IDENTITY AND ACTIVISM IN TWENTIETH CENTURY AND CONTEMPORARY
AMERICAN WOMEN’S MEMOIRS

A Dissertation in

English

by

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements
for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

May 2015
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Abstract

Identity and Activism in Twentieth-Century and Contemporary American Women’s Memoirs

In Identity and Activism I argue that women’s literary memoirs have come to occupy a public role that goes beyond examining and representing the idea of a self. In the wake of second-wave feminism, a significant faction of memoirists intervenes in the debates sparked by gender equality movements. Using the work of theorists Sidonie Smith, Julie Rak, Gillian Whitlock, and Leigh Gilmore, I study texts published in recent decades, along with memoirs from earlier in the twentieth century that established themes like religion, sustainability, health, as topics of concern for women writers. In addition to prose memoirs, I study graphic memoirs, digital life writing sites, and online storytelling projects. These media represent the perspectives of writers who see personal narrative as an opportunity to speak publicly, but who have not composed or published a book-length memoir. Considering these instances of life writing outside of the mainstream publishing industry widens the field of literary studies to include texts produced by a different community of writers and for a different reading public.

Each of the five chapters in this dissertation studies a cluster of texts linked by a similar theme or interest. Chapter one examines American women’s memoirs of the expatriate literary community in Paris during the 1920s. These authors experiment with memoir as a public document and pursue goals other than disclosing personal experience or private observations. Chapter two examines women’s memoirs of living and working in rural environments. Rather than essentializing women’s relationship to the environment, these memoirs envision an ecofeminism based on alternatives to urban gender roles and capitalist ambitions. Chapter three connects the memoir genre to the academic discipline of narrative medicine, which bases diagnoses and treatments on the stories patients tell. Graphic and prose memoirs by Ellen Forney and Kay Redfield Jamison explore the links between manic depression, identity, and creativity, and call into question the usefulness of understanding identity as fragmented. Chapter four examines spiritual autobiographies and argues that the memoir genre is linked to religious themes and religious habits of thought such as confession and conversion. Chapter five examines the personal narratives that men and women write for two sites, “My Duty to Speak” and the “Afghan Women’s Writing Project,” both projects that have contributed to changes in ideology and tangible reforms for gender equality. These projects are dynamic venues for telling stories that constantly develop and evolve, and reflect the ways personal narratives play a role in digital culture.

This research demonstrates that a belief that individual stories have persuasive power and currency in social debates has propelled the “memoir boom” between 1990 and 2010 in North America, and explains why autobiographical narratives continue to proliferate. Memoirs are a form of public discourse shaped by particular historical moments and rhetorical situations, and are a form of feminist rhetoric. I conclude that women’s memoirs rearticulate and reconsider the projects of second-wave feminism and intervene in cultural discourses about gender.
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Introduction

Identity and Activism in Twentieth-Century and Contemporary American Women’s Memoirs

Situating Women’s Memoir

Autobiographical narratives have a long history but have enjoyed a surge in popularity since the 1950s. Julie Rak calls the peak of this popularity “the memoir boom,” a period roughly spanning the first decade of the twenty-first century, when the production and public visibility of American and British memoirs by celebrities and relatively unknown people sharply increased” (Boom! 3). Leigh Gilmore writes, “Suddenly, it would seem, memoir has become the genre in the skittish period around the turn of the millennium” (The Limits of Autobiography 1). The success of memoirs like Susanna Kaysen’s Girl, Interrupted (1993) and Marjane Satrapi’s Persepolis (2003) raises several questions. What accounts for the appeal of personal stories? What distinguishes a memoir from other genres, like diaries, letters, and especially fiction? What views of identity and selfhood, and what types of relationships with others, do memoirs advance?

Writers and academics propose explanations for readers’ interest in the lives of others. Best-selling memoirist Mary Karr writes, in her introduction to the tenth anniversary edition of The Liars’ Club, “Just as the novel form once took up experiences of urban industrialized society that weren’t being addressed in sermons or epistles or epic poems, so memoir—with its single, intensely personal voice—wrestles with family issues in a way readers of late find compelling” (xiv). In Memoir: A History, Ben Yagoda echoes Karr and attributes the widespread commercial success of memoir to its usefulness as a persuasive tactic: “Autobiographically speaking, there has never been a time like it. Memoir has become the central form of the culture: not only the way stories are told, but the way arguments are put forth, products and properties marketed, ideas
floated, acts justified, reputations constructed or salvaged. The sheer volume of memoirs is unprecedented” (28-29).¹ Ann Jurecic, countering criticisms of memoir as “self-indulgent manipulations of sentiment and goodwill,” argues that writers of memoir continue to “test the possibility that a narrative will do meaningful work in the world” (Illness as Narrative 11).

Jurecic uses the word “proliferate” several times in Illness as Narrative to describe both the popularity of memoir and the variety present within the genre. Rita Charon, Helen Buss, Anna Poletti, and Julie Rak use the term as well, suggesting that the idea of “proliferation” has become significant in some way to the study of life narratives. My dissertation, Identity and Activism, considers this proliferation through the lens of gender. Reading women’s autobiographies and memoirs from recent decades reveals that narratives have sprung up around questions that are also powerful sites of female identity. As the memoir genre grew in popularity, several topics particularly mobilized women to write memoirs. Memoirists seem drawn to writing about notable events or periods in which they participated, such as the American expatriate literary community in Paris between World Wars. Writers revisited that time and place in memoirs that appeared during the 1950s, 60s, and 70s, and women who had been there published accounts that differ from the established narratives. In the wake of second-wave feminism, a significant faction of memoirists focus on the debates that were sparked by gender equality movements. These include work and domesticity, economic privilege, environmental consciousness, exclusion from religious institutions, and women’s active participation in their own medical care. Memoirs on these topics reflect feminist research along many different lines of inquiry, and add insights and nuances of their own. Second-wave feminism asserted that “the

¹ Yagoda reports that between 2004 and 2008 sales of personal memoirs increased 400% (7). For more on the increase in memoir publishing, see Memoir: A History and Julie Rak’s Boom! Manufacturing Memoir for the Popular Market.
personal is political,” an attitude that set the stage for a surge of memoirs written by professional women writers along with those who simply have a good story to tell. Finally, increased access to the Internet in the United States now offers another vehicle, the online memoir for telling personal stories with political implications.  

These are the topics I have selected to study in depth, to better understand the role of memoir in feminist literary and rhetorical discourse. I argue that beyond serving as a medium for constructing and understanding the self, memoir frequently serves a social purpose. The link between individual identity and broader debates or issues is one reason for the proliferation of memoirs by women in the 20th and early 21st centuries. I do not intend to create an artificial division between “autobiography now” and “autobiography before.” Rather, I believe this is an area on which scholarship should focus in order to understand autobiography’s growing popularity and continued relevance. A belief that our individual stories can have persuasive power and a larger significance, if told skillfully, has propelled the “memoir boom” and explains why personal narratives continue to flourish.

I study texts that were written as memoirs during or around the period scholars have come to call “the memoir boom,” along with memoirs from earlier in the twentieth century that established those topics as areas of concern for women writers. In my first four chapters, I exclude autobiographical fiction, personal essays, and journalism. Admittedly, the lines between these genres can be difficult to establish. My analysis will be informed by scholarly discussions of genre, but establishing distinctions will not be my goal. Within the field of life writing I will

Certainly, memoirs have proliferated around subjects including childhood, addiction, the Holocaust, food and cooking, and travel, but I do not see sustained exploration of gender taking place in these texts. Elsewhere, personal narrative offers a pointed commentary on gender norms—stories of women “making it” in the corporate world come to mind—but the critique these memoirs offer is too predictable to warrant close examination.
be isolating the texts that *claim* the label of memoir, in the title or subtitle or through the first-person perspective that fuses narrator and author. Such an explicit claim to memory and experience creates meaning in the text. In addition to print memoirs, I include graphic memoirs and, in my final chapter, shorter online memoirs. Digital life writing sites, sometimes called storytelling projects, collect writings that blur the lines between personal essay, memoir, and journalism. They are significant to my project, however, because they represent the perspectives of writers who see personal narrative as a valuable opportunity to speak publicly but who are not likely to compose or publish a book-length memoir. Considering these instances of life writing outside of the mainstream publishing industry widens the field of autobiographical studies to include texts produced by a different community of writers and for a different reading public.

The terms “autobiography” and “memoir” are often used interchangeably in casual conversation, and may be referred to collectively as “life writing” or “personal narrative.” Nonetheless, memoir has a history that is distinct from autobiography, and the two terms have different connotations that are especially relevant in a period when the memoir genre enjoys popularity. Julie Rak’s article “Are Memoirs Autobiography? A Consideration of Genre and Public Identity” remains the fullest examination of this question. For many critics, she writes, “the reflexivity of the authors, and the *literariness* of their texts” characterizes autobiography, and scholarship tends not to connect autobiographies to the material conditions of their production (308, italics in the original). By contrast, memoirs have usually been described as “texts that are ‘merely’ about public personae or historic events” (308). Rak goes on to explain:

In early autobiography criticism, memoirs were characterized as books written by public men about commerce, politics, and war. Who the writers were meant that what they wrote about could not be autobiography, since it was assumed that
public men could not and did not write about subjects commonly associated with
interiority, personality, creativity, or uniqueness. (308-9)

These public men did not write about private doubts or motivations in their memoirs, and for
centuries the term “memoir” carried its earlier association with confessional narratives of
scandals and unsavory professions rather than autobiography’s meditation “upon higher things
and essential humanity” (311). As recently as 2001, Smith and Watson discussed memoir as a
minor genre within autobiography. The first edition of their study Reading Autobiography
defines memoir as more concerned with the exteriority of the subject than with interiority (314).

Cynthia Franklin makes a similar distinction when she writes that memoir is separate from
autobiography because of its “attention, through a historically situated account of the author’s
perceptions and experiences, to a social environment” (Academic Lives 16).

In the late twentieth century, memoir’s popularity has prompted literary scholars to
reassess its status as a form of life writing. “What exactly is memoir?” Julie Rak asks. “It is hard
to tell. Memoirs blend private and public; they contain writing about the self and about others;
they are written by the most powerful public men and the least known, most private women”
(316). Memoir is associated with mass-marketing and “does not often attempt to disguise this
fact” (321). While memoir has surpassed autobiography in appeal to readers and writers, it
continues to carry a sense of being inferior, commercial, and often without literary merit.

Recently, however, scholars have recognized the flexibility of memoir as a tool for writers who
choose to narrate the self in unconventional ways. I agree with Ann Cvetkovich that “to dismiss
or champion memoir in some monolithic way seems misguided given its multiple possibilities
and especially its ability to stage interventions within particular public discourses” (Depression
Memoir’s blending of public and private also means that the genre may easily be turned to insightful and rhetorically effective statements about gender in society.

In fact, my study pays more attention to the public statements of the memoirs I selected than to the development of an interior self. Put another way, I am interested in memoirists’ portrayals of interiority and selfhood insofar as these portrayals help them to communicate insights and arguments about gender and to create identification with readers. The exterior focus attributed to memoir is one reason for its continuing relevance. Another reason is surely the opportunity to reach and enlighten the wide audience that memoir affords to a writer.

**Relevant Scholarship**

In *Subjectivity, Identity, and the Body* (1993), Sidonie Smith writes that autobiography is a means of “talking back . . . to the historically imposed image of the self” (20). Susanna Mintz, in a similar vein, calls life writing “a medium for counterdiscourse” (*Unruly Bodies* 9). Gillian Whitlock argues persuasively that “autobiography circulates as a ‘soft weapon’” which can “personalize and humanize categories of people whose experiences are frequently unseen and unheard” (*Soft Weapons* 3). She cautions, however, that memoir can easily be co-opted into propaganda and the “manipulation of opinion and emotion in the public sphere.” My own research on twentieth century and contemporary women’s memoirs in the United States draws on these theorists and on Julie Rak’s research on mass marketing of memoir in *Boom! Manufacturing Memoir for the American Public* (2013). In individual sections, I bring autobiography scholarship into conversation with research in the fields of ecocriticism, narrative medicine, religion, and digital life writing. My dissertation is an interdisciplinary project, rooted in the idea that these fields mutually enrich each other. I find this to be particularly true at the
intersection of autobiography studies and feminist theory. As Susan Gubar writes in her introduction to *True Confessions* (2011):

> When embedded in anecdotal particularity, insights about gender and about race, ethnicity, class, age, sexuality, and nation seem to arise with more tonality and flexibility, a resonant timbre and honesty, with less reductive generalizing, than they do when cramped under the theoretical rubrics usually used to engage them. Feminist scholars have much to gain by exploring the techniques of the memoir.

(xv)

My own project engages with the insights memoirists reveal, seeking to better understand the public role memoir has come to occupy.

*Identity and Activism* also situates twentieth-century and contemporary memoir in the field of rhetorical studies, particularly feminist rhetoric. Ben Yagoda’s statement about the uses of memoir and Mary Karr’s statement about the reasons why memoirs are compelling both allude to the rhetorical effectiveness of memoirs, which are forms of public discourse shaped by particular historical moments and rhetorical situations. At times rhetorical theory seems a more appropriate tool than literary theory to analyze personal narratives. Feminist ideas of rhetorical effectiveness question the “traditional aim of persuasion”—winning over an audience—and ask what goals writing might pursue in place of conquest and conversion (Ede, Glenn, and Lunsford 415). Life narratives are one way in which writers develop a discourse that “does not pursue a master narrative of subjection” (418).

In her investigation of autobiographies by American women activists, Martha Watson writes, “To be persuasive, then, authors [who chose to advocate change] had to draw readers to themselves, to overcome objections and hesitancies as they told their stories” (*Lives of Their
Own 11). She cites Kenneth Burke’s argument that identification is the key to persuasion and uses the concept of identification as a “vantage point for considering autobiographies as rhetorical narratives” (12). Mary Karr’s statement about memoir’s intensely personal voice invokes the idea of identification as a foundation for personal narrative, suggesting that even if memoirists do not necessarily write with Kenneth Burke in mind, rhetorical aspects of memoir will enrich the study of these texts. My final chapter deals in part with global feminism, a body of scholarly work in which Maria Lugones and Allison Weir (among others) put forth the concept of identification as a potential basis for solidarity between women. Identification, therefore, provides a starting point for bringing together autobiography theory, rhetoric, and feminism.

Chapter Outline

I begin this project by studying one instance of memoirs proliferating around a topic or issue. Chapter 1 is about memoirs by Janet Flanner, Sylvia Beach, and Kay Boyle, all central figures in the expatriate American community in Paris of the 1920s. Their accounts of that time and place—Janet Flanner’s Paris Was Yesterday: 1925-1939 (1972), Sylvia Beach’s Shakespeare and Company (1956), and Kay Boyle’s Being Geniuses Together, 1920-1930 (1968)—speak back to established notions of the “Lost Generation” writers who lived in Paris. All three books have been largely absent from studies of memoir and modernism alike, but pose an interesting example of women using memoir to articulate counternarratives before the memoir boom. These authors experiment with memoir as a public document concerned with topics beyond their individual or interior experiences. Flanner, Beach, and Boyle all take their public voices for granted, and in their memoirs they seek to continue the work they were known for as
writers and public figures. In doing so, they provide an early example of women’s memoir pursuing goals other than disclosing personal experience or private observations.

Chapter 2 considers Sue Hubbell’s memoir *A Country Year* (1983), Kristen Kimball’s *The Dirty Life* (2010), and Christine Byl’s *Dirt Work* (2012)—memoirs that share a theme of movement from a white-collar urban life to rural and agricultural life. *A Country Year* details Hubbell’s physically demanding work as a beekeeper, and her corporeal participation in the ecology within the borders of her farm in the Ozarks. *The Dirty Life* recounts Kimball’s move from New York City to upstate New York to begin a farm that would offer customers a whole-diet Community Supported Agriculture, and *Dirt Work* narrates Byl’s post-college work on national-park trail crews. All three writers understand their transitions from urban professional life to rural life as transformative in very gendered ways; in this chapter I look at the connection between a gendered self and the environment. Feminist theory has at times distanced itself from nature in response to metaphors linking women and land, wherein both are separate from culture and available for exploitation. Stacy Alaimo, however, suggests that American women writers have envisioned other relationships and sites of connection between women and the natural world. She explains in her book *Undomesticated Ground* (2000) that “a remarkable range of women’s texts inhabit nature in order to transform it, not only contending with the natures that have been waged against women but writing nature as feminist space” (13).

Women’s life writing has often dwelt on interior lives and intellectual development, but Hubbell, Kimball, and Byl also explore the identity that emerges through physical work. Significantly, their memoirs envision nature as a place for labor, rather than leisure, in contrast to excursion narratives or wilderness literature in which the natural world is seen as a refuge from daily life. Rather than essentializing women’s relationship to the environment, these memoirs
envision an ecofeminism based on alternatives to the gender roles and capitalist ambitions of the authors’ earlier lives. Meeting the practical demands of rural life dissolves the boundaries around what is considered “domestic.” These writers explore a paradox in the wake of second-wave feminism: by leaving the types of careers and lifestyles that have come to represent progressive gender politics, they open up possibilities for even greater personal freedom.

Memoir has proved itself especially relevant to discourses of illness and medical treatment. In Chapter 3, I connect the flourishing memoir genre to the new academic discipline of narrative medicine, which bases diagnosis and treatment on the stories patients tell. In her study establishing the field, Rita Charon writes, “Neither atheoretical nor pointless, the practice of narrative medicine has already shown its proliferative salience to individual practice, clinical education, health professional standards, national policy, and global health concerns” (Narrative Medicine viii). Focusing on Kay Redfield Jamison’s prose memoir An Unquiet Mind (1994), and on Ellen Forney’s graphic memoir Marbles (2012), both of which are narratives about manic depression, I question autobiography scholars’ tendency to see the self as fragmented. In neuromemoirs, the coherent “I” is indispensable to narrative voice, and the self remains an urgent topic to be explored and understood. I ask how the experience of this particular neurological disorder raises questions of identity and self for each writer, and how each writer contends with the anxiety or discomfort of that upheaval. In this chapter I also draw out the activist projects explicit or implicit in the memoirs, the implications for research in medical humanities and science studies, and the potential effect on the “casual” readers for whom these memoirs were written.

The tradition of women’s memoir grew out of spiritual autobiography. Chapter 4 asks how women reconcile feminism and institutional religion in the twentieth and twenty-first
centuries. Spirituality and individual faith have not often come into conflict with movements for justice and equality, but the formal structures of religious leadership and theological teaching frequently marginalize women in ways that have led many feminists to reject religion as inherently and inevitably patriarchal. Among the most interesting memoirs published by women in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries are those that narrate the authors’ experiences with such patriarchal religious institutions. Their experiences vary: memoirists, especially Mary McCarthy, tell stories of deconversion, while Mary Karr and Kathleen Norris narrate their own process of converting to formal religious faith as adults.

The memoir genre as a whole is linked to religious themes and religious habits of thought. Even secular memoirs frequently take the form of the conversion narrative, beginning with the author being lost, confused, alone, in despair, and moving through a moment of realization to end on the other side, in some sense reformed. Scholars trace the autobiography genre from St. Augustine’s Confessions through Rousseau’s Confessions to the present, when confession remains a popular theme. Nearly all memoirs convey a sense of disclosing information that is illicit or secret. Finally, the genre encourages writers to link together memories in a way that creates meaning, or turns events into profound experiences. This process strongly resembles the practice of constructing a testimony, using the rhetoric of conversion or the narrative of seeing God’s hand at work in ways that could not be understood at the time. In this chapter, I argue that women do reconcile feminism and institutional religion through narratives of their experiences, and that even those memoirists who reject religion early in their lives retain the sense of memory and selfhood that their early theological training instilled.

My final section of this project moves away from studying print memoirs to examining life writing that takes place online. In recent years, websites collecting and publishing stories
having to do with issues of gender and sexuality have appeared and flourished. In particular, I
study the personal narratives that men and women write for two sites: “My Duty to Speak,” and
the “Afghan Women’s Writing Project.” These projects are ongoing, updated every day or week
with further testimonies from contributors. They are dynamic venues for telling stories that
constantly develop and evolve, but unlike social media platforms that also invite personal
narratives, their format allows for longer stories that can produce complex meanings. Narratives
of the online self create what digital life writing scholar Aimee Morrison calls “autobiography in
real time” (126). Their presence confirms claims by autobiography scholars (including Elizabeth
Bruss, Paul John Eakin, Sidonie Smith, and Julia Watson) that giving an account of oneself is an
activity encompassing much more than composing a book-length memoir. Rather, telling and
hearing life stories plays a role in everyday human interactions and in forming individual or
collective identities. Digital life writing is the most straightforward example of the type of
memoir I see coming into prominence. The personal stories on these two sites speak to memoir’s
accessibility, and to its potential as a form of activism. Both online projects that I study have
contributed to tangible reforms and changes in ideology. Writers on these sites express their
desire to tell stories of what happened to them because doing so might bring about further
progress towards gender equality.

My primary method in this study is traditional literary research, by which I mean analysis
of primary sources—the memoirs themselves. As an interdisciplinary project, this analysis will
be informed by feminist literary theory, feminist rhetorical theories, and autobiography theory,
particularly studies that have outlined theories of women’s life writing. Individual chapters draw
on other bodies of scholarship in fields that are not immediately related. Throughout, I try to
demonstrate the ways that memoir mediates between academic disciplines, and between scholars
and readers. These memoirs and memoirists are not all explicitly feminist; in fact, at times in their writing careers Mary McCarthy and Kay Boyle distanced themselves from feminism as a movement. But their work, and the work of the other memoirists, certainly considers issues of social justice and women’s intellectual development. The technique of framing an argument or insight in personal experience produces the situated knowledge—as opposed to information presented as objective fact or universal truth—that feminism advocates.

I look for ways that the issues early feminist writers and activists took up are re-articulated in post-second-wave memoirs. Chapter 2, for example, shows that rural life memoirs cast domesticity and homemaking in a new light. On a farm that participates in the sustainable and local food movement, growing, preserving, and cooking for a family seems like an act of withdrawing from mainstream consumerist society. “Making a living” and “making a home” overlap, and undermine the gender roles associated with each. The memoirs of manic depression I study in Chapter 3 are in some ways the product of women’s health movements that produced Our Bodies Ourselves and encouraged women to advocate for themselves in their medical treatment. My research is guided by theoretical studies of autobiography and memoir that make a case for the genre as a medium for feminist counterdiscourse. Furthermore, memoir has emerged as a “soft weapon” that writers deploy to influence the reading public in the United States. This project adds to ongoing conversations about women’s memoirs, with the goal of moving those conversations forward into new subjects and considering texts largely unexamined until now.
Chapter 1

“The pronoun ‘I’ is an awkward one to deal with”: Women’s Memoirs of 1920s Paris

The expatriate community of Paris in the 1920s fascinated American journalists and their readers with its reputation for extravagant living, bohemian rejection of traditional middle-class values, and artistic experimentation. Janet Flanner’s “Letter from Paris” column in *The New Yorker* gained popularity by appealing to American interest in French culture and announcing the achievements of Americans abroad, including the publication of Hemingway’s *The Sun Also Rises* and the first issues of *transition* magazine. Our impressions of the generation of American writers who lived and wrote in Paris in the 1920s are based as much on the memoirs that many of them published in later years as on the fiction and poetry that they published during that time. Gertrude Stein’s *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (1933), Malcolm Cowley’s *Exile’s Return: A Literary Odyssey of the 1920s* (first published in 1934, revised and published again in 1951), and Ernest Hemingway’s *A Moveable Feast* (1964) have been most influential in establishing an image of members of the innovative, ambitious generation collaborating on their work and feuding over philosophies and reputations. These memoirs are primarily concerned with the artistic development of the individual genius and establishing the reputations of their authors. *A Moveable Feast* famously extols the virtues of hunger, poverty, and discipline to the young artist who wants to write differently from anyone before him. *Alice B. Toklas* seeks to confirm Stein’s genius and cement her role as an influence on the younger writers who sought her advice. Cowley crafts *Exile’s Return* to emphasize the expatriate writers’ subsequent careers in America and affirm his place as the perceptive, clear-eyed chronicler and reviewer of the Lost Generation.
Janet Flanner, Sylvia Beach, and Kay Boyle all observed and participated in life at the center of the expatriate American community Paris between the two World Wars. Their memoirs—Flanner’s *Paris Was Yesterday: 1925-1939* (1972), Beach’s *Shakespeare and Company* (1956), and Boyle’s *Being Geniuses Together, 1920-1930* (1968)—record their insights. Each book adds nuance, at times a contrary view, to the narrative of the literary community in more widely read accounts by Hemingway, Stein, and Cowley. Each memoir underscores the author’s significant achievement: Janet Flanner documented life in Paris for American readers, Beach opened the bookstore and lending library that was a hub for expatriates and French citizens alike, and Kay Boyle wrote highly-regarded novels and short stories about Americans abroad in Europe. That each of these autobiographical accounts has been largely absent from studies of memoir and modernism alike is surprising and regrettable.¹ The quality of writing, the authors’ prominence, and the continuing scholarly and popular interest in the Lost Generation all warrant greater attention to Flanner, Beach, and Boyle than these authors have received so far.

This lack of consideration by scholars of life writing in general, or women’s memoir in particular, might be explained by recognizing each memoir as a “limit-case,” or a text that explores the possibilities and boundaries of the memoir genre. Here I borrow the term that Leigh Gilmore uses in *The Limits of Autobiography: Trauma and Testimony* (2001). Gilmore seeks to expand scholarly understanding of memoir by examining texts at the border between nonfiction and fiction that incorporate memory and invention to effectively tell stories of trauma. Her term

“limit-case” is meant to identify and explain texts that transgress the conventions of memoir in other ways and towards other purposes. Writing their accounts, Flanner, Beach, and Boyle diverge from expectations that usually characterize studies of memoir and autobiography. Rather than construct the individual artist or individual life as the focal point of the text, they only engage in self-portrait or introspection at carefully chosen times. Flanner, Beach, and Boyle are primarily concerned with the literary and artistic community that all three were well-positioned to observe and document, and they construct their memoirs to convey a portrait of a generation of artists and writers rather than a portrait of the individual subject. These three memoirists write neither self-interestedly nor self-effacingly, but as a continuation of the work to which they had committed themselves while living as American expatriates in Paris.

In her “Letter from Paris” columns written for The New Yorker from 1925 to 1939, Janet Flanner aimed to be “precisely accurate, highly personal, colorful, and ocularly descriptive” (Paris Was Yesterday xix). When the “Letter from Paris” installments are read together in the collection Paris Was Yesterday, Flanner’s autobiographical voice—that of the outsider within—emerges quite strongly. In Shakespeare and Company, Beach proves herself to be an acute observer with a perceptive, though not sensational, writing style. Her memoir, too, is composed through loosely chronological anecdotes and personality sketches, so that Beach’s own personal narrative emerges obliquely. Being Geniuses Together, 1920-1930 breaks conventions of personal narrative by crafting a dual autobiography. Boyle alternates her own chapters with those from the 1938 autobiography of her friend Robert McAlmon. Boyle’s chapters trace her development as an author and as a young woman seeking independence, community, and moral certainty, a familiar narrative arc in memoir. Setting her own writing alongside McAlmon’s memoir creates a dialogue that simultaneously praises his work and differentiates her experience
of the expatriate community from his. Boyle questions the nature and purpose of life narrative; ultimately, she uses her own experience to argue that the development of the artist is relational rather than individual.

Theorists of memoir have traced this theme and technique of relationality, first arguing that it is a unique strategy of women’s memoir, and more recently arguing that relationality is a strategy for representing experience in all autobiography. In “The Other Voice,” Mary G. Mason argues that “women’s alterity informs their establishment of identity as a relational, rather than individuating process” (8); Susan Stanford Friedman argues for a theory of women’s autobiographical writing based in relationality, against Georges Gusdorf’s definition of autobiography as inherently individualistic (“Women’s Autobiographical Selves: Theory and Practice”). However, men’s autobiographies including Philip Roth’s Patrimony and Art Spiegelman’s Maus tell the story of the individual through his relationship to a privileged other. Even St. Augustine’s Confessions, which in Mason’s view served as the model for male autobiographers but never for women, follows a pattern of relationality. Using these three texts as evidence, Nancy K. Miller concludes that “some male autobiographers represent themselves in relation to others; indeed that may be what’s most interesting about them” (emphasis in original) (“Representing Others” 17). Miller proposes that autobiography and memoir might be “mapped along a continuum of relatedness and autonomy which often but not always coincided with gendered signatures” (18).

Studies of women’s memoir have also been concerned with women’s marginalized social and economic position. In her introduction to The Private Self, Shari Benstock lists “the ‘expected’ subjects of women’s autobiography,” subjects that her collection of essays covers: women situated in conflicting and constricting roles, the struggle against or within a society that
rigidly distinguishes “between ‘man’s world’ and ‘woman’s domain’”; “black women writing under the power of the dominant white culture”; the “bourgeois definitions of woman’s intellectual and imaginative abilities”; public women defying patriarchy; tragedy and trauma; and loss of identity (5). Marginalization, this list indicates, can take many forms and can be approached from many angles. “Such writings,” Benstock concludes, “serve as a means by which to create images of ‘self’ through the writing act, a way by which to find a ‘voice’ . . . through which to express that which cannot be expressed in other forms” (5-6). Descriptions like Benstock’s characterize the majority of critical work on women’s autobiography, work which positions the individual female self in opposition to culture.\(^2\) When that focus has been questioned by feminist literary theorists, it has been done by applying “theories of women’s selfhood,” that is, their collective and relational identities, “to women’s autobiographical texts” This “illuminates the unfolding narratives of women’s life writing and thereby revises the prevailing canons of autobiography” (Friedman 35). Craig Monk recognizes these contributions to women’s autobiography studies in *Writing The Lost Generation*. Likening *Shakespeare and Company* to a diary with a fragmented chronology and no unified narrative, he concludes, “a woman may wish to tell her story in a different manner than men had heretofore told theirs” (119).

The writings of Flanner, Beach, and Boyle do not neatly fit these concerns with women’s marginalization in the public sphere and as writers, or their essential differences as female memoirists. Certainly Flanner, Beach, and Boyle sought to tell their stories in a different manner than they had seen other memoirists tell theirs. I argue, however, that they did so for reasons

\(^2\) For more on the subject of marginalization in women’s autobiographical writing, see Leigh Gilmore’s *Autobiographics: A Feminist Theory of Women’s Self-Representation* or the essays in Smith and Watson’s *Women, Autobiography, Theory*. 
having more to do with craft than with gender. While I agree with Monk’s observations about the unconventional structure of their narratives, I am interested in the purpose that those differences serve in telling the stories of women who neither appear to think of themselves as excluded nor feel compelled to interrogate the fragmentation of the self in their memoirs. Each accepts that her perspective is limited, as in Beach’s recollection of the historical moment just before American expatriates arrived in Paris in large numbers:

I was too far from my country to follow closely the struggles of the writers there to express themselves, and I didn’t foresee, when I opened my bookshop in 1919, that it was going to profit by the suppressions across the sea. I think it was partly to these suppressions, and the atmosphere they created, that I owed many of my customers—all those pilgrims of the twenties who crossed the ocean and settled in Paris and colonized the Left Bank of the Seine. (23)

For Beach, individual perspective is limited but also emergent, evolving over the course of her life. Alongside her admissions of what she did not know or realize in 1919 is her claim to an established role in literary Paris that began before the Lost Generation arrived. “All those pilgrims” shared a common experience; Sylvia Beach had a singular experience of the period, as did Janet Flanner and Kay Boyle in their distinct ways.

Jane Marcus shows that in the memoirs of accomplished nineteenth-century women, “the work always takes second place to the life” (“Invincible Mediocrity: The Private Selves of Public Women” 122). More recent memoirs by women who achieved considerable success in their fields prompt the question of whether Marcus’s observation continues to accurately describe the narratives of women who lead public lives. Flanner, Beach, and Boyle take their public voices for granted, seeking neither to promote nor to prove those voices in their memoirs. Instead, they
want to continue the work that they were known for as writers and public figures. However, their works are still overlooked in women’s autobiography scholarship, despite the widening of the field, because the conventions and purposes usually recognized and celebrated in women’s life-writing are largely absent, or very subtly performed. This study aims to read their books as memoirs, thereby expanding what is meant by “women’s memoir” and what the genre might accomplish.

**Janet Flanner**

Janet Flanner invented a genre for herself when she embarked on writing her “Letter from Paris,” which was published fortnightly in *The New Yorker* beginning in October 1925. *New Yorker* editor Harold Ross’s only specific instructions were that “he wanted to know what the French thought was going on in France, not what [she] thought was going on,” and there was no precedent for this type of correspondence in American journalism (*Paris Was Yesterday* xix). Flanner resolved to write about what was important to her, recalling that she believed criticism “demanded a certain personal aspect or slant of the writer’s mind” to be valid, even though neither she nor *The New Yorker* had yet established a distinct writing style (xix). In her column she reports on events, performances, and people (often writing their obituaries) by placing them in their social and cultural contexts. Shari Benstock explains that in the early letters, Flanner “frequently commented on the kinds of information her fellow New Yorkers were receiving about Paris, carefully preserving the double perspective of an American resident in Europe. . . . [The letters] succeeded by casting the unknown in terms of the known” (*Women of the Left Bank* 102). In later “Letters,” she begins to add her own analysis. Throughout, Flanner assumes a sophisticated reader, and appears to take Ross’s instruction as grounds for assuming a style that does not cater to an American audience; she includes few comments on expatriate society and
covers a topic like women’s fashion insofar as it reflects the French attitude towards femininity or the effects of the Wall Street crash on French businesses.

By calling her reporting “letters,” Flanner explicitly invites readers to interpret their content as highly personal, inextricably linked to the thoughts and life events of a specific individual but not necessarily shaped in any deliberate narrative arc. When they appeared in The New Yorker, each “Letter from Paris” was addressed to the editor at the time, first to Harold Ross and later to William Shawn, and was signed with the androgynous name “Genêt.” Benstock explains the origin of this pen name: “Genêt” was “a totally androgynous name chosen for Flanner without her knowledge by Harold Ross, who apparently thought it the French equivalent of ‘Janet’” (104). “Genêt” implies an individual perspective in what has been written, but obscures the biography, gender, and politics of the writer. Many of Flanner’s friends and fellow writers seem to have been aware that she was the author of the “Letter from Paris,” but New Yorker readers were not. Nonetheless, as Benstock notes, the world that Flanner describes in her “Letter from Paris” is “a world defined by a woman’s perspective—Flanner’s own” (109).

Literary critics and historians have recognized Flanner’s merit and achievement as a writer, though not as a memoirist. Benstock characterizes Flanner’s prose over the course of the “Letter from Paris” columns as a “record” (Women of the Left Bank 100), “journalism” (104), and “commentaries” (112), but also a “narrative chronicle” (101) with an “evocation of time and place” that is “often highly poetic” (106). Benstock categorizes the letters as a record of experiences, not memories, and therefore uniquely valuable to later researchers (100). Craig Monk’s reading of Paris Was Yesterday centers around the letters’ “continuous present” that allows Flanner “the opportunity to write and rewrite her impressions” in successive installments
Monk calls her column “the most extensive record of life abroad during those years,” though “clearly not an autobiography in any conventional sense” (120).

Indeed, Flanner’s sketches, portraits, and journalistic reflections do not immediately resemble memoir, since on the surface they appear to be unlike the extended, retrospective self-analysis that more commonly characterizes the genre. I argue, however, that Flanner accumulates impressions gained through her experience and long-time residence in Paris, an autobiographical venture even if the letters are not tied together using the thread of a continuous individual personal narrative. Instead, her loosely linked accounts in the “Letter from Paris” columns take shape as a generational autobiography, and even more clearly so when Flanner published excerpts together in 1972 as the collection Paris Was Yesterday. She added an introduction, occasional comments on her earlier material “where moved by memory,” and a selection of the essays from her 1940 collection, An American In Paris (“Prefatory Note”). The anonymity of the “Letter from Paris” columns obscured Flanner’s individual perspective; by contrast, her identity as a woman and her writerly presence mark Paris Was Yesterday as a highly personal text.

Paris Was Yesterday has been read as an example of the epistolary and diary modes, but I suggest that the work is most successful as a memoir. Janet Flanner’s voice and perspective are present in the timely content of the letters, and are pronounced in the passages added decades

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3 Today, memoir is understood to be primarily a study of the self through memories of childhood and education, a perception based on high-profile, bestselling memoirs such as Tobias Wolff’s This Boy’s Life and Mary Karr’s The Liars’ Club. For Flanner and her contemporaries, Benjamin Franklin’s Autobiography, The Education of Henry Adams, the much earlier Confessions by St. Augustine and Confessions by Rousseau, and roman à clef novels of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, would have shaped a similar sense of life-writing as concerned with the moral and intellectual development of the individual, often a young male.

4 See, for example, Craig Monk’s comments on Janet Flanner in Writing the Lost Generation.
later, which give insight into how she perceived the purpose and value of her writing. Memoirists are often acutely conscious of how memories might not preserve an event or impression as it was originally experienced. At times they feel compelled to comment on the ambiguities in their writing or offer corroboration for their claims. Significantly, Flanner’s retrospective comments and introduction do not serve this purpose. She never calls into question the accuracy of her facts or the subjective position that produced her earliest observations of Paris. Instead, the juxtaposition of reprinted letters and added comments show the interaction of printed archive and thoughtful memory. This dynamic is frequently at work in memoir but rarely made so transparent to the reader and utilized so effectively.

