THE SERIAL AUTOBIOGRAPHIES OF MARY MCCARTHY, KATE MILLETT, JULIA ALVAREZ, AND JAMAICA KINCAID

by

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Abstract

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Director: Professor Nancy K. Miller

The Serial Autobiographies of Mary McCarthy, Kate Millett, Julia Alvarez, and Jamaica Kincaid explores the writings of four authors, each of whom wrote multiple autobiographical works. It argues that the serial autobiographer depends on her relationship with her reading audience and that the reader is an essential component of the long-term autobiographical project. In each case, the autobiographer uses her audience as a mirror in which to view herself as who she is changes over time.

The four authors discussed in this dissertation provide particularly illuminating examples of the autobiographical self-in-process, as they all write their autobiographies with the explicitly stated purpose of figuring out who they are. McCarthy writes as an orphan who yearns to know who she is and where she came from but does not have the aid of the "family memory" that comes with having parents. Millett struggles with the identity of "lesbian feminist," a term that described two incompatible camps within political activism when she was writing in the 1970's; she also writes as a means of coping with severe depression and mental illness as well as the loss of self that she felt occurred after her doctoral dissertation, published as *Sexual Politics*, made her famous. Alvarez and Kincaid both use writing to grapple with racial/national identities that represent complex positions. In Alvarez's case, she is expected to be both Dominican and American—identities which are incompatible in many ways—and Kincaid, as a colonial subject in Antigua, was raised with

the notion that she must try to be British but, at the same time, could never be British enough. As each author attempts to figure out who she is and communicate that self through autobiography, she draws the audience into the process as she revisits and in many cases revises her life story.

In addition to offering the opportunity to view the relationship between the autobiographer and her reading audience long-term, the serial autobiographies studied here provide unique glimpses into the various ways in which the autobiographer's attitude toward truth affects the structure of an autobiographical project. In each case, the author's stance on the issue of truth—combined with the above-mentioned relationship with the reading audience—has a direct impact on the overall structure that the project takes. By following these projects over a period of many years, we are able to watch the ways in which the authors' attitudes toward truth change over time and how these attitudes directly contribute to the construction of the long-term project itself.

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Introduction

Autobiography is typically considered a one-time act The autobiographer tells her story in one volume and the story of a life is complete, once and for all. Even within autobiography theory, the act of writing multiple autobiographies has rarely been discussed, a surprising fact, given that many autobiographers, as diverse in time, location and concerns as Frederick Douglass, Gertrude Stein, Roland Barthes, Richard Rodriguez, Alfred Kazin and Annie Ernaux, to name just a few, have written several autobiographical works. Yet observing autobiographical practice over time gives us a unique window into the way that an autobiographer views issues such as truth and identity. It also allows us to view the ways in which the relationship between the writer and her reading audience affects the structure of autobiography itself. This study looks at the "serial autobiographies" of four twentieth- and twenty-first-century American authors, Mary McCarthy, Kate Millett, Julia Alvarez, and Jamaica Kincaid. [1]

The act of serial autobiography did not originate with contemporary autobiographical practice. On the contrary, it began as early as the sixteenth century with the *Essays* of Michel de Montaigne. For years after he first published the *Essays*, Montaigne continued to go back to them, amending them extensively. The resulting text allows scholars to view the process by which his thoughts and opinions evolved over time. James Olney's discussion of the *Essays* in *Metaphors of Self* sheds light on this process. Olney discusses the "layers of personality" that emerge from Montaigne's revisions and how these layers offer the reader

[1] The term "serial autobiography" was coined by Leigh Gilmore in her 2001 book, *The Limits of Autobiography: Trauma and Testimony*.

"the unique opportunity of watching Montaigne, as it were, communicating with himself across a period of eight or ten years and not only with one earlier self but often with two" (55). Olney adds that Montaigne's later revisions reveal "a pattern of something like meaning in what otherwise might remain only a recorded experience" (57). Likewise, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the eighteenth-century philosopher widely regarded as the originator of modern autobiography, added footnotes to his *Confessions*, stating, for example, that his opinion on a particular subject had changed since he first wrote about it or that he had been mistaken about the character of a friend. Rousseau shared Montaigne's impulse to clarify the record of his autobiography, and his doing so allows us to see how he changed as a person from one writing to the next. Although in both of these early cases, the final autobiography remained a single text, they hint at the autobiographer's desire to continue the story of the self as he changes over time.

It is fruitful to consider the interplay between what Virginia Woolf, in "A Sketch of the Past," called the "I now, I then" of the autobiographer—the author as writing subject and the self she is remembering when writing the autobiography (*Moments of Being* 75). In the collection of autobiographical notes that ultimately became "A Sketch of the Past," Woolf experiments with the form until hitting upon an arrangement that pleases her. She says, "I write the date, because I think that I have discovered a possible form for these notes. That is, to make them include the present—at least enough of the present to serve as platform to stand upon. It would be interesting to make the two people, I now, I then, come out in contrast. And further, this past is much affected by the present moment. What I write today I should not write in a year's time" (75). This point is particularly relevant to serial autobiography as the serial autobiographer continually changes throughout the writing process.

In *Fictions in Autobiography: Studies in the Art of Self-Invention*, Paul John Eakin discusses the changing self of the autobiographer, arguing that autobiography is "a ceaseless process of identity formation in which new versions of the past evolve to meet the constantly changing requirements of the self in each successive present....Autobiography" he continues, "becomes a privileged bridge of discourse of the self with itself across lapsing time" (36). This discourse between writing self and past self creates an additional self, the self in the text, that would not otherwise exist. This dynamic—the interaction between the writing self and the remembered self (or selves) that creates the further written self—occurs within a single autobiography. Its implications expand exponentially when we consider an author who has written multiple autobiographical works. As each of the examples discussed here will show, the publication of an autobiographical text changes the self of the autobiographer. In other words, two additional selves come into being with the publication of each successive book: the self in that text, and the self of the autobiographer as the person who wrote that book and thereby introduced that textual self into the public sphere.

This dissertation expands on Leigh Gilmore's discussion of serial autobiography in *The Limits of Autobiography: Trauma and Testimony* in which she examines the various ways that survivors of trauma construct their life stories. Arguing that the strict parameters of autobiography impose unreasonable limits on trauma survivors, who often find it impossible to put their actual experience into language or to fulfill the role of representative subject expected in autobiography, she considers the works of authors who tell their stories by non-traditional means, such as through fiction, biography, or incorporating community experience into autobiography. Her study draws on Julia Kristeva's notion of the subject-in-process. Discussing Kincaid's autobiographical fictions, Gilmore says:

> This new self-representational figure…does not suggest a one-to-one correspondence between real and represented life. Instead, this figure, as a representation of identity, is capable of crossing all kinds of boundaries, including the boundaries of discrete texts, to extend the autobiographical into an intertextual system of meaning. The figure returns to the autobiographical scene, not exactly as a recurring fictional character or as the autobiographer at different stages of life; rather, this figure may be recognizable less for the features it shares with the autobiographer, or her textual simulacra, then for the preoccupations represented in and through it. (98)

Although the majority of her argument is positioned specifically within trauma theory, when expanded, Gilmore's notion of the subject-in-process through serial autobiography provides a useful framework for exploring the works of writers who employ autobiography as a means of searching for self, as the four autobiographers discussed in this dissertation do. As Gilmore states, "Serial autobiography permits the writer to take multiple runs at self-representation, more as a way to explore the possibilities present within autobiography than to produce a single, definitive solution to the problem of representing identity….Autobiography offers an opportunity to experiment with becoming a person" (103). This approach to autobiography allows the autobiographer to experiment with form in ways that are not possible within the framework of traditional autobiography. Rather than being restricted to an attempt to tell one's story in a conclusive way, then, the serial autobiographer can experiment with ways that may not strictly adhere to chronology or even truth, such as fictionalizing one's experience or telling one's story through poetry. She can even try out different forms for the same story to see which one(s) best communicate the aspects of her experience she wishes to portray at the specific time that she is writing.

Opening up the study of autobiography to include these genres allows for new and significant ways of studying methods of life writing that have previously been overlooked as such.

The four authors discussed here provide particularly illuminating examples of the autobiographical self-in-process, as they all write their autobiographies with the explicitly stated purpose of figuring out who they are. McCarthy writes as an orphan who yearns to know who she is and where she came from but does not have the aid of the "family memory" that comes with having parents. Millett struggles with the identity of "lesbian feminist," a term that described two incompatible camps within political activism when she was writing in the 1970's; she also writes as a means of coping with severe depression and mental illness as well as the loss of self that she felt occurred after her doctoral dissertation, published as *Sexual Politics*, made her famous. Alvarez and Kincaid both use writing to grapple with racial/national identities that represent complex positions. In Alvarez's case, she is expected to be both Dominican and American—identities which are incompatible in many ways—and Kincaid, as a colonial subject in Antigua, was raised with the notion that she must try to be British but, at the same time, could never be British enough.

As readers, we become a necessary component of these authors' search for identity. Choosing to conduct the search for self in this very public way makes the project dependent on the reading audience. While each book can, of course, stand alone, the ideal reader will be one who follows the author's progress as she publishes book after book, and as the self she presents evolves over time. Like Rousseau, who declares early on in his *Confessions*, "I am well aware that the reader does not require information, but I, on the other hand, feel impelled to give it to him," the serial autobiographer requires her reader to also be a participant in the project (31). This reader-participant who follows the progress of the

author's search for self is able to watch the process of her attempting to figure out who she is as her identity changes with each new book.

While their stories differ radically, one significant identity shift shared by all four authors is the process of going from someone who intends to write her autobiography, through the stage of someone who is writing her autobiography for the first time, to becoming a published autobiographer. And, in each case, this new subject position—"I am an autobiographer"—is interrogated and reworked in the subsequent volumes of the autobiographical project. The very act of documenting one's identity and offering it for public consumption changes the identity being documented, thus initiating a cycle that can continue indefinitely as the subject changes further with each successive stage of the autobiography.[2] Although this process plays out quite differently for each of the authors discussed here, in every case the reading audience is a fundamental part of the entire endeavor.

The relationship between the autobiographer and the reader is a significant factor in any autobiographical practice. The dichotomy of self-versus-other in autobiography has been discussed at length in the field of autobiography theory. In his 1956 essay "Conditions and Limits of Autobiography," first published in English in James Olney's influential 1980 collection, *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*, Georges Gusdorf claimed that autobiography can only exist in a society where isolated individuality—the self in opposition to all others—is the fundamental understanding of identity. In the 1980s, this notion of the isolated self was met with opposition from feminist critics, including Mary Mason, Domna

[2] As Millett, Alvarez and Kincaid are still living, there is no telling where their autobiographical practices will end. In McCarthy's case, she was in the process of editing the final volume of her autobiography, *Intellectual Memoirs*, when she died at the age of 77.

Stanton, and Susan Stanford Friedman, who argued that this model was insufficient for understanding the autobiographical work of women and minorities, many of whom express identity through connections with a community of significant others.[3] In her 1994 essay "Representing Others: Gender and the Subjects of Autobiography" Nancy K. Miller expanded this argument to suggest that the essential connection to others is not limited to works by women and minorities, but is fundamental to all autobiographical acts. In her 2007 essay "The Entangled Self: Genre Bondage in the Age of Memoir," Miller once again extends this idea, proposing that this network of connections includes the reading audience. For the authors of multiple, exploratory autobiographies, this connection to the reader becomes a relationship that forms and develops over time. While the relationship between author and audience is different in each case, in all of the autobiographical projects I will discuss, the reading audience is an active part of the process of their production as each writer incorporates the reactions of her readers—reactions by readers with whom she actually has contact, published book reviews, and even assumed reactions by the anonymous reading audience—into her later works.

For both McCarthy and Millett, this connection to the audience takes place in the most literal and immediate of ways, in addition to the more intangible connections that generally exist between the author and the anonymous reading audience. In both *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood* and *How I Grew*, for example, McCarthy asks the reader to provide information if the story she tells is incorrect or incomplete. *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood*

[3] See Mary Mason, "The Other Voice: Autobiographies of Women Writers," *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*. Ed. James Olney. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1980; Domna Stanton, "Autogynography: Is the Subject Different?," *The Female Autograph*. Ed. Domna Stanton. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1984; Susan Stanford Friedman. "Women's Autobiographical Selves: Theory and Practice," *The Private Self: Theory and Practice of Women's Autobiographical Writings*. Ed. Shari Benstock. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1988.

includes excerpts of letters she received in response to her previously-published autobiographical stories, and in *How I Grew* she asks the audience for information about a high school classmate. McCarthy's connection to—and apparent dependence on—the reading audience also extends beyond those with whom she could actually have one-on-one contact. Her larger audience is essential to her project, as well. McCarthy frequently speaks about her lifelong fear that she has a secret flaw that can be seen by everyone but her. She uses her autobiography as an attempt to search out that flaw and wants us to search with her. In *The Company She Keeps*, McCarthy's heroine, Margaret, relays to her psychoanalyst a dream in which she arrives at a restaurant wearing nothing but her underwear. The anxiety around this dream comes not from the fact that she is undressed but because no one else in the dream will acknowledge her predicament. If her friends would only point out her state of undress, Margaret tells her analyst, they could all have a good laugh, and the situation would transform from one of humiliation to a simple "embarrassing moment" to be recalled with pleasure later. The same idea applies to McCarthy's autobiographical works. She uses them to search for her secret flaw and employs the audience as a mirror with which to do so in hopes that when she does finally discover it, we, the readers, will provide the community necessary for the shared experience lacking in Margaret's dream. If her readers are engaged and watching as McCarthy discovers her flaw, it is hoped, when she does so she can immediately turn to us and draw us into the experience with her, rather than standing exposed and alone as Margaret does in the dream. McCarthy truly counts on the reading audience to make the journey with her. By the end of her writing career, in fact, she writes her autobiography seemingly with the assumption that those reading it are intimately familiar with all of her previous works.

Millett, too, engages both the people in her life and her larger reading audience in her search for self. She consistently shares her work with her friends and family as she writes it, and their reactions—and, in many cases, her own anxiety about their reactions—become part of the story. In the case of *Flying*, her first autobiographical book, for example, her lover, Vita, is the editor of the book, and Vita's commentary on the writing is built into the text itself. In addition, Millett uses her writing as a means of political activism. She writes for those who can't always publicly speak for themselves, such as women, gays and lesbians, the mentally ill and nursing home residents. By doing this, she cultivates an relationship with her audience which is not typical of many autobiographers; she uses her own story not only to tell the world about herself, but to open its eyes to the struggles of countless others. In several of those cases—a particularly poignant case being that of her mother, whom she rescued from the fate of living in a sub-par nursing home—the very people she writes for are able to read as well as participate in her story.

Millett, like McCarthy, writes for a general audience in addition to a specific one. She also uses the larger audience as a mirror in which to view herself, striking a variety of poses in an attempt to see (from our perspective) what she looks like specifically as a writer. She frequently describes herself in the act of writing, then takes a step back to reflect on how she is coming across to us, her readers. This is connected, at least in part, to a feeling of shame similar to McCarthy's feeling that she has a secret flaw. The writing of both authors fits within the model of the "shame stance" as described by the psychoanalyst Silvan Tomkins in which the shamed subject looks down at himself while keeping an eye on the person before whom he feels ashamed in order to gauge how he looks from the outside. This is a stance which Tomkins calls "deeply ambivalent," as the shamed subject simultaneously

wants to hide but also hopes to connect with the person before whom he feels shamed (Sedgwick 137). In the long-term projects of both McCarthy and Millett, we can watch this process as they use the audience as a mirror in which to view themselves. In other words, not only are they describing themselves to their readers, they are using the reactions of their readers (actual or imagined) as a way of assessing how they are coming across.

The shame stance, in which the shamed subject views herself through the perceived gaze of the other, is not uncommon in serial/exploratory autobiography.[4] It is, however, by no means the only standpoint that a serial autobiographical project can take. Neither Alvarez nor Kincaid writes within this framework. While both of their self-exploratory projects begin from the standpoint of feeling ashamed of who they are, both authors reject the position of the shamed subject and instead create a space in which they can communicate to their readers on their own terms. Alvarez speaks repeatedly of the desire to connect with, even gain intimacy with, her readers. Like Millett, she writes not only for herself but for others who have similar struggles to those she faced when she immigrated to the U.S. from the Dominican Republic at the age of ten. She feels that sharing her story can help ease the pain and loneliness of young Latinas who feel at sea in American culture. In addition to speaking for those who share her struggles, however, she speaks to those who might misunderstand them. In an early essay, "First Muse," she talks about how when some schoolmates taunted

[4] Kathryn Harrison, for example, discusses seeing herself through another's eyes in both *The Kiss* and *Seeking Rapture*. In *The Kiss*, she says, "I don't know it yet, not consciously, but I feel it: my father, holding himself so still and staring at me, has somehow begun to *see* me into being. His look gives me to myself, his gaze reflects the life my mother's willfully shut eyes denied" (63). A similar dynamic occurs with her future husband in *Seeking Rapture*: "Can you see yourself in a mirror the way you can in someone's eyes?" she asks. "When, on our third date, my future husband came up Mrs. K.'s stairs, Colin's expression of surprise and, worse, pity made me abruptly aware of the room in which I lived" (11). Likewise, in her autobiography entitled *Shame*, Annie Ernaux describes returning from a class trip in the company of her teacher and classmates to find her mother standing in the doorway of their home in a wrinkled and urine-stained nightgown, a sight which caused her a sudden and intense feeling of shame. "It was the first time" she says, "I had seen my mother through the eyes of the private school" (93). (For an in-depth discussion of shame in Ernaux's autobiography, see Nancy K. Miller's "Memory Stains: Annie Ernaux's *Shame*" in *Extremities: Trauma, Testimony and Community*.)

her for her accent shortly after her family's immigration to the U.S., she vowed that she would learn English well enough to punish and humiliate them. As she grew up, however, "revenge turned into redemption" and she began to want to save them (*Something to Declare* 141). Thus, she writes her story for herself, for those in similar circumstances, and for those for whom the immigrant experience is unfamiliar, even threatening.[5] This makes Alvarez's autobiographical practice different from that of both McCarthy and Millett, in that while she initially turned to writing as a response to the shame caused by her immigrant origins, shame, for Alvarez, is not the center of her project. Whereas both McCarthy and Millett remain perpetually in the position of the shamed subject, upon her initial experience with shame Alvarez almost immediately turned in the opposite direction, toward revenge. This shift in perspective prevented Alvarez from remaining in the stance of the shamed subject and allowed her to then move on toward what she calls "redemption." Rather than viewing the audience—the proverbial boys on the playground—as those who would shame her, then, she refuses the shaming gaze and uses her writing to connect with her reader on an equal footing. Thus, the focus of my discussion of Alvarez's work is not on shame but on the ways in which she uses her work to create a place where she can embrace and celebrate both sides of her Dominican American self.

Kincaid, too, refuses the stance of the shamed subject. She states on numerous occasions, in fact, that "whatever is a source of shame—if you are not responsible for it, such as the color of your skin or your sexuality—you should just wear it as a badge (Garner 2). Likewise, she states, "I think that if you're ashamed of something you must say it, because if

[5] This project extends beyond her strictly autobiographical work. In 2009, she published *Return to Sender*, a book for youth in which the two main protagonists are 6th graders who live on a farm in Vermont. One is the Caucasian son of a farmer, and the other is the daughter of undocumented immigrants from Mexico. The aim of the story is to encourage young readers to see the complexity of the American immigrant experience and to see the immigrant characters as real people, not simply factors in a contemporary "issue."

you don't, it gives people power over you. I try to say the things that I am ashamed of because I can't bear to be subject to anything….There aren't too many bad things anyone can say about me; I've already said them about myself" (Wachtel 64). Kincaid uses her writing to reject, even renounce the shame that she feels the British tried to make her feel as an Antiguan. Her approach to doing so, however, is radically different from that of Alvarez. Kincaid's relationship with her audience is one of opposition, even hostility. Her direct address to white tourists in *A Small Place*, as well as her translation of her brother's patois into standard English in *My Brother*, makes it clear that her presumed reader is the white American or European. The overt rage exhibited toward the white reader in *A Small Place* implicates that reader every time colonialism is mentioned in any of Kincaid's other books. Throughout her body of work, Kincaid's protagonists frequently speak about looking at themselves. It is significant that using the (presumed white) audience as a mirror for the self actually replicates the gaze of the colonizer, because through this process Kincaid takes control of that gaze herself. In this way, she calls attention to the fact that, as a colonized subject, she can never view or understand herself outside of the history of colonization in which she's trapped. Again and again, she directs our gaze (through hers) in order to make us see that fact. Kincaid's relationship with her reading audience is the most complicated of all of the authors discussed here. Although she speaks to her readers in a harsh, dismissive way, which would seem to indicate that she does not actually want a relationship with her reading audience, her project depends on having readers against whom she can take a confrontational stand. Her autobiographical project is based on the premise of forcing the reader to see that colonialism has robbed her of a stable subjectivity. That this is a paradoxical approach to autobiography is entirely the point.

In addition to offering the opportunity to view the relationship between the autobiographer and her reading audience long-term, the serial autobiographies studied here provide unique glimpses into the various ways in which the autobiographer's attitude toward truth affects the structure of an autobiographical project. In each of the cases discussed here, the author's stance on the issue of truth—combined with the above-mentioned relationship with the reading audience—has a direct impact on the overall structure that the project takes. By following these projects over a period of many years, we are able to watch the ways in which the authors' attitudes toward truth change over time and how these attitudes directly contribute to the construction of the project itself. In other words, these projects show us that the autobiographer's attitude toward the concept of truth helps determine the form that the autobiographical project takes. McCarthy and Millett, for example, both strive to tell their stories as accurately as possible. As a result, much of their long-term projects involve reflecting on what they previously wrote and, in many cases, amending it. Alvarez and Kincaid both fictionalize their stories as a means of exploring a larger "truth" without having to rely solely on a literal rendering of their experiences.

The desire to be able to see herself clearly is a recurring theme in McCarthy's autobiographies as well as in her fiction. She believes that there is one verifiable Truth and is almost desperate to reach the ultimate truth behind her experiences. This desire to find ultimate truth directly affects the structure of her project, and *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood* represents the first two stages of the process. It consists of autobiographical stories, most of which were published previously in *The New Yorker*, each followed by a new section which looks back at the experience covered in the story and corrects any mistakes or flaws in memory that she discovered after they were published. Her second autobiographical book,

How I Grew, covers a later period in McCarthy's life but similarly uses structure to convey the search for truth. Unlike *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood*, it is not divided into different sections, but throughout the story McCarthy repeatedly informs us that she is "just now remembering" what she is writing about or even stops herself midway to say, "But stop! That cannot be true," and correct herself (58, 5). She does this, I argue, in order to remind us that what she is saying is the pure truth, told in a straightforward way, not manipulated into the form of a story.[6] When she initially published her childhood memories as stories in *The New Yorker*, McCarthy was accused of making them up. This led her to conclude that the public must view anything by a professional writer as a made-up story.[7] Thus, she chose to go out of her way to write her later autobiographical works in ways that can by no means be interpreted as constructed narratives. McCarthy did write of her experiences in fictional form in her story collection entitled *The Company She Keeps*, but she returned to them in *Intellectual Memoirs*, the autobiographical work she was completing when she died. *Intellectual Memoirs* covers the same years of her life story as *The Company She Keeps* and, like the explanatory sections of *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood*, reveals the "real truth" behind the fictionalized stories. Thus, by reading her body of autobiographical work as serial project, we can see the pattern whereby her desire to mine for and relate the truest truth is reflected in the overall pattern that her work takes, as she increasingly distances her autobiographical work from the genre of fiction.

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[6] Writing as she did in the age of postmodernism, McCarthy of course knew that many of her readers would be unlikely to believe, as she did, that there is one actual "pure truth." She continued to insist, however, in her belief that there is a truth that can be reached if one can only try hard enough.

[7] McCarthy was a well-known writer of fiction (some unrelated to her autobiography), as well as theatre criticism and political theory.

Millett's autobiographical project is built on her attempt to be "honest enough." Although, unlike McCarthy, she does not believe that there is one ultimate truth, she is obsessed with telling her story as accurately as possible. As a result, what we frequently see as readers is the author watching herself as she writes and reporting on the accuracy of what she has written. While this shares many similarities with McCarthy's style, the end product is quite different, as Millett reports on herself as she is writing, not after the fact. And, unlike McCarthy's moments of correcting herself as she misremembers the past—the "But stop! That cannot be true" moments of *How I Grew*—Millett is writing her life as it happens. She strives to report her life accurately as she is living it. The result is a unique structure in which her books are frequently referenced within themselves. On a number of occasions in *Flying*, for example, Millett makes reference to earlier sections of the book, describing how they were written or reporting a friend's reaction to them. When she changes a passage, she often includes the original passage in full then informs us of the changes she is making to it, rather than simply editing the passage before publication in the traditional way. This blending of life and writing causes an uneasy relationship between lived experience and the life she is putting on paper.

Many times throughout her entire body of work, Millett expresses concern that she is perhaps living through a particular experience merely to have the opportunity to write about it. At other times, she alters her situation because she knows that she will have to put it in the book; she changes her actual life experience to fit within the story that she wants to be telling. (And, of course, she tells us that she is doing so.) The resulting structure of each of her books is that of a diary which is being written and presented as the experience happens. The "diary effect," however, is a constructed one, as evidenced by the numerous times when

it is obvious that this is not an actual diary, such as when Millett writes about the inability to write or conveys a suicide attempt in the present tense. While these books read as if they are disorganized stream-of-consciousness wanderings (and were largely reviewed as such), a closer look reveals that they are, in fact, tightly controlled in order to convey immediacy, even urgency. Much like McCarthy's insistence that she is not constructing a story, Millett uses the (sometimes contrived) sense of urgency to convey to the reader her desperate attempt to "get life down" as it happens—even in those situations when the writing must necessarily come after the fact.

Alvarez, unlike McCarthy and Millett, is open to playing with different versions of the truth. This is due in part to the fact that the identity she is attempting to put on paper, that of Dominican American, is too complicated to accommodate one single truth. As she quickly learns when, at the age of 10, she is immersed in American culture but still expected to adhere to her parents' traditional Dominican values, one can't be both fully Dominican and fully American at the same time. This feeling only intensifies as she grows older and finds herself coming of age in the U.S. culture of the 1960's which was, in many ways, the exact opposite of the conservative Dominican Catholicism of her parents. Rather than try to either eschew her Dominican heritage or return to it completely, then, she chooses to adopt a "portable homeland" within language (The Other Side / *El Otro Lado* 117). This homeland must necessarily be open to contradictions and able to contain the multiple sides of Alvarez's self. Thus, she chooses to write her story through fiction and poetry—more fluid and inclusive forms than traditional autobiography—before sharing her memories in autobiographical essays later in her career. It is interesting to note that within her earliest semi-autobiographical fiction up through her first autobiographical essays, one can trace a

trajectory from "less true" to "more true." Her first novel, *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents,* is loosely based on the immigration experience of her family. While the García family shares many similarities with Alvarez's own, however, the book does not purport to be an autobiography. *García Girls* is followed by *¡Yo!*, a novel in which the characters from *García Girls* reveal their own "truth" about Yolanda, its fictional author. Although the "truth" in *¡Yo!* is still that of fictional characters, this structure provides a useful window into Alvarez's ideas about authorship and the possibility of reaching a single truth. By opening up the story to various other perspectives, Alvarez illustrates the fact that one scenario or experience can have as many versions of the truth as there are people who experienced it. The two loosely autobiographical novels are followed by *Something to Declare*, Alvarez's first straightforwardly autobiographical book in which she drops the guise of the García family and speaks about her experiences from her own perspective. It is in this book that we get the "real truth" about the stories we are now familiar with from the earlier novels. This trajectory from less to more true is significant, because it is in *Something to Declare*—the most conventionally "true" book—that Alvarez most explicitly manipulates truth, making up stories about her family's traumatic past in order to help heal it. Viewing these three books together, we can see how using her fiction to break down traditional notions of truth prepares the way for Alvarez to deliberately manipulate memory for her own purposes in her autobiographical works.

