewing of the physical body might also, in Tolle's world, lead to fewer deaths, since "medical treatment is the third-leading cause of death after heart disease and cancer in the United States" (75). Health, here, is linked with the wealth of the "spirit"; perhaps "awareness" could lead, as Tolle would have it, to fewer diseases.

Ultimately, Tolle's message is simple: if the book doesn't "work" for a reader, this means that "awakening" hasn't yet happened for her:

For some people, the reading of this book will initiate the awakening process. For others, the function of this book is to help them recognize that they have already begun to awaken and to intensify and accelerate the process. Another function of this book is to help people recognize the ego within them whenever it tries to regain control and obscure the arising awareness. . . . Once you have had a glimpse of awareness or Presence, you know it firsthand. (260-61)

This "Presence" is, at various times, a product of the individual, the "universe," or "God." By becoming aware of it and growing able to sense "the simple joy of Being," one might be able to discover her "true purpose" in life, and thereby be fulfilled or "whole" (265-72). After all, what matters is "not *what* you do, but *how* you do what you do" (294, emphasis in original).

In 1901, William James described "mind-cure" as a "reaction against all that religion of chronic anxiety which marked the earlier part of [the nineteenth] century in the evangelical circles of England and America" (39). The irony, of course, is that though New Thought began "as a bridge of practical idealism linking nineteenth-century transcendentalist thinking with the

emerging philosophy of pragmatism,” changing market demands caused it to “[devolve] into an unapologetic and shameless commercialism whose spokespeople wandered far from its roots” (Haller 364). Contemporary New Thought is not the mind-cure of James’s moment; it is market-driven and –mediated. Emersonian independence has been replaced with bourgeois spiritual neoliberalism, the Prosperity Gospel, and clichéd rags-to-riches tales best-suited for television talk shows. In the twenty-first century, the failure to grow rich, successful, beautiful, or “harmonious with the Universe” implies negativity, lack of harmony, too little hard work on the self; again, the ownership shifts onto the individual. Put another way: only the individual can fix herself.

As such critics as Micki McGee, Trysh Travis, and Eva Illouz have argued, there exist clear connections between new religious movements and so-called "secular" self-help; there also exist parallels between both of these and the television talk show culture of the 1990s, which I will address at some length in the following chapter.⁴⁵ Beginning in 1956, sociologists had begun to track the "decline of the Protestant ethic," in favor of the "positive thinking" of Norman Vincent Peale and the capitalistic businessman model (McGee 36). Positive thinking leads to abundance leads to economic success and, following the New Thought/mind-cure movement, the implication is that such abundance and success might lead to feelings of wholeness, in spite of the fact that the subject itself, not to mention the “whole” subject, is a vast mirage. Certainly, there is much more operating here than mere economics and, as we will see in future chapters, quasi-religious thinking finds itself incarnated throughout this entire web of intersubjectivity, dragging the demand to "know thyself" as a philosophical-religious given far into the world of memoir and autobiography.

⁴⁵ See McGee's *Self-Help, Inc.*, Travis's *The Language of the Heart*, and Illouz's *Saving the Modern Soul*.

Chapter 2:

Misery Loves an Audience: Talk Show Culture, Forgiveness, and the 1990s Memoir of Abjection

The narrative constructs the identity of the character, what can be called his or her narrative identity, in constructing that of the story told. It is the identity of the story that makes the identity of a character.

—P. Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*

From magazines to television to how we're treated in school to what we read in our free time, there is always someone or something there to remind us that we're not perfect. . . but that's okay! Maybe we love too much; here's how we can fix it. Perhaps we need to stop worrying about the small stuff (and it's all small stuff), or stop the insanity, or remember that what we think is what we become, or just heal our lives.⁴⁶ Regardless of a self-help text's stated goals, one thing is clear: within contemporary pop therapeutics, the expectation is that we simultaneously manage, transform, contain, and embrace our “authentic” selves—and the corresponding implication is that these are “whole” selves. And, even though psychotherapeutics has posited the existence of a “divided” self, beginning with William James's 1884 “On Some Omissions of Introspective Psychology” and extending through R.D. Laing's 1960 seminal reading of psychosis, *The Divided Self: An Existential Study in Sanity and Madness*, and David Smail's 2005 *Power, Interest and Psychology*, popular therapeutic discourse takes both authenticity and wholeness as givens in the quest for mental health.

⁴⁶ See *I'm OK, You're OK*, *Women who Love too Much*, *Stop Worrying about the Small Stuff*. . . and *it's all small stuff*, *Stop the Insanity*, nearly any text by Deepak Chopra, and *You Can Heal Your Life*, respectively.

In this chapter, I will trace the evolution of 1990s self-help as it relates to popular memoir of the period. I will introduce two concepts that I contend grew out of this co-evolution, *active empathy* and the *autobiographical turn*, and explain the terms' significance within theories of memoir and autobiography. Finally, via readings of Elizabeth Wurtzel's *Prozac Nation: Young and Depressed in America* and Mary Karr's *The Liars' Club*, I will establish that the 1990s memoir of abjection is a differently-commodified *form* of self-help: readers might find solace in others' experiences, whether they mirror the readers' experiences or not.⁴⁷ The authors of such memoir are "experts" of a kind; they represent the post-religion notion that secular redemption—redemption in the form of mental health—is possible, even within postmodernity. Ultimately, being "broken" became the new "normal" in the last decade of the twentieth century; I will conclude the chapter by making connections between the aforementioned hermeneutics-of-the-other and the philosophical idea of forgiveness.

Self Help: The Explosion of a Genre

Self-help, as a category of texts, continued its meteoric rise in popularity, which began in the mid-twentieth century, throughout the 1990s and 2000s. In 1983, *The New York Times Book Review* added the category "Advice Books" because, according to its editors, few other kinds of

⁴⁷ Empathy and alterity, as Judith Butler has compellingly argued, are two ways of marking "lives that matter." In *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, she addresses this more fully, writing that

[M]y own foreignness to myself is, paradoxically, the source of my ethical connection with others. I am not fully known to myself, because part of what I am is the enigmatic traces of others. In this sense, I cannot know myself perfectly or know my 'difference' from others in an irreducible way. . . . I am wounded, and I find that the wound itself testifies to the fact that I am impressionable, given over to the Other in ways that I cannot fully predict or control. (46)

This brings the concept of active empathy together with the Derridean idea of justice-to-the-other. In what follows, I will operate under this premise as I investigate the nature of active empathy and forgiveness.

nonfiction (including memoirs, biographies, and political pieces) would ever appear on the list if they competed with self-help texts (Salerno 9). And between 2000 and 2004, “the market for self-improvement grew an astonishing 50 percent” (7), which translated to \$8.56 billion dollars, up from \$5.7 billion in 2000 (8). Steve Salerno, in his book *SHAM: How the Self-Help Movement Made America Helpless* (2003), contends that “[t]hese days, if it’s a problem for someone, somewhere, it’s a treatable disorder,” and the tremendous boom in self-improvement texts and products certainly reflects this. The category upon which I focus here, a conflation of “self-improvement” and “personal transformation” texts, featured 2396 titles in 1990. By 1999, this category had ballooned to include 5028 titles, some of them *mega*-bestsellers, all of them promising to help a reader become a better, healthier self.⁴⁸

As such critics as Salerno and Barbara Ehrenreich have noted, the 1990s self-help book differed in several key regards from its predecessors. Instead of focusing merely on positive thinking (as many of the first self-help titles suggested) or on negative thinking and victimhood (as the texts of the 1980s insisted), the 1990s self-improvement text brought these two things together. The pop-therapeutic texts of this decade—which include, as I will argue, television talk shows—establish a new kind of therapeutic discourse, one that suggests that *everyone* could benefit from a little bit of soul-searching, talk therapy (but not the kind in a professional’s office), strategizing for a better life, and the power of positive thinking. Put simply, this rhetoric of empowerment permeated nearly every form of popular media in the 1990s, from daytime television to magazines (think *Cosmopolitan*) to my main focus here: memoir, specifically, the

⁴⁸ See Bowker’s *Books in Print* database. My search was based in two date ranges: October, 1989-December, 1990, and October, 1998-December, 1999. The statistics that Salerno provides account for *all* of “self-improvement,” including seminars and products other than books.

tell-all memoir of abjection, where one exposes her wounds in order to be “cured” or “whole”—in order to forgive.⁴⁹

In spite of the big-name commodity nature of the authors themselves, the new self-help foci shifted the emphasis, in some regards, from the “expert” back to the individual. Implicit in many of these texts is the tautological suggestion that 1) problems come from within the (fragmented) individual, and 2) only the (whole) individual can remedy the problems, but needs “expert” advice to do so. The remedies themselves range from Dr. Phil McGraw’s “be accountable!” to Susan Powter’s “do it to spite all the people who think you can’t!”; nearly all of them require the reader to do some tangible “work.” And merely reading one text is inadequate; as some writers grew in popularity, so did their brands.⁵⁰ This led to entire series of texts—and their accompanying accessories—that one might (need to) buy, with which one could interact in order to feel better. As Salerno has compellingly argued, this marks a paradox: although the ostensible goal is to become “better” or “whole” enough to not require such texts, the writers, marketers, and publishers of 1990s self-help worked to make it nearly impossible to maintain the self without them, or at least to create the illusion that attempting unassisted self-maintenance is futile.⁵¹

⁴⁹ In *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, Julia Kristeva calls the abject “something rejected from which one does not part, from which one does not protect oneself as from an object. . . . It beckons to us and ends up engulfing us” (4). See *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*.

⁵⁰ A good example is Jack Canfield’s *Chicken Soup for the Soul* series, which includes over 100 titles, in addition to a diverse array of products, including pet food and Bibles.

⁵¹ Salerno claims that addiction to self-help is as real as addiction to drugs and alcohol. He claims that a “nihilistic view of life and living is stitched into the very fabric of Recovery” and that repeatedly reading texts that make it “all about *you*” causes inveterate narcissism (150-52).

Two primary foci presented themselves to a reader of many late-century self-improvement texts. One, being broken and in need of fixing had become the status quo instead of the abnormal. From divorced parents to a lack of determination (and everything in between), having problems was the new “normal,” and with this came a host of new experts, ready to help a reader learn how become a better self. Significantly, because the new “normal” was so fundamentally unstable, this meant that everyone might benefit from employing the suggestions found in self-help texts. This leads to the second focus of many of the books: interaction not just with the “expert,” but with a different version of the self, *another* self. Instead of merely consuming the text and moving on, readers of self-help in the 1990s faced demands for active participation, which came in the form of detailed instructions for daily life (Powter’s *Stop the Insanity!*), list-making (Richard Carlson’s *Don’t Sweat the Small Stuff. . . and it’s all small stuff*), meditation (Deepak Chopra’s *The Seven Spiritual Laws of Success*), writing (McGraw’s *Life Strategies*), and/or what I am calling “active empathy,” or the kind of empathy that implies direct participation with the other, something which is countered by the “apathetic empathy” elicited by television watching. Simply put, the 1990s memoir of abjection merges these two affective responses.

These responses have roots in two schools of psychology: existential psychotherapy and transactional analysis. Existential psychotherapy, which gained in popularity throughout the 1980s, provides a significant counterbalance to the kinds of platitudes inherent in the bestselling self-help texts of the 1990s, while simultaneously offering a compelling framework for reading the tell-all memoir of abjection. This form of dynamic therapy address four ultimate concerns that are reflected in this genre of memoir: death, freedom, isolation, and meaninglessness. The suggestion is that an individual who can successfully confront the anxiety that stems from these

concerns will be less filled with "mortal terror," thereby becoming more relaxed and content. This leads to better self-esteem, which begets a greater awareness of others and the subsequent motivation to participate in the well-being of others, often via a kind of altruism. According to psychologist Irvin D. Yalom, a proponent of this kind of therapy, existential psychotherapy "emphasizes a . . . basic conflict: . . . *a conflict that flows from the individual's confrontation with the givens of existence*" (Yalom 8, emphasis mine). Although many of the primary texts that I analyze here suggest another kind of conflict, that "with internalized significant adults," the nature of this kind of memoir itself is, in some ways, representative of this "basic conflict," even in its narrative form. The "I-then," or protagonist, and the "I-now," the narrator, frequently compete with and even undermine one another; the protagonist has not (yet) confessed or forgiven, and yet the narrator has. Both existential psychotherapy and the examples of memoir that I address here root themselves in the willingness of the individual (narrator) to address these potential crises of self.

Transactional analysis, popularized by Eric Berne in the 1960s, also finds itself reflected throughout the popular therapeutics of the 1990s. Although slightly different than existential psychotherapy in both tone and structure, it also takes as a given the idea of a "basic conflict" that drives an individual. Transactional analysis functions primarily as a social model of behavior, taking as a given the human need for "social intercourse," or interaction with others. In *Games People Play*, Berne outlines how this works: a "transaction" is a "unit of social intercourse." Whenever someone encounters another in "social aggregation," one of them will eventually speak, thereby providing a "transactional stimulus." Another person will then "say or do something which is in some way related to the stimulus"; this is called the "transactional response" (Berne 29). Transactional analysis finds itself represented in the three genres of

therapeutic discourse that I investigate here, and the conceptual basis of active empathy roots itself in a combination of transactional analysis and existential psychotherapy. Simply put, these branches of psychotherapeutics find themselves appropriated and repackaged by pop therapeutics, and woven throughout the popular tell-all memoir of abjection.

Know Your (Whole) Self: Theorizing What it Means

The notion of "wholeness," rooted in the work of Carl Jung and (often erroneously) appropriated by various New Age texts, grew into near-ubiquity as New Age anti-organized-religion became more popular in the mid-to-late 1980s. This has clear effects on the cultural climate that engendered both the brand of self-help I discuss here and the memoir of abjection. Put simply, if there is a societal expectation of "wholeness," or, what Jung deemed "the new psychological and spiritual ideal," it's no wonder that individuals who perceived themselves as less-than-ideal in the 1990s felt the need to make their stories known (Tracey 65).

For many believers in the tenets of New Age, as psychologist David Tracey compellingly argues, "splits, dualities, [and] distinctions are merely fictive creations of an imperious . . . judging mind. The task of advanced consciousness is to see through these divisions" (65). What this means here is that such dualities and distinctions—psychological tropes that date back to the late-nineteenth century—become largely replaced, at least in the world of pop therapeutics, with a New Age concept of "wholeness," or, a feeling of being "at one" with the "universe" (Tracey 66-9). This feeling of unity is, as many New Age texts suggest, absolutely necessary for physical, mental, and spiritual health.

Tracey contends that this does not align with Jung's concept of wholeness, in spite of the fact that New Age writers frequently invoke Jung in an argument to authority. Wholeness for

Jung occurs "in the daily battlefield of competing psychological forces," which we see mirrored in the examples of memoir that I address here: Elizabeth Wurtzel and Mary Karr, in particular, seem to be writing their way through the *paradox* of wholeness. They have recorded, in narrative, their "daily battlefields" in ways that might simultaneously give readers a sense of hope (after all, they've made it off of their respective battlefields alive) while never attempting to suggest their "oneness" with the "universe." In this way, we might read their examples as at least partially subverting the cultural narrative that grew at the same time, the one that begins to suggest, especially by the beginning of the twenty-first century, that such unity is both desirable and possible. For Jung, the kinds of suffering that these writers describe are an integral part of the development of consciousness itself; the splits of self that find themselves reflected in the very narrative form of this kind of memoir are, in Jung's world, necessary.

As sociologists such as Micki McGee, Trysh Travis, and Eva Illouz have argued, there exist several connections between New Age and so-called "secular" self-help; there also exist parallels between both of these and the television talk show culture of the 1990s.⁵² Beginning in 1956, sociologists had begun to track the "decline of the Protestant ethic," in favor of the "positive thinking" of Norman Vincent Peale and the capitalistic businessman model (McGee 36). Positive thinking leads to abundance, which leads to economic success and, following the New Thought of the late-nineteenth century, the implication is that such abundance and success might lead to feelings of wholeness. Certainly, there is much more operating here than mere economics and, as we will see, New Age thinking finds itself represented throughout this web of intersubjectivity, taking the demand to "know thyself" as a philosophical-religious given.

⁵² See McGee's *Self-Help, Inc.*, Travis's *The Language of the Heart*, Illouz's *Saving the Modern Soul*, and Keen's *Empathy and the Novel*.

The 1990s marked the dramatic rise of the tell-all memoir of abjection, what some have called "misery lit." This subgenre is frequently characterized by introspective investigations of trauma (child abuse, sexual assault, horrific bullying) or addiction to alcohol or drugs, and the narratives themselves often provoke visceral disgust, even horror, in readers. The texts can reveal dysfunction, humiliation, and degradation, revelations which mark them as potentially transgressive in the wake of the "normative memoir" of the mid-century. In many cases, these writers have had extraordinarily difficult experiences, which they transcribe, package as narrative, and sell. This, combined with the changes in therapeutic discourse writ large, provokes three key metaphysical questions surrounding the divide between empathy and alterity: could it be that abjection causes readers to foreclose the possibility of identifying with these narrators? Has the normalizing of tragedy primed us to accept such tales of woe as status quo? Does the memoir of abjection demand that the reader make the narrator into the other, or does the reader *become* the other?

Firmly embedded in this matrix, a new kind of intersubjective empathy, one that requires the same kind of participation that self-help texts began to demand in the last decade of the century, came to the fore and established itself as an ontological method of interpretation: *active empathy*. I mean for this term to be taken literally. I am defining "active," after the *Oxford English Dictionary*, in four ways: "characterized by outward action rather than inward contemplation or speculation"; "capable of acting upon something; originating or communicating action"; "working; effective, functional"; and, from medical nomenclature, "designating a disease that is at a stage in which it produces pathological changes or symptoms or is infectious." I am defining "empathy" also after the *Oxford English Dictionary*: "the power of projecting one's personality into (and so fully comprehending) the object of contemplation" (*OED*). The

goal of active empathy, at least on the surface, is to act in an obvious way in order to comprehend the self in its parts, which leads to the semblance of wholeness. It differs from *sympathy*, which is the ability to understand, or “feel for” someone else in her emotional state. Empathy is both an epistemological and an aesthetic concept, rooted in nineteenth-century German Idealism and fully represented in the therapeutic discourse of the 1990s. As Suzanne Keen contends, “[e]mpathy may precede and lead to sympathy, but . . . mature sympathy, pity, and compassion do not result from empathy, nor does empathy lead to helping” (22).

“Active empathy,” or what I view as the bridge between empathy and “mature sympathy,” takes Theodor Lipps’s nineteenth-century idea of aesthetic *Einfühlung* a step further. Lipps’s interests in experimental psychology and philosophy provoke him to abandon the earlier Kantian notion of absolute/universal beauty; instead, within the realm of physiological aesthetics, Lipps’s work illustrates a preoccupation with physical sensations and with individual responses to aesthetic stimuli. Though we may classify him as a phenomenologist, at least philosophically, Lipps’s interests in perception’s limitations, combined with his desire to make perception more scientific, lead him to the concept of *Einfühlung*, or the notion of “feeling into” an object or another person. Lipps contends that “[a]esthetic pleasure has no object at all. The [a]esthetic enjoyment is not enjoyment of an object, but enjoyment of a self. It is an immediate feeling of value that is lodged in oneself. . . . The object of *enjoyment* is not an object, but myself” (375-6, emphasis in original). Though there is some interaction between the self and the other, the primary enjoyment comes from within oneself: the self becomes the thing having the experience. Every interaction with another creates a new self, and the self thus becomes an object of aesthetic contemplation (itself). *Einfühlung* requires a kind of self-objectification that

is absolutely necessary in care-of-the-self; it provides a way of understanding sensation and the self, in addition to other selves and objects.

One can therefore *see oneself doing something* as if one were the primary object of aesthetic enjoyment. In the claims about memoir and autobiography that I make within this chapter, I rely on this definition as I explore the concept of active empathy as it relates to both the self-improvement texts of the 1990s and the memoir of abjection. This kind of empathy can ultimately lead to the kinds of altruism espoused throughout self-help texts: by feeling into others, we might cultivate a desire to help others achieve positive political or social ends. As Martha Nussbaum writes, “empathic anger and an empathic sense of injustice can each lead to personal, social, and ideological responses based on understandings of unfairness or evocation of righteous indignation on behalf of victims,” but “too much empathy can lead to an aversion to the victims or to the source of information” (qtd. in Keen 19). One wonders, then, if some of the negative reviews directed at both Elizabeth Wurtzel and Dave Pelzer stem from readers feeling *too much* for their narrators, or if the internalization of others’ pain and suffering, instead of stimulating altruism, actually affects a self-protective response in readers. As Keen suggests, “the . . . reader discomforted by empathic overarousal might well simply stop reading and might avoid similar [texts] in the future” (19).⁵³

Culturally, this kind of empathy provides both a contrast to and an underscoring of the allegations of “apathy” that popular culture leveled against members of Generation X, beginning

⁵³ Full disclosure: Keen’s book is about affective responses to fiction; however, I think that many of her concepts can be applied here. Though the social contract differs across genres—readers are very aware that the narrator of a memoir is ostensibly a “real person,” and can thus not take comfort in fictionality—we will see that empathy is both a psychological condition and a human emotion.

in 1991 with myriad “voter apathy” allegations.⁵⁴ Following Lipps’s assertion that “the object of *enjoyment* is . . . myself,” one might go so far as to claim that “being better” functions as a kind of absolute narcissism; that is, if one takes on the project of self-improvement that pop-therapeutics demands and propagates, one can love herself more. This is the opposite of apathy; apathy implies “insensibility to suffering,” yet therapeutic discourse suggests that suffering is everywhere, and the need to *interpret* said suffering, whether it occurs within the self or within the other, suggests both an intellectualization of affect and an emotionalization of rationality that forecloses the logic of calling a culture “apathetic.”

However, “apathy” is also one of the hallmarks of exactly the kinds of mental illness present in several bestselling memoirs of the 1990s. The medical definition of apathy is “an absence or suppression of emotion, feeling, concern or passion. Further, [it] is an indifference to things generally found to be exciting or moving” (*Encyclopedia of Medical Disorders*). We might go so far as to say, at least within the context of late twentieth-century therapeutic discourse and popular memoir, that it is exactly this kind of apathy that has led to the sensationalization, narrativization, and reabsorption of other people’s misery. Paradoxically, apathy toward others might be a prerequisite for active empathy, which begets the desire to understand or to change the self. Others’ misery might be the catalyst for a subject’s personal change, which then drives the consuming subject to purchase self-improvement texts.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ In 1991, allegations of voter apathy were first leveled against college-aged adults by the *Orlando Sentinel*. This bit of news led to follow-up articles by *The Chicago Tribune* and *The New York Times*; no one could agree whether Generation X was as apathetic as the *Sentinel* first suggested. As it turned out, members of this age group (18-24 in 1992) voted in large numbers, possibly because of MTV’s “Rock the Vote” ad campaign.

⁵⁵ This takes Heidegger’s hermeneutic circle to its logical extreme: the interplay between understanding the world and understanding the self becomes an existential task. If I require another in order to interpret myself—or even to *question the need* for self-interpretation—what

This peculiar combination of empathy and apathy led, in the 1990s, to what I, after critic Michael Gorra, call "the autobiographical turn," which is marked by several popular cultural phenomena that grew throughout the decade. These include the mainstream success of big-brand self-help authors, whose personal narratives make their way into the texts themselves, the overall rise in sales of memoir and autobiography, and the new (to the 1990s) confessional television program.⁵⁶ The autobiographical turn, it would seem, was provoked by the desire to put into language the experiences of an ever-elusive self, by the widespread desire for authors to "tell their stories" to an audience, and by the notion that public confession and forgiveness might lead to a sense of wholeness. Even in a decade still marked by postmodernism and poststructuralism, there was a lingering underlying assumption that language can adequately represent concepts, including the concepts of self, memory, and experience. The pop-therapeutics of the 1990s, and even the autobiographical turn itself, seem to take for granted that these concepts themselves are stable; in the wake of poststructuralism, however, we know this to be false.

Therapeutic Authority and an Empathetic Audience

The ostensible purpose of consuming self-help grew and metaphorphosed, however; instead of merely knowing themselves, readers of self-help seemingly began to want to be their "best selves." This bears repeating. Self-help texts aren't meant to help those with what we might call "real" problems, such as mental illness, addiction, abuse, or falling victim to violence and/or persecution; these subjects remain other, even within the therapeutic discursive community. The

does this do to Heidegger's insistence that the ability to interpret the self is the most basic underpinning of *Dasein*? The first thing I must do is care: all of *Dasein* ultimately depends on its willingness "to take care." Heidegger writes that "Dasein, *ontologically* understood, is care. Because being-in-the-world belongs essentially to Dasein, its being toward the world is essentially taking care" (*Being and Time* I.ii, 53).

⁵⁶ See Gorra, "The Autobiographical Turn: Reading the New Academic Autobiography."

come to function as a kind of popular psychology that some would call pseudoscience.⁵⁷

Interesting in this context, however, is the fact that most bestselling books about how to "be a better me" feature autobiographical markers from their respective authors, which provides an instant parallel to memoir and autobiography. Such bestselling titles as Susan Powter's *Stop the Insanity!* (1993), Richard Carlson's *Don't Sweat the Small Stuff . . . and it's all small stuff* (1997), any number of Deepak Chopra's twenty-one motivational texts published in the decade, Jack Canfield and Mark Victor Hanson's *Chicken Soup for the Soul* series, Dr. Phil McGraw's *Life Strategies: Doing what Works, Doing what Matters* (1999), and even John Gray's *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus* (1991), all feature one tried-and-true characteristic of self-help writ large: the authors establish their therapeutic authority—even authenticity—by drawing on their own personal or professional experiences.

Susan Powter, for example, whose *Stop the Insanity!* brand was comprised of infomercials, weight-loss tapes, a powerful-woman aesthetic, and a book of the same title, rose to fame in the beginning of the decade by touting herself as a "housewife who figured it out." The book presents itself as a hybrid of personal narrative and a toolkit for success, and Powter relies on her own story to connect with her audience. In addition to drawing on her personal fitness success, she recounts tales of spousal abuse, pregnancy, loneliness, and poverty, which she was ultimately (and begrudgingly) able to forgive. These things went away when she took control of her life, and the implication for a reader is that the same possibilities exist for everyone.

Another example is Richard Carlson, who published twenty self-help texts before his death in 2006 and two posthumous books, and who invented the immensely successful *Don't*

⁵⁷ I am employing the *OED*'s definition of "pseudoscience" as "a spurious or pretended science; a branch of knowledge or a system of beliefs mistakenly regarded as based on scientific method or having the status of scientific truth."

Sweat the Small Stuff series in 1997. He begins the first text with a William James quotation: “The greatest discovery of my generation is that a human being can alter his life by altering his attitude” (qtd. in Carlson 1), thus invoking a kind of philosophical, quasi-religious—as well as therapeutic—authority that is reminiscent of early New Thought texts. From there, he establishes his individual authority by describing the praise that he received from Dr. Wayne Dyer and recounting that he has “worked with clients” for “more than a decade” (2-4) before going on to offer a series of 100 platitudes, many of which contain personal details. He “used to . . . put off [his] loved ones so long that the loved ones los[t] interest in maintaining the relationship” (19). He used to become impatient with his daughters (38). He used to “get crazy” when interrupted (40). He used to allow bad moods to dominate his life (83). Then, it would seem, he learned that the real solution was to “live in the present moment” (back cover), and decided to pen lots of books on the subject. Is the implication here that, once a reader has learned enough, s/he too can be a self-help guru? This is Norman Vincent Peale, updated and repackaged for the nineties.

The last example, for purposes of this argument, is “Dr. Phil” McGraw, whose Oprah Winfrey-inspired *Life Strategies* includes a lengthy description of how helpful he was in helping her win her civil suit, in which she was sued by the Texas Beef Industry.⁵⁸ “As a friend, I wanted to hug her, to tell her that it would be okay and she shouldn’t worry,” he writes, “but I knew better. I knew if she didn’t snap out of it and snap out of it soon, she *was* going to lose. . . .

⁵⁸ In her controversial biography of Winfrey, Kitty Kelley describes the lawsuit as being based in Winfrey’s condemnation of the beef industry in the wake of the Mad Cow Disease scare of 1996. On a show called “Dangerous Foods,” Winfrey included beef; she was subsequently sued by the National Cattlemen’s Beef Association et al. for \$12 million. She won the case (Kelley 315-16).

I build strategies for a living . . . I study human nature and behavior” (15).⁵⁹ McGraw goes on to write about how he was a terrible therapist—in his world, psychology “as it is practiced today” is what has caused “society [to spin] out of control”—but is qualified to give advice for changing behavior in order to “succeed” (45), quite possibly because he resists the “‘self-empowerment’ industry that dominates our culture” (46). Interesting, then, that his entire book is about empowering, even forgiving, the self, albeit using methods that differ from the ones that Powter and Carlson espouse—McGraw believes in “tough love,” not shimmering self-empowerment.

These self-help gurus and brand leaders narrativize aspects of their pasts in order to show a reader that they, too, were once flawed. Now, however, they focus on helping others. While we can never know an author’s true intent, the immense success of these titles might imply that selling the possibility of wholeness and forgiveness—whether this means forgiving another or forgiving the self—and the accompanying fame and fortune for the most successful self-help authors/agents/publishers, is an always-already present example of the reification of the “whole self,” something that is reflected in the bestselling memoir and autobiography of the decade.

We can apply this to another cultural example of active empathy that comes from mainstream media. Americans in the 1990s witnessed the dramatic ascent of the daytime network talk show, which frequently featured a popular host interviewing a panel of guests whose problems, ranging from incest and abuse to addiction to affiliations with extreme political movements to infidelity and relationship problems (the “dysfunctional family” come to life), had the potential to simultaneously entertain and comfort viewers at home. The formula for these shows, including *Oprah!* and her subsequent *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, *The Jerry Springer Show*, *Ricki Lake*, *Montel Williams*, *Geraldo*, and *Maury Povich*, is relatively simple. The host,

⁵⁹ William James’s *The Varieties of Religious Experience* is subtitled “A Study in Human Nature.”

who is always named in the title of the series, appears in front of a cheering live studio audience and introduces the topic of the day. S/he frequently bears a serious countenance as s/he gives hints of what's to come. Lights, music, and inflammatory titles ("Sex in the Forbidden Zone!", "Help Me Save My Husband!") accompany this introduction for the television audience and, once that audience learns what the topic is (and how horrifying it might be), the show cuts to the first of many commercial breaks.

Following this break, during which mainly female audience members are encouraged to buy a variety of cleaning products, food items, and (after 1997) prescription drugs, the host introduces the first guest, who often reveals herself to be a variation of what sociologist Micki McGee calls "the maudlin exemplar," or someone who represents vulnerability-turned-triumph.⁶⁰ From there, following another commercial break, the host asks pointed questions of the first and subsequent guests; in spite of the lack of formal psychological training, the host frequently asks his or her guests to reveal psychic (or physical) trauma that might be better suited for a therapist. The implication is that some form of healing can take place only after a confession of sorts, which is followed by a professional intervention (also of sorts), which often features a key question: "can you forgive?" The maudlin exemplar represents the notion that confession, intervention, and forgiveness can lead to "self-discovery" and recovery.

As several television critics have noted, there is "little room for guests to be presented as complete or complex personalities. . . . Their primary function is revelatory" (Heaton and Wilson 83). Viewers are conditioned to identify the figures on their screens with *problems*, which range from abject trauma to obtuse political views that threaten their families and careers. Although the motivation for the hosts and networks is relatively clear—there is a demonstrated audience for

⁶⁰ McGee refers to the "maudlin exemplar" as having primarily physical disabilities; I have appropriated this terms to include psychological and/or social disabilities.

such spectacles, which leads to advertising revenue—the motivation for guests to appear on shows such as these is more difficult to understand. Heaton and Wilson explain the reasoning as ranging from "reworking a painful issue" to "a few minutes of fame and glory" (88), and this reasoning has also been applied, in various ways, to the 1990s memoir of abjection.⁶¹

According to the Museum of Broadcast Communications, these talk shows grew out of network anxiety over falling daytime ratings, which followed the mainstreaming of cable television. Using Nielsen ratings, the museum points out that daytime network viewership dropped from 90% to 65% in the late 1980s and early '90s; by the summer of 1993, seventeen talk shows were in national syndication, and in local markets, this number was as high as twenty-seven. In an attempt to keep advertisers happy, networks employed big-name personalities in order to make a spectacle of people's troubled lives, which viewers of such programs were happy to consume. And, as Laura Grindstaff argues in her monograph, the rhetorical presentation of "ordinary people's" confessions became so homogenized that a viewer would know exactly what kind of narrative to expect before watching any single episode (19).⁶²

This wasn't especially new. Phil Donahue began to host the first televised show of this kind in the late 1960s, and is "generally credited for pioneering the genre" (Grindstaff 18).

⁶¹ Jeanne Albronda Heaton and Nona Leigh Wilson's *Tuning in Trouble: Talk TV's Destructive Impact on Mental Health* claims that "mental health issues make for interesting shows that attract viewers, and viewers produce profit. And profit is the overriding goal of talk shows, not good mental health" (3). While I agree with this claim, they ignore completely the notion of empathy and what it might mean for an audience member, at home or in the studio, to hear a tale similar to her own. Like the memoir of abjection and in spite of the sensational nature of many daytime talk shows, the guests might represent a kind of hope, because they have lived through their traumatic experiences to tell their tales.

⁶² Grindstaff's main premise is that low-income individuals, particularly women and people of color, are more likely to be exploited by these kinds of shows. Although outside the immediate scope of this argument, I must acknowledge the role that social class plays in the creation of this spectacle. See Grindstaff's 2002 *The Money Shot: Trash, Class, and the Making of TV Talk Shows*.

However, something changed in the 1990s, when other people's misery replaced Donahue's blend of political and social commentary. The tremendous growth of this genre, combined with its demand to confront one's problems, confess one's wrongdoings, and forgive those who have caused injury, suggests something very similar to the popularity of the memoir of abjection: effective self-management can only happen if one is willing to air her grievances publicly.⁶³

Enter the Tell-All Memoir of Abjection

In the last decade of the twentieth century, memoirs such as Elizabeth Wurtzel's *Prozac Nation: Young and Depressed in America* (1994), Dave Pelzer's *A Child Called "It"* (1995) and Mary Karr's *The Liars' Club* (1995) dominated the bestseller lists.⁶⁴ All of these texts chronicle mental illness, family dysfunction, or abuse, and all were met with reviews that either praised or lamented their "shocking," "horrifying" truths. They do this in vastly different ways, however, which is my primary reason for grouping them together—what do their respective narrative styles add to the tenor of pop therapeutics in the decade? Although self-help and talk show

⁶³ In his monograph, Ben Yagoda explains the connection between talk show culture and the success of the memoir of abjection this way: "[Several] trends came together in the empathetic 1990s, the era of Bill Clinton's feel for pain, of Oprah Winfrey's furrowed brow and concerned nod. Oprah and her many fellow TV and radio talkers were crucial not merely in setting the mood but also in selling the units. In the publishing environment of the time, promotion was seen as the key to commercial success; the key to promotion was getting on talk shows; and the best way to get on a talk show was with a dramatic or unusual personal story" (238).

⁶⁴ Several other texts, though outside the scope of my immediate analysis, deserve mention here. These are Tobias Wolff's *This Boy's Life: A Memoir* (1989), William Styron's *Darkness Visible: A Memoir of Madness* (1990), Phillip Roth's *Patrimony: A True Story* (1991), Paul Monette's *Becoming a Man: Half a Life Story* (1992), Lucy Grealy's *Autobiography of a Face* (1994), Mikal Gilmore's *Shot in the Heart* (1994), Michael Ryan's *Secret Life: An Autobiography* (1995), Kay Redfield Jamison's *An Unquiet Mind: A Memoir of Moods and Madness* (1995), Frank McCourt's *Angela's Ashes* (1996), and Kathryn Harrison's *The Kiss: A Memoir* (1997) (Yagoda 228).

Pelzer's text, originally released by a small press, was republished by Health Communications, who also published the *Chicken Soup for the Soul* series (Yagoda 232).

rhetoric is few and far between within the three texts themselves, they share with 1990s therapeutic discourse two key elements: they're all examples of bestselling melodrama, they all require *active empathy* on the part of a reader or viewer in order to work, and they all feature a level of forgiveness—to the self or to the other. The theme of victimhood is met by the theme of redemption; in Wurtzel's text, redemption comes only when someone from the outside steps in to intervene; in Pelzer's, redemption occurs at the hands of a caring police officer; in Karr's, redemption comes through the self-knowledge that she locates in her mother's past. Either of these tales of woe could have been featured on an episode of *The Oprah Winfrey Show* and, in fact, Wurtzel was invited to appear on Winfrey's show and Pelzer became a semi-regular guest.

As Suzette Henke has compellingly argued, "autobiography . . . has the potential to be a powerful form of scriptotherapy," given its drive to constantly reassess the past and put it into narrative form, possibly in ways that television cannot emulate (xv). However, there exist clear parallels between talk show culture and the memoir of abjection. Both "I got better because someone (or something) helped me" and "I got better because I came to know myself" are the primary tenets of self-help. Key, here, is the obvious connection between such self-help texts as McGraw's ("how's that working for you?" he might ask any one of these narrators), Carlson's (some of the things that made the narrators unhappy were undoubtedly examples of "small stuff"), and Gray's (Gray would likely suggest that the female writers, in particular, have strayed too far from their assigned gender roles, thus leading to their unhappiness in relationships). In what follows, I will analyze these primary texts via the dual hermeneutic frames of 1990s bestselling "personal growth" self-help texts and the philosophical question of forgiveness. I begin with *Prozac Nation*, which is a marginalized text within the genre; it has been met with mostly negative critical reviews and is infrequently addressed by life writing scholars. From

there, I provide a brief reading of Dave Pelzer's *A Child Called "It"* before I move into my analysis of a critically-acclaimed literary memoir, *The Liars' Club*, a canonical text in the world of life-writing.⁶⁵

Elizabeth Wurtzel's *Prozac Nation: Young and Depressed in America* is, as its title promises, the chronicle of a young, depressed woman in the United States. Born and raised in a traditional, at least for the 1990s, middle-class Jewish family, Wurtzel was seemingly a product of her own imbalanced brain which, combined with the pressures of being a member of Generation X, led to catastrophic dysfunction. The text's thematic elements are remarkably similar to those of the therapeutic (con)texts I have analyzed above: depression, therapy, family problems and divorce, relationships and sex, drinking and drugs, and a kind of redemption-that's-not-absolution in the end. It is Wurtzel's memoir of her descent into atypical depression.⁶⁶

Met with mixed reviews—critics described her text as “narcissistic,” “histrionic,” “strikingly adolescent,” and “unhindered by insight”—and popular acclaim—the book has sold millions of copies to date and made Wurtzel into a celebrity—, Wurtzel's depressed narrator attempts to give an individual voice to what she characterizes as “the mainstreaming of mental illness” (Wurtzel 297). She describes this mainstreaming as generational; one of her main premises is that Generation X is doomed to depression and/or other forms of mental illness because its members frequently grew up in dysfunctional families. Because of this, she argues in her polemic epilogue, Eli Lilly's Prozac (fluoxetine hydrochloride), the immensely popular drug

⁶⁵ Though outside the direct scope of this argument, it is worth noting that there exists a high/low culture divide even in this relatively narrow world of bestselling memoir; Wurtzel, who defines herself as a “social advocate” and who continues to write inflammatory examples of life writing, exists in sharp contrast to Karr, a writer of “literary memoir” who has gone on to pen two more bestsellers and who has been widely accepted within the academy.