Flanner’s “Letter from Paris” essays cumulatively give the impression of an ongoing account of the culture and life of a city, rather than a retrospective memoir of a period. The letters demonstrate, too, that Flanner studied and described Paris without imposing a historically informed narrative on her recollections. She preserves the varied experiences of French and Americans in Paris as the expatriate community emerged, rather than recollecting impressions of that generation after the contours of its significance had formed. Flanner’s additions in 1972 bring her collection out of the continuous present and do anchor it as a retrospective study of a seminal generation and place. She makes explicit this double nature of the past, and of Paris Was Yesterday, in the first line of her introduction: “Memories are the specific invisible remains in our lives of what belongs in the past tense” (vii). By engaging with her early writing, she exposes

\[5\] Mary McCarthy is notable for using this technique to considerable artistic effect. Early versions of the chapters of her memoir were published individually in The New Yorker and other magazines between 1946 and 1953. When she published them together as Memories of a Catholic Girlhood in 1955, McCarthy added italicized passages, or interchapters, to explain instances when her memories conflicted with those of her brothers, to present evidence for stories that her readers insisted must be fiction, and to comment on the process of writing memoir. I address this publication history of Memories of a Catholic Girlhood in my study of women’s religious memoirs in chapter 4.
the process of making sense of past experience, and for Flanner, that past experience included her long series of contributions to *The New Yorker*. Decades after the peak of the Lost Generation, she frames her writing in Paris between the wars as a study of the city that surrounded Ernest Hemingway, Djuna Barnes, Josephine Baker, Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald, and the other expatriate authors who had become known—in some cases well-known—by the time the “letters” were collected.

Flanner’s self-reflexive approach to her additions contrasts with the authoritative tone of the original “Letters from Paris.” Jeff Gonzalez argues that by writing as the anonymous, androgynous “Genêt,” Flanner “is able to mime the master subject,” and frame her impressions as objective facts (48). Her “lack of the personal pronoun presents subjective observation as received wisdom,” a style that is similar to Hemingway’s or Malcolm Cowley’s reminiscences of Paris and the Lost Generation (50). However, the combination of biweekly essays with Flanner’s comments and introduction to *Paris Was Yesterday* intensifies the reader’s experience of the collection as memoir. In these most recent sections she adds the personal pronoun to her writings, as well as “us” and “we,” including herself in the intellectual ambition and iconoclastic lifestyle of the Left Bank. “Each of us aspired to become a famous writer as soon as possible,” she writes early in her introduction (vii). Flanner views—or positions—her place in the community as that of an outsider, though, calling herself and her friends “we minor Left Bankers” who went out to dance in Montparnasse occasionally and peered through windows at the Joyce family “being served royally” at dinner (xi). Miming the master subject in her letters and speaking from an outsider perspective in her notes and introduction, Flanner achieves memoir’s most difficult and valuable goal, that of artistically representing the way that experience is subsequently shaped and interpreted.
While Flanner does offer her American readers a position of knowledge of French culture, as Gonzalez persuasively argues, she also takes care to show that Paris was not just full of Americans. Reporting on the Wall Street crash, she writes “Generally, the French people’s sympathy in our disaster has been polite and astonishingly sincere, considering that for the past ten years they have seen us through one of the worst phases of our prosperity” (62). Flanner’s many obituaries in her “Letter from Paris”—including announcements of the deaths of Claude Monet (15), Isadora Duncan (28), Georges Clemenceau (59), and Edith Wharton (171)—reflect this transnational perspective. More accurately called eulogies, Flanner’s remarks on their deaths preserve the elements of their lives and characters that she believes most valuable. Rather than submerging her own judgment in favor of flat biographical facts, she writes remarkable commentary on the shift in culture that each death brings to mind. Writing at length about Edith Wharton in 1937, for example, Flanner developed a complicated portrait. “[Wharton’s] withdrawal from America was her most American act,” Flanner writes, linking Wharton to the more recent and numerous literary expatriates (174). Of Wharton’s reputation for coldness she suggests “certainly she was old-fashioned in that she reserved her magnanimity for special occasions” (176). Flanner concludes, “Mrs. Wharton had the tender and reserved sentiments of the truly literate,” obliquely critiquing the shallowness and dilettante art of many of the Lost Generation (177).

*Paris Was Yesterday* communicates in dualities. Flanner writes of forming her sentence style around antitheses and oppositions, and of giving her criticism “a critical edge, indeed a double edge, if possible” (xix). She recalls that living in the literary quarter of Saint-Germain, even before “the American influx of the early 1920s,” felt like “living both at home and abroad—living surrounded with the human familiarity of American friends and acquaintances,
and the constant, shifting stimulation that came from the native French” (xvi). Collected and shaped into a cohesive volume, her in-the-moment impressions of the news in France balance the commentary that she adds when she has the benefit of seeing how careers developed, how the expatriate reputation solidified, and who was forgotten or misunderstood. Flanner’s autobiographical voice, most significantly, is that of the outsider within. She writes from the privileged position of having political knowledge and access to every social event in the city, but she chronicles her generation with an eye to the broader context of inter-war Europe.

Sylvia Beach

Sylvia Beach appears at length twice in Janet Flanner’s chronicle. In a 1935 “Letter From Paris” column, Flanner calls Shakespeare and Company “the most famous American bookshop and young authors’ fireside in Europe” and in the introduction to Paris Was Yesterday she remembers Beach’s shop as “the hearth and home of the Left Bank American literary colony” (128, viii). Flanner remembers Beach as the first publisher of a complete text of Ulysses, in 1922, the appearance of which was “the most exciting, important, historic single literary event of the early Paris expatriate literary colony” (x).

Praise of this kind relegates Sylvia Beach to a nurturing, secondary role in the Paris literary community and begins to explain the neglect of Beach’s memoir. The credit she receives as the proprietor of Shakespeare and Company, her library and bookstore, does not extend to appreciation of Shakespeare and Company, her memoir. Critical work that considers Shakespeare and Company, however briefly, reveals biases in the study of life writing that are seldom recognized but clearly function to exclude certain unconventional texts. Beach’s decision to write her memoir as a narrative of the bookshop represents an unusual and intriguing choice, a
reinvention of the memoir’s form and purpose, and a claim for her vital role among the American expatriates.

Sylvia Beach first lived in Paris with her parents and two sisters from 1902 to 1905 while her father, the Presbyterian Reverend Sylvester Beach, assisted with a ministry to Americans in Paris. Sylvia was fifteen when the family arrived and seventeen when they returned to the United States; in place of a formal education during these years she read widely and attended talks for American students organized by her conservative father but featuring French artists, singers, and dancers. Beach wrote about her childhood and teenage years in early versions of her memoir, but these sections were omitted from the final published version. Noel Riley Fitch quotes Beach’s remark “I was not interested in what I could see of Paris through the bars of my family cage” from one such “suppressed” version (25). In 1907, at age twenty, Beach returned to Europe to live in Florence for a year, and in 1916 she visited Spain before returning once again to Paris. Beach’s experiences of European life and culture had fostered in her what she calls “a particular interest in contemporary French writing.” Her desire to study experimental literature “at the source” drove this last move, which was to become permanent (SC 9). During World War I, she spent a summer volunteering as a farm hand in Touraine and later worked as a member of the American Red Cross staff in Belgrade “distribut[ing] pajamas and bath towels among the valiant Serbs” (14). While working on farms and vineyards and learning to graft fruit trees, Beach reveled in the active physical labor and the alternative forms of womanhood such work created. She particularly relished the “stir” her work trousers made (The Letters of Sylvia Beach 32), and keeping up with the strongest workers “which isn’t bad for an amateur” (41). At one

6 For more on Sylvia Beach’s early life, see Noel Riley Fitch’s 1983 biography Sylvia Beach and the Lost Generation (New York: W.W. Norton and Company).
vineyard in Tours, Beach wrote to her sister with relief that she found no “bourgeoisies misses” or “jeune-fille talk to drive you mad” on the work crew she had joined (41).

Beach conceived the idea of opening an independent bookshop during these years of volunteer work, seemingly the first time that she reflected on her possible careers. In her memoir, the decision to open a shop that would also lend books to subscribers seems natural, and the success of Shakespeare and Company during the 1920s seems inevitable. Upon arriving in Paris in 1916, Beach had discovered Adrienne Monnier’s bookshop La Maison des Amis des Livres, and Monnier herself (to whom Shakespeare and Company is dedicated). During the beginning of their relationship, Monnier guided Beach’s reading of contemporary French writing, invited her to spend time in the shop’s reading room, and introduced her to an “exciting literary life” where she was then the only American (SC 14). Beach remembers that Monnier had collected all of the American literature translated into French, which was very little, and explained that contemporary American literature was not available in France. Returning from her wartime volunteer work and newly realistic about the prohibitive expense of opening a branch of Monnier’s shop in New York for American customers, Beach set her mind instead on an American bookshop for Parisian customers to complement La Maison des Amis des Livres.

Beach and Monnier shared a romantic relationship during most of the years that they knew each other, a detail of her personal life that Beach leaves implicit in her memoir. She recounts the beginning of their friendship and Monnier’s generous mentorship, but not the beginning of their intimacy or the fact that they lived together until 1937. Monnier’s constant presence through Beach’s memories, and the several anecdotes about their shared decisions and weekends spent with Monnier’s family, hint that they were partners during these years. Adrienne appears most often as a voice beside Sylvia, chiming in to add her own wry observation of
Beach’s subject. The reasons for Beach’s reticence to discuss their relationship are hard to discern, and set her apart from other expatriate writers of the time who examine sexual difference in their work. One possibly reason could be “the natural discretion which marked both women” and Beach in particular—a discretion that Beach seems to have made a conscious stylistic choice when she composed *Shakespeare and Company* (*Women of the Left Bank* 209). Both Fitch and Benstock hypothesize that Beach may have suffered from guilt or repression as a result of her religious upbringing. Such anxiety may have inhibited any references to sexuality in her letters or open discussion in her memoirs; Fitch notes that the repressed versions of Beach’s memoirs contain a few brief references. Furthermore, even though Beach enjoyed the permissive society of Paris in the 1920s, she wrote her memoir for an American audience in the 1950s whose conservatism had yet to be confronted by widespread feminist demands for reform. The most convincing and appropriate explanation for Beach’s omission of her sexual life, however, is that her interest in writing a memoir lay elsewhere. She set out to write an account of a literary community rather than of her individual self, and so it makes sense that Monnier’s role in the narrative would be that of an intellectual mentor and later partner. Beach may have anticipated that in a conservative social climate, disclosing such personal details would distract readers from the narrative she wished to craft.

*Shakespeare and Company* recounts Beach’s early life only briefly, and begins to narrate in detail with the opening of her bookshop. The memoir traces the shop’s role in literary Paris chronologically, through chapters with such titles as “Pilgrims from America,” “First Copies of *Ulysses,*” “Fitzgerald, Chamson, and Prévost,” “*Ulysses* Goes to America,” “War and the Occupation,” and “Liberation.” Beach divides her chapters further into sections that, in large part, dwell on the personalities of individuals or couples who were her customers and nearly
always her friends. Representative titles include “Mr. and Mrs. Pound,” “Two Customers from the Rue de Fleurus,” “A. MacLeish,” “Whitman in Paris,” “The Crosbys,” and “My Friend Paul Valéry.” Frequently, too, Beach organizes the sections of her memoir around events: “The Reading at A. Monnier’s” when Joyce first introduced sections of Ulysses, “transition” and “Commerce” about the launches of those reviews, and, memorably, the concluding section “Hemingway Liberates the Rue de L’Odéon.” At times, a section of Beach’s memoir lingers on a matter of particular concern to her, such as “Shakespeare and Company Regrets . . .” about her repeated decisions not to publish “exiled” books including Lady Chatterley’s Lover, “Joyce’s Way of Life,” and “Away, Away . . .” which describes her weekend travels out of the city with Adrienne Monnier and Monnier’s family.

These chapter and section titles convey the scope of Shakespeare and Company and of Sylvia Beach’s primary interests. Above literary accomplishment—which aspect of Joyce, Hemingway, and the others would have been too well-known to merit comment in 1959—Sylvia Beach is concerned with the relationships and favors that made the Left Bank a community and allowed much of the literary work of the period to reach the public in the first place. Beach describes Flanner as “one of my earliest American friends” and writes of her career: “Janet Flanner was always off, either to London or to Rome. . . . She was brilliant. She was also a great worker. But she always found time to look after people, as I can testify” (110). When Flanner sold her copy of Ulysses, suddenly valuable, to a library, she offered the profits of the sale to Beach. Flanner’s generosity places her in the company of Bryher and Robert McAlmon as a figure in the memoir. Like Kay Boyle, Beach is eager to defend McAlmon against his reputation for literary mediocrity by citing his talent, valuable work as a publisher, and the detrimental effect his social popularity had on his writing (25, 102). His wife, the poet Bryher, is even more
lauded for being modestly and protectively generous to her friends, “so different from the way most people blew in and out [of the bookshop], wrapped up in themselves like parcels for the post” (100). In subsequent years, Bryher used her personal wealth to support Shakespeare and Company, maintained relationships between the far-flung intellectual friends she took care of, and most remarkably was able to “rescue dozens of Nazi victims” (103).

One impression of Beach that emerges from her memoir is the ease with which she introduced writers to each other, not only her friends but also visitors she barely knew. As she was aware, Shakespeare and Company was “the first thing the pilgrims looked up in Paris” and many informed Beach that they had given the shop as their address. Beach remarks with no small pride, “I didn’t [mind], especially since it was too late to do anything about it except try to run an important mailing office as efficiently as possible” (23). In one section, Beach and Monnier arranged a dinner for the Joyces, Fitzgeralds, and André Chamson and his wife, gracefully providing an introduction for Scott, who “worshiped James Joyce, but was afraid to approach him” (116). Sylvia Beach’s friendship with so many writers afforded her a kind of status among American travelers, especially those who admired Gertrude Stein but were, as Beach writes, “‘skeered’ to approach her without proper protection” (29). “The poor things would . . . beg me to take them to see Gertrude Stein,” she writes of Stephen Vincent Benét and Sherwood Anderson when they were newcomers, and of Ernest Hemingway after his quarrel with Stein—all unlikely candidates to be labeled “skeered,” or “poor things” (29-33). Her importance in making these introductions should not be underestimated in a literary movement that thrived on debate, mentoring, and common purpose.

Academic appraisals of Shakespeare and Company range from affectionate dismissal to thinly veiled reproach. To Craig Monk, the scope of Beach’s Lost Generation portrait—which he
reads as limited to friends more colorful and prominent than she was—is “characteristic of its author’s beneficent personality,” which led her to concentrate on the lives of her contemporaries and neglect her own experiences and perspective (118). Beach tells readers little about her own family, her decades-long romantic relationship with Monnier, and the six months that she spent in a concentration camp; Monk contrasts this personal reticence with the detail in which she discusses James Joyce and *Ulysses*. For Shari Benstock, *Shakespeare and Company* is “little more than a catalogue of anecdotes about the now-famous writers who frequented the bookshop” (221). Benstock’s critique in *Women of the Left Bank* exemplifies the reasons why *Shakespeare and Company* has been trivialized:

Beach’s memoir is disappointing, most particularly because it is so successfully self-effacing that we are left with little sense of the woman who played such a pivotal role in Modernism. Unlike the memoirs written by others who experienced these years (most of them written by men), *Shakespeare and Company* does not make Sylvia Beach the heroine of her own story. Indeed, the memoir is not of her, but of the bookshop, and its title suggests the patriarchal literary heritage of England rather than a woman’s contribution to an American expatriate literary enterprise. (221)

This assessment is significant because of the (accurate) contrast Benstock draws between Beach and several of her contemporary memoirists, but also because of assumptions underpinning this judgment: that memoir should be focused inward, be aware of identity as gendered, and be above all concerned with the individual self. The expectations for the life writing genre that Benstock outlines in the introduction to *The Private Self* here lead her to describe the memoir of a woman who was personally interesting and central to modernist literature as “disappointing” (221).
Far from suggesting that she understood herself as significant only because of the publication of *Ulysses*, Beach asserts herself as a public figure through her refusal to either make herself the heroine of her story or engage in extended introspection about her private life. Benstock allows that in her letters Beach shows herself to be “an active person, but not at all a contemplative one” (215). Those letters in fact illuminate Beach’s goals in her memoir and offer a productive contrast in style and voice which points to her decisions as a writer. Beach’s letters to her family, friends, and artists she knew in Paris are notable for the insights into expatriate life that they add to *Shakespeare and Company*, and also for their lively tone which reveals, among other things, Beach’s humor. Her letters complement her published writing by indicating that the reserve with which she recounts experiences was an authorial choice, rather than a reflection of her limited skill. Beach’s rejection of the private, introspective self in favor of the public, active, influential self in her memoir enacts a type of alternative womanhood similar to, and continuous with, her work in agriculture, the Red Cross, and modernist literary culture of the 1920s.

Sylvia Beach wrote about her reasons for composing her memoirs and the difficulty of doing so in letters leading up to the publication of *Shakespeare and Company* in 1956.⁷ In a letter to Richard Wright dated May 26, 1947, Beach indicates that her writing was highly sought-after and she “had offers from quite a number of publishers” including New Directions and Harpers (*The Letters of Sylvia Beach* 198). In 1947, Beach was busy preparing her translation of Henri Michaux’s *Barbare en Asie* (*Barbarians in Asia*), so her own book was “swept aside” (199). In 1950 she refers to a piece of her memoirs that appeared in the *Mercure de France*, and in February 1951 she laments her inability to write much at all due to the severe headaches that had

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⁷ According to Noel Riley Fitch, Beach was approached about writing her memoirs as early as 1935 when Shakespeare and Company was in financial trouble (351), and “sat down to begin” them in 1937 (374).
troubled her all her life. Writing to Harriet Weaver in February 1955, Beach reports, “I am trying to finish my memoirs and have done a certain amount of work on them this winter” (216, 220, 234). Adrienne Monnier died in 1955 after long battling Meniere’s Disease, and attending to her former partner, still a close friend, no doubt delayed Beach’s own writing. Beach’s letters from this period reveal that she was neither reluctant to write about herself nor compelled by any desire to claim her prominence. More likely, Beach understood the process of writing her memoirs as of a piece with the friendships she maintained in the 1940s and 50s and a continuation of her role as a hub for expatriate life and advocate for the French and American writers she admired.

Sylvia Beach’s correspondence with Ernest Hemingway in particular reveals a strong sense of her memoir as a public document. Her joking announcement in November 1955, “these yere memoirs are coming out maybe one of these days,” is an announcement nonetheless, and discloses a certain amount of excitement and pride in the forthcoming book (238). That same letter and another sent nearly a year later demonstrate that Beach took her choices of anecdotes seriously, anticipating that her book would be widely read and her stories would have an effect on the reputations of those she described. She inquires, “I must ask whether you approve of the way I have ‘handled’ you in my memoirs—and whether you authorize my quoting from letters” (238). Beach may have taken care to consult with Hemingway because of the way Gertrude Stein had embarrassed him in her own memoir. In *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (1933), Stein dismisses Hemingway as “a good pupil” (266) who “had been formed by” herself and Sherwood Anderson (265). She disparages him as a writer who “looks like a modern and . . . smells of the museums” (266) and the narrator Alice quotes Stein telling Hemingway that he is “ninety percent Rotarian” (270). Beach found these assessments unjust and intentionally distanced herself from
such a style of memoir (and in *Shakespeare and Company* she takes credit for mending
Hemingway’s relationship to Stein). She later wrote in a letter to Hemingway:

> You will be just getting the extract from my memoirs (“*Shakespeare and Company*”)—the part concerning yourself. . . . After they had gone off, I realized, too late to make any changes, that perhaps some should be made, and I think you will agree with me about this. A certain number of references to your domestic life in the days when I first knew you could easily be spared and should be deleted. . . . I do feel that in the present circumstances they have no particular interest. (245)

Sylvia Beach’s careful, circumspect handling of Hemingway’s personal life stands in contrast to the way she writes about Joyce, who is a constant presence in *Shakespeare and Company*. Besides her role in publishing *Ulysses*, Beach reveals the personal knowledge she acquired through intimate friendships. Of James and Nora Joyce she writes:

> [Nora] used to tell me that she was sorry she hadn’t married a farmer or a banker, or maybe a ragpicker, instead of a writer—her lips curled as she mentioned this despicable kind of person. But what a good thing for Joyce, I thought, that she had chosen him. . . . His marriage to Nora was one of the best pieces of luck that ever befell him. His was certainly the happiest marriage of any writer I knew. (42)

She describes her first meeting with Hemingway (who wrote of Beach in his own memoir *A Moveable Feast* “No one that I ever knew was nicer to me”) and remarks, “Baptized or not—and I am going to say this whether Hemingway shoots me or not—I have always felt that he was a deeply religious man” (78). Her sly description of Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald is less kind, though hardly a unique impression: “Poor Scott was earning so much money from his books that he and
Zelda had to drink a great deal of champagne in Montmartre in an effort to get rid of it” (116). Sharing such “personal conclusions, privately held” might be understood as a form of introspection that deals with the community rather than private life (Monk 118).

In fact, Sylvia Beach refers directly to herself in Shakespeare and Company more often than Benstock’s assessment suggests, and her references to her private thoughts are stunning when they do appear. Many of these remarks have to do with the work and reputations of the writers who were also her friends—which is, after all, the subject of the memoir. Her remarks show confidence in her judgment, as when she states “the question who has influenced such and such a writer has never bothered me, and the adult writer doesn’t stay awake at night to wonder who has influenced him” (81). Beach contradicts Gertrude Stein’s famous claim in The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas that she had influenced Hemingway’s style when she adds, “I do think Hemingway readers should know who taught him to write: it was Ernest Hemingway” (81). As though to counteract charges of Modernist elitism, Beach remarks at one point on the variety of customers she saw: “students, readers, writers, translators, publishers, publishers’ travelers, and just friends were in and out” (105). She identifies with her customers and her authors simultaneously, writing, “I was very fond of plain readers like myself. What would the writers do without us? And the bookshops?” (105). Self-effacing in only the most playful sense, this statement can be read as Beach’s effort to widen the perceived scope of the literary community to include not just avant-garde writers, but readers and publishers too.

The liberality of spirit and finances that Beach observes in Flanner, Bryher, and McAlmon should be read as an indirect statement of her own value to this community. Similarly, her narration of the introductions she made between writers might be read as a statement of her centrality to the Paris literary network that produced such valuable collaborations. Beach,
famously, published *Ulysses* at her own expense, and in *Shakespeare and Company* she recounts the many times that she supported the Joyce family. Her own liberality, though, does not extend to omitting from her memoir the implication that Joyce took advantage of her:

As a rule, he would be in need of funds . . . whether anything was left in his account or not, we had to look after the author of *Ulysses*.

Joyce’s expenses were heavy, naturally, with a family of four, and, besides, he enjoyed spending the way some people enjoy hoarding. A visiting publisher said to me, after dining out with Joyce, “He spends money like a drunken sailor.” A funny thing to say, even if it were true, when you had been someone’s guest. (196-97)

Beach’s comment is a funny thing to include, even if it were true, if she had no particular intentions regarding Joyce in this passage or anywhere else in the memoir. On this point I disagree with the majority of Beach’s readers. Biographer Noel Riley Fitch writes that Beach decided, possibly “because of her social standards,” “not to be critical of anyone, particularly not of Joyce,” and deems this decision the largest among her “deliberate errors” in the memoir (412).

*Shakespeare and Company* is brief, given the decades that Beach lived in Paris; the section “Joyce’s Way of Life” could have easily been omitted and replaced. The details and memories that Beach does select and their juxtaposition one to another should be considered of equal significance to overt commentary, and more judicious. Friends agreed that “her genius lay in knowing precisely how to choose and discriminate,” and her portrait of Joyce is not as complimentary and “star-struck” as previous critics have deemed it to be (Fitch 412). Beach never goes so far as to reproach Joyce, but subtly criticizes the lopsided nature of her support,
writing, “Adrienne and I just managed to make ends meet by living in the simplest style. But Joyce liked to live among the well to do” (197).

More than anything, Sylvia Beach develops a public role that transcends the expatriate literary community about which she writes. She proves herself to be an acute observer with strong private opinions about people, but more crucially about the intrinsic value of literature. While women’s memoir may often be contemplative and attuned to the factors that marginalize women’s voices—and be valuable for those qualities—the memoirs of an active woman who is confident in her public voice broadens our understanding of how autobiographical identity forms. Beach’s friendships with French authors, artists, and composers, her residence on the Rue de l’Odeon until her death in 1962, and her investment in the ongoing reputation of her friends places her at the center of a literary community and by no means outside her own story.

Kay Boyle

*Being Geniuses Together, 1920-1930* is the text in this study that most closely resembles conventions of memoir. Simultaneously, it structurally undermines those conventions with dual autobiography. Boyle undertook this project at the suggestion of her Doubleday editor, Ken McCormick and substantially revised McAlmon’s autobiography, which had been published in 1938 but was out of print by the 1960s. Boyle’s revisions include changing the title from *Being Geniuses Together: An Autobiography* to *Being Geniuses Together, 1920-1930*. Other revisions include replacing McAlmon’s descriptive and sometimes biting chapter titles with each writer’s name and the date of the events, adding 90,000 words of her own, and omitting 40,000 words of McAlmon’s previously published text, a full seven chapters.\(^8\) Boyle’s own unassuming chapters trace her development as young American woman living in France, and trying to teach herself to

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\(^8\) For more on Boyle’s revisions, see Craig Monk, *Writing the Lost Generation*. 
write. However, by alternating her own chapters with those from the 1938 autobiography of her friend Robert McAlmon, she creates a dialogue that praises his work and distinguishes her experience of the expatriate community from his. Because Boyle questions the nature and purpose of life narrative, I am particularly interested in her innovations in the structural and thematic patterns of women’s life narrative.

As her biographers and scholars have noted, Boyle’s experience of expatriate Paris was vastly different from the experiences Stein, Hemingway, and Cowley recorded. In the introduction to *Paris Was Yesterday*, Flanner remembers Boyle, “with her variegated brood of children,” as “for a writer a rare domestic center” (xviii). Sandra Spanier argues that Boyle’s portrayal of Paris “disrupts romanticized images of writers in Left Bank cafes removed from such mundane concerns as economics and families” because she was a single woman working to support a child while she was learning to write (184). Monk contrasts Boyle’s memoir with Hemingway’s *A Moveable Feast*, in which Hemingway remembers himself “at the height of his powers, apprenticing to no one, relying on no one’s inspiration or support” (143). Boyle, instead, continually refers to friendships developed through sheer determination, the influence of Rebecca West’s novel *The Judge* and Evelyn Scott’s novel *Escapade*, and assistance from friends like Harry and Caresse Crosby.

Kay Boyle uses the narrative of her own life to argue that the development of the artist is relational rather than individual, a goal that is of a piece with her determination to recover McAlmon’s reputation. In a review for the *New York Times*, Malcolm Cowley praises Boyle’s memoir, with its “pictures of two lives—and many surrounding lives—from different angles” as giving “an impression of depth and substantiality that had been lacking in other memoirs of Paris in the 1920s” (73). That substance, I would add, also comes from Boyle’s awareness of the
competing demands on—and within—a writer. In her case, those demands were domestic, social, and artistic. The novels by West and Scott became “textbook[s]” for Boyle, from which she learned “enduring truths,” including “to mistrust a woman’s analysis of her own motives” (Being Geniuses 150). Boyle learned from reading Evelyn Scott that she wanted to write of an “unseen world” and was frustrated with helplessness or a constricted view in a writer. Boyle recalls, “I had come to demand a great deal of women, and more of women writers than I was able to express” (151).

Any discussion of Kay Boyle’s expatriate career should note that she did not travel independently from the United States to take up residence in Paris. Rather, she lived in small towns with her French husband, and then moved to the south with Ernest Walsh for the year that they had an affair before his death from tuberculosis. Boyle only settled in Paris in 1928. Her development as a writer depended not on freeing herself from the distasteful characters and dissipated culture that Hemingway remembers as impediments to his work, but on forging connections that could stimulate and instruct her, even if from a distance. Boyle’s defense of Robert McAlmon and his commitment to publishing modernists’ work matters all the more when she pairs it with reflections on her own education. Her revisions to his memoir are significant as well. “If Kay Boyle’s Lost Generation was not based on actual proximity and camaraderie,” as McAlmon’s version of the community was, “it did rely on the recognition of common intellectual and artistic concerns expressed within a temporal frame clearly demarcated” (Monk 149). As Monk explains, Boyle’s revisions of McAlmon’s text primarily work to give his autobiography a chronology and to end their story with the events of 1930. She suggests an “orderly history of a precisely defined generation of writers abroad” concluding with the Wall Street crash and the end of the exchange rate that had made a lavish Paris lifestyle cheap for so
many. Monk argues that because Boyle arrived to live in Paris only in 1928, she used this chronology to highlight the “late bloom” of the artistic generation and confirm her place there (150). “[E]ven her most bitter enemies,” such as Ethel Moorhead, “are treated with tact or diplomatically ignored” in order to achieve this unity (Monk 152). Her afterword indicates that she could have been much harsher on those who disparaged McAlmon’s writing.

I read Boyle’s memoir as a reflection on her own development and cite these critics not to question her stated goals in writing her memoir, but to emphasize that her goals were multiple. Along with her contemporaries and their memoirs, Boyle uses her memories for several public objectives, including to present expatriate modernism as a distinct moment. The “worthy purpose” of defending McAlmon reaches beyond his personal life and career to defend the causes he was invested in and those people who shared his commitments. Like Sylvia Beach, Boyle writes against the dominant image of expatriate Paris, which Spanier calls “the prevailing and rapidly ossifying mythologies of that time and place,” in order to expand the public’s understanding of which people and what types of contributions mattered to the literary achievement of the community (170).

The disorderliness that Boyle depicts in her own life is all the more striking against the background of the tight chronology and unified community that she creates rhetorically. I read this heightened sense of disorder as created by design, a response to the simplified life of the artist that Hemingway portrays and to the constricted lives of other women that frustrated Boyle. Her references to McAlmon’s poetry emphasize her feeling of incompleteness, even fragmentation, during the 1920s, but it was an incompleteness still in process and soon to be resolved through her emergence as a writer. One of the most interesting sections of Being Geniuses Together, 1920-1930 is Boyle’s recollection of a summer in Raymond Duncan’s
colony when she went “off the deep end,” ending with the abortion of a pregnancy when she could not be sure who the father of the child might be (317-20). Her realization “that if I, with the love of a gently bred family to shape me, had become what I was then the whole moral fabric of our society was in jeopardy” is one of a series of honest self-assessments that constitute a renewal of life-giving friendships and literary purpose (321).

One of the innovations of Boyle’s memoir might be in her refusal to posit any separate, essential feminine experience. Though her portrayal of the fragmented and relational autobiographical self matches what has since been identified as a female approach, Boyle’s commentary on autobiography lies elsewhere than with the gendered self. As she taught herself to write, using the novels of West and Scott, Boyle learned that she had no patience with women who saw themselves as helpless within a narrow world. However, critics have seen gendered social critique in her fiction and nonfiction. For Christine Hait, Boyle’s technique of “writing the self through reflection on an Other” can reflect traditional feminine ideals of selflessness and sacrifice instead of representing a modern feminist challenge to individualism (301-2). Hait argues that in Being Geniuses Together, 1920-1930, Boyle does develop an attitude of authority and self-definition, influenced by McAlmon’s criticism but not dominated by him. I argue instead that Boyle deliberately avoids framing her experiences and thoughts in terms of traditional gendered ideals. Suzanne Clark argues that Kay Boyle “refuses to omit gendered, female elements from her writing” but also resists “traps of ideology” including the opposition of male and female in her fiction (129). Boyle’s autobiography, too, develops a picture of the self that is sensitive to the gendered aspects of life but not bound by either traditional ideals or traditional resistance.
Kay Boyle “had a fraught relationship with life narrative,” but she did not worry about exposing her own life to readers or using her experiences as literary material (Monk 155). Her earliest novels and short stories were highly autobiographical, and she leaves details out of her memoir that readers can learn from her fiction. Boyle’s provocative reflection on her desire to work and give “allegiance to the words that others were able to set down” without ego or false prid—“how do I know that I am telling the truth now about what I believed and wanted then?”—anticipates the later debate over truth and fiction in autobiography (Being Geniuses 103). But Boyle doesn’t mean to question the memoirist’s intentions in retelling an earlier life. Her sense of the discontinuity between past and present selves speaks to her awareness of occupying distinct roles with different sets of values at the various points in her life.

**Conclusion: Writing Public Identities**

In the afterword to *Being Geniuses Together, 1920-1930*, added in 1984 for the second publication of the memoir, Kay Boyle writes:

> The pronoun “I” is an awkward one to deal with, and I do so with impatience; for I have come to believe that autobiography to fulfill a worthy purpose should be primarily a defense of those who have been unjustly dealt with in one’s own time, and whose lives and work ask for vindication. If autobiography is to be more than an exercise in self-absolution, it must be above all the brief presented in exoneration of the inequitably judged, of those denied an unbiased hearing and summarily sentenced to oblivion. (333)

In this passage Boyle describes the fate of her friend Robert McAlmon, whose books were long out of print and whose memoir was never published in the United States. Boyle’s comments also
speak to her own anxieties, and to her conviction that personal narrative should serve a purpose other than individual ambition. The afterword makes explicit her desire to differentiate her memoir from others published in the mid-twentieth century, including those that look back on the Lost Generation.

Sylvia Beach and Janet Flanner share Boyle’s ambivalence about the usefulness of writing solely about oneself. None of these three women professes the intellectual disillusionment that Malcolm Cowley outlines to describe his generation of exiles. Their narratives of life abroad reveal varied interests in European culture. Janet Flanner moved abroad from Greenwich Village when she left her husband for a relationship with Solita Solano, following her to Greece and then Paris. Sylvia Beach volunteered for service in France and Serbia during World War I and opened her bookshop in Paris because she loved French literature and could make the most of the exchange rate there. Other than a six-month internment during Nazi occupation and rare visits to her family in the United States, Beach lived in Paris during and beyond World War II. Kay Boyle was technically not an expatriate because she moved to France as the wife of a French citizen, and she remained in Europe after the Wall Street crash that marked the end of the expatriate period. All three take the “long view” of Paris and writers beyond 1930—the literary community in Paris rising and falling in numbers and reputation—and their writing testifies to a hopeful, if measured, faith in the achievement of modernist writers.

The problem of outsider status, a common theme in women’s autobiography and autobiography studies, is fluid and complicated in these three memoirs. If, as Benstock writes, autobiography explores the tension between the self and society, then Beach, Flanner, and Boyle shape their memoirs to explore and expand their prominent roles in society. However, even these three women cannot be grouped together in terms of their relationship to the expatriate
community. Boyle, in particular, developed as an intellectual and writer while she lived in far-flung small French towns before she settled in Paris in 1928, after McAlmon believed the expatriate community to be past its moment of glory. Upon arriving in Paris she was an outsider, unknown except to her friends and too shy to enter Shakespeare and Company and introduce herself to Sylvia Beach and the writers and artists inside (Being Geniuses Together, 1920-1930 84-85). At the time, Beach and Flanner were consummate insiders; respectively, they were the bookshop owner who made so many introductions and facilitated so much intellectual exchange, and the writer for whom “there was no event—no concert, opera, horse race, fashion show, ball, art opening, poetry reading, or salon tea—where she was not welcomed” (Benstock 101). Sylvia Beach, writing her memoir in the 1940s and 50s was concerned with the relationships and favors that allowed much of the literary work of the period to reach a reading public. The most prominent figures in her memoir are those who are as generous as Flanner, or those who are frequently and conspicuously the recipients of generosity. For herself, Sylvia Beach develops an image of a public role that transcended the expatriate literary community about which she writes. Like Flanner, she was an outsider within; Beach was not a writer herself until she composed her memoir, and unlike the transient expatriate community, she lived in France from 1917 to 1962.

In their careers, and later in their memoirs, Flanner, Beach, and Boyle devoted their private selves to public purposes. Their memoirs of the Lost Generation, largely overlooked by autobiography studies, demonstrate the possibility for personal narrative to explore a female writer’s influential public self, rather than solely her private life. Neither the content nor the tone of these three memoirs reveals any overwhelming sense of unjust or gendered exclusion to be corrected in a retrospective. These women stood a bit outside of the American expatriate community because of their connections to French society and culture. This perspective endows
them with insights into the lives of expatriate and European artistic life, and gives them authoritative voices tempered by the specificity of their experiences. Flanner, Beach, and Boyle take their public voices for granted, working not so much to develop or prove those voices in their memoirs, but to continue the work that they were known for as writers and public figures of the Lost Generation.

Janet Flanner pinpoints this sentiment as “the writing craft’s spirited solidarity” (18). She is not alone in understanding her writing life as one dependent upon and interconnected with other writers, both men and women. Kay Boyle’s defense of Robert McAlmon is one example of such literary solidarity. Boyle’s passionate engagement with writing by Rebecca West and Evelyn Scott is another example, and one that illustrates how important solidarity among women can be for the emergence of a female writer. Relationality, in the memoirs of women writers, can engender and sustain a crucial literary solidarity.
Chapter 2

Women’s Memoirs of Living and Working in Rural Environments

On her farm in the Missouri Ozarks, Sue Hubbell enjoys an open, untamed landscape just outside the door of her farmhouse:

I slept outdoors last night because I could not bear to go in. The cabin, which only last winter seemed cozy and inviting, has begun to seem stuffy and limiting, so I spread a piece of plastic on the ground to keep off the damp, put my sleeping bag on it and dropped off to sleep watching the stars. . . .

A house is too small, too confining. I want the whole world, and the stars too. (A Country Year 194-96)

This passage and others like it in Hubbell’s memoir depict the natural world as a place to build a life, and a setting that both prompts and satisfies deep-seated desires. The domestic space that Hubbell knows well, and even finds too familiar, comes into daily contact with a wilder space of woods and farm that she also seeks to understand.