There is an additional layer to the structure of Alvarez's autobiographical project, a body of work that includes poetry as well as fiction and essays. Poetry allows Alvarez to speak using an autobiographical voice—the speaking voice in her poems is her own—to explore particular moods, events, or struggles without having to contextualize them within

her larger experience. From the start, Alvarez has taken the idea of creating a home in language extremely seriously, to the extent that she often fears that she does so at the expense of other parts of her life. Not surprisingly, she channels the fear of living her life too much on paper into her writing, working through this issue primarily in her poetry.[8] The struggle between seeking intimacy with her reader and putting too much of her life into her writing informs the structure of her project, as it produces more writing, and thus, the cycle continues. This dilemma, combined with the fact that she is working through an identity that can never be resolved, has generated a prolific autobiographical writing career.

Like Alvarez, Kincaid writes of an identity that is perpetually in the balance between two disparate sides. As an Antiguan who grew up under British colonial rule, she was the subject of a monarchy she could not relate to in any way. As Homi Bhabha famously points out in *The Location of Culture*, the "native" subject under colonial rule is expected to replicate the colonizer but, at the same time, remain recognizably different so as not to upset the relations of power. Kincaid uses her autobiographical writing as an attempt to communicate this contradictory identity. Her writing is filled with images of her subjects expanding, contracting, splitting, cracking open, falling, spreading, awash, disembodied, etc. She further illustrates her unstable position by refusing to write a traditional, straightforward autobiography, even though she is often quoted as saying that everything about her fiction is autobiographical, "even the punctuation."[9] Kincaid's work makes the point, again and again, that colonialism robbed her of a stable identity outside of the impossible expectations of her as a British subject in Antigua. Instead of writing self-proclaimed autobiographies—which

[8] This is also a central theme in her 2006 novel, *Saving the World*.

[9] *A Small Place* and *My Brother* both contain elements of autobiography, but are at least ostensibly about other things.

would require a stable identity—she writes what she sees as the truth about a period in her life, even if it doesn't match up with the literal events of the time. She often refers to the episode that takes place in her novel *Annie John* in which Annie suffers a protracted illness as an example of this practice. In her actual experience, Kincaid did go through a similar illness but at a much younger age than Annie. In addition, the events associated with the illness in the story happened at various other times throughout her childhood. Telling her story through fiction allows her to combine the events into one in order to represent what she sees as the truth of the experience. Likewise, the protagonist of *Lucy* appears to be virtually the same character as Annie John with an almost identical history but a different name. Kincaid writes as if the truth of her first year in America (the time period covered in *Lucy*) is a different one from that of her childhood covered in *Annie John*. This pattern continues with *Mr. Potter*, in which she invents a history (again, her version of truth) for the father she did not know.

Kincaid's work shares a similar dynamic to that of Alvarez's overall autobiographical project. Just as Alvarez finds that achieving some success with the attempt to create a home in language produces a new dilemma in which she finds herself living too much on paper, Kincaid's success creates for her a new and unexpected situation. A prominent theme throughout every one of Kincaid's book is what she refers to as her "obsession with [the] powerful and powerless" (Wachtel 64). As the colonized subject, she views herself as one of the latter. Her overwhelming success as a writer—first as a staff writer at *The New Yorker* and later as a novelist and political writer—however, shifted that position, and she soon found herself in circumstances that are likely far more comfortable (and, in her terms, more powerful) than those of many of her readers. This makes her continued insistence that she is

one of the powerless awkward, to say the least. It is my argument that the repeated question that the protagonist of *Lucy* asks of her white employer—"How do you get to be the sort of victor who can claim to be the vanquished also?"—is actually a question she is struggling with herself (40). How does her fame and financial success factor into the identity she has worked so hard to craft? As with Alvarez, this is an issue that becomes a motivating factor in the project itself. And, as it does in Alvarez's case, it produces something of a spiral where the writing on the issue only serves to solidify it. This contradiction affects the structure of her larger project, as the real-world reaction to her early work is processed through the writing that comes later.

In the case of each of the serial autobiographies discussed here, we can see that the structure of the long-term project is directly affected both by the author's relationship with her audience and her attitude toward truth and its place in autobiography. We can see as well that the search for self through autobiography is a never-ending process whereby each step produces the need for further exploration, and as this process continues, the subject herself changes. Serial autobiography shows, then, that the very attempt to use autobiography as a means of finding a stable self is a literal impossibility; the act of writing and publishing one's autobiography changes the self, making it impossible to ever pin it down in a lasting way.[10] As readers of serial autobiographies, we are invited to watch as the writer grapples with the task of communicating this ever-changing self. In each of the cases discussed here, the author engages the audience in the process, using her readers as a mirror before which to strike various poses in the attempt to figure out which self she ultimately wants to present. As the project progresses and expands over time, the author joins the audience as a reader of

[10] As Philippe Lejeune states in his ground-breaking essay, "The Autobiographical Pact (Bis)," "Telling the truth about the self, constituting the self as a complete subject—it is a fantasy. In spite of the fact that autobiography is impossible, this in no way prevents it from existing" (131-32).

her own work. As later autobiographical works look back on earlier ones, the serial autobiographer draws the reader into the project of exploring her self by inviting the reader to look back with her. The ideal reader will participate by engaging with each autobiographical self along the way.

Chapter 1
"The Search is Not Conclusive": The Pursuit of Truth in the Works of Mary McCarthy

"The bliss of having a secret required...the consummation of telling it," we are informed by the narrator of Mary McCarthy's 1942 novel, *The Company She Keeps* (8). This aphorism seems to be a guiding principle of McCarthy's autobiographical and fictional work. As a writer who has been described aptly as "congenitally autobiographical," McCarthy is more than happy to spill her secrets (Cummings 1519).[11] And, like Margaret Sargent, the heroine of *The Company She Keeps*, McCarthy looks forward to "the My-dear-I-had-no-idea's" with which her reading audience will greet her revelations (8).

The reaction of the reading audience is, in fact, necessary to McCarthy's autobiographical project. Her position as an autobiographer resembles that recounted in the "exposure dream" that Margaret Sargent relates to her psychotherapist:

> You go into a restaurant and you think how beautiful and chic you are. You even pose a little.…And then all of a sudden you look down and you see that you have nothing on but a pair of pink pants. And the worst of it is that nobody shows the slightest surprise....They are all watching you, but out of cruelty they will give no sign. If one of your companions were to say, "Why, Meg, you're undressed," the situation would be saved. You could exclaim, "Why, gee, I am," and people would lend you things and laugh and fuss over you, and the whole thing would turn into one of those jolly Embarrassing Moments that readers send in to the *Daily Mirror*. (254-55)

[11] McCarthy's vast body of work includes three autobiographies, *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood* (1957), *How I Grew* (1987), and *Intellectual Memoirs: New York, 1936-1938*, posthumously published in 1992. She also famously used her life and those of her acquaintances in her fiction.

This dream reflects several important aspects of McCarthy's stance as an autobiographer.

McCarthy lost both of her parents to the influenza epidemic of 1918 when she was six years old. She was raised by relatives who were indifferent, when not blatantly cruel, to her and her three brothers. She lived with her aunt and uncle in Minneapolis until the age of eleven when she went to live with her maternal grandparents in Seattle. (At that time her brothers were sent to boarding school.) McCarthy states in *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood* that the loss of her parents resulted in a lack of childhood memories, because "*[t]he chain of recollection—the collective memory of a family—has been broken*" (5).[12] McCarthy describes herself and her brother Kevin trying with "*burning interest*" to reconstruct their past "*like two amateur archaeologists, falling on any new scrap of evidence, trying to fit it in, questioning our relations, belaboring our own memories*" (6). Her autobiographical writing is an important tool in this process.

The practice of serial autobiography allows McCarthy to involve the reading audience in the process of writing her life. For her contemporary readers, this involvement, at times, took literal form. In both *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood* and *How I Grew*, McCarthy invites her readers to contribute their own memories to her life story. In the "To the Reader" section of *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood*, she states, "*If there is more fiction in [this book] than I know, I should like to be set right; in some instances, which I shall call attention to later, my memory has already been corrected*" (4-5). She makes a similar call to the audience in *How I Grew* when she is unable to remember as much as she would like about a high school classmate. *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood* includes letters in which readers share similarities between McCarthy's life and their own. While the opportunity to

[12] *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood* is composed of previously-published stories supplemented by an introduction and inter-chapter commentaries which are printed in italics. All italics herein occur in the original.

participate in the construction of McCarthy's story has long passed, the books continue to involve the reader through their form, in which McCarthy pulls the reader into her own obsession with uncovering the truth of her life. This obsession with finding out the "real truth" behind the smallest details of her experience contributes to the unusual form that McCarthy's body of work takes. As an archaeologist of her own life, she returns to the same themes and stories repeatedly, each time digging deeper into the minutiae of details, feelings, and motivations behind both the lived experience and the story she has created about it.

In addition to depriving her of childhood memories, the abuse and neglect by her relatives left her feeling self-conscious and, at times, ridiculous. One example revolves around her relationship to language and the insecurity brought on by being scoffed at by her uncle:

> [Uncle Meyers] hated long words, or, rather, words that he regarded as long. One summer day, in the kitchen, when I had been ordered to swat flies, I said, "They disappear so strangely," a remark that he mimicked for years whenever he wished to humiliate me, and the worst of this torture was that I could not understand what was peculiar about the sentence, which seemed to me plain ordinary English, and, not understanding, I knew that I was in perpetual danger of exposing myself to him again. (62)

This attack on her use of language is particularly unsettling to the young McCarthy because before the death of her parents, "Mary's funny sayings" were cherished and celebrated, a source of pride. "After the flu," she laments, "there was no one there to record them any more" (*How I Grew* 2). Instead, Uncle Meyers made her feel like she was perpetually on the brink of humiliating herself.

The story of Uncle Meyers's mockery is the first of many instances in which McCarthy mentions the feeling that there is something wrong and embarrassing about her that can be seen by others but which she cannot herself see. *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood*, *The Company She Keeps*, and her short story "C.Y.E.", in particular, are replete with anxieties about humiliating quirks or flaws that are visible to everyone except herself. And, like Margaret Sargent's fellow diners in her exposure dream, no one around McCarthy will tell her what they are. An early and lasting instance of this feeling occurs when McCarthy is in the eighth grade and is given the nickname, "C.Y.E."—an abbreviation her classmates will not explain but assure her is "'very good,' that is, very apt. And it made everyone laugh" (*Memories* 135). "I was certain" she says,

> that it stood for something horrible…something I could never guess because it represented some aspect of myself that the world could see and I couldn't, like a sign pinned on my back….This name reduced all my pretensions and solidified my sense of *wrongness*. Just as I felt I was beginning to belong to the convent, it turned me into an outsider, since I was the only pupil who was not in the know. (135)

She finds herself in a humiliating double-bind, as she is dying to know the name's meaning but is aware that persisting in questioning her classmates will only make her appear even more "Cye-like" (*Cast A Cold Eye* 207). Her perpetual failure to receive the pink ribbon for good behavior at the convent where she attends school is "the same case as with the hated name; the nuns, evidently, saw something about me that was invisible to me" (*Memories* 136). Likewise, years later, after she left the home of her cruel aunt and uncle to live with her somewhat kinder but equally odd grandparents, she blamed herself, not her strange, inhospitable family setting, for the fact that she had few friends, "thinking there was

something wrong with me, like a petticoat showing, that other people could see and I couldn't" (235). The strongest description of this feeling about her invisible "wrongness" occurs in her 1950 short story "C.Y.E.", where she says that she felt her "fault was nothing ordinary that you could do something about....Plainly, it was something immanent and irremediable, a spiritual taint....a kind of miserable effluvium of the spirit" (*Cast a Cold Eye* 208-09).

Even as an adult, McCarthy cannot escape the shame associated with the name or the sense that others can see the humiliating side of herself that she cannot. In "C.Y.E.," she tells of having completely forgotten about the nickname until, as an adult living in New York City, she happened upon a sign for a clothing store called "Cye Bernard." The description of her feeling upon first seeing the sign could hardly be more dramatic:

> I averted my eyes from the sign and hurried into the subway, my head bent so that no observer should discover my secret identity, which until that moment I had forgotten myself. Now I pass this sign every day, and it is always a question whether I shall look at it or not. Usually I do, but hastily, surreptitiously, with an ineffective air of casualness, lest anybody suspect that I am crucified there on that building, hanging exposed in black script lettering to advertise bargains in men's haberdashery. (*Cast a Cold Eye* 199-200)

Although it is impossible that anyone in McCarthy's adult life—much less a stranger on the street—could know about her connection to the name Cye, merely glancing at the name on the sign fills McCarthy with a deep sense of shame and brings back the feelings of "wrongness" that the nickname engendered in her as a child. A letter to Hannah Arendt in 1974, when McCarthy was 62 years old, expresses a feeling much like those that McCarthy

associates with the nickname. In this letter, she speaks of her disappointment at the fact that none of her friends came to her defense when her controversial writings on the Vietnam War were attacked in the press. She writes:

> This leads to the conclusion that I am peculiar, in some way that I cannot make out; *indefensible*, at least for my friends. They are fond of me but with reservations....The fact that this *keeps* happening to me (the worst probably was *Birds of America*, which nearly "cured" me of writing novels) adds a ghostly element of repetition, as though I were condemned to this punishment throughout eternity....And the punishment is somehow mysteriously, arcanely, related to my eternal self: the bars of the cell are, so to speak, my own ribs. (*Between Friends* 368-69)

It is clear that the feeling of "wrongness" visible to the rest of the world but not to herself remained a preoccupation well into her adult life. In the same letter to Arendt, McCarthy expresses the "deeply discouraging" sense "that one is not getting through to one's imagined listeners" (369). This is, in fact, the "punishment" she describes. Thus, McCarthy makes a life-long project of attempting both to figure out who she is in spite of the absence of the "family memory" that comes with having parents and to enlist her readers in the attempt to discover what it is about her that can be seen by everyone but her.

The above mentioned "exposure dream" holds another significant clue to McCarthy's autobiographical position. Unlike the typical exposure dream in which the subject finds that s/he is completely naked, in Margaret's dream she is in her underwear. Although she makes much of how exposed she is—indeed, exposure is the central theme of the dream—she remains partially covered.[13] The same can be said of her autobiographical writing. The

[13] For a detailed discussion of this issue, see Jaime Cleland's "Pink Pants and Pessaries: Mary McCarthy's Aesthetics of Embarrassment."

persona she creates is that of an autobiographer with a burning, almost fanatical desire to uncover and expose the truth of her life. She pulls the audience into this quest for truth, yet, at times, backs away from what she might find, leaving the reader's expectations unfulfilled. An illustrative example concerns the description of her paternal grandmother, whose combined tyranny and indifference were a predominant part of McCarthy's childhood after the death of her parents:

> Luckily, I am writing a memoir and not a work of fiction, and therefore I do not have to account for my grandmother's unpleasant character and look for the Oedipal fixation or the traumatic experience which would give her that clinical authenticity that is nowadays so desirable in portraiture. I do not know how my grandmother got the way she was; I assume, from family photographs and from the inflexibility of her habits, that she was always the same, and it seems as idle to inquire into her childhood as to ask what was ailing Iago or look for the error in toilet-training that was responsible for Lady Macbeth. (*Memories* 33)

Here McCarthy presents her grandmother as a primary cause of her childhood suffering but refuses to look too closely at her character, with the excuse that she is not writing a work of fiction and, thus, it is not necessary. Yet, in the next breath, she compares her grandmother to two of Western literature's most famous villains, a device sure to accomplish nothing if not to rekindle the reader's curiosity about her.

Early in her career, McCarthy did indeed write of her experience through fiction. In addition to the stories republished in *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood*, McCarthy explored her life by fictionalizing it in several novels, such as *The Company She Keeps* (1942), *The Group* (1954) and *A Charmed Life* (1955). Even when McCarthy does write fiction,

however, she is not content to present it as such without returning to it and informing her readers about exactly which aspects of the fictionalized story are based on her life. Large sections of her later autobiographical works, especially *Intellectual Memoirs*, are devoted exclusively to sorting out which events and situations in her fiction were based on her own experience and which were indeed fictional. This push and pull in which McCarthy reveals then immediately pulls back from revealing too much but later returns to reveal even more characterizes her entire body of work.

Perhaps at last she had found him, the one she kept looking for, the one who could tell her what she was really like. (*The Company She Keeps* 101)

An essential feature of serial autobiography is the relationship between the autobiographer and her reading audience. Because the project takes place over the course of many years, the ideal reader will be one who follows along as the author discovers and presents each new step in the process. In many cases, the result is a feeling of intimacy with the audience—and a wish for the reciprocation of that feeling—on the part of the author.[14] McCarthy's work offers numerous clues to her own perception of her relationship with the reading audience. As discussed above, she welcomed actual input from any readers who might happen to know something about her life or that of her family. *The Company She Keeps* provides further indication of how McCarthy felt about the bond between the storyteller and her listener. After Margaret's intimate conversation with Bill Breen in "The Man in the Brooks Brothers Shirt," McCarthy's narrator says, "He would never be alone again…in fact, it was as if he had never been alone at all, for by a tremendous act of perception, she had thrust herself back into his past, and was settled there forever, like the dear companion, the twin, we pray for as children, while our parents, listening, laugh" (125-

[14] This is the case with Millett and Alvarez, as well; Kincaid, however, does not share this feeling.

26). For McCarthy, we, as readers, serve as that "dear companion," and we are the ones settled forever in her past. The further she digs into her past looking for the truth, the more she wants us to go there with her, and she draws us into the process with her constant reworking of the soon familiar stories in search of one more telling detail. As with the desired scenario in Margaret's exposure dream, McCarthy wants us to share in her discoveries. She hopes that by writing out her life, she will finally be able to find her secret flaw. And, when she does, she wants us to discover it along with her so that we can provide the community Margaret lacks. This accounts for the structure of McCarthy's serial autobiography in which each new book revisits past works, reviewing what she wrote about her life and combing through her memory for details she may have missed. In each new autobiographical work, McCarthy joins us as a reader of her previous works, thereby establishing the community she desires.

Long before she published her first autobiography, McCarthy was thinking about the relationship between the autobiographer and her audience. In an unpublished story, "The Lost Week," written in 1945, she considers the position of a writer who has shared his private life story with the reading public. After the author's private life has been made public, she says, "his private life is no longer private; it is a museum through which he himself has shown visitors, and if he continues to live in it, it is only as a custodian or janitor. Yet it was the very privacy of his private life that was the bond between him and his readers; in the sense of having something to hide, something unspoken, unadmitted, he was exactly like them" (qtd. in Kiernan 233). Not only does this passage indicate that McCarthy considered the bond between a writer and her readers, it shows us that she, at least at one time, believed

that the writer, in the act of autobiography, actually turns her life over to her readers, who own it thereafter.

McCarthy does indeed presume an intimacy with her readers. By the time she wrote *Intellectual Memoirs*, in fact, she evidently assumed that its readers would be familiar with her entire body of previous work. The book contains numerous references to characters and events from her fiction, several of which are given without context. We are, for instance, expected to know about her former employer, Mannie Rousuck, who appears as the character Mr. Sheer in *The Company She Keeps*. In order to understand the reference to Eunice Clark as "the 'spirit of the apples' classmate," one is expected not only to have read *The Group* but to remember it well enough to recognize one specific conversation in it (14). We are also expected to be familiar with her previous autobiographical works. How else can we comprehend the significance when she says "[w]e were living with Miss Sandison's sister's furniture" (12) or "[s]he was Lockwood, needless to say" (74)? [15]

We are also presumably meant to see the connections between McCarthy's life and her fiction, especially *The Company She Keeps*. In describing the dissolution of her relationship with John Porter (her affair during her first marriage) she says, in reference to her story "The Man in the Brooks Brothers Shirt," "[t]he deflation was already beginning, obviously, when I met the man in the Brooks Brothers shirt on the train that was taking me west" (43). In a later discussion, she actually begins referring to Margaret Sargent as "I":

> The reader will find something like those dinners in the chapter called "The Genial Host" in *The Company She Keeps*. If I may give an opinion, it is the weakest thing in the book. No doubt that is because I was unwilling to face the full reality of the

[15] Miss Sandison and Miss Lockwood were Vassar professors whom McCarthy discusses in *How I Grew*. "She was Lockwood" refers to one of two rival factions of English majors at Vassar, a situation covered in *How I Grew* and fleshed out most thoroughly in *The Group*. None of the above is mentioned in *Intellectual Memoirs*.

> relationship. In real life I slept with him and in the story I don't. I suppose I was ashamed....Even after I stopped sleeping with him, which was soon, he kept on asking me to those dinners, and I kept on accepting, because of his insistence and because, as the chapter says (though without mentioning sex between us), I was not quite ready to break with him, being still "so poor, so loverless, so lonely." (60)

The ongoing relationship between McCarthy and her readers—one which ultimately requires the reader to be familiar with nearly fifty years'-worth of material—is clearly essential to her autobiographical project, so much so that a reader of her later works would be rather lost without it.

McCarthy's relationship with the audience, however, is tenuous, and it is in this tenuousness that we can gain a great deal of insight into her personality and motivations. McCarthy wants to cultivate her bond with the audience—she wants to show us her true self and in doing so become able to see herself as she really is through our eyes—but she continually pulls back before allowing us to get too close. As Timothy Dow Adams states in *Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography*, McCarthy "presents for public consumption her most private sins in a display of candor that simultaneously reveals and conceals. She constantly claims that she wishes to hide the very sins she tells us about in blunt detail" (120). Throughout her work, there is a continual tension between wanting to draw us into her life and, at the same time, attempting to keep us at a distance.

The dynamic of shame discussed by psychoanalyst Silvan Tomkins in *Shame and its Sisters: A Sylvan Tomkins Reader* provides a helpful perspective for understanding McCarthy's relationship with her reading audience. Tomkins says: "The shame response is literally an ambivalent turning of the eyes away from the object toward the face, toward the

self. It is an act of facial communication reduction in which excitement or enjoyment is only incompletely reduced. Therefore it is an act which is deeply ambivalent….In shame I wish to continue to look and to be looked at, but I also do not wish to do so" (137). In shame, Tomkins continues, the shamed person is "forced unwillingly back into self-consciousness by the impediment to communication" when the person(s) with whom she is attempting to speak either react with derision or turn away (138). The shamed subject, in other words, retains the desire to communicate and be seen by the other but is forced instead to turn away and redirect the gaze inward, all the while still hoping to connect with the person(s) before whom she feels shamed. Like the child who covers her face with her hands but peeks through her fingers, the shamed subject directs her gaze inward and outward simultaneously.

McCarthy's search for her "secret flaw" through autobiography fits within the model that Tomkins describes. Like Margaret Sargent in her "exposure dream," McCarthy wants us to point out her flaws so that we can tell her what they are, but the real-life experience of sharing one's flaws, it turns out, is not as benign as the scenario Margaret wishes for. McCarthy's actual flaws are a source of shame, and sharing them puts her in the position of the shamed subject in Tomkins's analysis: the feeling of shame causes her to look inward, but she still wishes to look outward to the audience and draw us into the experience. The ambivalence Tomkins describes is clear in McCarthy's work, as she repeatedly backs away from letting her reader too close, but at the same time continues to dig into her past in search of the flaw(s) that everyone but her can see. Although she writes from a standpoint of shame, however, McCarthy does not back away from the search. In fact, the seriousness of the flaws she reveals only increases with every installment of her serial autobiography. While *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood* brings to light childhood humiliations and character

flaws such as pride and dishonesty, *How I Grew* broaches more significant issues, such as McCarthy's latent anti-Semitism. *Intellectual Memoirs* describes her sexual history in graphic detail, including infidelities and sexual encounters she lived to regret. Rather than a reason to stop writing, then, the shame stance becomes McCarthy's permanent position as an autobiographer as she continues to vacillate between revealing and concealing her secrets.

About truth I have always been monotheistic. It has been an article of faith with me, going back to college days, that there is a truth and that it is knowable. (*How I Grew* 199)

Her relationship with the reading audience is not the only thing about which McCarthy is ambivalent. She writes from a unique position, that of an autobiographer who uses her writing as a means of exploring her life and who firmly believes that in doing so she can reach a single, ultimate truth. Her stance on autobiography represents an unusual combination of both that of the more traditional autobiographer, who tells his story once and does not return to question it, and that of the serial autobiographer who uses autobiography to create a self on paper and whose work therefore tends to be more experimental. This pull between the wish to put the truth on paper once and for all and the repeated realization that she has once again failed to do so produces much of the material that makes up McCarthy's serial autobiography. The contradictions and paradoxes necessarily involved in this quest become a key aspect of her autobiographical project, as any progress toward the truth of her life reveals how impossible it is to reach, which only makes her more determined to try harder to do so.

McCarthy's desire to reach the ultimate truth of her life cannot be overstated. Unlike many of her peers writing in the mid-to-late twentieth century, McCarthy firmly believed that there is one objective truth and that one can discover it for oneself. In her foreword to McCarthy's *Intellectual Memoirs* Elizabeth Hardwick speaks about McCarthy's devotion to

the idea that truth is not only possible but that one's idea of truth can be completely trusted. Hardwick says, "If one would sometimes take the liberty of suggesting caution to her, advising prudence or mere practicality, she would look puzzled and answer: but it's the truth. I do not think she would have agreed it was only *her* truth—instead she often said she looked upon her writing as a mirror" (xi). Indeed, McCarthy often speaks of her confidence that there is one truth and that a person can find that truth if she is only willing to try hard enough. Her entire autobiographical project is an attempt to reach that ultimate truth about her own experience. As her metaphor of the writer as archaeologist suggests, she believes that if she can only dig far enough into her memory, she will finally discover the real truth.

Not surprisingly, McCarthy came across numerous obstacles in her search for ultimate truth, not the least of which stemmed from the fact of her orphanhood and her abusive upbringing. In *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood*, McCarthy speaks of the effects of her relatives' ridicule of her parents after their deaths: "Like all children, we wished to conform, and the notion that our former ways had been somehow ridiculous and unsuitable made the memory of them falter a little" (37). Thus began McCarthy's unstable relationship with her own memory in which she desperately wants to trust it yet is never sure that she can do so.