⁶⁶ *Prozac Nation* appeared on the *New York Times* bestseller list three separate times. In 2001, it was made into a film of the same name, starring Christina Ricci.

for depression, which functions as an “antidote to a disease as serious as depression—a malady that could have ended my life,” has become a “national joke” (296).⁶⁷ Throughout the epilogue, in which Wurtzel employs a much different narrator than she does in the rest of the text, her point is that this “mainstreaming,” while potentially helpful for people struggling with depression, has caused her to feel that her own story, at times tragic and at times infuriating, has been diminished. There is no room in the public sphere, in Wurtzel’s mind, for individual tales of woe, and this provides a striking counterbalance to the notion of individual successes embedded within the self-help texts of the period. In spite of the fact that the only mentions of self-help in the text are examples of what her parents did *not* do or read (*I’m OK, You’re OK*), this “mainstreaming of mental illness” reflects the same notion of many self-help texts of the 1990s and before: everyone could use a little bit of help, of guidance, of soul-searching.

One of the most striking features of this memoir, in addition to its obvious narcissistic—even histrionic—undertones, is its bizarre pair of narrators. As opposed to many examples of memoir that clearly distinguish between the narrator (the “I-now”) and the protagonist (the “I-then”), it’s as if there are two *narrating* Wurtzels in addition to Wurtzel-as-protagonist. One narrator uses italics and one doesn’t, but any attempt to figure out the pattern or rhythm to the switches is met with nothing more than frustration. At first glance, it appears that the italicized narrative operates largely in the historical present, while the narrative in plain text is in the past tense; however, neither narrator roots herself in any concrete tense, and the narrative switches do not seem to imply anything but confusion and distance. At various points, each narrator takes a turn with stream-of-consciousness prose; each narrator also has a chance to be straightforward,

⁶⁷ According to Siddhartha Mukherjee’s “Post-Prozac Nation: The Science and History of Treating Depression,” from *The New York Times*, Prozac was approved by the FDA in 1988. One year later, “2,469,000 prescriptions for it were dispensed in America. By 2002, that number had risen to 33,320,000.”

even clear and lucid, in her thoughts. There is simply no method to the narrative madness, no host to ask pointed questions which might guide a reader.

This confuses a reader looking to empathize. Much of the time, a reader might be attempting to figure out the rhythms of the narrative shifts, trying to discern which Wurtzel is telling the story. On the other hand, these breaks illustrate something about the nature of atypical depression itself, which is described by the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* as a “subtype of Major Depressive Disorder with Atypical Features,” characterized by such afflictions as “mood reactivity (I.e., mood brightens in response to actual or potential positive events)” and “significant social or occupational impairment” brought on by sensitivity to “interpersonal rejection” (DSM-IV). Wurtzel’s unreliable narrators, for as problematic they—and their striking shifts—are work to illustrate the first criterion, here, and they alternately describe the “significant . . . impairment” that comes with atypical depression. In this sense, the narrative mirrors the diagnosis. In an act of radical alterity, Wurtzel divides herself in two. Even within the narrative, there is no cohesion of parts-to-whole for her self, which forces a sharp contrast between her text and the implications one finds in pop therapeutics.

At a couple of key points, Wurtzel’s narrators directly challenge the kinds of platitudes inherent in self-help; in others, the narrators embrace them. Early in the text, as she’s having the last (chronologically speaking) depressive breakdown, she and her friend Julian have an exchange:

Julian says stuff like, Happiness is a choice, you’ve got to work toward it. He says it like it’s an insight or something.

He says, You’ve got to believe.

He says, Come on! Cheer up! Pull yourself together!

I can't believe how trite all this is. For a moment I want to step out of myself so I can teach him some better interpersonal skills, so I can help him learn to sound a little more sensitive, more emphatic than all this. (9)

The implication here is that all of this "get better" rhetoric is actually *insensitive* to those who are mentally ill; that is, if one cannot simply "cheer up," hearing these kinds of admonitions doesn't help much. Perhaps being truly broken, as Wurtzel would have us believe she was, is beyond the scope of mainstream self-help. Perhaps the inability to reconcile the parts into a whole challenges the narrative of pop therapeutics as a whole; it certainly suggests her rejection of the "whole self" as a possibility. In this regard, Wurtzel's text suggests the presence of absent wholeness, and it subsequently becomes an attempt to do justice to her "other self," the one that was horribly depressed. This, too, might account for the difficulties a reader encounters with her double-narrator.

At the same time, however, there are moments in Wurtzel's book in which her narrators sound very much like the "negative" self-help of the 1970s and '80s, in which victimhood was to be acknowledged and confronted before it could be conquered.⁶⁸ She spends quite a bit of time, beginning early in the text, describing her relationships with a series of therapists, for example:

I mention the family history of depression to every new therapist when it finally occurs to me, and they always feel obligated to point out the genetic component of mental illness. But then I'll tell them a little bit about my immediate family background, and sooner or alter, as the narrative continues, they're sure to say something like, *No wonder you're so depressed*, like it's the most obvious response. They react as if my family situation was particularly alarming and

⁶⁸ See, for example, Melody Beattie's bestselling *Codependent No More: How to Stop Controlling Others and Start Caring for Yourself* (1987).

troublesome, as opposed to what it actually is in this day and age: perfectly normal. (29, emphasis in original)

This kind of thinking—that broken is perfectly normal—is what drives television talk shows. It’s certainly reminiscent of the “negative” self-help rhetoric of the previous decade, which encourages people to work through their problems from the perspective of a detective, looking for the root of the malady. It also underscores Wurtzel’s later insistence that mental illness, in general, has become “mainstream”; if it’s “perfectly normal” to be as depressed as she claims in her memoir to have been, the kinds of empowered individuality espoused in the self-help of the 1990s conflicts.

Wurtzel implies that *everyone*, at least every child of divorced parents, should be depressed. She simultaneously condemns and condones the idea of the “dysfunctional family” as playing a role in (her) depression: “To ask anyone how he happened to fall into a state of despair always involves new variations on the same myriad mix of family history,” she writes. “There is always divorce, drunkenness, drug abuse and whatnot in any of several permutations.” She goes on to ask a popular question, at least within the therapeutic discourse of the ‘90s: “I mean, is there anybody out there who *doesn’t* think her family is dysfunctional?” (30, emphasis in original). Again, this brings her discrete narrative in line with a popular one; however, the tone of Wurtzel’s entire text is one of individual angst, and this paradox continues throughout the rest of the memoir. In addition, this provides readers with a way of reading the entire text as a meta-commentary—and a conservative one, at that—on the state of the family in the America of the 1990s, when the grand narrative of the family included the *fragmented* family.⁶⁹

⁶⁹ We might recall, for example, Vice President Dan Quayle’s infamous invocation of “family values” which, for Quayle, meant the nuclear family. We might also consider the “postmodern

For example, Wurtzel describes conversations with other “children of divorce” whose stories make her “own family history [seem] common and trivial” (30), but then goes on, in “Secret Life,” the following chapter, to describe her relationship with cutting, a serious condition that involves lacerating oneself with a razor blade, scissors, or other sharp edge. She calls her life a “tearjerker movie” (43). She “[finds herself] *wishing* for a real ailment,” and then goes on to create one—self-mutilation is a serious problem that can, if left unchecked, lead to serious injury or death. In the next chapter, “Love Kills,” she describes listening to her mother on the phone with her father every night, screaming, and then brings it back to herself: “last I checked, *I* was the one who was supposed to have problems” (59). This push-and-pull between her parents is, she would have us believe, the fulcrum of her problems. The desire to have a “real ailment” *leads* to a real ailment, and the rest of the text chronicles her unbalanced relationship with the “odd demands that modern life makes on humanity” (67). One of these “odd demands,” we might surmise, is the need to create the illusion of wholeness, which Wurtzel is incapable of doing, both within her actual life as she describes it and within the narrative of her life.

Wurtzel’s meditation on divorce comes off as a direct condemnation of self-help rhetoric, while simultaneously suggesting that, had her parents engaged their own respective desires to “be better,” she might not have found herself in such a state. In an italicized passage, she writes: “Sometimes I have to admire my parents for being so psychologically unenlightened, for avoiding books with titles like *I’m OK, You’re OK*, for choosing—or, rather, not choosing, but simply instinctually acting—to be true to their own untrammelled, unfettered, unresolved, and unexamined emotional immaturity” (68). Her parents, born in the 1930s, missed the “be better” discourse of the Baby Boom generation; here, Wurtzel implies that a large part of this problem is

memoir,” and Dave Eggers’s *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* in particular, as representing a new way of defining the American family in the decade.

that they *weren't* indoctrinated by self-help; at the same time, this raises the possibility that self-help itself has both a cause-and-effect relationship with these kinds of problems. This, too, works against her later insistence that her individual tale of woe is *not* representative of depression *writ large*, thus underscoring the paradox she creates.

By the time Wurtzel's narrator(s) gets to Harvard, things have gotten much worse for her (them). In high school, after her father disappears and her boyfriend dumps her, she finds herself to be "a perfect weirdo by any standard," something she has carefully cultivated up and to this point (83). Throughout this period in her life, her descriptions of her mother begin to sound more "codependent" (in the 1980s sense; see chapter three). At one point, her mother "opens up [her] bedroom window and tells [Wurtzel] that she is going to throw herself out. . . . She is raving. . . . And she keeps saying, How can you do this to me?" (93). This, of course, is followed by Wurtzel lamenting the fact that *she* is supposed to be the depressed one, that her mother emotionally betrays her: "it seems crazy to me, just plain wrong, that my boyfriend left me, my father left me, and I am sitting here trying to talk my mother away from the ledge," she writes (93).

Throughout the Harvard chapters, which make up the middle third of the text, Wurtzel begins to describe her inveterate drug use and sexual escapades. At one point, a drugged-out Wurtzel misses a visit with her grandparents, whom she ostensibly wanted to see, but she dismisses this as self-medication, claiming that she was "doing whatever [she] could to get [her] head to shut off for a while" (107), as if this somehow makes up for the disappointment she has caused her family and herself. She wants their forgiveness; she wants to forgive herself. She is only able to judge herself intersubjectively; the only way she understands her own actions is by observing how they affect others. Even this is met with distance.

Wurtzel relies on intertextuality to constantly remind readers that she's smart and educated, and maybe to garner their forgiveness. Interspersed throughout the text are many references to both canonical and popular culture texts, often juxtaposed with one another in ways that create further paradoxes in the narrative. It's counterintuitive, for example, to pair *Walden* with the U.S. Figure Skating Championship; however, the implication seems to be that she was looking for distraction and diversion wherever she could find it—her use of intertextuality begins to function—in Kristevan fashion—as a kind of intersubjectivity. Wurtzel turns to books and other cultural texts, rather than people, both to define herself and to write her own book. This illustrates something about her narrative that is reminiscent of Foucault's declaration that a text itself is "variable and relative" in its unity—as is Wurtzel's pair of narrators, and maybe Wurtzel's protagonist. Foucault writes that "[t]he frontiers of a book are never clear-cut: beyond the title, the first lines and the last full stop, beyond its internal configuration and its autonomous form, it is caught up in a system of references to other books, other texts, other sentences: it is a node within a network" (*Archaeology* 24). Here, given that this is a memoir, even the "frontiers" of Wurtzel's *life* are far from clear-cut, and her narrative move to rely on intertextuality as a form of intersubjectivity presents a new puzzle with which an empathetic reader must wrangle. Put simply, Wurtzel cannot know who she is without other *texts*, nor can she adequately describe her life without them.

And, indeed, this reflects Julia Kristeva's famous definition of intertextuality as a form of intersubjectivity. In *Desire in Language*, Kristeva describes how, via a discursive web created by text, context, and reader, "[t]he notion of *intertextuality* replaces that of intersubjectivity, and poetic language is read as at least double" (*Desire* 66, emphasis in original). But, then again, Wurtzel's counterintuitive juxtapositions force her readers into identification with a variety of

pre-scripted cultural codes; we must alternately recognize, for example, Bruce Springsteen—who Wurtzel wants to be—and Albert Einstein, whom Wurtzel quotes at the beginning of chapter six, "Happy Pills": "People like us, who believe in physics, know that the distinction between past, present, and future is only a stubbornly persistent illusion" (qtd. in Wurtzel 116). This, too, reflects the way in which Wurtzel seems to view her own existence and, by extension, her narrators—any attempt to distinguish narrator-from-narrator-from-protagonist makes us aware that the distinction itself might be a "stubbornly persistent illusion."

Throughout, Wurtzel has employed these references to underscore her education and intelligence (which, according to some tenets of therapeutic discourse, should be enough to help her out of her misery). The epigraphs to her chapters, which range from quotations from Edith Wharton and Edie Brickell to Albert Einstein and Tom Waits, with some Sylvia Plath, Bruce Springsteen, and Bob Dylan in between, illustrate this. She clearly wants her readers to understand how well-read she is; she cites Kant, John Stuart Mill, John Rawls, and Homer, all in the span of ten pages. Following these references, she gives the first indication that she views herself as a writer: "I actually wrote an article about [being estranged from my father] for *Seventeen*, talking optimistically about how we had gotten back together after several years of misunderstandings and anger. I thought [meeting with him again] was going to be great" (119). Are we meant to compare her with these other writers? Or are we meant to understand that, in her depressed, maladjusted state, her brand of intersubjectivity was actually *intertextual*?

The *Seventeen* article led to both a music-writing internship in Dallas and an offer to appear on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*. Wurtzel's year in Dallas was, in a word, tragic: she began seriously abusing alcohol and having multiple sexual encounters with different men, while simultaneously developing an inflated sense of self that made her feel invincible. Within the

narrative, she describes intentionally alienating her coworkers, since she felt that she was above them, and becoming more estranged from her mother following a drunken episode at the birthday party her mother had carefully planned. Initially, she plans to go to Chicago to meet with Winfrey, but she soon thinks better of it, writing that

It was too much the sort of thing I would do: Take a sad private matter, give the facts in technicolor detail to perfect strangers, and thus relieve myself of my life. And then later, I would feel cheap and empty, deeply dissatisfied, like a verbal slut, the girl who'd give it all away to just any old anybody. So I wanted to reclaim my lift, make it private, make it mine. Maybe, just maybe, if I lost the urge to tell all to all, maybe that would be behavior befitting a happy person and maybe then I could be happy.

The key to happiness, I decided, was *not* to appear on *Oprah!* (149-50)

Of course, Wurtzel goes on, in a fit of verbal sluttiness, to write a book that is exactly the sort of thing that Winfrey herself would love; it is revelatory in its abjection; Wurtzel has no shame. The implication here is that, because she continues to make public her private struggles with her text itself, she is not behaving like a happy person. She is not going to conform to the confront/confess/forgive narrative that happy people seemingly obey.

Wurtzel tries to run away; the move to Houston, and the later ill-fated excursion to London, where she lives with the ex-boyfriend of a friend and gives him an “accidental blow job,” both represent the opposite of what therapeutic discourse espoused in the 1990s. Wurtzel did *not* “confront her problems”; in the historical present of the memoir, she did not confess them. She tried to escape them, which ostensibly made them worse. Her self-proclaimed victimhood—at the hands of her parents, her boyfriends, and even her therapists—exists in stark

contrast to the rhetoric of empowerment found in self-help. Even Mellaril, the powerful anti-psychotic drug she takes too much of in London, signifies her attempt to escape her past, to escape the feelings of abandonment she experiences when her college boyfriend dumps her, to escape her self.⁷⁰ In the last half of the book, Wurtzel describes with increasing desperation her feelings of being out-of-control. In one italicized passage, she returns to the notion that her family is to blame, following a misquotation of Tolstoy:

All the unhappy families are pretty much the same. All types of misery are identical at the core, which is why for so many years people would tell me to go to AA meetings. They'd say that all addictions are alike, and my addiction to depression or stress involved the same mental mechanism as someone else's alcoholism. In any fucked-up family . . . the skeleton of the story line is always the same. The description of what causes the pathology is the same. It's always something about not being loved enough as a child, or being neglected at some other point. Listen to any unhappy person tell his tale of woe, and it sounds like every other tale of woe. (223)⁷¹

This is striking in both its return to the individual/everyone (postmodern) paradox that Wurtzel unironically embraces throughout; it also, however, functions as a startling commentary on the kinds of therapeutic discourse that rest on Alcoholics Anonymous and similar twelve-step programs. The key tenets of any twelve-step program begin with the admission that one is

⁷⁰ Mellaril (thioridazine), according to the U.S. National Library of medicine, is often prescribed for symptoms of schizophrenia, including "disturbed or unusual thinking, loss of interest in life, and strong or inappropriate emotions" (<http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov>). Prior to the FDA approval of Prozac and other SSRI drugs for depression, it was sometimes used to treat such symptoms as the ones Wurtzel experienced.

⁷¹ The first line of *Anna Karenina* actually reads: "Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way."

powerless over her addiction, so one must give herself over to a higher power to restore them to sanity.⁷²

And, for all of Wurtzel's narrative condemnations of self-help, and of therapeutic discourse in general, she does give herself over. She throws herself at the mercy of a particularly astute therapist, Dr. Sterling, who patiently listens to Wurtzel long enough to diagnose—and treat—her. This first invocation of AA is interesting, given the fact that Wurtzel *does* appear to be addicted to being miserable; once again, however, a paradox presents itself when, after describing “rock bottom” as “everything out of focus . . . a failure of vision” (255), and after trying to commit suicide in Dr. Sterling's bathroom (279), she begins to take Prozac—and to get better. In between, Wurtzel returns to intertextual references that become a form of intersubjectivity, citing the “madness” of Fitzgerald, Borges, Faulkner, and Tennessee Williams, and comparing that “madness” to the “depression” that plagued Sylvia Plath (258-59). She contends that we should “call it depression and admit that it is very bleak,” instead of calling it “madness[, which] draws crowds, sells tickets, keeps *The National Enquirer* in business” (260). One wonders, however, how Wurtzel's narrators would like us to characterize *Prozac Nation*. It is a memoir of depression, certainly, but it narrates depression in a way suited for *The Oprah Winfrey Show* or *The National Enquirer*. Two questions remain: where is the line, in this text, between (active) empathy and (apathetic) alterity? And how does forgiveness operate, here?

Indeed, the empathy/alterity division and the question of forgiveness are two philosophical questions to which I will return in the end of this chapter. In the meantime, Wurtzel herself provides a startling reading of the 1990s, completely relevant to this analysis in

⁷² Steve Salerno is skeptical of self-help programs, alleging that they turn the “message [into] *Your needs are paramount here. It's all about you,*” which leads to self-centered behavior (31, emphasis in original).

all of its simplicity: "I realized that this is just the way of the world, or at least the way of *fin de siecle* America. Not only would the next revolution be televised, but so would every other little stupid thing. It was already happening" (151).

Dave Pelzer's *A Child Called "It"*—and its paratext—provides the most overt tie to 1990s therapeutic discourse. The book, first published in 1993 by a small Nebraska press before being republished in 1995 by Jack Canfield's Health Communications, is about, as the subtitle indicates, "one child's courage to survive." In it, Pelzer recounts his traumatic experiences at the hands of his unstable, alcoholic mother, whose horrific behavior is almost hard to believe; her brand of abuse included making young Dave drink ammonia, forcing him to eat dog feces, and not allowing him to eat for days on end. Finally, in a passage that spans 13 pages, Pelzer describes how his mother stabbed him with a knife and left him to care for his own wound.

This is the stuff that 1990s daytime talk shows were made of, and Pelzer appeared to enjoy his celebrity status after appearing on *The Montel Williams Show* and *The Oprah Winfrey Show*. In a 2002 *New York Times* profile, journalist Pat Jordan casts light upon Pelzer's personality, writing that he "is a man who is fairly obsessed with the New York Times best-seller list," and who speaks "more than 270 days a year." In his talks, Pelzer seems intent upon accomplishing two goals: get people to buy more books, and let them know that one can recover from such horrors. The problem is that, in Jordan's words, "[a] close reading of Pelzer's books leaves . . . readers with the impression that they may not be entirely true." This is accurate. The narrative tone of *A Child Called "It"* is fairly straightforward, even banal, which does not echo the disturbing subject matter. At times, the narrator himself seems lifeless; at other times, he recounts with startling detail the things he allegedly remembers. To be fair, the book is "based on

the child's life from ages 4 to 12" (xi). Since John Locke, however, the accuracy of the procedural memory has been disputed by philosophers, and recent forays into the world of autobiographical memory prove how deeply flawed it really is.

The book's aesthetic resembles that of self-help rather than memoir, although it has been marketed as a memoir. The front cover, which features an image of a child's face, his eyes directed at the sky, being lifted by a barely-visible hand, loudly proclaims that the text is "An Inspirational Story," and that it is a "#1 International Bestseller," and that it is a "#1 New York Times Bestseller." The back cover indicates that *A Child Called "It"* is a "Self-Help/Psychology/Inspiration" title, *not* a memoir. From the beginning acknowledgments section, in which Pelzer describes the "years of intensive labor, sacrifice, compromises and deception" that went into the book's publication, which he follows with a puzzling use of the word "crusade" to describe his process, one gets the sense that Pelzer wants his readers to think of him as a victim. As *Slate's* David Plotz writes, "Pelzer's books come programmed for big sales. They straddle all the trendy genres: confessional memoir, childhood trauma, triumph-over-adversity, and self-help" (Plotz). Even the font is more what one might expect from a self-help than from a memoir; it's large and widely-spaced, and the pages are small.⁷³

The text is a chronicle of horrifying events; in many ways, it encapsulates the entire *pathos* of the memoir of abjection, yet in others it feels like a parody, albeit an unintentional one. On the first page of the narrative, Pelzer describes being smacked by his mother so hard that his head hits "the tile counter top" (3-4). From there, things only get worse. Interesting in this context is the fact that the book begins with "Rescue." Written in italics, this mini-chapter is the

⁷³ Plotz writes that "Pelzer's fame certainly can't be explained by literary merit. Unlike Mary Karr and Frank McCourt, fellow serial memoirists of terrible childhoods, Pelzer lacks prose ambition. His writing plods. . . . [H]e never tires of the "unconquerable human spirit" (Plotz).

story of how a group of teachers and police officers save Pelzer from his mother. Once a police officer tells him that he has "nothing to worry about" anymore, "a single tear runs down [his] cheek" when he asks if he is "free" (14). This promise of "freedom" sticks with a reader throughout the rest of the text and might be what enables one to keep reading; we know that Pelzer will be rescued in the end, so the descriptions of Pelzer's mother burning his arm on the stove (41), starving him (throughout), forcing him to eat the contents of a soiled diaper (55), forcing him to vomit when she suspects that he's eaten at school (64), deliberately mixing bleach and ammonia together and then locking Pelzer in a room with the mixture (72), forcing him to drink ammonia (74), and stabbing him with a kitchen knife (85-98), might be easier to stomach. Indeed, the fact that Pelzer survived such abuse and was able to write a book about it—the epilogue begins with the line "I am so alive" (155)—provides the reader with a reminder that abjection can be overcome, *with the help of experts*.⁷⁴

Significantly, Pelzer has forgiven his mother. "I'm so lucky," he writes in the epilogue. "My dark past is behind me now. . . . I made sure I let go of the past. . . . I took positive control over my life" (156-7). This sounds exactly like the sort of thing touted in the self-improvement texts above; let go of the past, take positive control, make your life work for you. Pelzer doesn't stop there: "After years of struggle, my purpose became clear; for above all, I came to realize that America was truly the land where one could come from less than humble beginnings, to become a winner from within" (158).

Pelzer's "winner from within" business is a common thread throughout therapeutic discourse of the 1990s, and simultaneously works to underscore his claims to "Americanness" in the sense that, if one works hard enough, one can accomplish great success, even in spite of

⁷⁴ In addition to all of this, his classmates shun him because of his torn clothes and unwashed body; he is a social pariah at home and in the world.

horrific obstacles. On the last page of the book, another "single tear rolls down the side of [his] cheek" as Pelzer looks at his own son, who is with him in the car. This time, however, the tear represents success-overcoming-tragedy. It's almost as if Pelzer is parodying the narrative trajectory of self-help, of daytime television talk shows, and of literary memoir. And, significantly, his appearance on *the Montel Williams Show* is what catapulted the book to bestseller status; American television audiences in the 1990s had been conditioned to expect and desire this kind of transformation.

In the wake of his success, Pelzer's family has taken issue with what they call "embellishments." His two brothers, from whom he claims to have been estranged in the book, as children and as adults, have accused Pelzer of lying outright. And, although I address the question of truth-in-memoir more fully in the next chapter, this deserves mention here: did Pelzer deliberately mislead his audience in order to sell more copies of *A Child Called It* and its follow-ups, *The Lost Boy* (1997), *A Man Named Dave* (1999) and a self-help book called *Help Yourself* (2000)? *Slate Magazine* once called Pelzer the "entrepreneur of child abuse," and it would seem that he is intent upon selling as many books as he can. As Jordan points out, this might not be entirely bad, given the positive, empowered response from many of his audience members, who often claim to have been abused, too. However, it does raise questions about exactly what the memoir of abjection is supposed to do: is it meant to entertain, to educate, or some combination? Is it meant to deliberately exaggerate the truth and the subsequent forgiveness, in order to underscore the idea of secular redemption? One thing is clear: Dave Pelzer has made fame and fortune for himself by being a professional victim. Forgiveness, for him, comes as a byproduct of fame.

Mary Karr's 1995 *The Liars' Club*, though completely different in tone and in content from both Wurtzel's and Pelzer's narratives, is also, at least in part, a chronicle of growing up in a dysfunctional family. In the interviews that followed the massive success of her memoir, Karr stresses the importance of narrative voice in memoir, and the need to craft a text that is about more than one thing, a text that can demonstrate that the main character is a different person in the end than she was in the beginning. *The Liars' Club* is the text that some critics cite as having kicked off the memoir boom of the late-'90s and early-'00s; her narrative techniques are oft-repeated, and her follow-up memoirs, 2001's *Cherry* and 2009's *LIT*, have both been critically and commercially successful.⁷⁵

On the surface, as critic Elizabeth Young was quick to point out in an early review, "the themes of the book are those bloody chunks of blue collar confession that make up the Oprah Winfrey and Ricky [sic] Lake shows. The book is replete with insanity, violence, neglect, alcoholism, lost children, strokes, cancer, child sexual abuse (twice) and multiple marriage" (Young 39). However, this is not what the book is *about*. Pokey, Karr's child-narrator, is too spunky, too much of an "asshole" (Karr's word), too unwilling to be thought of as a victim; at times, she even shows us how she willfully concealed events that would make her into a victim in the eyes of her family. Although the text's beginning suggests some kind of early trauma, it moves into a world where a reader might feel guilty for feeling bad for the narrator, thus adding a twist to the notion of intersubjectivity.

Karr's narrative opens in a conventional way that will strike readers of memoir as familiar. She writes:

⁷⁵ Many critics have written on *The Liars' Club*, including Paul John Eakin, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, and James Olney.

My sharpest memory is of a single instant surrounded by dark. I was seven, and our family doctor knelt before me where I sat on a mattress on the bare floor. He wore a yellow golf shirt unbuttoned so that sprouts of hair showed in a V shape on his chest. I had never seen him in anything but a white starched shirt and a gray tie. The change unnerved me. He was pulling at the hem of my favorite nightgown—a pattern of Texas bluebonnets bunched into nosegays tied with ribbon against a field of nappy white cotton. I had tucked my knees under it to make a tent. He could easily have yanked the thing over my head with one motion, but something made him gentle. “Show me the marks,” he said. “Come on, now. I won’t hurt you.” He had watery blue eyes behind thick glasses, and a mustache that looked like a caterpillar. “Please? Just pull this up and show me where it hurts,” he said. He held a piece of hem between thumb and forefinger. I wasn’t crying and don’t remember any pain, but he talked to me in that begging voice he used when he had a long needle hidden behind his back. I liked him but didn’t much trust him. The room I shared with my sister was dark, but I didn’t fancy hiking my gown up with strangers milling around in the living room.

It took three decades for that instant to unfreeze. Neighbors and family helped me turn that one bright slide into a panorama. (3-4)

Paul John Eakin, in his 2008 *Living Autobiographically*, describes this beginning as “creating a ‘you-are-there’ effect of immediacy that will be the hallmark of the narrative to follow. . . . This passage establishes the narrative as a work of memory” (Eakin 63). It also establishes the narrator herself as someone who may or may not be reliable. Her admission that “it took three decades for that instant to unfreeze” provides the sense that the rest of the text will illustrate the

thaw; however, her “sharpest memory” is “of a single instance,” which undercuts her seemingly careful descriptions of the events that follow. Throughout the text, we feel as if we’re remembering *with* her; Karr’s use of the second-person pronoun at various points, as well as her shifts between past- and present-tense, lend a sense of immediacy to the narrative that does, indeed, create a “you-are-there” effect. Significantly, her blend of showing and telling, combined with the elliptical nature of the text, allows readers to fill in narrative gaps with what we think we already know, instead of (à la Wurtzel) demanding pity because we’re told to pity her.

There are several key events in the memoir, which include her mother’s “Nervous” condition and what that means, at various points, for her and her sister Lecia, her grandmother’s death after having moved in with the family for several months and tormenting Pokey and her mother’s subsequent nervous breakdown, and the move to Colorado, at which point her mother marries another man and Pokey finds herself molested by a babysitter. This is followed by the girls’ return to Leechfield, Texas to live with their father; their mother soon returns, less “Nervous” than before. Any of these events, outlined in the way I have done here, could make for a “poor me” narrative. Karr’s memoir is anything but, though; the tragedies are met with a voice so astute and so comic that one cannot help but laugh.

The Liars’ Club itself is a group of her father’s friends, who meet to tell tall tales “at the American Legion or in the back room of Fisher’s Bait Shop at times when their wives [think] they [are] paying bills or down at the union hall” (14). Daddy is a gifted storyteller—Karr writes that her father “told [her] so many stories about his childhood that it seems in most ways more vivid to [her] than [her] own” (14). His friends “fall quiet” when he speaks, listening with rapt attention to stories about his childhood or his vehement hatred of scabs—he was a union man, after all (16, 21). The fact that Karr admits that his tales are “more vivid” than her own once

again calls Pokey's reliability-as-narrator into question; because her voice mirrors her father's, and her father regularly embellishes in order to entertain his daughter and friends, one wonders whether Pokey is doing the same thing.

Her father, Pete Karr, was very close to Pokey when she was a child. Near the end of the book, after he suffers a stroke that renders him nearly speechless, she writes: "I started shuffling through a shoebox of cassette tapes on the floor till I laid hold to the one with 'Pete Karr' on the label in red Magic Marker. I wanted nothing so much as to hear Daddy tell a story, to unreel a story in my head like so much sheer, strong fishing line casting me back to times I'd never lived through and places I'd never been except courtesy of his voice" (303). By this point, she and Daddy have grown apart; she describes that they "had long since faded from each other" because her "weird travels had taken [her] from him" (276). On the cassette tape, she finds a story that she plays for him on a small tape deck, and they both fall asleep listening to his voice.

In some ways, within her life and within the narrative, Karr gives Daddy the strongest voice, which implies that her own sense of self is tied to his. Even his absence, following the divorce and her mother moving them to Colorado, marks his significance. In a passage in the "Colorado, 1963" section that bears quoting at some length, she equates suffering with her mother's craziness, with intelligence, and with the absence of her father:

The first French sentence I learned might well have come from [Camus's *Sisyphus*]. *Il faut souffrir*, one must suffer. For some reason, suffering got lined up in my head not with moral virtue or being good, as it had with the Baptist kids back home, but with being smart. Smart people suffered, dumb people didn't. Mother had said this back in Texas all the time. . . . Daddy had always countered that message, for he took big pleasure in the small comforts—sugar in his coffee,

getting the mockingbird in our chinaberry tree to answer his whistle. Without him, Mother's misery was seeping in. Happiness was for boneheads, a dumb fog you sank into. Pain, low-level and constant, was a vigil you kept. (232)

This follows Karr's description of her mother's frightening nervous breakdown, which included her burning many of Pokey and Lecia's belongings in the front yard before threatening to kill them with a butcher knife, her mother being taken "Away" to a psychiatric hospital and the subsequent silence on the matter between the girls and Daddy, their move to Colorado and skipping two grades there, where she pretended to do homework at the bar her mother owned, even though she'd already finished it at school. She comes to accept the fact that her mother "had become the picture of somebody nuts" (223). Indeed, Mother represents a frustrated woman whose travels to New York City in the '40s, for whom intellectual and artistic desires were important, and whose "Nervous" condition set her apart from the other women in Leechfield; she is one pole of Mary Karr, opposed to the steadier Pete. Karr writes that "Mother's [past] was as blank as the West Texas desert she came from," and Mother remains a mystery to readers, mirroring the enigma that she was to her young daughter, for much of the book (23). Without her father's mediation, her mother's misery penetrates Karr's sense of self; even as a child, she requires multiple sources of intersubjective empathy in order to feel "whole."

In Pokey's young mind, the arrival of yet another character—for whom she allows only Lecia to feel sorry—is what significantly disrupts their family. When Pokey is seven, Grandma Moore comes to live with them. "Maybe it's wrong to blame the arrival of Grandma Moore for much of the worst hurt in my family, but she was such a ring-tailed bitch that I do," Karr writes, and the descriptions that follow certainly suggest as much (41). Grandma is physically frightening and morally superior, and her presence causes changes in the family's routine. For

example, instead of eating meals together in the master bedroom, they have to eat at the table; Grandma is concerned about hygiene, so Pokey and Lecia must wear shoes at all times and take nightly baths, something to which they are unaccustomed. Most importantly, Mother's behavior changes dramatically: she becomes, at least on the surface, collected. Karr describes Grandma's general demeanor as one of "slightly deranged scrutiny," pointing out that she constantly nags Mother and the girls; her presence also causes Daddy to stay away from the house for long periods of time. Her melanoma, which doctors treated by injecting her with mustard gas, leads to amputations and, eventually, permanent disability; taking care of Grandma pushes Mother into a state of calm competence: "As Nervous as she tended to be, she could always rally in times of crisis. . . . All trace of Nervous just evaporated. It's no wonder she collapsed after the funeral" (50). Throughout the descriptions of Grandma and the way that she affects the family, it becomes clear that she represents a threat to the family's quirky dynamic. In a sense, Karr's narrator is right about her: her arrival, and then her death, changes everything. Although Grandma threatens the family, she also provides some of the funniest moments in the text. The humor is key once again: it enables readers to identify with Pokey, rather than pitying her.

Believability, even honesty, are two frequently-contended concepts in the world of confessional memoir and autobiography; in recent years, and especially following the James Frey scandal, memoir seemingly has become regarded as a form of journalism, complete with fact-checkers.⁷⁶ Karr combats any potential claims against her narrative honesty by making it clear that she understands how memory operates differently for her sister, Lecia, and for her mother, which is significant for a reader in 2012 who remembers the Oprah Winfrey-inspired "truthiness" debate within memoir. At a couple of times, in direct addresses to the reader, Karr's

⁷⁶ I address the Frey scandal in the following chapter, and the rising popularity of fact-checking memoir and autobiography in chapter five.

narrator acknowledges that Lecia, if given the chance, might tell the story differently, or that Lecia's memories have also made their way into Karr's memoir. At one point, for example, following a possibly-intentional car crash at the hands of their mother, Karr describes how "Lecia contends at this point I started screaming." She goes on, in a parenthetical aside, to acknowledge that Lecia would tell the story much differently if she were writing it: "Were Lecia writing this memoir, I would appear in one of only three guises: sobbing hysterically, wetting my pants in a deliberately inconvenient way, or biting somebody, usually her, with no provocation" (90). Karr did her homework before writing the book; she is careful in interviews, too, to share that she consulted with both her mother and sister so that she didn't misrepresent them. In some ways, this adds tremendous ethos to a story that might otherwise be unbelievable, even if only because the details that Pokey recounts are so vivid.⁷⁷

Twice in the memoir, Karr recounts being sexually assaulted, once by a teenager in Leechfield, and once by a babysitter in Colorado. Karr describes being "cut out of the herd of neighborhood kids by an older boy" at age seven: "[O]bviously I had some kind of fear or hurt on me that an evil boy could smell. He knew I could be drawn aside and scared or hurt a little extra" (62-63). The "evil boy" would entertain the younger kids by showing them pictures of Buchenwald survivors; the kids would play "Torture," with him playing the Nazi and the others in the role of concentration camp victims. Parents would eventually come and get the kids of "lunch or supper"; one night, all of the other kids leave Karr alone with the "evil boy." Karr uses only three paragraphs to describe the rape. Most striking, especially in the context of therapeutic discourse, is the paragraph that follows the description:

⁷⁷ In 2006, Karr wrote an op-ed piece for the *New York Times* called "His So-Called Life." In the piece, Karr accuses Frey of "duping the public in order to sell second-rate books," and goes on to explore how one might make a distinction between fiction and non-. I address this more fully in the next chapter.