In this chapter, I study a group of memoirs in which compelling questions about gender, work, privilege, the environment, and personal fulfillment intersect. These questions are not new; many were in fact introduced in foundational feminist texts of the twentieth century. In The Feminine Mystique, Betty Friedan famously documented the number of white, middle-class women in heterosexual marriages who looked at their lives as wives and mothers and asked—or wondered but were afraid to ask—“Is this all?” Friedan insisted that housework and marriage not should be considered the only ways a woman could find personal fulfillment, and that women needed to cultivate meaningful careers and pursuits outside the home. In the decades
following its publication, *The Feminine Mystique* came to be known as much for this argument as for Friedan’s failure to address or account for the enormous privilege enjoyed by these stay-at-home mothers.¹

In the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, personal narratives have articulated these concerns anew within contemporary contexts. I am particularly interested in memoirs written by women who place a high value on their careers, but have chosen physical work on a farm or in the woods, not the professional careers that Friedan envisioned. Sue Hubbell’s *A Country Year: Living the Questions* (published in 1983), Kristin Kimball’s *The Dirty Life: On Farming, Food, and Love* (2010), and Christine Byl’s *Dirt Work: An Education in the Woods* (2012) all recount such lives. These memoirs ask questions that are pressing to women of the writers’ generation: Why don’t I find a high-powered career in business or medicine or education fulfilling? What other options do I have? Can the work that I choose serve not only my own interests and desires, but also a greater good?

Writers like Sue Hubbell begin to address these questions by bringing the wild into contact with the domestic. Hubbell, Kimball, and Byl negotiate the questions of work, gender, and personal fulfillment in their own lives through farming in rural communities and maintaining trails in vast national parks.² The rhythms of this type of work bring them into contact with plant and animal life more often than with other people, and require a corporeal interaction with the natural world. Through narrating these careers and personal experiences, the three memoirists

¹ For more on Friedan herself, the (often misrepresented) content of *The Feminine Mystique*, and reactions to the book, see Stephanie Coontz’s study *A Strange Stirring: The Feminine Mystique and American Women at the Dawn of the 1960s*.

² In general, I will refer to authors by their full name or last name when I am discussing them as writers. I will refer to their first names when I am discussing the versions of themselves that they present in the memoirs.
portray the environmental threats to their specific ecological landscapes. Each of these memoirists also feels pressed to consider the ways her work can productively intervene in the patterns of unsustainable living she observes in her society.

**Women Writing the American Landscape**

Memoirists interested in women’s experience of the natural world step into a fractious conversation about the meanings of “woman” and “nature,” and about the relationship between the two concepts. Feminism and feminist theory has at times seen the natural world, and the idea of nature, as a basis for female empowerment and for theorizing gender. Stacy Alaimo identifies Luce Irigaray, Adrienne Rich, and Mary Daly as examples of those who “imagine and promote feminist possibilities by looking toward nature as a realm untouched by the stalwart reach of patriarchal culture” (*Undomesticated Ground* 8). More often, though, feminism has sought to distance itself from claims about women’s relationship to the natural world, and from essentializing claims about women’s natural roles and qualities that reinscribe women as inferior, or “other.”³ “Nature,” Alaimo writes, “has been at the heart of a plethora of misogynist arguments and ideologies,” and in response feminism has sought to prove that gender is socially constructed (3). Further, environmental degradation has roots in sexist ideologies and metaphors. Annette Kolodny demonstrates this pattern in her studies of American literature *The Lay of the Land* (1975) and *The Land Before Her* (1984). Kolodny argues that the metaphor of “land-as-woman”—present since the earliest American writing—reflects and also reinforces an understanding of nature as feminine, fertile, and nurturing. In this metaphor, carried out in lived

³ For further discussion of feminist dismissals of ecofeminism on these grounds, see Greta Gaard, “Ecofeminism Revisited: Rejecting Essentialism and Re-Placing Species in a Material Feminist Environmentalism.”
experience, woman and land are both separate from culture and are available for exploitation in
the name of ambition and progress.

Finally, arguments for the social construction of gender denigrate nature as static, and in
conflict with women’s liberation. For Alaimo, one troubling aspect of the intersection of
environmentalism and feminism is the argument that sex is biological, while gender is cultural,
learned, and performative. If the distinction between “gender” and “biological sex” is predicated
on a culture/nature dichotomy, environmentalist arguments can conflict with feminist goals.
Alaimo explains that to “redefine nature as something other than a mere resource for culture
would muddy, if not collapse, the notion of the sex/gender system” (Undomesticated Ground 5).
In later work, she writes that when feminists distance themselves from “nature” (seen as the
ground of essentialism), nature is actually reconfirmed as “the treacherous quicksand of
misogyny” (Material Feminisms 4).

Both Stacy Alaimo and Rachel Stein seek to expand the discussion of women and the
natural world by demonstrating that American women writers have envisioned other
relationships and sites of connection to nature. Stein sees the invocation of nature in writing by
“those persons deemed nature incarnate” as a powerful “altercation” in which the writers speak
back to the dominant culture (15). The four writers in Stein’s study—Emily Dickinson, Zora
Neale Hurston, Alice Walker, and Leslie Marmon Silko—reconfigure the human relationship to
the non-human natural world “in order to replace the model of conquest and domination with
more interactive and egalitarian social/natural relations” (19). In Undomesticated Ground,
Alaimo explains that “a remarkable range of women’s texts inhabit nature in order to transform

4 Stein explains that metaphors of nature and wildness shaped views of race, along with gender,
in North American writing. Associating women, African Americans, and Native Americans with
“lower nature” construes those individuals as “social objects rather than as full and independent
persons” (16).
it, not only contending with the natures that have been waged against women but writing nature as feminist space” (13). For American women novelists, activists, journalists, and conservationists, nature is cast as a feminist subject that is “unruly” and “by no means maternal” (179). The natural world represents a space apart from the domestic sphere, untamed and thus “a model for female insurgency” and “an indispensable site for feminist cultural critique” (16).

Alaimo and Stein provide a set of ideas with which to approach memoirs about women engaging with the natural world. First, nature is portrayed as a feminist space, in part because it is separate from culture or society. Second, these memoirists’ connection with both society and nature give them a perspective from which to understand the relationships between the two. And third, they engage with nature as a material reality, rather than only or chiefly as an abstraction. “Nature” in these texts is a physical place with a distinct ecology, borders, and inhabitants that bring about the specificity of the memoirists’ experiences. In memoirs, insights about gender, nature, and the environment “arise with more tonality and flexibility, a resonant timbre and honesty, with less reductive generalizing,” than in abstract or theoretical approaches (True Confessions xiv).

Sue Hubbell, Kristin Kimball, and Christine Byl depict physical and philosophical transformations through their experiences of living and working in an “unruly” natural world. The authors represent their moves to rural communities as a process of adopting an identity that revolves around work in the woods or on the farm. Such relocations require them to give up urban lifestyles and white-collar careers, decisions that the memoirs portray as empowering

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5 I do not mean to conflate memoir (my topic) with fiction and poetry (the types of writing that Stein and Alaimo focus on), even when that fiction or poetry is based on the author’s life. Nearly all authors of memoirs and autobiographies understand themselves to be writing in a genre that is rhetorically and stylistically distinct from autobiographical fiction. Nevertheless, the connections between gender and nature that Alaimo and Stein read in fiction are relevant to women’s nonfiction narratives.
rejections of both conventional and progressive, “modern” feminine roles. All of these women, I argue, articulate a feminist environmentalism through the geographically situated experiences of emotional and physical labor that they retell. In their narratives, nature is neither lower than culture, nor mystically separate and unknowable. It is recast as a feminist space not because of an essential spiritual connection with women, but because it presents a realm in which to transgress, and then re-examine, norms of femininity and domesticity.

There are certainly many other memoirs that I could include in this discussion of women writing about the environment. Kathleen Norris, in *Dakota* (1993), Terry Tempest Williams, in *Refuge* (1992), and Sue Hubbell in her other memoirs, all layer narration of their own lives with environmental, cultural, and sociological concerns specific to their regions. Annie Dillard’s memoirs *An American Childhood* (1988) and *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (1974) focus on “the microparticulars of nature” that create patterns linking the world and self, and “awaken her sense of belonging to place” (*Reading Autobiography* 161). First-person narratives about women and sustainable agriculture have also proliferated in the past decade. This sub-genre includes (along with *The Dirty Life*) Barbara Kingsolver’s *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle* (2007), Novella Carpenter’s *Farm City* (2009), Alisa Smith’s *The Hundred Mile Diet* (2010), and Robin Mather’s *The Feast Nearby* (2011). Each of these writers testifies to the pleasures of adapting their diets to the food that is seasonally and locally available.

Memoirs about eating locally reflect—and in many cases helped to create—a broader social movement away from industrialized agriculture and toward more nutritious, sustainable food systems. Emily Matchar connects the memoirs in this locavore vein to a parallel movement among young women, for which she coins a term: the “New Domesticity.” In *Homeward Bound: Why Women are Embracing the New Domesticity* (2013), Matchar mentions *The Dirty Life*
alongside other memoirs that, similarly, tell stories of young white women who embrace the homemade and handmade, after careers as Hollywood executives, journalists, and Web designers. Matchar suggests, “the career girl—gone—*Green Acres* memoir is the new chick lit” (1). New Domesticity is manifested in blogs that chronicle cooking from scratch, raising children through attachment parenting, homesteading, and handicrafts. Bloggers and participants advocate these activities as cool and revolutionary, an overdue corrective to corporate careers and a feminist movement that unwisely scoffed at homemaking. A domestic, handmade aesthetic crops up in women’s retro fashion, in social media such as Pinterest, and in lifestyle magazines. Though the memoirs I’ve selected are substantially different from the chick-lit memoirs Matchar lists, Matchar’s research into this social phenomenon helps to answer a question that is important to my study as well: “Why are women (and more than a few men) of my generation, the children of post-Betty Friedan feminists, embracing the domestic tasks that our mothers and grandmothers so eagerly shrugged off?” (5).

The number and range of titles here indicates how lively, complex, and relevant to contemporary issues the field of women’s nature writing is. What particularly interests me in the memoirs I’ve chosen to study—*A Country Year, The Dirty Life, and Dirt Work*—is the motif, or theme, of movement that the narratives share. These three writers view their transitions between lifestyles as transformative in ways that that are especially relevant to femininity. Their memoirs re-cast nature as a space wherein women can experience domesticity and the physical world—including their physical bodies—apart from established gender roles.

6 The titles of these memoirs illustrate their “collective escapist fantasy [that] is more likely to involve a Vermont farmhouse and a cute Anthropologie apron than a SoHo loft and a pair of Manolos” (1). Among the most descriptive are *Rurally Screwed: My Life off the Grid with the Cowboy I Love, The Pioneer Woman: Black Heels to Tractor Wheels, and My Life from Scratch: A Sweet Journey of Starting Over, One Cake at a Time*. These titles also hint at the “chick-lit” tone, which (unfortunately) trivializes a potentially complex and interesting phenomenon.
Personal Transformation in Memoir

Several narratives of transformation converge in these memoirs. Movement from city to country leads to a shift in principles; the practical exigencies of farming lead to abandoning fashion and time-consuming beauty rituals. Physical work asks the worker to rethink cultural hierarchies and dichotomies; gaining physical strength reshapes what a female body can do, and therefore what femininity means. Transformation, in these memoirs, represents an ongoing and reciprocal relationship more than a moment of realization. Kristin Kimball asserts, “As much as you transform the land by farming, farming transforms you” (5). Christine Byl writes, in a similar vein, “My life in the woods changed me. Work changed my trajectory, my days, changed the shape of my hands” (xix). In this section, I identify the different sites of transformation that the memoirs portray as significant, and suggest connections between those sites of change.

However, since my study of these memoirs is organized along the common themes that arise in all three texts, I will pause here to note the background of each writer and summarize briefly the content of each memoir. These summaries will begin to show the similar contours of transformation.

*Country Year* details Sue Hubbell’s life—or, to be more accurate, her observations of the swarm of life going on around her—on her mountaintop in the Missouri Ozarks. She makes her living there as a beekeeper, having left a job as a librarian at Brown University and recently separated from her husband of thirty years. Sue Hubbell portrays a process of re-defining herself through her close study of the animals, climate, and geological features of her farm. Her memoir has the unrehearsed and contemplative feeling of a day-to-day account, with a naturalist’s love for minute observation and for the Latin names of species. Her naturalist-like observations occur
in the course of her remarkably physical, demanding work producing honey. Hubbell’s writing conveys a strong sense of her own agency in choosing and adjusting to her rural life, and in her corporeal participation in the ecology within the borders of her farm.

For Kristin Kimball, the move to farming and rural life followed from meeting her future husband, an organic farmer, while she was working as a journalist and living in New York City. Their decision to move upstate and begin a CSA farm offering an organic, sustainable diet to the community posed an economic risk to both partners. Even more at issue in this memoir, though, is Kimball’s decision to leave her literary career, urban lifestyle, and identity as an unattached single woman. She finds no models for the kind of woman farmer that she hopes to be, and very little in her life had prepared her for the physical work of farming. Nonetheless, Kimball writes *The Dirty Life* as a testimonial that “farming takes root in you and crowds out other endeavors, makes them seem paltry” (5).

Christine Byl only mentions food when she describes the diet she ate to assuage her “raging appetite” during seasons of work building and repairing national park trails. Byl is conscious that during these periods in Montana and Alaska over sixteen years she was a woman in a “man’s world,” as defined by her colleagues, her family, and the parks bureaucracy (216). Her memoir addresses the “constant specter of gender” that structures her experience, but which physical experience of the natural world can sometimes transcend (45). She is also conscious that while working on trail crews, she was a middle-class college graduate with a philosophy degree (and later a Creative Writing MFA), doing manual labor. *Dirt Work* negotiates this “opting out” of the professional careers Byl believes she was headed for. Physical work, though a life she knows she was privileged to be able to choose, reframes femininity and especially the female body.
Carolyn A. Barros proposes that “where there are no significant developments or life-changing experiences, there is no narrative” (3). All prominent (now canonical) memoirs and autobiographies are accounts of transformation, whether religious conversion, intellectual development, or the emergence of an individual self that either rebels against or finds harmony with society. Transformation has also been important to feminist autobiography and to the kind of first-person storytelling that propelled feminist social change. The first issue of *Ms.* magazine, for example, included Jane O’Reilly’s article “The Housewife’s Moment of Truth,” in which O’Reilly tells acquaintances’ stories of when they became aware—sometimes for the first time—of the injustice and sexism in their lives. *Ms.* later published letters from readers who had their own stories of “some experience that had resulted in a ‘click.’” These “Click!” moments used individual experience of a change in consciousness to bear witness to larger social problems and to suggest a direction and area for reform. Certainly, this pattern of storytelling perpetuates itself;

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7 Barros names John Bunyan’s *Grace Abounding to the Least of Sinners*, John Ruskin’s *Praeterita*, Harriet Jacobs’ widely-studied *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl Written by Herself*, Rousseau’s *Confessions*, and Nabokov’s *Speak, Memory* as examples of well-known memoirs of personal transformation. Twentieth-century and contemporary childhood memoirs by Mary McCarthy, Mary Karr, and Tobias Wolff (among others) narrate youth as a period of monumentally significant experiences.

Ben Yagoda explains that the earliest memoirs—pre-dating the novel by centuries—were accounts of religious conversions or spiritual growth. The memoir genre “blossomed” in the 16th century with spiritual accounts by members of dissenting Protestant sects such as the Quakers (*Memoir: A History*, 40). These autobiographies established a narrative outline that Carolyn Barros sums up by quoting John Newton, “I once was lost but now am found,” which even secular autobiographies would emulate (9).

8 For more on these sections of *Ms.* magazine, including examples of the “click” moments that were published in the 1970s, see Ruth Rosen’s history of the feminist movement in the United States, *The World Split Open: How the Modern Women’s Movement Changed America*, especially pages 208-217.

Feminists continue to write narratives that make the personal public (and political). “Click!” moments continue to be included occasionally in *Ms.* magazine, and J. Courtney Sullivan and Courtney E. Martin have published the collection *Click: When We Knew We Were Feminists*. 

reading a narrative of another person’s dramatic change in thinking or lifestyle might prompt readers to interpret their lives in a similar way. The transformation narrative on the one hand reflects the very real exigence for the writer to tell his or her story, and on the other hand offers a familiar, established framework through which to make sense of experiences.

Transformation narratives need not revolve around extraordinary moments of realization. The Paris memoirs that I study in Chapter 1, for example, are all narratives of selves emerging over time, though within a particular time and place. Likewise, Hubbell, Kimball, and Byl do not construct their memoirs around one central, intense experience. Each writer testifies to a profound dissatisfaction with American society in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Expectations for women and the roles and types of work available to women seem particularly constrained and unfulfilling, even after the tremendous achievements of the feminist movement. Moving to a rural life of farming and working in the woods demands physical and philosophical change, and reveals possibilities for individual and social renewal.

Physical change

Early on in The Dirty Life, Kristin Kimball measures her own progress as a farmer through learning to milk by hand. She describes milking as “a kind of physical meditation. It was never easy, and it wasn’t always pleasant, but it was rhythmic, predictable, gentle, and quiet” (65). Later she writes with marked satisfaction of the adeptness that she gains: “I was getting better at milking, faster, the milk no longer dribbling down my wrists or jetting erratically toward the barn wall. I’d learned to keep my nails short and smooth, and to strip each teat gently but thoroughly” (92).
Adeptness and physical ability entails changes to each memoirist’s appearance. Hubbell, Kimball, and Byl all take care to mention that they are short and small-boned women, healthy but not physically prepared for labor in the woods or on a farm. Their work initiates changes in body composition over time, which Kimball and Byl treat as points of pride. Kristin Kimball writes that when she learned to capably milk cows, her “forearms were bigger every week” (92). Christine Byl shows off the strength she earned during her first summer of trail maintenance, and enjoys feeling and seeing the “taut curve of shoulder into bicep, the imposing loaf of thigh muscle above bony knee” (56). She writes of her first season of trail work as the point when she “finally shifted from girl to woman.” Womanhood meant not becoming rounder and more voluptuous, but gaining a body that “felt purposeful and competent in a way it never had, as if it could take control, set the terms” (56). Work confirms what she had believed was flawed about traditional femininity, particularly the messages long sent to women and girls that female bodies “are to be presented, arranged for viewing” (57).

Byl describes her own newly muscular body in a way that avoids casting fitness and strength as aesthetic goals. Her labor brings about practical results, and to her has more worth than “scheduling in” exercise that promises toned legs and a flat stomach as its main rewards. In fact, this section of her narrative seems meant explicitly to discount the idea that physical work is akin to working out. Byl quotes the comments that tourists who pass their work site make about a female traildog’s appearance: “How’d a pretty girl like you get a job like this? . . . My, you seem strong! Well aren’t you something. I’ve always thought a dirty girl was pretty sexy” (italics in original) (56). She counters the conflation of strength with alluring but passive fitness: “I felt the intoxication of latent power, the knowledge that I didn’t just look a certain way, but could force
something to happen—lid from a jar, hand off my ass—that I could take the world into my hands, give it a firm grip, kick it in the balls if I chose” (57).

Not all physical changes are so welcome, however, or so visible and attractive. Work outdoors wears out the body, and brings drier skin and rougher hair. For Byl, sixteen seasons of trailwork gave her two permanently crooked fingers, carpal tunnel syndrome, two hernia surgeries, and, she laments “joints that feel older than I am” (xix). Kimball in particular experiences the changes to her body as an erosion or sacrifice of feminine qualities she had once maintained carefully:

I let my hair grow out, not by conscious choice but because making and keeping an appointment to cut it never reached the top of the priority list. I forgot to pluck my eyebrows. I hardly ever looked in the mirror, and when I did I saw that all the outdoor work was etching new lines around my eyes, weathering my complexion, bringing out the red tones, the freckles. My new life was marking me. (129)

Such descriptions avoid glamorizing the strong bodies and difficult work that the memoirs chronicle. Kimball does not appear to take much satisfaction in seeing her city vanity dissolve, but instead seems to realize that rural life is becoming permanent. Physical strength and physical changes document the memoirists’ commitment to the farm or the woods, and the new ways in which they become suited to that life.

**Philosophical change**

Physical changes reflect the memoirists’ new lives, and greater physical strength also enables them to live according to new values associated with rural settings where the natural world feels more immediately present. Along with her weathered skin, Kimball observes her
own reaction to these physical changes: “There were intermittent spells of resistance, during which I’d pluck and moisturize and exfoliate, and then there was a period of grieving for my old self, who seemed to be disappearing toward the horizon, and then I relaxed into it” (129).

Stronger arms and shoulders make these women more skilled at milking cows or wielding a chainsaw, and relaxing into a low-maintenance appearance frees time for learning about the work and the landscape. The endless work takes its toll, but also brings an unexpected peace. Kimball sees this change in herself when she recalls, “I had always been attracted to the empty, sparkly grab bag of instant gratification, and I was beginning to learn something about the peace you can find inside an infinite challenge” (158).

What appeal did the city once hold for these writers? Omitting that aspect of their experience from this discussion would oversimplify the decisions they make and the subsequent shifts in thinking they document. Christine Byl travels out West because, after finishing her philosophy degree, she is “more tired of school than Socrates had hinted possible” (xvi). After six seasons of trailwork in the summer and part-time jobs cobbled together in the winter, she enrolls in an MFA program at the University of Alaska in Anchorage. There, the city provides an environment in which to discuss the elements of plot and the craft of writing with other creative writers. Afterward, when she and her husband have moved even further north to work in Denali National Park, Byl acknowledges that she misses the “cultural tackle” of towns and cities. “Some days,” she writes, “when the cabin feels dark and small and there’s no way to stay warm outside for longer than an hour, I wish for a clean, well-lighted space, a hot drink amid the bustle of the public sphere, the haven of anonymity” (195). Sue Hubbell also appreciates that “cultural tackle” of cities—a performance of baroque music at the Harvard chapel, rows of stores with imported and artisan foods—but as an occasional exception to the pace and relative solitude of farm life. A
Country Year, like Dirt Work, rarely mentions these pleasures associated with cities and towns. Both memoirs allow that bustling places have their appeal, but not the lasting pull of wilder environments.

The city, with its distinct culture and cultural offerings, occupies its largest place in Kristin Kimball’s mind. To her and her extended family, moving to work in the “gleaming, mysterious city” is the natural next step towards a successful life after finishing an Ivy League college degree (219). When Mark visits her in New York City, Kristin is surprised by his lack of interest in bars, restaurants, and cafes, and his only moderate interest in bookstores and parties. In addition to enjoying these attractions of urban life, she perceives her urban lifestyle as more authentic than the suburban life of her childhood and her parents. With a trace of superiority, Kimball writes that in the city life she built for herself, she believed she had left behind the “conventions . . . rules and tastes and predictability” of a middle class home like the one in which she was raised (32).

Rural life and the wildness of a farm, the woods, or a mountain campsite are necessary to the kinds of transformation that each memoir portrays. Urban farming, though a growing opportunity that appeals to city-dwellers who want to be personally involved in producing their food, wouldn’t appeal to Byl and Hubbell. Both clearly articulate that the city or suburban landscape offers little that is fulfilling in the long term. Even for Kimball, the city is a large part of what must be left behind in choosing a new kind of life. Ultimately, she craved more than the

9 Jennifer Cockrall-King writes about the history of urban agriculture and the expansion of community gardens and urban farms in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries in Food and the City: Urban Agriculture and the New Food Revolution. Urban farmers grow fruits and vegetables, and raise chickens, bees, rabbits, and other animals, on abandoned spaces such as lots, rooftops, fire escapes, and tiny backyards. Memoirs of these projects include Farm City by Novella Carpenter, The Good Food Revolution by McArthur “Genius Grant” recipient Will Allen, and From the Ground Up by Jeanne Nolan.
work of growing plants and caring for livestock, which she could have had along with bars, cafes, and trendy neighborhoods. In New York, Kimball’s career consisted of “cobbling together freelance jobs, just scraping by” (22). She adds: “I was caffeinated and frazzled and worried about money, and, like most everyone else in New York, I accepted that as normal” (22). As a farmer, she continues to worry about money, but trades her tenuous career for one anchored in a landscape and a community. She and Mark are busy, and exhausted, but not frazzled. Instead, she finds herself “fundamentally happier” with her “focus on the ground” (158). Each season of planting crops and learning to raise animals in that climate and place roots her even more firmly to their farm. Deciding to commit her professional life increasingly to the farm takes over a year, during which Kristin questions how much she wants to marry Mark and considers her other possibilities. Both marriage and farming ask her to “let go of a big chunk of who [she was] before,” and as with the changes to her appearance “that loss must be grieved. A choice for something and someone is a choice against absolutely everything else” (248).

**Femininity and Domesticity**

Writing about a trip to Connecticut to market her honey, Sue Hubbell contrasts herself in her “worn jeans and steel-toed work boots, one of which has a hole in it from the time [she] dripped battery acid on it,” with the women in the suburbs who go out “buying things to drape on themselves, and things to put in their houses, and things to take care of the things hanging on themselves and the things in their houses” (120 – 21). Hubbell lived on the margins of such a community twenty years earlier, before moving to the Ozarks, and finds the women unchanged in the time since she left. Those Connecticut women carry a “look of strain on their faces,” like the women she remembers living near. To leave that life—a permanent move, or heading west at
the end of the sales day—feels like an escape (121). Observations like this scene seem intended to demonstrate how thoroughly Hubbell has adapted to a rural agricultural life. This passage contrasts the trivialities of urban or suburban life with the practicalities of rural life, using examples of gendered behaviors as metaphors for the difference. Such contrasts, symbolized by clothing and homemaking, are one common thread, particularly in *A Country Year* and *The Dirty Life*.

Like Sue Hubbell, Kristin Kimball envisions a clear distinction between country and city and structures her story along that division. Urban or suburban femininity is based in acquiring items to display in the home or on the body, and aspiring to a particular appearance rather than a set of skills. In the country, Kimball puts items of clothing whose main value had been as ornament to new, more serious use. She “discovered the insulating properties of silk,” which gave her lingerie an unexpected relevance to hard work, and adds, “some days I farmed in a black cashmere V-neck that I used to call my first-date sweater” (128 – 29). Out of necessity, Kimball repurposes clothes that she had originally chosen because they would reflect her place in the professional class and convey a polished, aloof femininity. In her experience of rural life, items are stripped of those cultural meanings and appreciated instead for practical value.

*The Dirty Life* questions the satisfaction to be found in modern, urban relationships, and asks whether relinquishing domestic tasks necessarily liberates women or brings them closer to the social status that men enjoy. Kimball’s city life entailed a flight from domesticity. When she met Mark she had been using the refrigerator in her studio apartment mainly to store dog kibble and her phone book, “bookshelf space being dear” (13). Mark is the partner who comes to their relationship with an inclination towards homemaking, particularly cooking. The value he places on homegrown and homemade food delights Kristin, and influences her thinking. During one
visit to New York City, he cleans a mouse nest out of the oven to use it for the first time. He clears off her desk to use in place of a dining room table, rearranging the furniture to bring the bed and table into the center of the room. Mark is the one to transform the apartment into a domestic space through cooking and eating, as he does later in their disheveled farmhouse.

While Kimball’s city-country dichotomy might be too neat for some readers, her memory of living in the city articulates a dissatisfaction that is interesting because it is so tied to normative gender roles in that setting:

I was dating in a way that can best be described as haphazard, shuffling drinks and dinners and movie dates with a filmmaker, an art collector, a political writer, and an ex. I assumed all of them had their own shuffles going on, too. We were all very busy and we were all very cagey about our feelings. If there was a chance for love, nobody was talking about it. Least of all me. . . . I’d gotten the idea that emotional needs were unattractive in a woman, especially after the age of thirty. Safer, I thought, to play it tough and elusive. (21)

This passage demonstrates Kimball’s dissatisfaction with a lifestyle that, like her “frazzled and worried” emotional state, seemed normal in her urban environment. Her romance with Mark is exactly the opposite, both more urgent and more genuine. When she visits him at his Pennsylvania farm for long weekends, Kristin experiences farm work among vegetable fields and chickens, and eats meals with Mark in his trailer that leave her feeling she would “never again be impressed with a man who simply took [her] out to dinner” (25-26). Mark’s cooking is a revelation, a combination of his self-taught skill and the ingredients he uses: “vegetables with the earth still clinging to them, herbs growing at arm’s reach, a quality of eggs and milk and meat
that you can’t buy in any store” (25). Kimball portrays him as forthright, and as authentic as the ingredients in his meals.

Memoir and The New Domesticity

Emily Matchar’s account of writers who dive into the popular New Domesticity initially made me skeptical of Kimball’s narrative. Kimball’s too-convenient city/country contrast and her praise for the earthy pleasures of food she grew herself seem to be part of that uncritical embrace of a superficially “empowering” retro lifestyle. However, closer reading shows that Kimball differs from most New Domesticity bloggers and enthusiasts in two important ways.

First, unlike the bloggers that Matchar studies, Kimball says little about the way she raises her two young daughters—organically or otherwise. Her first daughter’s birth at home in their farmhouse takes place offstage, mentioned briefly in the epilogue to The Dirty Life. Leaving motherhood out of her memoir perhaps signals a broader philosophical stance towards telling her story. Her relationship with Mark is more “fiery” than idyllic, and she resists the idea of marriage even during their engagement (265). Kimball writes about Mark in either frank descriptions of their sexual attraction, their infuriating differences in outlook, or their shared labor. His function in the memoir is that of a strong voice drawing her towards sustainable and community-based farming, and an ideological contrast to Kristin’s urban and suburban acquaintances. Although in her narrative Kimball describes feeling a visceral, “primal” attraction to Mark’s vigor and the vigor of his farming life, she doesn’t cast marriage and motherhood as a sphere that nature

10 Giving birth and raising children is a popular topic for New Domesticity enthusiasts. Matchar writes, “the DIY ethos of New Domesticity truly flourishes when it comes to parenthood” and involves breastfeeding, cloth diapers, making baby food from scratch, and homeschooling or staying home with young children (122). Matchar questions whether this style of parenting is “a sexist throwback” or a truly revolutionary phenomenon in pages 121-55 of Homeward Bound.
intended for her to occupy (28). Kimball separates domestic chores from the work of caring for a husband and children. When she writes about traditional work that is associated with an earlier historical period, she does not necessarily mean the traditional *female* work that the New Domesticity promotes as women’s natural role.¹¹

Furthermore, Kimball has little to say about furnishing and decorating her home, a major topic among Matchar’s bloggers and interviewees. *The Dirty Life* contains no moments that might be read as the literary equivalent of a blogger’s photo of her homemade curtains or her kitchen table built from reclaimed lumber. For much of the Kimball’s first year of farming, the farmhouse—which “smelled of pot and Raid”—was occupied by tenants (66). During those months, Mark and Kristin live in a rented house in town and drive a few miles each day to work on the farmland they leased, so that even the possibility of a cozy farmhouse is delayed. When they do move in, they outfit the kitchen with an industrial-sized, stainless-steel sink for cleaning milking equipment, and a hook in the ceiling for hanging quarters of beef to be butchered. Kimball wryly observes that the house—with dirt constantly tracked in on boots, and no couch or comfortable chairs—seems to say, “there is no sitting here. . . . Only work or sleep” (222).

I use Emily Matchar’s concept of New Domesticity and the content of *Homeward Bound* extensively in this section, though the book explores a social phenomenon without making significant reference to literary criticism or feminist theory. That trend does exist mainly among a narrow demographic of affluent, white, middle-class women, and may prove to be ephemeral. The subjects of Matchar’s study, however, should be taken seriously. These bloggers,

¹¹ Matchar is, in fact, critical of the New Domesticity for its “senseless worship of all things perceived to be natural” which, when it comes to gender, entails blatant gender essentialism and echoes the nineteenth-century Cult of Domesticity (240). In rejecting the achievements that feminism made in the 1970s by gaining women access to careers, New Domesticity also dangerously downplays the importance of financial independence.
memoirists, and enthusiasts comprise one immediate social context within which the three memoirs I’ve selected were written. The trend they represent is one many readers will associate with the transformation narratives that I take up in this chapter. Kimball, in particular, tells a story that resembles many of the decisions and ideas that New Domesticity proponents extol. Dealing with those ideas is necessary to explain what these memoirs are saying, and to clarify the explicit and implicit ways that Kimball, Byl, and Hubbell diverge from this trend. Matchar’s research shows that these memoirists are far from alone in critiquing and rejecting white-collar careers and urban values. However, Kimball, Byl, and Hubbell create new lives on a much larger scale than urban homesteaders or stay-at-home mothers who start up handicrafts businesses on Etsy. More importantly, they write a critique of mainstream consumerist society and develop their new philosophies without essentializing gender. While they wholeheartedly believe in the rural lives they’ve chosen, these memoirists never romanticize those lives or communities.

*The Rural Home*

Sue Hubbell and Kristin Kimball envision the urban or suburban home as a place concerned with decoration, fashion, and rejection of traditionally feminine tasks. In contrast, a farm home looks to use value, and defines quality in clothes or equipment as what will serve its purpose effectively and reliably for years. Transitioning from urban to rural life, Hubbell and Kimball also become producers rather than consumers. Hubbell stores up her own firewood, keeps a garden and chickens, and sells honey for the cash she requires to meet her few material needs. Kimball learns to grow and forage for vegetables, raise and slaughter animals, and collect and boil down sap for maple syrup. On both farms, the work of growing food that will be eaten
by the farmers themselves and also sold for profit calls into question the line between homemaking and working.\textsuperscript{12}

The Kimballs’ rural life and their approach to farming expand what domesticity means at Essex Farm. Crucially, Mark is an accomplished and enthusiastic cook, and so neither he nor Kristin envisions their partnership as one in which he works outside in the fields and barn, while she preserves and cooks what they grow. Their whole-diet CSA venture expands this reverence for growing and cooking food into an economic, environmentalist calling that the couple hopes will spread to their customers. Mark’s philosophy of farming is based around producing the healthiest and highest-quality ingredients for feeding a family, using methods that at the same time cultivate healthy farmland. For Kristin, joining him in the work of sustainable farming brings deep pleasure: “I was in love with the work, too, despite its overabundance. . . . For the first time, I could clearly see the connection between my actions and their consequences. I knew why I was doing what I was doing, and I believed in it. I felt the gap between who I thought I was and how I behaved begin to close, growing slowly closer to authentic” (158). This abiding satisfaction is part of the transformation that the memoir recounts.

Sustainable farming demands Kristin’s participation, because the work is so “overabundant” that neither she nor Mark can manage it alone. The tasks of domestic “homemaking” matter less than planting and harvesting chores, and lose gendered connotations on their farm. The small scale and diversity of Essex Farm seem also to permit Kristin’s active participation in work and decisions. Faced with planting, growing, milking, doctoring animals,

\textsuperscript{12} Michael Pollan’s most recent book, \textit{Cooked: A Natural History of Transformation}, also addresses this shift from being a consumer to being a producer. Preparing food for a family, he writes, “gives us the opportunity, so rare in modern life, to work directly in our own support, and in the support of the people we feed. If this is not ‘making a living,’ I don’t know what is” (23).
boiling syrup, building and repairing farm structures, and then harvesting, marketing, and finally selling their food, Mark and Kristin cultivate areas of expertise. They divide responsibilities according to which tasks each partner is most drawn to, and of the two Kristin is more skilled than Mark at the typically masculine task of working with the draft horses they employ in place of tractors.

Kimball’s most important contribution in her memoir may be to extend the domestic space outward to include the gardens, barns, and sugarhouse at Essex Farm. Making and maintaining their home includes boiling down maple syrup and training draft horses. Historically, and in contemporary discussion, homemaking and the domestic sphere are defined in opposition to paid work or work outside the home. However, the meat that they sell in the early months of their CSA is butchered in their kitchen. When the vegetables harvested for the CSA turn out to be a surplus, the family eats the extra at home. In this way, work inside the home intermingles with paid work. And at times, sustainable farming methods require a care or nurturing that resemble the domestic sphere.

The type of femininity that Kimball, Hubbell, and Byl all embrace is based in physical ability and self-sufficiency, but they offer three different understandings of home and domesticity. For Byl, who lives in a tent or a cabin during most of the time she writes about, homemaking is a bit beside the point. Her partner (later her husband) Gabe works on a separate crew, so the two rarely share even these makeshift domestic arrangements. She has little to say about food besides the impressive quantity she and her crew require in their packed lunches and campfire dinners. For Sue Hubbell, the connection between marriage, home, and gender is more pertinent. Hubbell draws a clear contrast between her life before her marriage dissolved, and her life as a single woman. She explains, “When Paul was here he cut the firewood and I, like all
Ozark wives, carried the cut wood to the pickup,” but after he departs the farm she buys a lighter chainsaw and cuts her own (45). Hubbell relishes not only the “supply of winter warmth, free except for the labor,” but also the self-sufficiency that completing the chore alone represents (48).

While *A Country Year* does not romanticize either rural farm life or solitude, Hubbell has important insights about the way these later years of her life have changed her thinking. On the evening when she sleeps outside because her cabin begins to “seem stuffy and limiting,” she wonders if she is “becoming feral” (194). She writes of her realization that “wild things and wild places pull me more strongly than they did a few years ago, and domesticity, dusting and cookery interest me not at all” (195). The fact that this wildness coincides with building a life alone as a single woman, and an older one for whom there is no clear social role in the culture of the United States, is not lost on her. “Nest building,” as she calls it, loses its charm at this point when she is past her reproductive years. In place of cultivating a life as part of a pair, Hubbell writes, “we have gained our Selves” (195). She expands this idea:

> Because our culture has assigned us no real role, we can make up our own. It is a good time to be a grown-up woman with individuality, strength and crotchets. We are wonderfully free. We live long. Our children are the independent adults we helped them to become, and though they may still want our love they do not need our care. Social rules are so flexible today that nothing we do is shocking. (196)

During this evening and morning, Hubbell decides that a house, and the set of tasks, roles, and feminine qualities that the house traditionally represents, “is too small, too confining” compared to her alternatives (196).
Negotiating communities based on traditional gender roles

Kristin Kimball, Sue Hubbell, and to a lesser extent Christine Byl view their experiences within a city/country dichotomy that holds rural values and agricultural or forestry work as superior in many ways to urban or indoor work. Several of these aspects are gendered. Hierarchy and division become complicated, though, by the fact that each memoirist works in a male-dominated field. Paradoxically, the liberating physical work that so changes their sense of self takes place in communities with even more traditional gender roles than the urban communities they had left.