Another obstacle to finding the truth of her past is her history of lying when she was a child. Her pursuit of absolute honesty requires her to confess that on many occasions in her past, she was "a problem liar," "a walking mass of lies," her "whole life was a lie," and that dishonesty "dominated every social relation except those with [her] teachers" (*Memories* 65, 136, 173, *How I Grew* 74). Yet, each time she mentions her prolific lying, she insists that, for one reason or another, she had no choice. This repeated confession, each time followed

by immediate back-pedaling, gives us insight into McCarthy's view of herself as an autobiographer. She feels compelled to tell the complete truth about herself but is discomfited by the fact that this truth reveals a persistent habit of lying which is, of course, in direct conflict with the picture of herself she wishes to present. Thus, she remains honest by confessing to her lies but insists that she never actually lied unnecessarily.

McCarthy's habit of lying in the past raises an issue that she finds extremely unsettling, that of the possibility of self-deception, a topic she addresses many times and about which she expresses strong feelings. In *Intellectual Memoirs*, for example, she states that "[s]elf-deception always chilled me," and claims that she is "a fairly transparent person" (32-33, 45). In *How I Grew* she informs us that, from the time that she was a young girl, "triteness and self-deception" were qualities she "hated with a passion" (101). Her first attempts at writing (when she was a high school student) consisted of creating overly-flawed characters then making them confront their own flaws, "rubbing my heroines' noses in [the truth], furiously, as though to wake them up" (*How I Grew* 101). Although it is a frequent theme in her writing, however, the moments when she admits to self-deception herself are few and are either moments of tremendous anxiety or instances in which self-deception is a youthful flaw which she has outgrown. In *Intellectual Memoirs*, for example, she presents an extensive argument for why she slept with Edmund Wilson and ultimately married him when she is convinced that she never wanted to do either, a conundrum she revisited through the character of Martha Sinnott in her 1955 novel, *A Charmed Life*. She concludes with the uneasy admission that "[m]aybe when I wrote *A Charmed Life*, I was fooling myself about Martha's motives and am still fooling myself today, when I should be old enough to know better, about what drove me into Wilson's study on that long-ago night" (99). Looking back

in *How I Grew* at the college recommendation letter written by her teacher, Miss Mackay—a letter whose undeserved compliments make her "feel like a worm"—McCarthy decides that maybe it was she who was mistaken in her character: "Invincible in her ignorance, she may have known me better than I knew myself. That is, *I* was deceived by the will-less, passive self I seemed to be living with, and Miss Mackay was not" (170). As an adult who has outgrown her childish self-deception, she believes, she can now see the truth behind the self she "seemed to be living with" during her teenage years.

On the other hand, however, McCarthy's work reflects a fear that freedom from self-deception is ultimately impossible. "Where did the hatred of self-deception come from?" she asks. "To have been so violent, it must have contained a fear" (*How I Grew* 104). Although she admits to frequent lying in her past, she resists drawing the connection between the lie told to others and the lie told to oneself:

> Yet lying to parents and teachers is a quite different thing from lying to oneself. I suppose the first can lead to the second, but the process, I think, generally begins with the lie told to oneself and goes on to the lie told to the world. And yet, in all honesty, I don't recall lying to myself, ever, though I do recall trying to. On the other hand, if I *had* lied, would I know? How, unless someone else caught me? And who could that be?...I can never know the answer. (104)

That she "can never know the answer" remains a troubling preoccupation throughout her entire body of work.

The fact that she simultaneously longs for self-knowledge yet despairs of it accounts for an considerable tension in her autobiographical writing. The tension between these two impulses is demonstrated in the character of Margaret Sargent, who fantasizes about a test

that would once and for all prove who she is as a person. She despairs of the idea, however, even in the midst of the fantasy:

> Yet actually all this is misleading; the details, the environmental factors, the conflicting accounts of witnesses serve merely to obscure the fact that the question has been put, is being put, will be put, but worded so ambiguously, tucked into such an innocent context, that the subject cannot learn whether or not he has taken the test, let alone what his mark is. It therefore becomes important—for the subject who is interested in his status…—to examine the data of his life with the utmost severity and cunning, turning the facts every which way, sidewards, upside down, as one turned those old newspaper puzzles to find the face in the cloud. (*The Company She Keeps* 274)

McCarthy is caught in an endless cycle: she feels she must search for the truth of her self, yet it is so well hidden that she will never find it. Therefore, she must search that much harder.

The unreliability of memory is another issue that causes significant problems for the autobiographer in search of ultimate truth, one which McCarthy finds a way to circumvent, much like she does her habit of lying. On numerous occasions, McCarthy speaks of remembering something after it has been suggested to her by someone else or after something around her triggers a memory that had, until that moment, been lost. In these instances, she allows herself to trust the memory entirely, even when doing so requires some rather complicated mental maneuvering. One example concerns the above-mentioned instance in which she came upon the sign for the "Cye Bernard" clothing store, which brought back the memory of her loathed childhood nickname. In "C.Y.E.", she tells of having completely forgotten about the name until, as an adult, she sees the sign: "It was

marvelous, I said to myself that day on the subway, that I could have forgotten so easily. In the official version of my life the nickname does not appear" (*Cast a Cold Eye* 201). Yet, on the very next page, she says of her childhood self (the one that has, until now, been entirely absent from her memory), "I see myself perfectly" (202). Her explanation for the instant clarity of this previously-forgotten memory sheds light on her attitude toward memory in general:

> How political indeed is the personality, I thought. What coalitions and cabals the party in power will not make to maintain its uncertain authority! Nothing is sacred. The past is manipulated to serve the interests of the present. For any bureaucracy, amnesia is convenient....But a moment comes at last, after the regime has fallen, after all interested parties are dead, when the archives are opened and the old ghosts walk, and history must be rewritten in the light of fresh discoveries. (201-02)

McCarthy wants to believe that once the "archives" of memory are opened, the truth will out at last. The fact that this means having to repeatedly rewrite history "in light of fresh discoveries" contributes to the never-ending quality of McCarthy's search for truth.

Even when two versions of her memory are irreconcilable, McCarthy finds a way to accept them both (all the while still maintaining her belief in one achievable truth). *How I Grew* provides a revealing example of this process. The adult McCarthy is preparing to write the section of her autobiography that will cover her college years at Vassar. Her memory of her first impression upon arriving on campus is one of rapture over the beauty of the Hudson River countryside that reminded her of the English literature she had spent her life reading, a feeling of coming home to where she belonged. In doing the research for the autobiography, however, she comes across her letters to a friend back home in Seattle, in which she

complains about the scenery and parrots the opinions of her boyfriend, describing Vassar as "brittle, smart, and a little empty" (198). "This is alarming," she says, "above all to one who has set out to write her autobiography. It raises the awful question of whether there can be multiple truths or just one" (199). The way that she resolves this dilemma is particularly illuminating. She decides that "Vassar changed me while I was not looking, making me more like itself. If I can no longer feel what I felt about the college when I wrote to Ted, it is because I, too, the product of a Vassar education, am now brittle, smart, and a little empty. And oblivious of it" (200). The fact that she would rather believe this unflattering description of her own character than that her memory could be incorrect shows how important it is to McCarthy to believe that her memory can be trusted.

There remain, of course, "unaccountable holes" in McCarthy's memory that are not so easily resolved (*How I Grew* 20). The issue of whether or not her father was a drinker, for example, "*remains a mystery, an eerie and troubling one*" (*Memories* 15). Other examples range from the trivial, such as what season it was when she moved from Minneapolis to Seattle, to the momentous, such as "whether [she] 'really' wanted to marry [Edmund] Wilson or prayed to be spared it" (*Intellectual Memoirs* 109). But through her entire autobiographical project, she continues to believe that the "regime" of personality will fall, and memory will be restored.

One inherent paradox in the search for self through autobiography—especially for the autobiographer obsessed with reaching a single truth—is the fact that the self of the autobiographer is not a stable entity. The act of writing autobiography necessarily involves several versions of the self: the self in the present writing the text, the past self (or, in many cases, selves) remembered in the writing, and the new textual self that emerges from the

process. After the publication of the autobiography, yet another new self—the writer as autobiographer—is born. All of these selves are present in a single-volume autobiography; in the case of the serial autobiographer, the potential collection of selves is virtually limitless. This presents a challenge to the autobiographer who attempts to find the self through autobiography, particularly one as concerned with truth as is McCarthy. The multiple sets of narrators in *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood* provide a compelling example of the slippery nature of the autobiographer's self. Each story in the collection has its own narrator; likewise, each story was written by McCarthy at a different time (making the self in the present writing of each story a different one). The problem this presents for McCarthy becomes clear in the sections of *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood* that serve as commentary on the individual stories. In every case, McCarthy—the writer of *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood*—realizes that she cannot rely on the self that first wrote the story. Each time she writes as herself in the autobiographical present, she discovers that she is not in fact the same person who wrote before. She is now someone who sees the errors committed by her past self who believed that what she was writing was true. This goes on *ad infinitum* as her project of digging deeper and deeper into her memory reveals the holes in each prior attempt. She hints at this problem very early in her work in her Foreword to the 1942 edition of *The Company She Keeps* (removed in subsequent editions). She says of the book:

> It is not only scenes and persons but points of view that are revisited—the intimate "she," the affectionate, diminutive "you," the thin, abstract, autobiographical "I." If the reader is moved to ask: "Can all this be the same person?" why, that is the question that both the heroine and the author are up against. For the search is not

> conclusive: there is no deciding which of these personalities is the "real" one; the home address of the self, like that of the soul, is not to be found in the book. (x)

If this is true of fiction, it is certainly the case with autobiography in which the multiple selves of the author herself also come into play.

At times, McCarthy herself speaks of her past self as if she was a different person. In the introductions to both *Sights and Spectacles* and *Theatre Chronicles,* for example, she describes her young, condescending critic's voice as "the voice of a period, as well as that of a person" (ix, viii). In *How I Grew* she looks back on herself the one year she attended public high school:

> Evidently the self that felt the attraction of Garfield's mob scene has been sloughed like a snake's skin. Or brutally killed, leaving me, the person I am now, as the sole survivor. "I know not the man," St. Peter said, denying Jesus, and I can say, with greater truthfulness, of that thirteen-year-old pennant-waver, "I don't know that child." In what I am about to relate the disassociation is almost complete, resulting in big patches of amnesia. (48)

The biggest divergence between past and current self occurs in McCarthy's various discussions of the hated childhood nickname, Cye. In the above-mentioned story, "C.Y.E.," she expresses outright hostility toward her former self. The story ends thus:

> And as for the pale, plain girl in the front of the study hall, her, too, I can no longer reach. I see her creeping down the corridor with a little knot of her classmates. "Hello, Cye," I say with a touch of disdain for her rawness, her guileless ambition....I hate her, for she is my natural victim, and it is I who have given her the name, the

> shameful, inscrutable name that she will never, sleepless in her bed at night, be able to puzzle out. (*Cast a Cold Eye* 212)

Seven years after the publication of "C.Y.E.," however, McCarthy again tells the story in her short story, "Names," which appears as a chapter in *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood*. "Names," presents the eighth-grade McCarthy with the same hated nickname, but treats her with sympathy and paints her as frustrated and embarrassed, but not nearly as abject as the figure in "C.Y.E.". This example yet again illustrates the instability of the autobiographical self. Not only does McCarthy paint her eighth grade self as two different people in the two versions of the story, the self that wrote the more sympathetic portrait of young Mary is not the one who chose to distance herself from her past with the earlier scathing criticism. One could argue, of course, that the two stories are simply written by the same adult writer in different moods—not actually two different selves—but for a writer like McCarthy whose entire project is based on discovering the truth of who she is, these differences matter a great deal as they show how impossible it is to pin down one definitive self and then present it to the world through autobiography.

Reading McCarthy's works as a series, one can trace the evolution of her struggle with the fact that there is not a single self that can be captured through the act of autobiography. Her analysis of Monique Wittig's novel *The Opoponax* in "Everybody's Childhood," a review published ten years after *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood*, reveals the conundrum faced by the autobiographer who hopes to capture a single self on paper:

> There are no flashbacks. It is all, you could say, a flashback, since the author is not recounting the story but reliving it sharply in memory. But she is reliving it as if it had happened to *somebody else*, which in fact is always the case. Catherine Legrand

> is not a fictional alias or transparent disguise for Monique Wittig: she is a conjecture about an earlier Monique Wittig. It is clear that between "me" remembering and my previous self, there is a separation, as in the Einsteinian field theory, so that if I write "I" for both, I am slurring over an unsettling reality. But how to state that uncertainty in narrative terms? (*The Writing on the Wall* 104)

These reflections on Wittig's work reveal the complex position in which McCarthy finds herself. She recognizes the difficulty—not to say impossibility—of capturing the "unsettling reality" of the multiple versions of self in the form of a story, but she is not interested in using nontraditional, experimental forms like that employed by Wittig to do so. In other words, she is aware of the inherent instabilities in self and narrative highlighted by those writing in avant garde forms, but she is not willing to accept them.

The theme of life as a story is one which McCarthy addresses explicitly and often. She states, for example, in "Everybody's Childhood" that "[e]verybody's childhood is the same in its essentials. For a child, it is a story he is memorizing under his breath, beginning with his name" (*The Writing On The Wall* 107). She often appears excited about the possibility of uncovering the true self through the act of creating a story. In *The Company She Keeps*, for example, Margaret takes courage from the idea that she is going to make sense of her life through telling it to her psychoanalyst:

> She felt suddenly excited and gay. Everything was going to be all right. They were on the scent. The fugitive, criminal self lay hiding in a thicket, but the hounds of the intellect were hot in pursuit. Ah, she thought, thank God for the mind, the chart, the compass. Of course, the universe had to be meaningful....Her life was not mere gibberish; rather, it was like one of those sealed mystery stories where the reader is on

> his honor not to go beyond a certain page until he has guessed the identity of the murderer. (267-58)

McCarthy, however, is repeatedly reminded of the complexities that the coherent narrative glosses over. Yet she remains determined to tell a coherent life story, even though she repeatedly runs up against the barriers to doing so. Rather than giving up on the quest, she incorporates the challenges she faces into her autobiographical project, and those challenges become a fundamental part of the story she tells. This is a pattern that McCarthy's work shares with that of all of the serial autobiographers discussed here: in each case, the act of writing one's autobiography presents difficulties and complications which become an essential component of the project itself.

McCarthy also fears that telling her life in the form of a story will force her to face—and share with the audience—some things about her history which she would prefer to disavow. She feels that her history as an orphan too closely resembles the stereotypical orphan tale found in literature, and she fears that her own individual experience will get lost in the resemblance of her story to the typical fictional one. The uncomfortable experience of being buttonholed by someone's assumptions about her is one with which McCarthy was familiar, as is evidenced in her interaction with a colonel on a train described in the article "Artists in Uniform" and revisited in "Settling the Colonel's Hash." In "Artists in Uniform," McCarthy tells the story of a train trip on which she engages in conversation with an anti-Semitic colonel who plies her with offensive remarks about Jews. Because of the way McCarthy is dressed, the colonel immediately recognizes her as an artist and a Bohemian and automatically disregards her arguments against anti-Semitism as "coming from *a certain quarter*" and therefore not to be taken seriously (*On the Contrary* 57). McCarthy is

dismayed to realize that she is so instantly identifiable "as an artist, through and through, stained with my occupation like the dyer's hand" (57). What's more, the fact that she is recognizable as an artist allows the colonel to place her within a stereotype that suits his opinions. Because he is partly correct about her, she cannot escape his view of her character; she loses control of the entire interaction and, in the end, the colonel gets the best of her. "I wanted to be an artist," she confesses in "Settling the Colonel's Hash," "but not to pay the price of looking like one" (*On the Contrary* 239).

McCarthy's relationship to her life story resembles her relationship to her status as an artist in "Artists in Uniform." Just as she wanted "to be an artist but not to pay the price of looking like one," she wants to sort out her life story but not accept some of the things that it might suggest about her. Margaret Sargent struggles with this dilemma in *The Company She Keeps*: "Ah, she said to herself now, I reject this middle-class tragedy, this degenerated Victorian novel where I am Jane Eyre or somebody in Dickens or Kipling or brave little Elsie Dinsmore fainting over the piano. I reject the whole pathos of the changeling, the orphan, the stepchild" (263). She goes on to innumerate several specific traumatic events from her childhood (most of which mirror those McCarthy describes about her own childhood in *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood*), which she also rejects because "[i]t is all too apropos for acceptance" (263). "Yet what were you going to do?" she continues. "You could not treat your life-history as though it were an inferior novel and dismiss it with a snubbing phrase. It had after all been like that" (264). While she cannot deny it, however, the similarity of her own story to the "typical" orphan tale upsets her:

> It was not merely a distaste for the obvious that had led both her and the doctor to avoid, insofar as it was possible, lengthy discussions of her childhood. The subject

> frightened them both, for it suggested to them that the universe is mechanical, utterly predictable, frozen, and this in its own way is quite as terrible as the notion that the universe is chaotic. It is essential for our happiness, she thought, to have both the pattern and the loose ends, to roughen the glassy hexameter with the counter-rhythm of speech. (262)

She wants, in other words, to explore the story of her life, but does not want to be reduced to it, and she fears that telling her story through narrative will do just that. As an autobiographer, she wants the audience to understand her, but she is anxious about the possibility that, like the colonel in "Artists in Uniform," the audience will merely see part of the story—the part that can easily be fit into a stereotype and dismissed—and will misinterpret her. All of these concerns about the effectiveness of telling one's story through narrative contribute to the form that McCarthy's overall autobiography takes.

***Now that I have established this, or nearly established it, I have the feeling of "remembering," as though I had always known it.* (*Memories of a Catholic Girlhood* 48)**

As with all of the authors discussed here, McCarthy's attitude toward truth determines the shape of her long-term autobiographical project. Even after she has written and published what she considers the truth, McCarthy returns to question and interrogate it further. This practice accounts for the layered structure of her autobiographical body of writing in which her later works revisit her earlier ones. *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood* is actually two layers in this process, as it is composed of stories, most of them published separately in *The New Yorker*, and supplemented with commentaries that outline extensively and in great detail the degree to which each story was, purposefully or unintentionally, fictionalized. *How I Grew* builds upon many of the same stories, while *Intellectual Memoirs*

reveals the autobiographical elements behind much of McCarthy's fiction, with particular attention to *The Company She Keeps* (the events of which reflect McCarthy's life between 1936 and 1938, the years covered in *Intellectual Memoirs*). In this quest for the truth, McCarthy digs deeper into her memories with every writing, hoping to find the "real" truth beneath each layer of falsehood. In doing so, she obsessively agonizes over details, many of which her readers could not possibly care about, much less discover on our own, such as, for example, the location of her false confession to the convent priest in "C'est le Premier Pas Qui Coûte," one of the stories in *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood*: "*Actually*," she says in the commentary that follows the story, "*it now seems to me that my interview with the first priest took place not in the convent parlor but in the old priest's study. Where this study was and how I got there, I have no idea*" (124). Although this detail is absolutely inessential, McCarthy wants us to know that she has pored over it and that she is sharing with us the most accurate possible recollection of the event.

The form of McCarthy's later autobiographical works, *How I Grew* and *Intellectual Memoirs*, reveals even more about McCarthy's view of truth in autobiography. When her autobiographical stories were first published in *The New Yorker*, she tells us in *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood*, many people assumed that they were works of fiction. The public, McCarthy decided, "*takes for granted that anything written by a professional writer is* eo ipso *untrue[.] The professional writer is looked on perhaps as a 'storyteller,' like a child who has fallen into that habit and is mechanically chidden by his parents even when he protests that* this time *he is telling the truth*" (*Memories* 3). She counters this problem in her later autobiographical works by adopting a less polished, frequently awkward and cumbersome style, which received much criticism from reviewers, who complained about the

"long stretches of trivia told in fatiguing detail" in *How I Grew* and the "catalogue of sexual adventures...that bears a striking resemblance to Homer's catalogue of Achaean ships in the *Iliad*" that makes up *Intellectual Memoirs* (Gelderman 347, Hart 50). Several reviewers also claimed that the later two works fail to reveal anything new about McCarthy or her experience. Jean Strouse, for example, claims that in *Intellectual Memoirs*, McCarthy's "once vivid and original voice now sounds thin, mannered, dryly self-important—listing the names of people, credentials, cocktails and clothes, but telling almost nothing of her emotional experience. She interrogates facts as if they could testify to some important truth, but as memory fades (and, probably, illness intrudes) the questions seem pointless" (16).

While the questions and minute details in McCarthy's later works may seem pointless in themselves, however, they reveal more than the above criticisms suggest. The awkward style of these works is a result of McCarthy's attempt to tell her story as truthfully as possible. Since McCarthy's attempts to write her life in the form of the stories that make up *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood* met with disbelief from the reading public, she alters her style in *How I Grew* and *Intellectual Memoirs*, choosing instead to write her life in a way that repeatedly jars the reader back into the present, thus ensuring that we will in no way mistake what she is writing for fiction. *How I Grew* is written in a style that repeatedly draws the reader back to the present moment of McCarthy's writing it. It contains no fewer than twenty-one comments along the lines of "But stop! That cannot be true," "But wait!", "Hold on!", "Come to think of it...", "All of a sudden it strikes me...", and "Till this moment, I never knew" (5, 58, 75, 100, 109, 97). *Intellectual Memoirs* relies less on this tactic, but includes the lists of irrelevant details that so many reviewers found excruciating, details like the "mechanics of publishing" that McCarthy learned at Covici-Friede: "I learned printer's

signs and the marks to make on a manuscript before sending it to the printer. For instance, you lower-cased a capital letter by drawing a slash through it; to upper-case, you drew three lines under a letter and wrote 'cap' in the margin; if you wanted to retain a hyphen, you made it into an 'equals' sign" (64-65).[16] Rather than an indication of carelessness or the failings of old age, I would argue that her digressive style is intended to illustrate to her reading audience that she is telling the unadulterated truth, not crafting her experience into a story.[17] By filling *Intellectual Memoirs* with random details about her life and reminding us roughly every thirteen pages in *How I Grew* that she is "just now remembering" what she is telling us, she affects a style specifically intended to highlight the ongoing nature of self-discovery in her writing and draw us, the readers, into that process. Reading her work as a serial autobiography allows us to recognize the ways that McCarthy's yearning toward truth (and having her work read as a truthful account of her life) directly affects the form that her larger autobiographical project takes.

There are several dubious points in this memoir.
(*Memories of a Catholic Girlhood* 47)

McCarthy's autobiographical project represents what might be considered an unintentionally serial autobiography. McCarthy wants nothing more than to locate and pin down the truth of her experience. The serial nature of her project is the result of her inability to do so. One gets the sense from reading her works that, unlike the other authors discussed here, McCarthy would have been content with writing one definitive autobiography that clearly states who she is as a person; her inability to do so was a life-long source of

[16] It should be noted that *Intellectual Memoirs* was unfinished at McCarthy's death and, thus, contains elements that may have been edited out had she lived to do so. Rather than diminishing the value of the book, however, this fact gives us particularly helpful insight into her writing process.

[17] For a detailed analysis of this issue, see Laurie F. Leach's "Lying, Writing, and Confrontation: Mary McCarthy and Lillian Hellman."

frustration. An important contributing factor to this frustration—and to the serial nature of her project—is the fact that no matter how well she thought she remembered something as she was writing about it, in time she would begin to see the holes in her memory or, in some cases, would even learn that what she was sure she remembered could not possibly have happened in the way that she thought. She would fill these holes and make corrections to her account with another layer of autobiography, but a lingering suspicion that she had not yet reached truth remained. After all, she had been sure about the previous version of the story and had, once again, been proven wrong.

As Hardwick points out, McCarthy viewed her writing as a mirror. Yet, she frequently experienced profound doubts about the possibility of ever telling one's story accurately. She was never sure that the self in the mirror was truly hers. In *The Company She Keeps,* McCarthy addresses this loss of faith in the possibility of finding truth through autobiography:

> [Margaret] was losing the thread of the story, which was getting fearfully involved, like one of those Elizabethan dramas in which the characters change their disguises so often (Enter the Friar disguised as a Friar) that the final unmasking leaves everyone more perplexed than before. She came at last to the place where she wondered whether the false self was not the true one. What if she were an impostor? (294)

This question—"What if I am an imposter?"—haunts McCarthy's entire body of work. It is the reason that, in spite of her continued insistence that one final truth is reachable, she could never conclude that she had finally managed to reach it and stop writing her autobiography. She was never able to overcome the fear that there was one more level of truth just below the surface of her memory.

McCarthy's anxiety about the possibility of being an imposter—and not knowing it—pervades all of her writing, not only her strictly autobiographical works. It is likely no coincidence that McCarthy created two fictional characters—the ironically named Kay Strong in *The Group* and Martha Sinnott (Sin Not) in *A Charmed Life*—whose lives share events with her own but whose personalities lack self-awareness, and kills them both in the end. Kay, a character based on McCarthy's life after graduation from Vassar, including her first marriage, struggles unsuccessfully to find an identity that is her own, not simply the performance of a role. The novel begins with her marriage and ends with her funeral after she falls to her death from a window. Martha Sinnott is based on McCarthy's life after her marriage to Edmund Wilson. As the above passage from *Intellectual Memoirs* suggests, McCarthy wrote this story in hopes of figuring out what drove her to marry Wilson (a man she doesn't believe she ever loved) in the first place. The narrator of *A Charmed Life* tells us that Martha tries to "see herself from the outside" but fails, "even...at her most objective, when she seemed to be straining out of the window of her nature" (22). Like Kay, she is killed off in the end of the novel, this time in a car crash. Perhaps Margaret Sargent, the other heroine whose life most closely aligns with McCarthy's, is allowed to live, in spite of her self-doubts, because ultimately, "she could still detect her own frauds" (*The Company She Keeps* 303). This seems to be McCarthy's ultimate autobiographical goal as well.

Chapter 2
"Being One's Actual Self On Paper": Living In/As a Book in the Works of Kate Millett

In her 1974 memoir, *Flying*, Kate Millett presents a paradox that would come to describe her entire body of autobiographical work. "You may well ask," she says, "how I expect to assert my privacy by resorting to the outrageous publicity of being one's actual self on paper. There's a possibility of it working," she insists, "if one choose the terms, to wit: outshouting image-gimmick America through a quietly desperate search for self" (83). The need to assert her privacy came with the 1970 publication of her doctoral thesis as *Sexual Politics*, a book that almost instantly became a bestseller, thrusting her into the international spotlight. In *Flying* she recounts how, as a thirty-five-year-old sculptor who had never yet had a public exhibition, she was unaccustomed to the attention brought on by the book's publication and responded to the media with naïve enthusiasm: "For a week or two it was fun to be 'famous'….Here were people so interested in what I might say they were prepared to write it down or broadcast it. So I chattered for reporters with an ingenuous candor I now find it particularly grating to recall" (82). The fun of being famous soon wore off, however, when Millett found that she was expected to embody the entire Women's Movement, a role that encompassed often conflicting ideas of who she should be. Some members of the Movement, for example, insisted that she perform as their "star" member while others criticized her for even putting her name on her work, a move they considered elitist and contrary to the egalitarian spirit of the Movement. Millett quickly came to feel that she had become "a curiosity, a photograph, the letters of a name," rather than a person (94).