I picture him now reading this, and long to reach out of the page and grab ahold of his shirt front that we might together reminisce some. Hey, bucko. Probably you don't read, but you must have somebody who reads for you—your pretty wife or some old neighbor boy you still go fishing with. Where will you be when the news of this paragraph floats back to you? For some reason, I picture you changing your wife's tire. She'll mention that in some book I wrote, somebody from the neighborhood is accused of diddling me at seven. Maybe your head will click back a notch as this registers. Maybe you'll see your face's image spread across the silver hubcap as though it's been flattened by a ball-peen hammer. Probably you thought I forgot what you did, or you figured it was no big deal. I say this now across decades and thousands of miles solely to remind you of the long memory my daddy always said I had. (66)

Here, Karr confronts her attacker and takes narrative revenge. The only confession here is that she would have felt ashamed had she told her parents. By assuming (or pretending) that the evil boy will hear about Karr's book, and the paragraph about him, she breaks the fourth wall to show him two things. One, she turned out okay, she lived to tell the tale. Two, what he did wasn't the worst thing that happened to her. She is not a victim; she is a survivor. Her use of humor here is slightly different from its other appearances in the text. In this passage, the idea of forgiveness is absent; she is not going to forget what happened to her or the person who did it, and she's demanding, in a sense, that her rapist remember, too.

She doesn't tell her parents about the rape—she imagines her father “gutt[ing] him like a fish,” her mother “locking herself in the bathroom,” and Grandma saying she “wasn't surprised at all”—because, in her words, “I knew what I would be if I told” (68). Because she doesn't give

readers a word for this, we're left to make our own inferences. Would she be a victim? Easy? A tattle-tale? Nor does she tell anyone about the babysitter molesting her two years later. In Colorado, Mother owns a bar, and frequently leaves Pokey and Lecia in the care of babysitters. Following a bad bout with insomnia, her mother plies her with alcohol: "Besides its tasting good, the wine seemed to go down deep in me, not burning like it had before, but with a slow warmth," she writes (237). Many nights "scroll past" before, in Karr's stark words, "I get sick one day and the grown man who allegedly comes to care for me winds up putting his dick in my eight-year-old mouth" (239). The eight-page description of the event is, in a word, heartbreaking. The fact that there is no trace of humor in these pages suggests that at this moment, Karr's narrator might desire empathy, even pity.

She's been reading E.B. White's *Charlotte's Web*, and decides to focus on the fact that, in the end of the book, she knows that Wilbur the pig will "never have to be lonely" (241). She's so excited about this that she summons the babysitter into her room so that she can share it with him—with someone—and he takes the opportunity to introduce her to the concept of "special friends." She notices the bulge in his pants and thinks about all of the times she's heard the word "hard-on," mainly in Leechfield before they moved, until it reaches the point where she "sit[s] and pretend[s] not to be home inside [her]self." She hears him telling her that he would "never, ever hurt" her. And then he does hurt her. When she vomits and he attempts to console her, she is "grateful for the warm rubbing of his hand" because that means that "whatever [she] did bad he's forgiven [her] for." The next day, even though she still feels sick, she goes to school (239-47). In an all-too-familiar narrative, a lonely child is exploited by a predator.

All of this is told in the present tense, which allows Karr (narrator) fully to become Pokey (protagonist) in the scene. It's told from the point-of-view of an eight-year-old; lost is the

narrative mediation of the adult Karr that we find throughout the rest of the book. The sense of immediacy, combined with the lack of humor, causes the scene to stand out for reasons other than its abject subject matter; even in terms of narrative, it sets itself apart from the rest of the text by *showing*, rather than *telling*. However—again—, sexual assault does not lead Karr/Pokey to think of herself as a victim. Although an active-empathetic audience likely reads a babysitter taking advantage of a girl's loneliness as abhorrent, Karr herself assigns no judgment; she leaves it up to her readers. Nor does Karr/Pokey make reference to “empowerment” in the sense of pop-therapeutics; these incidents are just things she remembers. For a reader, the fact that she experienced these things and was able to write about them in such a succinct way implies that it is possible to move beyond life's tragedies. Indeed, one of my main premises throughout this chapter is that one of the functions of the '90s memoir of abjection is this sense of possibility; by engaging in active empathy, a reader can project herself into the future, when she might be able to transcend her woes. Memoir of this kind might therefore function as a kind of self-help.

The most overt tie to therapeutic discourse and whether or not it has influenced our narrator comes when Karr, at age twenty-five, decides to visit Leechfield following her father's stroke. Her mother, who has “studied hatha yoga and macrobiotics, macramé and est” throughout the '70s, becomes depressed once more and “[sees] no good reason to get up and put on clothes” each day (276). The older Karr worries that her mother will commit suicide; she describes the phone as “the only umbilical cord that joined me to Mother,” and recounts hours spent on phone conversations, ostensibly to assuage the fear of her mother's death. Other examples come when Pokey locates her emotions, which are often more complex than she can adequately describe, in her physical body.

In their final visit to the Liars' Club, when Karr is twenty-five, a truck driver hits on her, provoking Daddy into a fistfight and our narrator into a brand of self-awareness that she claims not to have had before. She describes it this way: "Something about [being there] clarified who I was, made me solid inside, like when you twist the binocular lens to the perfect depth and the figure you're looking at gets definite" (280). By this point in the narrative, Karr had been away from Leechfield for eight years, and yet this return to the town—and to the care of her father—"clarified" her own identity, both separate from and deeply entwined with her family. Following this, and her father's stroke, she finds herself in the attic, where she finds a "line-up of wedding rings" that turn out to be her mother's. This prompts her to call a former therapist, "who had [her] write out all [her] questions for Mother on a spiral pad." When she approaches her mother to ask the questions, Karr hears, for the first time, her mother's history (310-318). These eight pages of Mother's confessions close the memoir. On the final page, Karr writes that:

[W]e should have glowed, for what Mother told absolved us both, in a way. All the black crimes we believed ourselves guilty of were myths, stories we'd cobbled together out of fear. We expected no good news interspersed with the bad. Only the dark aspect of any story sank in. I never knew despair could lie. . . . It's only looking back that I believe the clear light of truth should have filled us, like the legendary grace that carries a broken body past all manner of monsters. (320)

Ending the book in this way provides a sharp contrast to the beginning, in which Karr writes:

"The fact that my house was Not Right metastasized into the notion that I myself was somehow Not Right, or that my survival in the world depended on my constant vigilance against various forms of Not-Rightness. . . . I became both a flincher and a fighter" (10). Victimhood—"flinching"—is represented here, as is empowerment—"fighting." "I don't know who or what to

blame,” she writes in the middle of the memoir (106); in the end, however, we’re left with the sense that there *isn’t* anyone to blame. Karr successfully makes her family—a group of people who might be deemed “dysfunctional” by various experts—into her “normal.” The fierce loyalty that they have for one another subverts any kind of external norming, and the matter-of-fact, even humorous way that Karr narrates the story stops us from over-empathizing. There is never the sense that Karr wishes to be viewed as a victim, à la Wurtzel, or that she would have chosen any other life if given the chance. There are moments of forgiveness, particularly in the final paragraphs, which are especially significant when we compare her narrative with Wurtzel’s and Pelzer’s, neither of which can boast this kind of complexity.

Indeed, *The Liars’ Club* is the narrative opposite of *A Child Called “It,”* and also starkly differs from the poor-me tone of *Prozac Nation*. It’s about a dysfunctional family, to be sure, but underlying Karr’s tales of woe is the sense that these four family members really love—and are able to forgive—each other. They’re about as eccentric as it gets, especially in their blue-collar East Texas town, but we never get the sense that their relationships are so fractured as to be beyond repair. Karr’s narrator, a young girl in the past who is frequently mediated by a thirty-something woman, successfully makes her family into the “normal” of the text. Her humor stops readers from *over*-empathizing—there is never a sense that the text is calling for pity—and the matter-of-fact way that Karr’s narrator recounts such episodes as her mother’s nervous breakdown, her sister’s near-death experience following a man-o-war jellyfish sting, and even her own sexual assaults, forces a reader into empathy that is not alterity.

Empathy and Forgiveness

Public confession, absolution, and forgiveness thus became (popular) grand narratives of the kind that postmodern theory attempted to rebuke and, in nearly all cases, they underscore Fredric Jameson's insistence that all narratives display the desire for utopia. Forgiveness, itself a utopian concept rooted (at least in the United States) in Abrahamic religions, is seemingly at the root of the success of many of the examples that I address here. Of course, as Paul Ricoeur explains in the epilogue to *Memory, History, Forgetting*, forgiveness is philosophically complicated. Its intimate relationship with both memory and history, its status as "always in retreat . . . makes forgiving difficult." The "forgiveness equation," Ricoeur contends, is set on a horizontal plane ("below, the avowal of fault; above, the hymn to forgiveness"), and two speech acts are therefore at work. The first act brings to the fore a "moral accusation"—the accuser to the accused, *j'accuse!*—and "brings to language an experience of the same order as solitude, failure, [and] struggle . . . those 'boundary situations' upon which reflective thinking is grafted." The second speech act occurs when "the tension between the avowal and the hymn will be carried almost to a breaking point, the impossibility of forgiveness replying to the unpardonable nature of moral evil" (457-58).

Forgiveness is therefore always performative. Ricoeur's formulation assumes that the accused will avow his or her fault in a *mea culpa*, an action that relies on the narrative of confession itself. And the "hymn of forgiveness," or a non-Biblical call to God, first assumes the presence of a deity, which is very common in both therapeutic discourse and some examples of contemporary memoir. Simply put, Ricoeur's forgiveness equation looks like this: someone makes an accusation, which is followed by the avowal of the accused. The accused calls to a deity, thereby creating tension—"I am guilty," the accused might say, "but I ask for forgiveness."

Both of these speech acts ultimately result in a "promise," which binds the accused to her crime and also enables him or her to "be released from it through forgiveness." Accuse and forgive; confess and be released. What is at stake, in Ricoeur's mind, is "the projection of a sort of eschatology of memory of memory and, in its wake, of history and of forgetting" (459). If one "projects" her fear of death, judgment, heaven, or hell, all as it is bound by a web of memory, history, and the possibility of forgetting, one may atone for her sins and thus be forgiven. Before this can happen, however, an accuser must have demanded her confession: "only another can forgive" (479). This demand is what occurs in the examples from American culture that I analyze here.⁷⁸

Ricoeur concurs with Jacques Derrida's *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness* in several respects. One, "the *representation* of the act prevents, as it were, the return of the action to the agent" (462, emphasis mine), which means that, by naming the act, the accuser forecloses the possibility of the guilty becoming reattached to her act. This reflects Derrida's insistence that one cannot *ask* for forgiveness. By asking for forgiveness, one separates guilty actions from the guilty party, whereas the *act* of forgiveness, forgiving, requires a recombination of act with actor. Secondly, forgiveness is impure and abnormal. Derrida writes that "[f]orgiveness is not, it *should not be* normal, normative, normalising. It *should* remain exceptional and extraordinary, in the face of the impossible: as if it interrupted the ordinary course of historical temporality" (Derrida 32). Thirdly, "forgiveness must have a meaning" (36). It is not a term one should use casually; in

⁷⁸ I am not equating any of this with the gravity of Ricoeur's primary example, the Holocaust. These are much more minor examples of forgiveness.

This is admittedly reductive. Ricoeur's epilogue on forgiveness spans some 50 pages, and takes up each part of the equation in detail. He describes, for example, the "passage [of the spirit of forgiveness] through a variety of institutions: he spends several pages on criminal, political, and moral guilt, respectively, before even beginning to address the notion of gift-giving and forgetting.

spite of its ubiquity throughout therapeutic discourse—we might remember, for a moment, the eight step of recovery in Alcoholics Anonymous, in which one makes amends for wrongs committed and thereby expects forgiveness—, it requires a level of "salvation . . . redemption, atonement, . . . even sacrifice" on the part of the *forgiver*, not just the *forgiven* (36). Lastly, and significantly when considered in the context of pop therapeutics, "if anyone has the right to forgive, it is only the victim, and not a tertiary institution" (44). Oprah Winfrey cannot forgive someone on a victim's behalf; a reader of memoir cannot forgive the guilty on behalf of a writer.

Derrida asks whether one forgives *something*, "a crime, a fault, a wrong," or *someone*, which essentially removes the thing from the one (38). Within therapeutic discourse, these two things merge; they no longer exist in opposition; the thing and the one intermingle and become inseparable. *Asking* for forgiveness implies that the *person* will be forgiven, as we see when, for example, Elizabeth Wurtzel asks her family to forgive her for missing a dinner with her grandparents and for appearing drunk at a special birthday party (Wurtzel 107, 148). Mary Karr's mother, however, functions as an example of an agent/actor in the sense that Derrida and Ricoeur have in mind: Karr forgives her mother's actions, because her mother confesses them without asking for redemption (Karr 310-18). Ricoeur insists that this is a fundamental part of memory itself. He writes that

[I]n the light of the dialectic of binding-unbinding, the self-attribution of the set of memories that compose the fragile identity of a singular life is shown to result from . . . constant mediation. I have to be able to consider from a distance the stage upon which memories of the past are invited to make an appearance if I am to feel authorized to hold their entire series to be mine, my possession. (496)

This "mediation" requires active empathy on both sides of the horizon of forgiveness. One becomes inextricably bound, unbound, and bound again to her actions. And indeed, one must remember in order to forgive or to be forgiven.

As a whole, however, therapeutic discourse's appropriation of forgiveness does not align with Ricoeur's or Derrida's insistence that "forgiveness does not, it should never[,] amount to a therapy of reconciliation" (Derrida 41). Indeed, reconciliation—one might say "keeping the peace"—is at the heart of forty-two minute television talk shows, of a variety of self-help books designed to promote harmony in relationships, and of the kind of active empathy in which one must engage when reading a memoir of abjection. "If they can forgive," one might think, "so can I." This normalizes the act of forgiving and undercuts Derrida's definition of "pure forgiveness," which "cannot . . . *present itself* as such," lest it deny itself (48, emphasis in original).

Forgiveness that is not forgiveness, by this definition, is what we see throughout pop therapeutics. Forgiving can never be finished; it is a wound that refuses to heal; it's not as simple as saying "I forgive you" and then "moving on." Forgiveness itself requires a radical disjunction between the self and the other, one that active empathy might foreclose.

Whether "pure" in the Derridean sense or not, forgiveness, whether asking for it or giving it, is a key tenet of the tell-all memoir of abjection. Above, I have provided close readings of three representative memoirs of the period, in order to illustrate how the genre and the culture-of-therapy that produced the genre are mutually illuminating. Although Mary Karr's *The Liars' Club* provides the strongest example of Ricoeur's equation-at-work, and in particular the absolution that comes from forgiveness, both Elizabeth Wurtzel and Dave Pelzer employ the concept within their narratives to different ends.

We're given formulas for everything to do with identity. Horkheimer and Adorno end *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* with the reminder that

The most intimate reactions of human beings have become so entirely reified, even to themselves, that the idea of anything peculiar to them survives only in extreme abstraction: personality means hardly more than dazzling white teeth and freedom from body odor and emotions. That is the triumph of advertising in the culture industry: the compulsive imitation by consumers of cultural commodities which, at the same time, they recognize as false. (136)

This is reflected in the notion that readers might treat these memoirs of abjection as forms of self help, that they might find solace in others' experiences, whether they mirror the readers' or not. The authors are "experts" of a kind—they've lived their own lives—and, though none of these authors offers the kinds of concrete "solutions" we might find in one of Dr. Phil's books, they represent the notion that redemption is possible, even within postmodernity. Because they have written memoirs, they are automatically survivors; it becomes clear to an audience that Wurtzel, Pelzer, and Karr have all lived, not only to see another day, but to pen their stories for others, who engage in active empathy to "feel into" them.

Chapter 3:

A Contradictory Assemblage of Self: Authorship, Truthiness, and Oprah's Book Empire

In a world which really is topsy-turvy, the true is a moment of the false. —Guy Debord

What difference separates history from fiction, if both narrate? —Paul Ricoeur

There's no longer any such thing as fiction or nonfiction; there's only narrative. —David Shields

Oprah Winfrey: talk show host, Academy Award-nominated actor, book club director, role model, philanthropist, writer, media producer, entrepreneur, tycoon. *Time* magazine once called her the most powerful woman in the world, and she's certainly one of the richest. She sells products, makes careers, breaks them. By all accounts, Winfrey is a powerful woman. Her syndicated talk show, which ran from 1986 to 2011, was one of the most successful television programs of all time, and her wildly popular Book Club, which she invented in 1996 as a way to "get people reading again," cemented her position as what *New York Times* writer D. T. Max called "the most successful pitch person in the history of publishing" (qtd. in Farr 26). Simply put, she is an American icon who, in the past twenty-five years, has transcended race and gender barriers to become an ur-celebrity, and who continues to wield immense cultural capital in the United States.

Winfrey's self-professed ideology, which she described in an 1997 interview, partially explains her evolution from announcer to mogul to publishing pitch person: "As the years evolved I grew and wanted to say something with the show. . . . I wanted to be able to say things that were meaningful to the American public and culture. . . . I wanted to be able to use the show to enlighten as well as entertain, to have people think differently about themselves and their lives" (qtd. in Farr 9). She self-consciously made an attempt to differentiate her show, and what

viewers might learn from it, from the "trash pack" of other daytime talk shows (*Jerry Springer* comes to mind). She wanted to inspire others to "do good in the world," or so she claims, and her charisma now drives an entire Empire of Oprah—while doing good, she has done very well.⁷⁹ Her Book Club "placed [her] in the role of cultural critic and arbiter of taste" (Farr 14), a role that begs for further analysis in the wake of the James Frey scandal and embedded within a larger cultural narrative built on the fragmentation of self.

Indeed, Winfrey has created a cult of personality. Whether or not members of the academy choose to accept her, and even though she has inspired legions of people to read more books, by "focus[ing] on identity and self-help" but simultaneously "discouraging broader social critique or efforts at political change," she has deeply affected the cultural climate in the United States, and her covert capitalistic desires and motives seem to represent a larger societal trend (Rooney 14). She is part of the driving force behind what Fredric Jameson calls late capitalism; she is a sovereign in the Foucaultian sense; and she shapes history by asking the Ricoeurian "why?" that leads to an inevitable "because." Her endorsement single-handedly sells products, ideas, and identities; she is a force with which to reckon. In the words of Larry King, "her impact is enormous."

Creative nonfiction: the subgenre of life writing that might be the new novel. A genre that has far surpassed any other in terms of sales, shelf space in corporate bookstores, and reader interest, in spite of the fact that few people seem able to describe exactly what it is or what its cultural function might be. Lee Gutkind, who claims to have coined the term in the late 1970's and who founded the literary magazine *Creative Nonfiction*, defines it this way:

⁷⁹ A brief internet search reveals no fewer than twenty-five biographies of Winfrey, and several of them appear to focus on her immense success given the "disadvantages" that come with being a black woman in America, and her "struggles" on her way up the proverbial media ladder. The newest biography, Kitty Kelly's *Oprah: A Biography* has been met with some controversy.

Although it sounds a bit affected and presumptuous, “creative nonfiction” precisely describes what the form is all about. The word “creative” refers simply to the use of literary craft in presenting nonfiction—that is, factually accurate prose about real people and events—in a compelling, vivid manner. To put it another way, creative nonfiction writers do not make things up; they make ideas and information that already exist more interesting and, often, more accessible.

(Gutkind)

Gutkind goes on to remind his readers that "this general term . . . is basically acknowledged and accepted in the literary world," and that "the essential point" is that writers and readers alike acknowledge the "genre's boundaries." This raises several questions, however, that become relevant in the wake of cultural theory: how can we account for the fact that creative nonfiction now outsells fiction by a substantial margin? What does this say about identity construction and the need to consume pre-packaged, and maybe exaggerated, "reality"? How is the evolution of the genre tied to a larger master narrative?⁸⁰

James Frey: American writer. Fraternity-brother-turned-drug-dealer. Liar, traitor, a disgrace to creative nonfiction. Author of immensely successful novel-turned-memoir-turned-novel that, by way of becoming a Book Club selection and bestseller, ignited a media frenzy driven by Winfrey. In an interview with Larry King, Frey explores his own role in the spectacle:

I've acknowledged that there were embellishments in [*A Million Little Pieces*], that I've changed things, that in certain cases things were toned up, in certain cases things were toned down, that names were changed, that identifying

⁸⁰ We might compare this with the evolution of reality television. For an excellent reading of the latter's evolution and power, see Jonathan Bignell's *Big Brother: Reality TV in the Twenty-First Century*.

characteristics were changed. There's a great debate about memoir and about what should be most properly served, the story or some form of journalistic truth.

Memoirs don't generally come under the type of scrutiny that mine has. (qtd. in King transcript)

The reason for the scrutiny is quite simple: Winfrey endorsed the book, which led to a greater readership than Frey likely would have enjoyed without her. Over five million people purchased the book, read it, possibly applauded it, maybe even identified with it. And, when it turned out that Frey had falsified some of his narrative, in a strange turn of events, Winfrey retaliated in a way that simultaneously underscored her desire for power and the genre's need for a coherent definition.

The collision between Winfrey and Frey is strange enough to be true, and reveals something about the nature of creative nonfiction, confession, and our collective desire for truth-in-narrative. What else, other than a falsified memoir, could provoke Oprah to lose her cool and lead millions of readers across the globe, both inside and outside the academy, to question which part of the term "creative nonfiction" should be most prized? We have gone beyond questions of "creativity" or "nonfiction" and entered the realm of Truth: what happens when readers are collectively duped by an author and his publisher, and what does it mean that the wizard behind the proverbial curtain is Oprah Winfrey? The theoretical answers to this question come in the forms of power, ideology, and testimony. The bizarre events that unfolded between Winfrey, Frey, the media, and the reading public expose a key element of what happens when a writer, forced to interact with the media-at-large and with the ostensible queen of television, falsifies his truth in a culture that thrives on assembling fragments into whole identities.

This six-part analysis will, I hope, cast some theoretical light onto this strange situation. I begin with a more specific outline of what occurred between Frey and the media. I then read Winfrey's Book Club as a reinforcement of the "author function" that both Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault theorized in the 1960's, and briefly analyze Frey's narrative trajectory and the place of his text in the Winfrey canon. From there, I move into three separate readings of the situation itself. The first is based on Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* and *The History of Sexuality: Volume I*. Hinging on Foucault's argument that hegemonic discipline resides in the answer to the simple question: "who are you?," I examine the situation as a spectacle: Oprah and her Book Club members asked and Frey responded, though not in a way that many people liked, which marked Frey as a guilty man and Oprah's show, under Foucault's umbrella of power and confession, as a gallows. The next section roots itself in my reading of the situation through Paul Ricoeur's *Memory, History, Forgetting* as a way to illuminate readers' "horizon of expectation" through the "why/because" so embedded in creative nonfiction, in talk-show rhetoric, and in the self-help century. The penultimate section investigates some of the differences between "hoax" and "fraud," in order to illustrate the political stakes of each. Finally, I will interrogate creative nonfiction as a dangerous supplement to the overly commodified and fragmented media-mediated world of late capitalism.⁸¹

The Narrative

This narrative (turned history) begins in 2003, when Frey published *A Million Little Pieces*, a strikingly defiant and allegedly true story of his own battles with addiction and

⁸¹ A brief disclaimer: I am not aiming for theoretical convergence, as this would be impossible to achieve. What I'm doing, instead, is reading this cultural situation as a kind of narrative in itself, in order to expose the problems inherent in labeling *any* narrative, especially one mediated by memory (as opposed to creativity) as "true."

recovery. Though critics were divided, it was a commercial success; some critics praised Frey's innovative prose and unconventional grammar (others called it "gruesome," and "false"), and the public, already hooked on the confessional genre, saw the book as a way to begin discussion about problems of addiction, a life of crime, suicide, retribution, and forgiveness. In 2005, Oprah picked it as a selection for her Book Club, and it spent an additional fifteen weeks at the top of the bestseller list and sold two million more copies after she chose it. Her endorsement itself came as a surprise; after all, she frequently selected books that were clearly novels, mostly written by women ranging from George Eliot to Toni Morrison.⁸² Her responses to these novels were frequently sentimental and the shows often featured a teary-eyed Winfrey sharing her own emotional reactions to the texts with her viewers. Far from following her established model, at least on the surface, Frey's eccentric narrative was loaded with profanity, an outright rejection of Alcoholics Anonymous and the various other self-help models that Winfrey has prized over the years, and more violence than her club members may have expected. In their collection of critical essays on Winfrey's Book Club, Cecilia Konchar Farr and Jaime Harker remind us that Frey's "own mottos—'hold on' and 'FTBSITTTD,' for 'Fuck The Bullshit, It's Time to Throw Down,' which he tattooed on his arms—challenge the very core of what Oprah does on her show every day" (325), though this certainly foreshadows Winfrey's own response to Frey.

Following the immense commercial success of the book, the website *The Smoking Gun* unleashed a scathing article, condemning Frey for falsifying much, if not most, of his narrative. Frey responded by admitting that he invented small details, created composite characters, and may have embellished some scenes for dramatic effect. For the entire week of January 11-18,

⁸² While outside the scope of this analysis, Winfrey's selections frequently reveal her own gendered, frequently heteronormative, discourse. Kathleen Rooney's *Reading with Oprah: The Book Club that Changed America* features a compelling argument about this.

2006, some three years after the book's publication and in the wake of *The Smoking Gun's* report, the media feasted upon the story. It became a spectacle that Winfrey seemed unable to resist.

She initially stood up for Frey on *Larry King Live*, proclaiming that "the underlying message of redemption in James Frey's memoir still resonates with me, and I know it resonates with millions of other people who have read this book. . . . What is relevant is that he was a drug addict who spent years in turmoil" (qtd. in Wyatt 1). Indeed, her initial recommendation, by all accounts, is what made the book "the best-selling book by any American author [in 2005]" (Wyatt 1), and she seemed reluctant to condemn Frey. What seemed to matter to her, at least in the beginning of the spectacle, was that Frey had written a book that both helped other people out of addiction and encouraged an alternative to traditional self-help models, which might reach a different demographic within her group of viewers.⁸³

Then she changed her mind. She decided to throw down. When she invited Frey onto her talk show in early 2006, she questioned him and simultaneously reaffirmed her own authority and power: "Why did you lie? . . . I acted in defense of you and as I said, my judgment was clouded because so many people seemed to have gotten so much out of [your book]. But now I

⁸³ Rooney makes several excellent points that deserve mention. She calls Winfrey an "intellectual force," reminding readers that Winfrey is "a demonstrably intelligent, erudite, and well-spoken woman" (13). She goes on to assess what role the Book Club played (or did not play) in encouraging large-scale American literacy, writing that, while many praised Winfrey's ultimate goal, which was ostensibly to encourage her viewers to read more books, she "instructed her audience to experience the books in terms of how they personally related to the main characters, focusing less on the [texts] themselves and more on how their own life stories could be understood and improved in the process" (22). Rooney describes Winfrey's treatment of "fictional, novelistic events primarily as things that happen to real people . . . in large part because this approach to literature plays well on-screen" (24). This raises interesting questions about Winfrey's later treatment of Frey: if she primarily focused on fiction and encouraged her audience to identify with the characters, why was she so visibly upset when she invited Frey and Talese onto her program? One wonders whether Winfrey's own narcissism plays a role; that is, was she really challenging Frey because her readers were duped, or because she was embarrassed to have been duped, herself?

feel that you conned us all. . . . That's a lie. It's not an idea, James. That's a lie." Later, on the same show, to Nan Talese, Frey's publisher, Winfrey continued: "If you're publishing [a book] as a memoir, I think the publisher has a responsibility because as the consumer, the reader, I am trusting you. I'm trusting you. . . . I'm trusting you." She didn't come out and say it, but she was speaking on behalf of many American readers who may not have purchased the book if Frey and Talese had called what it is: a *semi*-autobiographical novel. A fictional history. Not a true story. The media loved it. Winfrey got press, Frey got press, her ratings went up, his book sold more copies. The debacle certainly underscores Stanley Fish's grim proclamation that "the death of objectivity relieves me of the obligation to be right; it demands only that I be interesting" (qtd. in Kakutani 1). It also brings to light a serious problem within this confessional genre: what happens when the testimony/confession/purportedly true narrative is false? This situation reflects a disturbing ambiguity inherent in Gutkind's definition, and reveals the need to investigate creative nonfiction as a potentially disruptive force in twenty-first-century identity construction.

Naming the (Dead) Author: The Evolution of a Genre

The history of the memoir, as Ben Yagoda describes in his 2009 monograph, has become more fraught with difficulties as the genre has exploded. Based on Nielsen BookScan figures, "total sales in the categories of Personal Memoirs, Childhood Memoirs, and Parental Memoirs increased more than 400 percent between 2004 and 2008," which has, according to Yagoda, led to the death of fiction (7). Yagoda boldly asserts that the novel was a twentieth-century phenomenon, and that life writing is what now drives the entire publishing industry. In an interview with *The Wall Street Journal*, Yagoda says that "people [have become okay] with revealing their inner life and secrets . . . [and] the intersection of voyeurism and exhibitionism

[drives the consumption of memoir]. . . . One final factor that people realized on the marketing end of things that a memoir is much more promotable [than a novel is]" (Alter). Accompanying this shift has been a dramatic rise in questions surrounding truth-in-nonfiction. Indeed, the Frey/Winfrey scandal seems to have uncovered, at least for many members of Oprah's Book Club, a desire to explore, however superficially, the role of the author in narrative construction.⁸⁴ Some genres, it would seem, embrace the author function more than others, and the saga surrounding *A Million Little Pieces* illustrates how relevant the author—and his or her authority—has been to the rise of creative nonfiction.

In 1968 and 1969, respectively, Roland Barthes's "The Death of the Author" and Michel Foucault's "What is an Author?" prompted a generation of literary critics to reconsider the roles of readers and writers in the construction of academic discourse. Their emphasis on the significance of language and its relation to history largely eliminated the consolidating force that author-driven studies encouraged. This precluded any continuing temptation, at least within academic circles, to mythologize writers. For Barthes, a text's meaning lies within the reader, whom he describes as "hold[ing] together in a single field all the traces by which the written text is constituted" (224). A text, in Barthes's estimation, is "only a tissue of signs, an imitation that is lost, infinitely deferred" (223), and an author is a mere scripter who produces but does not—cannot—explain the work. The scripter "no longer bears within him passions, humours, feelings, impressions, but rather this immense dictionary from which de draws a writing that can know no

⁸⁴ Winfrey is behind much of this—one feature of her early Book Club episodes, at least the ones focusing on living authors, is a "meet-and-greet" with the writers of her selections. In the early years of the Book Club, Winfrey went as far as to select several of her audience members to have dinner with the chosen author; while she claimed to be attempting to "level the field" and let people know that authors are real people, too, this practice actually made some viewers uncomfortable, and Winfrey discontinued it when she began promoting more classically canonical texts in 2002.

halt [because] life never does more than imitate the book" (223). His structuralist argument foregrounds questions of language; for Barthes, the origin of meaning lies in language itself, and he is skeptical about the notion of a singular identity of the self. Barthes contends that an author can disappear, leaving behind the subjectivity of the reader, which can then supersede an author's traditionally privileged subject position. This reveals the fact that the death of the author might work against any potential claims to a stable personal identity of any kind. Some forty years later, in the wake of the rise of (real and fictionalized) contemporary autobiography, this raises complicated questions about genre and verisimilitude.

Foucault challenges Barthes's structuralist notions and pushes them to another level. Instead of outright denying the existence of the author, Foucault describes the "death of the author" as revealing the history behind that author, behind the text, and behind the culture that produces a text, thereby undermining the author's influence and authority. For a reader, then, the author may or may not exist in the form of an embodied person. Foucault's "author function" is more about its temporal contingency within history, its link to the juridical and institutional system that creates and reinforces it, its manner of designation, and its applicability even in the absence of a physical person behind the text. In "What is an Author?" Foucault insists that

[A]n author's name is not simply an element in a discourse (capable of being either subject or object, of being replaced by a pronoun, and the like); it *performs a certain role* with regard to narrative discourse, assuring a classificatory function. Such a name permits one to group together a certain number of texts, define them, differentiate them from and contrast them to others. (227, emphasis mine)

For Foucault, the author is an ideological product that halts the proliferation of meaning by telling us more about the ideology that governs textual reception than it can about the text itself.

In the case of James Frey, then, there exist two levels of this author function. By initially grouping Frey's narrative together with other ostensibly true stories, Doubleday/Random House was able to assure that it would be classified within a genre that readers proved they would purchase. By calling Frey's book "creative nonfiction" or "memoir," the publisher defined it as a true story and established, for the book-buying public, that Frey was a writer of "true stories," a role that he initially performed quite well, thus marking (and marketing) the name "James Frey" in a way that was more appealing than, say, a novelist, to many potential readers. In fact, it's likely that no publisher would have purchased *A Million Little Pieces* unless it was bound to this author-function ideology—Frey claims to have shopped the novel to seventeen different publishers before Doubleday agreed to publish it as a memoir.⁸⁵ Additionally, when Oprah Winfrey recommends books, she frequently recommends a writer's entire body of work; she privileges the author function over almost any other. This naming of genre, of author, and, in the case of Winfrey herself, of recommender, is essential to the "autobiographical pact" that Philippe Lejeune outlines in *On Autobiography* and to the dynamic between readers and an autobiographical writer. Lejeune describes autobiography as a "retrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality" (4). Perhaps, then, Frey's narrative *is* an autobiography—maybe, in a strange twist, part of Frey's subject position requires him to invent truths.

⁸⁵ Nan Talese, the vice president of the division of Doubleday that originally published *Pieces*, disputes this, claiming in an interview with *Time* magazine that Frey brought the manuscript to her as a memoir.

In his cogent exploration of the spatial position of the autobiographical author, Frédéric Regard characterizes Lejeune's "basic premise" as one of the fundamental explanations for the controversial nature of the James Frey situation: "what is particular to the autobiographical subject implies an infallible identification of the author with the narrator and the character in the narrative, an inter-identification covered and guaranteed by the proper name on the book jacket" (93). This proper name, for Lejeune, for Winfrey, and for readers of autobiography, creates a pact—the author promises that his or her name on the jacket, and his or her narrative, is a record of historical truth. When an author mentions herself by name in the text of her narrative, she reinforces this pact with the reader; Frey does this at several points in *A Million Little Pieces*, most strikingly when he writes his own obituary:

I do not deserve tears. I deserve to be portrayed honestly and I deserve nothing more and I start to write an honest obituary in my own mind. I write the obituary that should appear, but never will. I start at the beginning and I stick to the facts and I move to what I know will be my end. James Frey. Born in Cleveland, Ohio, September 12, 1969. Started stealing sips from drinks at seven. Got hammered for the first time at ten. Vomited from abuse for the first time at ten. Smoked dope at twelve. By thirteen was smoking and drinking regularly. Blacked out for the first time at fourteen. (94)

The irony is, of course, that for all of Frey's claims that the truth will set him free, a cliché that appears with great regularity throughout his narrative, most of his book is fiction. Though he may have "stuck to the facts" in this small passage, in which he presents the details by which readers are to understand the rest of his novel, the fact that he names himself might be part of Winfrey's problem. If Frey makes this pact with his reader, only to break it repeatedly and with

little remorse, Winfrey's wrath might be more understandable. By naming himself in the narrative and calling it a memoir, Frey gives us a generic signal that keeps us thinking about truth claims. We may know, on some level, that memory is flawed, or that no one could ever have a double root canal without Novocain, but for Lejeune, this very naming is what secures the pact.⁸⁶

Winfrey's ideological embrace of the author creates a paradox. It challenges the arguments that Barthes and Foucault make, but simultaneously cements the fact that readers have the ultimate power of judgment in cases like this one. In her analysis of the author function in contemporary memoir and autobiography, Jakki Spicer describes readers' responsibilities to "decide whether what they are reading refers to what had once existed in the world," or whether what they are reading is a fiction (388). Spicer calls "the *figure* of the author" a "ghostly presence animating and providing the life for the text," and makes the compelling argument that "the figure of the author is the pivot around which questions of autobiography's relation to or difference from fiction finally turn" (388, emphasis in original). While Spicer's claims are largely applicable across autobiography as a genre, they become particularly relevant within the Frey/Winfrey debacle precisely because of the trace of the author upon which Winfrey insists, perpetuated by way of her Book Club's rhetoric.

This certainly complicates the author function. Foucault writes that the author is "the ideological figure by which one marks the manner in which we fear the proliferation of meaning" (230), and this is absolutely the case, here. In fact, one might go as far as to say that creative nonfiction is a form of discourse separated from fiction *only by the author function*, which

⁸⁶ This is not limited to the authors of the books. One might argue that Winfrey herself embodies the author-function, or at least the editor-function. Winfrey has created a canon of sorts, and attaching her name and "O" seal to books led to writers like William Faulkner making the bestseller list many years after writing their novels.

memoirists and readers of memoir simultaneously reinforce by way of Lejeune's pact. Given the fact that the evidence presented by *the Smoking Gun* caused Winfrey et al. to question the specific nature of Frey's author function, then, one wonders whether readers ought to *expect* that certain details of stories like Frey's might be embellished or exaggerated. Does any author within any genre possess the ability to tell a factual, historically verifiable truth?⁸⁷

In short, the need for readers of autobiography to embrace the author function eliminates any possibility of an authorless memoir, and the fact that the genre has made such a tremendous impact on the publishing world would seem, by extension, to foreclose the possibility of eliminating the author function *at all*. Winfrey's Book Club has reinvigorated the author for both fiction and nonfiction, and her analyses of the books she selects represent a return to a much older, purely humanist, idea of what an author really is. Though she encourages the birth of the reader, she does so at the expense of entire generations of debates surrounding intentionality in writing. The author, for Winfrey, who assumes the editor-function, looms large. She and the authors she chooses maintain a level of authority that is, in an Althusserian sense, overdetermined. Winfrey's appropriation of the traditional divide between high and low culture, that is, her paradoxical position within daytime television as an arbiter of literary taste, actually functions in a highly socio-political manner.⁸⁸ James Frey is not the exception to this rule;

⁸⁷ Paul de Man argues against Lejeune in ways that echo Spicer, contending that "[a]utobiography . . . is not a genre or a mode, but a figure of reading or of understanding that occurs, to some degree, in all texts. The autobiographical moment happens in an alignment between the two subjects involved in the process of reading in which they determine each other by mutual reflexive substitution" (921). Though this is outside the scope of the argument at hand, it certainly deserves consideration within the study and criticism of autobiography.