Throughout The Dirty Life, Kimball writes of gender norms as inflexible, even across shifting contexts. Moving upstate to begin their farm, she encounters a community that expects a traditional division of labor—one that does not take her seriously as a farmer. Though she and Mark think of themselves as partners, sharing chores and decisions, few neighbors and visitors recognize her role on the farm. Most men in the town, she writes, “would pull in, roll down the truck window, and ask, ‘Mark around?’ or ‘Stha boss here?’ and then would sit silently until Mark appeared, directing all questions, comments, and dealings to him and ignoring me completely” (75). However, In The Dirty Life, sustainable farming proves crucial to women’s participation in agricultural work. Essex Farm combines a type of work and a way of living through which Kimball can unsettle both the gender roles of her rural farming community, and the progressive gender roles of New York City.

Hubbell’s satisfaction in departing from the typical Ozark role for women is apparent even in her understated writing style. In A Country Year, she seems aware of those places where women are present and active, and where they typically are not. In an anecdote she recalls that a male friend at the lumberyard did not believe a “lady carpenter” was coming to visit and help
rebuild barns on her farm. Professionally, Hubbell contends with gender norms, though they
don’t appear to pose too much of an obstacle to her work. She does note that she is one of the
only female members of the South Central Missouri Beekeepers (and the only one who makes a
living from keeping her hives). When she hosts the beekeepers’ annual pig roast on her farm,
early all of the women who attend are wives interested in their husbands’ work but not active
beekeepers themselves.

In Hubbell’s mind, her age allows her to build an unconventional life within these
traditional gender norms. Along with the wider and wilder desires that replace nest building, she
has found unexpected freedom: “Social rules are so flexible today that nothing we do is
shocking. There are no political barriers to us anymore. Provided we stay healthy and can
support ourselves, we can do anything, have anything and spend our talents any way that we
please” (196). This is not to dismiss or downplay the sense of loss—and occasional loneliness—
that come with the end of her marriage. Hubbell documents that profound sadness and confusion
early in her memoir. This passage near the conclusion suggests, instead, that what her role amidst
these social expectations might be is a question to be lived, not answered.

Christine Byl confronts gender ideologies directly in *Dirt Work*. Men on the crews notice
when a woman is present; they comment on her appearance and assess her reliability as a worker
until she has been with them long enough to be familiar. Byl observes that men and women
working together on trail crews are “constantly negotiating our places on the spectrum between
*opposite* and *same*” (emphasis in original) (45). While bodies come to seem especially present in
settings of physical work, gender loses its primacy in those same settings:

> Here’s the twist. Those same bodies, so inhabited, provide us the
> ungendered moments, too, the times when cultural roles and physical parts
deconstruct and we become people working side by side. The best times, with men and women, are those when the moment demands every last thing and there’s no room in the brain, no will in the muscles, for the extraneous who’s stronger nice ass I’d sleep with. We aren’t checking each other out, and we even forget to evaluate ourselves, free for moments from awareness and appraisal. (44)

Later in the memoir, Byl reiterates this link between freedom and physical work, but recognizes the political implications: “For all it sometimes seems like just another job, being a woman in a ‘man’s world’ is an activism, a standing up to assumptions and limits and proclaiming with our bodies, our whole selves, I can be however suits me. And how that tells the men, You can, too (216, italics in original). During trailwork, Byl compares herself to both the women and the men with her. “We don’t need men,” she writes, “to be aware of gender” (44). In her narrative, gender very much shapes a person’s experience of physical work and the exigencies of the natural world. However, knowledge and experience are the factors that create distinctions in this setting, not physical size or strength, much less innate personal traits. The guys “seemed to have been born with tools in their hands” whereas most women were not “raised to perform the skills [they] were being paid for” (17). Women in this situation tend to remember “what it felt like not to know, to be expected not to know, to be taught,” and their expertise, once acquired, “feels earned, not inherited” (17). For Byl, acquiring expertise—like acquiring physical ability—brings power that exhilarates her. Just as her muscular limbs let her move a hand off her ass or give the world a kick in the balls, knowing the technique to fell trees lets her feel superior to cocky new traildogs, especially young men who take their physical prowess for granted.
Relationality

The farm work that Kimball learns is physically demanding, and demanding in other senses as well. Her description of milking as “physical meditation” registers the care that the chore requires, and the attentiveness to her specific place and physical presence that journalism never asked of her. Her work with their draft horses, or restoring the worn-out soil in a field, or assisting with the births of calves, require the care and attentiveness that characterizes milking. I read Kimball’s emerging sense of her place within Essex Farm as a version of relationality, an aspect of these memoirs that links them to other personal narratives and also clarifies the environmentalist consciousness of each story. Physically interacting with the ecosystem of her farm, Kimball comes to understand herself not as individual or autonomous, but instead as intertwined with the non-human life there and in her wider rural community.

These three writers’ shared focus on work differentiates their memoirs from most American nature writing, including many well-known texts. Canonical environmentalist writers such as John Muir and Edward Abbey wrote excursion narratives set in wilderness landscapes that celebrate the author’s adventurous spirit and the grandeur of places largely untouched by human society. To a certain extent these writers also celebrated masculinity, as represented by physical endurance and freedom from the domesticating influence of society.

Another way in which Hubbell, Kimball, and Byl depart from the dominant narrative in American nature writing is by locating their stories in settings of what Scott Hess calls “everyday nature.” In most environmental writing and culture, nature is treated as “a form of refuge,” a place apart from the practical concerns of day to day lives and “defined in opposition to the social, the economic, and the everyday” (“Imagining an Everyday Nature” 87). This view of nature emphasizes a protected wilderness or a wildlife refuge that humans visit, but where they
do not live or work. Hess mentions Edward Abbey as one such writer, together with Barry Lopez, Peter Matthiessen, Gary Snyder, and Rick Bass. Each moves to “special environments that take writers away from society and modernity into a more aesthetic or literary landscape” and writes largely about that “chosen, spectacular place” (88-89). While Hess does not aim to criticize these writers in his article, he argues that this view promotes a relationship to nature that ignores the implications of how we live our everyday lives. As an alternative, Hess cites Michael Pollan’s “gardener’s ethic of nature,” which accounts for the landscapes in which humans live and the ways their actions and social structures impact those places (109).

Sue Hubbell understands that by cutting firewood in the woods on her farm, she becomes “a part of the abstraction that is the forest community” through choosing which trees to cull and which to encourage (49). The abstraction of the forest, or indeed the rest of her farm, takes on an immediate and personal quality in Hubbell’s writing. As a six-year-old girl, her father had tried to teach her Latin names for plants, an early lesson that imparted not much scientific knowledge, but the beginning of a relational understanding of the world. In A Country Year, Hubbell remembers that “the names were too hard for me, but I did understand that plants had names that described their relationships to one another and found this elegant and interesting even when I was six years old” (10). The Latin names of plants and animals gain their importance later in Hubbell’s life. She “botanized obsessively” after her thirty-year marriage ended, while she “wandered about the woods that winter, good for little else, examining the bark of leafless trees” (12). She taught herself the system by which species are named, and recorded where plants grow, their habits, and the time of year that they bloom. This work of learning the abundant species on her land cleared a space in her mind for, as she phrases it at the end of her first chapter, “the
work of building a new kind of order, a structure on which a fifty-year-old woman can live her life alone, at peace with herself and the world around her” (12).

Much of *A Country Year* illustrates the peace Hubbell does find in solitude and in work. However, the memoir also makes clear that her solitude is defined by her being away from other humans, but that her work and leisure are in fact crowded with the presence of other beings.

Following this resolute statement of beginning anew, her second chapter opens: “One spring evening a couple of years ago, I was sitting in the brown leather chair in the living room reading the newspaper and minding my own business when I became aware that I was no longer alone” (13). Looking up, she sees her floor-to-ceiling windows covered with hundreds of inch-long frogs—*Hyla crucifer*, or spring peepers. This moment early in the memoir introduces one important thread in her narrative—that in a place as densely populated as her farm, a single attentive human comes to realize that she is not living her life alone in either a physical or spiritual sense.

Quotidian events that have just happened spark Hubbell’s meditations in each chapter. She writes, “last evening I was reading in bed and felt rather than heard a soft plop on the bed next to me” (15). This recollection leads to a narrative of the frogs inhabiting her farm. “The secretary of the park superintendent just telephoned to cancel an appointment” leads to her comments on the plans for a dam to be built on the river below her farm, but also the way that winter “mocks the making of plans” in her country (147). One effect of this unstudied style is to minimize the drama of the self that can be a weakness in memoir. Hubbell limits her introspection to brief (but striking) passages, and prefers to focus outward. Likewise, when writing her observations of other living creatures on her farm, Hubbell steers clear of any tendency to read their behavior as a metaphor for her own life. Rather, their connection is one of
reciprocity, as seen when she mourns a bobcat who roamed her farm and has been shot by a neighbor: “I knew that bobcat, and she probably knew me somewhat better, for she would have been a more careful observer than I” (141).

Hubbell’s most profound interaction with non-human life on her farm is with her honeybees, which are also the greatest source of mystery there. Much about bees’ habits is unknown, even by those who work with and study them. Hubbell emphasizes their difference, and the way that “close and intimate contact with creatures who are structured so differently from humans, and who get on with life in such a different way, is like being a visitor in an alien but ineffably engaging world” (192). In one passage she describes sensing that the air is “electric and full of excitement,” just before bees streaming past envelope her:

I am not sure how long I stood there. I lost all sense of time and felt only elation, a kind of human emotional counterpart of the springlike, optimistic, burgeoning state that the bees were in. I stood quietly; I was nothing more to the bees than an object to be encircled on their way to the spot where they had decided, in a way I could not know, to cluster. In another sense I was not remote from them at all, but was receiving all sorts of meaningful messages in the strongest way imaginable outside of human mental process and language. My skin was tingling as the bees brushed past and I felt almost a part of the swarm. (26 – 27)

Such reverence for the life that takes place independently of her own notwithstanding, Hubbell’s attitude towards the woods and animals on her hilltop is hardly a “leave no trace” philosophy. Her approach might better be understood as an ethic of relationality, wherein she has a role to play choosing which trees to encourage, or rescuing baby phoebes from a snake that swallowed them whole. The privileged “other” in Hubbell’s story is the dense web of plant and animal life
on her farm, of which she is part, and through descriptions of which she chooses to narrate her own experiences.

Christine Byl writes in a similar vein about the bear, moose, and smaller creatures in the woods with her. Hubbell’s honeybees are untrained and pose their own threat, but Byl encounters truly wild, dangerous animals. For her, “the specter of danger mingled with curiosity results in an otherness that both beckons and warns” (13). She later echoes Hubbell’s sense of the tension between familiar and untamed, both in humans and in the wider ecosystem. Byl writes, “proximity to wild things makes me feel feral—incautious and frisky and willing to gamble on what I cannot prove. And proximity to wild things makes me feel tame—glad I don’t have to hunt for every meal, eager to hunker next to a fire on a cold night” (13 – 14).

Relationality in these memoirs strikes me as a way to further environmental goals by telling the author’s story, rather than a gendered technique. As Nancy K. Miller argues, relationality is one way a memoirist chooses to tell his or her story, apart from theories of female identity development (“Representing Others”). Locating the self in the environment is a technique for writing memoir that also places the memoirist’s relationship to a landscape and nonhuman life at the center. The narratives I’ve chosen to study are rooted, rather than

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13 Tracie McMillan’s *The American Way of Eating* (2012) shows how a memoir about experiences of workers and consumers can also further environmental, activist goals. McMillan’s story is equal parts personal and outward-focused, and very much informed by feminist concerns. With public figures such as Michael Pollan and Michelle Obama in mind, she asks why processed food came to be so much cheaper and more convenient than fresh food, and how to change such a system. McMillan acknowledges that this was not something she “could learn from [her] cozy single-girl-in-Brooklyn apartment,” and so she takes jobs to understand these problems from the perspective of low-income workers and consumers (11).

In central California McMillan works picking grapes, peaches, and garlic; she stocks the produce section of a Walmart in Detroit; and she assembles meals in a Brooklyn Applebee’s. She uses the details of her experience to argue for a social justice dimension of the sustainable food movement. Further study of women’s farming memoirs might consider McMillan’s account of working with immigrant laborers at California’s industrial farms.
transient, and develop the author’s identity through narratives of the landscape—the “privileged other” that marks these memoirs as relational. Even Christine Byl, writing about vast and rugged national parks where human society has made few inroads, returns to the same camps, rivers, and mountain faces season after season so that these wild places become known and familiar. And Sue Hubbell, who writes of herself as beyond the life stages usually associated with self-discovery, develops a new identity through writing her memoir.

“Opting out” and Privilege

In their memoirs, Kristin Kimball and Christine Byl are aware of the economic and class privilege that makes possible their moves to farming and trailwork (and, readers might infer, to creative writing). Kimball’s anxiety before guests arrive at Essex Farm for her wedding reveals her self-consciousness in that weighty moment, and again while she writes about it. She realizes the opportunity her background affords: “I’d been given the enormous gift of an Ivy League education and had moved on from there to the gleaming, mysterious city, and now this. I felt that [these people from my past] had certain expectations of me, that they had a right to them, and that those expectations would probably be dashed by the sight of a scurrying rat or the smell of pig manure” (219). This passage outlines two sides of her self-consciousness about committing to a farming life. Her family’s affluence and her excellent education confer career possibilities that she left behind (a decision that could be construed as thoughtless and unappreciative), but also a set of expectations that Kimball feels uncomfortable abandoning.

Christine Byl writes equally explicitly and at greater length about the relationship between choice, or mobility, and work. Her own economically stable childhood and youth allowed her—or led her—to choose a low-wage job with little security. She acknowledges the
privileged position of opting to continue trailwork, or not: “I chose this job years ago, and every year I get to choose again, knowing two things: I could do other jobs—teach, edit, write grants, make sandwiches, go back to school in archaeology” (177). However, that freedom to re-apply to trail crews each spring may be misleading. Byl realizes that, “also, right now, trailwork is what I do best—dig holes, survey grades, design alignments, train crews, haul logs” (177). Her Ivy League education and MFA degree notwithstanding, Byl’s experience and temperament make her best suited for the manual seasonal work that began as “a whim” and a respite from schoolwork that cultivated cerebral ability and neglected physical skills.

Realizing her own position as a college-educated laborer leads Byl to consider, and then question the cultural paradigms that seem to her “set in stone.” Chief among those paradigms is the idea that “if you choose skilled labor among a host of possibilities available to you, or because of an apprenticed lineage, then it is ‘noble,’ ‘honest,’ ‘humble’ work. If labor is forced upon you by circumstance, lack of education, or desperation of one kind or another, then it is ‘soul-killing,’ ‘monotonous,’ “drudgery”’ (176). She herself is one of the former, but the cultural distinctions and stereotypes about work that she was raised with break down during the actual experience of demanding, exhausting labor. In reality, she asserts, “Labor is a job, a task, a grind, a career, a vocation, a whim, a duty, an assignment, a mission, a chore. Skilled and unskilled. Trade labor and grunt. Hired and forced. Artful tasks and thankless ones” (176).

Privilege, in these narratives, includes the mobility to move between types of work and from city to country, with the financial means to leave everything behind and establish a new home. It also means choosing to do physical labor without real anxiety about the class connotations of such work, and rejecting the middle-class standard of living. A friend of the Kimballs explains to a worried neighbor that the couple is “needy by choice” (emphasis in the
original) (77). Emily Matchar outlines a similar type of privilege in the New Domesticity phenomenon. She does not find many women or men from affluent or poor backgrounds turning to handcrafts and farming, but mainly the middle class. For these men and women, breastfeeding or making handmade goods is a choice bearing no association with poverty. Matchar explains the class issue involved in the trend:

New Domesticity is most attractive to people who are removed enough from the horrors of rural poverty to find canning charming yet still struggle to find genuinely fulfilling careers and decent ways to balance work and life. . . .

New Domesticity is, at heart, a cry against a society that’s not working. A society that doesn’t offer safe-enough food, accessible health care, a reasonable level of environmental protections, any sort of rights for working parents. (247 – 48)

Consciously or not, these choices make a statement about class status, education, taste, and concern for social justice. “Let’s be honest,” Matchar writes in her concluding section, “few of us are immune to the sway of fashion. And these activities have become widespread because they’re considered fashionable” (247).

However, these memoirs dwell on aspects of farming and trailwork that are far from fashionable. Kimball describes the parts of farming that are frankly unappealing. “I had daily intimacy not just with dirt but with blood, manure, milk, pus, my own sweat and the sweat of other creatures, with the grease of engines and the grease of animals, with innards, with all the stages of decomposition,” she writes. “Slowly, the boundary of what I found disgusting pushed outward” (128). Over time, farm activities feel more like obligations. Byl explains that in her experience, “days made up solely of hard labor or mindless chores create a different kind of
deadness, even as they invite another kind of meaning” (xviii). Hubbell describes a life so disconnected from mainstream society that few could find her day-to-day activities fashionable.

The narratives that Hubbell, Kimball, and Byl present resemble the stories of educated women who leave their jobs to be stay-at-home mothers, with a notable difference. Their dissatisfaction with urban lives and white-collar careers does not stem from the impossibility of balancing work with raising a family, a factor that is regularly cited by women who “opt out” of the jobs they trained for. Kimball and Byl are childless when they leave those jobs; Sue Hubbell has a son who is almost grown and attending boarding school. None leaves paid work behind altogether and none elects to be supported by a husband or partner instead. It should not be overlooked that these three memoirists embrace work they experience as even more strenuous and demanding than the career paths they left.

Matchar’s concept of New Domesticity has a precursor in the “back to the land” movement of earlier generations. Writing in 1983, Sue Hubbell is conscious of the misplaced idealism, bordering on arrogance, of these transplants. “Simple Lifers,” as she calls them, have theories about living in the country but little experience and seldom the humility to learn. In Hubbell’s experience, they usually spend their savings quickly and fail in their farming experiments. Hubbell admits that she has lived “both sorts of lives,” but with markedly less charity she recalls an Ozarker saying about back-to-the-landers: “The briars get their clothes, the hillbillies get their money and they leave with an empty suitcase in their hands” (211). Typically

14 Matchar cites this concern repeatedly in Homeward Bound. Many of the young women practicing New Domesticity became converts after their children were born and as their maternity leave from unfulfilling jobs ended. Academic studies of educated women opting out of the workforce to stay home include Opting Out? by Pamela Stone and Women Who Opt Out, edited by Bernie D. Jones.
white, middle-class men and women, they are unused to a life without regular paychecks and with no room to amend unwise decisions.

Finally, privilege has a crucial function in these memoirs because having “both sorts of lives” gives each writer an insider-outsider perspective. Hubbell understands the suburban wives shopping, but she herself goes about her day in worn jeans. She has a sharp insight into the difference between city and country, and writes persuasively of the reasons to choose the latter. Kimball and Byl, too, can speak to the ways that physical strength and domestic work affect gender identity—or more importantly, how transforming their lifestyles led to a new sense of their abilities and desires.¹⁵

Privilege can be a difficult issue to address, but it is a necessary one. I understand these writers as aware of the privilege conveyed upon them by their educations, their race and class, and the financial security they experienced before their farmer and traildog lives. Their memoirs neither deny these advantages nor apologize for them, though at times they push back against perceptions of trailwork and farming as recreation. Kimball, Byl, and Hubbell make their most effective statements about privilege when they examine the ways their mobility and perspectives allow them to explore gender issues and environmental concerns that matter to them. In this, they contrast with the New Domesticity writers and enthusiasts. As Matchar shows, participants in this movement celebrate anything they perceive to be natural without considering gender essentialism, and reject contemporary market-driven economies without recognizing that they are still embedded in those systems. However, Kimball, Byl, and Hubbell negotiate a fine

¹⁵ As an undercover journalist, McMillan is perhaps the consummate insider-outsider, a position that informs her research into how the “pressures of work and economy get translated into [American families’] meals” (11). She uses her experience, along with her knowledge and writing skill, to witness to the exploitation of migrant and low-wage workers now inherent in the industrialized food system.
balance between rejecting the very lifestyle that their middle-class readership enjoys and indulging those readers’ fantasies of rural life without also challenging their privilege. Those same Connecticut women that Hubbell distances herself from are the ones who might buy *A Country Year*; her book is the kind of object that they shop for to adorn their homes. The financial success of an “opting out of mainstream America” narrative seems to depend upon minimizing or neutralizing any critique the writer might wish to advance. All three participate in a vibrant market for memoirs of alternative lives, and readers and scholars should recognize the ways they ultimately do respond to that market’s demands.

**Conclusion: The Simpler Life**

Sue Hubbell writes with a mixture of sympathy and annoyance about being approached by newcomers to the Ozarks. She allows that these acquaintances are working “at dull jobs they do not like” and that “they are people who have grown weary of cities and who want to move here to live the Simple Life” (210). Of course, Hubbell and her husband left their jobs for similar reasons: the dullness of their work, his “uneasiness” with his career as a professor that eventually became unbearable (109). Other than those facts she is brief, even abrupt, in describing how she and Paul left Rhode Island, wandered for a year, and found their farm. She attributes her modest success with beekeeping—measured in being able to keep the farm at all—to luck. Hubbell also considers herself lucky to have found what she wanted in farming, as her husband presumably did not. Place did not change Paul’s uneasiness, and the couple carried the complicated parts of their marriage with them when they moved from the East Coast to the Missouri Ozarks. When she writes about the misguided “Simple Lifers” who move to the Ozarks but find farming does
not live up to their ideals, she may also have her ex-husband and his disillusionment with beekeeping in mind.

As Hubbell tells it, the crucial error that “Simple Lifers” make is bringing their theories to rural living. Newcomers’ plans embody their expectations that having academic knowledge of the place is sufficient, and will afford them control and financial success. They are not comfortable with the uncertainty and the complex web of relationships in the human or non-human environment that they find. Simple Lifers are not living the questions inherent to farming, as Hubbell has learned to do. This population treats the rural communities as a refuge and a place where they can leave behind the uneasiness and stress of their city lives.

What I wish to emphasize about these memoirs is that living a life attuned to non-human species and the rhythms and difficulties of outdoor work may be an act of withdrawing from the complicated world of cities and frazzled careers, but not one of withdrawing from the complicated natural world. In Hubbell’s description, being a librarian is fairly simple, whereas bees lead mysterious and complicated lives. The farm and the woods are not places of leisure or of simpler work, and certainly not settings or vocations for which women are destined because of their essential feminine nature. Each memoirist documents considerable struggle that is not necessarily apparent to those who view nature as a place apart. Hubbell counters the misperceptions of the Simple Lifers, explaining, “Ozarkers lead lives as complicated as those of people anywhere else. However, they are competent and resourceful about living in these hills; they are quiet about it, too, so it looks easy and . . . simple” (ellipses in the original) (211). Hubbell has the insider knowledge to recognize this Ozarker trait, and the outsider perspective to grasp why urban visitors misunderstand rural communities.
Byl reveals her insider-outsider perspective when she wryly notes “Of course, only someone who’s never done any would say that grunt work alone is path to a fulfilled existence” (xviii). During her years as a traildog she encounters Sierra Club volunteers who come to the national parks on week-long service trips, and “high school friends, distant cousins, and seatmates on airplanes” who express envy at her life in the woods. Even those who feel restless in their own careers or say they would “move to a park tomorrow if [they] could” cite their children, a new house, or law school debt as reasons not to do so (84). Most people who share Byl’s background view her seasonal work with what she dismissively calls an “airbrushed longing” (85). Kimball observes a similar sentiment among her acquaintances, and similarly takes issue with the underlying attitudes. She quotes a neighbor, who has recently bought a piece of land near Essex Farm, saying, “In my retirement, I just want to be a simple farmer. I want . . . tranquility (ellipses in original)” (265). Kimball responds to him, internally: “What you really want is a garden . . . A very, very small one. In my experience, tranquil and simple are two things farming is not. Nor is it lucrative, stable, safe, or easy. Some days the work is enough to make you weep” (265). Even if the trajectory of Kimball’s career mirrors a social trend and the aspirations held by a growing number of women of her generation, she distances herself from their idealization of rural life.

These memoirists also describe the desires, both corporeal and philosophical, that emerge as they replace the cultural tackle of cities with the network of plant and animal life around them. Hubbell’s impulse to sleep outdoors reflects the ways her desires had intensified and multiplied with time and solitude:

> I want indigo buntings singing their couplets when I wake in the morning. I want to read *Joseph and His Brothers* again. I want oak leaves and dogwood blossoms
and fireflies. I want to know how the land lies up Coon Hollow. . . . I want to know much more about grand-daddy-longlegs. I want to write a novel. I want to go swimming naked in the hot sun down at the river. (196)

Hubbell, Kimball, and Byl all do experience their rural landscapes as refuges from modernity when they move, but they combine that narrative with the gardener’s ethic for which Hess is an advocate. Their environments—even, in Byl’s case, a spectacular and aesthetic one—become sites of economic activity and contexts for everyday concerns. The Missouri Ozarks, upstate Essex Farm, and Glacier National Park are not treated as temporary retreats or places wholly apart. The effect of this philosophy is that these memoirs cultivate “a culture of everyday nature” with a “sense of value, awareness, and commitment to the environmental situatedness and effectiveness of our most ordinary, habitual actions and perceptions” (Hess 107). That culture and lifestyle, not nature as untouched wilderness and refuge, offers these women a sustainable alternative to the detrimental aspects of modernity.
Chapter 3

“I’m My Brain”: The Neurological Self

When Alison Bechdel recalls the moment pictured above from her childhood, the layers of her narration point to a similarly layered identity that she constructs. Her depiction of consciousness combines childhood memory, adult perceptions, and the texts she reads to make sense of her experience. The sequence includes several modes of narrative: a verbal frame for the memory (“At some point most of us wonder”), visual depiction of young Alison lying awake in

Figure 1

from *Are You My Mother? A Comic Drama* by Alison Bechdel (2012) pages 140-41
bed, verbal depiction of both her question (“How much of me is me?) and her conclusion (“I’m in my brain”), and both visual and verbal depiction of the shrinking self that she imagines while she wonders about the location of identity. In the context of Bechdel’s story of exploring her mother’s artistic frustration, her parents’ marriage, and her mother’s approval, this scene also seems to ask, “How much of me is me, independent of my parents’ lives and apart from their influence?”

This moment in Are You My Mother? cogently introduces the questions that preoccupy writers of neuromemoirs. Although Alison does not suffer from a neurological disorder, her question, “How much of me is me?” asks to what degree identity is rooted in the corporeal body, and in what areas of the body. When memoirists detail the loss or dramatic alteration of the physical, emotional, and mental functions they had become accustomed to, many wonder whether—or at what point—their core self also begins to change or disappear. Even if (as I explain in my introduction and previous chapters) the idea of autobiographical “self” cannot be described as a stable or unified entity, perhaps individuals can successfully represent the self by discerning its location. Young Alison, and many writers who narrativize their personal experiences of neurological disorder, locate identity in the physical brain. For this community of writers, the experience of “me” is in large part physical and introduces questions about the relationship between mind and body. These texts introduce the concept of “brainhood,” in which neurological functions underpin components of identity such as memory. They connect “brainhood” to “selfhood,” which also accounts for embodied experience and a person’s environment (Birge 89). Finally, in Alison’s imagination and in many neuromemoirs, loss (with overtones of trauma or injury) is the precondition or the process for thinking through the nature of the self.
Neuromemoirs return our attention to questions of selfhood at a time when scholars of memoir and autobiography have largely moved away from studying personal narrative as a clear and reliable expression of identity.¹ Research has established that memoirists lie in order to tell more compelling stories, and they fabricate minor details and essential information in situations when memory fails. Even the most scrupulously truthful writers are guilty of telling a version of their lives that is inflected by their own biases, convictions, and desires.² Furthermore, an individual’s self-knowledge is partial. We are opaque to ourselves, Judith Butler explains in Giving An Account of Oneself, because the individual “‘I’ does not stand apart from the prevailing matrix of ethical norms and conflicting moral frameworks,” a matrix we can only understand in part (7). For many scholars of life writing, identity emerges through the process of writing or telling one’s story. Identity is the result of autobiographical writing, not the starting point. In this reading, the self as portrayed in the text is a conscious construction or an illusion. Or, as memoirist and psychologist Lauren Slater states more bluntly, “the real self as a belief went out in the seventies” (Prozac Diary 196).

Memoirs that narrate experiences of neurological loss, however, prompt examination of the self that leads to new narratives of identity. Rita Charon is both a practicing clinician and a professor of narrative medicine and has studied this connection between health and identity. Her research in Narrative Medicine demonstrates that “Illness intensifies the routine drives to recognize the self” (87). The memoirists I study in my first two chapters, who write about their

¹ Rita Charon provides a useful overview of how autobiography scholars have written about the self in personal narrative. See Chapter 4, “Telling One’s Life” in Narrative Medicine, particularly pages 69-77.

² See Fictions in Autobiography by Paul John Eakin (1985) and Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography by Timothy Dow Adams (1990). Illness memoirs and neuromemoirs ask scholars to reconsider questions about truth and authenticity, and the ethical concerns these questions raise, as I explain in a later section of this chapter.
public literary lives and their corporeal engagement with rural landscapes, seem content to figure identity as emergent, fluid, and defined by their work. By contrast, writers of neurological memoirs seek a more solid concept of self. When identity feels under attack, as in narratives of what the memoirists often call “madness,” fluidity feels inadequate and the word “I” becomes much more important. To paraphrase Jeanne Perrault in Writing Selves, for writers of neuromemoirs “self” is an old-fashioned word that they refuse to surrender (129). The “strong presence of the ‘I’” remains politically necessary to feminist discourse, Perrault writes (129). My argument is that in neuromemoirs, the “I” is indispensable to narrative voice, and the self remains an urgent topic to explore and understand.

Numerous memoirs of mental illness have been written in the past three decades. Research on neurological disorders and identity has also become quite extensive. In this chapter I look closely at two personal accounts of manic depression: Kay Redfield Jamison’s conventional prose narrative An Unquiet Mind (1995) and Ellen Forney’s graphic memoir Marbles (2012). Both memoirs are at times illuminated by the insights of work on illness narratives; they also chart new ground in their examinations of the self, body, and brain. In the first section, I ask how the experience of manic depression raises questions of identity and self for each writer, and how each writer contends with the anxiety or discomfort of that upheaval. In the second section, I survey the already recognized genre of illness narratives in order to contextualize what I see as a re-valuation of selfhood taking place in late twentieth-century and early twenty-first-century neuromemoirs. I also explore the implications of neuroscience research for personal narrative more broadly. Recent studies by autobiography scholar Paul John Eakin, and research on neuroscience, memory, and narrative across scientific disciplines, together suggest an intersection between memoir and the proliferating neurological approaches to established fields
(Littlefield and Johnson 2). My final section connects the memoirists’ concern for selfhood with the types of stories they tell about neurological disorder. Both Jamison and Forney speak back to the accounts of illness and madness traditionally used to explain their condition. Finally, I underscore the activist projects explicit or implicit in the memoirs, propose implications for research in medical humanities and science studies, and infer the potential effects on the “casual” readers for whom these memoirs were written.

My study draws on theoretical writing about illness narratives, disability narratives, and—since the brain becomes present as a material entity in these memoirs—the physical body. My ideas are certainly informed by literary scholarship on the relationship between neuroscience and fiction. However, existing studies of the neuroscientific turn in literary studies almost all exclude memoir and autobiography from the body of writing referred to as “literature.” The field of neuroscience and literature has not yet attended to the ways that telling personal narratives may be intertwined with consciousness and cognitive ability. Nor has it paid attention to the significant insights that scientists, patients, and scientists who are also patients are able to voice through first-person narratives of their diagnosis and treatment. My study of neuromemoirs, therefore, has implications for both autobiography studies and medical humanities in the twenty-first century.

**Narratives of Brain, Mind, and Body**

In this section, I present critical summaries of two memoirs that, with clarity and depth of thought, explore the connection between illness, memory, self, and mind. By critical summary, I mean that as I explain the plot of the memoir I also highlight the events and observations that speak to these themes or present points of tension that need to be investigated. These are
complicated stories of disorienting illnesses; the authors are careful to reflect that complicated experience in their style of writing and drawing. Anticipating that few readers will have detailed knowledge of the memoirs (and hoping that my own discussion will not be disorienting), I introduce the texts in a way that frames my analysis. I will also give background about the author’s life, when it adds insight to understanding the memoir.

*Kay Redfield Jamison*

Kay Redfield Jamison introduces her mental illness as continuous with her memories of childhood and adolescence, though she did not experience her first manic-depressive attack until she was a senior in high school:

For as long as I can remember I was frighteningly, although often wonderfully, beholden to moods. Intensely emotional as a child, mercurial as a young girl, first severely depressed as an adolescent, and then unrelentingly caught up in the cycles of manic-depressive illness by the time I began my professional life, I became, both by necessity and intellectual inclination, a student of moods. It has been the only way I know to understand, indeed to accept, the illness I have; it also has been the only way I know to try and make a difference in the lives of others who also suffer from mood disorders. (4-5)

This description draws a coherent thread through periods of Jamison’s life that feel fragmented and confusing when they occur, and remain so in her memory. While *An Unquiet Mind* details the terrifying chaos and violence of her manic and depressive episodes and her diagnosis and treatment, Jamison precedes that narrative with this tidier version. Joseph and Rebecca Hogan argue that for Jamison, “writing a memoir represents a reclaiming of the self, a gathering of a
fragmented self back into a narrative unity, if not a psychologically unified whole” (40). By writing paragraphs such as the one quoted above, Jamison “provisionally reconstitutes the self” and tries to reconcile the fragmented identity she remembers (and that scholars theorize) with the unified identity she wants (40).\(^3\) Certainly in this paragraph Jamison appears to be setting up the crisis of identity that manic depression brought on, but I see her also insisting on two particularly important and continuous aspects of selfhood.

*An Unquiet Mind* follows the development of two traits Jamison identifies in this opening, present to her long before her first attack of manic depression. The first is her moods, and her propensity to be swept up in emotions and obsessive interests. As a child, she was “given to strong and absolute passions” and could be “simply in love with the idea of a strange idea” such as keeping a sloth as a family pet (19-20). She had a “terrible temper” that “frightened [her] and anyone near its epicenter” when it “erupted” (22-23). Jamison remembers this anger as “the only crack, but a disturbing one, in the otherwise vacuum-sealed casing of [her] behavior” and in the “fierce self-discipline and emotional control that had come with [her] upbringing” (23).

Jamison grows up on Air Force bases in Florida, Puerto Rico, California, Tokyo, and Washington as the family follows her father’s career. Part of her adolescent self-discovery is “a

\(^3\) This article summarizes the tension between concepts of the self as fragmented or unified that I outlined in my introduction. Hogan and Hogan argue that memoirs of mental illness are valuable sites for studying how identity is created in narrative:

> Because manic-depression and [Dissociative Identity Disorder] represent in a more clearly defined and extreme form the processes, dilemmas, and ambiguities of normal identity formation, these memoirs provide limit cases for the study of the subject. The fragmentation that the pain, fear, confusion, and exhilaration cause to sufferers of mental disorder seems to demonstrate the essentially fluid, shifting, and piecemeal nature of the self theorized by postmodern philosophers and psychologists. At the same time, those who display these symptoms continually express a strong desire for unified identity and, more importantly, for agency. (39)
gradual awakening to the reality of what it meant to be an intense, somewhat mercurial girl in an extremely traditional and military world” (27).

Living on military bases also opens opportunities to volunteer and observe doctors in nearby hospitals. Curiosity, or being “a student of moods” and human health, is a second trait Jamison alerts readers to early in An Unquiet Mind. She studies psychology as a college student at UCLA, and she works as research assistant in a lab that studies the structure of human personality. During undergraduate years and graduate school, the independence and flexibility that comes with lab research mitigates her “mercurial moods and recurrent, very black depressions” that make regularly attending class impossible (48). Jamison continues in a doctoral program in psychology at UCLA and begins treating patients, though she herself has not sought treatment for the manias and depressions that increasingly disrupt her personal and professional life. Writing about this time in her memoir decades later, Jamison wonders why she was unable to connect “the problems [she] had experienced and what was described as manic-depressive illness in the textbooks” (58).4

Three months after passing her dissertation defense, Jamison is “ravingly psychotic” (63). Confronting her need for treatment, she also confronts the fact that the exciting and difficult moods she has based much of her identity in are, in fact, an illness. “Madness carves its own reality,” she writes, but afterwards it leaves “incredible feelings to sort through” (67-68). Most serious among them are “Which of my feelings are real? Which of the me’s is me? The wild, impulsive, chaotic, energetic, and crazy one? Or the shy, withdrawn, desperate, suicidal,

4 Jamison knows manic depression from, in her words, “different vantage points” (212). She published research on the illness while a faculty member at UCLA and Johns Hopkins, including a standard text, Manic-Depressive Illness: Bipolar Disorders and Recurrent Depression (second edition, 2007). Before publishing her own memoir, Jamison also wrote a study of the connection between creativity and mental illness, Touched With Fire: Manic-Depressive Illness and the Artistic Temperament (1993).
doomed, and tired one? Probably a bit of both, hopefully much that is neither” (68). After
Jamison separates from her first husband, spends inordinate amounts of money, and experiences
a terrifying hallucination—a “vision of an entire life and mind out of control”—a colleague
prescribes medications for her and convinces her see a psychiatrist (80). Jamison describes a
reluctance to be treated that she later sees in patients, and which other memoirists echo:

Some of my reluctance, no doubt, stemmed from a fundamental denial that what I
had was a real disease. This is a common reaction that follows, rather
counterintuitively, in the wake of early episodes of manic-depressive illness.
Moods are such an essential part of the substance of life, of one’s notion of
oneself, that even psychotic extremes in mood and behavior somehow can be seen
as temporary, even understandable, reactions to what life has dealt. In my case. . .
. It was difficult to give up the high flights of mind and mood, even though the
depressions that inevitably followed nearly cost me my life. (91)
Jamison takes her prescribed lithium intermittently and resists hospitalization. She attempts
suicide and afterwards must rethink what she believes is her “self.” Jamison writes, “After each
of my violent psychotic episodes, I had to try and reconcile my notion of myself as a reasonably
quiet-spoken and highly disciplined person, one at least generally sensitive to the moods and
feelings of others, with an enraged, utterly insane, and abusive woman who lost access to all
control or reason” (121).