Millett's identity crisis—as well as her uneasy relationship with the Women's Movement—reached the breaking point when, mere months after *Sexual Politics*'

publication, she was outed as a lesbian at a Columbia University conference. A reporter for *Time Magazine* was in the audience, and the world soon knew that, although she was married to a man at the time, Millett identified as a lesbian. Soon she was embroiled in even more controversy between women's rights groups who wanted her to renounce her lesbianism and gay rights groups who deemed her insufficiently gay, as she was married to a man. (Bisexuality, Millett laments, was widely considered a "cop-out") (*Flying* 15). As a result of these protracted battles, along with pressure and guilt from family members who were embarrassed by the media attention given to her homosexuality, Millett came to feel that that she was no longer herself: "I can't be Kate Millett any more" she says in *Flying*. "It's an object, a thing. A joke at cocktail parties. It's no one" (14). This loss of self eventually led Millett to a mental breakdown and several suicide attempts.[18]

Beginning with *Flying*, Millett uses her autobiographical writing to reclaim the sense of self she lost as a result of these events. She even goes as far as to say that her writing is an effort to save her own life: "The confessional should wait upon one's ripe old age. But it was apparent to me that I might have no ripe old age, was sure not to have one, if I did not take some steps towards recovering my being" (83). Millett takes the idea of autobiography as a life-saving mission seriously, even, at times, literally. In *The Loony-Bin Trip*, she writes about how writing saved her from depression after she lost both her husband and her home: "The only way out [of depression] is to write: the manuscript I called the Deathbook with all the notes and passages, the fragments from the first bust and lockup, all the attempts at suicide that flooded in afterward, the very record of the end of me….A fight back, a writer's solution to the panic" (254-55). She continues: "You have to write your way out. Only work, only writing can do it—can forestall depression. Work will save you" (256).

[18] These events are referred to in *Flying* and discussed more thoroughly in *The Loony-Bin Trip*.

Throughout her body of autobiographical writing, she continually returns to this idea that her life is her work, and her work will save her life. Again and again, we are invited to watch as she writes her way out of loss or depression, even the impulse toward suicide.

Like Mary McCarthy, Millett explicitly states the objective of using her autobiographical writing as a means of exploring her life and figuring out who she is. While McCarthy depicts herself as an "amateur archaeologist" of her life (*Memories of a Catholic Girlhood* 6), Millett describes her autobiographical work on several occasions as a documentary. Both metaphors suggest the process of stepping back from one's life and examining it from the outside. The two writers differ, however, in the means by which they invite the reader into the process. The metaphors they choose are telling. As an "archeologist" of her life, McCarthy digs into her past in search of clues that will reveal to her—and, in turn, to us—who she is. She invites her reader to join her in the search for facts about her past but keeps us at a distance, repeatedly pulling back from revealing too much about the "artifacts" she finds and their meaning to her life. Millett, on the other hand, shows us everything (or at least works very hard to give us the impression that she does). An important aspect of the exploration process for Millett is sharing the process with the reader. For Millett, the performance of the search is at least as important as what she finds by doing it, whereas for McCarthy, the facts she seeks are the priority. In both cases, serial autobiography allows these authors to extend this process over the course of a lifetime, adjusting and adapting the method along the way.

For both McCarthy and Millett, shame is a driving force behind the autobiographical project, at least in part. McCarthy is obsessed with the attempt to find the shameful hidden flaw that she believes everyone else can see. Millett was publicly shamed and writes as an

attempt to regain control over the persona that fame and publicity created—the "Kate Millett" with whom she can no longer identify. The two writers differ in their methods, however. McCarthy's method of sharing her life with her reader is to partially reveal, then pull back…partially reveal, then pull back. Millett's approach, on the other hand, might be better described as: reveal…examine what she has revealed…adjust…reveal…reexamine what she has revealed…etc. Like McCarthy, Millett writes from the position of the shamed subject, as described by Silvan Tomkins. She directs her gaze inward while constantly keeping an eye on her reading audience and hoping to connect with us. Throughout her extensive body of autobiographical work, Millett adopts the stance of the shamed subject—maintaining it even after the immediate shame has passed—but turns it into a position of power from which she can control the image that the world sees. Unlike McCarthy, who wants to see herself through our eyes, Millett writes in order to direct our view of her.

There is another fundamental difference between McCarthy's writing project and Millett's. While McCarthy writes exclusively to figure out who she is, Millett combines this effort with an attempt to reach out to others whose struggles are similar to her own. She not only tells her own story but devotes herself to speaking on behalf of several groups who cannot so easily speak for themselves, such as the mentally ill, as she does in *The Loony-Bin Trip*, nursing home residents, as she does in *Mother Millett*, and women and homosexuals, as she does throughout all of her works. Millett exposes her own struggles, in other words, not only to cope with them herself, but to create a community with others who can benefit from reading her story.

For Millett, writing and shame are closely related. On numerous occasions in *Flying*, she returns to the moment of being outed at Columbia, citing it as a moment about which she

has difficulty writing: “I know the moment the felt pen stopped, the snow stretching into tedium through the lace curtains, the felt pen coming to a halt. Stopped, trying to speak that terrible moment at Columbia, Teresa Juarez yelling at me from the audience, ‘Are you a Lesbian? Say it. Are you?’” (14). Rather than writing about the moment itself, then, she instead writes about the experience of attempting to write about it. Each time she mentions “the long moment at Columbia” she does so in the context of attempting to write the story (*Flying* 181). *Flying* is, in large part, the attempt to regain writing and move past the particularly shameful moment that was the culmination of a long period of shame and exposure in Millett’s life. Instead of merely writing about the event, however, Millett draws on the experience in order to craft a unique writing style. Serial autobiography allows her to continually adjust and refine this style over the course of her entire writing career.

Throughout her numerous autobiographical works, Millett frequently describes herself as “living in a book” or, in one case, “living a book, which is always more fun than writing one” (*Mother Millett* 262). Millett experiences the “full rabbit run of living in a book” when she is writing about the experiences she is currently living, rather than merely reflecting on the past (*Going to Iran* 30). Thus, the book becomes an ongoing process that the reader is invited to witness. When engaged in the process of “living in a book,” then, Millett feels compelled to divulge details of her life that one would presumably edit out of a more traditional memoir. In *Going to Iran*, for example, she speaks of the attempt to reconnect with an aunt from whom she has been estranged in order to write a book about her. She says, “because I am visiting my aunt, while writing about her, I am living in a book. If she rejects me, I have to write that” (30). As spontaneous as it may seem, however, the aesthetic of “living in a book” is one that Millett purposefully and meticulously cultivates

throughout her writing career. This is perhaps nowhere more evident than in the fact that the book about her aunt that Millett discusses "living in" in *Going to Iran*—a book which is clearly about another topic entirely—was never published. Yet, Millett chooses to present herself in the act of living the experience in terms of how it will appear in written form, even if it means publishing it in an unrelated text. This practice reflects the above-mentioned stance of the shamed subject. Through the aesthetic of "living in a book," Millett is able to turn her attention inward and study her every experience while at the same time keeping an eye on how her life/text appears to her readers, as we frequently see her in the act of watching herself writing about her life.[19]

It is helpful to view Millett's autobiographical project as a mirror, especially when one takes into consideration her vexed relationship with her own mirrored reflection. She discusses mirrors explicitly on two occasions, both in *Flying*. The first mention of mirrors concerns her life-long view that, as a lesbian, she is somehow "grotesque": "Though I know it is the others who have made us ugly, the knowledge has never furnished me relief. I have taken their squint of disapproval into my own eyes, fearful of mirrors since adolescence" (92). The other mention of mirrors also concerns her homosexuality. In a conversation with her friend Vita, she says, "But for me my mirrored self has always been a stigma, accusing me. 'Someone ought to do a job on the mirror as a symbol in homosexual writing. Starting with Dorian's portrait. Capote uses them too, and other writers seem to resort to them when identity is questioned. Or feared'" (238-39). Millett's relationship with mirrors exemplifies

[19] In this respect, Millett's work joins a long tradition that began with Michel de Montaigne's *Essays*, composed in 1580. Michel Beaujour's analysis of Montaigne's *Essays* in *Poetics of the Literary Self-Portrait* could be applied to Millett's work as well: "Dismissing the imperative of textual elaboration and completion, the *Essays* foreground the procedure that produces them…. By drawing attention to the code rather than the message, the *Essays* engender the figure of the subject who manipulates the code to produce a new sort of message: this message is precisely *the foregrounding of the code by the addresser*" (111 Italics in the original). Likewise, Millett's notion of "living (in) a book" calls to mind Montaigne's claim that "I am myself the matter of my book" (2).

the ambivalent stance of the shamed subject.[20] Millett's goal as a writer of autobiography is to rid her view of self from the "squint of disapproval" inherited from others while both seeing and presenting herself in the way that she chooses. By striving to "be her actual self on paper" through serial autobiography, Millett is able to create a different kind of mirror, one which allows her to both create the image she wants to present to the world and continually check her own reflection to see what she looks like as an artist and a lesbian. The repetitive aspect of serial autobiography allows her to continually refine and readjust the image that she presents, a process that, to date, has spanned twenty-seven years.[21]

Millett's method of "assert[ing] my privacy by resorting to the outrageous publicity of being one's actual self on paper"—a technique that began with *Flying* and has continued throughout her career—has been met with misunderstanding, if not utter derision, by numerous critics such as Elizabeth Gleick, who disparages Millett's "flood of consciousness" style as "maudlin self-indulgence" and Chris Bearchell, who sees Millett's insistence on recording the minute details of her life as inability to place emphasis on the important ones (24). A closer look at Millett's work, however, reveals that her writing style is much more tightly-controlled than critiques like these suggest. Millett does indeed affect an unstructured, stream-of-consciousness style and displays an almost relentless attention to detail in her lengthy autobiographical accounts. She does so, however, for a purpose. She discusses this purpose explicitly in *Flying*: "If I finish my book I will have no secrets to be afraid for, corrupted over, tied to, as I have been all my life, hiding" (187). Later, she tells

[20] For another example of the relationship between mirrors and shame, see Virginia Woolf's autobiographical essay "A Sketch of the Past." In this essay, Woolf recounts a dream in which she is looking in a mirror and suddenly sees "a horrible face—the face of an animal" over her shoulder (*Moments of Being* 69). Woolf traces her life-long fear of mirrors to the shame she felt when, as a small child, she was sexually molested by her half-brother.

[21] *Flying*, Millett's first autobiographical book, was published in 1974. As of this writing, her most recent autobiography is *Mother Millett*, which was published in 2001.

her mother, "We are only free when we tell the truth. If you really let people know you aren't at their mercy" (434). Likewise, in *Sita*, she says of her notebook, "It has become my friend, solace, obsession. I will live in it, in the ability to record experience which makes me more than its victim. Putting feeling into words, and the words onto paper. Magical transformation of pain into substance, meaning, something of my own" (137). Thus, she uses her work as an attempt to circumvent the "image-gimmick" society that has made her into a caricature and instead present an image of her own choosing to the world.

The reviewers who see Millett's work as meandering and unfocused overlook a key aspect of her project: a careful reading of any of her autobiographical works reveals that the seemingly stream-of-consciousness style is deceptive and her work is, in fact, extremely controlled—one might even say policed—throughout. Her writing is specifically about writing—both the act and the product—and, quite frequently, what we as readers actually see is Millett watching herself write. She continually presents herself as writing, thinking about writing, worrying about how she will write about the event she is experiencing, even agonizing over a failure or inability to write. Like McCarthy insisting that she is "just now remembering" what she tells us in order to highlight the ongoing nature of self-discovery in her work, Millett uses her writing style to draw the reader into the process of creating and maintaining her image as a writer who is living her life on paper.

Then a hope of understanding, of figuring it out merely by portraying, conveying, taking the being who so puzzles and attracts, distilling that essence into matter with words on paper and holding it in the hand, outstretched. See—here it is. Here is why. Here is who. (*A.D.* 303)

It is difficult to imagine a writer who could take the idea of living one's life on paper more seriously than Millett does. Whereas McCarthy reflects on her past but draws the

reader into her present writing experience by frequently stating that she is only at that moment remembering the event about which she is writing, Millett writes in the present, or at least fosters the illusion that she is doing so. Moreover, she immerses herself completely in the writing project and strives to live her life as if its every event and detail is already a part of the book she is writing. This writing method began with *Flying*—Millett's first autobiographical book—and has continued throughout her entire writing career. In the 1990 introduction to *Flying*, she describes her writing experience:

> *Flying* is a strenuous effort to live one's conviction to the letter, to watch and keep track, thus its self-conscious awareness of each moment, its rigorous praxis, its reckless assurance, its aura of discovery and conversion, its necessary belief in friendship and in art, its determination to find another better way to live, its obsessiveness, even at the end its frenzy to escape living in a book. (x-xi)

This depiction describes Millett's method in all of her autobiographical works. Again and again, Millett uses her writing to "watch and keep track" of where her life is going and how she is living it. She presents herself as a writer, first and foremost, and even approaches life events through the perspective of how they will appear in her book. She does this, I would argue, in order not only to study her own life—the attempt to recover her being that she laments having lost with the fame and shame episodes covered in *Flying*—but at the same time to shape the picture of that life as she goes. This method also allows her to step back and look at the work she is writing and the life she is living and adjust the picture of herself that she presents to her readers over time. Serial autobiography extends this process even further, as she frequently views her life/self as it appeared in previous books as well as the current self she is constructing for the readers of the present work.

It is common for Millett to portray the book she is writing as an actual living being. She describes both *A.D.* and *Mother Millett*, for example, as "unplanned pregnancies" that interrupt other books. This suggests that for Millett living and writing are indeed inseparable. The impulse to write—to both live and record her life on paper—is so strong that she likens it to a force within, like a baby that grows inside her beyond her control and must be released into the world. (It would perhaps not be going too far to suggest that it also implies that the books will ultimately take on lives of their own.) Likewise, she refers, on several occasions, to her books as her "progeny" and to an unfinished written work as "an abortion, a book that didn't get born" (*Flying* 21). These metaphors also indicate the intense connection Millett feels between her life/self and the written works she produces. (It is significant that while Millett writes within several genres, she only describes her autobiographical works in these terms.)

Millett takes the idea of living in a book so seriously, in fact, that she almost always has a hard time "escaping" the book so that the writing of it can end. In *Sita*, for example, she expresses the desire to "escape living in a book," much like she does in the above-quoted passage from *Flying*: "This notebook business. The keeping of records. Good for an occasional *cri de coeur* maybe; but when it becomes bigger than what it recalls, takes on a life of its own? When the time comes that it has to be owned up to? I stand accused. Trapped in my own device" (273).[22] At times like these, she becomes so invested in the writing project that it takes over her life and she loses the ability to let it go. In *A.D.* she describes the obsessive writing process necessary in dealing with her aunt's death:

[22] It is interesting to note that in *Going to Iran*, Millett specifically states that when writing the journals that became *Sita*, she was not in "the full rabbit run of living in a book": "*Sita* was over before I saw it as a book, though half of its pages were written as it occurred; they were private exercises, journals, whatever" (30). Yet, in the final copy of the autobiography, she chooses to present the material as if it is being written in this way.

> Two years dead now and I spend a perfect day in Provincetown scrambling my woe into an old portable typewriter which transposes my persistent if divided emotions into still further incoherence. Why? In order to elevate real persons with their quirks and inconsistencies into abstractions, ideas, representative intellectual pinballs, principles? And then attack them all over again. (294)

She feels unable to cope with her aunt's death and enjoy her own life—the perfect day in Provincetown that goes by while she remains inside at the typewriter—until she can work through on paper every aspect of her complicated relationship with her aunt. This means dissecting this relationship, viewing it from every angle, and attempting to figure it out, all the while presenting it to her reading audience for our consideration. As the above quotation indicates, this is a process which is repeated over and over again. Just as she begins to reach one conclusion, she stops to dissect it, and the process continues. The act of serial autobiography extends this process even further, as she often rehashes themes from earlier works as she writes another new one.

Sita, which chronicles the dying relationship between Millett and a lover, is the most explicit example of Millett's inability to escape living in a book. In it, she reports having to actually leave the state of California in order to make herself stop writing the book: "But I know I want to leave her. If only so that I can stop writing this damn record, a record begun as consolation for losing her love. Having regained it in some measure, writing about it has come between us, forcing me to escape for a while just so the notebook can come to an end" (302). She states, in fact, on five separate occasions throughout the book, that she may have stayed in California as long as she did in order to have the experience to write about. On first mentioning the subject early in the narrative, she is still mulling over the decision whether to

stay in California or give up on the relationship and go home to New York: "I am lost here. Go back to New York or stay and go on suffering, experiencing whatever is to be experienced here? Maybe that's it, maybe the lure of the experience itself, painful as it might be, the experience in its learning and its sensations. If I leave I will not have had it. If I stay I can study it, even record, possess it" (60). As the narrative continues and she returns repeatedly to the subject, we see her coming to the conclusion that perhaps she is staying more for the writing than for the relationship: "Would I have preferred the expected, the reasonable shape and continuation of events? Preferred some trite and 'logical' pattern I could impose on a notebook? Wanted a notebook more than a lover, preferred a bit of scribbling to life?" (273). By the time she mentions the subject for the fifth and final time, she has decided that this is indeed the case: "And you stayed—remember—you chose to stay. In order to have this experience. And to have the record of it" (274-75). By the end of the book, she can't separate the experience from the writing; she feels unable to simply stop writing and live the experience. Escaping the act of "living in a book" requires physically relocating away from the events it encompasses.

Whether she is examining another person in her life or a quality of her own being, Millett works through her feelings on paper, setting up an image of the person or problem, scrutinizing it, knocking it down, rebuilding it, then scrutinizing it all over again. This process, more than the actual events she reports, is the (written) story of Millett's life. On numerous occasions, in fact, she connects her very selfhood to her artistic production.[23] In *Sita*, for example, when she experiences a dry spell, she reports feeling that she has lost herself entirely: "My disappearing self, which had lived in my work and is now homeless.

[23] References to art in her autobiographies almost always include writing, although Millett is a sculptor, painter and photographer as well.

Other people live without work, would love to be unemployed, can think of nothing better. But the artist, staring and impotent, unable to work, deprived of the saving and sustaining art. Hideous that experience, that knowledge of failure" (46). Later, she returns to the subject: "Artists without work are naked, hungry, frantic. We do not live merely to live…but for some other purpose beyond us. Merely instruments of our purpose, we are like corpses when it fails us, might as well be dead. Even feel we deserve to die. My yearning for suicide was always just the imposition of that sentence" (80). At times, she describes her actual written work as her self. On several occasions, for example, she refers to *Flying* as "my self," such as when she says, "There are so many obligations in life. One has them even to oneself. And this book like a baby that I haul bleeding through the world, abandoning it in railroad stations. My self" (266). Whether she is experiencing the fun of "living a book" or the desperation to escape the process, Millett consistently attempts to live her life on paper, to the utmost.

It is no surprise, then, that Millett focuses, at times obsessively, on the attempt to report her experience as accurately as possible. Although, unlike McCarthy, she acknowledges that writing the entire truth is not in fact possible, she attempts to come as close as she can and frequently reports on her progress. One way that she tries to achieve accuracy is by endeavoring to include as much detail as she can. In *Flying*, for instance, she questions whether her work can make an impact on the world if she fails to include sufficient detail: "'Kerouac and his buddies lived like this and it was important,' Rhoda says. Can we achieve such validity ourselves, could I give my friends life on paper? Not unless I can listen harder, remember exactly what people say. So far I'm trapped in self, trying to find me" (148). Although *Flying* is primarily an autobiography, Millett wants it to also be a

documentary about her community of artists, lesbians, and feminists. Thus, she worries about providing enough detail to make her community "come alive" for her readers, both present and future. As Naomi Schor discusses in *Reading in Detail: Aesthetics and the Feminine*, detail is essential to the "archeological stance" of the historian (in Millett's case, the historian of a life) (131). As Schor points out, "if a fragment is to ground a projected reconstruction, it must exhibit a high density of details, and, at the same time, a plethora of details ensures the survival of at least some trace of a civilization" (131). Millett seems to embrace this view as she packs the descriptions of her life and that of her friends with as much detail as she possibly can in the attempt to be "accurate enough." As mentioned above, this quest for sufficient detail applies at least as much to the search for "artifacts" as to the "artifacts" themselves.

Like McCarthy, Millett includes embarrassing details in her autobiographies, such as the time she and her friends thought that they had contracted gonorrhea: "How scandalous. How absurd. How ridiculous and so forth, but this is going to end up in the record. That Vita might have given us all the clap" (*Flying* 419). Millett's motives, however, differ from McCarthy's. This difference is perhaps best exemplified by McCarthy's famous "exposure dream," which Margaret Sargent, the protagonist of *The Company She Keeps* describes to her therapist:

> You go into a restaurant and you think how beautiful and chic you are. You even pose a little.…And then all of a sudden you look down and you see that you have nothing on but a pair of pink pants. And the worst of it is that nobody shows the slightest surprise....They are all watching you, but out of cruelty they will give no sign. If one of your companions were to say, "Why, Meg, you're undressed," the

> situation would be saved. You could exclaim, "Why, gee, I am," and people would lend you things and laugh and fuss over you, and the whole thing would turn into one of those jolly Embarrassing Moments that readers send in to the Daily Mirror." (254-55)

This dream epitomizes McCarthy's relationship with her audience, a relationship that differs fundamentally from Millett's. The difference lies in what the two authors hope to get from their reading audience. Throughout her autobiographical work, McCarthy repeatedly describes the feeling that she has a humiliating flaw that is evident to everyone but herself. This feeling causes her a great deal of anxiety. One could argue, then, that the act of sharing her "embarrassing moments" with her audience nullifies them by making them shared stories that she and the audience can laugh about together. Millett, on the other hand, expresses no interest in nullifying or minimizing her shameful experiences. If anything, she emphasizes them, inviting the audience to witness them but in no way expecting us to play them down or diminish their potency. Shameful experiences in Millett's work are meant to remain shameful. Millett shares her shameful moments in order to highlight the accuracy of her account, as if it would be untruthful and inaccurate to leave them out. Unlike McCarthy, Millett takes no pleasure in embarrassing herself or her reader. A telling example involves an instance in *Flying* after Millett has broken up with her lover, Vita. Millett is in Vita's apartment searching for a hair ribbon she has left there and wants to retrieve. Unable to locate it, Millett muses that perhaps Vita has "bewitched" it. Upon reflection, however, Millett is mortified by her own thoughts: "Suddenly I'm caught redhanded. By myself. Idiot, I whisper, you are behaving like a savage. Do you believe in magic? Or why have you made Vita a witch? How treacherous a mind is, crazy. Ultimately we have no control. Fool,

will you suppress this moment in your damn book? Paranoid as a loon" (441). Understandably, Millett wants to suppress this event, but instead she shares it in detail with her readers. It is moments like these—in which we, as readers, often feel embarrassed for her—that give Millett's autobiographies an air of absolute truthfulness. (If she will admit to this, we are tempted to believe, surely she must be telling us everything.) But, unlike in McCarthy's case, our embarrassment is not meant to reduce hers; rather, our discomfort functions as a gauge of the extent to which Millett is exposing her true (accurate) self to us.

Millett also forces herself—at times, seemingly against her own will—to include events which are less amusingly "scandalous" and more shameful, such as various arguments with her friends or family. One such incident involves a fight—reported in *Flying*—that she has with her sister Mallory while her filmmaker friend Nell O'Rourke is filming them. The next day, Millett tells Nell that she is "ashamed of yesterday's self" and asks Nell not to edit the film so as to make her look like a monster (459). This causes an argument between Millett and Nell, which Millett also details in the book. The discussion of the argument ends thus: "'Did it not happen?' [Nell] reminds me. 'Of course it happened. But I hate myself when I fight with Mallory'" (459). This fight—and Millett's detailed report of it—is so important to her that she returns to it in *Mother Millett*, which she wrote nearly twenty years later. In this case, Millett has been fighting with her other sister, Sally, about their mother's care:

> I do not want this to be taking place; we must not quarrel. But it is happening, it is there. "Did it not happen?" O'Rourke, my old movie teacher, shouted the morning after she had filmed a quarrel between me and Mallory—did it not happen? Sure it did, but quarrels don't have to be recorded. I can't write this down, therefore I don't

> want it to have happened since I'm writing this adventure with Mother as a book in my mind, the ending unknown. Things were "working out," it might have a happy ending, but now—bang—the inadmissible enters. (268)

Although she considers the fights "inadmissible" events, she not only records them both, but reminds the reader of the fight with Mallory nearly two decades after the fact. Her shame does not stop her from including the events in the record, even returning to them years later and, in so doing, introducing them to readers of the newer work.

In examples like this, we see the shame stance working in tandem with the quest for accuracy. In this specific case, Millett adopts the stance of the shamed subject twenty years after the shameful event has passed. She does so in order to prove to her readers that the view we are getting of her life is genuine. Whether we, as readers, are feeling embarrassed for her or bogged down by her frequently excessive stream of details, we are consistently given the message that the account we are reading is as accurate as a written account of a life can possibly be. As mentioned above, this stance also allows Millett to achieve control over what the reader sees. By admitting to the fights and other shameful events—and, in this case, reminding us of them later—Millett is choosing what we see and directing our view. In so doing, she takes events that cause her shame and purposely exposes them to us, thereby "asserting her privacy" through the "outrageous publicity" of autobiography. As Deborah Nelson states in *Pursuing Privacy in Cold War America*, "Privacy may simply be a mechanism of choosing what and how and to whom one reveals oneself; nothing more or less than the freedom of the speaker to refuse or embrace the confessional moment" (140). By choosing to embrace every possible confessional moment (or, at least giving us the

impression that she does), Millett reminds us, again and again, that the person we are seeing on the page is indeed her true and honest self.

Suddenly my London garden, the big roses across the wall, the geraniums in the foreground window box, the orange narcissus in urns, suddenly it becomes Spain. No, Italy I thought as I wrote it down. (*Flying* 336)

Millett spends a great deal of her autobiographical output in the act of watching herself write. The attempt to live her life on paper and report on the process of doing so often leads her to try to write as if the event she is recording is happening at the moment of writing (even when it is clear that this can't possibly be the case) then check to see how the record is coming across to the reader. This process results in a sometimes awkward but frequently intriguing writing style in which we, as readers, watch her monitoring her own writing.

Millett's self-monitoring at times takes the form of explaining why she is writing. In some cases, she does so while simultaneously presenting the writing itself. A classic example occurs early in *Flying*:

> Sitting down, drinking the watered white coffee, I invented my sentence: "Now that the overpowering sense of absurdity has abated, now that I can look at a porter or a professor or a housewife again without a dizzy feeling of envy followed by nausea, wanting to be them, then realizing they too are caught—now that the illness is past, I can perhaps try to explain it to myself." Bought a notebook to do the explaining with. Got as far as the second sentence. Something about things returning to their normal places again so I could calculate how far they had gotten out of line. (11-12)

In these cases, the act of writing takes precedence over what is written. In the above instance, we never see Millett's sentences in their original form, only as the product of her

remembered self writing them—including what she was drinking when she first wrote them. The fact that she indicates that she can't completely remember the second sentence highlights the idea that she is watching herself—in this case, her past self—in the act of writing. Even the past writing self is, in fact, writing about why she is writing. She frequently writes about writing in the present tense as well. In *Sita*, for example, she describes herself "[s]cribbling because the compulsion is so great, because it might ease the pain, because like a primitive and magical gesture it might lance a wound, give me some control over what happens to me, upon me, beyond my control" (61). This description of writing could hardly be stronger. Millett clearly regards writing as no less than a life-saving gesture, the one thing that she can cling to when the rest of her life is spinning out of control. It is especially significant, then, that the focus here is on the writing act itself as much as the content thereof. Millett, in other words, makes a point of writing about the experience of writing.