⁸⁸ Mark Hall, in "Oprah's Book Selections: Teleliterature for *The Oprah Winfrey Show*," investigates claims that "television harms the culture of reading" via Oprah's Book Club. He describes Winfrey's use of "textual literacy and television literacy" as a reminder "[to] viewers that they share an ideology, including common values and feelings" (96). His generally positive

rather, he reinforces the author-function—and Winfrey's position as a cultural maven—in ways that I address more theoretically in the sections that follow.

Winfrey's website also fortifies the paradoxical author-function present here: Oprah.com ignores Frey's text in favor of his lies. At the time of this writing, a brief tour of Winfrey's Book Club website includes, in addition to a master list of her chosen texts, shorter, categorical guides to books that are appropriate "if you have a broken heart," "for children six to nine," or "if you love the classics." Clicking on one of these lists reveals easy-to-read prose and a section called "Related Resources" near the bottom of the page. Thus, potential readers find a one-stop-self-help-shop on Winfrey's site; they can select a book, complete with a guide for reading and tips for understanding the characters in the narrative, and then follow the electrons to other guides—the "resources" following the "8 Books to Read with a Broken Heart" list, for example, include "5 ways to get your man to open up," "How to save your relationship," and an interactive quiz entitled "What's your love type?"

On the website, Winfrey's Book Club selections appear on a temporal list. From the list, one can click on a link to Winfrey's "reading guide" for each book. These guides, as a variety of critics have suggested, are reminiscent of *Cliff's Notes*.⁸⁹ They simultaneously flatten the narratives, reinforce gender norms, bring the author function to life, and encourage people to buy things that Winfrey has stamped with her approval. Included with each guide, in addition to a synopsis of each narrative and a downloadable character summary, is an "about the author"

overview of the Book Club acknowledges that "the homogenizing influence of mass marketing, including both Wal-Mart and Oprah's Book Club," though disturbing to some, actually reveals the ways in which Winfrey truly connects with her viewers. Although it is outside the scope of the argument at hand, this certainly underscores my contention that Winfrey, in a startlingly hybridized manner, manages to merge high and low culture.

⁸⁹ For more about Oprah's guides, see the variety of arguments in Cecilia Konchar Farr and Jaime Harker's *The Oprah Affect*.

section, where one can learn the details of a writer's life and how his or her experiences may have influenced his or her texts.⁹⁰ Frey's book is special. Clicking on *A Million Little Pieces* reveals a page devoted to "The James Frey Controversy." There is nothing about the book itself; there are, however, several links to other parts of Winfrey's site that "explore the truth." This, too, reinforces the author function by focusing on the controversy—and about the need to check the facts of every autobiography released since *Pieces*—instead of on the novel that Frey wrote and Winfrey selected. *A Million Little Pieces*, as a discrete text, has been replaced with the question of genre and with the "truthiness" of narrative. The discussion forum for Frey's text, unlike for the other selections, is buried within the links and, predictably, is more about the scandal than it is about the novel itself. Instead of a reader's guide, Winfrey provides an analysis of Frey's betrayal of her (and, she might add, of readers), and a link to "Oprah's Guide to Critical Thinking." An anomaly, indeed.

Although the scandal has revealed itself to be primarily about autobiography as a genre and about Winfrey's immense influence on the buying habits of her viewers, there exists yet another puzzling piece of this puzzle: the text itself and readers' reactions to it. My impression, from over 1800 reviews of Frey's text on amazon.com, combined with many more on the popular goodreads.com and Frey's website, is that there exist several categories of readers of *A Million Little Pieces*: those who feel betrayed that the book is fiction and therefore find Frey an

⁹⁰ One very good example of this exists in Winfrey's analysis of "Gabo" (Gabriel Garcia Marquez). In order to "get the most out of your reading experience" of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, for example, Winfrey's website implies that one must understand something about the authors themselves, in addition to their texts' position within cultural history. In addition, "you" can "find the insight you've been searching for with your exclusive Oprah's Book Club guide," where you can "explore deeper into the novel with reading questions, themes, and a detailed look at magical realism" and where you should be sure not to "miss inside information on Gabo, and his message of solitude." (<http://www.oprah.com/oprahsbookclub/Synopsis-of-One-Hundred-Years-of-Solitude>)

abomination to literature, those who think the book is rubbish regardless of its classification, those who believe it to be a wonderful book by a literary genius, and those who believe the message of the book to be more important than its genre. Many of the reviewers in the final category claim to have been inspired by Frey's text in ways that echo the very twelve-step program that Frey condemns. Several particularly poignant readers suggest that they were able to quit drinking, smoking crack, or snorting methamphetamines as a direct result of reading the book.

My own narrative of my experience with the book is a true story. I first read it shortly after it was released and believed, like millions of other people, that it was a memoir, a work of life writing. And I liked it. I found the subjective, stream-of-consciousness prose engaging and lively, and was riveted by Frey's seemingly endless descriptions of bodily fluids, pain, and rebellion—his text embodies the subgenre of "misery writing" that steadily grew in popularity throughout the late 1990's and early 2000's.⁹¹ Upon my second reading, following the controversy, I began to note more specific aspects that might illuminate why readers might become so attached to a novel in which the primary character is far from lovable. One of the main reasons for this, in my estimation, is that the book follows a completely traditional narrative arc, which might also explain why Winfrey selected it in the first place. Twenty-three-year-old James Frey, protagonist, awakens on a plane, with no idea about how he got there or where he is going. He is covered in his own bodily fluids (which, incidentally, function as a character in the book) and fiending for alcohol and/or crack: he is an addict. His parents pick him up at the airport and take him to a twelve-step rehab facility—one of the most expensive in the United States—where he gets sober largely, according to him, on his own volition. He loudly

⁹¹ In *Memoir: A History*, Ben Yagoda provides an excellent overview of this subgenre.

denounces the twelve steps at nearly every point, preferring the Tao Tse Ching over the Alcoholics Anonymous "Big Book."

As he gets sober, Frey describes everything in vivid, repeated, graphic detail. He vomits several times a day, and the narrative is careful to describe the contents of the vomit, which often includes "pieces of [his] insides." In one of the most famous and oft-recounted passages in the novel, Frey undergoes a double root canal with no Novocain since, in his fictional universe, addicts may not receive even a non-addictive local anesthetic for a painful dental procedure. The narrative thus follows a traditional trope within the subgenre of addiction writing; Frey's physical woes represent deeper psychological, emotional, and intellectual ones. This becomes clear early in the text:

The sickness ends and I sit down on the floor and I lean back against the front of the toilet. Waves of emotion begin streaming through me and I can feel the welling of tears. Everything that I know and that I am and everything that I've done begins flashing in front of my eyes. My past, my present, my future. My friends, my enemies, my friends who became enemies. Where I've lived, where I've been. What I've seen, what I've done. What I've ruined and destroyed. I start to cry. (48)

This is representative of the book as a whole. While denouncing the principles of Alcoholics

Anonymous, Frey's text follows almost exactly the narrative of the "Big Book."⁹² Frey equates

⁹² In her article about the "Big Book" of Alcoholics Anonymous, Trysh Travis explores the narrative trajectory of the self-help guide as rooted in "the most powerful discourse [of] the personal story." One of the founders of AA, Bill Wilson, "was convinced that the stories of the men of AA could convey the nature of alcoholism and of recovery with a force that no merely expository prose could match," and this echoes the very nature of Frey's recovery narrative (440). Travis's description of the "awakening" that accompanies the beginning of the twelve

AA members with addicts of all kinds: "They have an addiction. Addictions need fuel. I am not convinced Meetings and a Dogma and God can fuel mine. If what the Doctor says at the beginning is true, and joining AA is the only way to cure me, then I'm completely fucked" (78). Interestingly, this comes immediately after Frey announces that he is "an Alcoholic and a Drug Addict and a Criminal" for the first of many times in the narrative, which, according to the program he lambastes, might indicate that, despite his outward resistance, he is already on the first step of AA's recovery plan (78).

Frey meets his friend Leonard, the subject of a follow-up memoir/novel. Leonard is a Mafioso "with a heart of gold" who, at various points in the narrative, buys lavish lobster dinners for the men in their "unit," provides audio-visual equipment so that the men can watch a boxing match, and functions, once Frey learns to trust him, as a role model to the troubled narrator. Throughout the novel, Leonard represents unbridled masculinity. He encourages Frey to "step up and be a man," and Frey, in turn, seems to enjoy masculine posturing, whether or not it meets with Leonard's approval.⁹³ At one especially self-indulgent moment, Frey describes how Leonard supports his violent behavior and expects that Frey, because of his "frightening" tendencies, will "be able to make it" in rehab: "Life is hard, Kid, you gotta be harder. You gotta take it on and fight for it and be a fucking man about how you live it. If you're too much of a

steps for many addicts is, in fact, quite similar to Frey's text and the "if he/she can do it, so can I" reaction that many readers had to *Pieces* (445).

⁹³ In her "Afterword" to *The Oprah Affect*, Jaime Harker investigates Winfrey's rise to becoming "the most influential literary critic in the world" (321) as being based in viewers' need for "emotional authenticity" (322). This authenticity, Harker contends, is actually based in a need to view a *performance* of emotion, which Winfrey's television show regularly provides. Harker's reading of Frey's text as "conform[ing] to Oprah's persona and worldview perfectly" by "matching the other kinds of emotional nakedness that Oprah's talk show—and Book Club—values" (325) is accurate, as is her characterization of *A Million Little Pieces* as a "male melodrama of addiction" (331).

pussy to do that, then maybe you should leave, 'cause you're dead already" (107). Frey responds predictably, by "taking it on" and adopting Leonard's motto, which becomes a mantra: "hold on."

In one of the least original elements of the story, Frey meets his soon-to-be girlfriend Lilly, who is a "hooker with a heart of gold," and whose blue eyes mesmerize him in nearly every scene in which she appears. The cliché is tried and true, and Frey's stylistic twists on the novel as a form cannot conceal the fact that, essentially, the story is a recycled version of a traditional heterosexual romance. After a long diatribe about "[trying] many times . . . to kill [his] loneliness with a girl or a woman" and "want[ing] to be close to someone" more than anything, Frey recounts the fact that he "either ran [from] or did something to destroy" every relationship he'd had. Lilly, of course, is unlike these other girls/women who "felt [his] loneliness and . . . want[ed] to get closer" (80); her own troubled existence runs parallel to Frey's, which makes him able to connect with her in a new way. He falls hard. Within the text, Frey casts himself as a hopeless romantic who would do anything for Lilly—a story that many readers have heard before. In fact, the novel describes a version of what Oprah Winfrey presents on her show almost every day: a psychologically disturbed character finds redemption via friendship, love, and inner strength. In this sense, the book gives readers exactly what they might expect, and the repetition within the stream-of-consciousness style projects a certain level of verisimilitude that readers seem to appreciate.

Foucault writes that "the coming into being of the notion of 'author' constitutes the privileged moment of *individualization* in the history of ideas, knowledge, literature, philosophy, and the sciences" (225, emphasis in original). This individualization might be what has led to the surge in sales of creative nonfiction as a genre; however, in the context of Winfrey's Book Club, it presents yet another paradox. Winfrey encouraged her viewers to create a very public

community, defying the solitary mode of reading that has been customary for many years. Part of her reaction might be due to the public embarrassment she felt when it turned out that she had been duped. Lejeune argues that "we *indeed know* that one is fooled [if one believes in the transparency of language, and in the existence of a complete subject who expresses himself through it]; we are not so dumb, but . . . we go on as if we did not know it. Telling the truth about the self . . . is a *fantasy*" (qtd. in Spicer 389, emphasis in original). One can only wonder, then, if Winfrey had any inkling about the true nature of Frey's fiction, or if it mattered at all to her before her Book Club members rallied to support her following the allegations of untruth. In the sections that follow, I make only cursory references to Frey's novel; more interesting to me are questions surrounding the cultural authority of Oprah Winfrey, and the theoretical bases for the evolution of the saga.

Who are You?: Foucault and the Question of Disciplinary Power

Who are you? We ask this question time and time again, in various situations, as a way to create our identities in a fragmented world. By employing a distilled version of Michel Foucault's disciplinary power structure, which he outlines in *Discipline and Punish*, and by investigating the idea, which he presents in *The History of Sexuality: Volume One*, that the answer to this question—confession—is the main ritual of truth-production, we see that the Frey/Winfrey debacle is one way of reading the confessional genre of creative nonfiction as a disciplinary, almost hegemonic, cultural tool.⁹⁴ Foucault's multi-volume analysis of modern power as a mode of disciplinary control, with its focus on what people have not done (as opposed to what they have done), and his suggestion that individuals internalize societal norms and

⁹⁴ I will abbreviate Foucault's works as follows: *Discipline and Punish* will be *DP*, and *The History of Sexuality: Volume One* will be *HS*.

monitor themselves, thereby embodying inherent power structures, illuminates this situation in a decidedly theoretical manner.

Frey committed a crime. The question became "what did he do?" not "did he do it?" (*DP* 19). Once he realized that proclamations of innocence were futile and that he stood to receive a very public version of torture—at the hands of Winfrey, the sovereign—he confessed. Winfrey claimed to harbor a desire to ground the judgment in truth; she *needed* to know how much Frey embellished, and behaved as if all of humankind stood to lose some fundamental part of itself if he did not confess. Under the gaze of the media's panoptic eye, Frey had little choice but to confess his sins in a different medium—on television.

Indeed, the spectacle became uncannily similar to Foucault's description of the public execution, which functions to remind everyone involved, even the readers relegated to the periphery, that *truth* is the goal. Winfrey's omnipresence turned into a kind of sovereign power and her television show, for which Frey appeared to "take his whipping" (Shields 43) or, more precisely, to announce his own guilt and accept his punishment, morphed into a Foucaultian gallows. Following Foucault's rules, "the investigation and the punishment became mixed" (*DP* 41) as soon as Frey conceded and allowed Winfrey to condemn his lies. By agreeing to appear on the show in the first place, Frey admitted his guilt, or "commit[ted] himself to the procedure . . . sign[ed] the truth of the preliminary investigation" (*DP* 39). The ultimate goal, of course, was to make Frey a docile body, to eliminate the possibility of his recidivism, and to establish that, learning from his example, no one else would commit the same crime.

The disciplinary apparatus—television—is almost perfect, as it "make[s] it possible for a single gaze to see everything constantly" (*DP* 173); the media watches Frey and all other memoirists, and elicits the truth:

The major effect of the Panopticon is to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power. . . .

Power should be visible and unverifiable. Visible: the inmate will constantly have before his eyes the tall outline of the central tower from which he is spied upon.

Unverifiable: the inmate must never know whether he is being looked at any one moment; but he must be sure that he may always be so. (*DP* 201)

Oprah sits in the Panopticon with Larry King and the *Smoking Gun*, watching and waiting. Frey, as an outlier, must be punished in order for the structure to work. And punished he was.

The Frey/Winfrey situation fits perfectly with Foucault's insistence that punishment must be calibrated to fit the crime. His six rules for maintaining discipline outline the evolution of this spectacle's effect on creative nonfiction and illustrate his insistence that "one must punish exactly enough to prevent repetition" (*DP* 93). According to Foucault's first rule of minimum quantity, "a crime is committed because it procures certain advantages" (94); the advantages of mislabeling the narrative, for Frey, were the possibility of increased book sales and (perhaps) notoriety. Though he could not have known it at the time, another advantage—Winfrey's endorsement—also lurked in his production of a confessional narrative. Foucault's rule of sufficient ideality, which states that "if the motive of a crime is the advantage expected of it, the effectiveness of the penalty is the disadvantage expected of it" (95), also illustrates Frey's potential motivations: the expected advantage, again, was increased sales. The disadvantage, however, seemed rather unexpected. Frey never anticipated Winfrey's endorsement-turned-condemnation, nor did he expect that anyone would question the validity of his narrative. While Frey could not have predicted the backlash against him, this leads into Foucault's third rule, lateral effects: "the penalty must have its most intense effects on those who have not committed

the crime" (97). The effect on Larry King, on Oprah Winfrey, on the media at large, and on the reading public was certainly greater than the effect on Frey, who retreated from the media circus to write another book.⁹⁵

Foucault's notion of perfect certainty, or the need for "the laws that define the crime and lay down the penalties [to] be completely clear" (98) becomes less relevant to the Frey/Winfrey situation than it does for future writers. Most questionable, here, are the laws that define the crime; if we continue to struggle with a coherent definition for "creative nonfiction," how we might define any crime against the genre remains a significant question. If, as David Shields asserts in his recent *Reality Hunger*, "anything produced by memory is a fiction" (Shields 57), than confession as the main ritual of truth production falls into question, at least under the label of confession-turned-creative-nonfiction.

Foucault's fifth and sixth rules, common truth and optimal specification, respectively, ride on an assumption of confession: "like a mathematical truth, the truth of the crime will be accepted only when it is completely proven," Foucault writes (*DP* 99). *The Smoking Gun* questioned Frey's narrative and then he confessed, thus proving his larger untruths; without his confession, what would remain is mere speculation about the validity of labeling his book "creative nonfiction." Foucault's declaration that "all offenses must be defined; they must be classified and collected into species from which none of them can escape. . . . Individualization appears as the ultimate aim of a precisely adapted code" (100) returns this situation to a question

⁹⁵ Incidentally, though Frey's second book, *My Friend Leonard*, was fiction, his publishers marketed it as a follow-up to *A Million Little Pieces*. Winfrey did not select *Leonard* for her Book Club, and it sold far fewer copies than *Pieces*. One can only wonder whether Frey (and Random House) would have pitched *Leonard* as creative nonfiction if this spectacle had not occurred.

of "who are you?": we crave these kinds of narratives because they satisfy our own panoptic impulses, even as we need to be reassured that they are, in fact, *true*.

"There is no exteriority" to the matrix of power for Foucault (*HS* 98). Beginning with Winfrey's phone call to *Larry King Live*, it seemed that she recognized her own role in the power structure, particularly as she wielded her judgment to force Frey's apology, a gallows-speech of sorts. Foucault writes that "the confession is a ritual of discourse in which the speaking subject [Frey] is also the subject of the statement; it is also a ritual that unfolds within a power relationship, for one does not confess without the presence . . . of a partner who is not simply the interlocutor but the authority [Winfrey]" (*HS* 61). This web of denial and apology (Frey), acceptance and subsequent apoplexy (Winfrey), and the subtle cues sent by the media to the reading public, with its increasing demands for truth-in-narrative, reinforce Foucault's declaration that "[the] discourse of truth finally takes effect, not in the one who receives it, but in the one from whom it is wrested" (62). This situation is an example of confession-gone-wrong, as the sovereign power of Winfrey-cum-media judged Frey's confession and forced him into another confession—a true confession—that established the positive effects of discipline. By forcing Frey's *mea culpa*, Winfrey upheld Foucault's notion that, by becoming "the herald of his own condemnation," Frey fed into the public's demand to satisfy their "insatiable curiosity" (*DP* 45-6): her viewers tuned in to see the show, and media outlets like CNN ran clips over and over again. The social function of punishment, then, reassured Winfrey, her audience, and lovers of the confessional genre that, following Frey, future writers of memoir ought to be more careful about how they label their narratives. Perhaps, if they decide to consciously embellish significant parts of their tales, they will include some kind of disclaimer, alerting readers to the untruths

embedded in their "truths." Then again, perhaps this raises another question entirely; that is, the question of subjectivity within an inherently fragmented world.

Creative nonfiction, as a whole, relies on a given reader's desire to create his or her identity through others, in a borderline-voyeuristic fashion. We may interpret this in several ways, asking these different questions to arrive at a Foucaultian genealogy that exposes the evolution of modern society as a birthplace for the narrative of creative nonfiction, and for the narrative implicit in the Frey/Winfrey spectacle. All of this becomes a Foucaultian discursive practice—the historical and cultural rules, here, dictate that, under the guise of creative nonfiction, one shall not embellish; a witness shall not give false testimony. Power operates from within.

No History can be True: Paul Ricoeur and Historiographical Epistemology

Foucault insists that discourse functions as the verbal trace left by history, which this situation illustrates, and even false testimony, as long as publishers and writers label it in the right way, sells books to the masses. A combination of Paul Ricoeur's epistemological approach to the historiographical operation, combined with the phenomenon that is the immense cultural capital of the memoir and some more observations of what happens when a memoir turns out to be a lie, gives us yet another angle from which to view the scandal. Within the framework of the Winfrey/Frey spectacle, we might uncover a larger cultural trend implicit in the creation of memoir. These books capture something about a cultural moment in much the same way that fiction can; the difference is that they're purportedly based on fact, on truth, on witness testimony—and they captivate popular audiences, drive the publishing industry, and illustrate the populace's desire to create identity out of fragmentation. Autobiography expert and author

William Zinsser describes this phenomenon: "A good memoir is also a work of history, catching a distinctive moment in the life of both a person and a society" (15). One question remains, however: what happens when that "good" memoir, adored by many critics, promoted by Winfrey, and devoured by readers, is actually a "novel"?

Within Paul Ricoeur's encyclopedic *Memory, History, Forgetting* there lie reminders about the nature of testimony-turned-archive, about judgment, and about the role that Winfrey plays as a cultural arbiter in a situation like this one. In this case, it's clear that the (historian)-judge is Winfrey, acting on behalf of her Book Club members and within an emotional display of her own woefully betrayed psyche. The testimony in question is Frey's (which, because he's written it, has also become archive). And employing Ricoeur to investigate exactly what happened in this puzzling cultural moment may, in fact, say something more about what we mean when we say "memoir," the kinds of power we give to cultural icons such as Winfrey (and to Frey, representing the category of autobiographical writer), and how we feel and behave, as readers and as consumers, when we're tricked into believing false testimony, when our questions lead us to something in the archive that isn't true, and when we re-categorize a purportedly true narrative as fiction.⁹⁶

Ricoeur defines *history* as the transference of memory to a narrative of the "presence of absence or absence of a previous presence" ("Humanities" 2). *Testimony*, for Ricoeur, is a "declaration of a witness who says three things. 1) *I was there*; 2) *believe me or not*; 3) *if you don't believe my word ask somebody else*" (5). He asserts that historical writing "assumes the function of representing the past," thereby creating a historical text that is "a true representation

⁹⁶ The Library of Congress continues to catalog *A Million Little Pieces* this way: 1. Frey, James, 1969— 2. Narcotic addicts—Rehabilitation—Minnesota. 3. Narcotic addicts—Minnesota—*Biography* (my emphasis). I found the paperback version in the biography section of the Capital Area District Library.

of the events whose traces had been stored in our archives and which had been questioned in terms of *why?* and *because*" (3). If we combine this with his notion that judges and historians are intimately linked in their methodologies, then we can see just how powerful Winfrey really was in shaping the scandal, by forcing Frey to proclaim his own guilt.⁹⁷

For Ricoeur, though interpretation takes place on every level, there exist three distinct phases in the historiographical operation: first, we build archives, based on testimony, that contain traces of the past. Ricoeur writes that "for a historian, everything can become a document," and in this case, Frey's memory, his writing, his experimental book (labeled as memoir), functions as both testimony and archive. Because it's written, instead of spoken, it leaves itself open to historians' hypotheses or questions. Ricoeur describes this level of interpretation as looking for "a fact, facts, capable of being asserted in singular, discrete propositions, most often having to do with the mentioning of dates, places, proper names, verbs that name an action or state." He goes on:

A vigilant epistemology will guard here against the illusion of believing that what we call a fact coincides with what really happened, or with the living memory of eyewitnesses, as if the facts lay sleeping in the documents until the historians extracted them. . . . We shall need to resist the temptation to dissolve the historical fact into narration and this latter into a literary composition indiscernible from fiction, so too we need to resist this initial confusion between a historical fact and a really remembered event. (178)

⁹⁷ I will abbreviate Ricoeur's works as follows: *Memory, History, Forgetting* will be *MHF*, "Humanities between Science and Art" will be "Humanities," and the interview with Sorin Antohi will be "Interview."

So, in this context, and admittedly taking Ricoeur's idea to (and maybe beyond) its logical extreme—let's pretend for a moment that even the reading public are historians of a kind—it's up to the reader of a memoir to make a distinction between fact and memory (in fact, doesn't memoir often elicit a series of personal memories in the reader? Isn't this part of why the genre is so immensely popular?). In Frey's case, therefore, the emotional truth of what happened may become more critical to some readers than whether it can be factually proven (which, obviously, it cannot be).⁹⁸ His testimony, though factually false, justifies his memories of addiction, and may in turn validate the memories of others who have experienced a similar struggle. In addition, his dramatizations of the events in his life resonate with his readers more deeply than a straight historical narrative could: the more credible emotional truth, here, exists in opposition to the false memories that Frey writes into narrative—this is the link between memory and history, and a possible explanation for Winfrey's apoplexy.

The second stage of Ricoeur's historiographical operation is "explanation and understanding"—historians relate facts to one another. Ricoeur describes it this way: "to explain, generally speaking, is to answer the question 'Why?' through a variety of uses of the connector 'because'" (*MHF* 182). For Ricoeur, this grammatical *because* is one of the most significant aspects of the entire enterprise: in this pop culture saga, the *because* functions on many levels. "Why did you write this book?" is answered with "I wanted to communicate something to others" or "I wanted to be a writer." On the other end of the spectrum, "Why did you lie, James?"

⁹⁸ Emotional truth vs. factual truth has been a large part of the ongoing integrity debate within creative nonfiction. In her 2007 *PMLA* article entitled "The Entangled Self: Genre Bondage in the Age of Memoir," Nancy K. Miller investigates the controversy, writing that "self-mythification" has been part of memoir since Augustine wrote his *Confessions*. Emotional truth, writes Miller, seems to be more important to the reading public than the certainty of facts which, in the age of Google, can be easily verified—or not.

This also serves as another reminder of Paul de Man's argument against Lejeune's "autobiographical pact."

is followed with "because I'm a writer and I was trying to produce a good book" or "I wanted to sell a lot of books." We might ask Winfrey a similar question: "Why did you get so upset, Oprah?" Her answer? "This was about the trust I share with the audience who faithfully supports [my] book club and buys the books I recommend; and based on that trust, I thought we were owed an explanation about the truth of this memoir," she told *Vanity Fair* magazine (qtd. in Peretz). The trust that she carefully cultivated within the people who buy the books she recommends permitted her to become a judge-historian and to affect the ways in which history is documented—or, at the very least, what it's called to a popular audience.⁹⁹

This leads to the third phase of the historiographical operation: documentation. The whole process, for Ricoeur, "occurs in the plane of writing," and "historical and fictional narrative both belong to a single class, that of 'verbal fictions'" (*MHF* 251). In Ricoeur's world, the difference lies in the contract established between the reader and the writer: a novel announces itself to take place in an unreal world. A person reading history expects a true narrative:

A novel, even a realist novel, is something other [than] a history book. They are distinguished from each other by the nature of the implicit contract between the writer and the reader. Even when not clearly stated, this contract sets up different expectations on the side of the reader and different promises on that of the author. (261)

⁹⁹ Following this framework, the answer to "why do we read memoirs?" might be "because, to return to Foucault, we're obsessed with other people's confessional narratives." Miller describes, for example, the surge in Islamic narrative following the September 11, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center—people want to learn, and they want to do it via first-hand witness testimony.

This narrative contract may, in fact, illuminate the rift that occurred between Frey, Winfrey, and the reading public: by claiming to be writing a version of history that was true, Frey violated readers' expectations. He broke the contract. His microhistory was, in fact, not history at all, but an embellished narrative that, while interesting and relevant to a great many people, was fundamentally an example of false testimony, a tainted archive, an *imaginary* history. A novel, no matter how realistic or believable, calls upon readers to invoke the willing suspension of disbelief. Historiography, on the other hand, does not. Ricoeur describes the reader as "having been taught to look out for falsehoods" in history, because "[s]he does not want to have to deal with a liar" (261). In Ricoeur's terms, Frey's narrative—at least initially—stands for a version of his personal history; however, following his admission of embellishment, perhaps we should question his intentionality, since "the question . . . is whether, how, and to what degree the historian satisfies the expectation and promise conveyed by the contract" (275). Quite clearly, Frey did not satisfy the promise.

Ricoeur describes "retrac[ing] the journey back to the sources of the grandiose ambition of historical self-knowledge to arrive at total reflection, the eminent form of absolute knowledge," citing the metahistorical connections between Augustine's internal time in *Confessions* (which, indeed, is one of the earliest examples of memoir) and Reinhart Koselleck's historical time. Ricoeur writes that "the parallel is striking between the pair: horizon of expectation and space of experience, and the pair: present of the future and present of the past. The two pairs belong to the same level of discourse. . . . They open a critical space in which history can exercise its *corrective function* with regard to memory" (296, my emphasis). Ricoeur's move into a comparison of historian and judge is necessary, he writes, because "the respective roles of historian and judge, characterized by their aims of truth and justice, invite

them to occupy the position of a third party with respect to the places occupied in the public space by the protagonists of social action," and that a "vow of impartiality is attached to this third-party position" (314). Ricoeur outlines the similarities and differences between judges and historians: both are supposed to be impartial representatives of truth and of justice, and they both begin with witness testimony and archives, which they must sift through before making a decision. Both ask questions about the *because* that follows the *why?*. The judge's verdict effectively ends a discussion, however, while the historian's system is less regimented: history is always written, rewritten, and rewritten again. Therein lies Winfrey's role in all of this as an arbiter-historian: the media seized upon her initial verdict (innocent), and then capitalized on her second verdict (guilty). They managed to relegate her final verdict (pardon) to the back pages; after all, the scandal waned, everyone cooled down, Frey wrote more books, and Winfrey continued to drive the self-help bandwagon gaily forward.

In this media circus, there is yet another significant point to ponder, Ricoeur's appropriation of Plato's *pharmakon*, the dangerous supplement. "Does writing," Ricoeur asks, "work as a poison or as remedy as regards the weaknesses of memory? Who knows? Which weaknesses?" ("Humanities" 2). In Frey's case, particularly in connection to Winfrey's outrage, his original archive produced a "crisis of belief," which her reaction reinforced: her initial support lent credence to his emotionally (if not factually) true testimony-turned-archive; her later lambasting—her evocation of the dangerous supplement as she evaluated his archive—threw her viewers and many of his readers into a fact-finding frenzy. "I was there," Frey said. When readers reached the stage, however, when they didn't believe him and asked someone else, Winfrey wielded her spectacular power to unleash an all-out war, cementing her role as judge in the scandal. The *pharmakon* lives. Perhaps the dangerous supplement, in this case, is the genre

of memoir-autobiography-true-story-personal narrative that has dominated booksellers and driven the publishing industry for the last ten years. Or perhaps it's the idea of being duped, of someone intentional producing and selling a fraudulent microhistory.

The Politics of the Hoax

A significant question remains: was the Frey scandal a hoax, a fraud or something else?¹⁰⁰ Did he, Nan Talese, Random House, et al. *deliberately* mislead the public into buying his book? And, if the answer is affirmative, was anyone cheated, or did the "message of redemption" stay intact? Are there any deeper implications, or is it merely an entertaining narrative?

As is often the case, an instructive and illustrative example may be found in popular culture. In January of 2013, the media broke a story about popular college linebacker Manti Te'o, then playing for Notre Dame, who had won the hearts of fans with his unfailing support of his girlfriend, Lennay Kekua. Kekua's tragic narrative included a serious car accident that left her comatose, followed by a long and ultimately fatal bout with leukemia. In fact, prior to a major football game, the media announced that Te'o's grandmother *and* Kekua had died on the same day; Te'o was going to play anyway, to honor their memories, and went on to lead his team to victory. There was just one problem: no record of Kekua existed. The car accident left no police report or hospital record. Conventional Google searches revealed only a Twitter and Facebook

¹⁰⁰ The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines *hoax* as "a humorous or mischievous deception, usually taking the form of a fabrication of something fictitious or erroneous, told in such a manner as to impose upon the credulity of the victim," and suggests a link to the word *hocus*, which means, simply, "to play a trick upon."

account for her. Ultimately, the pictures accompanying these social media profiles turned out to be of an unrelated woman. Kekua existed only in the electrons.

Only much later was it revealed that the online persona called "Lennay Kekua" was actually an acquaintance of Te'o's, a musician by the name of Ronaiah Tuiasosopo. According to Timothy Burke and Jack Dickey's *Deadspin* article, it's unclear how the two young men knew one another, but several of Tuiasosopo's friends and relatives claim that they knew he "was the man behind Lennay," that he had created her in 2008, and that "Te'o wasn't the first person to have an online 'relationship' with her." Ultimately, it became clear that Lennay Kekua did not exist, at least not as Lennay Kekua, and that Manti Te'o had been either the victim or a perpetrator of the hoax.

As media outlets such as *Deadspin*, *sportsillustrated.com*, and *cnn.com* reported, we learned that 1) Lennay Kekua did not exist, at least not as Lennay Kekua, and 2) Manti Te'o is either the nicest, most gullible college athlete in the country, or he deliberately went along with the hoax. If the answer is the latter, it's difficult to discern *why* he would do such a thing: speculation ranges from "he wanted to do well in the NFL draft" (he was actually drafted 38th in the second round, not early in the first round, as was predicted) to "Notre Dame made him do it so that the team could win and (maybe) become more well-liked" to the more offensive "Te'o is gay and used Kekua to make people think he isn't." *The New York Times* called Kekua Te'o's "noncorporeal girlfriend," and Katie Couric grilled him with more rancor than is her custom on a special edition of *Katie*. She followed up with testimonials from others who had been "duped," and featured interviews with Nev Schulman, the creator of a documentary called *Catfish*, in which he traces his own victimhood at the hands of someone, off in webspace, pretending to be

someone else. In Schulman's words, "it's a lot harder to prove that your feelings were true than to assume that they weren't," and he has been publically supportive of Te'o.

Te'o has attempted to prove that *his feelings were true*. In a statement released to the press on January 16, 2013, that he "developed an emotional relationship with a woman [he] met online. [They] maintained what [he] thought to be an authentic relationship by communicating frequently online and on the phone, and [he] grew to care deeply about her" before realizing that he was "the victim of what was apparently someone's sick joke and constant lies [which] was, and is, painful and humiliating" (qtd. in Burke and Dickey). Te'o, who has been adamant in his claims to authenticity—even heroism—found himself duped by someone who did not exist—or did s/he? When Lennay Kekua revealed herself to be a hoax and Te'o found out, he did not step forward right away to correct the public perception that he was "the perfect guy." He couldn't bring himself to admit the ruse; he'd become famous in part because of the heartbreaking love story, not just because of his athletic success.

I use this example as an illustration largely because of Te'o's insistence that *his feelings were true*, which is a response that echoes Winfrey's loud protests against Frey and her subsequent annihilation of his character (she maintained, throughout the process, that the text itself had literary merit). She was duped; we were duped. Readers' feelings about Frey's narrative were "true"; that is, they may have identified with James Frey (the protagonist) in some way, or at least allowed themselves an affective response to his narrator. Although Frey claimed that his feelings were also true, when the story was revealed to be factually "false" (and yet, perhaps, emotionally authentic), the entire genre of confessional memoir was thrown into

question. Can we believe others with similar stories, such as Augusten Burroughs, Jeannette Walls, or Elizabeth Wurtzel?¹⁰¹

The hoax is not a new phenomenon; nor is the memoir that really isn't a memoir; nor is the *fraud*. We might think, for example, about P.T. Barnum's bag of tricks, or of *The Autobiography of Howard Hughes*, in which Clifford Irving invented countless stories about Howard Hughes, only to have his publisher sued by the recluse; Irving, a journalistic reporter, was subsequently blacklisted, his journalistic career ended. In terms of the history of literary hoaxes, we might consider Daniel Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year*, *Moll Flanders*, or *Robinson Crusoe*, which professed to be "true stories," albeit by fictional narrators, but were not.¹⁰² What has changed are the ways in which readers respond to allegations of untruth in autobiography and memoir: what used to be a common practice is now a capital offense in the world of publishing, marketing, and consuming books.¹⁰³

¹⁰¹ Augusten Burroughs' factual veracity has also been questioned; in particular, his *Running With Scissors*, which chronicles a dysfunctional, abusive childhood, provoked a swift backlash from the family members that he implicated. See chapter three for an analysis of the 1990s memoir of abjection, as a subgenre.

¹⁰² The kinds of literary tricks that Defoe employed would not have been considered either a hoax or a fraud in the eighteenth century, when this was a common practice. See also Frances Burney's *Evelina*, an epistolary novel that purports to be the "true" correspondence between the titular protagonist and a cast of other characters.

¹⁰³ Other notable hoax memoirs of the late-twentieth century include Forrest Carter's *The Education of Little Tree*, which purported to be an account of a Native American childhood but was revealed to have been written by an active member of the Ku Klux Klan; Anthony Godby Johnson's *A Rock and A Hard Place: One Boy's Triumphant Story*, which claimed to be about a boy surviving a horrific childhood, entering prostitution, and contracting HIV; Lauren Stratford's *Satan's Underground* was ultimately revealed to be written by a serial hoax-writer (Laurel Rose Wilson), who also penned a false Holocaust memoir. Even Beatrice Sparks's *Go Ask Alice*, a foundational anti-drug text for many young adult readers, was not a girl's diary, as was originally claimed, but was in fact a novel.

Another interesting literary case from relatively recent years comes in the form of Benjamin Wilkomirski's *Fragments*, an account of surviving internment in Majdanek and Birkenau as a child. It is a text that, as of the time of this writing, is unavailable in the U.S., outside of Stefan Maechler's *The Wilkomirski Affair: A Study in Biographical Truth*, a case study commissioned by the original publishers of *Fragments*. Concerned about allegations of untruth—and maybe deliberate lying—on Wilkomirski's part, the Jüdischer Verlag, a division of the large publishing house Suhrkamp, hired Maechler, a Swiss historian and expert on anti-Semitism, to fact-check Wilkomirski's original text. In *The Wilkomirski Affair*, Maechler, in addition to “setting the record straight” about Wilkomirski's alleged fabrications, raises significant questions about the nature of history, historiographical methods, and whether someone's subjective account can ever be classified within the false binary of “true/false.” In his foreword, Maechler writes that

The genesis of *Fragments*, its success and the regard paid to its author, the public controversy following Ganzfried's article, and the sudden transformation of respect into disdain are all phenomena of analytical interest far transcending the person of Wilkomirski. Questions arise about the history of child survivors and foster children, about the therapeutic production of memory, about the function of a literature of contemporary witnesses, about the treatment of the Shoah and all the perils of its being instrumentalized, about the aesthetics of a literary work's reception, and last but not least, about the actions of the media. (ix)

With two notable exceptions—James Frey made no allegations of childhood abuse, and he never claimed to have been involved in anything as tragic as the Holocaust—we can apply Maechler's questions to the situation at hand. As I've demonstrated, there exists a paradox within the author-

function, particularly in memoir. The therapeutic production of memory, in Frey's case, actually depends on both the actions of the media ("addicts should read this book in order to transcend their addictions") and readers ("this is my memory of this book, and this is how it helped me to transcend my addiction"). Finally, and though I am in no way comparing a false account of addiction and recovery to the traumas endured throughout the Shoah, I think it fair to point out that by instrumentalizing addiction and recovery, Frey/Winfrey capitalized on the premise that I investigate throughout this project: what does it mean to live in a society that demands that I "become a better me"?