Jamison describes her manic depression in *An Unquiet Mind* largely through metaphors, a
part of her style that Schoeneman et al. examine in their article “A Fire in the Blood.” This
technique serves three purposes; it gives expression to an illness she struggles to understand; it
offers offering insight to readers who have not suffered from manic depression themselves; and it
represents the nuances of her illness in a way that does not universalize it to all who share her
diagnosis. Schoeneman et al. also identify one way to differentiate between depression and
Bipolar Disorder (the authors’ preferred term). Jamison’s metaphors for depression do share
similarities with those William Styron uses in *Darkness Visible*. Both write of depression as
destruction, darkness, and terror. In Jamison’s memoir, though, mania and Bipolar Disorder are
both “powerful forces of fieriness” with desirable aspects like “seduction.” Jamison regards
mania as quickness and motion, “a double-edged sword of delight and destruction” (Schoeneman
et al. 201). In the language of *An Unquiet Mind*, Bipolar Disorder is marked by strangeness,
multiplicity, and contradiction. The contrast between Styron’s and Jamison’s metaphors further
addresses one of my underlying concerns in this chapter: how to understand the ways that certain
neurological disorders pose more urgent or painful examinations of self. When Jamison does
finally accept regular medication that steadies her moods, she continues to feel that she has lost
an exciting and alluring earlier self. She is still occasionally tempted to skip doses of lithium in
order to experience a mania, but the subsequent loss of vitality during the inevitable depression
deters her. As a doctor and acclaimed researcher with a happy marriage, Jamison has too much at
stake to experience the intensity that attracts her. Instead, she opts for a lower level of medication
so that she remains subject to moderated “fluctuating tides of energy, ideas, and enthusiasms”
(Jamison 213). Her final descriptions of moods are not only more moderate but also do not
include the language of selfhood and identity that was pervasive in earlier sections:

> My mind still, now and again, becomes a carnival of lights, laughter, and sounds
and possibilities. The laughter and exuberance and ease will, filling me, spill out
and over and into others. These glinting, glorious moments will last for a while, a
short season, and then move on. My high moods and hopes, having ridden briefly

in the top car of the Ferris wheel will, as suddenly as they came, plummet into a black and gray and tired heap. . . .

These comings and goings, this grace and godlessness, have become such a part of my life that the wild colors and sounds now have become less strange and less strong; and the blacks and grays that inevitably follow are, likewise, less dark and frightening. (213-214).

The metaphors in this description serve to distance Jamison from these moods, which seem more like experiences or visits to a place outside herself than a part of her core identity.

Ellen Forney

Artist Ellen Forney is diagnosed with manic depression, or Bipolar I, just before her thirtieth birthday. In her memoir of that diagnosis and subsequent treatment, *Marbles: Mania Depression, Michelangelo, and Me*, she writes that the symptoms of mania sound familiar to her when a doctor first lists them: “My own brilliant, unique personality was neatly outlined right there, in that inanimate stack of paper” (19). 5 The revelation that her personality “reflected a disorder -- -- shared by a group of people” distresses Ellen, and for the first months afterward she resists any medication that would make her moods more even and predictable. Her resistance is influenced in no small part by her research into the link between mood disorders and creativity. Ellen reads Jamison’s *Touched by Fire* (or rather, reads the list of artists and writers with

5 When I quote Forney’s written narration in the paragraph without reproducing an image of her comics, I preserve her underlining and much of her punctuation. When I quote instances where Forney uses “+” I try to preserve some of the visual nature of the text and I do not replace the symbol with “and.” Elsewhere, I make one small adjustment to the appearance of her text. While Forney writes the dialogue represented within the comic frames in a familiar style (capitalizing “I” and the first word of the sentence but writing all other letters as lower-case), sections of her own narration are written in all capital letters. An example of this contrast is in the image from page 69 that I include in Section III. In my quotes, I have not preserved this stylistic choice.
depression in Appendix B since she is “too restless to read more”), and fixates on the role mania plays in facilitating creative and prolific artwork. “If they were unmedicated, maybe I should be, too. If I get treatment, am I killing any chance to do my best work?” she asks. She poses a larger question, as well: “Who gets to be crazy-brilliant, + who’s just crazy-crazy?” (43).

Forney wrote Marbles more than ten years after the events she narrates. In retrospect she seems to have come to a better understanding of the distinct patterns of her illness. She explains her early denial about the severity of manic depression with her insight that “during a manic episode, depression seems entirely impossible” (68). Both manic and depressed states come to feel like a burden as she studies her illness further. While depression inhibits any work on her comics at all, Ellen experiences mania as the more dangerous state when self-awareness evaporates along with inhibition. For her, manic depression brings an intense questioning of self, and a troubling dissociation between her two extreme ways of inhabiting her identity: “Manic, I knew the ‘up’ me was the true me (‘I’m exponentially me!’); depressed, I knew the ‘low’ me was the true me (a waste of space)” (78).

In a review of Marbles for the website “Graphic Medicine,” Michelle Huang summarizes the middle section of the memoir:

Much of Marbles addresses the long journey of trial-and-error necessary to find the right balance of medications, where ‘keeping track’ and ‘watching’ are complicated by the lack of a fundamental baseline to measure against. Over the four-year period covered in Marbles, Ellen cycles through multiple psychotropic medications, each with its own suite of side effects. (np)

In addition to medication, Ellen seeks out traditional treatments like cognitive behavioral therapy and yoga, and unconventional methods like reading children’s books with illustrations and
predictable plots that she finds soothing. Whether manic or depressed, carefully applying M.A.C. “Paramount” lipstick is her “key to feeling together” (139). Though one important contribution of Marbles is the memoir’s vivid insights into the difficulties of finding a successful combination of psychotropic medication (side effects, price, the anxiety of monitoring improvements and problems), two other “treatments” stand out as significant to discussion of neurological disorder in memoir.

The first is Ellen’s affinity for other crazy artists, whom she encounters through their writing and visual art, and imagines as her colleagues in “Club Van Gogh.” Initially, Ellen remembers that she liked feeling special because of her diagnosis, but she writes, “I also felt very alone” (28). When she first reads An Unquiet Mind, the hallucination scene Jamison describes seems so irrelevant to Ellen’s positive experience of mania that she dismisses the memoir completely. Months later, a depressed episode prompts her to approach memoirs again, and this time she finds that Jamison provides “company” (90). So too does William Styron’s Darkness Visible. Forney recalls, “it was stunning to see my own demons nailed so effectively” and on the page she writes out his phrases that aptly describe her own state: “dank joylessness,” “an immense and aching solitude,” “infantile dread” and others (91). Besides offering company, Styron and Darkness Visible give Ellen “evidence that depression might go away, + creativity might come back” (91).

Forney remembers “it was really my sketchbook where I could face my emotional demons in a wholly personal way. I didn’t have the energy to draw very often, but I started carrying my sketchbook with me—a combination of carrying a teddy bear + carrying a can of mace” (92). After that statement, following an image of a tearful artist whose head appears to be exploding with lightning bolts that jump directly from her brain to the page, Forney concludes,
“The drawings both scared me + gave me comfort” (92). Susan Squier argues that “comics can show us things *that can't be said*, just as they can narrate experiences without relying on words, and in their juxtaposition of words and pictures, they can also convey a far richer sense of the different magnitudes at which we experience any performance of illness, disability, medical treatment, or healing” (emphasis in the original) (“Literature and Medicine” 131). Drawing during her illness and when she creates a narrative of illness is central to Forney’s ability to negotiate disruptions to her sense of self. In *Marbles*, she reproduces the mental images that she drew as therapy, and the self-portraits she began to draw after learning that van Gogh had drawn more than forty. Her question is: “Was he trying to pin down the confusing swirls inside his head, to bring them outside?” This partially explains Ellen’s own reasons for drawing herself (119). She explains that one self-portrait, subtitled “Crying in the Bathroom” (Figure 2), records her desperation after leaving an appointment with her therapist, “knowing I wouldn’t be back in that safe space for at least a few days” (98). Her appearance in the bathroom mirror is “jarring” to her and, I believe, to most readers. But the process of drawing helps Ellen to calm down and “come back into [herself].” On a page her demons are “inert” and “more handleable” (98). The self-portraits serve another purpose in the narrative, though, by chronicling the experience of depression that seems impossible to the self who is in a manic or stable state. Ellen’s self-portraits (often the only work she can complete during

*Figure 2, from Marbles page 100*
depression) create an archive of evidence for her artist self to use in constructing a narrative of her illness.

Rita Charon writes that illness “occasions the telling of two tales of self at once, one told by the ‘person’ of the self and the other told by the body of the self” (87). The visual nature of graphic memoirs makes the body present on nearly every page of the narrative. Forney’s visual style centers on energy (or lack thereof), and the narrative verbally and visually traces the ebb and flow of Ellen’s professional, sexual, emotional, and physical energies. She depicts her first severe depression with a bleak image of her cocooned body, an image in which both physical and mental characteristics are erased (Figure 3). Alongside her emotional fragility and dank joylessness, Ellen feels her depression as a lack of vitality and an overwhelming desire no longer to be present in the world. Medication presents more acute physical changes, so that her four-year struggle to understand and manage her illness is manifested on her face and body.

Yoga eventually helps Ellen “land,” recalling a term Forney uses early in the memoir to describe her brief transitional times between mania and depression when she can work, sleep, and relax in patterns that are comparatively moderate. Yoga provides a way to move forward as both a therapeutic outlet for her body and a metaphor to bring her moods and creativity into harmony. At yoga class during a depressive episode “it was good to spend time with other people, knowing I wouldn’t have to really talk with anyone” (110). She reproduces a comic titled
“Wednesday Morning Yoga,” published during the turbulent phase just after diagnosis, that depicts her “floating, rumbling anxieties” and Ellen crying quietly during poses (124-6). Ellen initially dismisses yoga as a “wishy-washy noncompetitive new age stretching fad” (26). She rejects stability, a goal that some doctors and therapists promote, as being equivalent with boring. Devastating cycles of depression and mania, though, loosen her attachment to the frenzied periods of intense energy and productivity. Forney draws the resolution to her ongoing conflict between creativity and stability in an unusually calm, silent moment. In this image she replaces the manically expressive face that characterized Ellen in many earlier panels with a face that has no mouth and no expression. Even her eyes are closed, conveying her inward focus:

![Figure 4, from Marbles page 197](image_url)

Marbles concludes with a sequence in which Forney imagines having a conversation with her younger self. In this conversation she would reassure post-diagnosis Ellen that “everything was going to work out” (233). This imagined scene is full of the language of self and identity.
Younger Ellen insists that a manic state is her “true me,” and then in a depressive episode despairs, “I’m just a waste of space. This is the true me. I’m nothing” (234). While balance does indeed arm Ellen with a way to reconcile creativity and stability and move forward, she seems also to have found a way to regard her “selves”—past and present, manic and depressed—as legitimate. *Marbles* represents the “I” of memory as fragmented, but presents the self that remembers and writes a narrative as cohesive. Both are authentic. Layering the two is her strategy for honoring the disruption to her identity that manic depression brought about, but also living in the stable self for which illness has created desire.

![Figure 5, from Marbles page 234](image)

*Mind, Body, and Self*

In the medical narratives Charon studies, illness creates dissociation between the body and the self. She quotes as an example Lucy Grealy’s description of the pain she felt after a surgery to replace a part of her jaw that had been removed during cancer treatments: “When I awoke I was in a lot of pain, but the pain was in my hip, where the graft came from, far away from my face, my ‘self,’ so it was easier to deal with (Autobiography of a Face 170, quoted in Narrative Medicine 90). Charon reads Grealy’s description as an expression of her sense that
“one part of the body is self while the other is nonself” (90). For Grealy, that dissociation serves as a protective device. Dissociation plays a part in navigating neurological disorder too, and possibly a protective role as well, but I maintain that the experience of neurological disorder seems markedly different from cancer, blindness, or paralyzing stroke (other narrative examples Charon uses). While Ellen Forney, for example, might feel dissociation from her depressed self when she is in a manic stage, she experiences both her depression and her mania as a self that is, if anything, intensified.

I recognize the potential problems of differentiating too insistently between neurological disorders and illnesses that are more firmly located outside the brain. As Charon and other make clear, all illnesses have emotional valences and are experienced in the mind; in many instances physical pain or loss effects cognitive function. Charon tells the stories of two patients who meet with their doctors, one to discuss severe abdominal pain and one to manage treatment for hypertension, breast cancer, spinal stenosis, insomnia, and anxiety. Both patients, the doctors discover, have been sexually assaulted at points in their past. And while that trauma is not deemed to be the cause of their abdominal pain or hypertension, telling the long-held secret is a step in their treatment that has a positive impact on other symptoms (65, 99-102). Conversely, the neuromemoirs that I study here both narrate changes to physical ability (like the energy or exhaustion of manic depression) along with mood and cognition. Prominent autobiography scholar Paul John Eakin begins his study of selfhood, How Our Lives Become Stories, by claiming that neuroscientific research proves that “subjectivity and selfhood are deeply rooted in the body, that psychology and physiology are intimately linked” (20). As these memoirs show, one way to make sense of neurological disorder is to understand the balance and imbalance of
Brain chemicals and the firing or misfiring of neurons, two attributes of the brain that are decisively physical.

Neuronarratives are not exactly stories of embodied selves, however. Or, they are not only narratives of illness and wellness experienced through the body. Conflating physical injury or illness with neurological disorder poses the potential problem of glossing over key differences. While I acknowledge the overlap between illnesses of the body and illnesses of the brain, I am reminded again of the scene from Bechdel’s Are You My Mother? that I used as an epigraph to this chapter. Memoirists live in and through their bodies, and bodily experience plays a crucial role in narrating identity, but the brain is a privileged location of selfhood. Loss of limbs, organs, or physical function impels a re-definition of “self” that is often excruciating, but loss of the brain is unimaginable. My aim in distinguishing between neurological disorders and the types of illnesses and accidents Charon largely addresses in Narrative Medicine is to make clear what neuromemoirs have to say that is not articulated in the genres of illness narratives, neurofiction, or nonfiction accounts that exclude personal perspective. Changes to physical appearance and ability are certainly disruptions to an existing sense of self, but the most devastating consequence of neurological disorder is the disruption of a person’s facility for forming or reconstructing a self at all.

Illness Narratives, Neuroliterature, and the Neuroscientific Turn in the Humanities

During the time that has come to be regarded as a memoir boom—variously defined as the “skittish period around the millennium” (Gilmore, The Limits of Autobiography 1) or the years “roughly spanning the first decade of the twenty-first century” (Rak, Boom! 3)—narratives about illness proliferated. Ann Jurecic contrasts this surge in “autobiographical accounts of
illness spoken or written by patients” with the near absence of literature about illness in earlier periods, even after devastated and widespread events like the 1918 influenza epidemic (*Illness as Narrative* 2). Jurecic proposes that literary production about HIV and AIDS in the 1980s and 1990s, which coincides with the “memoir boom,” initiated the genres of illness and disability narratives. Additional factors explain why these genres continued to grow after accounts of HIV and AIDS waned: “the growth of the publishing industry, changed attitudes toward personal disclosure, patient activism about women’s health and AIDS, and the rise of the Internet” all contributed to the turn towards personal narrative as a way to “give illness meaning” (18).

Surveying the titles that have been published in roughly the past two decades suggests centers of particular interest to well-known and formerly unknown writers alike:


- **The mental illness and treatment of adolescent girls and young women**: *Girl, Interrupted* by Susanna Kaysen (1993), *Wasted; A Memoir of Anorexia and Bulimia* by Marya

Other centers of interest include aging, death and grief, and neurodiversity. Several memoirs document the illnesses of family members or spouses, an example of when relationality—writing a narrative ostensibly focused on the life of another—enables the memoirist to write about his or her own life.

I list these titles in order to outline in broad strokes the contours of the genre, not to oversimplify. Memoirs can, and often do, occupy more than one category, or can draw connections between illnesses. This list also demonstrates that personal accounts of suffering, diagnosis, and treatment give voice to a wide range of experiences usually contained in the private sphere. “Since their ascendance,” Jurecic argues, “these narratives have shifted the boundaries of literary study” by aiding in the development of the medical humanism field (2). In medical schools and centers, professors of medical humanities assign literature that deals with illness and disability as a way of teaching how “narratives report and construct the experience of illness, from the personal level to the national” and encouraging “attention, respect, and understanding” in the practitioners’ responses to stories of suffering people (3). Sometimes called “pathographies,” narratives told in the office of a doctor or nurse, in the home, or in a written medium are understood to have a value to the speaker or writer, who cannot otherwise

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6 Lauren Slater is among the serial memoirists of the memoir boom, and has published six memoirs as of 2013. Her earliest memoir, Welcome to My Country: A Therapist’s Memoir of Madness (1996), documents her interactions with patients she treated during her career as a psychologist. In the concluding section of Welcome to My Country, Slater reveals that she was hospitalized in a psychiatric ward as a young woman. This confession anticipates her next Prozac Diary (1998), a memoir of Slater’s own illness and experience with drug therapies, and Lying: A Metaphorical Memoir (2001), which uses epilepsy to frame her meditations on constructing a narrative of the self. Subsequent memoirs Love Works Like This: Travels Through a Pregnant Year (2003) and Playing House: Notes of a Reluctant Mother (2013) trace the effects of mental illness on her marriage, pregnancy, and raising her two children.
convey what he or she is going through (Charon 65). By linking seemingly disparate facets of experience—memories, symptoms, intimate relationships, fears, and desires—narrative tries to create order. “Without these narrative acts,” Charon explains in _Narrative Medicine_, “the patient cannot himself or herself grasp what the events of illness mean” (66).

Neuromemoirs can be effective texts for giving voice to this knowledge of lived experience in several contexts. Recognition of the complexities of illness has the power to shift the conversation. At the same time, neuromemoirs can be subject to the criticisms leveled at illness memoirs. To critics who dismissively call them “misery memoirs” or “victim art,” personal accounts of illness “may seem to be self-indulgent manipulations of sentiment and goodwill” (Jurercic 11). Many of what Ben Yagoda calls the “sins” of the memoir boom—chief among them narcissism, melodramatic cliché, and disregard for privacy—are conspicuous in illness memoirs (240). For neuromemoirs, translating a vivid physical or bodily experience into words presents an even greater problem. The accounts of manic depression that I study negotiate a disorder that manifests itself in a tangle of physical, mental, and emotional disruptions. These symptoms are

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7 Yagoda places the peak of the “misery memoir” (which also includes narratives of childhood poverty and abuse) in 2006, when 1.9 copies of “tales of extreme woe” were sold (233). He anticipates the arguments made by Jurecic and medical humanists who claim that many texts with limited aesthetic or literary achievement have value in other arenas:

While only a handful of memoirs, such as _This Boy’s Life_ and _The Liars’ Club_, can take their place with literature of the first order, the boom has spawned hundreds—if not thousands—of worthwhile books. Many have shed light on an impressive variety of social, ethnic, medical, psychological, regional and personal situations. And many are just plain good. The memoir boom, for all its sins, has been a net plus for the cause of writing. Under its auspices, voices and stories have emerged that, otherwise, would have been dull impersonal nonfiction tomes or forgettable autobiographical novels, or wouldn’t have been expressed at all. (240)
all bewildering and unpredictable to the patient/writer, and so the challenge of writing a memoir is to represent experiences they themselves do not fully grasp. Significantly, the writers I consider in this chapter refer to their symptoms as “madness”; Jamison’s subtitle to *An Unquiet Mind* is *A Memoir of Moods and Madness* (which echoes Styron’s subtitle *A Memoir of Madness*). Writers rarely apply the word to illnesses like cancer or to bodily injury. “Madness,” furthermore, conveys lingering, inscrutable pain, and conveys the writers’ anxiety about their very ability to truthfully represent their condition.

Neuromemoirs form a subgenre that diverges from patterns in the now-established category of illness and disability narratives, especially the way risk is represented. Memoirs about neurological conditions seldom exhibit worry about contagion or the spread of disease through the contact of daily life, and so do not envision risk in the same way that written accounts of AIDS do (Jurecic 18). In contrast to memoirs like Lorde’s *The Cancer Journals* and Antonetta’s *Body Toxic*, which both examine environmental factors causing or contributing to cancer, memoirs about manic depression or epilepsy, for example, are not able to trace either illness to environmental factors. Part of their goal in writing, therefore, seems to be to make sense of what seems a random disruption to daily life and personal identity. While manic depression does have genetic or hereditary roots, it is not linked to any single gene mutation in the way that breast and ovarian cancer have been linked to the BRCA mutations. Huntington’s disease is the exception: in *Mapping Fate* Wexler narrates the ways her family members live with the uncertainty of whether or not she and her sister will develop the disease their mother suffered from. Unlike testing for BRCA mutations, though, which has led to high-profile stories of preventive mastectomies or ovary removal, genetic testing for Huntington’s disease does not suggest ways to manage or minimize the risk predicted by a positive test result (Jurecic 27). One
aim of my study, therefore, is to understand the different ways that risk—unpredictable, unknowable, or misunderstood—contributes to views of self and identity in neuromemoirs.

Narrative is not only the purview of autobiography studies. The field of medical humanities has begun to consider spoken and written narrative as tool for understanding how such knowledge of illness, risk, and identity emerged. As Charon writes in the preface to what has become a foundational text, Narrative Medicine:

By telling stories to ourselves and others—in dreams, in diaries, in friendships, in marriages, in therapy sessions—we grow slowly not only to know who we are but also to become who we are. Such fundamental aspects of living as recognizing self and other, connecting with traditions, finding meaning in events, celebrating relationships, and maintaining contact with others are accomplished with the benefit of narrative. (vii)

Recognizing the importance of these narratives of the body produces insights into how individuals encounter and understand each other. Charon explains: “How we live our lives within our bodies—including, of course, our brains and synapses and memory traces and sexual passions and the like—is more and more being recognized as a critical element in our efforts to find or make meaning out of one another’s creative productions” (125). Memoirs of neurological disorders pursue these goals publicly, thoughtfully, and with a further goal of offering readers an avenue by which to understand an experience of the world that may seem entirely foreign. Using the self-reflexivity and first-person perspective of personal narrative, these texts document the author’s struggle to know and become who she is.

For Paul John Eakin, neuroscientific research showing that “psychology and physiology are intimately linked” is not surprising “in the age of Prozac” (How Our Lives Become Stories
Theories of personal narrative demonstrate that the “invariant, timeless self, a kind of secular equivalent of the soul”—which most people believe human beings are born with—does not, in fact, exist. The testimony of those taking antidepressants reveals a similar truth: that “these drugs do more than cure depression, they literally alter personality” (20).

Eakin’s 1999 study of memoir, *How our Lives Become Stories*, uses then-recent research by neurologists Antonio Damasio, Oliver Sacks, Kay Young, and Jeffrey Saver to argue for a strong neurobiological link between memory, narrative, and identity. Eakin cautions autobiography scholars not go so far as to claim that when the ability to create narrative is lost, so is all identity. Rather, neurological disorder can enable or impair an individual’s facility for memory, and therefore for narrative. Citing Sacks’s famous case study of a man with Korsakov’s syndrome, whose memories only last a few seconds, Eakin concludes that “Only when the capacity to construct narrative is impaired (as in cases involving brain damage) or are never acquired in the first place (as in severe cases of child abuse) are we apt to recognize that identity itself has been damaged as well” (124). Furthermore, the crucial insight for autobiography scholars to gain from studies of disrupted memory and identity is that the narratives humans create are not only or not necessarily about the self. In instances of people living autobiographically rather than writing an autobiography, “which most of us never get around to doing anyway,” telling a life story from memory is shown to be “in some profound way a constituent part of the self” (101, emphasis in the original).

Sacks includes this case study in *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat* (1984). Eakin quotes Sacks’s conclusion that “It might be said that each of us constructs and lives a ‘narrative,’ and that this narrative is us, our identities” (*The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat* 110, quoted in Eakin 101). Earlier in *How Our Lives Become Stories*, Eakin also uses Sacks’s research and case studies to support his argument that identity is embodied, rather than a phenomenon based solely in the mind. Eakin explains, “Sacks’s ‘neurology of identity’ is anchored in proprioception,” or awareness of how parts of the body are connected, “and the body image” (30).
In his subsequent study, *Living Autobiographically: How We Create Identity in Narrative* (2008), Eakin develops his observation that narrating selfhood and identity often takes place in everyday speech and thought, rather than in written autobiography. He returns also to the question of how neuroscience can illuminate the connections between narrative, identity, and memory in that informal or unspoken context. Beginning with “the basic proposition” that “narrative is not merely something we tell, listen to, read, or invent; it is an essential part of our sense of who we are,” Eakin posits that we have an autobiographical consciousness (ix).

Drawing largely on the research of Antonio Damasio to support and explain this idea, Eakin explores a concept of self that “is not an effect of language but rather an effect of the neurological structure of the brain” (67). This connection between the self and unconscious neurological processes has several implications for reading and interpreting personal narrative. A memoirist like Mary Karr who takes pains to get her story straight and not omit details or invite misinterpretation does so “Not just to satisfy the biography police but to respond to a psychological imperative that gravitates to the performance of narrative as integral to the experience of identity” (78). Furthermore, consciousness shares attributes with the autobiographical “I,” most relevantly first-person perspective, ownership of the object being viewed, and agency to act within the perceived circumstances.

9 Eakin spends most of the second chapter of *Living Autobiographically* outlining Damasio’s ideas of the self, after reminding the reader that he “will be speculating about self in autobiography on the basis of neurobiological theory that is itself already necessarily speculative” (68). In particular, Eakin is interested in Damasio’s theory of the connection between body and identity. He explains: “The body responds to its encounters with objects in its environment, and it also responds to its own changing internal states. And *self* is Damasio’s name for the feeling of awareness or knowing that these events are taking place” (68).

In my discussion, I have not included all facets of Damasio’s research that Eakin finds pertinent; for more on neurobiology of identity, see pages 60-86 of *Living Autobiographically.*
Most provocatively, Damasio’s treatment of consciousness as ordinary and not at all elevated conflicts with memoirists’ treatment of self and consciousness. While memoirists do not all necessarily view selfhood as something akin to a secular version of the soul, the task of understanding and representing how the individual self interacts with the norms of culture and society continues to be a central project of writing memoir. For writers like Jamison and Forney, the crises of identity brought on by mental illness does elevate the neurological self present in thoughts, emotions, and madness above other biological functions. And the memoirists’ version is the one that resonates with most readers. Eakin explains: “whether or not this neurobiological self—this feeling of knowing generated in the body’s brain—is truly ordinary, humans seem to be constituted to regard it as every bit as mysterious and elusive to their attempts to represent it as the older transcendental self that it replaces” (72). In other words, as Eakin wrote earlier in *How Our Lives Become Stories*, “Brain research is one thing, however, and writing memoirs another” (107).

Melissa Littlefield and Jenell Johnson, both professors of science studies, express skepticism about the ways Eakin uses popular neuroscience texts, especially those by Damasio, to argue that autobiographical impulses are grounded in “neurobiological rhythms of consciousness” (*Living Autobiographically* 79). In the introduction to *The Neuroscientific Turn*, they point out that “[Eakin’s] argument does not rely on MRI scan time, participants, or protocols; instead, he employs neuroscience as philosophy or theory to supplement and support his own arguments” (7). This methodology makes him one example, and not exactly an admirable one, of a researcher in their category of “humanists and social scientists who often collaborate with the neurosciences through secondary data analysis and/or by repurposing
neuroscience as theory” (7). In this way, humanities scholars participate in the wider turn towards uncritically adding a “neuro-” angle to existing academic disciplines and research topics.

In The Neuroscientific Turn, Littlefield and Johnson express their desire that any academic relationship formed between the humanities, social sciences, and neurosciences be a two-way conversation in which no discipline is privileged or made “primary author.” In memoir, authors can achieve this bilateral conversation. Memoirists who are trained in the sciences—such as Lauren Slater and Kay Redfield Jamison—can widen the scope and human relevance of their specialized knowledge by linking it to questions posed by the humanities. And authors who identify first as writers or artists explore the idea of selfhood through new avenues when they delve into the scientific research about their neurological conditions.

**Authorizing Counternarratives**

An array of factors de-authorize memoirs of illness, particularly the narratives that I call neuromemoirs. These prejudices and expectations call into question the writer’s permission to tell her story, and her ability to connect with an audience by doing so. The instability attributed to mental illness (by readers and, in many cases, by the author) means that the narrator “describing a breakdown from an asserted position of recovery is always suspect” (Reading Autobiography 145). Writing their memoirs, Jamison and Forney recall the confusion and chaos of manic depression and confess to irrationality, violence, and near-insanity. Even though they create coherence in their writing, the confusion of those earlier episodes adds to the unreliability of memory to undermine the memoir’s claim to truth and legitimacy.

Illness narratives are also widely de-authorizer by criticisms of the genre as self-absorbed, formulaic, and melodramatic. Ben Yagoda describes the “misery memoir” as having
“nearly interchangeable titles and pastel covers with a photograph of a plaintive child” (233). The value of these memoirs tends not to be literary, he claims, but rather “social or journalistic in putting a human face on the problem” (232). In my opinion, Jamison and Forney distinguish themselves from this sea of personal narratives that are easy to disparage, but it also worth considering that literary criticism has not been able to account for the popularity and persuasive power of illness memoirs. Ann Jurecic offers one reason, proposing, “no critical consensus has emerged about how to evaluate them” (10). Furthermore, “because illness narratives provoke affective and intimate engagement, responses that have little currency in academic discussions of the arts and literature, they disrupt critical expectations and typical standards of judgment” (10). Still, despite the criticisms or dismissal of reviewers and literary scholars, readers continue to seek out illness narratives and writers continue to find them an accessible venue for making private lives public.

One way that writers begin to authorize their narratives is by acknowledging the limited appeal or relevance their stories hold for other people, and addressing the skepticism a reader might bring when he or she begins the memoir. If audiences are tired of hearing about suffering and misfortune, so are the writers. Forney resists the model of other artists who used mental illness as inspiration: “I don’t want to do art about my sufferings. My sufferings suck!” (122). She questions whether she is shallow or weak for responding in this way, and concludes: “Sometimes it seems like ‘pain’ is too obvious a place to turn for inspiration. Pain isn’t always deep, anyway. Sometimes it’s awful + that’s it. Or boring. Surely other things can be as profound as pain. . . . ?” (123, ellipses in original). The phenomenon is gendered—Ben Yagoda tells us that at its peak in 2006, the misery memoir genre was “marketed mostly in supermarkets and to women” (233)—and so the resulting criticism and trivialization is especially de-authorizing to
women artists. Ellen Forney’s question, “Who gets to be crazy-brilliant, + who’s just crazy-crazy?” is in part a question about the source of authorization to tell one’s story originates (43). With this concern, Ellen voices her awareness that mental illness, and, equally importantly, artistic representations of mental illness, are regarded differently for individuals from privileged groups and for those established as geniuses.

Therefore, one of the most important counternarratives these memoirs produce is a story in which the patient becomes an expert. Professionally recognized authorities on the subject like Kay Redfield Jamison have a persuasive position from which to write against prevailing norms of mental illness. Jamison is not alone as a scientist who specializes in the conditions she suffers from and addresses in her memoir. Lauren Slater, a prominent figure in the memoir boom, holds a master’s degree and a doctorate in psychology, and writes extensively about science through the lens of personal memories. Her advanced degrees and years of clinical work authorize her to speak about the disorders she has observed in patients and has experienced herself (in not one, but three memoirs). Slater’s memoirs are not only extensions of her research and clinical practice, packaged for a wide readership but also reflections of the degree to which her past determined the direction of her education and career. Even with this credibility, Slater articulates another fear relevant to all memoirists after the memoir boom. The specter of extracted public confessions like those featured on Oprah now haunts any project of narrating personal experiences. As she concludes Welcome To My Country with the revelation of her own illness and treatment, Slater states that she is well aware of “the criticism levied against this trend, how such open testifying trivializes suffering and contributes to the narcissism polluting our country’s character” (179).
Ellen Forney writes from a different professional background but develops the authority to narrate “creative survivorship” through her research into manic depression, and by situating herself as a member of “Club Van Gogh” (Buss 43). Forney identifies the similarities between her own depressions and those William Styron describes, and the similarities between her manias and those portrayed by other crazy artists, in order to place herself among these established and legitimised figures. Equipped with medical knowledge and personal experience, she situates herself as part of a tradition of artists whose turbulent emotional lives go hand-in-hand with their creativity.

Jamison and Forney deploy this expertise and authority to craft a narrative of illness that includes clinical notes, doctors’ reports, and medical studies, but also goes beyond the types of knowledge found in those texts. In Depression: A Public Feeling, Ann Cvetkovich argues that “one of the problems with medical discourses, whether about trauma or depression, is not just that they pathologize but that they homogenize and universalize a nuanced range of feelings” (157). Cvetkovich, Jurecic, and Charon celebrate the possibility of illness memoirs to produce new and individual accounts with “proliferative salience” to many audiences and areas of study (Charon viii). In addition to resisting the universalization that Cvetkovich sees in medical discourse, these memoirs represent the patient as expert. They also negotiate identity beyond the point of diagnosis to years of living with illness. They bear witness to suffering, in particular to the crisis of identity that disorder and diagnosis precipitates.

Several academic studies of illness memoirs and neuromemoirs have already given attention to the way that personal narratives portray the complexities and individuality of illness. For Charon, learning to read or hear individual patients’ stories of illness means that a clinician can “with deep empathy, name the suffering they see, offer themselves humbly as one who
recognizes, who listens, and who cares” (103). Attention to narrative changes the health care provider and changes the type of care that is offered. “Narrative considerations,” Charon writes, probe what, in the end, it might mean to be sick and to be well. . . . We see how intricate are the processes that lead to one’s feeling well, one’s feeling oneself, and, more saliently for health professionals, we see how much we can do for those who are ill and in our hands” (186). These narrative considerations appear in spoken accounts given in doctors’ offices (frequently included as a scene in illness memoirs) and in autobiographical writing that is carefully composed and revised. Michelle Huang’s review of Marbles accurately states that the memoir “provides a much-needed corrective to a normative view that considers mood disorders categorically damaging.” An Unquiet Mind likewise addresses categorical assumptions about neurological disorders and those who suffer from them.

As these memoirists understand their lives, neurological disorders influence the directions their professional work takes. Jamison’s memoir recounts the trajectory of her illness and tells also how her career as a researcher and clinician grew out of her “necessity and intellectual inclination” to be “a student of moods” (5). She represents her condition through text that she shapes for different rhetorical audiences, joining her professional role in a narrow scientific community to an activist project of educating a broader public. Forney, too, seems to have an activist goal in mind when she composes Marbles. Her “universe-given role,” she explains (in what she later admits is the grandiose state of mind her manic episodes bring about) is “to help the women of the world to see themselves as beautiful, and sexy!” (30). Forney says that she finds her own body and other women’s bodies beautiful, and in the months around her Bipolar I diagnosis she embarks on a collection of comics celebrating “a variety of ages + body types,” all “perfect” (31). In the memoir, however, Ellen is unable to think so positively about
her non-normative brain. One activist project of *Marbles*, though not one she states as explicitly, is to find a way to see a range of brain and mood functions as beautiful.

In both of these memoirs, the writers connect their personal and professional lives. Their public careers emerge out of private struggle, which Jamison and Forney come to see as having public implications. Conversely, one way to make sense of a mental illness diagnosis and begin to rewrite the narrative surrounding the condition is to become an expert. These public or professional goals do not supplant the very private nature of the experience, nor do they obscure the degree to which the disruption of identity takes place privately. Even Jamison’s narrative of her education and her professional achievements keeps mental illness as the primary focus. By doing so, these memoirs articulate yet another relationship between public and private.

Conventional memoir takes up private life as its topic, but as I demonstrated in Chapter 1, women’s memoirs of 1920s Paris placed the writers’ public literary roles firmly in focus. The details of their personal lives mattered in those narratives only insofar as they motivated their careers. Women who write memoirs of rejecting city life for physical work in agriculture or forestry—the subject of Chapter 2—portray the public and private spheres as indistinguishable in their lives. Jamison and Forney, by contrast, show how public and private lives inform each other even when memoirists keep them fairly distinct. Jamison does not conduct research or see patients in her home, for example, though what takes place at home clearly shapes the direction that her research and publishing will take. Public and private selves are necessarily separate, but are productively linked.

That same dynamic describes the memoirists’ treatment of their past and present selves. Of the two, Forney most effectively narrates the complicated relationship among intangible memories, tangible archives of past experience, and present perceptions. Her achievement in
doing so is considerable, and offers an innovative solution to the problems of deception (accidental or not) and faulty memory in memoir. Eakin asserts that, unlike scholars of autobiographical writing, “The overwhelming majority of autobiographers continue to place their trust in the concept of an invariant memory that preserves the past intact, allowing the original experience to be repeated in present consciousness” (How Our Lives Become Stories 107). Through the medium of comics, Forney develops techniques for preserving past experience, and coherently representing those events and impressions for her readers.