One particularly remarkable manifestation of Millett's self-surveillance occurs when she writes about how she must hurry up and write—about something else entirely. The following passage from *Flying*, written as Millett prepares for an overseas trip, is a typical example:

> [I] sit down at the dining room table to become crazier still trying to get it done before England, save the book that is me, bits from the old notebook when I was mad in the winter, scraps I wrote then lying all over the table. There are more of them in the shopping bag where I keep the book itself…. Like an old crone frantic that I will lose some piece of it, the scraps floating at the bottom, must put them together to make sense.…But England looms ahead like pressure….The plane takes off at eleven. Hurry. Don't lose the book again. (233-34)

As the passage continues, she remembers some notes she wrote on the flyleaf of a book—the writing of which we readers witnessed earlier—which she locates in her bedroom and copies (presumably, within the course of the narrative). She continues: "Happy, I walk the Bowery floorboards. I can be a writer. Quick, back to the table. There is no time to gloat, it may have already cost you something, some piece lost at the bottom of the shopping bag" (236).

It is, no doubt, passages like these that led reviewers like Bearchell to wonder "if the book will ever end, where it actually began, or if she isn't perhaps referring to another book altogether" (24). But it is also these complex narrative moments that best illustrate how Millett has chosen to present her written self. She asks us to suspend disbelief while she acts the part of the harried writer, desperate to capture the present moment on paper. Rather than recalling the urgency in the course of her narrative, she presents it in action. Thus, she is able to set up an image of herself as someone who is always writing and whose self is defined by doing so. This quite apt description of Millett physically constructing "the book that is me" from fragments of experience typifies the method behind her entire autobiographical project.

Through Millett's ostensibly haphazard writing style, she is frequently able to share with us the construction of the very book we are reading and the thought processes involved in its writing. One particularly straightforward example of this practice occurs in *Sita*, a book in which Millett records the death of a romantic relationship. Midway through the book, Millett wonders aloud whether she has chosen the right form through which to communicate her experience, or if she would be better off writing it as a novel instead of an autobiography: "If Sita were someone else, and if I were someone else, if we had the cover of fiction, would our experience be more worthwhile, less disreputable, even more 'real' to

readers? Or would we be only a 'story'?" (251). She toys with the idea of turning what she has written into fiction, making her "character" a painter, rather than a writer. In doing so, however, she keeps turning herself into a friend of hers who paints, rather than a truly fictional character. Still, she is reluctant to give up on the idea: "But try, try being a painter. It would be so convenient. Noticing once or twice I have almost written down 'painting' for writing, canvas for manuscript, carefully guarding my writing table to be flexible enough for later revision into easel, studio for study, etc. Little points here and there where I protect my identity so it might still be switched" (252). Obviously, she gives up on this idea and ultimately tells her story as an autobiography. But in the meantime, the inner debate about what form to use becomes part of the story itself.

Millett also demonstrates her writing process by sharing things that she has deleted from the final draft of the work. (The fact that this idea is impossible to work out logically reveals the method behind her craft.) One example occurs in *Flying* when she presents herself writing about Vita, a lover who is also the editor of the book:

> I go on insanely trying to finish the part about Wellesley. Already unsure, sensing there are things left out because she'll see it. Faked so Vita will appear the inspirer, the shining star, the warm mother helping me, always helping me. Saving me from madness. While instinct whispers from the gut, "She's sabotaging you. Escape her or there's going to be no book." (172-73)

This is an ingenious writing strategy. Not only is it another way for Millett to show herself in the act of writing, mentioning passages that have been deleted from the final text actually draws more attention to them than including them in the story would have.

Millett often plays with time within her autobiographical narratives in order to bring us into the process of remembering and writing. At times she does so simply by writing about past experiences in the present tense, as she does with her memories of mental illness and attempted suicide in *The Loony-Bin Trip*. At other times, however, she uses a disjointed sense of time to jar us into the awareness that we are continually reading a work in progress. Take, for example, the following passage from *Flying*: "Starting in the spring last year, just a year ago in New Haven, I slept with a woman for the first time in eight years. Starting in the spring—wrote that on a page and stopped. Naomi suggested I begin the book there starting when it all started again" (20). With only these three sentences, Millett is able to accomplish a great deal. First, she interrupts the narrative to remind us that it is constructed in a particular way. Second, she draws our attention to the writing process, both as we wonder when exactly the sentence was started and finished, and as she reveals that the original beginning of the book was replaced by another. (This passage doesn't occur until page 20, well into the book.) By doing so, she calls attention to the fact that she is a writer making decisions about her content as she goes along, indicating that there are numerous ways to interpret her experience, and inviting us to watch her choose which one(s) to present. At first glance, it may seem that this practice conflicts with Millett's obsession with accuracy. I would argue, however, that it illustrates it in that through passages like these, Millett shows us her process of struggling to find the most accurate way to tell her story. Thus, it actually reinforces her constant concern about being "accurate enough." In addition, it allows her to tell multiple versions of the story and, in doing so, present various possible truths. Finally, by writing the sentence about sleeping with a woman twice within the narrative, she

highlights the fact that this book is, at least in part, about who she is as a lesbian in addition to who she is as a writer.

Another striking example of the way that Millett manipulates time in order to watch herself telling her story occurs when she describes the night that she learns that her father has died and goes upstairs to tell her husband:

> The night my father died I yelled at him on paper. Words for the occasion:
>
> > So it's happened. My father dead. I say the words as I walk upstairs, hearing them as I go to tell Fumio. Only when they are out in the air, knocking up against the dirty plasterboard in front of my eyes as I climb to the landing. Only then do they have breath outside of me. The words go ahead of me, still hanging and echoing as I turn to face Fumio above the second flight of stairs. (*Flying* 38)

In this passage, we see Millett remembering the experience, remembering writing about the experience, remembering (within the quoted text) how the words for the experience formed in her mind, and, of course, presenting all of the above to us in the current moment of writing *Flying*. By collapsing all of these layers of memory into the present tense within the earlier text that she quotes, Millett is not only able to show us the experience as she lived it, but is able to look back at it herself to see how she appears, specifically as a writer finding the words to communicate her experience.

Throughout her autobiographical work, Millett consistently presents a picture of herself in the act of writing, usually (but not always) writing the text the reader is currently reading. The amount of detail she provides is often remarkable, including, in several cases, a physical description of the notebook she is writing in or the notes she uses to form the text of the book. In *Flying*, for example, there is the above-mentioned shopping bag full of notes,

which we later learn has "huge lettering on the front [that] tells you everyone's shopping at International Food Stores now" (248); her British notebook, "a green notebook, plain cover, none of your flowered nonsense over here if you please. Blick's Student Notebook, it announces on the front" (257); and "two notebooks: one with flowers, one with flag stars" (79). *Sita* was composed in the "blue notebook, the one out of sequence" (177) and one described simply as "this notebook, the narrow-lined one" (300). At times, she includes the notes themselves, such as when, in *Flying*, she quotes a series of notes written on the back of a restaurant menu: "'King Bomba' it announces grandly, under a drawing of the sun. My orange felt pen writing on the back. The notes run down the side: wine, Lila, carapace, foam rubber, Ethel, crucible of life, Party and sex, Victoria Woodhull, typing, Florence Foster Jenkins, Jane Digby El Mezrac, Isabel Eberhardt, shoo to a tiger, Lynton the arsonist" (263-64). The only reason that we, as readers, can understand this list is the fact that it refers to a conversation we have already witnessed (the conversation during which the notes themselves were taken). By citing these notes verbatim—including even the color of ink in which they were written—Millett is again calling our attention to the act of writing, even elevating the act itself over the event the written work records, as the notes supplant the conversation itself in our attention. In addition, by sharing the rambling list and the fact that it was written on a menu in orange ink, she is setting up a very particular image of herself and the type of writer she is. This is not a writer who thrives on the peace and quiet of a book-lined study, but one who writes on the fly in restaurants, in the midst of conversations, and, as we learn elsewhere, on airplanes, in bed, at the beach, and at picnic tables, scribbling on anything available, including menus, scraps of paper, the backs of envelopes, other books, even, in one extreme case, on toilet paper.

Millett's writing persona includes discussion, even critique, of her own writing style. At times, she is deliberately transparent about the act, such as in *Flying* when she presents herself in the act of reading a draft of her book into a tape recorder to be transcribed by a friend: "How will I appear? Just fuck it and read it all in. You can always revise later. Already guilty knowing I won't revise enough. To be saved in the end by vanity? Precious she is about what appears over her name. Her style! Dear God, as if she had one. Like a nylon with runs. Just do the thing and you'll be lucky" (339). In this case, she even puts herself in the place of the future reviewer of her work—a prediction which, not surprisingly, proved accurate—yet, she does not change her writing style to make it more accessible. Instead, she draws attention to it.

A similar scenario occurs in *Sita* when Millett feels that she has nothing to write about but pretends to do so anyway so as to appear industrious to Sita's children with whom she is sharing a home: "what would they think if they knew I recorded today's lunch, this morning's breakfast, this very four o'clock on a wooden picnic table, the little daisies in the grass, the rose tree still blighted with winter, or what passes for winter here? What would they think?" (60). Again, she chooses to share a moment of vulnerability that is specifically related to the act of writing and speculation about what readers would think of what she has written. And again, she lets us know that she sees herself through the reader's unsympathetic eyes. These moments most clearly epitomize the above-mentioned stance of the shamed subject gazing inward while keeping an eye on the view of the shaming other. But, as I have argued, she turns this stance into a position of power wherein she can control the aspect of her being that the reader sees. Rather than remaining in the position of shame about her

apparent lack of narrative style, she creates an entire persona around it, embracing it, even recreating it within the narrative long after the moment of shame has passed.

> **First I must write a preface. On the picnic table in the farmyard, under the sun, fighting out each sentence. Writing to find out who I am….I called it a necessary preamble, a bridge between the voice talking in my head and prose as I'd known it. It was to explain myself to myself—ponderous, self-conscious. It went like this. (*Flying* 81)**

Throughout her body of work, Millett engages her readers in the process of constructing her autobiography. She frequently invites her friends and acquaintances to read her work in progress and records their reactions to it. As with everything else in her experience, their reactions become part of the story itself. One instance occurs when she reads a section of *A.D.*, the book about her conflicted relationship with her aunt, to the volunteers at her farm/artists' colony. When she finishes reading, one of the volunteers asks her why she loved her aunt (who, it should be noted, does come across as cold and judgmental in the book). Not expecting this reaction, Millett is disheartened: "Brought down hard from the euphoria of testing new work, the private audience, the intimacy of reading aloud, I wanted to throw the book at Sara but limited myself to pointing out how my aunt was beautiful and smart and glamorous, even her money a glamour, everything about her miraculous to me in childhood" (217-18). The anger Millett feels soon turns into insecurity about her success in communicating her relationship with her aunt. She expresses this insecurity to her partner later that evening: "'Jesus, Sophie, if I failed to convey what was lovable about my aunt—at least when I was a youngster adoring what was magical—good God, I surely must have got down something of her charm...' I light a cigarette. 'No?'" (218). Rather than making her aunt a more sympathetic character, however, Millett instead incorporates the insecurity about her portrayal into the work itself.

About eighty pages later, Millett returns to the subject: "And did you convey her at all? Did you even understand it yourself? Are your pages about her only the diatribe Solzhenitsyn warned against? Or servile praise of lucre? Or a love story of some complexity and nuance, circumstance and relationship, time and blood and custom, rebellion and desire?" (302-03). Millett ultimately turns this quandary into part of the subject matter of her aunt's portrait. Addressing the anonymous reader, she continues: "I loved her. Of course a reader needn't. In fact a reader may even dislike or disapprove. Or prefer her to me. Fine. Take her part and see her point. But if I make you see her or why I loved her, why this kind of being is lovable, full of power and energy—for reasons right or wrong, then would I have succeeded? Not really—and I am still trying to find her myself" (303). She spends much of the text in the act of "trying to find" her aunt and attempting to work through the conflicting emotions she feels toward her. Rather than remaining defensive about her reader's reaction to her work, then, Millett uses the doubt it created to explore her complicated relationship with her aunt. Thus, the act of exploration through writing in the written present takes as central a place in the text as Millett's memories of her aunt, and the reader's reaction shapes the final work.

While all of Millett's autobiographical works incorporate readers' reactions in some form, *Flying* is her only book in which a friend/lover actually serves as editor of the book (at least until around 200 pages into the book when Millett relieves her of the position). The fact that a large section of *Flying* is filtered through Vita's eyes gives us a unique view into the way that Millett reacts to her reading audience and incorporates audience feedback into her work. One particularly enlightening instance occurs around a preface that Millett writes early in the book. Interestingly, this preface does not serve as such, but is incorporated into

the main text. This allows Millett to interact with it in ways that she would not otherwise be able to. First, she presents herself in the act of writing the preface, "[o]n the picnic table in the farmyard, under the sun, fighting out each sentence" (81). Next, she provides the preface in its entirety. It begins with an apology and explanation:

> No apology justifies what I have done. A coward pushed into risk, the next moment squirming in it. I will always clutch after extenuation. With all the bravado of the truly intimidated, I will admit that excuses are in themselves both servile and presumptuous. But let this be brought forward by way of explanation: *it had occurred to me to treat my own existence as documentary*. (81, italics in the original)

She continues for several more paragraphs, explaining how fame affected her and why she feels it is necessary to write the book. The preface ends with the above-mentioned objective of asserting her privacy by resorting to "outrageous publicity" (83).

A couple of pages later finds Millett "trapped in a corner," "expect[ing her] fate" as she waits for Vita to tell her what she thinks of the book so far (85). Vita compliments the rest of the book, but tells Millett that the preface is "servile": "Just take a look at the diction, the vocabulary as you scan the first paragraph: apology, justifies, coward, squirming, clutched, extenuation, intimidated, presumptuous" (85). Millett immediately agrees that she is indeed "hopelessly servile" (85). Later, Vita offers further criticism: "She says the last sentence of the preface doesn't sound like a last sentence," Millett tells us. "I rush to fix it" (86). While it is impossible to know whether, or to what extent Millett actually changed the last sentence of the preface, we can see that she did not choose to change or remove the language that Vita criticized in the first paragraph. Instead, Millett chooses to explicate the preface, clarifying what she meant by it. Thus, we see her take the reaction of her reading

audience and incorporate it—both the reaction itself and her response to it—into the work itself.

Throughout her body of work, Millett makes a practice of including the reactions of her readers—and, at times, her anxiety about them—into her autobiographical texts. She shares the manuscript of *Sita* with Sita, for example, and informs us in the very beginning of *Mother Millett* that her mother lived to read the entire book. In addition to Vita, Millett shows unfinished parts of *Flying* to several people, including her husband Fumio, her friends Nell and Paul, her sister Mallory, her lover Claire, and her mother. In each case, the apprehension about what they will think of the text becomes a part of the story. While Fumio reads a section of the text, for example, Millett nervously looks for the coffee maker so that she can "bribe" him by serving him (79). When choosing what portion of the manuscript to read to Claire, she worries that "[i]f she despised me there [in relation to her writing], I would be done for" (484). She confesses her anxieties to Nell when she informs her that she and Paul are in the book and shares her reaction:

> Will I lose my friends by putting them in a book? Or just say nice things? Simplify. Distort. Hoke it up. Make a valentine. And loving my friends, how easy I would be to subvert. I wait for her verdict, aquiver with dread and indecision, squirming again while she grows vehement, the green eyes aboil at the changeling in me. "Write that book for yourself!" She says it hard. "Your truth. Not theirs". (301)

Including these interactions with readers in the final versions of her autobiographical texts allows Millett to share a part of her writing life that is usually absent from autobiographies, especially single autobiographical works. It allows us the unique opportunity to watch Millett as she relates to her friends and loved ones who will be her readers and reacts as they

give her their various feedback. All of this directly contributes to Millett's image of herself as a writer constantly in the act of living her life on paper.

As intriguing as it is to see Millett gauging and responding to others' reactions to her work, the moments during which we are invited to watch her as she watches herself in the act of writing are even more enlightening. We are, of course, always watching her write her life when we read her autobiographical writing, but there are numerous specific instances in which she joins us as a viewer as she writes then returns to view the writing (and/or the writing self) within the same work. One particularly revealing example of this process occurs in *Flying* as Millett is organizing the notes that will eventually become the book. She says, "Back again with the scramble of papers, the outline now finally coming together. Pieces falling into place under a felt pen on a tablet of typing paper. An elaborate key to the confusion of notebooks, labeling and coding the passages, the glimpses of self snatched on planes" (235). The reference to her previously-written notes as "glimpses of self" exemplifies the idea of her autobiographical output as a mirror in which she is constantly checking her reflection. In the initial writing process, she sees her self and records what she sees; thereafter, she is able to return to this reflected self and incorporate it into her larger project. What we as readers of the final autobiography see is Millett viewing her own reflection and analyzing what she sees.

Another instance of Millett viewing her own writing self also occurs in *Flying*. The scenario begins early in the book when Millett has arranged to meet Celia, a former lover with whom she is still in love, at Verde's, a Manhattan beer garden. During the scene, Millett has arrived at the restaurant early and spends a great deal of time switching tables and

agonizing over whether she has adequately set the scene for Celia's arrival. When Celia does finally arrive, Millett describes it thus:

> Then it happens, I look up to find her barreling down on me. Little half round of a tomboy's grin, a cloth bag thrown over her shoulder bouncing against her hip. I struggle to rise in the hurried confusion of her embrace. Always beyond calculation, Celia does not sit down across from me at the table where hope had placed her these two hours past. Instead she plunks down next to me on the bench. Do we look strange? Will the people stare at us? (88)

The restaurant scene continues and concludes, and Millett eventually moves on to other topics. Roughly seventy-five pages later, Vita criticizes Millett for her "craven" behavior in the Verde's scene. Unable to make Vita understand her motives, Millett changes the subject by saying, "I wrote the passage right there while I waited, but of course you can tell that" (162). Naturally, Vita could not have been able to tell; as the above-quoted passage shows, it is impossible to tell when Millett stopped writing, as the present-tense account continues beyond Celia's arrival, and thus, beyond the time Millett could actually have been writing. Millett's discussion with Vita about this passage reveals an important aspect of Millett's writing project to Millett herself and, in turn, to us:

> Suddenly Vita claims to be thunderstruck by this detail of composition as if it were some miracle. Now I am getting scared, this sort of praise is more dangerous than blame or coldness. But it has made me start building things in air, over the bed, out the casements to the Bowery, a roof spanning the city, a shimmering hope this book might make our lives live, our Downtown real. (162)

In this scene, we see Millett witnessing the power of her own written words. Through her unique writing style, we are able to see the passage in its original form, filtered through Vita's eyes, then again through Millett's reaction to Vita's reaction. Vita's reaction to the text indicates that Millett has achieved her desired style in which the seams between the lived experience and the writing of it begin to fade, and it is impossible to see the difference between what she wrote as it was happening and what she wrote upon later reflection. The structure of *Flying* allows us, as readers, to witness the moment of Millett experiencing Vita's reaction to her work.

Mother Millett, Millett's last autobiographical book to date, provides a striking example of the potential Millett sees in her long-term serial autobiographical project as well. The passage in question involves her memories of the events that comprise *The Loony-Bin Trip*. In the section of *The Loony Bin Trip* in which she is institutionalized against her will in Ireland, she describes the fantasies that spring from the boredom of enforced confinement, in particular, fantasies of witches and Joan of Arc. After long flights of fancy she comes to with the shameful realization that creating these stories is precisely the thing that could "prove" her madness. The "crime of the imaginary," as she calls it, could seal her fate if she does not vigilantly fight against it (241). Resisting her creative impulses is the only possible way to eventually secure her freedom. She revisits this issue in *Mother Millett* after the woman translating *The Loony Bin Trip* into German calls to clarify some of the terminology surrounding Millett's witch fantasies. In reference to this imagery, Millett says, "What after all is the relationship between literature and life, the written and lived? As literary references the witches make every kind of sense, but psychiatrists would make 'madness' of it, absurdity, irrationality, 'grandeur' or 'flight of ideas'—wonderful term—just what a writer

dreams of. Are things alright in books, but not in life? In 'reality'" (267-68). As she continues the above train of thought, she reflects on her sister Sally's role in having her wrongfully committed (the primary subject matter of *The Loony Bin Trip*). She continues:

> I am at the moment in the reality of another quarrel with my sister [about their mother's possible commitment to a nursing home] which I already know I do not want to write about. Because I love her and she might not "look good" therefore I should not write it, since she still smarts over *The Loony Bin Trip*, having long ago regretted what she did, having become a good civil rights lawyer since, having helped others, clients, to escape the fate of commitment. So that what happened then is not even true in the present. (268)

In this instance we see that the book (*The Loony-Bin Trip*) has influenced the actual lived experience of one of its readers. This change in Sally affects Millett so strongly that it leads her to consider the previous events of her life as no longer true. One could, in fact, say that the success of *The Loony-Bin Trip* is the very thing that renders its content untrue.

Millett's self-observation is not always so uplifting, however. On several occasions, we also watch her struggling with the inability to write. The fact that she portrays these moments in the present tense shows once again that she has chosen to set up an image of herself as a writer and view it, even after the experience she presents has past.[24] In *The Loony-Bin Trip* she remembers a time of profound depression. About writing, she says, "It has simply disappeared. I have been trying to write at the kitchen table, where I wrote all the other books or parts of them. And the table never failed. Months ago it was a day's labor to

[24] While much of Millett's autobiographical writing is done in the present tense, she does sometimes speak of past experiences in the past tense. It is, therefore, significant when she chooses to present a past experience as if she is living through it at the moment of writing.

get a page. Then less and less would come, until now an afternoon yields nothing at all. I play music, walk back and forth—nothing helps. There is nothing there" (276). About her suicide attempts during the same depression, she says:

> Let it [suicide] be now—it's over and there is nothing more to come. From writing to live I have come to live to write, but the well is now dry as a vacuum. A terrible silence those days at the farm trying to start another and then still another book, and neither came; this would be a good time to go. Horrible to live on, straining for something that came once or twice and is never to come again. (77)

Clearly, by the time Millett writes these passages, the ability to write has come again. Yet, she chooses to present the depression and writer's block as if they are occurring at the time of writing.[25] Reenacting the inability to write, rather than merely remembering it, allows Millett to incorporate those moments into her image as a writer living her life on paper—even at times when the predominant factor in that life is a loss of writing ability. In addition, creating a distance between the self that is currently writing and the past self who couldn't write (rather than presenting one "I" in the moment of remembering the experience) allows her to put herself in the position of the reader as she examines her own story.

The above is not the only instance in which Millett writes about the inability to write. This issue occurs repeatedly throughout her entire body of autobiographical work. On several occasions, she writes about having nothing left to say. In *Flying*, for example, she says, "Walking the floors of the Bowery, cold, in panic, I stop at the red table where I wrote a book, so long ago—writing for professors. Writing when I did not even want to be a writer, just burning with an idea that could make me do a book, call it a thesis, rip off a Ph.D. Now I

[25] In the passages cited here, Millett weaves between past- and present-tense accounts, indicating that the text was written after the fact, not as journal entries during the time she describes.

am sick with wanting to write. There is nothing to say; you cannot make a book from air. I have lost myself" (43). In *Sita*, Millett once again struggles with writer's block, telling herself, "you have simply had no book to write for three years. Probably never again. Done for" (131). In *The Loony-Bin Trip*, she expresses the feeling after the publication of *Sexual Politics* and *Flying* that she has said all she has to say: "I have played it out, the success and now the failure, the first book and the second. There is nothing left. There is no longer anything to write now, nothing suggests itself. *Flying* was the whole discovery of writing and it is over now" (77). Finally, in *Mother Millett*, she laments that "the chief thing is, there isn't really anything to say. Or if there is it might be unpleasant, boring or wrong," and wonders, "does one say nothing, having nothing to say?" (80). On several other occasions, she complains that she is unable to write because of her geographical location. These locations include England: "It's their English, not mine. Get out of this place, you can't write here" (*Flying* 248); upstate New York: "How can I write that sort of book up here? I have neighbors who think I'm a wife" (*Flying* 180); Sita's California home: "I can't work here in this madhouse, this uncertainty, this emotional whirlpool" (*Sita* 46); and Minnesota, her childhood home where her elderly mother still lives: "I have bought a notebook and can tell it nothing….I am going back to death, age, futility" (*Mother Millett* 211). On each of these occasions, Millett takes on the persona of the person who cannot write, all the while living out the experience through the words on the page. In this way, we again see her in the act of watching what is necessarily a past experience as if it is occurring in the present.

The act of serial autobiography allows Millett to view her writing self long-term. On several occasions, the experience of one book—either the events encompassed in the narrative or the writing thereof—becomes part of another. In *Sita*, for example, Millett

speaks about the attempt to write the book about her breakdown that came after the publication of *Sexual Politics* (events that occurred after the writing but before the publication of *Flying*): "And nothing comes, and the manuscript you drag around with you now will never be finished. Bits in notebooks, pages here and there out of the chaos of a life wrecked: your madness, your separation, your attempts to die. How would you ever put that together? Nerve ending, blood, hunks of flesh" (18). This manuscript, which Millett comes to call "the Deathbook," figures in *The Loony-Bin Trip* as well. The manuscript itself is inexplicably lost, but the events it describes make up a good deal of the text that becomes *The Loony-Bin Trip*.

Likewise, in *The Loony-Bin Trip* Millett talks about the experience of writing *Flying*. In addition to the above-mentioned instances in which she speaks of *Flying* as the culmination of all she has to say, Millett describes it as "a first book really, one book of your own. Before the bubble burst and you lost your guts, sat at the dining room table at the farm and in two speedy afternoons discovered you were not a writer at all. You were scared when you started *Flying*, but now the scare is past all measure, a panic huge and unconquerable" (77).

The experience of writing *Flying* is also remembered in *Going to Iran*, a hybrid book that is part autobiography, part political treatise, as well. Interestingly, *Flying* comes up in the context of a book that Millett is writing about her aunt—a project that is never finished until after the death of Millett's aunt more than a decade later. In the above-mentioned passage, Millett describes the experience of writing about her aunt in this way:

> I am living in the middle of a book again. Risky. Not since *Flying* have I taken on that madness, not after the fact, but during it. *Sita* was over before I saw it as a book,

> though half of its pages were written as it occurred; they were private exercises, journals, whatever. The full rabbit run of living in a book, I had tried to avoid that after *Flying*. And now, because I am visiting my aunt, while writing about her, I am living in a book. If she rejects me, I have to write that. (30)

As this description shows, serial autobiography allows Millett to look back over her writing career, comparing the various experiences of autobiographical writing, and include her observations about those experiences in yet another autobiographical book. Reflecting on previous experiences also allows her to make conscious decisions about how to exist within each current writing project and gives her the language through which to communicate her intentions to the reader.