Upon its initial publication in 1995, *Fragments* was praised by critics, and even compared to Primo Levi's haunting *If This is a Man: Survival in Auschwitz* and *The Diary of Anne Frank*, for its seemingly honest retelling of a traumatic tale, for the empathy it calls forth in readers.¹⁰⁴ Ultimately, however, Maechler discovered that Benjamin Wilkomirski was actually Bruno Grossjean, a middle-class Swiss man whose childhood was, according to the factual record, quite different from the one he recounted in *Fragments*. Although he was abandoned by his mother and adopted by an abusive foster family, there is no record that Grossjean/Wilkomirski was ever interned in Majdanek or Birkenau. In fact, the public record suggests quite the opposite.

Wilkomirski readily admits to "gap[s] in his memories" (Maechler 30).¹⁰⁵ In an interview with Maechler, however, he insists that he is not Bruno Grossjean; as Wilkomirski tells

¹⁰⁴ As Maechler explains: "Many [readers] express the hope that, despite his disrupted childhood, the author may come to know happiness and love. 'It was as if I had to take this little child in my arms and tear away all that had happened to him,' says one letter from Switzerland" (119).

¹⁰⁵ I will refer to him as "Wilkomirski" in what follows, simply because that is the name under which *Fragments* was published.

it, he was switched “with the other boy” (25). He claims that he didn’t begin to understand his story until he was in high school, when he read reports of the Nazi trials in Germany and Austria, and was dismayed by the “ridiculously light sentences and scandalous not-guilty verdicts they received.” He began to plan his revenge against the government who, he says, harmed him (54). Instead of bombing government buildings, however, he began to do research, which included visits to Auschwitz and Birkenau where, according to Wilkomirski, prompted the series of vivid memories that he later included in *Fragments* (68). He went on to give university lectures about the nature of recalling childhood trauma and the problems inherent in doing so; throughout, he has maintained that *Fragments* is his true story.

The problem is that there exists evidence that clearly illustrates that Benjamin Wilkomirski, one, is actually Bruno Grossjean, and two, that Bruno Grossjean never spent time in concentration camps. For Maechler and for various critics who have interrogated the Wilkomirski affair, by “mixing fact and fiction in his story,” Wilkomirski “turn[ed] the Shoah itself into fiction” (Maechler ix). The stakes of a hoax, then, might be much larger than readers returning the title page for a refund or agreeing with Oprah Winfrey; a hoax of the magnitude of Wilkomirski’s has real political implications.

In 1998, writer Daniel Gantzfried published an article in which he claimed that *Fragments* is “an internalized collection of images by a man whose imagination run away with him” (qtd. in Maechler 129). Gantzfried’s article goes beyond the simple fact/fiction rhetoric that *The Smoking Gun* employed when outing James Frey; in his piece, Gantzfried

explores the reason for the book’s ‘phenomenal success.’ The ‘need to sympathize’ with another individual’s fate, he argues, releases one from the onerous task of analyzing what is incomprehensible. Wilkomirski thus ‘relieves

us of the task of thinking and the dreadful realization that our human understanding fails us when confronted with the fact of Auschwitz. *We use the experience of the other person to keep from having to make good on something beyond our power to conceive.* Lost in mindless sympathy, we find in the victim the hero with whom we can fraternize on the side of morality: Benjamin Wilkomirski. (Maechler 130, emphasis mine)

This, then, is the real problem in a situation such as this one: *we use the experience of the other person to keep from having to make good on something beyond our power to conceive.* When we consume a text in which a hero so clearly emerges on the other side of horror, and when we believe that text to be true, we can more easily digest what might otherwise be incomprehensible, not representable.

In her recent “Reading for Narrative Truth through the Absence of Narrative Awareness in Wilkomirski’s *Fragments*,” critic Heidi Pennington makes a series of points about the Wilkomirski scandal. Although Pennington is careful to delineate the differences between Wilkomirski, who stood to feed fodder to Holocaust deniers by fabricating his tale, and Frey, who, it would seem, simply wanted to publish a bestselling book, I think it prudent to apply some of Pennington’s ideas here. Her first suggestion is that a “naïve reading” of a text such as Wilkomirski’s provides ample evidence for deconstructing what she calls Wilkomirski’s “all-too-neat narrative world.” She goes on to suggest that “close reading practices can expose the ruptures that exist in *Fragments*” (37); the same can be said of *A Million Little Pieces*.

Pennington asserts that

[Life writing] challenges the cultural capital attached to ideas of the fact and (as) truth and argues for the individualization of autobiographical truth-value through

the practices of close reading. My focus is squarely on the reader as the ultimate arbiter of autobiographical and literary truths, recognizing, too, that readers evaluate texts through their perceptions of the author, especially in autobiography. (43)

Though she roots this statement in her reading of Wilkomirski's troubling text, this kind of thinking falls into line with my reading of autobiography and memoir as a genre. We might remember Paul John Eakin's assertion that "[t]he presence of fiction in autobiography is not something to wish away, to rationalize, to apologize for, as so many writers and readers of autobiography persist in suggesting, for it is as reasonable to assume that all autobiography has some fiction in it as it is to recognize that all fiction is in some sense necessarily autobiographical" (10).

This is not to suggest that there are no politics tied up in the Winfrey/Frey debacle, though the stakes are clearly much smaller than denying the Shoah. Instead of providing fodder to rabidly racist groups, the politics of the aforementioned situation serve to illuminate the ruptures that can occur within the autobiographical pact, the nature of readers' expectations, and the capitalistic impulses within the American publishing industry of the twenty-first century. By grounding ourselves in the acknowledgment of the reality of Eakin's statement, we might be able to avoid situations like this in the future. The entire situation reveals aspects of American popular culture, such as the conflation of factuality and authenticity, which I further explore in the following chapter.

However, a question remains. What if, as Dave Eggers suggests in the preface to *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*, we "pretend it's fiction"? Does naming a genre change the paratext of a work so significantly that, like James Frey and Benjamin Wilkomirski,

writers who lie should be led to the gallows? In these post-memoir-boom years, this question looms large. In Frey's example, it's clear that *A Million Little Pieces* would not have been published as a novel, much less marketed by Random House in such an aggressive way. It stands to reason that Oprah Winfrey would not have selected the "tale of redemption" for her Book Club audience, which would have had very real financial implications for Frey and his publisher. In this context, then, it would seem that Frey's games, unlike Wilkomirski's, are more in line with the definition of *fraud*: "to defraud, cheat, or deceive (a person)."

Always Historicize

In 2009, in a startling turn, Winfrey apologized. According to a *Time* magazine article dated May 13, 2009, she "picked up the phone and called Frey to apologize for the public whupping she handed him in 2006," which surprised Frey and led to further speculation about Winfrey's motives (Luscombe). The story, by this time, had become irrelevant to the media beyond this blurb in *Time*; there were more important things to report, and this very public feud seemed to end there. What doesn't end, however, are the ways in which this ostensibly "true" genre affects the populace, particularly when they're guided by a judge like Winfrey. This raises another key issue that, while outside the scope of this analysis, might deserve further consideration: by apologizing, did Winfrey *pardon* James Frey, thus rendering any further explanation or apology on his part irrelevant? If, as Ricoeur claims in an interview with historian Sorin Antohi, "amnesty prevents both forgiveness and justice," what does Winfrey's apology signify? Has the public forgotten this tale, filed it away, and gone on to purchase confessional memoirs of another kind? Or, following Foucault, does something lurk in our minds about this case that might make us think twice about the contract between readers and writers in this genre?

Until now, I have left the question of economics largely open to interpretation, but there is yet another layer to all of this: Fredric Jameson, and his insistence that works of art represent modes of production. Following this, we may infer that, in fact, we have entered a post-postmodern period where, instead of merely consuming fictional narrative, we *require* the confessional genre of creative nonfiction in order to produce ourselves, or in order to identify with a larger master narrative. Winfrey's Book Club illustrates this in its own lineage: she began by endorsing popular realist novels (which Jameson would classify as representing an earlier era of modern capital), moved into the postmodern prose of Morrison and Joyce Carol Oates, and, following a brief stint when she endorsed the canonical classics, began to read creative nonfiction. Jameson describes "the form of [a] work of art . . . [as] a place in which one can observe social conditioning and thus the social situation" ("Marxism" 360), and implicit in this is the potential to interrogate "creative nonfiction" even further: how have people's ostensibly true stories been written, rewritten, repackaged, and sold back to the public?¹⁰⁶ Embedded in the Frey/Winfrey scandal, in addition to the obvious tales of addiction and redemption, we also find evidence of this capitalistic social conditioning, and of history and causality: in this case, we've been taught a paradox. We might want to believe, despite evidence to the contrary, that creative nonfiction, as a genre, is the bearer of all things capital-T True. And we're prepared to purchase other people's confessions in an attempt to form our own narratives.

Jameson, in a 1998 interview with Xudong Zhong, explains our collective desire for narrative stability in a way that illuminates Winfrey's reactions; perhaps she was affected by her own desire to construct a coherent cultural identity, or at least to keep safe the one that she has carefully cultivated for so long:

¹⁰⁶ I will abbreviate Jameson's works as follows: *The Political Unconscious* will be *PU*, and his interview with Xudong Zhong, "Marxism and the Historicity of Theory," will be "Marxism."

We all have an existential stake in not seeing contradictions. We would like things to be stable. . . . We would like to think that we are unified subjects, and that the problems we face are representational and thus relatively easy to think through.

("Marxism" 375)

Following Jameson, then, the ideological contradictions embedded in this cultural moment reveal themselves. Winfrey, by initially supporting Frey, did not want to see the contradictions implicit in her own behavior, in the formation of her Book Club, or in her identification with fictional characters and then with "real" ones. When she realized that her viewers needed more—or when she realized that she had something to gain by doing so—she changed her tune, thus illustrating her own fragmented subjectivity in the wake of the scandal. Jeffrey Nealon, in *Foucault beyond Foucault*, writes that "for both Jameson and Foucault, the primary theoretical question or problem of the present is the increasing saturation of cultural power and its modes in the last century" (Nealon 58), a statement that resonates throughout the Frey/Winfrey narrative: if the twenty-first century may be classified as "post-postmodernism," then Nealon's characterization of "the privatization of cultural value" illuminates this situation in a startling manner—we have moved beyond simple production and consumption and into a world where nearly everything has become a media-mediated spectacle, an assemblage of frayed elements of subjectivity that we attempt to cohere into a whole. Perhaps all of this is an example of expressive causality, with Winfrey's reaction symbolizing the desire to rewrite a text in terms of a deeper and more fundamental master narrative, the desire for *truth*, and a larger refusal to acknowledge her own role in the saga.

For Jameson, *every* text is inserted into one grand narrative—but we all exist only within that narrative, which gives way to problems of interpretation such as the one Winfrey faced. Her

desire to remedy the situation by wielding her power reveals that the text (in this case, situation-as-text) is two-sided: ideological and utopian. Winfrey's self-professed ideology precluded her ability to continue to support Frey; after all, she was responsible for a couple million of those five- million-books-sold, and telling the truth has always been important to her. For Jameson, narrative always equals the desire for utopia and there is no narrative pattern that operates outside of this desire, and this is reflected by Frey, by Winfrey, and by the reading public, on all of the levels I've outlined above. Fundamentally, for Jameson, the fragmentation of the subject forces it to shift away from individuality and into a collective community (*PU* 283); the collective community, here, may be described as writers of creative nonfiction, readers of memoir, Winfrey's viewers, or anyone invested in a study of this genre. And, because a consumer society leads to historical amnesia, we seem to have forgotten the time when novels were inherently semi-autobiographical and the question of what "creative nonfiction" really means was irrelevant. Finally, if we accept that Winfrey is firmly embedded in the superstructure-media, her turn to ideology, hegemony, and the desire to construct identity through others reflects the importance of the relations behind her social power.

The problem arises, therefore, from the fact that our media-driven culture seems unable to sift fiction out of fact, to read a supposedly true narrative with the recognition that archives distort events, and to make our own judgments, as pseudo-historians in our daily lives, about truth claims in the "witness testimony" that is popular memoir. Pop culture analyst Julie Rak investigates this controversy:

When life stories about traumatic events make their way from the private to the public sphere, the result is often a demand . . . that the truth claims in the text be absolute and even legally verifiable. . . . Self-representation and the consumption

of other people's identities in popular culture has become central to how Americans are getting, distributing, and consuming information. (327-28)

More troubling than the notion of consuming other people's "true" identities (and therefore weaving them into our own), however, is Rak's claim that identity itself has become commodified and, I would add, fragmented. Someone else's embellished memory, as emotional truth, may resonate with readers who seek to validate their own troubled memories in the words of others—even if those words are far from factually true. In the case of Frey, did it really matter, for those who claimed to be profoundly affected by his book, that it was fictional, particularly given Jameson's assertions about the larger master narrative? In a 2010 *New Yorker* article about the nature of memoir, Daniel Mendelsohn summarizes, in terms that resonate with Lejeune, Ricoeur, Foucault, and Jameson, what may have been behind the outrage that Frey incited:

The need for certain kinds of memoir to be true goes back to Augustine's "Confessions": if the anguish and the suffering aren't real, there's nothing to redeem, and the whole exercise becomes pointless. It is precisely the redemption memoir's status as a witness to real life that makes the outrage so loud when a memoir is falsified. (4)

When the readers' horizons of expectation fail to match with what actually occurs, we are left with these problems of betrayal. In a media-driven society, this is what happens when people mislabel their narratives—and when readers come to imagine themselves outside of a larger master narrative. The overall message, here, might remind us of more serious questions embedded in the quest to assemble ourselves with the fragments we find in cultural histories like Frey's. David Shields describes that, because we live "in a manufactured and artificial world, we

yearn for the 'real,' semblances of the real. . . . Our culture is obsessed with real events because we experience hardly any" (81-2). If we have no cohesive selves, it makes sense to want to find versions of our frayed subjectivities in those narratives that, incidentally, we purchase from bookstores and publishers—large corporations.

The desire for self operates hegemonically and, within the Empire of Oprah, we enter into a quest for unattainable utopia via other-people's-purportedly-true-stories. As we read these books, one might argue that we want to see ourselves staring right back at us, and in the narcissistic world of late capitalism, we might take this to the logical extreme and label *all* narrative as Oprah-narrative. We search for a sense of self in creative nonfiction in much the same way that Winfrey sees herself in novelistic characters, thereby parodying ourselves within the performance of memoir. We might crave visions of ourselves that are different from who we really are; what we desire is more than the books we buy and the television shows we watch and the icons we trust, and yet we're lost without those things. We purchase more than objects, we read more than texts; what we desire are new, improved, always-already-attractive selves, and, through creative nonfiction, we become the over-signifying objects of our own collective gaze, characters in our own intricately woven cultural narrative. When the "truth" turns out to be a fiction, then, an unsettling feeling creeps over us and we move to another text, one that promises to help us construct ourselves in a more satisfying way. Fundamentally, the Frey/Winfrey spectacle exposes both the need to recognize that *all* narrative lies outside the realm of factual "truth" and that, to some degree, we're all guilty: because we cannot escape the master truth-consuming narrative, we all produce a million little lies.

Chapter 4:

"A Ludicrous Fairy-Tale Ending": Health, Wealth, and Bestselling Genre Memoir in the Twenty-First Century

[The] site of truth is not in the heads of economists,
of course, but is the market.

—M. Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*

Mapping a Genre and the Question of Agency

Oprah Winfrey's cult of personality, James Frey's lies, and the overall popularity of life writing in the early part of the twenty-first century all provoke questions about a reader's horizon of expectation and the accompanying anxiety that, sometimes, memoirists don't tell the truth. From talk shows to social media sites such as Facebook, from the early prosperity theology of the post-war years to megachurches, and from the spiritual conversion narratives of the nineteenth century to the ones of today, one thing is clear: the ideological contradictions embedded in the cultural moment in which Winfrey wielded her massive power to publicly shame Frey have, among other things, revealed that we have moved beyond simple production and consumption and into a world where the media mediates a variety of spectacles—including, perhaps, the production of life writing.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁷ In his 2008 monograph *Living Autobiographically: How We Create Identity in Narrative*, Paul John Eakin explores the connections between "text, person, [and] culture." He describes the Oprah Winfrey/James Frey controversy as "turn[ing] out to be about packaging." This conflict, as I have explored in the previous chapter, raises questions about "the definition of a literary genre," about "the author's identity," and "about the values of the culture at large" (20-21). In what follows, I will argue that Eakin is absolutely accurate in his assessment, albeit in ways that continue at the time of this writing to haunt the self-help-mediated genre of memoir or, as some would have it, "creative nonfiction." The distinction between memoir and creative nonfiction, while still relatively unclear in the field, remains an obstacle to critics who wish to interrogate "truthiness," and the term "creative nonfiction" persists in rearing its head when such questions of authenticity arise.

Confessional conversion memoir has become a genre akin to, say, mystery fiction or fantasy, in the sense that in order to write it, an author must be familiar with the genre's conventions and willing to reproduce those conventions for readers (fans). In order to become commercially successful, writers of "genre-memoir," must conform to a standard and predictable narrative arc that insists upon initial "brokenness" as a prerequisite to the "soul-searching" that ultimately leads to forgiveness, at least in the 1990s memoir of abjection.¹⁰⁸ With varying degrees of literary success, writers of these kinds of memoir must have 1) recognized and internalized the desires of the market, and 2) recognized and internalized the rules and desires of what sociologist Pierre Bourdieu calls a "field," or the relationship between individual agents and the contextual environment in which they operate.¹⁰⁹

I am not suggesting that writers of genre memoir have no individual agency; quite the contrary, especially given Bourdieu's insistence that "agents do not act in a vacuum, but rather in concrete social situations governed by a set of objective social relations" (Johnson 6). What I seek to investigate here is the set of "objective social relations" that has led to memoir's multifaceted generic shift: originally a marginalized genre, particularly in the academic field, it

¹⁰⁸ In her recent "American Neoconfessional: Memoir, Self-Help, and Redemption on Oprah's Couch," Leigh Gilmore calls this kind of memoir "neoconfessional," with the caveat that the writer must have had to "publicly confess" a *second* time, as James Frey did following Oprah Winfrey's scathing judgment. For purposes of my argument, I will employ the more general "genre memoir," which assumes the presence of a confession of some kind.

¹⁰⁹ The two texts of Bourdieu's that I employ at length here are 1984's *Distinctions: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* and 1993's *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*. I will abbreviate them as follows: *Distinctions* will be *Distinctions*, and *The Field of Cultural Production* will be *Field*. In Bourdieu's terms, for a text to be a "literary success," it must first gain acceptance by other writers (specific principle of legitimacy). It must also be recognized by critics and members of the academy as "good" or "worthwhile" (bourgeois consecration). Here, my focus is on an example of a text that has enjoyed "literary success"—Cheryl Strayed's *Wild*—and on one that has achieved its legitimacy via a different combination, that of bourgeois consecration and the sanction of a popular mass audience, Elizabeth Gilbert's *Eat, Pray, Love*.

has gained some symbolic prestige since the 1970s, in ways that I have described in preceding chapters. Ironically, however, now that memoir is taken more seriously among literary critics, the versions of it that are most frequently consumed by the public have become illustrative of the societal privileging of the bourgeoisie.¹¹⁰ This marks a change from the literary memoir of the mid-twentieth century, when examples such as Maxine Hong Kingston's *Woman Warrior*, Audre Lorde's *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*, and Gloria Anzaldua's *Borderlands* were "big titles," even among popular audiences. Simply put, the genre as a whole—in spite of specific examples that counter this claim—has shifted and divided itself in such a way that it becomes fruitful to examine its *cultural*, rather than its *symbolic*, capital—what Bourdieu would call its "principles of legitimacy." For Bourdieu, symbolic capital "refers to degree of accumulated prestige, celebrity, consecration or honour and is founded on a dialectic of knowledge (*connaissance*) and recognition (*reconnaissance*)." Cultural capital, on the other hand, is "a form of knowledge, an internalized code or a cognitive acquisition which equips the social agent with empathy towards, appreciation for or competence in deciphering cultural relations and cultural [artifacts]" (Johnson 7).

Bourdieu describes the three competing "principles of legitimacy" this way:

[We] find three competing principles of legitimacy. First, there is the specific principle of legitimacy, i.e., the recognition granted by the set of producers who produce for other producers, their competitors, i.e. by the autonomous self-sufficient world of 'art for art's sake', meaning art for artists. Secondly, there is

¹¹⁰ In a sense, this chapter takes a break from hermeneutics in order to focus on the sociological implications of the consumption of both contemporary self-help and genre memoir. Although hermeneutics can help us understand many of the philosophical implications, my goal here is to give a very concrete, historical-materialist reading of what Bourdieu calls "the field of cultural production."

the principle of legitimacy corresponding to 'bourgeois' taste and to the consecration bestowed by the dominant fractions of the dominant class and by private tribunals, such as salons, or public, state-guaranteed ones, such as academies, which sanction the inseparably ethical and aesthetic (and therefore political) taste of the dominant. Finally, there is the principle of legitimacy which its advocates call 'popular', i.e. the consecration bestowed by the choice of ordinary consumers, the 'mass audience.' (*Field* 51)

These definitions reveal the ways in which I am approaching the flattening of genre memoir and its merge with the tenets of therapeutic discourse. In figure one, I have charted the general trajectory of memoir and self-help texts, along with the specific placement of the texts that I analyze here, following Bourdieu's figure and corresponding analysis in "The Field of Cultural Production."

The grid in figure one, modeled after Bourdieu's map of nineteenth-century French literature, illustrates the move across two axes of two genres, self-help and genre memoir. The memoir of the 1970s, including examples such as Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* and Lorde's *Zami*, appears on the bottom-left of the plane, indicating their relative anonymity *at the time of their production*. New Age self-help of the 1960s-80s appears there, too; this kind of self-help, though gaining in popularity as of the time of this writing, was frequently relegated to the fringes in the mid-twentieth century. Beginning with the memoir of abjection, which burst upon the scene in the 1990s, the genre has moved steadily left, towards a mass audience and bourgeois (read: middle-class) appeal. There are some outliers—Lauren Slater's postmodern *Lying: A Metaphorical Memoir* and Dave Eggers's *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* both appear closer to the center of the chart—but the overall trajectory indicates the growth of a

market demand for both memoir and self-help that appeal to a mass audience with bourgeois ideological aspirations.

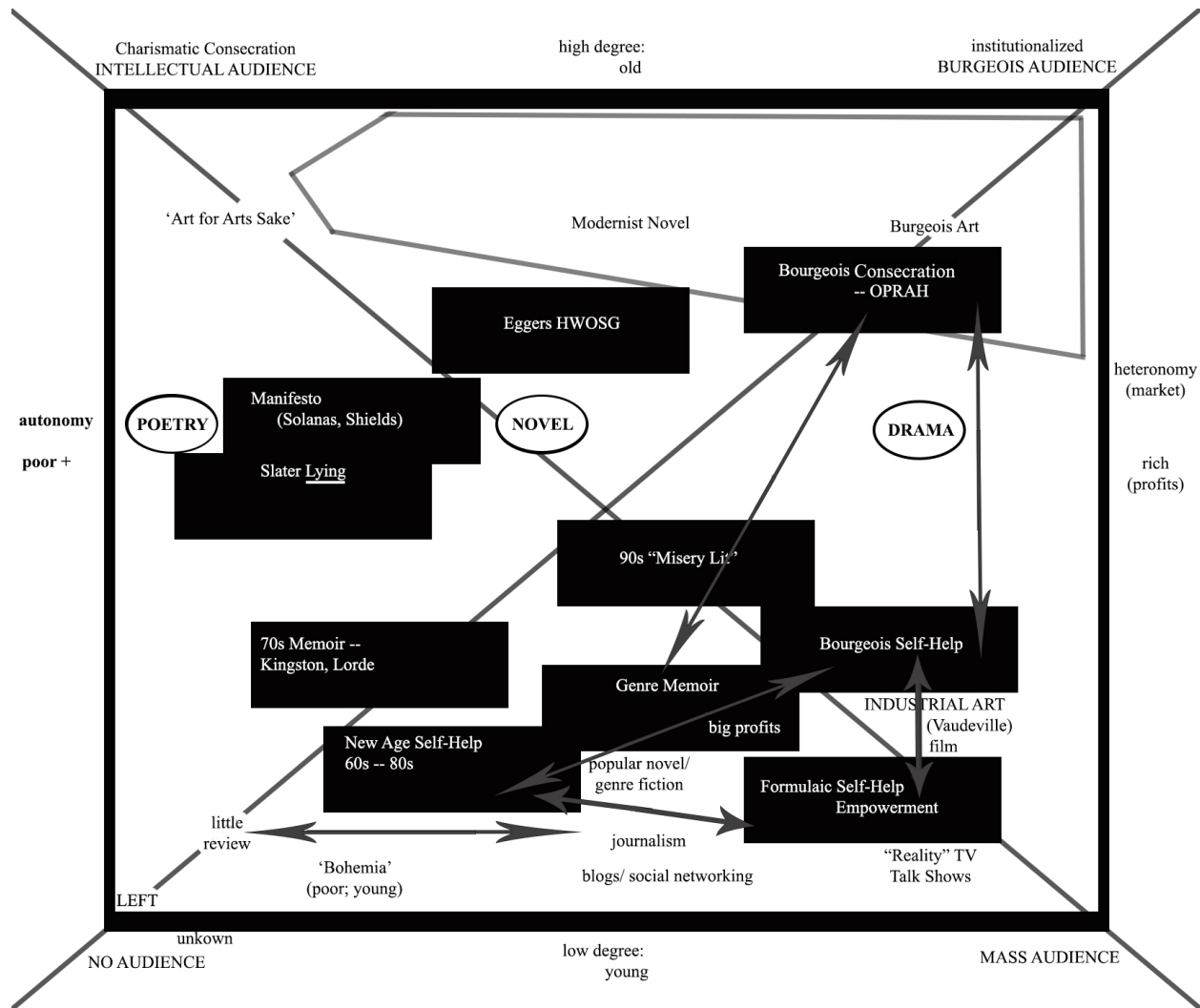


Figure 1: The Shift to Genre Memoir in the Twentieth Century

What we see is an overall progression to the upper-right field of the figure; that is, memoir, following the bourgeois consecration of Oprah Winfrey and some members of the academy, has moved from being a relatively marginalized genre in the days of Kingston and Lorde (left, poor, either unknown or with an intellectual audience) to a position on the right side

of the middle half of the grid (the memoir of abjection of the 1990s). It finally ends up triangulating with "bourgeois self-help," the New Age self-help of the 1960s-80s, the self-help of empowerment that gained in popularity in the 1990s, and the intended mass audience of reality television and television talk shows ("industrial art," in Bourdieu's terms). We see another triangulation between Winfrey, the bourgeois consecrator, genre memoir, and contemporary self-help *writ large*. What this reveals is that popular memoir, as a whole and in a very general sense, has moved out of *specific* principles of legitimacy and into a hybrid of *bourgeois* and *popular* ideological principles.¹¹¹ The bourgeois consecration is "bestowed" by Winfrey (a "dominant fraction of [the] dominant class") and by the academy (a formulation of the state that, according to Bourdieu, sanctions bourgeois politics). Because the texts are designed to have mass appeal and reach a broad swathe of audience, they attain popular legitimacy.

In the first twelve years of the twenty-first century, it appears that little has changed within the standard narrative trajectory of genre memoir—especially when examined next to the "misery lit" of the 1990s, save for the final outcome. Forgiveness still plays a conceptual role, as we will see; at the end of the day, however, what appear to be most important in both the self-help/pop therapeutics and in the genre-memoir of this period of American literary history, are the concepts of *action*, frequently depicted as travel (whether such travel be literal or metaphorical, and including the notion of ascension), and *gratitude*.¹¹² The latter inevitably leads to the action

¹¹¹ Because the bourgeoisie doesn't really exist in the United States as a class, I use the word (and its adjective, bourgeois) here to reflect an *ideological* preoccupation. That is, most Americans consider themselves "middle class," even when their socioeconomic status suggests otherwise; this reflects an ideological desire for material ascension, which is mirrored in the consumption of these kinds of texts.

¹¹² Within the larger context of American literature, there is nothing new about the conflation of travel narrative and conversion narrative. Some early examples are Thomas Morton's *New English Canaan*, Mary Rowlandson's *The Sovereignty and Goodness of God: Being a Narrative*

that might deliver the narrator to material and personal "success"—a word that, when used in this way, represents a hegemonic conception of agency ("I am free to act"), of material wealth ("I'm successful if I make money"), and of heteronormativity ("I'm successful if I end up married to someone of the opposite sex once I've conquered my inner demons"). These demands interpellate the actively-empathetic reader: within the overlapping worlds of self-help and memoir, both action and gratitude become requirements for becoming a "better self."

The generic assumptions go like this: the person (Oprah Winfrey says "spirit") harbors a desire to "be better," which she learns and internalizes via interpellation. As a way of adhering to the grand narrative of confession, she admits her wrongs and consumes self-help (whether it be televised or written). She consumes genre memoir and, via an act of active empathy, goes on to seek outside approval, before repeating the narrative *ad infinitum*. This consumption and subsequent empathy lead to what Bourdieu characterizes as "a long process or inculcation" (Johnson 7), whereby cultural capital and its myriad codes become etched into a genre. There is an accompanying, looming expectation that "work" on one's "spirit" will lead to a material return. Essentially, and in spite of its surface claims to the well-being of the person, this has become less a spiritual act and more a material one, for reasons that I will illustrate here. Health and wealth become inextricably linked in ways that suggest an overall cultural moment in which neoliberal selfishness continues to reign supreme, *disguised* as spirituality, *disguised* as health, and so thoroughly rooted in the market that they appear to mark a larger shift away from welfare capitalism and towards political libertarianism. This is marked by the perceived need for the individual to manage herself, with little or no help from the state. The very act of selling one's story suggests that everything *is*, in fact, for sale. And the web of intersubjectivity, in this period

of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson, Sarah Kemble Knight's *The Journal of Madam Knight*, William Byrd II's *Diaries*, and Jonathan Edwards's *Personal Narrative*.

of time, becomes so closely linked to sales numbers that it becomes difficult to separate the writer from the story, or the writer from the genre. These generic assumptions, this kind of governmentality, assume the very opposite of the kinds of agency that Bourdieu—and I—champion. Generic assumptions assume that readers and writers will blithely sit by and consume; what happens in reality is that readers and writers must respond, continually, to the demands of the market, thus asserting their respective agential powers.

In *Governing the Soul: The Shaping of the Private Self*, Nikolas Rose connects this with what he calls "a therapeutic movement for 'growth' and 'human potential,'" which has "taken shape, [and] whose practices . . . promise not so much relief to the anguished as a transcendence of the mundane for those frustrated by their own normality" (214). And as we have seen, the goal of such self-help texts as Rhonda Byrne's *The Secret* and Eckhart Tolle's *A New Earth* is "finding your true potential" or "attaining great wealth," not just losing weight, maintaining healthy relationships, or finding a satisfying job. Indeed, alongside the flattening of genre memoir, the whole tenor of pop therapeutics has changed and, in some ways, become simultaneously more reflective of the New Religious Movements of the American nineteenth century; its contemporary metamorphosis suggests an even greater impulse in this decade, on the part of the everyday citizen, to achieve *more* than what is "normal." The intense preoccupation with being one's "best self" has led, at least according to Rose (who follows Christopher Lasch), to "personal life and forms of self-reliance [being] transformed into a set of skills to be learned from doctors, social workers, and psychologists" (216). I would add that self-help and genre memoir have begun to function in a similar way. "Personal life" is eclipsed by the need for external validation, in spite of the promise of autonomy; "self-reliance" requires a measure of wealth and material success. Both of these genres, in their current popular forms, reify this larger

cultural trend. This provokes, in Rose's words, a psychological state in which an individual "searches desperately for a personal peace of mind under social and psychological conditions that militate against it" (216). In a sense, then, this is a mutation of Max Weber's sense of the spirit of capitalism: instead of the need for "adequate wages," this overall shift implies a desire for *bourgeois* wages, for a middle-class standard of living. Weber describes the nineteenth-century capitalist order as "a monstrous cosmos, into which the individual is born and which in practice is for him, at least as an individual, simply a given, an immutable shell, in which he is obliged to live" (13) and, while we might contend that the economic structure that I describe here is "a monstrous cosmos," there is now an additional cultural expectation. The individual, now, must be the best individual that she can be; she must maintain work on herself in addition to work within the economy.

A "Spazzy Free-for-All": The Symbolic Capital of Gilbert and Strayed

This, especially when combined with the popular resurgence of New Thought/New Age/quasi-religious thinking, has led to what memoirist Elizabeth Gilbert describes—disparagingly—as a spiritual "spazzy free-for-all" in her text. The connections between her *Eat, Pray, Love* and Cheryl Strayed's *Wild*, at least on the surface, are obvious. They're both first-person, ostensibly true accounts by women who traveled alone in order to "find" themselves. They've both attained immense popularity, been endorsed by Winfrey, and inspired readers. At first glance, they both serve as examples of genre memoir; that is, they both begin with their respective protagonists searching for something meaningful in the wake of tragedy (Gilbert has recently been through a painful divorce and Strayed is coping with terrible grief after the death of her mother). They both contain moments of abjection that rival those of the 1990s. Both

narrators have committed wrongs and are sorry for those wrongs; they've hurt other people and hope for forgiveness. At various points, they both express gratitude for things, places, other people, and the sense of self that they find on their respective journeys.

There are some significant differences, however, in both the narratives themselves and in their respective paratexts: Gilbert was paid to travel and to write the book; its existence was intentional from the start. Strayed, on the other hand, wrote several versions of the essay that would become *Wild* long before the book itself became a reality.¹¹³ Secondly, while both texts are about action and gratitude, they vary in the degrees to which these concepts are present and in the levels of nuance each author employs. In what follows, I will illustrate the similarities and differences in the texts, as a way to make clear how the dual triangulation of genre memoir-Oprah Winfrey-formulaic self-help and genre memoir-bourgeois self-help-formulaic self-help has led to the flattening of popular bestselling life writing and the subsequent silencing of the marginalized.

Eat, Pray, Love: One Woman's Search for Everything Across Italy, India and Indonesia is, the publisher would have it, a "wise and rapturous book [that tells] the story of how [Gilbert] left behind . . . outward marks of success, and of what she found in their place" (back cover). Gilbert begins her book with an introduction, subtitled "How This Book Works, or, The 109th Bead), that is all about gratitude. She describes the Yogi *japa malas*, or string of prayer beads, and writes that bead number 108 is regarded as "most auspicious, a perfect three-digit multiple of three, its components adding up to nine, which is three threes" and the connections between this numerology and "the more esoteric circles of Eastern philosophers" (1). She explains that she

¹¹³ Strayed's early essays, "The Love of My Life" and "Heroin/e," are very clearly early versions of what would become *Wild*; they both describe Strayed's grief following her mother's death, and her subsequent infidelity and drug use.

will follow this method for organizing the book because it is "structured," as is "Looking for Truth," which she claims to have been doing while on her literal journey. She says that "Looking for Truth" is *not* "some kind of spazzy free-for-all," but something that she—and, by extension, her readers—should take seriously.

Gilbert is grateful for her Guru, though she refuses to name this person or her Ashram in India. Her "final expression of gratitude" involves her election to "change the names of every single person [she] met—both Indian and Western—at this Ashram in India." She claims that this is "out of respect for the fact that most people don't go on a spiritual pilgrimage in order to appear later as a character in a book" (2).

A full third of Gilbert's memoir (and more, if we include references made in the other two-thirds) is devoted to "finding devotion" at the Ashram. She begins her descriptions of a quest for devotion early in the book; when she confronts her adult refusal to conform to the "wife and mother" role that she had selected for herself in her early 20s, she must try "to convince [her]self that [her] feelings were customary, despite all evidence to the contrary" (11). In this sense, she appears to be rebelling against the hegemonic demand that married women have—or desire—children. In spite of her rejection of the pressure subtly placed on her by both her then-husband and society at large, she learns to trust herself; every month when she gets her menstrual period, for example, she finds herself "whispering furtively in the bathroom: *Thank you, thank you, thank you, thank you for giving me one more month to live*" (11). To whom does she whisper this gratitude, and is it a prayer? Is she driven to thank a yet-unknown deity, or does this signify something else?

The evidence, given the early placement in the text, seems to indicate that at this point she is thanking an unknown being—one that she does not yet call "God." But maybe she is

thanking herself, or her then-husband. This precedes her first self-described prayer; she's included it in the short section of the book in which she acknowledges that her marriage is falling apart: "We both knew there was *something wrong with me*, and he'd been losing patience with it. We'd been fighting and crying, and we were weary in the way that only a couple whose marriage is collapsing is weary. We had the eyes of refugees" (12). She's very careful to make clear that the rest of the memoir is not about her marriage, per se, about her husband's problems, or even about her lack of desire to have children. This book is about her pilgrimage, her prayer, her newly developing sense of self.

One of the book's primary narrative strategies, especially in the first third, is to incorporate flashbacks into the narrative as a way of illustrating her "transformation" as it unfolds. This technique first presents itself when Gilbert finds herself praying on the bathroom floor during "another solitary bedtime in Rome," during which she finds herself "completely alone": "Grasping this reality, I let go of my bag, drop to my knees, and press my forehead against the floor. There, I offer up to the universe a fervent prayer of thanks" (9). She says the prayer—this time, she *calls* it a prayer—in English, in Italian, and then in Sanskrit. From there, we enter a flashback in which Gilbert describes herself on another bathroom floor "in the suburbs of New York," trying not to notice that "the truth kept insisting itself" to her (10). *The truth* is something that she presents in a monolithic way. She does not say "truths" or even "realities": it's *the truth*. The fact that it "insists itself" seems to suggest that it exists outside of her; however, at various points she contradicts this with the notion that she is fully in control of her own life (and, certainly, of her own narrative).