I identify three modes of drawing in Marbles, which I term “registers.” The first is characterized by a jagged, claustrophobic, fragmented style:

![Figure 6, from Marbles 69](image)

This register visually captures the frantic and terrifying state of descending into depression. In this image and others like it, Forney makes use of comics as “a hybrid genre—a combination of word and image, narration and juxtaposition” that “has the capacity to articulate aspects of social experience that escape both the normal realms of medicine and the comforts of canonical literature” (Squier, “Literature and Medicine” 130). While Forney portrays that experience differently than prose without images would allow, I do want to avoid implying that comics can portray mental illness or interiority better. In An Unquiet Mind, Jamison proves that words can
skillfully describe depression and madness. Instead, Forney’s greater achievement in developing this series of visual registers is finding a way to represent the past and the present separately but in close contact, sometimes overlapping or layered upon each other. In the above image, Forney shows that these memories are still frightening and difficult for her to understand even at the time she composed *Marbles*. She draws past experiences in a style that represents how taxing they have been to process and smooth out, rather than imposing an artificially tidy narrative through a tidy visual style (pp. 52-53, 151). While the larger narrative is coherent, in these images Forney preserves the incoherence of manic and depressive episodes.

In contrast, other sections of *Marbles* are drawn in a register marked by organization, or calm and silence. Forney renders many of Ellen’s conversations with other people—her parents, friends, and especially with her therapist Karen—in consistently-sized frames:

![Figure 7, from *Marbles* page 65]
These moments in the narrative are often drawn with six panels to a page, which gives the scene an orderly, measured pace. The above scene is an example of when two panels are joined to briefly interrupt that pace, here giving the impression of an outburst or sudden peak in Ellen’s energy. Frequently, too, Forney draws these panels following a consistent visual pattern. In the scenes of Ellen’s therapy sessions with Karen, in the final scene of the memoir when Forney imagines counseling her younger self, and in other scenes throughout the narrative, the figures of the two characters remain in the same positions facing each other. Aside from facial expressions and hand gestures to complement the dialogue, Forney does very little with the bodies in these images and directs the reader’s attention to the conversation instead.

Forney also employs this visual consistency in moments when she is alone, and sometimes silent. Two such scenes are missing both dialogue and narration (pp. 81, 125). Another is paired with narration, but the point she makes is a visual one:

Figure 8, from *Marbles* 113
Forney uses this orderly visual register to compose verbally driven scenes, and also to convey to the reader when a memory is one that she has come to terms with one or in which she has found meaning. When Ellen rediscovers her ability to “see things in other things,” for example, that scene stands out as significant because it initiates her transition out of the depressive episode. Visually as well as verbally, Forney invokes logic, order, and either dialogue or introspection. These scenes contrast with the louder and more raw moments that punctuate the memoir, but are no less emotionally vivid.

**Conclusion: Forms of Testimony**

I had students read *Marbles* in an introductory Women’s Studies course that I taught during the Fall semester of 2013. In my mind, the memoir perfectly suited a course designated “Representing Gender in Art, Literature, and Popular Cultures” because it combines visual representations of women’s bodies, feminist literary techniques, the popular genre of comics, and intertextual moments that link Forney’s story to William Styron, Virginia Woolf, Emily Dickinson, and other “crazy artists.” My students, though, had questions about why we were reading this memoir that in their view did not voice an agenda about feminist issues. This forced me to think more carefully about how *Marbles* and other neuromemoirs are involved with questions of gender. In *Marbles*, Ellen Forney discloses that she herself is a feminist, but the memoir does not emphasize questions about gender or make points about manic depression that sound overtly feminist.¹⁰

¹⁰ A longer version of this study might look at the memoirs written by women about their mothers’ neurological illness, such as *Mapping Fate* by Alice Wexler (1996), *Wishing for Snow* by Minrose Gwin (2011), and the graphic memoir *Tangles* by Sarah Leavitt (2012). Lauren Slater’s later memoirs about pregnancy and being a mother also tell stories in which gender plays a more visible role.
Marbles takes up feminism as a methodology, rather than as subject matter. Forney asks questions about who has the authority and permission to speak from experience, and questions about how a patient interacts with the power structure that is present in health care in the United States. By telling her story through graphic memoir, rather than through a fictionalized story or nonfiction that conceals the author’s own position, she enacts the feminist goal of making the personal political. Memoirists reveal their personal histories, values, and perspectives they bring to writing, which means that their insights and knowledge are situated and do not claim universality. Graphic and prose memoirs can be “forms of testimony that mediate between the personal and the social” (Cvetkovich 15).

Both Jamison and Forney tell stories of madness and identity that yield insights about gender. Jamison recalls that in her memories of her childhood “independence, temperament, and girlhood met very uneasily” in the traditional military environment (27). The Air Force base where her family lived was also “singularly intolerant of personal weakness . . . self-control and restraint were assumed” (29). These expectations applied most specifically to women, who were instructed that an argument with their husbands could cause the men to be angry or upset during a flight, leading to a lapse in concentration and an deadly accident. “Anger and discontent, lest they kill, were to be kept to oneself,” Jamison writes, adding, “The military, even more so than the rest of society, clearly put a premium on well-behaved, genteel, and even-tempered women” (29-30). She does not imply at all that this ideology caused her to have manic depression later in life. Rather, it structured the ways in which she privately responded to her diagnosis and the negative reaction she anticipated from anyone who learned about her illness.

Hilary Clark makes similar points when she explains her decision to focus her chapter “Telling Trauma: Two Narratives of Psychiatric Hospitalization” on women’s memoirs (Nancy

Clark justifies that choice in the following way:

> Although men have written hospital narratives, too—most notably William Styron in his *Darkness Visible: A Memoir of Madness* (1990)—I am focusing on women’s narratives because depression and borderline disorder (Kaysen’s diagnosis) are more commonly diagnosed in women, and because both writers analyze their diagnoses and experience of hospitalization within the context of their lives as women in a sexist society (46).

Clark shows that these two authors write of hospitalization as “an inevitable consequence” of their illnesses and the directions of their lives, but also a major disruption “whose meaning she cannot completely discern” (46). “In each case,” Clark concludes, “the hospital episode represents, to some extent, the logical outcome of a distress intensifying to crisis—for these women authors, a distress stemming as much from their inability to easily assume conventional feminine roles as from neurobiological factors” (52).

Eakin and Jurecic both set readers/writers and scholars/critics in opposition to each other, with diverging interests. Eakin’s two statements about how literary criticism differs from reading or writing a memoir—“Brain research is one thing, however, and writing memoirs another” and “autobiographers continue to place their trust in the concept of an invariant memory that preserves the past intact” (*How Our Lives Become Stories* 107)—indicate that autobiographers work using a different methodology and according to different values than do those who study them. One key difference for neuromemoirs is that while critics read personal accounts from a perspective informed by a hermeneutics of suspicion—a reading practice that expects a text to fail—memoirists believe the genre has more potential (Jurecic 14). “Whatever the critics say
about the limits of the genre,” Jurecic writes, “writers continue to produce these memoirs” (11). Certainly memoirists have financial reasons for publishing, and the expectations for and constraints on female writers shape the message of the text. Many writers also respond to pressure and suspicions and craft their story in such a way as to demonstrate its authenticity or truth. But the most insightful and innovative memoirs do also de-emphasize questions of truth and memory to focus instead on “the possibility that a narrative will do meaningful work in the world” (11). Their financial success may be due only in part to the fact that they conform to established patterns for women’s illness narrative. Contemporary markets for autobiographical writing (and some critics) welcome memoirs that tell a story with eloquence and pursue a balance between fragmented and stable identity.

Reading *An Unquiet Mind* and *Marbles* in this way makes clear that factors beside eliciting empathy motivate the memoirs, and shows that the writers’ positions are much more complicated than the victimhood a term like “misery memoir” implies. Jamison and Forney “are able to transcend their definition by their bodies” or definition by their non-normative minds. They incorporate their experiences of being embodied into their “concept of self and their movement through the world and through life” (Charon 76). Jamison resists the idea that a reader could come to empathize with her:

I have become fundamentally and deeply skeptical that anyone who does not have this illness can truly understand it. And, ultimately, it is probably unreasonable to expect the kind of acceptance of it that one so desperately desires. It is not an illness that lends itself to easy empathy. Once a restless or frayed mood has turned to anger, or violence, or psychosis, [her husband], like most, finds it very difficult to see it as illness, rather than as being willful, angry, irrational, or simply
tiresome. What I experience as beyond my control can instead seem to him deliberate and frightening. (174)

Instead, the detailed experiences narrated in *An Unquiet Mind* might only make a reader’s understanding less abstract than it was before encountering her memoir (173). Jamison’s accounts of her uncontrollable moods, her self-doubt, and her fear that she is incurably mad are as close to a day-to-day understanding of manic depression as readers without firsthand knowledge can attain. And while manic depression might be all but impossible to understand, Jamison’s narrative of questioning and reconstructing her identity is not. Forney, too, tells a story of illnesses that resists empathy, but also a resonant story of creating a self with which to go forward in her life.
Chapter 4

The Religious Voice of Women’s Memoir

Arguably, the roots of Western memoir lie in spiritual and religious life writing. The *Confessions* of St. Augustine, written around the year 397, is acknowledged as the first book-length autobiographical narrative (*Reading Autobiography* 105). Ben Yagoda calls the *Confessions* “the inescapable example” of autobiography’s emergence in Christian Europe, and “one of the most remarkable autobiographies of all time” (32). Literary historians regard *The Book of Margery Kempe*, an account of Kempe’s mystical visions written in the 1430s, as the first English autobiography (Yagoda 34). Centuries before the recent memoir boom, Puritan conversion narratives appeared and proliferated in England during the seventeenth century. These narratives, like the medieval spiritual testimonies of Julian of Norwich, Angela of Foligno, and Teresa of Avila, were written “as a form of devotion in the service of spiritual examination” (*Reading Autobiography* 105). Yagoda notes that John Bunyan, in his autobiography *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners* (1666), cites biblical exhortations to believers instructing them to remember and recount their stories of sin and repentance (43). In North America, Mary Rowlandson and Elizabeth Ashbridge wrote autobiographical accounts that portrayed the events of their lives as part of a divine plan. Presumably, these accounts of spiritual journeys also aimed to inspire similar conversions in readers and draw public attention to marginalized sects.

When women write memoirs of their religious or spiritual lives, they follow many of the patterns of narrating the self that literary scholars trace back to Augustine. However, the spiritual autobiographies of women in medieval and early modern Europe also set a precedent for women who want to narrate their own religious lives in a way that consciously authorizes their self-
disclosure. Early life writing by women also speaks in opposition to the theology of a patriarchal, hierarchical church. Cheryl Glenn argues that Julian of Norwich developed a rhetoric of inclusion in her writing, and “a rhetoric of theology that widens the circle of purposeful Christian participation” (93-94). Julian wrote *A Shewing of God’s Love* (later expanded into a fuller account titled *Sixteen Revelations of Divine Love*) in the vernacular, rather than in French and Latin, the “official languages of power—of government, religion, and education” (95). Significantly for the study of women’s spiritual autobiography, Julian wrote a theology based in the experiential knowledge that she had gained through visions and during private contemplation of biblical texts. Her account of these spiritual practices “moves toward action that improves the spiritual lives of all men and all women” and articulates what Glenn calls “a kind of feminist liberatory theology” in “the broadest sense” (99). Both Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe assert that “God is not exclusively male, and God’s word will not be interpreted exclusively by males” (116). Rather than be excluded from Christianity, both writers “feminized their Christian faith” (116).

The opportunity to write spiritual autobiography presented women, in particular, with the opportunities historically denied them in secular and religious institutions. Three of Mary G. Mason’s “four great originals,” women who established patterns of narrating selfhood in memoir, wrote spiritual accounts (231).1 For some women, composing a story of their experiences took the place of formal theological training. “By exploring their own private experience,” Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson write, “some women writers find alternative access

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1 In her frequently cited and anthologized essay “The Other Voice: Autobiographies of Women Writers,” Mary G. Mason identifies the ways Julian of Norwich, Margery Kempe, Margaret Cavendish, and Anne Bradstreet “record and dramatize self-realization and self-transcendence through the recognition of another” (235). That other, for Julian, Kempe, and Bradstreet, is the spiritual presence of God or of the religious community.
to self-knowledge in a church that forbade them formal learning. Here, autobiographical practice becomes an alternative form of education” (Reading Autobiography 108). Religious faith and the genre of spiritual autobiography also enabled women to make these accounts public. For Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe, “religious devotion and fervor constituted their feminine rhetorical power” and justified their teaching and writing (75). Margery Kempe’s ethos as a narrator of her own story is one based on the “convergence of spirituality, selfhood, and authorship” (104). The Book of Margery Kempe articulates her “private, disenfranchised experience through the public discourse of religion” (115). Since visionary or mystical writings were acceptable forms of literacy for women in Europe at the time, “Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe turned to the only intellectual world within women’s reach: the world of eternal—and internal—truth” (92).

In this chapter, I consider the ways that women’s memoirs struggle with questions of private and public spirituality, as well as the ways feminist life writing employs religious tropes of confession and conversion. Spiritual memoirs written in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries envision a relationship between religion and feminism that begins a necessary conversation between them. I approach each memoir with the following two questions. How has the author experienced religious faith and belonging as gendered? What are the specific ways the author encountered misogyny and sexism within institutional or formal religion? Rather than denouncing religion with a categorical dismissal or a broad statement that its institutions are irrelevant, women’s memoirs recognize the power, influence, and even appeal of religion for many who remain spiritually unchurched. During the period that Leigh Gilmore, Julie Rak, and others have called the “memoir boom,” and earlier in the twentieth century, numerous memoirists wrote accounts of spiritual journeys that do not contend with religious institutions. In
my conclusion to this chapter, I consider some of the reason why the memoir form invites
spiritual reflection and the ways memoir gives explicit or implicit spiritual dimensions to a
narrative. However, religious institutions present an especially fraught topic for women who
espouse progressive views of gender. In women’s memoirs, we can begin to see the ways
doctrine and tradition oppose women’s freedom and hinder their full participation, enable
empowering conversion, and sustain a complex search for identity.

Within the context of this long history of women’s memoirs, I see three predominant
narratives in American women’s memoir during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.
Deconversion narratives tell stories that are more complex than stories of secularization, in
which the writer leaves the church because he or she sees religious institutions as increasingly
irrelevant. To such writers as Mary McCarthy, Carolyn Briggs, Leah Vincent, and Martha Beck,
faith and spiritual experience remain important even when they themselves become alienated
from religious institutions. Women also write conversion narratives recounting the way they
came to adhere to religious faith after living a secular life. Kathleen Norris and Mary Karr
portray their conversions as freeing and fulfilling. While conversion and deconversion stand out
as the most dramatic of spiritual narratives, a third category of memoirs tells stories of lives lived
within religious cultures and communities. These narratives do not always have a climactic
moment of realizing belief or doubt. Instead, they offer a close and nuanced understanding of a
particular culture and faith, and the reasons a woman raised in that system of belief might choose
to remain there.

2 There is certainly overlap between what I am calling spiritual and religious memoirs here. I
mean to distinguish the group of texts I study from those memoirs about spiritual experiences
that do not address the divisions between religion and feminism. Memoirs of spirituality often do
not take seriously the influences that governing bodies and congregations of believers can have
over the individual.
Crucially, several of the memoirs I study envision opportunities for feminist action based in religious practice. That is, they see participation in formal, institutional religion as a foundation (or a potential foundation) for dismantling power structures and living better lives within a mainstream culture that continues to define and limit individuals because of gender. Like the memoirists in my second chapter who find freedom in a life close to nature, these writers narrate counterlives that replace secular ideals of freedom with religious concepts of nonconformity. Their assertion that institutional religion, along with personal spirituality, can take this form will strike many readers as counterintuitive or simply hard to believe. Much of feminist theory and feminist literary criticism takes as a commonplace that all major religions are hostile, incompatible, or antithetical to women’s freedom and full participation in public life. This received knowledge is often not accurate, as Norris, Karr, and Kasdorf show. When that commonplace is true, as Mary McCarthy and several recent memoirists contend, the generalization conceals the specific ways in which religion intersects with other aspects of identity. Memoirs give a more nuanced understanding of the part religious institutions and spiritual faith can play in identity and autonomous selfhood.

Deconversion: Leaving the Church

Deconversion narratives critique religion by telling stories of devout believers who, following pivotal events or realizations, separate themselves from their spiritual backgrounds. For women writing spiritual memoirs, the process of deconversion can illustrate the barriers to women’s full participation in religious communities. John D. Barbour examines this narrative arc in Versions of Deconversion. Augustine, he notes, writes at length about leaving the Manichees over a period of ten years, a deconversion from one sect that takes place before the conversion
narrative for which he is better known. In other texts, deconversion may be the primary narrative of individual transformation. Mary Daly’s *Outercourse* (1992) tells a story of her permanent deconversion from all forms of patriarchy, beginning with Christianity. Deconversion takes many forms in memoir, and so rather than define the concept narrowly, Barbour suggests common characteristics. Deconversion, for Augustine, Daly, and others, includes doubt or denial of the truth of a belief system. Often this doubt leads to moral criticism of an entire way of life connected with those beliefs. Emotional upheaval and feelings of grief, guilt, loneliness, and despair may follow deconversion, and the transformation is usually “marked by the rejection of the community” (2). Barbour draws his examples entirely from memoirs and autobiographies about Christianity. While “disavowal and disaffiliation” may occur in other systems of belief and other religious communities, deconversion seems to reflect Christian motifs in the same way that conversion narratives do.

Deconversion, crucially, differs from narratives of secularization in that the memoir “represents a series of events arranged as a plot and a decision that the writer tries to justify.” In contrast, “Secularization is a gradual fading away of beliefs, as religion simply ceases to inform a person’s life, to make any real difference” (2). A secular memoirist, presumably, would not see his or her former religious experience as significant enough to write about in any detail. Frequently, deconversion is a movement away from traditional forms of spiritual practice towards radical or informal faith. Recent deconversion narratives, part of the memoir boom chronologically and thematically, bear out the lingering power of religious faith, if not formal religion. I address these briefly, before turning to Mary McCarthy’s explanation of her deconversion in *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood*. 
Higher Ground by Carolyn Briggs (2002), Leaving the Saints by Martha Beck (2005), and Cut Me Loose by Leah Vincent (2014) trace these authors’ eventual deconversions back to their early memories of being silenced. Briggs recalls conversations with other members of her evangelical church who answer her questions with too-simple explanations and admonish her not to question God. Church leaders required almost uniform beliefs among congregants, and only men are allowed to teach. Briggs describes one Bible study when she is invited to explain dispensational theology, only to be “lovingly” put in her place by a leader who says, “You’d get eaten up in seminary, you know that?” Briggs recalls her internal response to that leader:

I had heard teachings on a woman’s submission dozens of times, and I believed that to be God’s will for me, but I registered a voiceless protest coming from within me from time to time. I repressed that rebellion. I hushed it, I spoke on top of it, I mocked it, but I never quelled it entirely. . . .

I didn’t speak again the rest of the morning. Phil didn’t call on me, and I didn’t have the nerve to answer any more questions even if I did know all of the answers. (168)

As an adult, Briggs continues to have an affinity for religion but loses any desire to belong to that fundamentalist congregation or others like it. Higher Ground ends without resolving this tension. Briggs completes a BA and MFA in her thirties and begins a career of teaching and writing, but nothing replaces fundamentalist religion as an organizing principle in her life.

In Leaving the Saints, Martha Beck uses her experience to argue that the Mormon Church protects male believers at the expense of children and women. Her memoir narrates a period when Beck moved, with her husband and young children, to her hometown of Provo, Utah while
she completed her graduate study. Much like Briggs, she portrays herself as initially striving to be the faithful wife and mother her church holds up as an ideal. While in Provo, she recovers repressed memories of child abuse by her father, which her mother and siblings refuse to believe and which her father, a prominent scholar and Church leader, refuses to acknowledge. All but a few Mormons in her community ostracize her; when she speaks publicly about the trauma, her statements are deemed a betrayal. Beck feels herself also silenced by Mormon leaders’ surveillance at Brigham Young University. The semester she begins teaching there, church officials instruct the members of her sociology department to cease publishing in secular journals and to avoid “sensitive research” on, among other topics, feminism (81). One especially striking scene takes place in her Sociology of Gender class. After a lesson in which she explains why “religion and science occupy different corners of reality,” a male student stands up to argue that she is wrong. Beck quotes the reasons he gives for why he need not defer to her expertise: “‘You see, Sister Beck,’ he told me in an earnest voice, ‘I hold the priesthood, and that means I’ll always know better than you.’” Most of the class nodded sagely in agreement” (222). Beck remains a person of faith but formally leaves the Mormon Church, believing its teachings to be manipulative, false, and damaging—even to the patriarchal figures it protects.

Leah Vincent’s memoir *Cut Me Loose* describes her isolation and suicidal depression when her Orthodox Jewish family refuses to support or interact with her. The offenses she describes seem minor—exchanging letters with a friend’s brother, buying new clothes, expressing interest in college—but they offend her family’s understanding of how a devout and

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3 Martha Beck earned a PhD in sociology during the time period that *Leaving the Saints* covers in detail. After separating from the LDS Church, she taught and researched sociology, social psychology, and business at Harvard. She now works as a life coach, and *Leaving the Saints* briefly narrates these career transitions. Beck’s other nonacademic writing includes the memoir *Expecting Adam*, self-help books *Finding Your Own North Star* and others, and columns for popular magazines.
virtuous young woman should live. No arranged marriage is made for her as a result, meaning that she has no way to practice her faith within the Jewish community. “There is little room for the single girl in Yeshivish life,” Vincent writes. “For a woman, the rhythm of observance is tied to family. One is either a daughter or a wife” (72).

Similarities between these memoirs suggest patterns in deconversion narratives. All three women belong to fundamentalist, orthodox communities, and all three are tied to that type of faith by older relatives and friends who seem to have no religious doubts at all. The authors experience separation from community and tradition as painful, but they portray shifts in their own beliefs as peaceful and inevitable. Still, memoir conveys a specificity of experience that lends these texts their affective and persuasive power. For many feminists and academics, it comes as no surprise that religious communities restrict women and girls based on traditions and on interpretation of holy texts. However, memoirs of women who experienced a deconversion from these systems of belief demonstrate that while their narrative trajectories may be similar, the details of oppression in each writer’s past vary. Their lived experiences translate the abstract opposition of religion and feminism into concrete instances of having their selfhood and dignity denied.

Mary McCarthy’s account of losing her faith is all the more interesting for not following the patterns I observe in the others. Told in Memories of a Catholic Girlhood, her deconversion begins as a charade to win the attention of nuns, priests and fellow students. Beginning seventh grade at the Forest Ridge Convent school feels to her like being “a lorn new soul come to Paradise, elated and charmed by what I saw.” However, McCarthy finds herself unable to win recognition from her teachers and from the polished, aristocratic older students (105). Mary’s superiority and incisive “meanness” (she gives an example of making a wealthy girl cry by
calling her *nouveau riche*) transgresses traditional Catholic ideals of good conduct in girls. “If I could not win fame by goodness, I was ready to do it by badness,” McCarthy writes (111). She has no period of deep inward struggle; McCarthy’s loss of faith comes about as a calculated decision that sets the stage for a dramatic reversal that she plans to perform four days later during a school retreat. Sent to speak with a priest about her doubts, Mary realizes that she knows all the expected atheistic objections to religious faith, but that she can use none of them since she has also internalized all of the Church’s answers. “Searching my memory” for skeptical arguments, she writes, “doubts that I had hurriedly stowed away, like contraband in a bureau drawer, came back to me, reassuringly” (115).

Mary’s skeptical probing of Catholic doctrine arises from her need to defend what begins as a disingenuous assertion of doubt. The questions she manufactures—doubts about life after death and the Resurrection of the Body—strike her as impressive and “remarkable in one of [her] years,” and she imagines comparisons to the young Jesus “discoursing with the scribes and doctors” (115). Father Dennis, who is called in to counsel Mary, disappoints her with “a weary abstracted air” and “low listless voice” (116). In their conversation, he is not the intellectual sparring partner Mary anticipated. Worse, he is not impressed by her questions; he waves them aside by telling her they are “beyond the reach of [her] years” and forecloses further discussion by saying, “Believe me, the Church has an answer for them” (116-117). However, as Mary voices her questions they begin to strike her as real, and as the conversation leads her beyond rehearsed objections she realizes that her faith could actually have slipped away. When the bored priest asks whether she doubts the existence of God, Mary answers that she does, “in exultant agony, knowing that it was true” (120).
Mary’s initial questions recall the painful trauma of losing her parents and living as an orphan. Her secret suspicion, stowed away like contraband but drawn out by the need to prove she is not faking, uncovers a genuine and difficult anxiety: “Perhaps it was really true that the dead just rotted and I would never rejoin my parents in Heaven?” (115). Her deconversion, then, arises not so much from her questions about Catholic doctrine as from the Church’s inability to address the genuine concerns of her young life. The death of her parents and the abuse by Uncle Myers and Aunt Margaret are the most recognizably serious of those traumas, but McCarthy illustrates others in “C’est le premier Pas Qui Coûte.” She believes herself to be not only a bright student but “a prodigy of theological lore” and craves recognition in her school (107). When Father Dennis and, later, Father Heeney fail to be impressed with Mary’s questions and refuse to answer her, they disregard her intellectual ability.

*Memories of a Catholic Girlhood* portrays the Catholic priests who counsel Mary as authority figures who disregard the intellectual curiosity and excitement that their discussions spark in her. Instead, these priests project onto her their own concerns about the influence of secular culture on young Catholics, and they treat her as an embodiment of these fears. Father Dennis assumes she has read atheistic literature and has learned her objections there, rather than in lessons about skepticism and theological argument taught by the nuns in her school. Despite Mary’s assertions to the priest (and to the reader) that she knows nothing about atheism, he concludes their conversation with a dismissive command to “give up reading that atheistic filth” (121). Father Heeney, who counsels Mary next, is similarly convinced that she is repeating arguments she had read illicitly. “These priests,” McCarthy remembers bitterly, “seemed to imagine that you could do nothing for yourself, that everything was from inheritance and reading” (122).
In this, the two priests reinforce a pattern of treatment that McCarthy had already encountered in her Uncle Myers and would see later in her Grandfather Preston. These two guardians (neither one a Catholic) also fail to recognize her as a complex and intelligent person. Uncle Myers abuses her and her brothers because of harsh theories of reforming spoiled children and his own prejudice against intellect, rather than actual misbehavior or bad character. Grandfather Preston, though much kinder and much more fair, treats Mary as “as a child who could hardly be trusted to take a streetcar without a grownup in attendance” (169-170). McCarthy does show herself to be vain about her intelligence and sophistication, and her belief that her grandfather cannot not fully see her maturity comes in part from this vanity. However, her descriptions of his protectiveness convince readers that his notions of what a young woman would enjoy have clouded his perception of her actual interests and abilities.

In assuming—out of kindness, cruelty, or arrogance—that they understand Mary better than she understands herself, these four patriarchal figures place themselves in the way of her development. Even at this young age, Mary is an intelligent and autonomous person who has desires and thoughts of her own. Her understandable response is to keep her reading and her inner life a secret. To conceal her experiences, she repeatedly constructs elaborate stories and deceptions that fit guardians’ and teachers’ expectations, many of which are gendered and based in religious tradition. Writing about these girlhood experiences decades later, McCarthy attributes a purity of intention to her lies. As early as her first Communion, she writes, “I have battled, usually without avail, against a temptation to do something which only I knew was bad, being swept on by a need to live up to other people’s expectations of me” (21). In reality, these secrets are not all that “bad,” but they uphold her individual will. Through deception, Mary
asserts her intelligence and creates a space for independent thought and action within a series of hierarchical relationships, including those in the Church.

After losing her faith and gaining the attention of her teachers and classmates, Mary enacts the conversion she planned. In a characteristically contrarian flourish, she attributes her reversal to a dream so as to give neither priest the credit. But since neither man has changed her mind or even taken her questions seriously, Mary feels she has been driven “straight into fraud” (123). McCarthy does not raise objections to Catholic teachings on gender in these scenes of her deconversion or in the rest of the memoir. However, gender certainly plays a role in her failure to return to the congregation of believers. The Catholic Church comes to seem deceitful and inadequate to her because of its way of responding to serious, searching questions from a female. The deeper irony in the chapter “C’est le premier Pas Qui Coûte” is that arguing about theology excites her younger self. When the idea “that Christ really could have been a man” comes to her, McCarthy responds strongly. “The idea of Christ as simply man had something extraordinary and joyous about it that was different, I perceived, from the condescension of God to the flesh. I was glad I had started this discussion, for I was learning something new every second. All fear had left me and all sense of mere willful antagonism” (119). She feels more passionately interested in religious faith during these conversations that at any other time in the period of her life that she narrates.

McCarthy’s false crisis of faith reveals to her a genuine loss, and she does not regain her piety and conviction in *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood*. But her rigorous convent education profoundly influences her intellectual formation, and she continues to recognize the relevance of religion and spirituality as an adult. In a long introductory section to the memoir titled “To the Reader,” McCarthy claims, “Looking back, I see that it was religion that saved me” (18).
Religion provided the only aesthetic outlet of her childhood “in the words of the Mass and the litanies and the old Latin hymns, in the Easter lilies around the altar, rosaries, ornamented prayer books, votive lamps, holy cards stamped in gold and decorated with flower wreaths and a saint’s picture” (18). She gains a knowledge of Latin, European history, and theology that later allows her to grasp Dante, Chaucer, and T. S. Eliot. Catholic education teaches her to “care for the quarrels of the past” and identify with “a losing cause” in a way most American children never learn (25). “The final usefulness of my Catholic training,” McCarthy concludes, was “a conception of something prior to and beyond utility. . . . What I liked in the church, and what I recall with gratitude, was the sense of mystery and wonder” (26). She savors the strangeness of Church rituals that have no concrete purpose but that create “exalted moments of altruism [when] the soul was fired with reverence” (27). From Catholic doctrine and history McCarthy learned to identify with and care for romantic, hopeless causes; as an adult she interprets that passion as “a straining against reality, a rebellious nonconformity” that is unusual in America (25). Looking back as an established writer, such passion strikes McCarthy as a rare and valuable source of literary creativity.

Mary McCarthy also learns the creative potential of deception from her experience of deconversion. The story she invents leads her into recognizing truths about her spiritual questioning that piety had disguised. Critics have noted that most stories in Memories of a Catholic Girlhood narrate occasions of lying and misleading, and that McCarthy frames these stories with italicized interchapters commenting on the mendacity inherent in remembering and telling one’s story.\(^4\) In fact, her conversations with priests are one instance in which McCarthy

\(^4\) See, for example, Fictions in Autobiography: Studies in the Art of Self-Invention by Paul John Eakin pages 3-55, and Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography by Timothy Dow Adams, especially pages 85-120.
yields to the temptation to invent because “recollection is hazy” and an instance when she remembers “the substance of an event but not the details” (4). This phrase, in reference to her own writing, also anticipates the inadequacy she finds in the teachings of the Catholic Church. The priests sent to counsel her do so with a dry, hollow focus on the details of doctrine, rather than on the deeper substance of Mary’s serious questioning.

Conversion: Finding the Church

In *Dakota: A Spiritual Geography*, Kathleen Norris narrates a personal transformation that recalls the trajectories of the environmental memoirs of my second chapter. Like Byl, Kimball, and Hubbell, Norris builds an urban literary career as a young woman, and like them she ultimately rejects that career in favor of living and establishing roots in a rural community. In 1974 Norris agreed to move from New York City to Lemmon, South Dakota, a town with a population of 1,600. In Lemmon, she would live in the house her deceased grandparents had built and would manage the cattle herd and the farmland the family leased to neighbors. Norris takes care to explain that even in this agricultural community, hers was not a move “‘back to the land’ in the conventional sense” (3). Once there, she and her husband, the poet David Dwyer, work at “a crazy quilt of jobs” in the public library, schools, bars, and a cable television business. Norris gives the sense that her move to the Dakotas was an impulsive but fortunate change of course in mid-life. She knew the town and felt prepared for the conditions of life there, but she did not anticipate the spiritual conversion that her family history and the vast and silent landscape would bring about.

To Norris, moving to South Dakota is a journey with “inner logic” (11). All four of her grandparents lived out their lives on the Plains and her mother grew up in the house in Lemmon;
her own life there feels like a return “to the holy ground of my childhood summers” (2) and “the place where . . . [she] would find [her] stories” (11). Those stories are largely (though not only) stories of the religious lives of older generations. They represent to her four different ways of embodying religious faith. Norris remembers her maternal grandfather Totten as a man who “could be sentimental about religion but lacked faith,” while his wife was “a quietly pious Presbyterian” (94). Upon moving into their home, Norris writes, “for a time I tried on her Presbyterian church, the way I wore her old jackets and used her furniture” (94).

When Norris begins trying to attend church once again, ten years after this first attempt, she contends with the memory of her paternal grandparents. Although her grandfather, a clergyman who led several Methodist churches in South Dakota and Iowa, served his congregations with tolerance and flexibility, her grandmother “clung to a rigid and often fierce fundamentalism” (93). For a period during her adolescence and early career Norris ceased to practice any form of religion. She in traces her aversion back to memories of her grandmother Norris:

She talked about Jesus coming and the world ending . . . . Fundamentalism is about control more than grace, and in effect my grandmother planted the seed of fundamentalism within me, a shadow in Jungian terms, that has been difficult to overcome. Among other things, it made of Christological language a stumbling block, and told me that as a feminist, as a thinking and questioning person, I had no business being in church. Most insidiously, it embedded in me an unconscious belief in a Monster God. (96)

These lessons and examples within her family leave Norris with an uneasy view of religion, traces of which persist at the time she writes Dakota. At age twelve, she discovered an aunt she
had never heard of, her grandmother Norris’s daughter Mary, who “suffered terribly” from her family’s “hard religion” (100). Kathleen Norris explains this Aunt Mary’s suicide as a result “of lots of things: sex and fundamentalist religion and schizophrenia and postpartum despair” (100). Adding adult perspective to the stories she remembers hearing from family, she suspects that her aunt Mary was “a good girl who became pregnant out of wedlock and could make no room for the bad girl in herself” (100-101).

Barbour characterizes Dakota as a deconversion narrative because of these recollections, but I disagree with his interpretation. It would be more accurate to say that Norris creates a narrative of temporary secularization in her accounts of rejecting religion. During college and her time in the city, religion ceases to play any meaningful role in her life. More importantly, though, her secularization is only one segment of her memoir, and Norris includes her early memories and disillusionment in order to give dramatic weight to her eventual return. A large part of Norris’s spiritual work in the period of her life Dakota recounts is to recognize and confront the shadow of manipulative and unforgiving versions of Christianity. As an adult, Norris writes that, “trust in the religious sphere has been hard to come by” (97). Fundamentalism and family ghosts are two obstacles; cultural conceptions of religion among her urban, literary friends pose another set of barriers. Norris explains her long period without spiritual practice or religious faith as part of a wider generational phenomenon: “Like many Americans of my baby boom generation, I had thought that religion was a constraint that I had overcome by dint of reason, learning, artistic creativity, sexual liberation” (97). As a result, between her devout childhood and her move to South Dakota, Norris had not attended church for twenty years.

Along with her fierce fundamentalist grandmother, Norris remembers a Lutheran professor who taught classes at her family’s church. These classes set her on “a disaster course”
that put poetry and religion in opposition to each other. “I needed liturgy and a solid grounding
in the practice of prayer,” Norris writes, “not a demythologizing that left me feeling starved,
thinking: If this is religion, I don’t belong” (92). Much like Mary McCarthy’s disillusionment
with Catholic belief, Norris’s adolescent interest in religion foundered in a church that
emphasized only one part of religious experience. As an adult, the converging influence of both
her grandmothers makes it impossible for her to settle in either “the easy answers of
fundamentalism” or the “overintellectualized banalities of a conventionally liberal faith” (133).
She discovers an alternative, preserving “what was good in their faith,” through monastic
worship and the solitude and harsh beauty of the Dakotas.

The question “What is sin?” eventually brings Norris back to reading theology and
attending communal worship. Norris’s deceased fundamentalist grandmother remains a presence
in her spiritual life, ostensibly well-meaning and still very close to her, a memory that is not easy
to ignore or treat lightly. When Norris writes, “I now realize that the question was raised by the
pious Protestant grandmother at my core,” she seems to be referring to both religious
inheritances (93). The lives of her two grandmothers converge in her discovery of faith as an
adult, providing an example and an “other” through which to understand her own experience
(93). Ten years after giving up the Presbyterian services at her grandmother Totten’s church,
Norris joins a Presbyterian church once again. Early in this return, other older women convince
her to reconsider what church might offer. “Even as I exemplified the pain and anger of a
feminist looking warily at a religion that has so often used a male savior to keep women in their
place,” she remembers, “I was drawn to the strong old women in the congregation. Their well-
worn Bibles said to me, ‘there is more here than you know’” (94).
The conversion Norris recounts in *Dakota* is slow and indirect. Transplanting herself to South Dakota, she followed impulses she cannot fully identify, and which surprise her when they become clear:

My path of conversion may have a few elements of Indianness, because of the spirits of the land where I live, and because I understand that my faith comes from my grandmothers. It was in moving back to the Plains that I found my old ones, my flesh and blood ancestors as well as the desert monks and mystics of the Christian church. . . .

It came as an unwelcome surprise that my old ones led me back to church.

It continues to surprise me that the church is for me both a new and an old frontier. (131)

Her childhood, decades of ignoring religion, and forays into the varied religious traditions of her family form a path with “wrong turns and dead ends” (Leigh, *Circuitous Journeys*, 3). In this sense she follows a pattern in spiritual autobiography, and shows how her family history, individual spiritual experience, and geographical place all connect.