If nothing is said, we have nothing and go through life in the dark. Why do you suppose people read biography so voraciously…people read it like food. Why, because they want to know about other people's lives, because they're flying without instruments themselves and have no idea—not that a book would tell you. But a little truth and some exchange of information might help: how to live your life is the most important thing there is. (*Mother Millett* 78-79)

In each of her autobiographical books, Millett expresses the desire to live her life on paper and share her true self with the reader to the best of her ability. This practice has also enabled her to look back at her own written self and view herself as a writer and as a person throughout the years. This is not, however, done simply out of narcissism or a narrow self-focus. On the contrary, Millett has repeatedly expressed the desire to use her writing to reach out to her reading audience in various ways. Her description of *Flying* in the introduction to the 1990 edition epitomizes her entire writing career:

> *Flying* is about living a new life, a Vita Nuova, pinching Dante's title for that strange little surreal volume of poetry he started out with which announced the new

> consciousness and vision he shared with his school: what else is literary myth, Genet's or Kerouac's or anyone else's, but "writing up one's friends," seeing one's own experience and that of one's circle in the light of romance? Taking ourselves seriously. (x)

She believes that this practice of taking one's daily life seriously and recording it has the potential to help others who may have similar experiences, and she has devoted her writing life to facilitating the "truth and…exchange of information" that she advocates in *Mother Millett*. As we can see in her writing, community is of the utmost importance to Millett. She is happiest when she is surrounded by friends and loved ones. (She even purchased a farm in upstate New York and turned it into an artist colony where women could come together to live and work in each other's company for months at a time.) Millett uses her writing to extend that community to the reader who may not have access to the society of like-minded peers that Millett herself enjoys.

In her autobiographical work, Millett reaches out to her reader by foregrounding her private and personal moments that seem on the surface to be less important. Her reason for doing so can be found in a discussion she has with Doris Lessing, recorded in *Flying*. In this discussion, Lessing brings up Mary McCarthy's work and the inspiration it holds for her: "There is a passage in Mary McCarthy where the heroine so-called does the sublimely stupid thing of getting drunk of a train and spends the night in a berth fucking some character she's picked up. It's the sort of harebrained thing we've all done and hated ourselves for afterwards. But she had the guts to admit it" (357). Lessing continues:

> Of course that is just the sort of thing one blushes to write….But the most curious thing is that the very passages that once caused me the most anxiety, the moments

> when I thought, no, I cannot put this on paper—are now the passages I'm proud of. That comfort me most out of all I've written. Because through letters and readers I've discovered these were the moments when I spoke for other people. So paradoxical. Because at the time they seemed so hopelessly private. (357)

Like McCarthy, Millett refuses to shy away from the things "one blushes to write."

Millett takes this idea a step further than McCarthy, however. In McCarthy's work, "speaking for other people" is a byproduct of her writing, not its point. McCarthy speaks for herself alone, even if readers may later see themselves in her work. Millett, on the other hand, spends much of her autobiographical work writing not only for herself but for her larger community, specifically women, artists, and lesbians. She consistently writes with an eye toward how her individual experience fits within and/or sheds light on that of her community with the goal of reaching out to her readers and documenting "how my generation of women tried to invent our lives" (*Flying* ix). It is this sense of autobiography within community that makes Millett's work unique. Throughout her body of work, she writes with the goal of effecting actual change, not only in her own personal life, but for others as well. As she says in *The Loony-Bin Trip*, "Someone can win sometime, thereafter everyone can" (144). For Millett, the project of being "one's actual self on paper" is a powerful way to spend her life fighting for that victory.

Chapter 3

"What We Make Makes Us": Writing as Identity in the Works of Julia Alvarez

Two stories, one in the past, the other I was composing
one foot ahead of the other, the way that our lives get written.
("The Other Side / *El Otro Lado*" 144)

Julia Alvarez was born in New York City to Dominican parents in 1950. A few months after her birth, the family returned to the Dominican Republic where Alvarez was raised until the family came back to the United States and permanently settled in New York ten years later. As children, Alvarez and her three sisters were told that they "immigrated" to the U.S.. They later learned, however, that the family had, in fact, *escaped* from the Dominican Republic where their father had been involved with a plot to overthrow the country's cruel dictator, Rafael Leonidas Trujillo.

Alvarez's first memories of the English language centered around conflict and insecurity. The earliest of these memories took place well before the family left the Dominican Republic. In her essay "My English," she talks about the fact that before she and her sisters learned English, their parents would use it to communicate when they didn't want the children to understand what they were saying. Alvarez later learned that these English conversations often had to do with fears inspired by her father's involvement with the underground movement against Trujillo. At the time, however, all Alvarez could understand was that "English was the sound of worry and secrets, the sound of being left out" (*Something to Declare* 22). Later, while still living on the Island, Alvarez and her sisters were sent to the American Carol Morgan School so that they could get an "Americanized" education. This experience further compounded her insecurity with English, as she was made to feel that her native Spanish was inferior. When she would accidentally let a Spanish word slip into her English conversation, she would be humiliated by the glares of her teacher

and classmates: “I grew insecure about Spanish” she recalls in “My English.” “My native tongue was not quite as good as English, as if words like *columpio* were illegal immigrants trying to cross a border into another language. But Teacher’s discerning grammar-and-vocabulary-patrol ears could tell and send them back” (*Declare* 24). Thus, before ever leaving the Island, she had already inherited a conflicted, insecure relationship with English.

Not surprisingly, Alvarez’s insecurity with English increased exponentially when, armed only with minimal classroom English skills, she was abruptly relocated to New York City. The English she had learned in school did not prepare her for the fast, rough speech of the neighborhood and playground where she had a hard time deciphering where one word ended and the next began. Every day at school, a group of boys would make fun of her English pronunciation, chasing her and throwing stones at her, yelling, “Spic! Spic! Go back where you came from” (*Declare* 139). Ashamed of her accent and her insufficient grasp of the language, she told them that she did not speak English at all. In her essay “First Muse,” she cites that experience as the genesis of her writing career: “Looking back now, I can see that my path as a writer began in that playground. Somewhere inside, where we make promises to ourselves, I told myself I would learn English so well that Americans would sit up and notice. I told myself that one day I would express myself in a way that would make those boys feel bad they had tormented me.” She goes on to say, however, that over the years her view of the schoolyard boys and their actions changed: “Yes, it was revenge that set me on the path of becoming a writer. At some point, though, revenge turned into redemption. Instead of pummeling those boys with my success, I began to want to save them (140-41). She has spent her lengthy writing career attempting not only to sort through her own experience as an immigrant, but also trying to reach, even move, those readers who

would misunderstand what that experience means. Rather than merely prove a point to those who hurt her personally, Alvarez wants to accomplish much more—she wants to reach out to the public through her writing and make a connection with her readers, even those who might initially be unable or unwilling to see past their own stereotypes of the Latin American immigrant.

In this way, Alvarez's project differs from that of either McCarthy or Millett. Both McCarthy and Millett make their experience of shame the foundation of their autobiographical projects, adopting the stance of the shamed subject as a permanent position. McCarthy experiences a life-long feeling of shame about the flaw that she thinks everyone else can see. Millett discusses numerous qualities about which she feels ongoing shame, including her homosexuality, her physical body, and her mental illness. Like McCarthy and Millett, Alvarez does pinpoint a shameful experience as the origin of her career as a writer, but for her the shame remains in her past. She experienced shame as a child, but instead of adopting the stance of the shamed subject, in which one looks down and inward while also trying to connect with those who have shamed her, Alvarez immediately moved from shame to revenge, then on to an unambivalent desire to connect to her reading audience as an equal. In other words, while McCarthy wants to enlist our help in finding her shameful flaw and Millett experiences extreme anxiety about how the self she is showing us is coming across, Alvarez refuses the shame that the schoolyard bullies attempted to inflict on her and instead embarks on a project of creating a space for herself in her writing where she may experience pride and take pleasure in who she is as a Dominican American woman.

The cruelty of the boys on the playground is not the only aspect of her childhood immigrant experience that Alvarez believes led her to be a writer. She also gives much of the credit to having to master a new language at the age of ten:

> Why did the Americans say *under the weather* instead of *sick*, why *pleasant* instead of *nice* instead of *friendly* instead of *amiable* instead of *kind*? Every writer has to do this kind of fine-tuning in her own native language, but I was doing it as a ten-year-old struggling with a second language. And this process made me interested in how words can contain and hold and pinpoint experience, how words can help us know what we are thinking and feeling, how words can make us feel intimate with ourselves and with strangers. (*Declare* 156)

Writing, in particular, provided Alvarez with the control over words that she needed in order to communicate in her newly acquired language. Unlike the intimidating, fast talk of the New York City street and playground, the written word allowed for careful, precise molding and shaping. Alvarez describes her first experience composing a poem—written less than a year after she learned English—as "directing my wary words through the wilds of strange vocabulary / to get to that intimate place I couldn't get to in person, / inside my reader's head as she read what I had written" (*The Other Side* 117). Writing poetry, forging the relationship between writer and reader, provided the intimacy lacking in the spoken English word.

Alvarez perfected English quickly and, with the aid of a nurturing and creative elementary school teacher, soon found that she could summon the atmosphere of her lost island home through writing about it. She almost immediately fell in love with—and found a new home inside—language: "English, those verbal gadgets, those tricks and turns of

phrases, those little fixed units and counters, became a charged, fluid mass that carried me in its great fluent waves, rolling and moving onward, to deposit me on the shores of my new homeland. I was no longer a foreigner with no ground to stand on. I had landed in the English language" (*Declare* 28-29). Likewise, in "The Other Side / *El Otro Lado*", she says that in English, she "had found the portable homeland where I wanted to belong" (*The Other Side* 117).

Of course, this transition into the English language was neither easy nor simple and did not come without struggle and consequences. As she says in her poem "The Other Side / *El Otro Lado*," even as an adult who has been fluent in English for decades, Alvarez still feels at times that a "border has closed like a choice / I can't take back. And the trouble isn't the new / but the shadow falling across it of the old, / every word alloyed by a Spanish version" (*Other Side* 147). She goes on to say that "the life / I might have lived haunts the one I bungle / without self-confidence or precedence" (147). Much of her writing—both autobiographical and fictional—addresses the difficulty of living between two worlds. As Dominican women, Alvarez and her sisters were expected to be "good Catholic señoritas" who would put family first and refrain from all sexual activity until marriage. The sisters, like the four García sisters in Alvarez's loosely autobiographical novel *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*, "had had to put up with this kind of attitude in an unsympathetic era. They grew up in the late sixties. Those were the days when wearing jeans and hoop earrings, smoking a little dope, and sleeping with their classmates were considered political acts against the military-industrial complex" (28). Thus, a predominant theme in Alvarez's work is that of exploring and attempting to navigate the untenable position of both Dominican and

American. If it is impossible to be exclusively one or the other—much less be both at once—how does the Dominican American woman define who she is?

While Alvarez acknowledges the pain and confusion of feeling "caught between the woman's libber and the Catholic senorita," her work celebrates the rich and complex identity that evolves from this dual heritage (*García Girls* 48). She chooses to use her ongoing quest for identity as a means to create literature. Through her writing, she hopes to create a new space in which she can live comfortably: "Sometimes I hear Spanish in English (and of course, vice versa). That's why I describe myself as a Dominican American writer. That's not just a term. I'm mapping a country that's not on the map, and that's why I'm trying to put it down on paper" (*Declare* 173). She does not do so simply out of necessity, however; for Alvarez, her dual identity is a dynamic source of creative inspiration: "I am a Dominican, hyphen, American" she says. "As a fiction writer, I find that the most exciting things happen in the realm of that hyphen—the place where two worlds collide or blend together" (Qtd. in Stavans 552).[26] I would argue that this is true of her poetry and her (explicitly) autobiographical work, as well. For Alvarez, identity is a fluid and ongoing process, and she negotiates it through her writing.[27] Throughout her body of work, one idea remains consistent: writing a story does not complete it; putting an experience or emotion down on paper is not a conclusive act. While this idea is evident in individual works—several of

[26] Unlike some bi/multicultural writers who make a point of embracing or rejecting the hyphen in describing their identities, Alvarez does not take a stand on the issue of whether or not to use the actual hyphen in describing her heritage. At times, she describes herself as a Dominican-American, while at other times, she leaves out the hyphen and simply says "Dominican American." As the above quotes suggest, Alvarez is interested in the hyphen in its metaphorical sense—as an indicator of the connection between the Dominican and American parts of her identity—not in whether or not it is essential to always use (or refuse) it in the written description of her ethnicity.

[27] It can, of course, be argued that *all* identity is negotiated on an ongoing basis; this fact is not unique to the "hybrid" subject. Alvarez's work, however, focuses on and dramatizes this process in an unusually explicit way.

which present varying versions of particular stories/memories—serial autobiography allows Alvarez to explore and negotiate her identity as a Dominican American woman over time. It also allows her to experiment with its presentation in various forms. She tells and retells the story of her life through fiction and poetry as well as autobiography. For Alvarez, the ongoing story of her life is inseparable from the life itself. As she says in her poem "Tom", "we make our art / out of ourselves and what we make makes us" (*The Woman I Kept to Myself* 122).

But if the deepest loss,
short of death—of a language, of the valuable

codes of the mind, of a land dusty with ancestors—
can be, not just survived, but made into the matter

of hope, made into song, not into a hatchet
to cut off the offending parts, made into poems,

then blessed be the end of things, the loss of whatever
secures us blindly and mutely to our lives.
("Beginning Again," *Other Side* 53-54)

In *¡Yo!*, Alvarez's third novel, Laura García, mother of the four García sisters, says of the family's past that, "all those years have mixed together like an old puzzle whose box top is lost. (I don't even know anymore what picture all those little pieces make)" (24). The image of the past as a puzzle with no box top is a useful way of looking at Alvarez's autobiographical project. With no pattern for guidance, the pieces may combine in many possible configurations, no one more "correct" than another. Like a puzzle, too, it may be dismantled and begun again. The pieces, of course, remain the same, but the combination may tell a different story. Alvarez has spent her writing career building and rebuilding the puzzle of her past, and she has done so in a variety of forms. The choice of the forms she uses to do so is, in fact, an essential part of the story.

A distinctive quality of Alvarez's writing project is the variety of genres in which she works. While her novels made her famous, her first book—and, as she states, her "first love"—was poetry (McClellen 3). In an interview with *Atlantic Monthly*, Alvarez states that "poems, the best poems, address that cutting edge of self—hone it as well—that edge where the self transmutes into spiritual being, or something like that. (I need a poem to say what I mean right now!)" (3). Writing her autobiography through poetry as well as fiction and more traditionally autobiographical forms enables Alvarez to create an additional aspect of her written self, the "I" of lyric poetry. While fictionalizing her story in novel form allows Alvarez to approach her experiences through multiple perspectives (relaying a single episode through the voice of various family members, for example), sharing her story through poetry lets her do the opposite. The voice of the lyric poet, unlike that of the fictional narrator or the traditional autobiographer, is intimate, and the poem can evoke a sense of immediacy that the novel or autobiography lacks. Take, for instance, Alvarez's poem, "On Not Shoplifting Louise Bogan's *The Blue Estuaries*," in which we see Alvarez as a young college student discovering her own voice as the author's words "were stirring [her] own poems" inside her (*The Other Side* 46). Telling this story as a short poem allows Alvarez to focus in on the specific moment of awakening without having to contextualize it within a larger narrative. Within this framework, the simple phrase, "I wanted to own this moment," conveys a combination of both pleasure and urgency that would be easily diluted by a detailed description within a longer story (46).

Alvarez's choice of poetry as an autobiographical form serves another important purpose as well. Writing her story as a lyric poet allows her to relay the facts of her life while simultaneously making a statement about her place within the larger genre of

American literature. Alvarez is compelled by the idea of utilizing repressive standards in order to dismantle them from within. This is particularly true regarding conventional standards of female behavior. She often places her fictional characters in the position to manipulate these restrictions to their own advantage. One such situation involves Yolanda García, a character in Alvarez's loosely autobiographical novel *How the García Girls Lost their Accents*, a character who is often compared to Alvarez herself. The event occurs when Yolanda is a child, before the family moves to the United States. Yolanda's grandparents, who have been vacationing in the States, bring her an American cowgirl outfit which is exactly like the cowboy outfit they bring her (male) cousin Mundín, with the exception that hers has a skirt instead of pants. Her mother protests: "The outfit would only encourage my playing with Mundín and the boy cousins. It was high time I got over my tomboy phase and started acting like a young lady señorita. 'But, it *is* for girls,' I pointed out. 'Boys don't wear skirts'" (228). Yolanda is willing to identify with her parents' repressive standards of femininity precisely to the extent that they allow her to remain a tomboy. This maneuvering within and around traditional expectations of feminine conduct is strikingly similar to Alvarez's poetic practice.

In her poetry, Alvarez refuses to reject traditional forms altogether. While she recognizes their often repressive history, particularly the ways in which they have customarily portrayed women, she attributes her skill as a poet to the lessons she has learned from them. In college, she states, she "read the great writers, Yeats, Milton, Shakespeare, Chaucer, Whitman, with a sprinkling of female exceptions. I do not regret having had these models. They taught me my craft; they forced me to go outside my own experience and background." She goes on to point out, however, that "it was difficult to find or trust my

own voice using only these male models" (*Declare* 160). As a writer, she was unable to find her own voice until she rediscovered the dialect of her childhood. After graduating from a creative writing master's program, Alvarez was given a writing residency at Yaddo, a writers' colony. One day, discouraged by fruitless efforts to put grand and significant poetic ideas on paper, she joined the facility's staff for coffee in the kitchen. Paging through a cookbook which she found lying on the table, she came across lists of ingredients that brought back the memory of her mother and aunts cooking when she was a girl. "A little later," she says, "I went upstairs to the tower room and wrote down in my journal this beautiful vocabulary of my girlhood. As I wrote, I tapped my foot on the floor to the rhythm of the words" (161). She composed the poem "What Could it Be?" which appeared in *Homecoming*, her first volume of poetry. In the poem, "the aunts" attempt to decide what flavor is missing from a pot of chicken and rice:

> cumin, turmeric, saffron, and endives.
>
> The aunts each put in a shake of their favorites.
>
> The steam unwrinkled the frowns from their faces.
>
> They cackled like witches, sampled, and nodded. (29)

Alvarez describes the moment of writing this poem as "the first time I heard my own voice on paper" (*Declare* 160). She went on to write other poems using the vocabulary of her childhood such as "Orchids" which celebrates her only unmarried aunt, Tía Chica, who raised orchids instead of children:

> I name them in celebration:
>
> Brassias and Dendrobiums,
>
> Eipdendrums and Vandas,

Oncidiums and Mormodes,
Jewel Box and Queerie Deeries,
White Nuns and Lady Slippers,
and her prize the very rare
fluttery white Diacrum.
Twenty-two varieties
bred by a single woman! (*Homecoming* 41)

Similarly, she enumerates types of cloth in "Naming the Fabrics," a poem that recalls her two aunts, Tía Ana and Tía Fofi, who worked in a clothing factory:

Mother, unroll the bolts and name
the fabrics from which our clothing came,
dress the world in vocabulary:
broadcloth, corduroy, denim, terry. (34)

Alvarez uses her distinctive voice to utter the unique language of her childhood. These poems joyously revel in the rhythms and sounds of the words, but they do so for a purpose; they call attention to the undervalued components of so-called "women's work." Rather than departing from traditional forms to cultivate this newly acquired voice, Alvarez instead used her own voice to infiltrate those forms, altering their themes in order to celebrate the powerful women who have inspired her life.

Unlike many radical, contemporary feminist poets, Alvarez does not view writing within traditional forms as a capitulation to a dominant male authority. She states, "I think of form as territory that has been colonized but that you can free. See, I feel subversive in formal verse. A voice is going to inhabit that form that was barred from entering it before!"

(Gwynn 171). "The word," she insists, "belongs to no one, the houses built of words belong to no one. We have to take them back from those who think they own them" (171). By taking them back, making them hers, she transforms them. One form with which Alvarez particularly takes issue is the sonnet, which she wants to wrest from the oppressive tradition it represents. She points out that the sonnet tradition "was one in which women were caged in golden cages of beloved, in perfumed gas chambers of stereotype. I wanted to go in that heavily mined and male labyrinth with the string of my own voice. I wanted to explore it and explode it too" (172). She does so with her "free verse sonnets": "By learning to work the sonnet structure and yet remaining true to my own voice, I made myself at home in that form. When I was done with it, it was a totally different form from the one I learned in school" (172). While Alvarez's sonnets are written in (loose) iambic pentameter with ten-syllable lines, they do not read as traditional sonnets. Their rhyme schemes vary, and the rhymes are often slant. Heavy enjambment gives them a conversational tone, while their themes are far from lofty. The first sentence of one sonnet in the sequence entitled "33" is an excellent example:

> I was sitting at my desk this morning
> trying to get a poem I was having
> trouble with in an umpteenth revision
> over and done with, but by this version
> what I had written wasn't what I meant
> but sounded hollow and self-important. (*Homecoming* 99)

This sonnet documenting the inability to express herself is only one of the many ways in which Alvarez has utilized traditional forms to manipulate themselves.

"Bilingual Sestina," is another example of Alvarez's use of a traditional form to express her position as a bilingual/bicultural writer of English verse. The poem opens by saying, "Some things I have to say aren't getting said / in this snowy, blond, blue-eyed, gum-chewing English" (*Other Side* 3). Alvarez attempts to remedy this situation by adding Spanish words to her poetry, starting with this, the opening poem in *The Other Side / El Otro Lado*. Employing two languages in this incredibly complex traditional form is an act of skill as well as revolution. The repeating words found at the ends of the lines are chosen carefully to express Alvarez's feelings about language. The six repeated words are *said/say, English, closed, words*, *nombres* (names), and *Spanish*, while in the fifth stanza, one alteration is made and *words* is replaced with *world.* Merely reciting this list of words gives a clear indication of the poem's message: the *world* of *words* is *closed* when one is forced to *say* them in *English*; their *Spanish nombres* are needed.

In the opening stanza, the first example of the things that, for Alvarez, "aren't getting said" in English is "dawn's early light sifting through *persianas*[28] closed / the night before by dark-skinned girls" (3-4). Her choice of the phrase "dawn's early light" evokes "The Star-Spangled Banner" in order to illustrate the fact that this specific English phrase holds different meaning for her from that which it can be expected to hold for one born and raised in the United States. For Alvarez, "dawn's early light" is not only fireworks and patriotism, but is also the warm island sun of her childhood home in the Dominican Republic. Her choice of this phrase shows that, as a citizen of the United States, she recognizes the significance of this specific string of words to American culture, but wishes to remind the reader that the words are equally as valid when used to describe another way of life. While

[28] Shutters

North American culture and the English language are important elements of her identity, she refuses to allow them to overshadow her Dominican heritage.

In the last line of the first stanza, Alvarez describes the Dominican Republic as "that first world I can't translate from Spanish" (6). Like her use of "dawn's early light" four lines earlier, her choice of the term "first world"—usually signifying Western imperialist ideologies—to describe her Caribbean childhood home is no coincidence. By using the term in this way, she empties it of its imperialist connotations, instead using it to indicate that the Spanish world was her first, formative environment. The Western, English-speaking "first world" does not take priority—it is not *her* first world.

The poem closes by saying:

> —the world was simple and intact in Spanish—
> *luna, sol, casa, luz, flor,* as if the *nombres*
> were the outer skin of things, as if words were so close
> one left a mist of breath on things by saying
>
> their names, an intimacy I now yearn for in English—
> words so close to what I mean that I almost hear my Spanish
> heart beating, beating inside what I say *en inglés*. (4)

The final line melds the closing words of the previous two, making English into Spanish, Spanish into English. The two languages are distinct yet inseparable like the American and Dominican sides of Alvarez's Dominican American self. This poem is a stunning example of the way that Alvarez uses and manipulates form to creatively and powerfully tell the story of who she is.

Alvarez's use of form as part of the story is not limited to her poetry. Her "loosely autobiographical" (Alvarez's term) fiction—namely *García Girls* and *¡Yo!*—is also carefully crafted, so that the form tells an additional story to the one presented in the narrative. *García Girls*, published in 1991, was her first loosely autobiographical novel. The García family has many parallels with Alvarez's own: it consists of a mother, father, and four daughters; the father, a doctor, is involved in the underground movement against Trujillo; and the family narrowly escapes to the United States when the daughters are young children. One of the daughters, Yolanda, grows up to be a writer.[29] The novel, told as a series of vignettes, begins with Yolanda returning to the Dominican Republic as an adult with the plan of possibly relocating there. Rather than answer the question of whether she will stay or return to the States, however, the novel moves back in time, covering the previous 33 years. Alvarez had a specific reason for structuring the novel in this way: "I didn't want the traditional Bildungsroman, with time going forward and the character growing up. I wanted the reader to be thinking like an immigrant, forever going back" ("A Clean Windshield" 132). Thus, we meet Yolanda at a time when she is experiencing profound confusion about where she belongs in the world. The last scene of the story that opens the novel—hence, the chronologically last moment of the book—ends with Yolanda more confused than ever, as she realizes that she has not found her place in the Dominican Republic as she had hoped. Instead of a solution to that confusion, we are presented with the events of her past that led

[29] Numerous critics have drawn a direct parallel between Yolanda and Alvarez herself. Even a cursory look at the details (such as the birth order of the daughters), however, reveals that this is not exactly the case. Aspects of Alvarez's experience and personality—as well as features and situations that do not represent Alvarez herself—can be found in all of the García sisters.

her to that place. We find ourselves, as readers, looking back over the sisters' lives, trying, like them, to find clues to why their lives unfolded the way that they did.[30]

The backwards structure of the novel has another important effect. On a number of occasions, the reader is presented with the memory of an event—at times, more than once—before reading about the incident itself. One such event occurs when Yolanda is five years old. While rooting around under the floorboards of her father's closet, she accidentally discovers an illegal gun that he has hidden there. Always one to tell stories, she brags to a government official, at whose home the sisters are watching television, that her father has a gun. Fortunately, the official regards this as simply a childish fiction. Yolanda's parents, however, fear for their lives. To instill the danger of telling such stories in Yolanda, they take her into the bathroom and, with the shower running to drown out her screams, beat her with a belt. Because of the way that the novel is structured, we learn that the story has been told and retold until it has become a family legend—"the time Yoyo almost got Papi killed"—long before we read about the actual event. This way of telling the story highlights the power of memory—individual and family—in shaping who we become. The story of the gun is a particularly powerful example of this phenomenon, as its importance to the García family, Yolanda in particular, does not become completely apparent to us as readers until it resurfaces in *¡Yo!*. (I will return to this story in my discussion of *¡Yo!* below.)