To begin the first chapter *in medias res*, and then to incorporate flashbacks into a narrative that is otherwise told in the present tense, works to create an obvious juxtaposition

between Gilbert "then" and Gilbert "now." In the beginning of the story (if not the narrative itself), Gilbert wrestles with her lack of desire for children, which leads her to dissolve her marriage and pack her bags. The narrative-present Gilbert seemingly is able to reflect in a cogent way on the events that led her to her journey. She, by the time she is telling the story, has come far enough in her quest to be better that the tone of her prayer has changed: she is no longer groveling on the floor, begging to be set free from her marriage and the expectation of children. Instead, she is *grateful* on the floor, seemingly thanking God for the solitude that she needs to find "healing and peace."

In the first flashback, Gilbert describes her initial encounter with prayer: "What happened was that I started to pray. You know—like, to *God*" (12, emphasis in original). What next occurs is her first in a series of polemic breaks that she has interspersed throughout the rest of the text, and upon which I will focus the rest of my analysis. In the third chapter, for example, she "pauses . . . for a moment to explain exactly" what she means when she says "that loaded word—GOD" (13, capitalization in original). She provides a list of other words she could "just as easily use":

Jehovah, Allah, Shiva, Brahma, Vishnu, or Zeus. Alternatively I could call God 'That,' which is how the ancient Sanskrit scriptures say it, and which I think comes close to the all-inclusive and unspeakable entity I have sometimes experienced. But 'That' feels impersonal to me—a thing, not a being—and I cannot myself pray to a That. I need a proper name, in order to fully sense a personal attendance. For this same reason, when I pray, I do not address my prayers to The Universe, The Great Void, The Force, The Supreme Self, The Whole, The Creator, The Light, The Higher Power, or even the most poetic

manifestation of God's name, taken, I believe, from the Gnostic gospels: 'The Shadow of the Turning.' (13)

Interesting, here, especially in the context of her alleged refusal of a "spazzy free-for-all," is that "The Shadow of the Turning" actually appears in the New Testament, not the Gnostic gospels. James 1:17 states: "Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and cometh down from the Father of lights, with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning" (KJ). This is about a Christian God providing the source of all good—a notion with which Gilbert seemingly agrees—however, whether or not she intentionally misattributes "The Shadow of the Turning" to the Gnostic gospels and/or misreads "*neither* shadow of turning" as "The Shadow of the Turning" is less relevant than her clear invocation of the cultural capital that readers might locate in the Gnostic gospels. Here, it would seem, is a writer who has done her homework, and very deliberately chosen "God" as the name for her deity; the problem is that she's misquoted the "most poetic manifestation of God's name." It becomes clear, with this slip and in various other places in the book, that Gilbert *does* in fact "cherry pick" from a variety of religious doctrines in order to create her own. She forms her own sense of spirituality—to be distinguished from religion, which she abhors—and though she does seem to practice traditional Yogic devotion in the second third of the book, she arrives at her definition of "God" only via the tragedies that she perceives in her material and romantic life. Simply put, she had to lose her money and her husband in order to be delivered to her definition of a deity.

In this first polemic she seems to assume something about her readers and our relationship (or lack thereof) to this God. By tracing what other words she could use, Gilbert employs her narrative as a way to unite seemingly disparate categories of believers—but not *nonbeliever*, because she's going to "skip that argument completely" (13). What she wants us to

understand, via this brief description of her own spiritual history, is that for her God "is an experience of extreme love," an experience that has ostensibly provoked her to eat in Italy, pray in India, and love in Indonesia. She describes herself as "culturally, though not theologically" Christian, "born a Protestant of the white Anglo-Saxon persuasion," but unable to "swallow that one fixed rule of Christianity insisting that Christ is the *only* path to God." She has "traditionally . . . responded to the transcendent mystics of all religions," and will also respond "with gratitude to anyone who has ever voyaged" to God as "*an experience of supreme love*" (14, emphasis in original). Here, she is invoking the immense cultural capital behind Eastern religions (as does Eckhart Tolle) in a way that Winfrey has no problem consecrating. Relatively early in the text, it becomes clear that Gilbert's (publisher's) intended audience is a group of people who likely have embarked on a similar spiritual journey, even if they lacked the funds necessary to travel the world on their quests.

Following the first polemic, Gilbert moves into her first description of prayer, which she describes as stemming from an interest in "saving [her] life," and which provides an overt connection to the notion of "spazzy free-for-all" turned religion—a *quasi* religion: "I had finally noticed that I seemed to have reached a state of hopelessness and life-threatening despair, and it occurred to me that sometimes people in this state will approach God for help. I think I'd read that in a book somewhere" (15). She may have read it in a book, certainly. But as a person thoroughly steeped in American bourgeois culture, it's more likely that she'd internalized the cultural narrative with which we're so familiar, that of the conversion narrative that is older than the federal republic itself.

She apologizes to God and speaks to Him "as though [they'd] just been introduced at a cocktail party," telling the deity that she has "always expressed ample gratitude" for the

"blessings" that He's given her in her life.¹¹⁴ She begs God to help her, to tell her what to do about her seemingly dire situation—not wanting to have children, it would seem, is a horrible fate for a married, upper-middle-class writer—before "quite abruptly, [the crying] stopped" and her "misery had been completely vacuumed out" of her (15). She then hears a voice—not God's, but her own—telling her to "go back to bed." Following this, she acknowledges that "this little episode" is akin to a Christian conversion experience, at least on the surface, with its "dark night of the soul, the responding voice, the sense of transformation." She goes on, though, with a definitional sleight-of-hand, to assert that what actually happened was "the beginning of a religious *conversation*" that would "ultimately bring [her] very close to God, indeed" (16). A "typical Christian conversion experience" frequently includes the notion of being "born again." Here, however, Gilbert doesn't describe herself as "saved," but as opening a "dialogue" with God that might lead her to connect with the "Universe," something that provides a connection with both *The Secret* and *A New Earth*. If God is communicating back and forth with Gilbert, then there must exist some kind of connection between her prayers, which are often silent, and God. This quasi-religious connection is what leads Gilbert to conquer her depression (attain good health) and subsequently regain her wealth.

Gilbert chronicles the role that societal expectations and her own family culture play in the germination of her depression. She describes depression a bit differently than, say, Elizabeth Wurtzel: for Gilbert, the problem seems to be less biochemical and more social. She doesn't want to be married anymore, largely because she resists the societal pressure to have children: "I was supposed to want to have a baby. I was thirty-one years old. My husband and I—who had been together for eight years, married for six—had built our entire life around the common

¹¹⁴ I'm following Gilbert's lead here and calling God a "Him" with a capital-H. In the previous chapter, she is clear that she "generally refer[s] to God as 'Him,'" so I will do the same here.

expectation that, after passing the doddering old age of thirty, I would want to settle down and have children. But I didn't" (2). She has internalized the cultural narrative that tells her to get married, get rich, and have children. As it turns out, she wants two of these three things; the pressure she feels to breed, however, causes her great sadness, to have a post-divorce relationship with "David," a much younger man, as a way to distract herself—and, eventually, depression.¹¹⁵

The book's second polemic comes, in the historical present of the memoir, once she's been in Italy for ten days, but includes a meditation in the present-tense and a flashback. It spans two chapters. In the first, she personifies "Depression and Loneliness," describing how they "track [her] down" and invade her life. She "[knows] these guys very well," since they've "been playing a cat-and-mouse game for years now" (46-7). Gilbert follows this with her anecdote about discontinuing her antidepressants, which she had done "only a few days earlier," since it "seemed *crazy* to be taking antidepressants in Italy." She uses the metaphor of being "lost in [the] woods" to describe depression, and describes it as "the fight of [her] life." From there, she analyzes it: "I became a student of my own depressed experience, trying to unthread its causes. What was the root of all this despair?" She questions whether it is "temporal," "genetic,"

¹¹⁵ Nikolas Rose describes the forces of biopower as appropriated by the psy disciplines in a way that resonates with Gilbert's social-turned-psychological problem:

In the contemporary family the personal projects of individuals to live a good life, to infuse their actions and choices with meaning and pleasure, to realize their ambitions, and to give their existence a transcendental purpose in the face of certain death have become linked to social obligations for the continual reproduction and rearing of adequate numbers of healthy and well-adjusted children. Personal desires have been caught up in social networks of power and control, shaped and organized through the images and criteria provided by professional technicians of subjectivity and intersubjectivity. (151)

Gilbert has internalized the networks of power and control; when they conflict with her "personal desires," she slides into clinical depression. Sadly, due to the ending of her memoir, her text ultimately reifies what the networks of power and control fed to her.

"cultural," "astrological," "artistic," "evolutionary," "karmic," "hormonal? Dietary? Philosophical? Seasonal? Environmental?" She asks if her "yearning for God" is "universal," or if she has a "chemical imbalance," or if she "just need[s] to get laid" (49). Throughout all of this, she intersperses parenthetical musings that suggest her full awareness that she is, in fact, recounting a list of grand narratives about what makes people unhappy. Gilbert follows this series of questions—less an analysis and more an existential quagmire—with an admission that she "bought all those embarrassingly titled self-help books" and "commenced to getting professional help with a therapist who was as kind as she was insightful." Her actual symptoms, which range from "endless sobbing" to an "emergency phone call" to her friend Susan, end with a diagnosis and medication, along with resistance: "we're a family who regard any sickness as a sign of personal, ethical, moral failure." Once on a cocktail of "a few different drugs—Xanax, Zoloft, Wellbutrin, Busperin," Gilbert started to "feel an extra inch of daylight opening in [her] mind" (50-51).

Most interesting in the context of my analysis is this initial sense that she needs to "get better" and first requires the help of others (her friend, the doctor, the therapist, the self-help books, the drugs) to make that happen. And, like Elizabeth Wurtzel, she has mixed opinions about chemical treatments for her despair: "I'm deeply ambivalent about mood-altering medications. I'm awed by their power, but concerned by their prevalence. I think they need to be prescribed and used with much more restraint in this country, and never without the parallel treatment of psychological counseling," she writes; this mirrors Wurtzel's epilogue to *Prozac Nation*, in which Wurtzel goes on an extended diatribe about how SSRIs have destroyed her

generation. Here, however, Gilbert makes less a societal argument and more an individual one: only an individual quest can lead to her salvation.¹¹⁶

The next polemic break occurs when she is still in Italy and notices that "Americans have an inability to relax into sheer pleasure," which is what has brought her to Italy in the first place. Our "entertainment-seeking nation," in Gilbert's mind, leads Americans to "spend billions to keep themselves amused . . . but that's not exactly the same thing as quiet enjoyment." We "work too hard, then . . . get burned out and have to spend the whole weekend in our pajamas, eating cereal straight out of the box and staring at the TV in a mind coma" (61). She even writes about her "ingrained sense of Puritan guilt" and connects it with "Planet Advertising" (62). She realizes, when pressed by her Italian friends, that what matters is how *she* "define[s] pleasure" for herself, not what "Planet Advertising" tells her. This is a conversion, too: she renounces her "ingrained" Puritan work ethic in favor of pleasure, which allows her to relax. Her next direct condemnation of American culture comes when she describes what it means "to create a family with a spouse" and how it is "one of the most fundamental ways a person can find continuity and meaning in American . . . society." She describes attending family reunions and her view, from a literal and metaphorical distance, that everyone is "held so reassuringly in their [family] positions" (94). She outlines, yet again, that she feels ostracized by her choice not to have children, and that she feels compelled to "find another purpose" in life (95).

This directly contradicts her later musings about Indonesian culture, in which she describes "balance" as being key to finding "salvation" (the third part of the book). In Indonesia, she has no plan and is seemingly carefree; the "social mapping" system of naming children there is comforting to her, as is the fact that most Indonesians have four or five children. This comforts

¹¹⁶ See chapter two for an analysis of *Prozac Nation*.

her because Indonesian culture, in her mind, creates "a state of perfect balance" where one can "know exactly where [she] is located at every moment, both in [her] relationship to the divine and to [her] family here on earth" (227). Gilbert does not hesitate to condemn the aspects of American culture that she loathes—and that provided the material support necessary for her to undertake her journey. When she sees different ways of accomplishing the same goal of family and balance, however, she is enamored.¹¹⁷

While in the historical present of the Ashram in India, Gilbert muses about the history of Yoga and what has led to her to India in the first place: "The task at hand in Yoga is to find union—between mind and body, between the individual and her God, between our thoughts and the source of our thoughts, between teacher and student, and even between ourselves and our sometimes hard-to-bend neighbors" (121). The task at hand for Gilbert is to become comfortable enough with *herself* that she can spend hours in quiet meditation; she describes it as "disentangling the built-in glitches of the human condition, which [she is] going to over-simply define here as the heartbreaking inability to sustain contentment." She goes on to explain that

Different schools of thought over the centuries have found different explanations for man's apparently inherently flawed state. Taoists call it imbalance, Buddhism calls it ignorance, Islam blames our misery on rebellion against God, and the Judeo-Christian tradition attributes all our suffering to original sin. Freudians say that unhappiness is the inevitable result of the clash between our natural drives and civilization's needs. . . . The Yogis, however, say that human discontentment is a simple case of mistaken identity. We're miserable because we think that we

¹¹⁷ Though outside the direct scope of this argument, it becomes interesting in this context to consider Gilbert's appropriation of "other cultures." Following the success of her book, Indonesian medicine men began to be visited much more often by wealthy American women.

are mere individuals, alone with our fears and flaws and resentments and mortality. . . . We have failed to recognize our deeper divine character. We don't realize that, somewhere within us all, there does exist a supreme Self who is eternally at peace. (122-23)

Her "supreme Self" eludes her for a time while in India; she struggles with some of the more difficult Sanskrit prayers, and with silent meditation. Prayer, however, comes relatively easy to her: "Prayer is the act of talking to God, while meditation is the act of listening. Take a wild guess as to which comes easier for me" (132). It would seem, then, that Yoga and her corresponding stay at the Ashram make it easier for her to resist the "spazzy free-for-all" of quasi-religious ideas that drive her in her quest, but her list of explanations of "man's apparently inherently flawed state" shows that she does, in fact, understand aspects of the world's major religions, and that Yoga is the true answer for her. Later, she describes faith as "walking face-first and full-speed into the dark," and that only God can provide her with "a prudent insurance policy" against unhappiness (175).

She ends up "happy and healthy and balanced," though she "cannot help but notice" that she is "sailing to this pretty little tropical island with [her] Brazilian lover." This is, as she admits, "an almost ludicrously fairy-tale ending to this story, like the page out of some housewife's dream." She goes on, however, to assert "the solid truth" that she "was the administrator of [her] own rescue," that no one did it for her (329). She makes claims to agency here that belie what really is a "ludicrous fairy-tale ending." In fewer than 300 pages, Elizabeth Gilbert has gone from crying on various bathroom floors to eliminating her "American guilt" in the pursuit of pleasure (62) and learning to make her "prayers . . . more deliberate and specific" (176), and she has done it, at least in part, because of a large advance she received from a

publisher. So, while no one person outside of her is responsible for her "rescue," one question remains open: if Elizabeth Gilbert had been less bourgeois, and not been paid to travel for a year and then write about it, would she have been able to administer her "rescue"?

This "ludicrous fairy-tale ending" has yet another layer: she marries the Brazilian lover, called Felipe in the book, and subsequently writes a "marriage memoir" about their relationship. In this sense, she ends where she began, with one caveat: she has found her better self. What "keeps [her] from dissolving" might be the notion that *she* "was the administrator" of her "rescue"; but it leaves readers with questions about the nature of rescue, and whether it might take a year, paid for by a publisher, of travel and reflection in order to become better. It also leaves us in a familiar place: here is the story of a woman who has conquered what she initially describes as insurmountable odds (depression, the loss of money, a hostile divorce) to attain enlightenment and the corresponding happy heterosexual pairing in the end.

This is the ultimate ending to an Oprah-Winfrey-fairy-tale. Not only does Gilbert find a method to feel better—to *be* better—but her various descriptions about buying things, along with her overall wealth, fit the model of bourgeois spiritual neoliberalism. Although the book is optimistic (it's a conversion narrative, after all), it comes with the series of polemic breaks that become preachy at times. One of the most disturbing aspects of the text, in addition to its ultimate adherence to normativity, is that one would have to be as wealthy as Gilbert in order to emulate her behavior, and she never fully acknowledges this fact, beyond her description of "losing" money during her divorce and then "finding" it again when she receives the advance for what became *Eat, Pray, Love*.

In spite of the fact that Gilbert's text was a bestseller, in spite of the fact that Oprah Winfrey consecrated it, and in spite of the fact that it was made into a movie starring America's

sweetheart Julia Roberts, there was a swift backlash against it, mainly by feminist scholars and journalists. In a scathing 2010 article from *Bitch* magazine called "Eat, Pray, Spend: Priv-Lit and the New, Enlightened American Dream," Joshunda Sanders and Diana Barnes-Brown make a series of points that are relevant here, both to my analysis of the text and to its cultural production. "Even now," the authors write, "as some of the hardest economic times in decades pinch our budgets, our spirits, we're told, can still be rich. . . . There's no end to the luxurious options a woman has these days—if she's willing to risk everything for enlightenment" (3). Perhaps the most cogent point in the critique is the contention that "*Eat, Pray, Love*, and its positioning as an Everywoman's guide to whole, empowered living embody a literature of privilege and typify the genre's destructive cacophony of insecurity, spending, and false wellness" (3).

"False wellness" appears throughout both Gilbert's text and Byrne's *The Secret*.¹¹⁸ The assumption seems to be that outright materialism—whether real or, in the case of Byrne, imagined-leading-to-real—will lead to some sort of tangible spiritual enlightenment, what Sanders and Barnes-Brown call the "expressed goal . . . [of] spiritual, existential, or philosophical enlightenment contingent upon women's hard work, commitment, and patience, but whose actual barriers to entry are primarily financial" (3). Without directly stating it, Sanders and Barnes-Brown make a point similar to the one I am making here: such "motivational memoir" as *Eat, Pray, Love* is fine and dandy, until we begin to consider who is left out of the narrative.

Gilbert describes herself as "postfeminist" at a couple of points in her text; what this means, according to Sanders and Barnes-Brown, is that the kind of "empowerment" that Gilbert

¹¹⁸ See chapter one for my analysis of *The Secret*.

espouses actually means "the power to spend [her] own money," and that "the women who buy into [this kind of empowerment] assume the work of feminism is largely done," which allows "the antifeminism embedded in the wellness jargon of priv-lit" to continue as a cultural narrative, largely unchallenged (4). Is it antifeminist for Gilbert to write a text about losing (and then regaining) her money, about traveling the world on the search for pleasure, devotion, and balance, about finally stopping her quest for the perfect man only to find him in the end? *Bitch* magazine thinks so; they describe how texts such as this one "perpetuates . . . negative assumptions about women and their relationship to money and responsibility," especially combined with Winfrey's empire and her constant demands for her audience to spend, spend, spend in order to reach some kind of enlightened wholeness.

Micki McGee, with whom Sanders and Barnes-Brown conducted an interview, describes the cultural situatedness of these kinds of narratives this way:

One of the brilliant parts of the self-help genre as a whole is that there are these various contradicting threads or themes, all woven together, and emphasized differently at different times. . . . Self-improvement culture in general has the contradictory effect of undermining self-assurance by suggesting that all of us are in need of constant, effortful (and often expensive) improvement. There is the danger of over-investing in this literature not only financially, but also psychologically. (qtd. in Sanders and Barnes-Brown 5)

McGee describes the overt connection between the ideals of self-help, embedded in a culture that also faces woeful economic crises, and the stratification that Bourdieu first wrote about in *Distinctions*. The cultural narrative implies that investing in self-help (economically and psychologically) will lead to bourgeois status, and that such an investment "demonstrates the

deserving nature of those who do [invest]" (6). Nikolas Rose describes this as a "promise . . . of reshaping subjectivity. . . . Our selves are defined and constructed in psychological terms, constantly subject to psychologically inspired techniques of self-inspection and self-examination" (xiii)—a starkly biopolitical argument. Perhaps this "promise," so difficult to attain but so deeply ingrained in American popular culture, has been internalized and reconverted into narratives such as Gilbert's.

This is how biopower, biopolitics, and therapeutic discourse connect, in a complicated web of cultural expectations and the (seeming) desire for class ascension. Cultural capital of the kind espoused by Winfrey and Gilbert leads to an internalization by all kinds of readers (consumers), who then wish to possess the same kinds of capital. The "meaning of the work" is therefore to perpetuate the status quo, to keep the market alive—especially since for Bourdieu heteronomy (the market) arises from *demand* ("Field" 46). The demand, in this case, is created by a biopolitical move that ensures the likelihood of audience members' desire for "enlightenment" or "wellness"; the collective desire for wealth, at least outside of *The Secret*, is masked by the desire for health.

Although feminist autobiography scholar Leigh Gilmore, in "American Neoconfessional: Memoir, Self-Help, and Redemption on Oprah's Couch," sets up a stark opposition between "the blonde-haired, blue-eyed, radiant good girl, Elizabeth Gilbert" and "the bearded bad boy of privileged-enough-to-have-your-parents-pay-for-rehab white masculinity, James Frey," *both* writers worked their way through the demands of the market in order to 1) produce bestselling texts, and 2) to be endorsed by Oprah Winfrey. Gilmore describes *Eat, Pray, Love* as "Gilbert's cheerful blending of travel narrative, optimistic self-help story, and old-fashioned romance" as the antithesis of *A Million Little Pieces* and, indeed, in some ways it occupies this position (665).

In other ways, however—particularly within the polemic breaks I've analyzed above, "the message of redemption" continues to drive the production of such texts as Gilbert's. And although Cheryl Strayed's *Wild: From Lost to Found on the Pacific Crest Trail* was endorsed by Winfrey and attained both popular and bourgeois legitimacy, aspects of it—the text itself more than the cultural narrative surrounding it—allow for exactly the kinds of political engagement that the You Industry, on the whole, forecloses. I wish to take this a step further and contend that such homogeneous narratives as Gilbert's and Frey's actually foreclose the possibility of political engagement; by becoming a bourgeois genre, "neoconfessional" texts silence the voices of those who cannot participate in such games as the ones that Gilbert, Winfrey, et al., engage. "Ordinary people" might be able to consume the narratives, but what happens when these ordinary people wish to write their own memoirs? The answer is that they fall so far outside of the bourgeois market that they end up on the far left of the grid; that is, publishers don't promote them and, as a result, few people read them. They become an example of "art for art's sake," produced only for other producers and a select few members of a primarily intellectual audience. Therefore, the explosion of genre memoir reveals another rift: an academic-vs.-popular culture one.

Moreover, *Wild* exists, at least in part, in opposition to *Eat, Pray, Love*. Although it is also the story of a single woman traveling (mostly) alone, its tenor and implications are much different. Strayed's travel narrative takes her from the Midwest to the Pacific Crest Trail, which she will hike from the Mojave Desert through California and Oregon, before reaching Washington State. She begins the journey with no experience as a hiker, and the descriptions that she gives of the beginning of her trip give us some sense of how this inexperience will test her as much as the hike itself. In what follows, I will explore Strayed's text as the antithesis of Gilbert's, but will leave room for the overt connections between the two, namely the grief that drives both

women into travel, their use of (vastly different kinds of) prayer while they're on their respective journeys, and their ultimate adherence to generic conventions that lead, in the end, to Winfrey's bourgeois consecration. Strayed's is a conversion memoir of a different sort than Gilbert's, however; *Wild* illustrates several direct challenges to biopower, in addition to possessing strong feminist undertones.

The relatively sudden death of her mother from cancer at age 45 changes Strayed from happily married college senior to promiscuous drug-abuser; the text begins with descriptions of her mother, her childhood in Minnesota, her terrible grief, and her subsequent struggles with depression and drug abuse. Very early in the narrative, Strayed describes her (non)relationship with God, as she confronts the notion that her mother is sick and might die:

All that day of the green pantsuit, as I accompanied my mother and stepfather, Eddie, from floor to floor of the Mayo Clinic while my mother went from one test to another, a prayer marched through my head, though *prayer* is not the right word to describe that march. I wasn't humble before God. I didn't even believe in God. My prayer was not: *Please, God, take mercy on us*.

I was not going to ask for mercy. I didn't need to. My mother was forty-five. She looked fine. . . .

Fuck them.

That was my prayer: *Fuckthemfuckthemfuckthem*.

And yet, here was my mother at the Mayo Clinic getting worn out if she had to be on her feet for more than three minutes. (10)

This "prayer" gives readers a glimpse of Strayed's rebellion. Here, she reverses the traditional "I prayed to God for mercy" cultural narrative, the one we've all heard and that Gilbert employs in

Eat, Pray, Love. "After she got sick, I folded my life down," Strayed writes. "I told Paul [her then-husband] not to count on me" (18). She is destroyed by her mother's sickness and subsequent death, and her "*fuckthemfuckthemfuckthem*" prayer is emblematic of her personality leading up to and throughout her hike: she won't allow herself to be afraid; she's much more interested in channeling her own physical and psychic power.

Strayed responds to the death of her mother in a variety of ways, invoking Elizabeth Kübler-Ross's "stages of grieving," which are denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance.¹¹⁹ The text weaves the historical present (Strayed on her trip) together with stories about her mother and her unusual childhood. We might go so far to say that the book is *about* dealing with her mother's death and subsequent sense of isolation and loneliness that led Strayed to infidelity and heroin use; the book is also about, however, a young woman "finding herself" only by being alone, after years of doing the opposite. Indeed, the death of her mother is also the topic of the two published essays that preceded *Wild*—"The Love of My Life" and "Heroin/e,"—and the focus of many of her interviews about the book.¹²⁰

Her goal is to "be the woman [her] mother raised," and so she entertains the "outlandishly stupid idea" that becomes her hike as a way to heal "the hole in her heart" (90, 189). At one point on the trail, Strayed entertains the notion of quitting: "I'd set out to hike the trail so that I could reflect upon my life, to think about everything that had broken me and *make myself whole again*. But the truth was, at least so far, I was consumed only with my most immediate and physical suffering. Since I'd begun hiking, the struggles of my life had only fluttered occasionally through my mind" (84, emphasis mine). This echoes, at least on the surface, Elizabeth Gilbert's reason for

¹¹⁹ See Kübler-Ross's seminal *On Death and Dying* from 1969.

¹²⁰ In myriad interviews, including those with Oprah Winfrey, Strayed revisits the trauma that she experienced when her mother died.

traveling: to reflect, to forget, to heal. However, the reality is that hiking with an 80-pound backpack (which Strayed nicknames "Monster") is grueling, physically and mentally, and at many points on the hike, Strayed describes her will to survive, to continue, to finish, as seemingly more significant than "healing." "I had to change," she writes. "*I had to change* was the thought that drove me in those months of planning [the hike]. Not into a different person, but back to the person I used to be—strong and responsible, clear-eyed and driven, ethical and good. And the PCT would make me that way. . . . I'd find my strength again, far from everything that had made my life ridiculous" (57). Once we reach the end of the text, we realize that part of this has happened for Strayed—she's found her strength again—but she's not the person she once was. The need to be "better," or "whole" is embedded in her, to be sure, but Strayed's text ultimately presents a challenge to the health/wealth paradigm. Although she begins her hike with a collection of material goods, she relinquishes many of them along the way.

Throughout, Strayed tracks her literal journey by examining her body, which begins to function as a metaphor for the inner changes she experiences, in addition to providing interesting parallels between the concept of health and her mother's illness. As she grows stronger mentally, she also grows stronger physically, and this fact surprises her at several moments in the text. At first, her body feels like "a bag of broken glass" on the trail, since she hasn't physically prepared in any way for her hike (63). The physical agony doesn't stop there, as she's purchased hiking boots that are much too small and recounts, in painful detail, losing several of her toenails. The first specific mention of the *awareness* of her body occurs after she's been on the trail for just over a week, and she becomes aware that the deodorant she has used each morning is having no effect—she can "smell [herself as she] move[s]." She hasn't bathed in over a week, and her body is "covered in dirt and blood," her hair "dense with dust and dried sweat," her feet "rubbed raw

with blisters, their bones . . . fatigued from the miles" (70). This is the beginning of Strayed's body-as-character in the memoir. From there, however, she begins to track its changes in a way that reflects her physical—and mental—power: "I'd worn my feet raw, chafed my body until it bled, and carried not only myself over miles of rugged wilderness, but also a pack that weighed more than half of what I did. And I'd done it alone. That was worth something, right?" (81). She follows this several pages later with a mantra that she often repeats: "*Who is tougher than me?*" The answer was always the same, and even when I knew absolutely there was no way on earth it was true, I said it anyway: *No one*" (90, emphasis in original). Still later, she looks "tan and dirty. . . [and] remotely leaner" (107).

Once she reaches a motel—the first time she's slept anywhere but in her tent in weeks—she gives a description of her physical change that bears quoting at length:

I . . . took off my clothes and looked at myself in the full-length mirror.

I was a startling sight.

I did not so much look like a woman who had spent the past three weeks backpacking in the wilderness as I did a woman who had been the victim of a violent and bizarre crime. Bruises that ranged in color from yellow to black lined my arms and legs, my back and rump, as if I'd been beaten with sticks. My hips and shoulders were covered in blisters and rashes, inflamed welts and dark scabs where my skin had broken open from being chafed by my pack. Beneath the bruises and wounds and dirt I could see new ridges of muscle, my flesh taut in places that had recently been soft. (129)

This physical transformation, and her reference to a "violent and bizarre crime," becomes solidified later when she describes "legs . . . as hard as boulders, their muscles seemingly capable

of anything" (190). Her physical transformation, on many levels, mirrors her psychological one. It also provides a direct link to the concept of health, both mental and physical. As Strayed becomes physically strong enough to carry her heavy pack on the trail, she becomes mentally strong enough to let go of her mother.

At two points on her hike, she is confronted by things that remind her of her mother, but responds much differently each time. Midway through her hike, she sees a red fox, and the sight of him causes a physical response: "My heart raced, but I sat perfectly still, fighting the urge to scramble to my feet and leap behind the tree for protection. I didn't know what the fox would do next. . . . He was barely knee-high, though his strength was irrefutable, his beauty dazzling, his superiority to me apparent down to his every pristine hair." When she names in a whisper and he runs away, she calls out to him: "'Come back,' I called lightly, and then suddenly shouted, 'MOM! MOM! MOM! MOM!' I didn't know the word was going to come out of my mouth until it did. And then, just as suddenly, I went silent, spent" (143-44). It's unclear whether she believes that something about her mother resides in the fox, or if he reminds her of him; it appears to be unclear to her, too, since the "MOM!" refrain occurs "suddenly." Thinking about her mother and calling her name, however, renders Strayed "silent, spent,"; here, she's overtaken by emotions that she hadn't had the time or energy to consider on the hike.

Much later in the text, Strayed becomes angry and starts to catalogue her mother's flaws: "*Fuck her*, I thought, so mad that I stopped walking." From there, however, she begins to "wail" about how "relentlessly awful" it is that her mother "had been taken" from her. "I can't even hate her properly," Strayed writes. The source of her anger, it turns out, is not her mother; it is her mother's *death*: "Her death had obliterated . . . me. It had cut me short at the very height of my youthful arrogance. It had forced me to instantly grow up and forgive her every motherly fault at

the same time that it kept me forever a child." Here, Strayed laments the fact that she could not have a proper young-adulthood; she is both stunted and accelerated; she is haunted by the presence of her mother's absence. She continues walking, chanting "*Fuck her*" with each set of steps, before she stops "to sit on a boulder" and notices "a gathering of low flowers." She names them: "*Crocus*, I thought, the name coming into my mind because my mother had given it to me." At that moment, she is able to partially let go of her grief: "I didn't begrudge my mother a thing" (267-68). Here, on her own in the wilderness, she is still haunted, but becomes grateful: her mother has given her the names for beautiful things.

In the text and on her journey, Strayed relies heavily on Adrienne Rich's poem "Power," while never including the poem itself in the text.¹²¹ Strayed's memoir is, in some ways, an example of "the earth-deposits of our history" that Rich depicts; Strayed does not, however, "[deny] her wounds / [deny] / her wounds came from the same source as her power," as Marie

¹²¹ Rich's "Power":

Living in the earth-deposits of our history

Today a backhoe divulged out of a crumbling flank of earth
one bottle amber perfect a hundred-year-old
cure for fever or melancholy a tonic
for living on this earth in the winters of this climate.

Today I was reading about Marie Curie:
she must have known she suffered from radiation sickness
her body bombarded for years by the element
she had purified
It seems she denied to the end
the source of the cataracts on her eyes
the cracked and suppurating skin of her finger-ends
till she could no longer hold a test-tube or a pencil

She died a famous woman denying
her wounds
denying
her wounds came from the same source as her power.

Curie does in Rich's poem. On the contrary, Strayed *embraces* the fact that "her wounds [come] from the same source as her power," whether they be physical wounds (her beat-up body on the hike, her brutally ruined feet from boots that are too small) or emotional ones (the death of her mother, the breakup of her marriage). It also provides a nearly-perfect parallel to her refusal of fear: "I simply did not let myself become afraid [on the trail]. Fear begets fear. Power begets power. I willed myself to beget power. And it wasn't long before I actually *wasn't* afraid" (51). Strayed moves from weak to powerful in the text, both literally and metaphorically; in the end, she understands the only one of several texts that made the entire journey in her backpack, Rich's *The Dream of a Common Language*, more than she did at the beginning:

[It] was enough to trust that what I'd done was true. To understand its meaning without yet being able to say precisely what it was, like all those lines from *The Dream of a Common Language* that had run through my nights and days. To believe that I didn't need to reach with my bare hands anymore. To know that seeing the fish beneath the surface of the water was enough. That it was everything. It was my life—like all lives, mysterious and irrevocable and sacred. So very close, so very present, so very belonging to me.

How wild it was, to let it be. (311)

This might be a veiled reference to another of Rich's poems, "Diving Into the Wreck," in which Rich's speaker, a heroine, describes her descent into a disaster, where she discovers that "the words are purposes / the words are maps." Critic Judith McDaniel has described the poem as a "complex . . . image of rebirth," in which the wreck symbolizes "the life of one woman, the source of successes and failures" (McDaniel). The poem's heroine is loaded down by her diving equipment, which Strayed echoes in her own text with Monster. The poem's speaker is

"exploring the wreck" beneath the sea; with her memoir, *Strayed* is "exploring the wreck" that was her pre-hike life, her grief, her mistakes. In the end, however, *Strayed* is content to "[see] the fish beneath the surface of the water" instead of continuing to explore the wreck. This implies healing, closure, a sense of personal power and agency.¹²² It also shows readers that by confronting the wreck, by taking the time and effort to complete the hike, *Strayed* ultimately ends up "healthy."

Near the end of her hike, "sleeping on the ground in a tent each night and walking alone through the wilderness all day almost every day had come to feel like [her] normal life," and the idea of not doing it anymore scares her. She pauses near a river and notices that it is "narrow and shallow here, so late in the summer and so high up" before she wonders where her mother is: "I'd carried her so long, staggering beneath her weight." She has a realization: her mother is "*on the other side of the river*." At this moment, "something inside" of her "released" (306). She moves into overt gratitude: "*Thank you*, I thought over and over again. *Thank you*." She goes on to assert that she is grateful for "everything the trail had taught [her] and everything [she] couldn't yet know" (310). The struggles of the trail, and of her life before the trail, are eclipsed by this moment of thanks, which almost feels like a prayer—albeit a different kind of prayer than the earlier "fuck you."

This gratitude is of a different kind than Gilbert's. By toiling away on the trail, losing her toenails, and harboring a growing awareness of her own strength and power, *Strayed* becomes grateful for what is *inside* of her, versus Gilbert's gratitude for what is *outside* of her. And although Rhonda Byrne might say that "envisioning" completing the hike is what made it

¹²² "It was true that *The Pacific Crest Trail, Volume 1: California* was now my bible, but *The Dream of a Common Language* was my religion," *Strayed* writes. "I opened it up and read the first poem out loud, my voice rising above the sound of the wind battering the walls of my tent. I read it again and again and again. It was a poem called 'Power'" (60).

possible for Strayed to do so, the reality is that the struggle of the hike is a metaphor for the struggle of grief, and of the sense of agency with which she is left in the end.

This newly developed sense of agency, especially when combined with her use of Rich's poems, illustrate her feminist bent; in fact, there are moments in the text when Strayed *names* herself a feminist. Not a "post-feminist" like Gilbert, a *feminist*. At one point, she encounters a reporter from the *Hobo Times* who thinks that she is a hobo and wants to do a story on her because he "hardly ever meet[s] any hobo women"; she corrects him, calling herself an "*expert* hiker" and telling him: "I hike fifteen to twenty miles a day, day after day, up and down mountains, far away from roads or people or anything, often going days without seeing another person. Maybe you should do a story on that instead," she quips. She insists that she is not a hobo; she is a hiker. He responds by saying, "Oh, I see . . . You're a feminist, then." She replies with a simple "yes" and writes that "it felt good to agree on something" (180). This simple "yes," following the description of what she does every day, suggest that, at minimum, she is a feminist in the simplest terms; that is, she believes in equality for women. At other points in the memoir, Strayed describes having to explain to other (male) hikers that she really is okay out on the trail alone, and most of them are impressed.