Along with her family history, Norris finds a monastic approach to belief in the Dakota landscape. Monastic worship—like the example Norris observed in strong old women in the church—is based in the belief that there is more present in worship, study, and service than either the faithful or the outsiders know. While Norris identifies herself as firmly Protestant, she also attends worship at a Benedictine monastery. Monasticism emerges for her as “a religious frontier where the new growth is fed by something very old” (131). In the traditional Presbyterian churches of her past, Norris recalls, “Doctrinal language slammed many a door in my face, and I became frustrated when I couldn’t glimpse the Word behind the words” (94). Monasticism
reveals to her a religious discipline that submerges doctrine during prayer and worship and, in everyday practice, has little interest in the distinctions between one denomination and another. In the Plains convents she knows, monks and nuns are primarily concerned with cultivating their own spiritual lives. In Norris’s turn to monastic traditions I see further evidence that Dakota is foremost a conversion narrative. She does not conclude the memoir by portraying herself as spiritually unchurched, though with an appreciation for and affinity to religion, as is common in deconversion. Rather, Norris finds spiritual fulfillment in a preeminently formal, traditional, patriarchal branch of Catholicism.

When Norris writes “the Plains have been essential not only for my growth as a writer, [but] they have formed me spiritually” she refers to the physical place as well as the inhabitants (13). Dakota plains seem empty, but the observant resident knows hundreds of varieties of flowers, grasses, and herbs grow there. Human life feels precarious in the Dakota climate of extreme heat and cold, with destructive droughts and storms. Along with “too much horizon, too much sky,” the land has an “essential indifference” to humans (156). In such a place, the landscape itself compels change:

Living close to such an expanse of land I find I have little incentive to move fast, little need of instant information. I have learned to trust the processes that take time, to value change that is not sudden or ill-considered but grows out of the ground of experience. Such change is properly defined as conversion, a word that at its root connotes not a change of essence but of perspective . . .

Both monasteries and the rural communities on the Plains . . . are places where being open to conversion is most necessary if community is to survive.
Norris suggests, too, that the Dakota plains have a holiness in their indifference to human society and in their contrast to more settled regions. She learns to recognize the emptiness of the landscape as bountiful and realizes that “A person is forced inward by the spareness of what is outward and visible in all this land and sky” (157).

Conversion narratives written by women in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries speak to cultural attitudes that denigrate religion, particularly Christianity. Earlier women who wrote theology and autobiographical accounts of their faith had to create a space to speak within a Church whose power and relevance was unquestioned by their contemporaries. In many cases spiritual memoirs gave them just such a voice. For women writers in the United States at the end of the twentieth century and beginning of the twenty-first century, though, the power of religious institutions seems diminished. In Norris’s conversion narrative, belonging to a congregation represents an opportunity rather than a constraint she must navigate.

Mary Karr finds Catholicism a surprising source of balance for her life, which seems out of control. Most events of Lit, published in 2009, are more ordinary than those of Karr’s earlier memoirs, The Liars’ Club (1995) and Cherry (2000). Alcoholism, recovery, marriage, parenting, divorce, adjunct teaching, writing, and publishing don’t provide Karr with the same vivid and bizarre scenes that filled her earlier life and pushed the limits of believability. However, Lit makes claims, particularly about spiritual realities, that have more at stake than the claims Karr made about her family and childhood in her previous memoirs. Conversion itself is a topic that inspires skepticism. Many readers can forgive an author for stretching or embroidering the truth about an experience in childhood, or, as McCarthy writes of her own memoir, being faithful to “the substance of an event if not the details” for the sake of an entertaining or compelling story (4). Inventing events or details to portray past experiences as miraculous or divinely epiphanic
seems less forgivable. Few readers would see such literary embellishment as anything other than dishonesty and manipulation for fanatical religious ends.

Besides sounding fanatical, memoirists who detail personal religious experiences run the risk of sounding “misty-eyed or drippy” (242); Karr repeatedly uses those evaluations, along with “sentimental” (296) and “soft-headed,” to interrogate her own assertions (334). When Alcoholics Anonymous counselors encourage her to pray, Karr resists. She maintains that religion appeals to people who can’t deal with their own problems, or who are looking to impose artificial meaning on disorder and suffering in their lives. In Lit, Karr seems to imagine her audience as being exactly those skeptical rationalists who would raise these objections, and with whom her former self would have agreed.

Karr deals with the skepticism of her imagined audience and the inherent challenges of writing about religion in three ways. First, she establishes herself as a tough-minded and firm non-believer before her conversion, one who is in no way looking to be persuaded of the truth of Catholic teaching. Neither she nor her parents were churchgoers when she was young; Karr remembers her father’s remark that “church is a trick on poor people” (191). Second, at each step in her parallel conversion and recovery, Karr references the claims or objections that she expects from her skeptical audience. Initially, most have to do with prayer. “It sounds so fake to say it, but only after I started praying was I able to put sober days together,” she explains to one nurse (272). Checked into a clinic after admitting suicidal plans, Karr finds that prayer is a habit, even as she allows that lying with her face on her knees “is, skeptics may say, the move of a slave or a brainless herd animal” (296). Karr writes more confidently (and with a characteristic sharp edge), about her spiritual realizations as the memoir traces her years of committed faith. Trusting God with financial problems “sounds nuts until you’ve spent a few years during which prayer
keeps you from driving into stuff” (316). After Karr’s clear-eyed account of her breakdowns, her resistance to prayer, and then the end of her ego-driven struggle, it becomes more difficult to dismiss the fundamental truth of her experience.

Last, Karr documents her conversion as carefully as possible, and as concretely as internal events can be documented. Here too, her claims and tone are understated while her language and personality on the page are bold. God doesn’t speak to her in dramatic or conspicuous ways, but instead as “solid quiet in the midst of psychic chaos . . . reversals of attitude so contrary to my typical thoughts—so solidly true—as to seem divinely external” (276). Counseling with a priest lets her sleep soundly without medication and gives her a touchstone phrase—“That’s done”—to repeat when her mind “lurches for the old miseries” (303). When Dev calls her “poopy head” over and over, she laughs at him, and when another driver cuts her off, swearing, she does not “automatically flip him the bird” (304). These are minor changes, but for Karr, religion is a matter of being saved from the torments that she inflicted on herself, rather than reverence for a cosmic plan. Karr also brings her appealing self-awareness and self-deprecating humor to her account of her subsequent struggles with how, exactly, to handle Christian doctrine. Her language and tone become no more reverent or pious. “Despite my conversion,” she writes, “I don’t much care to see God in all things. I prefer to find God in circumstances I think up in advance, at home in my spare time—circumstances God will fulfill for me like a gumball machine when I put the penny of my prayer into it” (363). Unusually for a conversion narrative, Karr’s most dramatic transformation is not from sin to holiness, by way of guilt and repentance. She moves instead from despair and depression to hope, by way of pain—and by way of running out of other options. During the first several years after her conversion, religion serves Karr as a calming self-help technique, and theology is an intellectual source with
little reference to sin.

Thematically, *Lit* follows the pattern of St. Augustine and John Bunyan, cautioning readers and offering renewal. In this story, though, sin is neither abstract nor theological, nor is it appealing temptation with minor consequences. For Karr, sin takes the form of ugly harm she does to her family, and harm done to her by them. Karr’s goal in *Lit* is to represent religious faith as an avenue to personal dignity and intellectual vigor. While neither of those qualities is necessarily gendered, both have been denied to women in recent church history. As repulsively self-abasing as the act of prayer may have seemed in AA, a prayerful life gives her self-awareness and self-control to live without constant panicked striving. Likewise, as softheaded as religion seemed, theology proves intellectually demanding and rewarding. In Syracuse, Karr settles in the Catholic Church that her friend (and fellow memoirist) Toby Wolff attends because it has a tradition of working for social justice. This congregation allows space for members to “argue like mad” (336).

Karr’s vision of the faith-oriented life is not the loosely structured “spiritual but not religious” thought in which many people in the twentieth and twenty-first century locate themselves. Fluid, self-defined spirituality is also more often present in literature than the formal practice of faith that Norris and Karr chronicle. Such postsecular belief rejects strict rationalism in favor of the idea that the world is charged with wonder. Postsecularism also rejects church doctrine and defined concepts of good and evil in favor of partial conversions and unchurched communities. Karr finds these positions insufficient. When she visits “super-liberal Protestant parishes that shun dogma,” these churches put her off with “the sterile feel of an operating theater” and with sermons in which there is no mention of God or Jesus, sermons that “might

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5 My understanding of postsecularism, especially as represented in literature, comes from John McClure’s *Partial Faiths: Postsecular Fiction in the Age of Pynchon and Morrison*. 

come from Reader's Digest” (332). As a writer of spiritual autobiography, she treads lightly on the subject of sin. Still, when the pastor of one church says they don’t believe in evil, the phrase strikes her as obviously untrue, “like a Rotary Club meeting where everybody’s agreed on the agenda in advance and is only waiting for the danish to come out” (333). In Karr’s experience, spiritually flexible religion is also intellectually sparse.

Postsecularist thought deemphasizes conversion in the spiritual life. Karr advocates for a much more transformative, solid, doctrinal form of religion. For Karr, conversion was entirely necessary, not only for her own sake but also for the sake of the people she damaged. Even though she would not have found religion without therapy, she distinguishes between the two: “Therapy rescued me in my twenties by taking me inward, leaching off pockets of poison in my head left over from the past. But the spiritual lens—even just the nightly gratitude list and going over each day’s actions—is starting to rewrite the story of my life in the present, and I begin to feel like somebody snatched out of the fire, salvaged, saved” (304). Though her conversion is slow, she moves fully from the abject misery of needing to prove her worth to embracing “the degree to which [she’s] watched over” (383).

Karr’s experience of the divine earns credibility because it unfolds slowly as each of her objections breaks down, and because she depicts each small change in herself so completely that she brings her readers along with her. Prayer as a meditative pause leads to prayer as an actual plea for divine intervention. Her requests then lead to an experience of an external higher power, which evolves into a belief in God, if not yet entire acceptance of Jesus Christ or Biblical and saintly miracles. The same spiritual exercises that initially made Karr cynical lead to a profound moment late in the memoir. While praying to have her sinfulness revealed to her during Lent, she helps to empty her mother’s deteriorating home in Leechfield, Texas, and move her to a new
one. Karr finds her aging mother furious and shrieking at the change, “spewing the kind of bile I listened to for most of the worst evenings of my life.” She responds in kind, voicing the bitterness and rage that she holds towards her mother for years of abuse, neglect, and manipulation. “And,” she writes, “that’s how I find my sinfulness in all its ugliness—not in prayer but in its absence. Without God, any discomfort makes me capable of attacking with piety the defenseless” (380). That same night, Karr unpacks her mother’s Bible and turns to the passages in Psalms and James that she had been given by her advisor. There, she finds both verses had been marked in blue chalk by her mother as a child decades earlier. This is the only episode in *Lit* presented as a miracle, and Karr cautiously interprets it as “a message that I could be made new, that I am—have always been—loved” (383). “I know how specifically we were designed for each other,” she writes of her mother in the concluding section. Conversion and the beginnings of a spiritual life give Karr grace in place of bitterness. Like Norris, she experiences conversion as “not a change of essence but of perspective, as turning round; turning back to or returning” (*Dakota* 145-46).

“Other meanings always danced beneath the smooth surface”: Multiple Commitments

A third narrative in women’s spiritual autobiographies follows a pattern Julian of Norwich sets in her autobiographical account, *A Shewing of God’s Love*. Julian’s text, Mason writes, takes the form of an “ascent towards God” but departs from the Augustinian model because it has “has nothing of the climactic structure of a conversion story” (214). A number of spiritual autobiographies written by women in the twentieth century follow Julian’s model. These autobiographies and memoirs narrate ongoing commitments to religious faith that change and evolve, but chart neither a process of conversion nor deconversion. Kathleen Norris’s second
memoir, *The Cloister Walk* (1996), adds to her account of conversion a meditation on the most institutional forms of Catholicism. She writes about her own life, and the lives of devout men and women during centuries of monastic tradition. *The Cloister Walk* considers, among other questions that monasticism raises, the ways Catholic traditions of nun’s habits and virgin martyrs can be made compatible with progressive gender roles. Julia Kasdorf, similarly, writes about a life rooted in the Mennonite faith in *The Body and the Book* (2009). In this section, I focus on Kasdorf’s collection of personal essays, which recounts the influence of Mennonite ancestors on her own identity and the dissonance she discovers between the religion she was born into and the writing life she pursues as an adult.

The *Body and the Book* follows neither a conversion or deconversion narrative arc, and departs from conventional memoir in that Kasdorf does not follow a continuous linear narrative. Though her poems and essays primarily focus on her own life, Kasdorf narrates her perceptions and experiences through her memories of older relatives and the stories about them handed down to her. Often, researching Mennonite history is what leads her to an understanding of speech and silence, gender and sexuality, and community and outsiders. Still, *The Body and the Book* belongs in a study of memoir. Besides taking an interest in family and church history from a decidedly autobiographical perspective, Kasdorf’s collection of essays about the origins of her writing and the relationship her writing created between herself and her Mennonite community forms an “autography.” A mode of autobiography and memoir, autography is a work of self-writing “that is not necessarily concerned with the process of unfolding of life events, but rather makes the writing itself an aspect of the selfhood the writer experiences and brings into being” (Perreault 3-4). *The Body and the Book* lends to this study an autographic perspective on gender and religion not fully present in other memoirs.
Kasdorf’s previous writings include a biographical study of a prominent Amish writer and teacher, *Fixing Tradition: Joseph W. Yoder, Amish American* (2002), and two books of poetry, *Sleeping Preacher* (1992) and *Eve’s Striptease* (1998). *The Body and the Book* reprints poems from both volumes alongside essays in which Kasdorf discusses her experience of writing the poems and having them read by her relatives and their Mennonite community. Kasdorf describes her work as a poet and essayist in *The Body and the Book* in the following way: “If earlier books sought to understand and resist the scripts of ethnicity and gender, these essays attempt to understand and revise the female ethnic author’s role. Thus I have tried to climb out of the corner that pinched me between the traditional community and my literary ambition” (73). In addition to being autobiography, *The Body and the Book* considers the status of women within a religious tradition that—while no longer persecuted in the United States—remains marginalized and misunderstood.

Kasdorf grew up in a suburb of Pittsburgh, hours away from her Mennonite relatives in a part of central Pennsylvania locally referred to as Big Valley. She describes herself as “raised in an observant Mennonite home, yet apart from the rural, religious ethos” (xvii). This “within but apart” relationship to her heritage reflects her parents’ decision to move away from Big Valley for education and work; her mother was raised Conservative Mennonite and her father was raised by an Amish father and Mennonite stepmother. That step-grandmother, Bertha, plays a large role in developing Kasdorf’s perception of Mennonite women. Bertha married late in her life, after years of relative independence keeping house for a preacher in the Ozarks and teaching Bible school in Michigan. Both were “acceptable but significant adventures for a single woman of her time and faith” (14). As a married woman living once again in Big Valley, Bertha made “pragmatic and contradictory negotiations” between independence and submission. Kasdorf
remembers her grandmother as bossy and boisterous, louder than most women, in part because she was deaf in one ear from childhood accident. She did not fully conform to expected feminine behavior, yet remained acceptable: “Some other meanings always danced beneath the smooth surface of public appearances, and I never considered her to be especially subjugated because of her gender or religious commitments” (15). Kasdorf’s indirectness here acknowledges questions about gender and religion, but leaves them largely unresolved. Possibly, she prefers not to infer more about a grandmother she knows from childhood impressions and from the distanced perspective of a young woman who has moved to the city to pursue education and a career.

Kasdorf writes elusively of her own early commitment to the Mennonite faith as well. She formally joined the Mennonite church in 1976 at age 14 by receiving “believer’s baptism,” and chose to wear a head covering for baptism and worship. With this decision, she joined the diminishing number of women who still followed traditional prescriptions for women (15). Kasdorf explains her choice as a decision she made to gain relatives’ approval and show identification with them, implying her need to confirm her belonging in their congregation. Her grandmother’s example made her think she could “simply ignore the doctrine of male headship and female submission that it officially signified” (15-16). To remain fully within, she adopted a tradition that signifies multiple commitments, rejecting the official ones but fully embracing what Norris calls the “inheritance” of place and previous generations.

Still, Kasdorf’s decision is a contradictory negotiation between traditional significance and individual meaning, and possibly also a pragmatic gesture solidifying her identification with a community that might regard her as secularized and “other.” In The Body and the Book, however, Kasdorf does not seem as concerned with critiquing and reforming Mennonite tradition as with untangling her own relationship to that culture. Her poetry collections Sleeping Preacher
and *Eve’s Striptease* come to define that relationship through the process of writing and through the response of her Mennonite community. She reports one criticism voiced by her mother, who, upon reading the poems about tensions in family history and Mennonite culture wondered if Kasdorf “couldn’t find kinder words to express [her] meaning” (41). Kasdorf surmises that her mother’s concern “seemed to spring from that long tradition that has asked us, especially us women, to soften our language or to remain silent” (41). Later, *Eve’s Striptease* met with a different kind of objection, also related to gender. Mennonite editors and publishers, who otherwise embraced Kasdorf’s role as a Mennonite voice in secular U.S. culture, refused to use the provocative title when quoting or publishing a review of the collection. A friend who organized a reading to celebrate the publication was unable to find an auditorium in Big Valley because no one would risk offending conservative donors.

Kasdorf’s vocation as a poet runs counter to Mennonite values, beyond the topics she chooses. For Kasdorf, and for fellow Mennonite writers, writing poses risks that have roots in cultural memory:

> The fear of publishing a first book is a fear of conflict that reaches well beyond the typical writerly anxieties of self-revelation and failure to meet literary standards. That kind of dread is familiar to the Swiss-Pennsylvania Amish and Mennonites of my background, who silenced errant preachers to check their authority. It is essentially a fear of abandonment and dislocation that reaches back to the time when an outspoken dissenter—whether she was forced to leave or

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6 *Sleeping Preacher* reflects on her move to New York City and her secular life there, along with memories of Mennonite life. The autobiographical poems in *Eve’s Striptease* narrate bodily experiences and the process of coming to an adult understanding of the lessons about sin, silence, and confession Kasdorf was taught while she was young.
conform to the community’s will—lost dearly, either in terms of her context in the world or in terms of her own voice. (43)

At the same time, that risk helps to validate, or authenticate her writing. Mennonite readers take transgressive writers more seriously, Kasdorf explains, “as if the vague threat of punishment were a mark of authenticity or excellence. The terror of punishment for Mennonite writers—whether real or imagined—seems to invigorate creativity as persecution and trauma engendered Mennonite literature longer ago” (182).

Kadorf’s mother points out the inaccuracies and embellishments in *Sleeping Preacher*, some of which are quirks of memory such as mistaking the model of a car, or the age of a family member when an event occurred. More often, her mother objects to added or altered details. Metaphors, inventions, and fictionalization are techniques foreign to traditions of Mennonite writing, and to the literary culture that values the solid spiritual and historical truths of the Bible and *Martyr’s Mirror*. While other memoirists encounters similar challenges from those who know a different version of the events, Kasdorf locates her mother’s concept of truth and writing in a Mennonite belief system: “It’s true that Mennonites have not been in the habit of changing details to suit the story: from our very first confessions of faith we’ve expected language to be a useful, solid bucket to hold truths as clear as water. Writers and scholars, on the other hand, play with language, realizing the rich possibilities of a convention that is full of holes and gaps in meaning” (41). Mennonites, she adds, would “mend” any hole that appears in a bucket. Writing autobiographical poetry, and later autography, places Kasdorf in opposition to this tradition of using language to declare, not question, spiritual truths.

Still, even as Kasdorf’s poetic and autobiographical use of language runs counter to Mennonite patterns, she comes to feel a kinship with the writers who contributed to church
history. The collected stories of Anabaptist persecution in *Martyr’s Mirror* are not the antithesis to poetry and memoir in every way. Kasdorf links herself to both silenced and outspoken women in Mennonite history, including martyrs who spoke powerfully during their execution or were physically silenced because the executioners knew they would sing or preach as they died. Martyr stories form an inheritance, not of “submission and silence, but men and women who spoke with their words and with their bodies, who refused to hold their tongues or keep the peace” (188). And while the martyr’s separation between body and spirit is a division she would later need to unlearn, during childhood that split gave her “a way to survive” (187). In several poems and in *The Body and the Book*, Kasdorf narrates episodes of sexual abuse by an elderly neighbor. During those years, she kept the abuse secret from her parents and believed with the martyrs that “it is only my body you can touch” (187).

Writing poetry and essays from experience, Kasdorf uses feminist values of situating knowledge and acknowledging “the humble and specific and difficult position of ‘I’” (161). She acknowledges that silence in speech or in writing, if chosen, can be “a fierce form of resistance” (171). Speaking one’s testimony can also transform “a mute, confused victim into a subject with a clear vision of her experience and a literate voice” (177). In her poetry, and more directly in *The Body and the Book*, Kasdorf reflects on a religious culture that resists both speaking about oneself and using language in nonliteral ways. Through her writing she works to invigorate a religious tradition that uses language to contain meaning rather than create it.

**Conclusion**

Memoir continues to be a genre that opens up wide possibilities for women to discuss spirituality and religion. The personal voice and introspective focus of memoir lends itself to
narrating spiritual insights and offers a means to communicate private, interior experiences. Spiritual memoirs also yield insights into religious institutions, the more formal structures of power and systems of belief that have historically allowed women only a narrow and subservient role. Within that same history, though, women have used written accounts of their spiritual experiences to authorize their teaching and to express theological arguments. Contemporary memoir inherits that tradition, articulating the ways that religion can constrain, empower, or sustain the individual. Women who write spiritual memoirs do not all address the same issues or take the same stance on institutional religion. In many cases, the events narrated in the memoir leave implicit the role that gender plays in religious experience. I have tried to tease out those connections when they are hard to see. What these memoirs do all demonstrate, however, is that women in the United States have a much more varied and nuanced relationship to religious belief and practice than either feminist scholars or religious institutions recognize.

Early spiritual autobiographies have had a wide influence on the memoir genre, visible in the persistence of confessional narrative style and conversion tropes in secular life writing. Augustine’s *Confessions* is not only the earliest example of Western autobiographical writing, but also a model of spiritual and secular personal narrative that subsequent have writers followed. For his influence on spiritual and secular personal narrative, St. Augustine “is usually considered the fountainhead of Western autobiography,” writes John Barbour (*Versions of Deconversion* 1). Smith and Watson identify elements of his conversion narrative: “Augustine construes the first half of his life as a chronological narrative of errors and self-indulgence . . . He narrates, in Book 8, the turning point of his life, the moment of conversion when he was called by a spiritual voice to seek dialogue with an unapproachable God” (*Reading*
Secular memoirs, notably addiction memoirs, borrow these conversion tropes and employ much of the same language of spiritual transformation.

The spiritual memoirs I study in this chapter indicate yet another connection between religion and life-writing. Narrating his conversion, Augustine reflects on the centrality of memory to spiritual salvation. In similar fashion, nearly all subsequent memoirs find meaning in group or individual memory (Reading Autobiography 105). Likewise, introspection and honest assessment of oneself play a part in conversion and in constructing a narrative. Several memoirists write accounts of their questioning, realizations, and decisions that anticipate their personas as memoirists. Mary McCarthy writes of being denied awards for good conduct because of her meanness to other students, particularly an instance of mercilessly criticizing another girl’s performance in a school play. This experience looks ahead to the scathing theater reviews for which she became famous. Certain traits that make her an unsuccessful Catholic, including her lying and her impatience with sentimentality, make her an appealing writer. Kasdorf describes religious questioning in terms that equate the process with developing her identity as a writer. “Over the years,” she writes, “I’ve struggled to rely less and less on given meanings, and instead, to construct individual ones from my own experience: to make art. Tension, for both writers and readers, arises when the individual meanings collide with the received meanings endorsed by the community” (44). Norris (who even in her three memoirs appears to think of herself foremost as a poet) notes similarities between art and religion. She acknowledges “wariness on both sides” since “poets and Christians have been at odds with one another, off and on, for two thousand years.” But Norris also sees possibilities for an alliance between memoirist-poets and religion. She writes, “There is also trust: we are people who believe in the power of words to effect change in the human heart” (Dakota 105).
Memoirs suggest that feminists who make traditional, formal religion part of their lives are not trying to ignore contradictions, but may be “people who have learned to live with imperfection” (*Dakota* 120). For Norris, a religious life requires that she be comfortable with ambiguity:

> At its Latin root, the word religion is linked to the words ligature and ligament, words having both negative and positive connotations, offering both bondage and freedom of movement. For me, religion is the ligament that connects me to my grandmothers, who, representing so clearly the negative and positive aspects of the Christian tradition, made it impossible for me either to reject or accept the religion wholesale. (133)

Twentieth-century and contemporary memoirists negotiate not just their authority to speak about religion, but the need to. The doubts that readers bring to these texts tend not to raise questions about the memoirists’ right to speak about their experiences, but the relevance of their religious insights to contemporary life. Questions about the legitimacy of religious institutions have superseded the questions about a woman’s right to speak publicly, questions that Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe faced. Each writer I study in this chapter indicates that she could choose to live a secular life among like-minded friends, since religion has become “optional,” and even problematic, for many women of their education and social class. Yet none rejects the value of faith, tradition, and belonging to the congregation of believers. Religious institutions can learn from the conflicts and insights narrated in women’s memoirs, and feminism can learn just as much from the way memoirists portray religion as the foundation of their identity.
Chapter 5

Digital Memoir Culture and Feminist Activism Online

The website My Duty to Speak (mydutytospeak.com) collects stories written by men and women from all branches of the U.S. military who survived sexual assaults during their service. Blog posts to the site bear titles like “Airman afraid to report rape,” “Coast Guard Captain calls rape survivor ‘liar’ and ‘nut case’,” or simply “The bystanders.” The posts themselves record experiences of startling violence, retaliation by supervisors and co-workers, and indifference from authorities when the crimes are reported. These commonalities build an image of routine brutality and lack of justice within the military. At the same time, distinct details in each story—the name of the base where the assault took place, the names of the assailants and authorities, and the exact nature of the trauma and retaliation—give each account a specificity that builds credibility and conveys a picture of the particular life that was violated.

My Duty to Speak began as a writing workshop in November 2010. The earliest posts on the site are dated from January 2011. The project continues to collect stories that managing editor Panayiota Bertzikis and her staff screen and publish. Bertzikis, herself a military veteran and rape survivor, had previously founded the Military Rape Crisis Center when she was unsatisfied with the way that command at her Coast Guard base responded to sexual assault cases, including her own. The collection of testimonies on the website My Duty to Speak complements the MRCC’s legal resources and support groups. Panayiota writes in an introduction to the site that survivors’ testimonies have “been used by the Department of Defense and the United States Congress to help improve the sexual assault prevention and response office. They also [have] been used by the Department of Veterans’ Affairs to improve and train
physicians, psychologists and social workers on Military Sexual Trauma” (“About My Duty to Speak”). My Duty to Speak also functions as what autobiograpy scholar Gillian Whitlock calls a “soft weapon.” When autobiographies circulate, Whitlock writes, they “can personalize and humanize categories of people whose experiences are frequently unseen and unheard” (3).

Indeed, Panayiota describes the act of sharing stories as breaking “the silence of abuse” (“Message”). She invites visitors to contact their state representatives, sign petitions, and share their own testimonies. She envisions the site as a way to undermine false ideologies about sexual assault and build public support for institutional reform.

My Duty to Speak is one example of a digital life writing site that collects first-person accounts and participates in a proliferation of self-representation that is taking place online.¹ Other websites centered around issues of gender and sexuality include the Afghan Women’s Writing Project (awwproject.org), When I Came Out (whenicameout.com), Microagressions (microaggressions.tumblr.com), and The Everyday Sexism Project (everydaysexism.com). In some cases, digital memoir sites operate as one branch of an organization with a significant web presence. The “Survivor Stories” page on the website for Take Back the Night, for example, posts personal narratives to accompany the resources a group might use to plan an event drawing awareness to sexual assault in their community. Similarly, the “Our Bodies, Our Stories” page on the Our Bodies, Our Selves website posts accounts of women’s experiences with cancer, birth control, fertility treatment, miscarriage, and giving birth. These essays occupy a role much like the personal stories included alongside the women’s health information in the many print

¹ Terminology can become imprecise in discussions of the new genre life writing online. In this chapter, I use broad terms like “life writing” and “autobiographical writing” to refer to the phenomenon in general. At other times I use “digital memoir” or “personal narrative” to locate the writing in the wider memoir culture, or I follow the example of site editors and use “testimonies,” “posts,” or “stories” to refer to individual pieces of writing.
editions of *Our Bodies, Our Selves* published since 1970. As parts of these larger organizations, online archives of individual testimonies complement the resources and academic research articles that appear on the site, and also pursue their own distinct goals.

**Online Self-Representation**

The “genre” of sites I consider in this chapter invites comparison to projects like Six-Word Memoir or PostSecret, two sites that collect brief, but suggestive, “mini-memoirs” from users (McNeill 144). Six-Word memoirs—allegedly inspired by Hemingway’s narrative in six words, “For sale: baby shoes, never worn”—can be earnest or playful, and come from professional writers, celebrities, and contributors who hold neither of those distinctions. The curators of the PostSecret website describe the project as “an ongoing community art project where people mail in their secrets anonymously on one side of a postcard” (postsecret.com).

While the confessional atmosphere of PostSecret depends on anonymity to appeal to contributors, the narratives of Six-Word Memoir might remain anonymous, or the author might choose to display their name or photo. Contributors to both sites experiment with the possibilities of telling stories within the parameters and conventions of each project, seeking to “engage in a communal act of auto/biographical reflection and affirmation” (McNeill 150). Anna Poletti argues that by collecting “autobiographical fragments” (29), such projects form a genre in which

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2 Six-Word Memoir began as a section of the online magazine Smith.com, a forum for storytelling, and has sparked multiple print book collections of six-word memoirs by celebrity and non-celebrity readers. For more on Six-Word Memoir, see “Life Bytes: Six-Word Memoir and the Exigencies of Auto/tweetographies” by Laurie McNeill in *Identity Technologies*. Frank Warren began PostSecret as an art project in 2004, by distributing 3,000 postcards and inviting participants to write a true secret they had never shared. He uploads received cards (including thousands of handmade ones after the original 3,000) to [www.postsecret.com](http://www.postsecret.com), and five books of postcards have been published. For more on PostSecret, see Anna Poletti, “Intimate Economies: PostSecret and the Affect of Confession.”
members can act upon “their desire to confess, to be heard, and to be literate in each other’s experiences” (34).

Digital life writing sites also invite comparison to personal blogs and to social networking. Users of Twitter and Facebook create online identities by telling stories, posting status updates, sharing pictures, and expressing their interest in and similarities to the stories told by other users. Recently, social networking sites have come to be seen as platforms for political activity along with their recreational aspect. In May and June of 2014, a Twitter campaign organized around the hashtag #YesAllWomen gained a large enough following to draw interest from mainstream news media. In response to Elliot Rodger’s shooting spree near the University of California at Santa Barbara, women tweeted their own anecdotes of encountering sexism and violence. Writing about the campaign in an article for The New Yorker, Sasha Weiss describes #YesAllWomen as “testimony that Rodger’s misogyny grew out of attitudes that are all around us” and “a kind of memorial, a stern demand for a more just society” (“The Power of #YesAllWomen). The #YesAllWomen campaign demonstrated the possibilities for activism in online communities. Setting aside for the moment the flaws with such online activism, I believe that this episode shows that telling personal stories is central to forming online communities and engaging in online activism.

Aimee Morrison sums up the popularity of online self-representation in the following way:

Ever-greater sections of the population engage in digital life writing online, population dating profiles, personal blogs, or social network sites with their life stories, or otherwise leaving numberless small traces of their ideas and experiences in their daily digital travels: a comment on a news site, a contest form
filled out, a shopping basket and personalized recommendations at Amazon, a collection of bookmarks and interests maintained in the cloud. (“Facebook and Coaxed Affordances” 126)

Readers of book-length memoirs might not initially recognize this activity as autobiographical practice, and might point out that very little of it is literary. Admittedly, the ease with which users can compose and publish accounts of their lives and selves also means that many of those accounts are banal. However, all forms of digital self-representation are now of interest to life-writing scholars because they translate autobiography as a genre into autobiography as a practice. Narratives of the self online, and narratives of the online self, create what Morrison calls “autobiography in real time” (126). Online self-representation confirms claims by such autobiography scholars as Elizabeth Bruss, Paul John Eakin, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson that giving an account of oneself is an activity which encompasses much more than composing and publishing a book-length memoir. Telling and hearing life stories also plays a role in everyday human interactions and in forming individual or collective identities. 3

Morrison’s list, which seems meant to be all-inclusive, omits the kind of writing that takes place on sites like My Duty to Speak and The Afghan Women’s Writing Project. These life writing websites share features in common with their narrative cousins, and appeared within a similar cultural context. However, they occupy a distinct niche in online self-representation that deserves attention from scholars of life writing and women’s studies. Unlike personal blogs, which an author typically maintains over a period of time and to which he or she posts a number

3 In fact, analyzing personal narrative as an activity rather than a genre now appears to be the approach most favored in critical studies of memoir, following books by several of the most prominent autobiography scholars. See, for example, Autobiographical Acts: The Changing Situation of a Literary Genre by Bruss, Getting a Life: Everyday Uses of Autobiography edited by Smith and Watson, and Eakin’s How Our Lives Become Stories: Making Selves and Living Autobiographically: How We Create Identity in Narrative.
of entries, digital life writing sites typically allow writers to contribute only once.\(^4\) An individual usually feels that he or she owns a Facebook profile, Twitter account, or blog; but the websites I study here do not have a single author whose experiences and persona dominate the narrative. Instead, the websites organize dozens or thousands of voices around a specific and often fairly narrow activist project, or exigence. The writers understand themselves to be crafting personal testimonies that individually and collectively have the potential to change social attitudes, and to counter sexism and injustice. These contrasts between digital life writing sites and blogs or social networking indicate that public collections of testimonies from multiple voices function in a different way than other online self-representation.

These sites also convey a serious purpose missing from Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, and similar social networking sites. Users visit such sites frequently and for many different reasons (or for no particular reason). Like #YesAllWomen, digital life writing sites create a sense of speaking out or breaking a prevailing silence together, but develop more slowly and hold the possibility of a more lasting impact. Writer and women’s health advocate Bernadette Lim points out that #YesAllWomen elicited 1.2 million tweets in its first four days, but the hashtag and public discussion of gender violence had disappeared six weeks later (“Because #YesAllWomen Will Not Be Enough”). MyDutytoSpeak.com, by contrast, has generated testimonies from women over a period of years and has proved a launching point for legislative action even as the site continues to fulfill its original mission. Individual tweets, PostSecret cards, and most Facebook status updates are “too short to present a story that can produce meaning” (Poletti 35).

\(^4\) Digital memoir sites share few of the formal features Carolyn R. Miller and Dawn Shephard use to define blogs in “Blogging as Social Action: A Genre Analysis of the Weblog.” They do share many of the same exigences and social actions that Miller and Shephard observe, and this article points towards variations in the format and function of blogs by concluding, “it may no longer be accurate to think of the blog as a single genre.”
Instead, they gain their relevance in popular culture and in studies of life writing because they are dynamic venues for telling stories that constantly develop and evolve. Digital life writing sites have that same dynamic quality, and also a format that allows for longer stories that can produce complex meaning. A third aspect of these sites—their activist purpose—recalls the 1970s feminist slogan “the personal is political” and the consciousness-raising groups that gave currency to personal narratives. Not all digital life writing sites express an interest in feminism or social change, but the many that do reveal a developing alliance between online self-representation and feminist activism.

To understand the rhetorical purposes of digital networking sites, and the ways in which their writers and editors create personas and personal narratives to realize those purposes, I consider the following questions: What voices or personas do writers adopt to narrate trauma, violence, and sexism? What roles do the editor and the design of the website play in composing stories and telling readers how to interpret them? Do norms on these sites control or constrain which stories are acceptable? How do these sites suggest a broader significance for individual life stories? Do they allow for multifaceted identities, or do they narrow the self to the incident or trauma that the writer narrates? Finally, what currency do online personal narratives have in the twenty-first century?

Despite what I see as substantial differences between digital life writing sites and other online forms of self-representation, I base my analysis in part on academic studies of those forms. Julie Rak, Anna Poletti, Paul Arthur, Aimee Morrison, Carolyn Miller and others have all offered theories of digital biography and autobiography and have published studies of individual manifestations of the impulse to write about oneself online. I elaborate on their research by studying a collection of websites that combine elements of social networking, online
confessional spaces, and activist campaigns to produce what I see as a new medium of autobiographical writing. Personal narratives online mirror the public purposes of the print memoirs I examined in previous chapters, but they expand the genre to include new writers and reach new audiences.

“I did not officially enter hell until I spoke up”

In their introduction to the collection *Getting A Life: Everyday Uses of Autobiography* (1996), Smith and Watson explain that invitations and imperatives to speak autobiographically are a part of contemporary everyday life. We are “called on to become autobiographical subjects in a variety of situations, a range of temporalities” (17). To be understood and to have our life narratives accepted as legitimate, we must compose those stories in accordance with relevant social “scripts” (12). Poletti, Rak, and McNeill pick up on this conception of memoir as an everyday activity, simultaneously called forth by social interaction and constrained by social contexts, to analyze blogs, social media, and digital storytelling.