Alvarez uses the structure of the novel as a means of making a point about memory in other ways, as well. Being removed from their home culture and relocated to a foreign

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[30] In "'Turning and Turning in the Widening Gyre': A Second Coming into Language in Julia Alvarez's *How the García Girls Lost their Accents*, " Julie Barak offers in interesting take on the structure of *García Girls*: "To untangle these complications and to bridge the gap between the bilingual, immigrant García family and the mostly monolingual, monocultural, English speaking reader who is her primary audience, Alvarez spins a narrative that spirals from the outside in, whirling backward through the García's lives, highlighting in this spiral movement the centripetal and centrifugal forces which pull them toward and away from their island home, toward and away from the U.S., toward and away from an integrated adulthood" (160).

country with only the immediate family brought the family close together, sometimes uncomfortably so. It also had the effect of making "family stories" a prominent part of their experience. One such story was, of course, the story of the day they left the Dominican Republic to come to America. In an interview with *The Bloomsbury Review*, Alvarez discusses the process of writing "The Blood of the Conquistadores," the chapter in *García Girls* in which the family leaves the Island. Alvarez has no memories of the family's last day on the Island, so her account is entirely fictional. After writing it, she asked each member of her family to write out his/her memory of that day. Not surprisingly, she found that each member of the family had a different story to tell—and some of them were completely incompatible. (Remarkably, one sister remembered that the family had to roll the car out of the driveway with the engine off so that the secret police wouldn't hear them. Another sister quickly corrected her, however, pointing out that the scene she described was not from their own experience but is from *The Sound of Music*.) Alvarez incorporates family memory—and how it shapes individual experience—into the structure of both of her loosely autobiographical novels, another aspect that sets them apart from the traditional bildungsroman. The stories are told from a variety of perspectives, some in first-person, others using a traditional third-person narrator. While some stories, like the first, focus on one sister in particular, others are told by multiple narrators including any combination of the four sisters, the father, the mother, the maid and, in one case, a member of Trujillo's secret police. By structuring the novel in this way, Alvarez is able to communicate the idea that one's memories are interconnected with those of others without having to explain the concept in so many words. *¡Yo!* takes this idea even further, as all of its stories are about Yolanda, but none of them are told from her perspective.

The structure of several individual stories within *García Girls* highlights the lack of stability that the García sisters experience as immigrants. The opening story—the story of Yolanda's return to the Island—is an excellent example, particularly because its end represents the last chronological moment of the narrative. The story ends with Yolanda driving away from a small village where she has noticed a poster advertising Palmolive soap. The poster stands in stark contrast to an elderly Dominican woman who has befriended her: "In the glow of the headlights, Yolanda makes out the figure of the old woman in the black square of her doorway, waving goodbye. And above the picnic table on a near post, the Palmolive woman's skin gleams a rich white; her head is still thrown back, her mouth still opened as if she is calling someone over a great distance" (23). Ending the story with the image of the woman perpetually calling out is a powerful way to express Alvarez's position as someone who must continually negotiate between two cultures, both of which leave her feeling incomplete. Like the eternally frozen Palmolive woman, Yolanda will never complete the act of searching for where she belongs.

Several chapters throughout the novel conclude on similarly unsettled images. One example in particular brings to mind the above analogy of the puzzle. The story, entitled "The Human Body," is found in the final section of the novel and takes place shortly before the family leaves the Island. Yolanda and her cousin Mundín have been playing with a doll representing the human body with removable organs. When Mundín's mother catches them in the coal shed, which they have been forbidden to enter, they are whisked into the house and the doll spills out onto the shed floor. Later, when the gardener brings the toy to the house, "most of the organs had been chewed out of shape by the dogs or bent by my aunt's stepping on them. We couldn't tell the blue kidneys from bits of lung or the heart from a

pink lobe of brain, and though Mundín and I tried using the diagram, there was no puzzling the whole back inside the little man" (238). The doll remains incomplete because the parts cannot all fit together, much like a woman who is made up of (often conflicting) parts of two distinctly different heritages.

"An American Surprise," told from Carla's perspective, provides another example of an open ending. The story takes place before the family's move to the United States. The "American Surprise" is a mechanical bank, given to Carla as a gift by her father after one of his trips to America. When a coin is inserted into the bank and the lever is pulled, an angel ascends into the clouds then drops back down. The final image of this story is significant. After leaving the bank in the rain and letting it rust, Carla inserts a penny and pulls the lever. The story ends with this scene: "The little figure rose, her arms swiveled. Then she stopped, stuck, halfway up, halfway down" (274). This image reflects the sense of displacement Carla feels after the family's move to the United States. When the family celebrates the first anniversary of their move, Carla wonders: "what do you wish for on the first celebration of the day you lost everything?" (150). She feels that "she will never get the hang of this new country" (151). By the time we read this story, however, we have already been told that not only does Carla "get the hang of" life in the United States, "by the end of a couple of years away from home, [the sisters] had *more* than adjusted," so much so, in fact, that "Mami and Papi got all worried they were going to lose their girls to America" (109). Carlos and Laura decide that the sisters must spend their summers in the Dominican Republic so that they "wouldn't lose touch with *la familia*" (109). With this forced return to the Island, the sisters lose the sense—however artificial this sense may arguably be—that they may successfully "become" American teenagers. Thus, like Carla's angel, they are perpetually "stuck"

between the cultures and expectations of their family in the Dominican Republic and their peers in the United States. Once again, the form of the story helps convey its message.

The conclusion of the novel is consistent with the sense of incompleteness felt throughout. In the end, the narrative does not sustain its backwards structure. In "The Drum", the final story in the novel, Yolanda abuses a baby kitten by placing it inside a toy drum and banging around the yard. That night the kitten's mother sits by Yolanda's bed and wails until dawn. After that the cat is locked out of the house, but Yolanda continues to see it beside her bed each night. The story concludes with Yolanda saying that "I gave the drum away to a little cousin, throwing the ghost cat into the bargain" (289). Rather than ending there, however, the narrative is suddenly propelled into a chronologically forward trajectory with the next sentence: "But the cat came back, on and off, for years" (289). The trajectory is instantly accelerated in the next and final paragraph of the novel when Yolanda fires off a list of momentous life events in rapid succession: "Then we moved to the United States. The cat disappeared altogether. I saw snow. I solved the riddle of an outdoors made mostly of concrete in New York. My grandmother grew so old she could not remember who she was. I went away to school. I read books" (289). At this point, there is a startling shift to present-tense in which the narrator suddenly addresses the reader in second-person: "You understand I am collapsing all time now so that it fits in what's left in the hollow of my story?" (289). While not the only use of present-tense in the novel, this is the only moment in which we, the audience, are addressed directly. Thus, we get the sensation that the narrator is no longer Yolanda, but that we are now hearing from Alvarez herself. She goes on to tell us that:

> I began to write....I grew up, a curious woman, a woman of story ghosts and story devils, a woman prone to bad dreams and bad insomnia. There are still times I wake

> up at three o'clock in the morning and peer into the darkness. At that hour and in that loneliness, I hear her, a black furred thing lurking in the corners of my life, her magenta mouth opening, wailing over some violation that lies at the center of my art. (289-90)

This paragraph ends the novel. It is clear that this story is not finished.[31] While it is impossible to say whether the "violation" Alvarez speaks of is one that was perpetrated by her or upon her, it is obvious that she feels a sense of incompleteness or unfinished business that the act of writing is meant to correct. As witnessed by her serial autobiographical project, however, the business of writing her life will never be complete.

The story of the García family was also not completed with *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*. Six years after its publication, Alvarez published *¡Yo!*, a book of short stories that all center around Yolanda García. The title of the book is a complex play on words. "Yo" is one of Yolanda's many nicknames. In Spanish, it means *I*. Yolanda's voice, however, is strikingly absent. We view the process of her identity formation through the eyes of others. In this story Yolanda has recently published a novel (presumably *García Girls*) using her family and friends as "characters." The collection of stories that makes up *¡Yo!* is their revenge, everyone else's turn to tell stories about her. The title of each story is made up of the person telling it and a term having to do with writing. Examples include "The mother—nonfiction," "The stalker—tone," and "The third husband—characterization." The first chapter, written from the perspective of the sisters, provides numerous examples of the family's general reaction to Yolanda's first novel. These include complaints that she is "talking about our family like everyone is some made-up character she can do with as she

[31] The fact that Alvarez wrote further books confirms this idea, but it would be true of this particular story, even if Alvarez herself never wrote another thing, as the identities of Yolanda and her sisters hang in the balance even after the novel ends.

wants" and her "fictionally victimized sister" angry that "people have been coming up to me at work asking, so which one are you. My therapist says this is a kind of abuse!" (3, 6). Her mother has threatened to sue her, her father is mugged while calling her from a pay phone (to escape her mother's attention), and her sister Sofía can no longer read a novel, even by someone who is now dead, without thinking, "oh my god, I wonder what their family thought of this story?" (5). Interestingly, members of the family begin to live out character traits which Yolanda's novel has assigned to them. Sofía laments the change that she believes has come over her husband since he read Yolanda's novel. When, in referring to the novel, Sofía declares that "Mami's going to hit the roof!" her husband Otto replies nonchalantly that "Your mother will hit the roof anyway." "I'm out and out flabbergasted that he would say such a thing," she says, "even if it is true, which it is. I know for a fact that before he read the book and had lines like that plopped into his mouth, he would never have said so of his own accord....I feel like my whole life is losing ground to fiction" (5). When disagreements arise about various family memories that the book has brought up, she is forced to ultimately conclude that "I don't know what to believe anymore except that everyone in our family is lying" (13).

As with *García Girls*, Alvarez uses the unusual form of *¡Yo!* to make a point about autobiography and identity. Like Millett, Alvarez makes the point that there is no single truth that can be definitively written in an autobiography. But while Millett tells us that the ultimate truth of experience can't be found, Alvarez shows us this fact through the form that her loosely autobiographical fiction takes. She repeatedly shows us that one character's truth rarely, if ever, matches up to another's. She does this not only by sharing varying versions of the García family's memory, but by introducing new characters who are not found in *García*

Girls. The only thing that all of *¡Yo!*'s characters have in common is the fact that they have interacted with Yolanda at some point. Each of their stories centers around this interaction. (Some interactions are brief; others, such as those with her family, span her lifetime.) As a result of this structure, we are presented with snippets of stories that raise more questions than they can possibly answer. Several of the situations presented are left radically unresolved. One example is the story told by Yolanda's landlady, Marie Beaudry. Living in an apartment above Marie's home, Yolanda witnesses the abuse Marie endures at the hand of her husband, Clair. Unable to concentrate on her writing, Yolanda informs Marie that she will break her lease and move out unless Marie takes action against Clair. When, during a rainstorm, the roof above Yolanda's apartment—which Clair has failed to fix—leaks, ruining her written work, she reaches her breaking point. After they clean up the water as best they can, Yolanda turns to Marie and says, "I want to go downstairs now and have you show me what belongs to Clair" (168). The two women spend the entire night gathering all of Clair's belongings and tossing them out in the front yard. Then they wrap up in blankets and sit outside waiting for him to return from the home of his latest mistress. This is where the story ends: "I look over at Yo, who's sitting there with her head down, listening to that rain like it's reminding her what was written on them ruined pages. I put everything I got into listening, too, but all I hear is the taps, splats, and pings of the rain coming down hard on Clair's things" (169). We never learn what becomes of Marie. There is a reference in a later story to Yolanda having lived "in a run-down old house that burned down," from which we may draw our own conclusions, but we never hear the whole story (176). When a story no longer involves Yolanda, it no longer fits within the narrative of *¡Yo!*. Each of *¡Yo!*'s stories has its own main character. Because Yolanda is the focus, however, these characters are

relegated to peripheral status, and their narratives are abruptly dropped when they no longer directly involve her. The frustrated curiosity engendered by this situation highlights the fact that Yolanda's identity (and, by extension, the identity of Alvarez or, indeed, any autobiographer) cannot be contained within a narrative. By including all of these other characters, Alvarez demonstrates that drawing closer attention to her story actually makes its "hollow" grow ever wider.

This dynamic can be attributed to Alvarez's larger autobiographical project, as well. Looking at *García Girls, ¡Yo!*, and Alvarez's book of autobiographical essays, *Something to Declare*, as a series, one can view a trajectory from less "true" to more. *García Girls* is purely fictional. (Although it is loosely based on Alvarez's experience, it makes no claims to be literally autobiographical.) *¡Yo!* claims to reveal the "truth" behind many of the stories in *García Girls*. In the introductory chapter of *¡Yo!*, for example, Mami says of Yolanda "I tell you, I want my equal time. I want my chance to tell the world how she's always lied like the truth is just something you make up" (12). In addition to other characters voicing their own sides of Yolanda's stories, *¡Yo!* reveals details of the family's story that are fictionalized in *García Girls*. We learn in *¡Yo!*, for example, that the secret hiding place behind the bathroom on the family compound in the Dominican Republic (where Carlos hides from Trujillo's henchmen in *García Girls*) is in fact a fictional detail created by Yolanda. In this sense, *¡Yo!* approaches closer to the truth in that its focus is on revealing the truth behind *García Girls*, even though it is still the truth of fictional characters. With *Something to Declare* Alvarez drops the guise of the García family altogether and tells her stories as herself in her first explicitly autobiographical book. In addition to providing many previously untold stories from Alvarez's life, *Something to Declare* repeats several of the

events that are fictionalized in the novels. When we read the above-mentioned anecdote in "First Muse" about the boys on the playground pelting Alvarez with stones and telling her to go back where she came from, for example, we are already familiar with it, as Alvarez describes it happening to Carla in *García Girls*. In instances such as this, the true story (as well as the ultimate significance) of previously fictionalized events is revealed from the perspective of Alvarez herself.

An important feature of this trajectory from "less true" to "more true" in her work is the fact that the closer she comes to presenting her actual "true" experience in more traditional autobiographical form, the more outspoken she becomes about the desire to distort the truth and invent memories to suit her own purposes (and/or those of her characters). It is as if in illustrating the unstable nature of memories, she opens the door to the possibility of purposefully manipulating them. On two particularly moving occasions, existing memories are changed, with profound results. In one instance, Carlos (the father in *García Girls* and *¡Yo!*) radically alters an existing memory. The other occurs in the essay "Genetics of Justice" in which Alvarez fabricates a memory for her mother. The first example of the deliberate manipulation of memory occurs around the above-mentioned story of Yolanda and the gun. The story of Yolanda's discovery of Carlos' gun is told and retold several times within both *García Girls* and *¡Yo!*. With each repetition of the story, fundamental details vary depending on the perspective of the teller. As Carlos points out in *¡Yo!*, "the particulars of what happened over there one Saturday afternoon have all become jumbled together in my head....this memory has been my shameful secret, and when you do not tell the story, everything mixes with everything else" (302). The last time the story is told, in the end of *¡Yo!*, Carlos changes its ending. The one factor that remains the same through each telling of

the story is that Carlos owns an illegal gun. In one variation, "Yoyo told their neighbor, the old general, a made-up story about Papi having a gun, a story which turned out to be true because Papi did really have a hidden gun for some reason" (*García Girls* 198). Her Mami and Papi beat her with a belt in the bathroom with the shower running to drown out her screams. In another version, related by Laura in *¡Yo!*, Yolanda does not make up the story but actually finds the gun hidden under the floorboards of her parents' closet. Laura discovers the disturbed floorboards and confronts Yolanda. Yolanda will not admit to seeing the gun, and Laura is afraid to suggest it to her in case she did not, in fact, see it. In this case, Yolanda does not tell anyone about the gun, but her parents live in fear that she will. Laura relates that "I hated being at the mercy of my own child, but in that house we were all at the mercy of her silence from that day on." She goes on to say,

> isn't a story a charm? All you have to say is, *And then we came to the United States*, and with that *and then*, you skip over four more years of disappearing friends, sleepless nights, house arrest, narrow escape, *and then*, you've got two adults and four wired-up kids in a small, dark apartment near Columbia University. Yo must have kept her mouth shut or no charm would have worked to get us free of the torture chambers we kept telling the immigration people about so they wouldn't send us back. (28)

In the final version of the story, told by Carlos, Yolanda finds the gun and tells the old general next door about it. In this instance, Carlos is the one to discover the disturbed floorboards in the closet. Later that afternoon the maid brings the girls home from the general's house with the news that Yolanda has told him the story. In this instance, too,

Yolanda's parents beat her with a belt in the bathroom, warning her that she must never tell stories.

It is this final version of the story of the gun that Carlos transforms from a story of shame into a father's blessing. In the final chapter of *¡Yo!*, Yolanda has called her father in tears because she has doubts that writing is really her destiny. Carlos promises her that when he sees her for Thanksgiving, he will give her his special blessing, a father's blessing like those found in the Bible to make the curse of her doubt go away. After he hangs up, he rehearses how the blessing will go. He knows that in order for Yolanda to believe it, it must be in the form of a story. This story—the story of when he first realized that Yolanda's destiny was to tell stories of her own—is inseparable from the shame which his part in it causes him:

> It is a story I have kept secret because it is also a story of my shame which I cannot disentangle from it. We were living in terror, and I reacted with terror. I beat her. I told her that she must never ever tell stories again. And so maybe that is why she has never believed in her destiny, why I have to go back to that past and let go the belt and put my hands on her head instead. I have to tell her I was wrong. I have to lift the old injunction. (296)

Carlos turns the shame into a father's blessing:

> I have promised her a blessing to take the doubt away. A story whose true facts cannot be changed. But I can add my own invention—that much I have learned from Yo. A new ending can be made out of what I now know.
>
> So let us go back to that moment. Let us enter that small, green-tiled bathroom that will have a fictional hidden closet behind the toilet in stories to come.

> I am turning on the shower. Her mother sits down on the toilet seat to hold Yo for me. It sounds like Isaac pinned on the rock and his father Abraham lifting the butcher knife. I lift the belt, but then as I said, forty years pass, and my hand comes down gently on my child's graying head.
>
> And I say, "My daughter, the future has come and we were in such a rush to get here! We left everything behind and forgot so much. Ours is now an orphan family. My grandchildren and great grandchildren will not know the way back unless they have a story. Tell them of our journey. Tell them the secret heart of your father and undo the old wrong. My Yo, embrace your destino. You have my blessing, pass it on." (308-09)

These words are the end of *¡Yo!*. With them Alvarez's character transforms a shameful memory into a call to keep the family's narrative alive.

It is no surprise that Alvarez has her character impart these words. She herself embraces the task of "undoing the old wrongs" through writing her family's stories. In some cases, this simply involves bringing the story to light. In other cases, however, Alvarez takes it upon herself to actually change the story. One particularly poignant instance occurs in *Something to Declare*. In her essay "Genetics of Justice," she changes a memory from her mother's youth. The focus of this essay is Alvarez's parents' experience living under Trujillo's regime. Her mother (also named Julia) has told her that in addition to requiring that his portrait—altered to cover his dark, Haitian skin and airbrushed to hide his flaws—be hung with the family portraits in every home, Trujillo, a.k.a., El Jefe, would periodically organize a parade where he would be stationed on a dais and every woman in the city would be forced to march past him and turn her head in deference to him. Refusing to participate

would result in the state's refusal to stamp the rebellious woman's identification card which was required for nearly everything. The time eventually came when Julia was to march in one of these parades. Her experience was, evidently, uneventful. Alvarez, however, creates a memory for her mother around this event. In this memory, the parade takes place on a scorching summer day. Just as Julia walks into Trujillo's line of vision, the parade is forced to stop while medics haul away a woman who has fainted from the heat. Julia silently curses Trujillo for forcing these thousands of women to march in the miserable heat only to stroke his ego. She looks up at him—the man whom she has only seen in the artificially handsome photo in her home—and what she sees makes it worthwhile:

> For there, no more than ten steps away, he stands, a short, plump man sweating profusely in his heavy dress uniform. The medals on his chest flash brightly in the hot sun so that he looks as if he has caught on fire. She can see the rivulets of sweat under his Napoleonic hat, making his pancake makeup run down his face, revealing the dark skin beneath. I invent this scene because I want my mother to see what she cannot yet imagine: El Jefe coming undone. (107)

With this invented memory, Alvarez gives her mother hope, even if only in retrospect. Since there is no one single truth of a life, she feels free to create the truth that she wants. She does this, of course, while still presenting the facts of her autobiography as she sees them. (She doesn't change the facts then present the story to us as truth. Rather, the act of changing the facts itself becomes an important part of the story.) Like her character Yolanda, Alvarez feels compelled to continuously record—and, at times, rearrange—her life on paper. The variety of unique forms in which she writes allows her to do so repeatedly and over a long span of time.

Sometimes the words are so close I am
more who I am when I'm down on paper
than anywhere else as if my life were
practicing for the real me.
.....
Why do I get confused living it through?
(*Homecoming* 102)

For Alvarez, writing and living are inseparable. As she says in her essay "Grounds for Fiction," "writing begins before you ever put pen to paper or your fingers down on the keyboard. It is a way of being alive in the world" (*Declare* 264). The union of the two, however, is often as painful as it is redemptive. In *Homecoming*, her first book of poetry, she states that even when she is happy,

> perverseness keeps me going back to name
> those sadnesses as if my tongue
> could cure by catalogue, as if a song
> were all that was needed against the pain
> of having been so lost. (105)

At times she finds herself so trapped within language that she is unable to fully connect with her lived experience. In addition, she struggles with the question of whether writing is ultimately enough to actually accomplish anything. This is a theme that occurs and recurs consistently throughout her entire body of work. As early as *¡Yo!*, Yolanda's cousin accuses her of being "the haunted one who ended up living your life mostly on paper" (53). In *Something to Declare*, Alvarez compares herself unfavorably with her husband, who knows how to raise crops: "He knows about real life, real things, real tomatoes and cucumbers that we can really eat. All I know can be put between the covers of a book, and it won't feed the hungry or fill the kitchens of the poor" (88). In her 2004 book of poetry *The Woman I Kept to Myself*, she returns to the subject, saying:

> The inhumanity of our humanity
> will not be fixed by metaphor alone.
> The plot will not fail, the tortured will divulge
> our names, our human story will end, unless
> our art can right what happens in the world. (70)

And, in *Saving the World*, published in 2007, her heroine, also an author, repeatedly speaks of her real life as "this story that is not a story," referring to the fact that one cannot change the facts or ease the pain of real life by turning it into a story. Yet Alvarez persists, writing and rewriting her life, determined to find "a happy ending to close at least one version of [her] story" (*Other Side* 145). The offspring of this repetition is a rich and dynamic writing career and a fascinating serial autobiography.

As a Dominican American writer mapping out a homeland through language, Alvarez at times finds herself caught in a double-double bind, caught between Spanish and English while caught between writing her life and living it. Existing as she does in the world of words, she recognizes their fragility. In "Bilingual Sestina," she remembers facing this difficulty even before the switch to English: "Even Spanish / failed us back then when we saw how frail a word is / when faced with the thing it names" (4). The enforced addition of a new language, of course, complicates the matter further. In "Sound Bites: *The Word Made Flesh*," Alvarez speaks about the inability to find the words to describe her first love either in English or in Spanish, her "first, more heartfelt language":

> There was no way to say
> what I wanted
> .....

no way to do it but do it,
lie down and slide my tongue
into his all-American mouth
looking for the words to say
what was happening in silence. (43-44)

Unable to resolve this silence in lived experience, she copes with it in the poem by uniting the two languages, placing the silence "in my *cuerpo* and his heart, / in his *corazón* and my body" (44). Portraying his all-American body in her heartfelt Spanish (his *corazón*) while using his English to describe her heart is an act of intimacy that could only be accomplished through language. Other poems, however, present the difficulty that focusing too strongly on the written word can cause in real life. In "The Joe Poems: First Love Letter" Alvarez bemoans the consequence of having "learned of love mostly from books I love": "My Romeos, Heathcliffs, my Anthonys, / like rich brocaded tapestries / hiding you from my view, whoever *you* are" (62-63). When the word becomes the only place in which one can find intimacy, the written life obstructs the reality—the lived intimacy—of human relationships. If the love on the page causes her to lose sight of the human lover, all intimacy is lost and she is left with nothing.

Whatever ongoing challenges living through the written word presents, however, the stakes of doing so—and the payoff of the moments when she is able to do so with success—are too high for Alvarez to refrain from repeatedly returning to the page. Looking back over a two-year struggle with writer's block, she reflects in "The Other Side / *El Otro Lado*" on the significance of the ability to write her life, to contain it within a story: "But the greatest [safety] net of all was the one I made with language, / the precarious world underlaid by the

sturdy net of a narrative. / Silence had been the closest I had come to true impoverishment" (*Other Side* 144). In "Redwing Sonnets" she speaks about the notion that, particularly for a woman, silence is supposed to be covered over with the "pretty talk" that hides what she is really thinking. She protests both the silence and this empty talk, saying:

> Against such talk I write—
> or try to anyway—that other kind
> of talk that is as awful as silence
> if it hits the mark, when just the right
> string of words will make your life fall in line
> and shine with an eloquent radiance. (*Homecoming* 106)

This is the language that can "ease a three o'clock in the morning / terror" (106), that can help her understand and continue to formulate her fluid relationship to the world around her, that can enable her to create a place of stability within the perpetually fragmented category of neither Dominican nor North American but always somehow both.

The ultimate goal of reaching this community through words on a page, however, is not always easy to achieve. The inability to translate the poetry of experience into the written word—along with the effort to overcome this crippling disability—is a predominant theme in *The Other Side / El Otro Lado*, Alvarez's second book of poetry. The poems follow (are the other side of) the aforementioned two-year bout with writer's block. Frustrated with her own silence, she attributes her inability to write to cultural alienation within the American Midwest: "I hadn't fit into any of the stories—that was the problem— / like Cinderella's ugly sister with a shoe store worth of discards— / not the love story, the sob story, the homegirl-made-good story" (116). So, she decides to return to the Dominican

Republic, entering an artists' colony, hoping to find her voice through the Island's cultural narrative, hoping to "roll back the big boulders of silence / and release the voice that would gather the scattered pieces together / and tell me at last the story of this life I had been living" (110). Her sojourn to the Island, however, does nothing to release the words inside her until she descends from the mountaintop colony and enters a small, remote village. Mingling with its poverty-stricken residents, her focus shifts from her problems with writing to social activism: "Surrounded by Boca's starving I was shamed into action: / fund raising, office trotting, in a month's time we were promised / a schoolhouse, a dispensary, a better road than the channel crossing" (144-45). When she begins to invest her energy in living, she realizes what has been missing from her writing life: "I'd bypassed the other stories afraid of their golden cages, / pretty heroines rattling the bars after their happy endings" (116). In rejecting the "pretty talk" of the American good-girl stereotype, however, she had failed to replace it with an alternative. She had failed to strike the balance between the attempt to substitute such talk with "the words [that] will make your life fall into line" and actually living (*Homecoming* 106). She concludes that while it is vital for her to work through her life on paper, she must first allow herself to live it:

> No excuse—no matter how good—holds over the long run
> for withholding yourself from your life, giving it all to paper.
> For although as the saying goes in my Dominican Spanish,
> *el papel lo aguanta todo*, the paper can hold anything,
> it needs the breath of your breath, the bone of your living bone,
> to become incarnate truth in the yearning heart of your reader. (117)

Alvarez cannot give up the need to write—to continually work out and work though the contradictions of her life on paper—but at the same time she must consistently remind herself that language has its limits, that it is the living that matters most. The act of living remains the seed of the written word, and she will not be able to connect with her reading audience in the way that she wishes to unless she can connect her writing to her life itself. And, for Alvarez, this connection with her reader is an essential aspect of her autobiographical project. She writes in order to create a space for her Dominican American self on paper, but she does not wish to do so in isolation. Over and over again, she expresses the desire to forge a relationship with her reader.[32] She writes not only to tell her own story but to form a community with her readers, even those she will never meet.