Strayed does include references to her (hetero)sexuality, albeit in ways that feel less heavy-handed than Gilbert's; in *Wild*, the goal is not to remind readers of her normativity, but to show her freedom to choose whether she will have sex. Following her promiscuity leading up to and after her divorce, she falls into a dysfunctional relationship with "Joe," with whom she also does heroin. When they break up, she feels a sense of liberation; for the first time in a long time, she's not bound to a man. She takes a twelve-pack of condoms with her on her hike, but realizes that she's not likely to need them; not only is she physically dirty and awestruck by her physical

metamorphosis, but she also doesn't meet any men—at least until near the end—with whom she wants to have sex. She puts all but one of the condoms in a community resupply box at one of the base camps along the trail. When she uses the one she has saved, it is on her own terms and with a man who respects her desire for independence. She and Jonathan spend a couple of days together on the beach before she decides that she's had her fun and must move on to finish her hike. Immediately after this, "the headband man," whom she had met before and sees again, calls her "baby" outside a store. She stops, turns around, and instructs him not to call her "baby" (255-261). The trail has empowered her.¹²³

Strayed's author's note, which begins the book, indicates her seeming willingness to abide by the "rules" of contemporary memoir, at least on the surface. She "relied on her personal journals," did research, "consulted" with some of the characters in the book, and "called upon [her] own memory." She has changed the names of most people in the book, and modified identifying details, though she states that "there are no composite characters or events" in the book, though she has omitted some. Ultimately, however, Strayed doesn't obey the rules of genre memoir, at least as they're put forth by Gilbert; she doesn't gloss over the more difficult aspects of her hike, or of her life. She resists the kinds of saccharine optimism that Gilbert employs; she is, it would seem, brutally honest about herself.

In one of the darkest scenes of the text, one that Gilbert would be loath to write, Strayed describes having to euthanize her mother's horse, Lady; Strayed and her brother visit the farm where they grew up, and find Lady suffering. When they try to shoot her, however, she suffers

¹²³ As far as "ludicrous fairy-tale endings go," one is not to be found in *Wild*. Although Strayed does make reference to her (now) husband and their two children, this does not occur until the acknowledgments section, which comes at the end of the book. *Wild* is about Cheryl Strayed and her own inner demons; although others figure prominently in the text, the only person whom she credits for saving her is Eddie, the man she meets at the first stop and who encourages her to travel a bit lighter.

greatly before dying. Strayed calls this "the worst thing [she had] ever done . . . a massacre," and quickly moves the text in an introspective direction. After being asked by a man named Paco if she is "on a spirit walk," she pauses for a moment before replying: "Maybe you could call it that," she says (163, 166). Later, when alone again, she asks herself a series of questions that make it clear why she's really on her journey:

I wondered about walking with the spirits. What did that even mean? Did I walk with the spirits? Did my mom? Where had she gone after she died? Where was Lady? Had they really ridden together across the river to the other side? Reason told me that all they'd done was die, though they'd both come to me repeatedly in my dreams. The Lady dreams were the opposite of those I'd had about my mother—the ones in which she'd ordered me to kill her over and over again. In the dreams of Lady, I didn't have to kill anyone. I had only to accept a giant and fantastically colorful bouquet of flowers that she carried to me clenched in her soft mouth. She would nudge me with her nose until I took it, and in that offering, I knew that I was forgiven. But was I? Was that her spirit or only my subconscious working it out? (167)

In this passage, Strayed employs Lady—who doubles for her mother—as a metaphor for her own guilt and desire to let go. This occurs at a point in the book when Strayed questions the nature of her journey, and it becomes clear that she is longing for a version of herself that is untouched by grief or guilt or, as she writes earlier, "the woman I knew I could become and . . . the girl I'd once been" (4).

Strayed's name itself (not her given name), and how it came to be, shows us the agency that, paradoxically, she only seems to embrace in her grief. Following her divorce, Strayed and

her soon-to-be ex-husband "paged through the [divorce] documents" before they "came across a question that asked the name [they'd] each have after the divorce" (21). Strayed goes on to describe her "amazement" at the fact that they could name themselves anything they wanted; she has no question that she will change her surname. What she doesn't do, however, is revert to the "name [she] had in high school and be the girl [she] used to be," so she makes a list of possible names that would sound good with "Cheryl." One day, she looks up "strayed" in a dictionary and "knew it was" hers because "its layered definitions spoke directly to [her] life and also struck a poetic chord: *to wander from the proper path, to deviate from the direct course, to be lost, to become wild, to be without a mother or father, to be without a home, to move about aimlessly in search of something, to diverge or digress*" (96, emphasis in original). It becomes clear, however, that Cheryl Strayed, by wandering off the proper path and becoming lost and wild, has conquered many of her demons *without* relying on quasi-religion or self-help. In this sense, and although it conforms to the conventions of genre memoir in its confession-turned-redemption message, the richness of her text combined with its feminisms provides a much-needed counterbalance to the flattened normativity of Gilbert's.

Genre Memoir and the Norm of Autonomy

Both examples of memoir that I have analyzed here, Gilbert's hugely successful *Eat, Pray, Love* and Strayed's *Wild*, continue to reify a moment that is reminiscent of what Nikolas Rose calls "the norm of autonomy," or the promise of individual, neoliberal success, both material and social.¹²⁴ There are still few guarantees of actual autonomy or wholeness, but the

¹²⁴ Memoir does not always conform to this; there are good examples of life writing that rebel against genre-memoir, such as Dave Eggers's *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* (see

perception continues to loom; the promise, it would seem, is that if one addresses what Winfrey calls questions of the "Spirit," she might find herself on the road to happiness, success, or "wholeness."¹²⁵ What changes in this early part of the twenty-first century is that key metaphysical questions—who am I? How can I know? Can I know myself better by understanding someone else?—appear to be replaced by questions of *action*—what will I do? What should I say? What does this other person think? The promise in these self-help texts and popular memoirs is that a combination of *action and gratitude* will lead to a "healthy Spirit."

Bourdieu posits that writers have recognized and internalized the desires of the market *and* the desires of the field; both Elizabeth Gilbert and Cheryl Strayed, in spite of the vastly different tone and mood that they present in their respective works, bring with their texts a demand that being one's "best" is the new normal. This is where they overlap with bestselling self-help texts published at roughly the same time, such as *The Secret* and *A New Earth*. With all four of these texts, the writers' individual agency is, seemingly, a part of the machine that is the market. That is, in order to write a memoir in the first place, one must have a certain degree of freedom to act; to write a bestselling memoir, one must understand the conventions of the genre. To write a bourgeois self-help book, one must be completely steeped in the projected expectations of our postmodern deity, Oprah Winfrey.¹²⁶

chapter four) or Lauren Slater's *Lying: A Metaphorical Memoir*. Winfrey-sanctioned examples, however, absolutely follow this trajectory.

¹²⁵ See chapter one for a more extensive analysis of Rose's text in a Foucaultian context.

¹²⁶ It becomes clear that genre memoir as a whole has shifted from a marginalized to a consecrated genre. Once shunned by academics, memoir now appears on university syllabi for courses that provide tools for both writing and reading memoir; there is a canon of life writing that such critics as Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, Paul John Eakin, James Olney, and Leigh Gilmore have examined with care and diligence.

As I have illustrated in preceding chapters, the core of the master narrative embedded in these texts is nothing especially new; it is based on confession (with roots in Rousseau) and the seeming readerly desire for an authoritative "I" behind the narrator of memoir, which is a prerequisite for the rebirth of the author following her demise in the critical theory of the 1970s and 80s. And although it is true that the active empathy that memoir provokes does require the reader in order to create the writing/narrating self, the narrating "I" *does* exist—corporeally—and can be sent by her publisher—a representative of the market—out on tour to promote her book. This leads to a collapse of the distinction between writer and work; that is, the writer/narrator and her text merge into one thing to be packaged and sold: Eakin's words resonate. It no longer matters if a narrative is "true" or not. What matters now is conformity to the genre itself. Authenticity, it would seem, has been eclipsed by the material demands of the market.

There exists a caveat, however. What *is* new is that "genre memoir" as a group of texts suggests a strong, collective reaction by publishers (big business) and the reading public—in particular those influenced by Oprah Winfrey—against the fragmentation implicit within postmodernity, in favor of a nostalgia for the perceived authenticity of an earlier time. In this context, self-help/popular therapeutics ultimately comes to function as a kind of evangelism in which the deity is replaced with the notion of a "better" or "best" self. This seeming willingness to obey the traditional trajectory of grand narrative—even within the micronarratives that memoir provides—marks genre memoir as resistant to literary postmodernism, in which Truth is replaced with truths, the problem with history is verification, and, especially within historiographic metafiction, the continuing relevance of fiction and fact as an opposition (Hutcheon 110-13). Postmodern fiction subverts traditional concepts of subjectivity; genre memoir, on the other hand, reifies the bourgeois subject. One clear connection, however, is in the

"general cultural awareness of the existence and power of systems and representation which do not *reflect* society so much as *grant* meaning and value within a particular society" (Hutcheon 7). Genre memoir *grants* meaning and value to the very concepts espoused in self-help, thereby reifying self-help's generic cultural capital.¹²⁷

One can no longer sit blithely on the couch and watch daytime television in order to construct a sense of self; one must go out into the world and make "real changes." And, significantly, instead of blaming others for one's problems (and then forgiving these others)—as we saw in the 1990s—the primary goal here is to accept the self as inherently flawed and in need of work. "Be better" is replaced by "do your best"; Micki McGee's "maudlin exemplar" falls away, to be replaced by a "spiritual exemplar" who illustrates by her example the need for actual, physical travel to accompany her metaphorical soul-searching. Broken is still normal; now, however, our exemplar promises that one can find her *best* self—her healthy, wealthy self—if she so chooses, and if she is grateful, determined, and willing to travel.

¹²⁷ Here, too, I rely on Hutcheon's distinction between "socio-economic periodization and the cultural designation." She describes her desire to show that cultural practices can exist outside of their economic systems, and the corresponding intention to "acknowledge their inevitable implication in capitalism, without relinquishing the power or will to intervene critically in it" (25). One aspect of genre memoir that is difficult to ignore, however, is that it may relinquish power—it may, in fact, be *libertarian*, in the sense that the reliance on the self in these texts leads to selfishness, and to the sale of one's narrative. Nothing exists outside of the market.

Outside the immediate scope of this analysis is one looming question that I hope to take up in future work: does genre memoir resist *philosophical* postmodernity? (Here I consider Lyotard's skepticism toward the totalizing nature of grand narratives and their reliance on "transcendent and universal truth.") The "transcendence" is marked in both the genre memoir and self-help of our current period as a desire to escape one's current condition in order to become more like oneself (as opposed to, say, more like someone else?); the corresponding implication seems to be that "universal truth" lurks within each one of us, and the combination of action and gratitude that I address here might lead us to it.

Chapter 5:

She Exaggerates: Lauren Slater's Subversion of Narrative Authenticity

in *Lying* and *Prozac Diary*

Is it more important to be true or to ring true?
—Timothy Dow Adams, *Telling Lies in American Autobiography*

What I am pleading for is lying in art.
—Oscar Wilde, *The Decay of Lying*

There is no fiction or nonfiction as we commonly understand it: there is only narrative.
—E.L. Doctorow

The small group of texts that comprise the category of postmodern memoir offers a refreshing counterbalance to the genre hegemony inherent within many examples of bestselling memoir. Some threads carry through, however: intertextuality, intersubjectivity, and some acknowledgment of the cultural impetus to “be better” all remain, albeit in ways that differ from these texts’ bestselling counterparts. The questions that I address here return to the nature of authenticity, and what markers of authenticity we find reproduced in the postmodern memoir and, along the same lines, within a metaphorical memoir. As a related question, I wonder to what extent the turn, at least among some readers, from a desire for *authenticity* to a desire for *factuality* has been affected by the instability that the postmodern memoir engenders. The subgenre, like the hoax memoir, operates under the aegis of authenticity: whereas the postmodern memoir poses direct challenges to notions of textual authenticity, however, the hoax memoir *relies* on these notions—and on the authority of its writers—to dupe its readers and

spark outrage in the media.¹²⁸

In a 2012 article in *Biography*, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson examine the “metrics of [textual] authenticity” present in most examples of memoir, including the hoax, in order to illustrate the political implications of “the scandal of the hoax [and how it] shadows contemporary witness narratives” (“Witness” 591). Their interest is in “how particular ‘I’-formations produce, refuse, thematize, or circumvent the politics of authenticity.” They arrive at a series of five metrics that “are produced internally at the intersection of the witness’s singular experiential history and the shared communal discourses and narrative rhetorics through which that experiential history unfolds, and externally through the production, marketing, and circulation of witness narratives” (591, 593). As a way of exploring the political implications inherent within an individual narration of what might be a collective experience, Smith and Watson interrogate what has remained a significant question in the field of life writing: its ethics.

The metrics that they describe, which I will take up here, are the “you-are-there sense of immediacy”; the invocation of rights discourse; the affirmation of the duty to narrate a collective story; the normative shape of victim experience and identity; and the ethno-documentation of cultural specificity (594-5). A sympathetic reader is often asked to “respond with uncritical empathy” as they identify with “those positioned as victims,” which makes “reading itself . . . preparation for an act of rescue,” something that is both vicarious—one cannot rescue someone at such a far distance, at least in a literal sense—and financial. I will focus primarily on their characterization of textual “vulnerabilities that prompt suspicion,” such as the use of dialogue (which, although it is highly improbable that one would remember a conversation that took place

¹²⁸ Here and throughout, I am deliberately conflating “autobiography” and “memoir” under the much larger categories of “creative nonfiction” or “life writing.” For purposes of this argument, because so many of the theorists upon whom I rely employ the word “autobiography” and its derivatives, I will often fall back on this term.

years before the time of writing, generates a sense of immediacy in a text), the deployment of “a paratextual commentator [who attempts] to flesh out the narrator’s vagaries of memory and to acknowledge the difficult struggle to tell a story,” and the use of “evidentiary referents and signposts such as dates and place names” (596-7). Significantly, such rhetorical tropes as dialogue, paratextual commentators, and evidentiary referents are also markers of authenticity, maybe even of factuality. And, yes, we have seen these tropes appear over and over again in the examples of memoir that I analyze here. However, as we will see in Lauren Slater’s texts, these markers can also be employed to confuse a reader, to call forth a kind of *critical* empathy, or to make a much larger point about textual verisimilitude.

Marks of the postmodern memoir can be slippery. Although it shares with bestselling memoir some generic similarities, it reappropriates some of these things. The postmodern memoir is inherently performative; that is, it might work allegorically to illustrate some significant aspect of the society that shaped it. It demonstrates a loss of faith in systems, especially social (family structure, traditional gender roles, etc.), biopolitical (modern medicine, “safe sex,” etc.), and subjective (knowing the self). The postmodern memoir interrogates the limits of established discursive “rules” (tell the truth, do not embellish, have a clear narrator) and shows a “crisis of belief in the possibility of authentic self-expression or objective representation,” and overcompensating accordingly (Waugh 114). On the surface, it attempts to lure a reader into wanting to assemble its fragments into a whole, though it ultimately resists such coherence. Its narrative is nonlinear, and there is often little resolution; unlike bestselling memoir, the postmodern memoir is frequently frustrating in its open-ended (non)closure. It employs parody as a way of “simultaneously destabiliz[ing] and inscrib[ing] the dominant ideology through its (almost overly obvious) interpellation of the spectator as subject in and of

ideology” (Hutcheon 104).¹²⁹ Fundamentally, it does not try to hide—in fact, it might celebrate—the fact that memory is faulty and historical accuracy is impossible, thereby flying in the face of fact-checkers and truth claims. It makes more conscious the master narratives and asks us to understand them in historical context.

Postmodernist writing, on the whole, tends to stress that “humans desperately (and ultimately unsuccessfully) cling to illusions of security to conceal and forget the void over which their lives are perched” (Bedford 360). Hutcheon’s description of historiographic metafiction highlights the ways in which postmodernist writing foregrounds the apparatus; that is, it “[de-doxifies] . . . the construction of the individual bourgeois subject” (138). Hutcheon insists that, for postmodernist writing, “subjectivity is represented as something in process, never fixed and never . . . outside history” (37). As we consider the microhistories that many examples of memoir provide, then, we must remember the history of the genre itself and what it purports to *do*. If subjectivity is never fixed and never outside of history, and yet the genre relies on subjectivity—however slippery it may be—and on the subject’s history, then memoir that is firmly rooted in postmodernity but simultaneously makes claims to authenticity or to wholeness becomes suspect. Then again, Andreas Hyussen describes history itself as the search for cultural identity and “reality” as a bourgeois concept; for him, mass culture is the homogenization of difference, so it becomes instructive to examine examples of mass culture that *stress* this difference. The point, for Hyussen and for such writers as Lauren Slater, is “not to eliminate the productive tension between the political and the aesthetic, between history and the text, between engagement and the mission of art,” but to “heighten that tension, even to rediscover it and to bring it back into focus” (220-21). The postmodern memoir, by virtue of its status as an example

¹²⁹ Here, Hutcheon is talking specifically about film, but this idea of destabilization and simultaneous inscription is relevant to the discursive structure of postmodern memoir, too.

of historiography that intentionally violates—even parodizes—conventions of life writing, thereby placing tension on those conventions and on the grand narratives that, in some circumstances, beget them.

Hutcheon's *The Politics of Postmodernism* suggests a belief in the possibility of genuine agency, accessible via the narrative tropes of postmodern writing. In the text (and in contrast to Fredric Jameson, who motors much of my thinking throughout this project), she describes her belief that postmodernism's "complicitous critique . . . situates [it] squarely within both economic capitalism and cultural humanism—two of the major dominants of much of the western world (13). Like Jameson, she asserts that "[p]ostmodernism is a phenomenon whose mode is resolutely contradictory as well as unavoidably political" (1). She sees ideology (in the Althusserian sense) as a "necessary and unavoidable part of every social totality," and she characterizes postmodernist art and fiction as occupying the space where "documentary historical actuality meets formalist self-reflexivity and parody" (6-7). Within this, she grants value to positions that pose challenges to this space but simultaneously could be encouraging the reification of artificial categories of identity. Hutcheon breaks "the direction of politics" into two, seemingly opposed categories. The big political question, for her, is whether a work is "neoconservatively nostalgic or . . . radically revolutionary" (12).

Hutcheon's work on historiographic metafiction, or intensely self-reflexive texts in which there is a clear interpretation of past events, is well-known. She's also interested in what she calls "fringe constructions," something that is applicable here given the textual implications of authenticity—and of challenging the very notion of authenticity. Although Hutcheon describes these constructions in her analysis of postmodern photography, such constructions are also applicable to narrative, particularly in a political context. She writes that

[Fringe constructions] combine the visual and the verbal, mass media and high art, artistic practice and aesthetic theory, and, in particular *in the spots where these apparent opposites overlap and interfere both with each other and with mainstream notions of 'art.'* The postmodern . . . process interrogates and problematizes, leaving the viewer no comfortable viewing position. . . . [It investigates] the borders along which [limits] can be opened, subverted, altered by the other in new ways. . . . And, one of the most insistent of [the works'] demands involves coming to terms with the theoretical and political implications of what has too often been seen as an empty, formal play of codes. (114, emphasis mine)

This bears quoting at such length because, as we will see, the examples of memoir that I read here make this happen, albeit to different degrees and ends. Hutcheon's direct investigation of the political nature of what might be considered a hedonistic, play-centered version of postmodernism illuminates the political thrust of postmodern fiction *and* the postmodern memoir. Leaving viewers/readers with "no comfortable viewing position" suggests that this kind of art/narrative directly challenges an audience's aesthetic—and maybe political—sensibilities.

The connections between epistemology and ontology become blurry. We might consider, for example, Brian McHale's insistence that "postmodernist fiction" is based on the dominant—following Jakobson—of ontology, deploying such questions as "Which world is this? What is to be done in it? Which of my selves is to do it?" alongside deeply ontological questions such as "[w]hat is a world? What kinds of worlds are there, how are they constituted, and how do they differ? What is the mode of existence of a text, and what is the mode of existence of the world (or worlds) it projects?" (10). However, there is an epistemological question lurking beneath the surface: how do we *know* when something is "authentic," or even true? How do we

establish the difference between authenticity and factuality, or has that difference eroded? All of these questions loom large. Fundamentally, the postmodern memoir must “project at least one internal field of reference . . . constructed in and by the text itself” (29) and, like its fictional counterpart, “does hold the mirror up to reality” while *acknowledging* that “that reality . . . is plural” (39). Reality is plural: realities. Subjectivity is plural: subjectivities. Along the same lines, might authenticity be plural—*authenticities*?

A significant question exists surrounding authorial presence and absence. McHale describes the “oscillation” between them as what “characterizes the postmodernist author.” He outlines the “epistemological uncertainty” that, at some point, becomes “ontological plurality or instability,” which demands existential questioning about the universe itself, in addition to the kinds of subjectivities inherent in bestselling memoir. We might begin to consider what the dominant of memoir/autobiography is, and trace connections between that and McHale’s “plurality of the universe” (27). “Postmodernist fictions,” he writes, “are often fictions about the order of things, discourses which reflect upon the worlds of discourse,” and this can certainly be said about both the postmodern memoir and the hoax, in which narrators seem to be experiencing existential crises of a kind, whether intra- or paratextual. Slater’s protagonist in *Lying: A Metaphorical Memoir*, for example, narrates few lucid moments, and the ones she does experience might be grounded in realizations that are ultimately rooted in misperception. These occurrences often accompany a shift in her spatial orientation or mark a moment when her experiences with temporal lobe seizures begin to function as a covert metaphor for *something*—but what? Questioning the metaphor leads us to question the narrators: who are they? What are they up to? Why create such a labyrinthine structure within a relatively short memoir?

The answers to these questions are problematic. As Timothy Dow Adams compellingly

argues, nearly any example of memoir “clearly indicate[s] that no definition can outwit the modern author, no solid distinction can or ought to be made between confession, autobiographical novel, mock autobiography, or autobiography, even though we can sometimes isolate nearly perfect specimens of each” (7). And, in 1990, he might have been correct. All told, however, the kind of generic ambiguity that Adams thinks is inherent in life writing seems largely to have eroded, at least within most bestselling examples of the genre. Slater’s texts, however, support his statement that “[m]odern autobiographers . . . want to keep the reader guessing about the precise degree of fictionality within their text” (8). Such rhetorical tropes as disclaimers (“I’ve done my best to remember the facts but cannot possibly succeed”), in-line questioning on the part of a narrator (Mary Karr’s *The Liars’ Club* provides a good example of this), and the devices we will see, in particular within *Lying: A Metaphorical Memoir*, do keep an astute reader guessing.

Here I seek to come full circle, and to uncover what markers of textual authenticity are present in memoir as a whole that simultaneously find themselves in two of Lauren Slater’s better-known texts, 1998’s *Prozac Diary* and 2000’s *Lying: A Metaphorical Memoir*. How do these markers operate? What effects might this have on a reader yearning to empathize with a subjective account of a writer’s life? Significantly, I also ask: why do we now need the solidity of self that memoir provides, and in what ways might both the postmodern memoir and the hoax challenge this need? Why is it so disruptive to pose such a challenge? Both of these subgenres pose a direct threat to therapeutic discourse—they undercut the grand narrative for one to “be her best (whole) self,” the master narrative that demands authentic confession, and the grand hallucination of a unified, stable, authentic subject.

Deeply fragmented in text, paratext, or subject matter, the postmodern memoir

underscores the need to reconsider the notion of wholeness, whether that notion be embedded in the self-as-written or in the cultural narrative surrounding a text. Dave Eggers's *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*, for example, which he suggests we "pretend [is] fiction," is noteworthy first for its front and back matter, which pose all kinds of challenges to the questions of authenticity and nostalgia that present themselves here, and also to its deviation, after the first 123 pages, from a relatively straightforward narrative trajectory.¹³⁰ *Prozac Diary* seeks to narrate Slater's experiences as one of the first people to take the massively successful Eli Lilly anti-depressant. And *Lying: A Metaphorical Memoir* manages to incorporate aspects of the postmodern memoir, the hoax, and the spiritual memoir—another subgenre of life writing—much to the infuriation of many readers and critics. Its status as a hybrid in this sense provokes me to analyze it at length, especially combined with its willful violation of the "rules" of memoir, to which Slater seemingly adheres in *Prozac Diary*. Slater's texts, especially when viewed together, directly challenge the tenets of authenticity, the idea that one might create a coherent sense of self in narrative, and the notion that solidity of self, or "wholeness," is possible. More fundamentally, they illustrate the futility of attempting to represent in language thoughts and experiences that are mediated by both time and memory.

Going with Her: Slater's Problematic Authenticities

"Come with me, reader," Lauren Slater requests in her 2000 *Lying: A Metaphorical Memoir*, a text that is, on the surface, a memoir of temporal lobe epilepsy.¹³¹ "I am toying with

¹³⁰ Full disclosure: I originally intended to read *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* alongside *Lying: A Metaphorical Memoir*, but became so immersed in Slater's world that I would have been doing Eggers a disservice.

¹³¹ This is the American title. The British title is *Spasm: A Memoir with Lies*.

you, yes, but for a real reason. I am asking you to enter the confusion with me, to give up the ground with me, because sometimes that frightening floaty place is really the truest of all. . . . Enter that lostness with me” (163). If we go with her, we enter strange places where things are not at all what they seem; we cannot assume that what we know about reading memoir applies to this book. Slater includes several markers of authenticity: dialogue appears with regularity, as do paratextual commentators who testify to the veracity of her text. Evidentiary references and signposts are everywhere; Slater includes several embedded texts with seemingly correct citations, along with geographic locations that are specific enough to be verifiable. Under scrutiny, though, we find a house of cards that falls apart and that subsequently poses direct challenges to any conflation of authenticity with factuality.

The cerebral demands that Slater places upon us begin in the first chapter of her text when she tells us, simply: “I exaggerate” (3)—what is a reader to make of a memoirist who seemingly is so honest, so willing to divulge her exaggerations from the very beginning? The relatively short text that follows this warning—221 smallish pages—is, ostensibly, an illness-memoir about epilepsy, though it is also about Slater’s relationship with her parents and with the medical community. It is also about adolescence and her difficult transition from childhood to adulthood. It might be about depression and/or anxiety. It is also, as the title suggests, about lying, about authenticity, and about what happens when capital-T Truth falls under erasure, in favor of a peculiar combination of emotional and spiritual truths that may or may not be factually accurate. In some ways, then, it is a memoir about memoir, about writing, about readers’ expectations and writers’ responses to those expectations, and about what Slater calls “one point” that postmodernism makes: “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” (219).

The text begins with a paratextual commentator, a USC Professor of Philosophy named Hayward Kreiger. He suggests, in the introduction, that he has known Slater as a writer since she published *Welcome to My Country*, her 1997 memoir about being a therapist who works with schizophrenics.¹³² He calls *Lying* a “daring mediation on creative nonfiction . . . at once entertaining and disturbing,” which it proves to be. His suggestion that we “enter with her a new kind of Heideggerian truth” is the first play on the generic conventions of memoir—for Heidegger, we might recall, truth (or what he called *aletheia*) is about disclosure, about how things appear in the world, and therefore linked less to *fact* and more to *interpretation*. Right off the bat, then, readers enter what Kreiger calls “the truth of the liminal, the not-knowing, the truth of confusion,” which “yields us greater wisdom . . . than packaged and parceled facts” (n.p.). This marks the text as a meta-commentary on truth, on fact, on authenticity, on interpretation. Whether we choose to go with Slater is up to us; where we end up is a matter of how we interpret her definition of truth.

This paratextual commentator is performative. Hayward Kreiger does not exist, at least not as a philosophy professor at USC. We know this because journalists have done their homework and fact-checked the memoir; this is the first “untruth” in the text. Or it could be that Kreiger is lying, too: later in the text, one of Slater’s doctors reminds us that Slater had made claims about her communications with him since she was about thirteen years old, or some twenty years before *Welcome to My Country*. Slippery stuff, indeed, and this kind of slippage

¹³² *Welcome to My Country*, Slater’s first book, is a memoir about her experiences as a clinical psychologist who works with schizophrenics; it is more about them and less about her. Other, more recent Slater-authored texts include 2002’s *Love Works Like This: Moving from One Kind of Life to Another*, 2005’s *Opening Skinner’s Box: Great Psychological Experiments of the Twentieth Century*, 2012’s *The \$60,000 Dog: My Life with Animals*, and the forthcoming (2013) *Playing House: Notes of a Reluctant Mother*.

marks Slater's pack of narrators as decidedly unreliable. Her second seemingly-reliable character/signpost, neurologist Dr. Carlos Neu, does not exist, either—at least not as a neurologist. Fact-checking reveals that Carlos Neu is a Boston psychiatrist who receives mixed reviews on various rate-your-doctor websites, which I discovered by performing a simple Google search. According to reviewers, his bedside manner is not at all what Slater describes (the words "kind" and "gentle" do not appear). And yet, as I write this, I refer to them as "Kreiger" and "Neu"—the text will have it no other way.

Slater describes her first encounter with Dr. Neu in one of the many embedded texts in the book, a letter to the reader which is dated January 18, 1998.¹³³ She begins the letter describing the relationship she had with God at the age of ten and had "learned to fall" correctly in Topeka, Kansas, under the care of several nuns at a hospital called St. Christopher's.¹³⁴ She writes that she "knew God when [she] was ten," thus establishing a thread that comes back later in the text—Slater's zealous relationship with God, whether that God be Christian or Jewish, is for Dr. Neu a sign of temporal lobe epilepsy and its accompanying behavioral symptoms. The letter goes on to describe how her mother, with whom she has had a strained relationship, "turned into a writer of maxims" at that time; these maxims are familiar to anyone who has ever read a self-help text or had experience with therapeutic discourse: "'Dress for the position you want,' she wrote, 'not the one you have,' and 'If it's not a beautiful morning, let your cheerfulness make it one'" (63). Slater situates this in 1976, when "all over the country love was

¹³³ This letter pre-dates the publication of *Prozac Diary* by nearly eight months. The first edition of *Prozac Diary* appeared on August 18, 1998. Nearly everything in *Lying* is a retelling of the medical history Slater provides in *Prozac Diary*.

¹³⁴ St. Christopher is the patron saint of travel; according to Catholic and Eastern Orthodox doctrine, wearing a medal with his depiction will protect the wearer from harm while traveling. This, of course, could be yet another metaphor, as could "learning to fall."

flowering”; the sad irony, of course, is that Slater’s mother is miserable through much of the text, seemingly immune to her own platitudes.¹³⁵

As her mother is writing these maxims, which she sends to “Hallmark, to poetry contests listed in the back of *Good Housekeeping*, Slater is going “down, down into adolescent sickness and skin, down into daily seizures” (63), doing cruel things, and even lying about having cancer in order to make friends (66). She begins to steal, too, which Dr. Neu will later tell us, in his medical-journal article that Slater embeds in her text, is one of the signs of her disorder. She describes all of this in the familiar-to-the-genre language of descent and loss. Even at menarche, Slater claims that she “kept waiting for an emotion or two, but all [she] could feel was worried that [she] didn’t have an emotion, or two” (72). She had lost everything, or so it seemed—her social life, her body, her mother. The only thing she had left by the time she met Dr. Neu were her pre-seizure auras, which were “with [her] almost constantly after [she got her] period, states of light and sizzle, states of joy and trees, states of dread laced through with terrific sweet smells” (72).¹³⁶

Beth Israel Hospital in Boston, which functions as a geographic signpost of authenticity—that is, the location is verifiable, as is her time in Boston—is where she first meets Dr. Neu. Slater writes, in the letter to her readers, that “everyone . . . should read the work of Dr. Neu, because he understands the philosophy of neurology,” something that Hayward Kreiger appears to understand, too. On their first meeting, Dr. Neu stimulates Slater’s brain with an

¹³⁵ In *Prozac Diary*, Slater’s case notes appear within sections called “Letter to my Doctor.” In one of them, Slater’s mother is described as having a “possible Axis II diagnosis.” This, according to the *DSM-IV*, suggests a personality disorder of some kind (71).

¹³⁶ An aura, according to *Epilepsy.com*, is a “distinctive feeling or some other warning sign when a seizure is coming” which varies “significantly between different people” and includes “changes in bodily sensations” that might be “embarrassing or weird.”

electrical stimulator (a drawing of which Slater includes in the text, apparently to show us that it really existed); shortly after this, Slater describes “the real and the reflected, the true and the false [getting] mixed up and merg[ing] together” (79), which reveals itself to be a major theme of the text. Where the true ends and the false begins is tricky.

One of the hallmarks of the memoir of abjection, a category which we might extend in this context to include illness memoir, is its ability to function as a kind of self-help for a reader. An actively-empathizing reader might find her feelings of alienation diminished when she reads a narrative that describes a different kind of alienation, which she can feel into in order to make active changes to her own life. The obvious (and clearly intentional) slippage between true and false in Slater’s narrative, however, forecloses active empathy; the text’s insistence in dismantling grand narratives of all kinds, from *gnothi seauton* to confession to the Cartesian subject itself, produces instead a kind of *critical empathy*. That is, we realize that something terrible has happened to Lauren Slater, but we simultaneously begin to understand that the something isn’t what it seems.

At one point, for example, as Slater is describing her time in the hospital following exploratory brain surgery, she acknowledges mental illness, not a neurological condition, as a possibility, which trips up a reader looking to empathize with her stories about epilepsy:

Maybe I was becoming mentally ill. Actually, I was becoming mentally ill. If you’ve read my other books—and I have written other books, *Prozac Diary* and *Welcome to My Country*, which I suggest you run out and buy—you would know that mental problems have been issues throughout my life.

Is epilepsy mental or is it physical? (81)

Is it mental or physical? Is it real or imagined? True or made-up? The fact that she follows this

with a description of stealing a baby from the emergency room might suggest that, for the Slater in this text, it's mental—for both her reader and for her. Dr. Neu suggests that Slater have brain surgery that will sever her corpus callosum, a procedure that she describes in detail; and afterwards she steals a baby, with one caveat: "I didn't want the baby, but to be the baby," she writes (85). She never really stole a baby. It's a(nother) lie.

At this point in the letter, Slater reveals that she became a kleptomaniac at this time, and that she began to frequent different emergency rooms and, using fake names, cause herself to have seizures. She even shifts to third-person at this point in the text: "'I am epileptic,' Juliette said. She showed the nurses her epilepsy bracelet. 'I have seizures all the time. I'm fine'" (87). As if this weren't confusing enough, at least when questions of authenticity are concerned, Slater then drops a bomb, or what she calls "a little hoary truth in this tricky tale." That summer, the summer she turned thirteen, Slater claims that she "developed Munchausen's on top of [her] epilepsy." She follows this with another direct address to her reader, embedded within the letter to her reader:

[Y]ou must consider this, I ask you to please consider this—perhaps Munchausen's is all I ever had. Perhaps I was, and still am, a pretender, a person who creates illnesses because she needs time, attention, touch, because she knows no other way of telling her life's tale. Munchausen's is a fascinating psychiatric disorder, its sufferers makers of myths that are still somehow true, the illness a conduit to convey real pain. (88)

By this point, a reader might be thoroughly confused. Does Slater have epilepsy? Does she have Munchausen's? Does she have both? She follows this plea with quotations from *The British Journal of Psychiatry*, *The Journal of Existential Psychiatry*, and *The Annals of Psychiatry*,

medical journals whose titles sound authentic enough. But the journals don't really exist; the titles are either wrong (one word might be off) or completely made-up. For example, *The Annals of Psychiatry* could be *The Annals of General Psychiatry*, or it could be *The Annals of Clinical Psychiatry*. Slater's appropriation of—maybe playing with—Munchausen's, and the embedded definitions from these ostensibly credible sources provokes a reader, even me, someone who cares much less about verifying facts than she does about narrative verisimilitude, to fact-check her.¹³⁷

Munchausen syndrome, according to the Mayo Clinic, is closely related to obsessive-compulsive disorder, the treatment for which Slater describes in her more straightforward *The Prozac Diaries*. The Mayo Clinic describes Munchausen syndrome as a condition in which “symptoms revolve around faking or producing illness or injury in order to meet deep emotional needs.” People with the condition often go to great lengths “to avoid discovery of their deception,” which makes it “difficult to notice that their symptoms are actually part of a serious mental disorder.” Tellingly, the criteria for diagnosis include several things that also appear in Slater's text, namely “dramatic stories about numerous medical problems,” “vague or inconsistent symptoms,” “extensive knowledge of medical terminology and diseases,” which Slater displays with her self-authored medical-journal articles, “seeking treatment from many different hospitals or doctors,” which we might extend in this context to include “readers,” and “conditions that get worse for no apparent reason,” which happens with both epilepsy and

¹³⁷ G. Thomas Couser, in “Disability as Metaphor: What's Wrong with *Lying*,” provides a scathing critique of Slater's memoir. He contends that, by appropriating epilepsy as a rhetorical trope, Slater strips those who actually have epilepsy of agency. He argues that this is dangerous, especially given that epilepsy is a condition that is 1) still vastly misunderstood and under-researched, and 2) “has been a particularly and peculiarly stigmatic condition throughout history” (150). Although I take his point, I believe that he's missing Slater's point, depending on what and where the metaphor is in her text. See his article in *Prose Studies* 27:1-2, 141-154.

Munchausen's itself in Slater's text.

But if she's lying about the Munchausen's, if it's a metaphor, then what?

One of the aliases that Slater uses in *Lying* is "Jean Levy," who also appears in one of the fake Munchausen's articles, from *The Annals of Psychiatry*, that bears quoting at length because of what it reveals about Slater's text:

Jean Levy . . . had absolutely no physiological evidence of any epileptic activity.

On the one hand, she had rather masterfully succeeded in convincing people that she suffered from temporal lobe seizures, to the point where she wrote and published an account of her illness, and yet on the other hand, she prominently placed a book entitled *Patient or Pretender* on the shelf in her hospital room. This child was bright, engaging, and extremely convincing; like most Munchausen's patients, she was an excellent storyteller, well versed in what Adorno so aptly called 'the jargon of authenticity.' Munchausen's patients have learned to convey authenticity to their audiences precisely by admitting to a limited number of lies.

(90)

This is key, and not only because Marc D. Feldman's *Patient or Pretender* was published in 1995, well outside the period in her life that *Lying* narrates. Jean Levy appears later in the text, when Slater is applying to a writer's workshop, and Levy mirrors Slater here, too. She "masterfully succeeded in convincing people" that she had seizures, something that she has done up and to this point in *Lying*. Levy "wrote and published an account of her illness," which *Lying* is, as is the earlier *Prozac Diary*. She is an "excellent storyteller" who is clearly well-versed in the jargon of authenticity, as is Slater. Levy and Slater both admit to "a limited number of lies." By admitting to a limited number of lies, a writer further dupes a reader—if she acknowledges

that *some* things are untrue, as so many writers of memoir do in their disclaimers, forewords, and afterwords, it makes sense that readers would believe the rest. But what of Lauren Slater, what of her claims to exaggeration? Is “I exaggerate” a lie, too? And, significantly, is she suggesting that memoir *itself* has Munchausen’s?