The personal narratives on My Duty to Speak, however, show that their writers were discouraged from telling their stories. These men and women come from all branches of the U.S. military. They vary in age, and they worked in different locations in North America and overseas. They establish themselves as individuals through these and other details, but their stories are linked though a common experience of being silenced. Many accounts explain that the survivors of Military Sexual Trauma, or MST, were initially called upon to tell their stories to commanding officers. After doing so, the writers met with retaliation, as described in the following excerpts:

when I finally left I went to my Commander who told that it is a “he said she said”. 12yrs of service went down the drain that night. From that point on the Air
Force saw me damaged goods and they told me I had PTSD and medically discharged me. (Mary Gallagher, “TSgt Raped at Sather Air Base Iraq”)

I did not officially enter hell until I spoke up about it and the military commands did everything in their power to distract me, discredit me, demoralize me, and destroy my once promising career as they railroaded me out of the service for political reasons. (Anonymous, “Raped and retaliated against in the U.S. Navy”)

A third, anonymous writer describes the retaliation against her in very specific terms. She decided to “keep quiet” after being sexually assaulted by four men, and at one time even told her platoon sergeant that the encounter had been consensual because she was “too afraid to say otherwise” (“NO means it was not consensual”). After returning home from Iraq she was required to travel with her assailants to a disciplinary hearing, where, she writes:

I was made to stand at parade rest in front of Lt. Colonel Corkery, and explain my actions. I was the ONLY female soldier present at this Article 15 hearing. I stood at the desk and faced the Lt.COL Corkery completely alone, and there were other unknown male soldiers present. Again, I was offered NO advocate or even a chaperone. Lt. COL Corkery made me feel extremely bad about myself. He did his best at making feel even more ashamed and embarrassed, including telling me that “I was an embarrassment to the Army, and to all the female soldiers who came before me.” (Anonymous, “NO means it was not consensual”)

I have maintained irregularities of spelling, grammar, capitalization and punctuation when I quote My Duty to Speak posts.
A copy of the charges against this writer—violation of general orders and indecent sexual acts—was posted on a bulletin board visible to her unit.

Other writers report that commanders and colleagues explicitly disputed the truth of their allegations. In many instances, when cases are dismissed because of a lack of evidence, the victim is accused of lying. Others are accused of mental instability, as in the following:

I am in desperate need for some help. I reported my rape and it went nowhere. I was told that there were not enough creditable evidence to bring this case to trial. They have separated the two of us and I am safe from him. My problem is since my allegations came back as not having enough creditable evidence to bring the case to trial I am being viewed as a liar. I am called a nut case and a liar every single day often by CWO and a Captain. (Anonymous, “Coast Guard Captain calls rape survivor ‘liar’ and ‘nut case’”)

Equally often, writers express doubt that their story will be accepted as true, or express their own disbelief that the experience was actually rape:

Who’s going to believe that a male T.I. raped a male anyway. I have never told anyone until now. YOU. this website. (Anonymous, “Male Recruit Raped at Basic Training”)

I was thinking. Did he just rape me? No. He did not. It could not have happened. I kept on telling myself that. Of course he did not rape me. I led him on and he took the opportunity to have sex with me. I actually thought that if I left that I would have insulted him. I felt that if I left he would have thought that he did something
wrong. (Anonymous, “Coast Guardswoman writes about rape at Coast Guard in Hawaii”)

Such statements reveal the degree to which many survivors had internalized misconceptions about sexual assault, including who victims and perpetrators are and ways that the victims might have been responsible for the attacks.

In his influential 1987 article “Life as Narrative,” Jerome Bruner writes, “In the end, we become the autobiographical narratives by which we ‘tell about’ our lives. And given the cultural shaping to which I referred, we also become variants of the culture’s canonical forms” (15). In a twist on Bruner’s claim, these men and women have had narratives told about them that placed them in the most dehumanizing and misogynist “canonical forms” that U.S. culture has created. Many survivors recount the accusations and rumors about them that spread among their units. In almost all cases, those rumors constructed a narrative that identified them as liars, as responsible for their attacks, or as “nut cases” who are mentally and medically unfit to continue serving in the military. A number of survivors recount the testimonies that their assailants and commanders gave in judicial hearings and quote written reports about their cases that have been added to their records. The personal stories they submitted to My Duty to Speak seek to establish counternarratives to these official narratives that do not account for the lived experience of sexual assault and re-victimization.

Posts on My Duty to Speak indicate that telling their stories in the public sphere plays an important part in re-establishing their identity after MST. Many write of adjusting to life outside the military, and of forming a family and finding a new profession. Others write of coming to realize that they were not at fault for their attack or for their branch’s response when they reported the attack. Telling their stories aids in forming new identities in different ways. The
majority of men and women write of undoing the influence of a culture that normalizes misogyny and sexual violence, and that expects victims to “get over” trauma privately. Those who internalized this culture act against the imperative to keep silent by writing their experiences in a forum that anyone with access to the internet may read. Doing so, writers establish themselves as no longer under the explicit or implicit control of the military culture, which, to quote the phrase many use, “betrayed” them.

Readers respond to these stories by aiding in the writers’ common goal of re-establishing their identities. A reader who identified himself or herself as “V” replied to “Coast Guardswoman writes about rape” in the comments section after the post: “I am so sorry this happened to you. The fact is this: YOU did nothing wrong! This dirtbag raped you. He damn near killed you! I wish you had been able to report this without fear of repercussions, but I know how that goes too. I was raised military, as an AF Brat. I saw too many of my active duty friends suffer the way you have.” In fact, the anonymous writer had recounted that her attacker “threw me down on the couch, grabbed a pillow, put it over my face. I could not breathe let alone scream or fight back.” She leaves little question that she was raped, and describing her own doubt afterward underscores her naiveté. The post has received 17 comments, which is a high number for the site. This writer appears to be asking for responses telling her that she was not at fault and that her experience is not unusual—and that, indeed, is what the responders say. She concludes her post by explaining that she has met with a counselor whose treatment will not show up in her records; she does not want to be labeled as a rape victim; and she is continuing with her Coast Guard service. We might well assume that this writer has told the story of her MST before, though the post does not seem rehearsed. I point out these aspects of her testimony not to cast doubt on the credibility of this writer, or the authenticity of her story. Rather, I read
“Coast Guardswoman writes about rape” as a self-aware narrative, written in a way that prompts empathetic and indignant responses from readers.

On the individual level, autobiographical stories aim to set the record straight by going outside the military’s judicial and medical systems to give accounts of specific instances of MST that authorities lied about or suppressed. A few name the individual perpetrators and call out individual commanders who re-victimized the survivors. Collectively, though, the stories on My Duty to Speak portray widespread and systemic failure to carry out justice. The site, along with related advocacy groups, demands broad social change in the way gender and sexual violence are viewed in the U.S. as a whole and in the military in particular. My Duty to Speak has a more concrete institutional change in view, however. Panayiota Bertzikis writes in her greeting to the site, “As you can read from the testimonies the military response to rape is often as disturbing and horrifying as the act of rape itself.” She invites readers to call their representatives and “demand better treatment for sexual assault survivors in the military” (“Message from Panayiota Bertzikis”). Posts on My Duty to Speak describe the culture that makes MST common, but usually spend more time recounting the authorities’ inadequate responses. The site administration supports this norm by posting news stories of offenders who received laughably light penalties, and videos of congressional hearings addressing MST response procedures.

My Duty to Speak, along with the related groups Military Rape Crisis Center and Protect Our Defenders, contributed to a swell of support for reforming the legal procedures for reporting and prosecuting MST. My Duty to Speak began posting survivor stories in 2011; the documentary about MST, The Invisible War, which also features survivor stories, premiered at the Sundance Film Festival in 2012. In 2013, Senator Kirsten Gillibrand and Representative Jackie Speier introduced amendments to Defense Spending bills that attempted to reform the
way military sexual assault is reported and handled. Both Speier and Gillibrand read aloud from survivors stories in congressional hearings supporting their amendments. While I can only speculate about the role a specific website like My Duty to Speak might have played in this particular surge in awareness and support, it does seem clear that Panayiota’s project was part of a broader cultural moment and that it was influential. The site parallels and at times intersects with legislation and litigation. As a separate activist project, however, it includes stories from survivors who are unable to testify in institutional settings.

Gillibrand’s Military Justice Improvement Act was blocked by filibuster in the Senate in May 2014. At the time of the writing of this chapter, very little of the other legislation or litigation introduced in 2012 and 2013 has met with concrete success. My Duty to Speak, I argue, takes on an even more important role at this juncture. The growing collection of personal accounts is a “soft weapon” that may serve to sustain public concern for this issue. By creating My Duty to Speak, Bertzikis opened up an avenue for men and women to report crimes that otherwise would have gone unreported. When official channels prove ineffectual or unwilling to contend with the problem of military sexual assault, survivors turn elsewhere. In effect, these digital memoirs report the initial crime of sexual assault and the subsequent crime of re-victimizing the survivor, a process that many survivors report as being more painful and degrading than the initial trauma. My Duty to Speak reports military sexual assaults to the public, and claims credibility and authority in the public sphere engendered by online spaces.

6 Videos of Speier’s and Gillibrand’s speeches can be found at http://mydutytospeak.com/2013/01/29/congresswoman-jackie-speier-discuss-rape-in-the-u-s-coast-guard/ and http://mydutytospeak.com/2013/03/15/senator-gillibrand-presses-military-leaders-on-sexual-assault/
My analysis of My Duty to speak is guided by my own reactions to the stories on the site. I read these testimonies without skepticism; as a visitor, it feels inappropriate to try to discern whether the writer is telling the verifiable, factual truth about her experience. In part that is because I am predisposed to feel sympathetic to rape victims in any setting. Too, recent news coverage of sexual assault in the military and on college campuses has reminded me (and many others in the United States) that blaming the victim is a product of sexist ideologies. However, I believe the cumulative effect of reading so many stories together is to diminish the significance of questions about factual truth. So many men and women cannot all be lying or embellishing their stories, and writing anonymously means that they have little to gain personally from their disclosures. Upon first reading these stories, months before I began writing about them, I responded with anger and frustration. This was far from the first time that studying gender, sexuality, and social justice movements left me depressed by the difficulty of bringing about even small and obviously necessary changes. This affective response—which I suspect the writers and editors hope for—motivated my subsequent analytical reading for this discussion. Compiling so many stories in one place has another effect: after reading several dozen accounts, I am convinced of the systemic injustice to which the victims testify. I suspect that this judgment is also a response that the Military Rape Crisis Center hopes to evoke, though the project never felt manipulative to me. The patterns of silencing and discrediting victims that emerge from the posts and the passivity that military authorities display are the dominant impression I retain months after reading.
“To Tell One’s Story is a Human Right”

Digital storytelling, Poletti argues, has “an explicit focus on bringing the voices of ordinary and marginalized people into the public sphere” (“Coaxing an Intimate Public” 81). For western internet users, the expansion of life writing online has meant that they now have access to the voices of non-western men and women who tweet, blog, or post YouTube videos about their lives. The Afghan Women’s Writing Project, founded in May 2009, collects narratives that women and girls compose in online workshops facilitated by mentors from the U.S. and England. The stories—which include autobiographical essays, first-hand testimonies about the experiences of other women, and journalistic pieces that report on events in Afghanistan—are posted on the project’s website and sent out in monthly email newsletters. In March 2013, AWWP expanded to include oral narratives. Writers in Afghanistan began collecting stories from other women in the country, in particular from women who are illiterate and cannot write their stories themselves. AWWP writers and staff record, transcribe, and translate their stories into English, and publish them in clusters with themes like “Women in Business” or “Ramadan” every few months. The AWWP staff in Kabul also produces a radio

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7 Poletti uses the term digital storytelling to refer to a narrow genre of texts: “audio-visual vignettes of approximately two to five minutes in length which present a first-person voiceover in conjunction with visual material sourced from the personal archive of its author, edited together on consumer-grade computers and software” (“Coaxing” 73). Digital storytelling, she explains, was developed in the 1990s by the Center for Digital Storytelling (www.storycenter.org), which began teaching the practice in workshops to community groups. I am studying a markedly different format of online storytelling, but find parts of Poletti’s analysis relevant in written online texts as well.

8 According to a Frequently Asked Questions page apparently written in 2011, over ninety women had participated in workshops at that point. The volume of essays on the site and new initiatives started by AWWP suggest that the number of participants is now dramatically higher.
broadcast centered on these oral stories and on the topic of widows’ rights under the law and Islam (“Oral Stories Project”).

Founder Masha Hamilton writes that the Afghan Women’s Writing Project originated in observations she made while working as a journalist in the Middle East. While there, Hamilton saw that “not only were women hidden beneath burqas, but their stories were silenced. After many years as a journalist, I had come to believe that telling our own stories is as important to a certain kind of survival as food and shelter” (Hamilton, “History + Mission”). The Afghan Women’s Writing Project website—which carries the subtitle “To Tell One’s Story is a Human Right”—presents the project as highly effective in improving the lives of women who participate. Hamilton explains what she believes to be the value of telling and publishing their autobiographical writing:

But why should we care about an essay by a woman from Kandahar, or a poem by a woman from Logar? Because in telling their own stories, we’ve seen these women gather strength, courage, and self-confidence. They become empowered to make change within their homes, their communities, and eventually their country. They also gain computer literacy and skills of language and critical thinking, which increases their job-related skills. A number have used as part of their job or school applications work written for AWWP, shepherded through by our award-winning mentors and editors, and put up on a site updated constantly by our volunteer webmaster. They have become lawyers, journalists, parliament members.

Additionally, the voices of women tend to be moderating influences, and this makes it more important than ever that they become part of the national
dialogue and eventually perhaps part of a movement that will speak out on issues important to women, issues of job and educational equality, healthcare, and more.

(“History + Mission”)

Hamilton cites both concrete and intangible effects of participating in AWWP, all of which most Western readers will accept as encouraging and even inspiring results. Visitors to the Afghan Women’s Writing Project are potential donors, too, and fundraising has a large presence on the site. The AWWP site quotes writers who sum up the value that autobiographical writing has had for them. Sabira, who published seven personal essays during 2010 and 2011, writes, “This project supports Afghan women by showing they are as important as other women in the world. It shows the world that even though Afghan women faced lots of problems, they didn’t lose their ability or courage. It shows the kindness of American women who spend their precious time working for the development of their Afghan sisters” (“What AWWP Means”). Again, supporting Afghan women and making their stories available to the rest of the world will appeal to altruistic readers, particularly to women who are concerned with the conditions under which women live in the Middle East.

However, readers should also ask to what degree ideas like the “self-confidence” and “critical thinking” cited by Hamilton are goals that the Afghan women themselves name when they participate in writing workshops. Furthermore, we should consider what it means for participants to be “shepherded” by American mentors and editors, and how that shepherding shapes the stories they write. The process of telling one’s own story, autobiography scholars claim, shapes the narrator’s identity, and so interventions in the act of writing highly personal narratives have implications for the writer. My goal is not to criticize this project or call into

9 A few writers publish their stories anonymously, but most AWWP participants elect to use their first name alone or first name and last initial.
question the truth of the Afghan women’s narratives. In practical terms, it would be difficult to discern exactly how Western ideas shape the writing and revising process AWWP uses without participating in one of their writing workshops myself. Instead, I hope to understand the way that autobiographical writing facilitates understanding between Afghanistan and the West. Recently, feminist writers and theorists have critiqued ideas of sisterhood and cultural narratives in which women in the United States and Europe come to the aid of women of color.¹⁰ In *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* (2013), Lila Abu-Lughod writes that Muslim women in particular symbolize to the West “just how alien [Muslim] culture is” (6). A United States-based project designed to give nonwestern women a voice is susceptible to making such a claim, or to portraying Muslim women as a homogeneous, victimized group. One way to study personal narrative projects like AWWP is to examine how this current in transnational feminist thought shapes their practices.

In many ways, AWWP does reflect recent feminist debates about representing women in Muslim countries. To begin with, the project as depicted on its website does not claim any essential similarities among all Muslim women or even among all Afghan women. The writers are all female, all currently live in Afghanistan, and are all either in heterosexual marriages or are anticipating marriage in their future. Otherwise, their stories and Hamilton’s introduction pages show that their personalities and situations vary. Many lived outside the country for a time, while others have always lived in Afghanistan. Several are university graduates with professional

careers, several are students in college or high school, and others say little or nothing about their education and describe their work as mothers, artisans, or activists. Editors and writing mentors structure the Afghan Women’s Writing Project to bring forth writing on the many subjects that are important to women. For example, in June, July, and August of 2014, nine women and girls wrote about the disputed Afghan presidential election. These writers combined personal anecdotes with their observations of the political climate in the country, asserting their individual experience as evidence of broader issues and also as a basis for institutional change.

Since women in this region are often defined by their religion, it is significant that their memoirs express very different views about Islam. Similarly, individual women express varying relationships to men. Maryam L. writes of standing up to her uncles when they suggested a marriage she did not want, and how her father supported her in all her decisions (“Standing Up To My Uncles, and Other Class Assignments”). Shakila, who returned to work in Afghanistan while her family remained in Iran, writes that after her return she refused to wear traditional dress, paid for her younger sisters to go to school in Kabul, and “refused to marry because I didn’t think I needed a husband for security.” Her father was “amazed” by these decisions. Shakila writes, “He was proud of having a different daughter” who was stronger than her brothers and “out in the world” (“The Different Daughter”). Mahnaz writes a poem about her father’s hard work for their family and his defense of her ambitions:

Scared of people’s talk
My brothers didn’t want me to work
But my dad upheld my rights
And broke the tortured silence
He said, “Nobody should force my daughter to do anything she doesn’t like”
Then he drove me to work on his motorbike

Proud of carrying his daughter, a teacher,

Letting the wind blow the bitter looks

(“My Father, Conqueror of My Heart” 33-40)

A father like this one who champions his daughter’s education and career is a common figure in AWWP personal narratives. Also common is a contrast between this type of father and the woman’s brothers or uncles who instead would force her to marry or stay home. One of the few anonymous stories on the AWWP site details the experiences of a young woman whose father defended her desire to go to school and rejected a marriage proposal so she could continue studying. Her brothers, however, “grew up under the Taliban government and were influenced by it.” When the writer’s father died, she describes her position in the family as “not like a girl in the house, but a slave,” under the control of her brothers and a wealthy uncle whose money gives him power to force her to accept a marriage and punish her family if she refuses (“I Am For Sale, Who Will Buy Me?”).

Abu-Lughod writes of the individuals and family she studies in *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* “These women’s lives show us just how varied and complicated the sources of any one woman’s suffering might be” (24). The same is true of the AWWP writers. Their stories show that generational differences, regional cultures, and family cultures determine girls’ freedom more directly than religion or politics do. Poverty or financial uncertainty after a father’s death has more profoundly felt implications for a girl’s education and future than ideologies have. By making these differences visible, the Afghan Women’s Writing Project appears to find meaning in the varying circumstances of the writers’ lives. The very nature of the project—invisiting
women and girls to write and speak about their own lives, rather than having someone else speak for them—puts into practice the fundamental values for which transnational feminism has advocated. Placing the project’s emphasis on personal narratives by Afghan women promotes the “world-traveling” model of identification that feminism philosopher Allison Weir proposes. Weir explains the forms such identification might take: “To identify with another is to recognize her experience and her meanings, and, importantly, to recognize her resistant agency; and it includes also an affective component: to identify with another is to love her; to ‘welcome her world,’ to value her” (123). Lila Abu-Lughod echoes these goals:

> I argue that rather than clicking on a website to donate $10 or flying to distant lands to bring school supplies to girls, and certainly before calling in military troops, we should take time to listen. . . . Gendered Orientalism has taken on a new life and new forms in our feminist twenty-first century. . . .”

If we were to listen more closely, I believe we would discover that matters are not so simple. (202)

Rather than finding identification (or the related ideas of “solidarity” and “sisterhood”) in sameness, I might engage with an Afghan woman by “learning about her world, learning to take her perspective, and thus forever changing my own” (125). Autobiographical writing, with its strong first-person perspective and attention to the details of daily life, is especially well suited to this “active process of getting to know the other” (125). As Poletti argues, by reading each other’s narratives online, we begin “to be literate in each other’s experiences” (Poletti 34).

11 Weir bases her concept of “world-traveling” on writing by Maria Lugones. Lugones outlines a view of identification in contrast to Chandra Mohanty’s understanding of identification as “an act of appropriation based on sameness”—an act Mohanty rejects in favor of “a coalition based on recognition of power relations and conflict” (123).
The practical details of the AWWP show that administrators also structure the program to account for writers’ interests and needs, some of which might not be immediately apparent to readers. Many workshop participants write in English rather than in any regional dialects of Farsi or in other languages they might know. The site explains that writers asked to do so, because many “want an opportunity to improve and deepen their ability to communicate in English, the international language of commerce and diplomacy.” Since many learned English while living abroad as political refugees or in refugee camps, it “is not the language of the privileged in Afghanistan” (FAQ). The project also appears to respond to writers’ concerns about the risks women take by making their stories public. The AWWP uses donations to maintain a “Women’s Writing Hut” at an undisclosed location in Kabul. The space is used as an internet café, reading salon, and library that offers a measure of secrecy and security. The program covers nighttime travel expenses for writers who might not be safe traveling on foot. Writers who live more remotely may receive a laptop from the AWWP and funds to cover internet service, which is inordinately expensive in Afghanistan and appears to be the largest cost for the project.12

In many ways, the Afghan Women’s Writing Project exemplifies the ways that activists and non-profit organizations might productively form relationships with women outside of the United States and Europe. The names of U.S. women who are involved as mentors, editors, or administrators are discreet or hidden, to keep the site’s emphasis on Afghan writers, and possibly also to protect the mentors and staff. A note might refer to the site editor, who a reader could only identify by referencing the staff profiles page. However, features of the site—the primary way that Western audiences will encounter the AWWP—raise lingering concerns over how such global projects are delivered to viewers in wealthier and more liberal countries. In the process of

12 AWWP estimates that it costs $2,500 per woman per year to run the project (“Out of the Burqa, Into the World”).
making the AWWP legible to Western audiences, the organization resorts to what Abu-Lughod and others call “gendered Orientalism” (202). This is perhaps most apparent in the choice of photos for the AWWP website. Editors have selected stock photos of veiled women, worn-looking mothers with young children, arid landscapes, crowds of protesters and, and armed conflict to pair with most stories. These photos invoke the foreignness of Afghan culture and the oppression of Afghan women. They also reference international campaigns for the rights of women and girls, and the work of Western photojournalists. Arifa’s story “Marrying Young in Afghanistan,” for example, is paired with a still from the CNN film “Girl Rising.” Several essays about the 2014 elections appear with photos by the German photographer Anja Niedringhaus. Professional photos are visually striking, but their presence speaks to a lingering need to accommodate readers’ expectations and diminishes the writers’ highly personal narratives.

Consider what the effect would be if AWWP were to use photography by Afghan women instead. The organization could support those women financially and give them a public platform for their work. Training participants in photography, just as they are trained in writing, would help women and girls cultivate skills that they might carry into their professional careers. A few photos from Afghan women, including a few photojournalists, appear in a “Photos” section of the AWWP website that is separate from the written stories. The majority are images of everyday life; photojournalist Leeda’s image of women learning to weave carpets and sew curtains would certainly suit written narratives by women who are learning trades that will give them greater freedom. Most importantly, using photos by Afghan women would add a compelling visual dimension to the writers’ local and culturally contextualized narratives. This approach to pairing text and image does not represent a perfect solution. Using a photo by one Afghan woman alongside a story by another might suggest in some cases that the women and their stories are
interchangeable. Any way that AWWP combines visual and verbal narratives will have an effect on the way that readers understand the writers’ accounts, and site editors must consider and weigh the implications of these decisions.

A paragraph on the AWWP homepage gives an overview of the project with the unfortunate title of “Out of the Burqa, Into the World.” After reading the stories composed by the Afghan writers themselves, it is clear that this title glosses their experiences in a way that conflicts with the actual diversity their narratives display. Women like Shakila were “out in the world” as students and professionals before they ever began writing in AWWP workshops. To be sure, several writers do express frustration or anger at being forced to wear the burqa. Many more never mention any type of veil, or do not object to wearing one, or like Shakila state that they freely choose not to wear traditional dress. The conservative dress of Muslim women is a divisive issue among feminists, among some academics, and occasionally among Western politicians. ¹³ This prominent but unwarranted reference on the AWWP site therefore deserves further attention. The debate over how westerners should view the many garments for covering women’s bodies, referred to collectively as “the veil,” is one possible reason for this incongruous reference to the burqa.

The title “Out of the Burqa, Into the World” indicates that to Western organizations and audiences the burqa tidily symbolizes the oppression of Muslim women. However, Muslim women are far from united in sharing this view of the burqa or the veil. For a number of writers, the veil symbolizes the preoccupations with minor issues that keep Afghan officials from addressing what these women see as more important problems. Sitara writes, “Instead of solving

¹³ Myra Macdonald’s “Muslim Women and the Veil: Problems of Image and Voice in Media Representations” gives a succinct explanation of the veil’s symbolism and feminist debates over this cultural practice. The Politics of the Veil by Joan W. Scott analyzes heated debates about the rights of Muslim women to wear the veil in secular France.
the real public challenges, [ministers in Parliament] always are worrying about women’s clothing and veils” (“The Conservative Jihad on our Media”). Mariam comments on photos of her mother and other Afghan women in the 1970s, who enjoyed freedom in their style of clothing, and asks “Why should women’s dress be so important? There is too much was going on in our country to have time to consider how women are dressing” (“Voices of Afghanistan: It’s Not about Clothing”). Kamila concurs:

It doesn’t matter if a woman wears a hijab, a burqa, a small scarf, or tight jeans—the men bother her all the same. . . Instead of making strict rules for women, it would be much better for us Afghans to make rules for murderers, suicide attackers, rapists, thieves, and other criminals, so that no mother will lose her children in a bomb blast, no father will be killed by the Taliban, and no orphan child will die for lack of food (“No Woman No Tension”).

There is no single way to characterize Afghan women writers’ attitudes towards the burqa or the veil. What these examples show is that while websites like awwproject.org will refer to the burqa to invoke stereotypes about conservative Islam and gendered oppression, many Afghan women use the burqa in their narratives as an emblem of misguided political goals, and recognize that in their country debates over women’s dress distracts government from addressing the problems that concern them most.

Here, too, my own responses guide my analysis of AWWP. Perhaps because I have been trained to approach accounts of non-Western women’s lives with caution, I was struck by how rarely the organization took the same care. Often, Hamilton’s writing or the site editors’ explanations felt either condescending to the writers or blandly optimistic about the changes AWWP was bringing about. The organization’s uncritical ubiquitous slogan “To Tell One’s
Story is a Human Right irritates me, partly because it uses the idea of human rights so uncritically, and partly because it seems to upstage the more pressing human rights violations that the writers describe. As with My Duty to Speak, however, the writers’ testimonies resist the critical and analytical habits that literary scholars often bring to a text. In the course of reading, I realized that it was a bit smug and very much beside the point to look for evidence that Western perspectives and values were shaping the kinds of stories that the Afghan women wrote. For the most part, I read with curiosity. I passed over the stories and poems about beautiful countryside and loving families that, to be fair, seemed saccharine (I can imagine the kinds of writing workshop prompts that would have produced these texts). Reading other account—of girls who were pressured to marry at young ages, or accounts of women attacked and harassed in public spaces—I felt some of the same anger and heaviness that My Duty to Speak produced. However, I also gained a glimpse of the environment these women live in and their political opinions that I do not think I would have had otherwise. In calling this experience a “glimpse” I realize that I echo some of the same troubling language of spectatorship and spectacle that AWWP uses; but in fact, I was grateful to have the opportunity to be a spectator.

**Conclusion: Speaking Out**

Digital memoir sites developed out of what Smith and Watson call “the international culture of the autobiographical prevalent in the early twenty-first century” (*Reading Autobiography* 102). Book-length autobiographies and memoirs gained tremendous popularity with readers and, as I show in my earlier chapters, offer writers a means by which to engage with ongoing debates. Beyond the trade publishing industry, though, women and men in the United States and abroad see personal narrative as an accessible and rhetorically effective way to try to bring about reforms. Both My Duty to Speak and The Afghan Women’s Writing Project deploy
the persuasive power of individual stories to address abuses of power and failures of justice. The sites go outside of judicial and political systems that do not defend vulnerable citizens. Instead, they publish writers’ testimonies in the online public sphere, reporting crimes that often go unreported and making heard voices that are very often silenced. In both cases, telling these stories has contributed to concrete action that improves the lives of writers and others like them.

One example of an intervention that developed in response to online life writing is the campaign for an anonymous AWWP participant. In January 2010, AWWP published the story titled “I Am For Sale, Who Will Buy Me?” on its website. Heroine Anonymous, as one reader calls the author, begins, “I used to think big.” She describes her childhood and teenage years in school, supported by a father who encouraged her to be a “superstar” in her classes and refused marriage offers. Heroine Anonymous laments the changes to her family after he died:

When I lost him, I lost my shadow, but he left me with his words and advice and books. After his death, our economic situation was bad. Mom’s salary was the equivalent of $25, which was not enough. I began teaching classes in a private school. Half my salary was for my studies and half went for house expenses. During these years, I was the poorest student in my class. I spent days without breakfast or lunch, but I felt happy for my education. During the last four years, I received a number of marriage proposals but I rejected them all. Most wanted me to stop my studies and never work outside the home.

After my father died, the responsibility for me fell to my brothers, who grew up under the Taliban government and were influenced by it. Now I live with

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14 In 2010, AWWP was publishing participants’ stories on a Wordpress blog. Since that time, the project acquired its own website at awwproject.org, and has transferred earlier essays and reader comments so that they remain available.
three Talibs and I must obey what they say. I am not like a girl in the house, but a slave. (“I Am For Sale”)

Heroine Anonymous writes of traveling to university classes on foot when her family moved to cheaper housing outside of Kabul. She expresses her hope to earn a graduate degree and establish “an independent life, standing on my own feet,” but earlier in the year her brothers had arranged a marriage to a wealthy, conservative cousin. Faced with the prospect of living in a family that does not allow women to leave the house, she writes, “I think if this happens, I won’t stay in this world.”

The day “I Am For Sale” appeared on the AWWP website, twenty readers posted comments, and eighty responded within a week. Nearly all responses describe the readers’ frustration and concern, and a few responses denounce Afghan laws and culture. Many readers offer to send money to Heroine Anonymous. A follow-up essay in July 2010 indicates that such a campaign did take place, and Heroine Anonymous was able to match the bride price and buy her freedom. The online community’s response to Heroine Anonymous is exciting and unusual. Few AWWP essays evoke this many responses, and I do not find other instances of a fundraising campaign being started for individual writers. Her story is not representative, but it speaks to the concrete interventions that personal narratives can bring about.

Autobiographical writing on digital memoir sites creates identity by locating the writer as part of a group, and situating the experience he or she describes as part of a larger issue. The medium of the digital memoir site—dozens or hundreds of stories published together with a common formatting, and prefaced by an introduction from the editor or founder—presents the stories as related. The individuality of each autobiographical subject at times matters less than the similarities, intersections, and points of contact that emerge from reading many stories.
together. At the same time, each story is told with an intensely personal voice, and, as with blogs, “the personal form . . . is what seems to both motivate and satisfy the readers and writers” (Miller and Shephard).

The writers who make their personal stories public through My Duty to Speak and the Afghan Women’s Writing Project also seem to be motivated by their conviction that speaking up will have real effects in the world. In addition to calling for policy changes, digital memoir sites show that online activism may go beyond re-tweeting a news story or “liking” a Facebook post. Reading the stories of Afghan women reveals that, as Abu-Lughod writes of the Muslim women she knows, “terms like oppression, choice, and freedom [are] blunt instruments for capturing the dynamics and quality of their lives” (25). Likewise, terms like guilt, innocence, loyalty, and victimhood are blunt instruments for capturing the dynamics of reporting and prosecuting MST. Reading the stories as told by the men and women who post on these sites facilitates “a devotion to observation rather than intervention” (Abu-Lughod 226). Commitment to active observation may then lead to the self-critique that is the best first step in addressing gendered injustice in the U.S. and abroad
Conclusion

The Public Voice of Memoir

In each chapter in this study, I have drawn conclusions about the ways memoirs can engage with an issue and intervene in discussions. Memoirs by Janet Flanner, Sylvia Beach, and Kay Boyle successfully presented an alternative view of American literary expatriates to counter the impression of that community which prevailed in the decades after World War II. These three memoirists emphasize their public roles rather than private or interior lives. In doing so, they each assert their right to record an account of the artistic culture in Paris that includes participants beyond those American writers who had come to be regarded—often through their own efforts to establish their reputations—as individual geniuses. Writing decades later and in a far different context, memoirists Sue Hubbell, Kristin Kimball, and Christine Byl make similar choices to focus on work rather than on the traditional subjects of autobiography. They leave aside discussions of their childhood, families, education, and intellectual development, and instead focus on their physically demanding labor on farms and in remote national parks. Through these narratives, Hubbell, Kimball, and Byl argue for the liberating possibilities of a life attuned to non-human species and the rhythms and difficulties of outdoor work.

Writing for a public purpose does not require that memoirists avoid narrating memories of what took place in their personal lives or private thoughts. Rather, those private experiences can become the foundation for public roles, as in the case of Kay Redfield Jamison’s academic study of manic depression, the illness from which she suffered. Jamison and Forney narrate diagnoses of manic depression, symptoms, and subsequent treatment and convey insights that extend beyond their individual experiences. Readers might gain a more complex understanding
of a complicated disease and of the way those with manic depression struggle to create a balanced, stable identity. In similar fashion, religious or spiritual memoirs link personal memories and events from private life to public conversations. The texts that I study all invite readers to consider the memoirists’ internal and private experiences against the context of feminist critiques of patriarchal religion and against secular United States culture. I draw two conclusions from these accounts. First, memoirists such as Kathleen Norris and Mary Karr demonstrate that formal religious institutions can be compatible with feminism, and can even support movements towards greater equality. Second, Western religious traditions shaped the form of the memoir genre. Secular memoirists regularly draw upon tropes of confession and conversion, using those plots to make sense of their lives and to fit events into a coherent narrative. Even deconversion memoirs like Mary McCarthy’s *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood* reflect the way that early training in religious traditions forms the memoirist’s consciousness and her sense of what it means to tell one’s life story.

Studying self-representation online introduces a new dimension to analyzing memoir, by viewing the genre as a practice rather than a product. Conversely, scholarship on autobiography and memoir can illuminate the role personal narrative plays in forming online communities and carrying out online activism. The testimonies and digital life writing sites I study in my final chapter participate in an international culture of autobiography, a culture that is especially productive for feminist activism. Drawing these conclusions from each group of texts leads to conclusions about the significance of memoir at a time when the genre is immensely popular. Writing a memoir is no longer chiefly an act of self-discovery or chiefly interested in studying the contours of selfhood; a personal narrative can be just as successful when it focuses outward from the individual self and claims a public identity for the writer. Women are mobilized to write
personal narratives in large part because the intensely personal voice of memoir offers a flexible, creative, and effective way to engage in social critique. Digital culture creates new environments for composing, publishing, and responding to personal stories.

Second-wave feminism serves as a reference point for situating and interpreting these memoirs. Writers like Mary McCarthy and Sylvia Beach wrote during the decade just before feminist activism became widespread in the United States, and Janet Flanner and Kay Boyle wrote in the midst the second wave of feminism. All four recall an earlier period in the 1920s and 30s that was in many ways a precursor to midcentury social change. During these years, as their memoirs reflect, some women enjoyed new sexual freedoms and opportunities to pursue university education and professional careers. And in two ways, the feminist movements of the 1960s and 70s in the United States made possible the subsequent proliferation of memoir. Through consciousness-raising and the slogan “the personal is political,” movements for gender equality gave individual stories currency. In this climate, it became a commonplace that speaking out through written or spoken personal narratives could help to dismantle the laws and traditions that constrained women’s choices. For many women, though certainly not all, second wave feminism also brought about access to new professions, guaranteed new legal rights, and uprooted earlier norms about marriage and motherhood.

The types of counterlives narrated by the memoirists I study here were made possible for more women in the United States than had previously been true. However, these are “post-second wave” memoirs in another sense as well. Several begin to reconsider the values and goals of earlier generations of feminists. Even as they critique certain forms of gender inequality, a number of these writers reexamine domesticity and religious devotion, which feminists of previous generations rejected. Other writers take up issues that second-wave feminism failed to
address. Ellen Forney, for example, advocates for recognizing the entire spectrum of brain functions and moods as beautiful. Digital life writing facilitates connection and empathy among cultures, races, and social and economic classes, drawing a wide population of men and women into feminist activism.

The memoirs and personal narratives I study in this project are predominantly accounts written by middle-class white women, though this group of writers is diverse in other ways. I noticed at each stage of my research and writing how few women of color publish the kind of “memoirs about a topic” that I chose as the subject for my study, unless those topics are race or human rights. I infer from this pattern that the publishing industry in the United States welcomes memoirs from women of color when those narratives deal with the topics like family, childhood, education, and self-discovery that are the traditional concerns of memoir. When a writer like Audre Lorde or bell hooks does publish a memoir focused on an issue or debate, it seems to occur after she has established herself as a public intellectual through other avenues. The proliferation of memoir in the past three decades has been characterized by the publication of memoirs by men and women who simply have some facility with language and a story that readers find engaging. These memoirists need not be distinguished in any other way. Some are professional writers or experts on the topic about which they write, as is true of Jamison and McCarthy, but through their memoirs they reach a wide audience who does not know them for these accomplishments. Opportunities for memoirists to intervene publicly in an issue like environmental sustainability or religion—drawing primarily on their own experiences to articulate their positions—seem to be most often open to those whose race and class confers privilege.
Digital life writing sites present themselves as an exception to this trend. Although these sites are mediated by editors and by the organizations that created them, they place few obstacles in the way of contributors who want to share their stories. Autobiographical comics, as Hillary Chute has argued, allow women to tell subversive and transgressive stories outside of mainstream culture. For this reason, graphic memoirs suggest another way that the growing field can include diverse perspectives. Other topics that have emerged as sites for autobiographical engagement with feminist concerns, such as women’s experiences of academia, might also prove to be an exception. Future research on women’s autobiographical writing might productively consider a category of memoirs that are “post-second wave” in their subject, their form, and the perspectives they include. Attention to such memoirs will have implications for the study of memoir, the study of twentieth-century and contemporary American literature, and the study of gender. Examining the ways that memoirists of recent decades engage with the feminist movements of the past will reveal the legacies of those activists and writers. Through personal narratives, women today reflect on where earlier feminists remade the culture of the United States, and where they leave projects that still need to be completed.


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Survey of American Literature from 1865  
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