The last part of the letter to the reader describes Slater’s brain surgery, in which Dr. Neu severs her corpus callosum, thereby “disconnecting the left and right hemispheres” of her brain. She returns, in these final pages of the letter, to how she views her mother: “She had such high hopes, she must have entered life with such a lunge, and now, at this midpoint, what?” Significantly, Slater also shows us that she doesn’t get a sense of love from her mother, which is a risk factor for Munchausen’s and something that we see in various other examples of contemporary memoir: “Once she had watched me seize with something like love in her eyes. But I had been younger then, and so had she” (93). At this point in the text, Slater describes feeling bad about having made her epilepsy seem worse than it was, but instead she “said nothing, half from fear, half from confusion.” She goes on:

I had always believed there could be two truths, truth A and truth B, but in my mind truth A sat on top of truth B, or vice versa. In this instance, however, I had epilepsy, truth A, and I had faked epilepsy, truth B, and A and B were placed in a parallel position, instead of one over the other, so I couldn’t decide. (93-4).

This reflects the two truths that, at this point in the text, a reader thinks she knows. Either Lauren Slater has epilepsy, truth A, or she has faked epilepsy, truth B, and yet the “parallel position” that they occupy forecloses a decision either way. Anyone who has read *Prozac Diary* might even acknowledge the possibility of truth C: that Slater is rewriting her medical history in order to make a larger point about readers’ consumption of illness narrative, and maybe about memoir as

a genre.

What is wrong with Lauren Slater? Maybe epilepsy. Maybe Munchausen syndrome. Maybe depression. She might be a victim of abuse. Maybe nothing is “wrong” with her. At the end of this section of the text, Slater returns to naming as a rhetorical trope. As Dr. Neu is operating on her brain, an operation that does not require general anesthesia, given that the brain itself does not have nerves that feel pain, “the whole time . . . it was Lauren who hung on to the sound of her cry, a sound without pretense or mask, true-tongued and absolutely absolute—remember this, remember this, no, not you, Juliette, not you, Bobby, not Maria or Kayla or April or June but Lauren—“ (97). Then she reminds us that this is a letter, one that is signed “Love, Lauren.” Here, it’s as if she’s promising that the rest of the text will be *Lauren Slater’s* text, that it will be true and absolute. This, of course, is not the case. Later in the text, for example, Slater gives another puzzling clue that involves names: “My name is Lauren,” she writes. “I go by no other. In the story you have before you, I am not a novelist's character; I am my best approximation of me. I am not a fiction, but nor am I a fact, because a fact implies a literalness, a fact implies permanence, and someday I shall die. . . . This is true, yes” (164). One wonders, therefore, whether the times in the text when she refers to herself by another name, which happens with great frequency, are lies, or if they're embellishments, or if they're metaphors.

Immediately following the letter to her reader is yet another embedded text, an article called “The Biopsychosocial Consequences of a Corpus Callostomy in the Pediatric Patient,” written by Dr. Carlos Neu, M.D., and Patricia Robinson, P.T. The article is fascinating for what it says, for concepts it introduces that come back later, and for the way it brings these first 100 pages of the text together. Of course, it’s later revealed (by a counselor at Brandeis, which Slater claims to have attended) that half of the pseudo-medical terms in the article don’t even exist:

they're made up by Slater, who is attempting to sound authentic while simultaneously unleashing a meta-critique of the medical establishment. Neu writes that "a significant number of patients" with temporal lobe epilepsy, including a patient called only "LDS" (Lauren D. Slater) in the text, display a series of dysfunctional character traits that include a tendency toward exaggeration and even downright disingenuousness (mythomania), hypergraphia, hyperreligiosity, and emotional lability. . . . Psychologically speaking, such patients are oftentimes deeply concerned with religious/spiritual issues, display artistic proclivities that include excessive writing and, in some cases, that are so prone to fabrications that they themselves are no longer able to determine where fact and fiction meet. (99)

Mythomania, the medical term for compulsive/pathological lying, is something that by this point in the text we suspect Slater to have. Examples of Slater's hypergraphia, or excessive writing, are yet to come, as are examples of hyperreligiosity. The question that arises in this passage is whether Slater/LDS is "able to determine where fact and fiction meet," or whether this is better turned back onto the reader: is Slater satirizing memoir, or is she suggesting that *everyone* fabricates the past? In this embedded article, Neu goes on to describe "LDS" and her relationship with "a Hayward Kreiger," with whom "she discussed Ouspensky ideas," and who Neu was unable to locate, which "only further underscores the diagnosis" (101).¹³⁸

¹³⁸ P.D. Ouspensky, a twentieth century Russian philosopher, demanded "the utmost honesty" in his works, which include a treatise on truth called *Conscience: the Search for Truth* and *Tertium Organum: A Key to the Enigmas of the World*, in which Ouspensky asserts that "language is a weak and inadequate vehicle even for the expression of our usual understanding of things, to say nothing of those moments when the understanding unexpectedly expands and becomes deeper" (xiii). Throughout, Ouspensky explores the nature of consciousness and wishes to separate it from the "commonly understood psychic functions: thought, feeling, and sensation" (xiv). His work is decidedly epistemological: "The most difficult thing," he writes, "is to know what we do know, and what we do not know" (11).

If we want to fact-check the Dr. Neu aspect of the memoir, we discover that Slater might be telling one truth when she describes being under Neu's care, and when she says that she is mentally ill—one version of her medical history, told in *Prozac Diary*, suggests that she was hospitalized for psychiatric reasons at about the same time she claims that Dr. Neu operated on her brain. But the very fact that I, as someone who has posited that authenticity and factuality are vastly different beasts and that to conflate them is misguided, would search databases to confirm the factual truthfulness of Slater's embedded texts, suggests that something in the narrative, in spite of its incorporation of seemingly-authentic tales and going beyond its troubling title, is making significant demands on a reader steeped in the rhetoric of authenticity and factuality. Though Dr. Neu's article is fake—a Dr. Carlos Neu did publish a few articles in the 1970s and 80s, though they were about psychopharmacology, not neurology—the fact that it describes the use of "cognitive restructuring techniques: Patient taught to restructure negative self-talk with positive or reality-based statements as exemplified by the work of A. Beck (1984)" is fascinating. Slater is twisting this; we must wonder what the "reality" in these "reality-based statements" really is.¹³⁹ The section that follows the "article" by Dr. Neu, Slater tells a different version of the same story; she narrates the diagnosis; she asserts her narrative agency in the telling of her medical history.

In several ways, Slater's text demands that we reconsider the "mistake of confusing the writer with her words," in spite of the fact that she so insistently names herself throughout it (122). This becomes most apparent when she describes her experiences at the Bread Loaf writer's workshop, for which she gains admittance under the name Jean Levy, having been

¹³⁹ Aaron Beck published a book in 1985 called *Anxiety Disorders and Phobias: A Cognitive Perspective*. Slater's use of this text makes more sense in the context of *Prozac Diary*, which describes the phobias ("the fear") she developed in early adolescence.

rejected as “Lauren Slater.” The workshop marks the first time she’d gotten along with her peers—they “were the first girls who . . . were either rejects like me or so completely artistic that they had transcended all adolescent categories” (118), and the beginning of a dysfunctional sexual relationship with an older writer, whom she calls Christopher in the text, and to whom she reveals that her *actual* name is “Lauren Jean.” The relationship with Christopher lasts for several months, during which time Lauren becomes obsessed with writing, and with the writer. At this point in the text, Slater describes feeling bad about having lied through omission to her Bread Loaf peers about the epilepsy: “Lying is lonely. No one knows you. When people are interested in you, you understand it’s for false reasons, and you get depressed. . . . 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” (133).¹⁴⁰

In addition to functioning as a larger metaphor for Slater’s experiences with writing, Christopher also comes to double for the reader and is therefore another performative character. Throughout the text, Slater makes direct addresses to her readers, which are mostly pleas for us to “go with her” on this metaphorical journey. At one point, as Slater is describing the cognitive dissonance she experiences when she has one eye closed, she makes an interesting observation about an apple that might serve as a metaphor for both her text and her reader:

I might be reading a book, and close my left eye, and see before me not words but
a scrabble of black ants in a meaningless march. Or I would hold an apple in my

¹⁴⁰ Before this, she discovered writing and had her first orgasm while writing, which suggests a sexual dimension to Slater’s experiences with writing that may undercut Christopher as a “factual” character: “One day, when I was typing a story for an English class, I had an aura that ended in an orgasm. I pressed the *Q* key, and heat went through me; I pressed the *U* key, and the heat turned into a sweaty shiver, and I came to the sound of *I-E-T*, *quiet*, clack, *quiet*, and each pulse of pleasure was a word, and the words were turquoise” (111).

right hand. . . . With both eyes open I knew I held an apple, but with my left eye closed, again, I could not name the apple, or eat the apple, and so there was no apple.

And so there was no apple.

And so there was no Christopher.

And so there is no you. (146).

Within the context of what happens next with Christopher, a series of confluences of sex and writing, this becomes a deeply troubling metaphor. She tells us that they "fucked the whole time" in a motel room; she had brought him ten stories to read, and "he read one, we fucked, he read another, we fucked again, until we'd fucked ten times over the course of the weekend. . . . With both eyes open, I saw language as a bridge across the chasm; we could cross. We did" (149). They engage in anal sex, which hurts her initially; when she asks him to stop, however, he demands that she tell him: "'Which one?' he said, his voice hoarse, almost ugly. 'Which do you want, Lauren Jean? Stop or start?'" She tells him to "do it," and he does; and "while [she] felt split [she] also felt full, held, bound by a touch irrevocable" (150). If we read Christopher as a double for her reader, the inevitable conclusion here is that her *reader* is the one who "split" her but who binds her by a "touch irrevocable." Her *reader* is why she is doing these things—and by "these things" I mean both the account in the text and the very writing of it. It might be her *reader* who, metaphorically, "pushed deeper in," causing "a sharpness, a dark red flame of pain" in her. This might be the point; the "butt sex," as she puts it, marks a turning point for her, in which the two hemispheres of her brain are joined, and yet she begins to do things like plagiarize Colette in her writing, which makes her feel "terrible, fraudulent," but, Slater writes, "I . . . believed I needed to do whatever I needed to do to keep him impressed" (152). Therefore, the act

of writing joins the two Lauren Slaters. *We* are the Christopher whom she needs to keep impressed, and this need to impress explains the complicated web that she weaves.

In what follows, Slater provides yet another embedded text, a section called "How to Market This Book," ostensibly addressed to her editor and publisher. This part of the text cements my reading of Christopher-as-metaphor; in it, she directly addresses the nature of memoir:

This is a difficult book, I know. . . . The seizures are real or something else. I am epileptic or I have Munchausen's. 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, they wouldn't know where to put the product, and it would wind up in the back alley or a tin trash can with ants and other vermin. (159-60)

Still more metaphors. In this passage, she directs us back to the "truth A or truth B" question, in addition to making reference to the brain ("gray matter") as the "something in between" fact and fiction. Its hybrid status might mark it as "vermin," or something threatening, uncategorizable, parasitic. Again: this is the point. She goes on to assert that 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" (164). When we narrate, we lie.

In her 1998 *Prozac Diary*, Slater makes some of the same moves she makes in *Lying*: there are lots of geographical signposts, scenes with dialogue, carefully described places and experiences, and embedded texts. The language, true to Slater's style, is smooth and poetic, with lots of metaphor. There is a standard disclaimer that would seem completely straightforward to

someone who hasn't read *Lying*: "the names of the characters in this memoir have been changed, as have some details about them and the events recounted here" (n.p.). This is what such disclaimers are made of, and it's not especially alarming in this context.

Prozac Diary provides a counterbalance to the memoir of abjection that so fully took root in the 1990s. In many ways, it is about *healing*, not about illness; although Slater describes depression here and there and hints at having been abused by her mother, the text is *about* getting better. It's about her relationships with who she calls "Eli" and "Lilly" (Eli Lilly owned the patent on Prozac until a generic version became available in 2001), and with herself.¹⁴¹ It also, chronologically and thematically, sets a reader up to be even more confused by Slater's next book, *Lying*. Throughout *Prozac Diary*, Slater's descriptions of depression—which, according to this text, started for her at the age of six or seven—are overshadowed by her descriptions of wellness, which she attributes to Prozac. She is not entirely uncritical; one side-effect of the drug, for Slater, is an almost-complete loss of her creativity, which concerns her as much as the sexual side effects that are common with SSRIs do. In *Lying*, of course, we come to question nearly everything Slater's narrators are showing us, because it doesn't align with what they're telling us; *Diary* is, it would seem, a more straightforward memoir.

At one especially compelling moment in *Diary*, Slater describes how she got her first white-collar job: she made up a work history and crafted a resume, which "remains, to date, one of [her] finest pieces of fiction" (55). Having nearly conquered her crushing depression rendered her able to lie in a functional way, albeit one that was also creative. One wonders, then, if her ability to lie so convincingly is somehow linked to her mental health; I would go so far as to say this is likely a deliberate decision on her part, though this is of course very tricky.

¹⁴¹ I will abbreviate Slater's texts as follows: *Lying: A Metaphorical Memoir* will be *Lying*, and *Prozac Diary* will be *Diary*.

Attempts to fact-check *Lying* against *Prozac Diary* reveal discrepancies which are, I think, the point. The act of fact-checking a memoir, Slater seems to be saying, is an exercise in futility, given that *Lying* is "a book that takes up residence in the murky gap between genres and, by its stubborn self-position there, forces us to consider important things" (*Lying* 161). In *Prozac Diary*, Slater describes her first hospitalization, which occurred for psychiatric problems and not neurological ones, as occurring when she was fourteen years old; in *Lying*, she is cruising emergency rooms for sympathy at the age of fourteen. In *Lying*, Slater does not describe having any siblings; in *Diary*, she claims to have had two sisters, whom her mother loved more: "compared with my sisters," she writes, "I was badly behaved" (83). *Lying* purports to be a memoir of her experiences with epilepsy; *Diary*, at one point, describes her "quite normal" neurological PET scan. A technician looks at the scan and tells her that "'Everyone's brain is colorful like this. The problem comes when you have too much color concentrated in one area. . . . But not here'" (95). In *Lying*, Slater describes her sudden interest in spirituality as a product of her TLE symptoms; *Diary* attributes it to depression and suggests that Prozac caused her to "see Prozac's point of view, which posits God as a matter of molecules and witchcraft as a neural mishap" (107).

A significant continuity between the two texts is the language Slater uses in her descriptions of surgical procedures. In *Diary*, Slater visits a doctor for an abortion after a one-night stand that may have been a rape (though she's not clear about how she views it). Slater isn't pregnant, but the doctor does discover an irregularity: "'Even though you are a sexually active twenty-six-year-old, you are still, medically speaking, a virgin,'" the doctor tells her; her hymen is still intact, which isn't "normal." She pictures her hymen in her mind as the doctor informs her that "'continued pain during intercourse could cause . . . psychological difficulties,'" a terrible

irony, given what we know about her mental health (66). Slater consents to the procedure, which she describes this way: "In the name of health, I let him lead. A shot of Novocain, and my insides hummed and numbed. The scissors were tiny, like cuticle clippers. I felt not a thing. I heard a crisp *snap*. In that moment the last cords to my old self, my sick self, were cut" (67). In spite of the fact that Slater felt perfectly normal before the procedure, she allowed it to happen anyway, in the name of "health."

A similar description occurs in *Lying*, after Slater has agreed to have a corpus callostomy, the procedure that separates the right and left hemispheres of her brain. By this point in the text, she has become afraid of having her "brain cut": "A great darkness came over me," she writes, "because I knew I was a thief and a liar and it felt wrong on a very basic biological level" (95). She describes the procedure itself in terms that echo the cutting of her hymen:

It was Lauren, then, who lay on the table in the OR, Lauren who felt the needle of lidocaine slide into her scalp, Lauren who heard the whining of the saw and felt the pressure from his hands and then the cutting devices, Lauren who fancied she heard the snapping sound of disconnecting tissue, and the cool air that came to fill the cleft where her connections had once been, and the whole time it happened it was Lauren who hung on to the sound of her cry, a sound without pretense or mask. (97).

In both cases, Slater describes a feeling of loss that is followed by a kind of hesitant relief. When the Russian doctor snips her hymen, Slater grieves for it—yet this is a metaphorical vehicle for which we do not have a tenor. Following the corpus callostomy, Slater gives myriad descriptions of how her "severed brain" limits the seizure activities, yet the auras remain; additionally, she cannot find words with her left eye closed. This inability to find words, these two sides of the

brain, might be metaphors for "healthy" Lauren and "ill" Lauren, especially when we compare these two texts side-by-side.

There is one even more significant continuity between the two texts: Slater's insistence that diagnosis—and even illness itself—is a narrative. In *Diary*, for example, Slater describes the work of psychiatrist Arthur Kleinman, who focused his research on the "subjective meanings of illness." Slater writes that

He calls illness, or suffering, a narrative, which, at its best, concentrates a coherent story of self. Symptoms and pain take on value as they become symbols referring to something larger than themselves. The cancer patient must make of her pain *this* or *that*. The schizophrenic sees his pain, perhaps, as stories sent by gods and devils, and as such the stories are rich in reverberations. According to Kleinman, it is more than a set of symptoms, over the long term transforming itself into the hows and whys and ways of being. (50)

This finds itself reflected throughout *Lying*, and especially in the afterword, where Slater insists that "despite the huge proliferation of authoritative illness memoirs in recent years, memoirs that talk about people's personal experiences with [illness], memoirs that are often rooted in the latest scientific evidence, something is amiss. For me, the authority is illusory, the etiologies constructed" (*Lying* 221). Of course, this follows a text that clearly understands how the illness narrative works, what markers of authenticity must be present, and what readers seem to expect. Of course, it follows *Prozac Diary*, Slater's own attempt at illness narrative.

A significant question about *Lying* is deceptively simple and leads to other, more complicated ones: what is the metaphor? Is *lying* the metaphor, as the title suggests? Is it epilepsy? Is it the text as a whole, with its confounding group of narrators and markers of

authenticity that reel readers in and deliberately cause them to question an entire genre of confessional narrative? Does it simultaneously use and rail against life writing as a system of representation? Is *memoir* a metaphor?

Yes. The tenor and the vehicle become confounded.¹⁴² The act of lying, in this text, functions as both sides of the equation, as we see in Slater's afterword, in which she appears to come clean:

And still. You want to know. What are the real facts about the condition I call epilepsy in the story. All I can give you is this. . . . I have had several symptoms that doctors have diagnosed as consistent with temporal lobe epilepsy. However, diagnosis itself is a narrative phenomenon, because the same symptoms that doctors saw as epilepsy in one era of my life, they saw as borderline personality disorder in another era of my life, and then as post-traumatic stress disorder in yet another era, and as bipolar, and as Munchausen's, and as OCD, and as depression, and, once, even, as autism. Autism! (220)

Slater predicts and pre-empts a reader's desire to diagnose, to know the *facts* about her condition(s). She also, with the simple "diagnosis itself is a narrative phenomenon," reminds readers of their role in constructing the entire (series of) lie(s): without us, Slater doesn't have a text, and her self-referential tone, here and throughout, reminds us of this. Lying is the tenor, represented by the various diagnoses that may or may not factually exist in Slater's medical records; lying is also the vehicle, where it represents, perhaps, Slater's troubled relationship with her parents, her amorphous mental illness(es), or her final contention that "[i]llness, medicine itself, is the ultimate narrative; there is not truth there, as diagnoses come in and out of vogue as

¹⁴² Here I am relying on I.A. Richards's terms for the "sides" of a metaphor. See *The Philosophy of Rhetoric* (1936).

fast as yearly fashions” (221). Illness is the ultimate narrative. Slater’s is a narrative ostensibly about illness, which, if we follow her logic, marks it as about narrative itself: “there is not truth there.” For Slater, there *cannot* be truth there, as diagnosis varies.

This throws the rhetoric of “becoming a better me” into question; we want to be diagnosed so that we can get better, right? By giving authority to health-care professionals, the idea is that they will help us to achieve some better version of ourselves. By giving authority—and, significantly, empathy—to a writer of a memoir, perhaps we hope for the same thing. In this sense, Slater’s entire text can be read as a parody of both of these grand narratives. She simultaneously undercuts the authority of medicalization, the authority of memoir, and her own authority; there is no authority, even for a reader. Narrative is slippery. More troubling for readers of life writing is her assertion that “authority is illusory” in memoir, and that the “only . . . kind of illness memoir [she] can see to write [is] slippery, playful, impish, [and] exasperating” (221), especially since her other illness memoir, *Prozac Diary*—a memoir that she could once see to write—is none of these things.

In Linda Hutcheon’s words, a plot (whether “it be seen as a narrative structure or as a conspiracy”) is “always a totalizing representation that integrates multiple and scattered events into one unified story. But the simultaneous desire for and suspicion of such representations are both part of the postmodern contradictory response to emplotment” (65), which brings me to yet another question. If both of these texts, by the same author, use markers of authenticity to tell vastly different tales, ostensibly about the same medical history and subjective experiences, how do we classify them? Slater is right: we must call *Lying* a paradox, but what of *Prozac Diary*? On the surface, the answer is simple. *Prozac Diary*, Slater’s first subjective memoir, functions as a relatively straightforward example of a recovery narrative. As one of the first people to take

Prozac—she was a member of a clinical trial in the late 1980s—she was a guinea pig, and the *Diary* tells that story. *Lying* tells a different story, one that is at once more and less convoluted: medicalization, diagnosis, and subjective experience are all narratives; therefore, they are difficult to verify with empirical evidence. All of the empirical evidence presented in these two texts suggests that Slater does *not* have epilepsy, and yet *Lying* suggests that she might; then again, depression is also difficult to diagnose and to treat. Outside of the scope of both of these texts is the fact that there is every indication that her mother was abusive, and yet she only gives subtle hints here and there. Where does abuse fall on the medical spectrum?

These two works by Slater work to illustrate what Hutcheon writes about the postmodern in general:

[It] appears to coincide with a general cultural awareness of the existence and power of systems of representation which do not reflect society so much as grand meaning and value within a particular society. . . . [T]here is a paradox involved in this awareness. On the one hand, there is a sense that we can never get out from under the weight of a long tradition of . . . narrative representations and, on the other hand, we also seem to be losing faith in both the inexhaustibility and the power of those existing representations. And parody is often the postmodern form this particular postmodern paradox takes. By both using and ironically abusing general conventions and specific forms of representation, postmodern art works to de-naturalize them. (7-8)

Slater de-naturalizes several forms of representation. Via her embedded texts, she calls into question the narrative veracity of diagnosis, of medical studies, and of articles in medical journals—in *Prozac Diary*, she appropriates her own medical chart and then interrupts it with her

subjective memories, and she embeds fake journal titles and articles into *Lying*. The "long tradition of . . . narrative representations" here represents both medical narrative *and* the illness memoir; Slater plays with and parodizes tropes from both kinds of narrative to make a much larger point about writing, reading, and the nature of authenticity in memoir. As readers, we search for patterns, shapes, consciousnesses, temporalities, and interconnected symbols, and part of the frustration surrounds Slater's subtle, yet compelling, condemnation of narrative systems.

Slater's Cipher: Metaphorical Memoir and the Theosophical Connection

Until now, I have left Slater's reference to Russian philosopher P.D. Ouspensky relatively untouched, though it provides a covert, counterintuitive connection between Slater and New Thought-based therapeutic discourse. Ouspensky published his denial of the reality of motion and of Aristotle's Logical Formula of Identification, *Tertium Organum*—"Third Instrument"—in 1912. In it, he challenges several tenets of conventional wisdom. Ouspensky believes in the "true self"—a tenet of New Religious Movements—but he maintains that we spend much of our time in the realm of the unconscious, never reaching our potential, never having mystical experiences. We *know* that we have no clear sense of identity, and for Ouspensky, this leads to a kind of self-deprivation, in which we deny the existence of a fourth dimension as well as our individual abilities to access it. *Tertium Organum* questions some of the most basic tenets of belief that people have about human perception and the world: "the most difficult thing," he writes, "is to know . . . what we do know, and what we do not know" (1). The world around us is constantly changing, and his notion of a Heraclitan universe is reflected in both his text and in Slater's serial medical diagnoses, which are influenced by the positivistic science that Ouspensky and Slater both seemingly abhor. He and Slater both question the

veracity of science, of language, and of “truth,” from both ontological and epistemological perspectives. What is the meaning of life? They ask this; they also interrogate how we *know* what we are experiencing and who we are. Fundamentally, they agree that “all systems dealing with the relation of the human soul to time . . . are symbols, trying to transmit relations which cannot be expressed *directly* because of the poverty and the weakness of our language” (Ouspensky 113, emphasis in original).¹⁴³

Dr. Hayward Kreiger is a significant aspect of Slater’s text. He appears within two of her primary textual markers of authenticity, both as her initial paratextual commentator and within Dr. Neu’s case notes, and she “discussed Ouspenskian ideas” with him. This, then, suggests that there is something “Ouspenskian” about Slater’s authenticity. Therefore, we might consider these “Ouspenskian ideas” in the context of this analysis—think of it as a decoding, a key, a guide for assembling the puzzle pieces. In Ouspensky’s words, “no secret cipher exists which cannot be solved without the aid of any key,” and it becomes apparent that *Lying: A Metaphorical Memoir* and Ouspensky’s theosophical *Tertium Organum: The Third Canon of Thought* have much in common (Ouspensky 135). In fact, we might read *Lying* as a reworking—a literal interpretation—of *Tertium Organum*, which marks Slater’s text as a work of theosophy, a cipher for which *Tertium Organum* is the key. Thus, Slater’s temporal lobe epilepsy becomes a metaphor for memoir itself, yes, but also for a series of mystical experiences that cannot be expressed in words. Slater (and Ouspensky) reject positivistic, diagnosis-based science and medicine, and Aristotelian logic, which tells us that something is either “A” or “not-A,” and nothing in between. Both Slater and Ouspensky embrace the fundamental inadequacies of language itself and the multiplicity of the narrating-I. “‘I’ is a complicated quantity,” Ouspensky

¹⁴³ Unless otherwise noted, all emphases are in the original text. Both Ouspensky and Slater often italicize words and phrases.

writes, “and within it goes on a continuous motion” (39). This “continuous motion” is what Lauren Slater has employed in this set of two memoirs; she is two; she contains multitudes.

Ouspensky’s reworking of logic finds itself repeated throughout Slater’s text. Aristotle, in the *Organon*, outlined a simple scheme for observation:

A is A.

A is not Not-A.

Everything is either A or not A.

Ouspensky insists that although this is “quite sufficient for observation,” it is insufficient for experiment, “because the experiment proceeds *in time*, and in the formula of Aristotle time is not taken into consideration” (82-3). Ouspensky and Slater both meditate on time; Ouspensky does this directly, whereas Slater employs the metaphor of temporal lobe epilepsy, perhaps to narrate some unrepresentable experience, whether it be spiritual, mystical, or literal.

Instead of Aristotle’s simple scheme, which does not reflect that we don’t know what we don’t know, Ouspensky suggests a “new logic,” the *Tertium Organum*. He uses Aristotle’s scheme as a model to express the new logic:

A is both A and Not-A. . . .

Everything is both A and Not-A. . . .

Everything is All. (252)

He acknowledges the impossibility of this, the paradox it contains; everything cannot be all, and yet this scheme reflects his earlier insistence that “science [and logic] must come to mysticism. . . Science should throw off almost everything old and should start afresh with a new theory of knowledge” (245). Positivism and its accompanying empirical truths are, according to this, absolutely harmful to people, and regarding “all mystical states as *pathological ones*—unhealthy

conditions of the normal consciousness” is a terrible mistake. By describing her condition as pathological/neurological and then working to undercut her own account of her life with epilepsy, Slater makes the same point.

Slater employs a logical system that, in addition to providing a narrative parallel between her description of truth A and truth B, resonates with Ouspensky’s. Ouspensky writes that “in reality we know only our own sensations, perceptions, and conceptions, and we cognize the objective world by projecting outside of ourselves the causes of our sensations” (3). Slater’s truths are quite similar: truth A and truth B do not exist together within Aristotelian logic, but they do exist together in the third instrument. Ouspensky insists that “our knowledge of the subjective world, and of the objective world also, can be true and false, correct and incorrect,” and Slater is certainly making the same point, albeit within a genre in which works are ostensibly one or the other. The self is true, the self is false: both/and.

For further confirmation that Slater is appropriating Ouspenskian logic, we might also return to one of her embedded texts, the section entitled “How to Market This Book.” In this part of the text, Slater is clearly aware of the “rules” of memoir, of how her work is likely to be received, and of the paradox of Ouspensky’s insistence that “[t]hat which can be expressed, cannot be true” (Ouspensky 112). She suggests that “any good nonfiction memoirist, whose purpose is to capture the *essence* of the narrator” cannot accommodate the “inauthenticity” of “com[ing] clean” in the text. She is “not a liar,” she is “passionately dedicated by the truth,” which “is not necessarily the same thing as fact.” Therefore, she suggests that her publishers “pitch it to the public as [a paradox], jacket copy to read, perhaps, *a book that takes up residence in the murky gap between genres and, by its stubborn position there, forces us to consider important things*” (*Lying* 160-1). Both/and.

The most obvious connection between *Lying* and *Tertium Organum* is the respective authors' meditations on psychic life. Ouspensky insists that "our usual positivistic view regards psychic life as *a function of the brain*," and goes on to suggest that "[w]ithout a brain we cannot imagine rationality" (170). Then, however, he begins to question the relationship between the brain and psychic life; he describes a "split brain" and sets up a parallelism between "psychic activity and the activity of the brain." The nature of this parallelism, however, is "obscure," because the brain is "a mirror, reflecting psychic life" as experienced phenomena. Ouspensky believes that these experienced phenomena fall into psychical and physical categories, and that difficulties with one category directly influence the other. She incorporates what appears to be a *literally* split brain—she has a corpus callostomy—and this establishes that her appropriation of neurological phenomena might in fact be an attempt to represent something outside of physiology.

Her entire metaphor, temporal lobe epilepsy, reflects this. At one point in her text, when she is called upon at an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting to tell her story in spite of the fact that she has lied to the members of the group—she's not an alcoholic—she writes that she had a "chance to tell the truth":

They wanted my story, I would tell them my story. I was not an alcoholic, I suffered from a different disease. . . . Alcoholism can stand in for epilepsy, in 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. (204)

The truth is that she does “not know how to say the pain directly,” and yet she alludes to it throughout the entire text. The fact that “epilepsy can stand in” for a variety of other indescribable events in her life including, perhaps, the depression that she avoids describing, in favor of narrating her treatment for it, in *Prozac Diary*. Ouspensky includes Dostoevsky’s description of epileptic states in his text: “suddenly in the midst of sadness, spiritual darkness and oppression, there seemed at moments a flash of light . . . and with extraordinary impetus all . . . vital forces suddenly began working at their highest tension” (qtd. in Ouspensky 291). Perhaps, then, what Slater is attempting to describe is the mystery of this state; perhaps her metaphor is for something that is not representable in language.

Déjà-vu is a symptom of temporal lobe epilepsy (and in particular the auras that often accompany seizures). By retelling her medical history in the way that she does, Slater causes a kind of déjà-vu in someone who has also read *Prozac Diary*, thereby causing the reader to think she understands more subjectively the auras that Slater did or did not experience. All of the doctors, in both *Lying* and *Prozac Diary*, take a positivistic view of Slater’s diagnosis. They name it based on what’s in vogue at the time; but it might be unnamable, it might defy language and the system of language. Her use of *temporal* lobe epilepsy is significant, too, when we line up her cipher with its key—here we might return to Ouspensky’s insistence that “our human language” renders us incapable of speaking about time: “its true essence is *inexpressible* for us.” This inexpressibility is “the sign of the truth, the sign of reality” (112); therefore, Slater is telling the truth about her reality, which means that she hasn’t violated the “rules” in quite the way that some critics have suggested. Ouspensky and Slater agree that the relations she is describing “should not be understood literally any more than it is possible to understand the symbols and

allegories of [visual] art literally. It is necessary to search for their *hidden meanings*, that which cannot be expressed in words” (Ouspensky 114).

Ouspensky’s conception of time helps to explain the discrepancies between Slater’s two seemingly conflicting medical accounts. He writes that the three temporal states with which we are familiar, the past, present, and future, are simulacra, or copies of originals that do not exist:

[T]he past already does not exist. It has passed, disappeared, altered, transformed itself into something else. The future also does not exist—it does not exist *as yet*. It has not arrived, has not formed. By the present we mean the moment of transition of the future into the past. . . . For that moment only does the phenomenon exist for us in reality; before, it existed in potentiality, afterward it will exist in remembrance. But this short moment is after all only a fiction: it has no measurement. We have a full right to say that the present does not exist. (29)

This kind of thinking explains Slater’s play with temporal constructions—remember that her metaphor is very specific, *temporal* lobe epilepsy. Reading *Prozac Diary* and *Lying* together shows this very clearly: the timing does not correspond. Then again, if “the present does not exist,” then neither does the past, which means that narrative accounts of the past must necessarily be factually false.

If temporal lobe epilepsy is an analogy for some kind of mystical or otherwise indescribable experience that Slater has had, and attempts to uncover what the metaphor is result in frustration with the text, then we might employ Ouspensky’s address of the problem of analogies and the futility of trying to understand them. In this case and read this way, we find Slater’s text directed back onto readers yet again. Ouspensky writes that the method of analogies is

a rather tormenting thing. With it, you walk in a vicious circle. It helps you to elucidate certain things, but in substance it never gives an answer to anything. After many and long attempts to analyze complex problems by the aid of the method of analogies, you feel the uselessness of all your efforts; you feel that you are walking alongside of a wall. Thereupon you begin to experience simply a hatred and aversion for analogies. (68)

The reader is tormented by the analogy. *The reader* walks “in a vicious circle.” Our attempts to figure out what is going on with Slater’s narratives are, according to this, exercises in futility: we’re missing the point.¹⁴⁴

A return to the Christopher-as-reader analogy suggests that Slater’s reader, at least one who desires to understand exactly “what is wrong” with her (he shouts this at her when she has a seizure at his feet during their last meeting) and who performs a parallel reading of *Prozac Diary* and *Lying*, is what Ouspensky condemns: a positivist. For Ouspensky, positivism produces only the simulacrum of knowledge—real knowledge comes not from empirical data and scientific methods, but from the mystical insight garnered from experiences that cannot be explained in language. “Truth,” for both Ouspensky and Slater, might *begin* with sensory perceptions, but it doesn’t end there; there is a *metaphysical* dimension to truth(s). In this sense, any reader looking for verifiable facts in Slater’s text becomes a positivist, too, someone who, “when he begins to realize [that thought and energy are not the same], feels that the ground is quaking underneath his feet. . . . Then he sees clearly the necessity for a new method. *As soon as he begins to think about it* he begins quite unexpectedly to notice things around him which he did not see before”

¹⁴⁴ And even I, as I write this, am caught in Slater’s postmodern quasi-mystical game.

(Ouspensky 140). This altered view changes the way a positivist reads memoir; if we're left with no empirical evidence, we must rely on poetic license; we must go with our writer.

This extends the metaphor into what Ouspensky would call "the fourth dimension," or the making of a new consciousness, from which one can have mystical experiences of the kind described by William James in *The Varieties of Religious Experiences*.¹⁴⁵ At one point in *Lying*, Slater describes William James's thoughts on human will in terms that resonate with Ouspensky:

William talks about there being two kinds of will. Will A and Will B, I call it.

Will A is what we all learn, the hold your head high, stuff it down, swallow your sobs, work hard kind of will. Will B, while it seems a slacker thing, is actually harder to have. It's a *willingness* instead of a willfulness, an ability to take life on life's terms as opposed to putting up a big fight. It's about being bendable, not brittle, a person who is brave enough to try to ride the waves instead of trying to stop them. . . . It's a secret greater than sex; it's a spiritual thing. Will B is not passive. It means an active acceptance, a *say yes*, and you have to have a voice and courage if you want to learn it. (53)

In addition to subtly condemning the platitudes of most self-help, this suggests that Slater has decided to stop fighting. Correspondingly, she might be suggesting that her reader stop trying to figure out the empirical truths in her text, in favor of "riding the waves" and actively accepting the emotional, spiritual, and experiential verisimilitude contained therein. This kind of paradox leads to a questioning of the solidity of self that purely "authentic"—and, ostensibly, empirically true—memoir provides to readers. If Slater is leading her readers into a kind of mystical

¹⁴⁵ Ouspensky describes James's "call[ing] attention . . . to the unusually vivid emotionality of mystic experiences. . . . The deliciousness of some of these states seems to be beyond anything known in ordinary circumstances" (283).

experience (or even a postmodern game) that parallels the one that she is attempting to describe in this text, it's absolutely necessary that readers be unable to distinguish "reality" from simulated reality. If this is *simulated* temporal lobe epilepsy, it might be the ultimate simulacrum, that is, a work of "life writing" that steps outside everything we know about "life," at least from a positivist perspective. The world of *Lying* is the world of the hidden, not of the visible and verifiable.

Memoir, finally, is art, not journalism. Slater's text, especially in the context of its hidden meanings, makes this point loud and clear. It thus flies in the face of anyone attempting—even as I have done earlier in this chapter—to verify facts, to prove empirically that Slater is or is not lying. The cerebral nature of *Lying: A Metaphorical Memoir* gives us ample room to discuss the genre as a whole, and to investigate the "rules" from a slightly different (and maybe enlightened) perspective. In Ouspensky's words, "the thing is never constant . . . it always changes in the course of time" (43), as does Lauren Slater. *Lying* is postmodern, to be sure, and it also functions as a covert reminder of the significance of artistic agency throughout the larger genre of life writing. Slater plays with the "rules" of memoir—and maybe violates some of the genre's ethics, if we follow the thinking of Couser and Eakin. Ouspensky writes that "we must learn first to *think* things in other categories, and then . . . to imagine them therein. Only after doing this can we possibly develop the faculty to apprehend them in higher space" (47). Ultimately, then, Slater's text functions as a deconstruction of the nonfiction-fiction binary upon which questions of *factuality* rest. Fundamentally, and although it is empirically false, this metaphorical memoir is absolutely authentic in its attempts to describe experiences that lie outside the purview of language.

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