> **We are rewiring ourselves with our writing and our talking and our sharing of stories. Now that we, mujeres of my generation, are becoming the elders of the tribe, we want to pass on some of what we have learned from the struggles we had to take on.**
> **(*Once Upon a Quinceañera* 235)**

Like Millett, Alvarez writes both in order to understand her own life and in hopes of helping others along the way. Her view of why we read is remarkably similar to Millett's description of the same in *Mother Millett*. Alvarez writes, "We need to tell, and we also want to know (don't we?) the secret heart of each other's lives. Why are we so ashamed of this? Perhaps that is why we love good novels and poems—because we can enter, without shame or without encountering defensiveness or embarrassment, the intimate lives of other people" (*Something to Declare* 278). Alvarez uses her writing project to counter shame. Her writing began as a means of refusing the shame that her peers tried to inflict upon her when she was an immigrant child trying to find her way in American society. It continues as a way to share

[32] In signing this reader's copy of *Saving the World*, Alvarez actually chose the phrase "Thanks for being my reader!" to accompany her signature.

her life with those who may have similar struggles and be too ashamed to actively look outside of themselves for help. As the above statement suggests, Alvarez is aware that wanting to look into the private experiences of others is a desire that is often considered shameful. She also knows, however, how helpful it can be to hear about how someone else coped with a struggle you are facing, something Alvarez herself had to go without when she was growing up. By sharing her intimate life through writing, then, she creates a space where her readers can look into her life without shame and know—without having to ask—that they are not alone. As Millett says, "a little truth and some exchange of information" can go a long way toward helping each of us figure out how to live our own lives (*Mother Millett* 79). Alvarez shares this view with Millett and has devoted her autobiographical project to opening up her own life to her readers.

One specific group that Alvarez sets out to help with her writing is young Latina women who, like herself, struggle to find their place in the culture of the United States. In her 2007 book *Once Upon a Quinceañera: Coming of Age in America*, a book that combines a sociological analysis of the Quinceañera tradition in Latin American culture with reflections on her own youth, Alvarez says of the forays into her own memory, "Why am I revisiting these places? I suppose I am hoping to understand the places that tripped me up as a young Latina woman in an effort to save somebody else some heartache" (196). The same could be said of her entire autobiographical project. Alvarez shares the turmoil of growing up as a "hyphenated" subject in order to provide young women growing up in similar circumstances with both a predecessor that they can recognize and an example of one way of working through the confusion.

But Alvarez does not write only for those like herself. She writes, she says on more than one occasion, for everyone. While she is explicit about the fact that she writes to figure out her own life, she always does so with an eye toward her reader, whether that reader is someone with a similar background to hers or someone for whom the identity of Dominican American is completely foreign. And, she is not satisfied with the idea of her life being merely words on a page. She states on numerous occasions that she wants to achieve intimacy with her reader. This idea comes through particularly strongly in her poetry, where she repeatedly makes the point that poetry depends on the reader as much as it does the writer. In "Reading for Pleasure," for example, she states that it is those who read "for pleasure" who breathe life into literature's "dead characters." She continues: "And now, like them, I lie on these cold sheets, / waiting to be a woman once again. / You who are reading these words come closer" (*Woman* 136). Likewise, alluding in her poem "Direct Address" to Walt Whitman's directive to "Look for me under your bootsoles," she says:

> I'd like to think this is how I'll come back:
> lines in a poem that spring upon your lips,
> though who the author was has slipped your mind.
> It's agency, not fame, I want: my words
> at work, a slap awake, a soothing hand.
> But since death's likely to transform my wish,
> there's no direct address that I can give
> where you should look for me. So you (yes, *you*!)
> keep watch! I could be under your bootsoles
> or inside this poem already inside you. (*Woman* 138)

Like Millett, Alvarez views her written work as an extension of her very self, and her relationship with the reader is essential. Her work, in fact, is not complete until it has reached her reader. Even if that reader forgets who wrote the words she is reading, Alvarez has achieved her goal if her words enter the reader's heart and make an impact. As she says in her sonnet sequence "33," "There's nothing you can do. / By now, I am already inside you" (*Homecoming* 100).

Chapter 4

"A Mystery No One Can Answer": The Colonial Subject in the Work of Jamaica Kincaid

Who you are is a mystery no one can answer, not even you.
And why not, why not! (*The Autobiography of My Mother* 202)

Jamaica Kincaid has made a name for herself writing about the horrors of colonialism. She is perhaps best known for her 1988 book *A Small Place*, which describes the devastating effects of British colonialism on her native Antigua. Although *A Small Place* is her most direct attack on colonization, the experience of the colonized subject is a constant theme throughout her entire body of work, from her fiction, to her book about the life and death of her brother, to her book about the garden at her home in Vermont.

It is immediately obvious to any reader of her work that Kincaid has two primary themes that thread their way through every one of her books: colonization and her fraught relationship with her mother. The two, it turns out, are related. While it is certainly true that Kincaid experienced life-long conflict and discord with her real-life mother, whom she insists always hated her,[33] she realized later in her career that the theme of mother-daughter struggle represents a microcosm of the power struggle between the colonizer and the colonized subject. In a 1991 interview with Allen Vorda of *Mississippi Review*, she discusses the relationship between the mother and daughter in her well-known story, "Girl":

> I've come to see that I've worked through the relationship of the mother and the girl to a relationship between Europe and the place that I'm from, which is to say, a relationship between the powerful and the powerless. The girl is powerless and the

[33] "I once did not see my mother for twenty years, even though I thought of her first thing in the morning and last thing at night, and almost all my thoughts of her were full of intense hatred, but she was alive and not in my sight and I could so well remember her hatred toward me—I will not add a qualifier to that, her hatred toward me, or modify it, this was just so: my mother hates her children" (*My Brother* 154).

> mother is powerful. The mother shows her how to be in the world, but at the back of her mind she thinks she never will get it. She's deeply skeptical that this child could ever grow up to be a self-possessed woman and in the end she reveals her skepticism; yet even within the skepticism is, of course, dismissal and scorn. So it's not unlike the relationship between the conquered and the conqueror. (12)[34]

For Kincaid, then, it all comes back to the theme of power relations between the powerful oppressor and the powerless oppressed.

The description of this relationship between mother and daughter does indeed sound very much like that of the colonizer and the colonized subject. As Homi Bhabha famously points out in *The Location of Culture*, for the colonial situation to work to the colonizer's advantage, the colonized subject must try to perfectly imitate the colonizer but must never be able to succeed. (Successful imitation on the part of the colonized subject would, of course, make her indistinguishable from the colonizer, thereby disrupting the balance that keeps the colonizing country in the position of power.)[35] The best way to accomplish this goal is to make the colonized subject actually want to imitate the colonizer. As Kincaid points out in *My Garden (Book)*, there are only two sure ways to make someone behave in the way you would like: "You can hold a gun to their head or you can clearly set out before them the thing you would like them to be, and eventually they admire it so much, without even knowing they do so, that they adopt your ways, almost to the point of sickness; they come to believe

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[34] For more on Kincaid's discovery of this connection, see also Frank Birbalsingh. "Jamaica Kincaid: From Antigua to America." *Frontiers of Caribbean Literature*. Ed. Frank Birbalsingh. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996. 138-51; and Moira Ferguson. "A Lot of Memory: An Interview with Jamaica Kincaid." *The Kenyon Review* 16.1 (Winter 1994): 163-88.

[35] "[M]imicry represents an *ironic* compromise. If I may adapt Samuel Weber's formulation of the marginalizing vision of castration, then colonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, *as a subject of a difference that is almost the same but not quite*. Which is to say, that the discourse of mimicry is constructed around a *ambivalence*; in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference" (86, italics in the original).

that your way is their way and would die before they give it up" (141). The power of colonialism lies in its ability to successfully do the latter.

One of the most painful manifestations of the colonial situation for Kincaid is the fact that she can only express her anger at the colonizers in their language, as the native language of Antigua had been replaced with English long before she was born. She points out the irony of this fact in *A Small Place*:

> For isn't it odd that the only language I have in which to speak of this crime is the language of the criminal who committed the crime? And what can that really mean? For the language of the criminal can contain only the goodness of the criminal's deed. The language of the criminal can explain and express the deed only from the criminal's point of view. It cannot contain the horror of the deed, the injustice of the deed, the agony, the humiliation inflicted on me. (31-32)

Thus, she finds herself in a situation where she feels that she is unable to express herself without resorting to a language she finds hateful but which is the only one she knows. This contradiction extends to her very selfhood, as she cannot separate who she is from her background as a colonial subject. In her novel *The Autobiography of My Mother*, Kincaid states that West Indians subjected to colonial rule "had long ago been reduced to shadows: the forever foreign, the margins, had long ago lost any connection to wholeness, to an inner life of our own invention" (133). And, she insists that this is a situation from which there can never be an escape or any kind of resolution: "But nothing can erase my rage—not an apology, not a large sum of money, not the death of the criminal—for this wrong can never be made right, and only the impossible can make me still: can a way be found to make what happened not have happened?" (*A Small Place* 32).

At first glance, Kincaid's work does not fit within typical definitions of autobiography. Much of her story is told in novels with characters who are based on herself and her family but have different names and, in some cases, have radically different experiences from those of Kincaid herself. Her work that can be considered most autobiographical—in that she speaks as herself and tells stories from her own life—is not written as autobiography per se but as political essays about other, less personal issues. Her work, however, fits within the expanded definition of autobiographical practice that Leigh Gilmore describes in *The Limits of Autobiography: Trauma and Testimony*. Gilmore points out that typical autobiographical practices are not always possible for those who have suffered traumatic experience:

> [C]onventions about truth telling, salutary as they are, can be inimical to the ways in which some writers bring trauma stories into language. The portals are too narrow and the demands too restrictive. Moreover, the judgments they invite may be too similar to forms in which trauma was experienced. When the contest is over who can tell the truth, the risk of being accused of lying (or malingering, or inflating, or whining) threatens the writer into continued silence. In this scenario, the autobiographical project may swerve from the form of autobiography even as it embraces the project of self-representation. (3)

This situation aptly describes Kincaid's work. (It is, in fact, in discussing Kincaid's writing that Gilmore coined the term "serial autobiography.") For Kincaid, the trauma of colonialism—combined with the fact that the language to which she has access as well as all of the literary models she had growing up belong to her oppressors—left her feeling like she didn't have a self of her own.

The lack of a stable self, of course, precludes traditional autobiographical practices. Instead of simply lamenting this fact and remaining silent, Kincaid chooses to write her autobiography in a way that illustrates the impossible position in which growing up as a colonial subject placed her. Although her writing is based on her life—she is frequently quoted as saying that her fiction is all autobiographical, "even the punctuation"—her writing does not tell the story of a single, stable subject. [36] Instead, she tells pieces of her story in each book, fictionalizing it or including it in works, like *A Small Place* and *My Brother*, which are primarily (or, at least ostensibly) about other subjects. The following passage from *The Autobiography of My Mother*—a book which Kincaid says is "not really about my mother but about a woman who could be my mother and so therefore could be me" (Brady Q2)— provides a compelling view of the way that Kincaid approaches the idea of memory:

> Parts of my life, incidents in my life then, seem, when I remember them now, as if they were happening in a very small, dark place, a place the size of a dollhouse, and the dollhouse is at the bottom of a hole, and I am way up at the top of the hole, peering down into this little house, trying to make out exactly what it is that happened down there. And sometimes when I look down at this scene, certain things are not in the same place they were in the last time I looked: different things are in the shadows at different times, different things are in the light. (33)

This view of the past is reflected in Kincaid's serial autobiographical practice which presents a fragmented look at her history. This approach to memory and autobiography differs from that of each of the other three authors discussed here. McCarthy and Millett—as self-proclaimed "archeologist" and "documentarian" respectively—both seek to find and record

[36] Quoted in Donnell and Muirhead. She also frequently makes statements like the following: "Practically everything I've written is autobiographical, and if it isn't I make it so" (Muirhead 45).

the actual truth of their experience (although the extent to which they believe that can be done differs). Alvarez's approach to the past as a puzzle with a missing box top is closer to Kincaid's method, but Alvarez still seeks to make a picture out of the past, even if that picture may change with each repetition of the story. Kincaid, on the other hand, does not wish to present a unified picture of her past. On the contrary, she makes a point of showing us that she does not feel that she has a solid, cohesive self to portray.

Subjectivity in Kincaid's work is very often represented as ephemeral. Her books often portray the self of the protagonist expanding, contracting, splitting, cracking open, falling, spreading, awash, disembodied, even erased. A typical example is a passage from her short story entitled "Blackness":

> The blackness is visible and yet it is invisible, for I see that I cannot see it....In the blackness, then, I have been erased. I can no longer say my own name, I can no longer point to myself and say "I". In the blackness my voice is silent. First, then, I have been my individual self, carefully banishing randomness from my existence, then I am swallowed up in the blackness so that I am one with it. (*At the Bottom of the River* 46-47)

This imagery suggests the idea of a self—or the possibility of self-knowledge—just out of reach: "I see that I cannot see it". Kincaid's autobiographical work is perpetually reaching out toward the idea of a self that could never be—the self she would have been had Antigua not been colonized.

Serial autobiography allows her to return to this theme repeatedly and explore it in various ways. The above passage from "Blackness" (the title of which can, one assumes, refer to racialized identity as well as the visual darkness described in the passage) calls to

mind the endings of both *Annie John* and *Lucy*, her autobiographical novels about her childhood and adolescence. Near the end of *Annie John*, the narrator says:

> Everything I would do that morning until I got on the ship that would take me to England I would be doing for the last time, for I had made up my mind that, come what may, the road for me now went only in one direction: away from my home, away from my mother, away from my father, away from the everlasting blue sky, away from the everlasting hot sun, away from people who said to me, "This happened during the time your mother was carrying you." If I had been asked to put into words why I felt this way, if I had been given years to reflect and come up with the words of why I felt this way, I would not have been able to come up with so much as the letter "A." I only knew that I felt the way I did, and that this feeling was the strongest thing in my life. (133-34)

Like Alvarez, Kincaid rejects the structure of the typical bildungsroman in constructing her fictionalized autobiography as insufficiently representative of her experience. Unlike the typical coming-of-age novel, which ends with the protagonist gaining self-knowledge, *Annie John* ends with its heroine absolutely unable to express anything about herself or her feelings about her life experience thus far.[37] This, of course, opens the way for further exploration of her situation. (Although she does not return to the character of Annie John per se, Kincaid has made it clear in numerous interviews that Annie's story is her own.)

Lucy, Kincaid's autobiographical novel based on her first year after she immigrated to the U.S. at the age of 17, ends on a similar note. The novel ends as Lucy is leaving the employ of the family for whom she has worked as an au pair and setting off on her own. As

[37] For a thorough discussion of the ways in which Kincaid manipulates the traditional bildungsroman, see Maria Helena Lima. "Decolonizing Genre: Jamaica Kincaid and the Bildungsroman." *Genre: Forms of Discourse and Culture* 26:4 (1993): 431-59.

a going-away gift, her employer, Mariah, has given her a journal. The novel ends with the following passage:

> At the top of the page I wrote my full name: Lucy Josephine Potter. At the sight of it, many thoughts rushed through me, but I could write down only this: "I wish I could love someone so much that I would die from it." And then as I looked at this sentence a great wave of shame came over me and I wept and wept so much that the tears fell on the page and caused all the words to become one great big blur. (163-64)

As with the ending of *Annie John*, *Lucy* concludes with a protagonist who is unable to speak for herself. Similarly to Annie, who would not be able to get past the first letter of her name were she to try to explain her feelings about her past, Lucy declares herself by writing her full name out on the page, only to be overcome with shame that literally washes the name away. The shame itself is a result of a wish for complete annihilation, a far cry from the stable self-identity achieved at the end of the classic coming-of-age novel. By writing first-person (albeit fictionalized) novels that tell a life story but end with a declared inability to tell one's story, Kincaid reminds us of the instability of her own personhood. In this way, she reminds us that the person she believes she was supposed to be—an Antiguan as an Antiguan, not a British subject—does not and can never exist. Serial autobiography allows her to make this point again and again while also giving us glimpses into her own experience that allow us to understand why she feels this way. The epigraph above encapsulates Kincaid's view of colonial subjectivity: "Who you are is a mystery no one can answer, not even you. And why not, why not!" (*The Autobiography of My Mother* 202). The fact that the "why not" is presented as a statement, not as a question, illustrates the fact that Kincaid is not asking why she cannot know herself (a question to which she already knows the answer)

but drawing our attention to the reasons why it is not possible. The "why not!" is not a query but an expression of anger.

Kincaid's view of her own selfhood takes a significant turn later in her writing career when she finds that the identity of author gives her access to the stable self she had previously been lacking. This sense of self is, however, in direct contrast to the image she had previously spent her career expressing, which presents Kincaid with a new struggle which she must write her way through. Reading her entire body of work as a serial autobiography allows us to watch these transformations within Kincaid's self-view and track the various means by which she attempts to come to terms with them.

I came to know myself, and this frightened me. To rid myself of this fear I began to look at a reflection of my face in any surface I could find. (*The Autobiography of My Mother* 99)

Kincaid's relationship with her audience is adversarial, to say the least. It is clear that she addresses an audience of white Americans or Europeans. This is exemplified not only in her direct address to white tourists in *A Small Place*, but in the (some might argue unnecessary) translation of her brother's patois into standard English in *My Brother*.[38] Unlike Millett and Alvarez, Kincaid does not speak for others who are in a similar situation. (Her criticism of colonialism can potentially benefit other colonized subjects, of course, but those other subjects are not the focus of her writing and, as we will see, she takes a critical, even condescending view of other Antiguans.) Her serial autobiography also differs from that of the other authors in this study in that she does not attempt to connect with her audience in any way. She is, in fact, uninterested in what her readers might have to say. She writes in a way that preempts any possibility for argument on the part of the reader and, for

[38] When, for example, he says, "Me hear you a come but me no tink you a come fo' true," it is more than clear what he is saying, yet Kincaid offers a translation (9).

the most part, she gets none. This does not mean, however, that her audience is not essential to her project. Like McCarthy, Millett and Alvarez, Kincaid uses the audience as a mirror to view herself, but more than any of them, she specifically manipulates that view in order to make her point.

Time and time again, throughout her body of work, Kincaid's protagonists speak about looking at themselves. The frequently-cited passage in which Annie John spots herself in a store window, "hanging there among bolts of cloth, among Sunday hats and shoes, among men's and women's undergarments, among pots and pans, among brooms and household soap, among notebooks and pens and ink, among medicines for curing headache and medicines for curing colds" and is, for a moment, unable to distinguish her own face from the commodities she sees is only one of many examples (94). By repeatedly describing the act of looking at herself, Kincaid invites us to do so with her. In fact, she demands it. In this way, she purposely replicates the gaze of the colonizer. She does so in order to make us see what colonialism has done to her—to make us look at what we have done. As the above quote suggests, however, to see her is not to know her. On the contrary, the message that continually comes through in her work is that to see her is to see how unknowable she is, and, much more importantly, how impossible it is for her to know herself outside of the context of colonialism. She is frightened at the idea of knowing herself because, in her eyes, to do so would be to become complaisant and acknowledge the position of the colonized subject as natural and acceptable. So, she makes a life's work of shining a light on the damage that colonialism has done to her selfhood.

Kincaid's autobiographical project, then, is a means of creating a self on paper while continuously reminding us that she is having to create this self because she was robbed of the

self she should have been. In numerous interviews, she speaks about having reinvented herself upon her move to America at the age of 17. She immediately cut ties with her family, not returning to Antigua or seeing her mother for almost twenty years. When she began writing, she changed her name from Elaine Potter Richardson to Jamaica Kincaid so that people back home would not know of her writing career. Reflecting on that time in her life, she says in an interview with *Missouri Review*'s Kay Bonetti:

> I didn't have the words for it, but yes, I was inventing myself. I didn't make up a past that I didn't have. I just made my present different from my past....The crucial thing was that I would not communicate with my family. Somehow I knew that was the key to anything I wanted to make of myself. I could not be with people who knew me so well that they knew just what I was capable of. I had to be with people who thought whatever I said went. (133)

She takes a similar approach to autobiography. Whatever she says goes, and she does not allow room for questioning. Her writing performs a delicate balancing act between telling us of her actual life experiences while at the same time keeping her reader at a distance. As readers, we are never allowed close enough to feel that we really know her, and no one from her past has the opportunity to offer another version of the story.

Kincaid's view of truth and its relation to autobiography differs from that of traditional autobiography as well as that of McCarthy, Millett and Alvarez. She does not seem interested in questions of truth within the context of memory and the ability (or lack thereof) to give an accurate account of one's life. One gets the impression, in fact, that she trusts her own memory completely. On numerous occasions, both in *My Brother* and in interviews, she tells of how her mother and other people from her past came to hate her

ability to remember events and her insistence on correcting other people's accounts: "Nothing would pass by me. Someone would repeat something we both witnessed, leaving out things that I would fill in. As I got older, it wasn't a joke anymore. People began to say: 'Oh, you remember all those old times stories.' My mother still says that to me. But what I remember is not an old times story: it's the truth" (Birbalsingh 146). She does not seem to question for a moment that her memory is completely accurate; this question in her work is simply beside the point. "Often, the truth is contradictory and complicated," she says. "I like to hold all versions in my hand at once. My writing is a way of understanding what happens" (Conover 9). Likewise, she says, "I don't aim to be factual, I aim to be true to something, but it's not necessarily the facts" (Bonetti 125). Instead of grappling with questions of truth and accuracy as they relate to her past, she tells her story in a way that communicates a larger, more encompassing truth—the truth as she sees it of an experience or a time period as a whole, not the truth as it relates to the details. "To say exactly what happened," she says of her childhood, "was less than what I knew happened" (Perry 129).

As we have seen throughout this study, the serial autobiographer's attitude toward truth directly affects the structure of the autobiographical project, and Kincaid's work is no exception. Her view of truth as greater than an accurate retelling of the facts determines the shape of her entire project. As she explains in a number of interviews, telling her story in the form of fiction allows her to manipulate the facts until they "make a kind of psychological sense that I couldn't have foreseen or I can't see until I'm writing" (Perry 129). An example she frequently cites is the instance in *Annie John* in which Annie suffers a long illness that happens to coincide with a huge storm. Delirious with fever,

Annie ruins the family photographs by washing them with soap and water in the wash basin in her room. As Kincaid reports later, all of these things did happen to her, but not all at once, and the illness and washing of the pictures occurred when she was much younger than Annie is in the story. Kincaid combines all of the events into one because for her, telling them in combination as one event tells the truth of her experience of childhood. As she explains in an interview with Donna Perry for the collection *Backtalk: Women Writers Speak Out*, "I would say that everything in *Annie John* happened—every feeling in it happened—but not necessarily in the order they appear. But it very much expresses the life I had. There isn't anything in it that is a lie" (129). For Kincaid, combining certain events or changing their order actually represents a more truthful account of her past than would recounting them exactly as they happened. She also states that constructing the disparate events of her life into a fictional story often helps her to see the connections between them and what they can tell her about herself and her relationship to her past experience:

> I want the truth. I begin to understand this thing about the mind, and I'm sure it's not just true of me. I'm always shocked to see that things are more neatly connected than we think. I really manipulate the facts, but within the manipulation there is no lie. I believe I can safely say that—that in everything I say there is the truth. I arrange things in a way that I can understand them. (Perry 139-40)

Thus, for Kincaid, finding the truth often involves rearranging the facts so that they take the form of a story.

She is not, however, interested in making her entire past as a whole tell a cohesive story. On the contrary, she purposely leaves it fragmented, even as she insists that it is all

her own story. When asked by Vorda why the character of Lucy was given a new name, even though she seems to be the same character as Annie John, Kincaid had the following to say:

> I don't consider it a continuation because I would never write a continuation. It's a continuation only in the sense that it's about my life and it's the same life I'm writing about, but they weren't meant to be the same person at all….I'm not interested in making the thing whole. I'm interested in parts of things. When Annie left her mother that was it. We're not going to hear from Annie again. We're not going to hear from Lucy again….You might very well hear about how this life turned out, but to say it's a continuation of Lucy would be a mistake. (22)

For Kincaid, it is not an insurmountable contradiction to say that the two stories represent the same life but not the same person. It is as if each segment of her life has its own truth, and she is content to tell each of those stories separately and then move on to the next segment.

While she tells much of her story through fiction, however, Kincaid drops clues along the way that these stories have their foundation in her actual life experience.[39] She does so by repeating certain images and incidents from one book to the next. For example, one scene we witness over and over is that of a young girl telling her mother, "I wish you were dead," a statement that results in her mother suffering a prolonged headache. This scenario first occurs in Kincaid's early short story collection, *At the Bottom of the River*. It is repeated in both *Annie John* and *Lucy*. The recognition we as readers feel when we read

[39] That they do is confirmed in later interviews, as we have seen, but the works themselves provide numerous hints that they are not entirely fictional.

the same scenario again and again gives us the sense that we are not reading three disconnected stories but, rather that there is a very specific thread connecting them.

Likewise, Kincaid presents us with experiences that happen to a particular relative of the protagonist, giving us the clear impression that we are indeed reading about the same set of characters, albeit with different names. For instance, *Annie John* and *Lucy* tell the exact same story of their great-grandmother's death: as a child, the father of the protagonist lives with his grandmother, and they sleep in the same bed every night. One morning the grandmother fails to arise early and wake the father; he awakens to find that she has died in her sleep. The fact that Annie John and Lucy share this exact same family history strongly implies that they are based upon the same person. A similar thread runs through *Annie John* and Kincaid's later novel, *The Autobiography of My Mother*. When Annie John's uncle passes away, a worm crawls out of his leg and dies. The same thing happens to the protagonist Xuela's brother in *The Autobiography of My Mother*.[40] Although the mother in *The Autobiography of My Mother* is clearly not Kincaid's mother any more than Annie John is Kincaid herself (the protagonist of *The Autobiography of My Mother* in fact bears no children), the connection is important because it allows us to see that these are not simply fictional stories but are each separate parts of one larger story. By revealing the connections between the stories with these events and recurring minor characters, Kincaid actually highlights the instability within her own story. As a reader, it is unsettling to recognize a scenario or event that would naturally lead us to assume that we should be reading individual parts of a coherent story when it is clear that we are not. In this way, Kincaid repeatedly reminds us that she is telling us the story of her past but is

[40] Kincaid later confirmed that this did indeed happen to her uncle. See Cudjoe, 406.

not giving us a traditional or even trustworthy autobiography. The content of the story (life under colonial rule) repeatedly makes it clear why this is so.

Fictionalizing her story has another advantage in that it allows her to write not only the story of what has happened to her but also the story of the life she could have had. This way, she is able to explore the possibilities and, once again, expand her idea of "truth" to include multiple possible outcomes. When asked by Frank Birbalsingh in an interview for his book *Frontiers of Caribbean Literature* why Annie John goes to England when Lucy (as well as Kincaid herself) came to America, Kincaid explained her choice this way:

> Because that is what people where she came from did. The girl's whole life was very much connected to Europe, and Europe was England: so it would make no sense to suddenly have her go to America. It would be inexplicable unless I meant to explain a lot more than I wanted. The book is true in some way to my own life. But it's also true to other things—to a path that my own life did not take. The path my own life took would require another book. (138)

It is intriguing to note that the path Kincaid's life actually took is the one she considers inexplicable. This shows us how significant her immigration to America, rather than England, was in her mind. Kincaid takes the opportunity to write things as they could have been in other books as well. In *The Autobiography of My Mother*, she creates a character whose biography largely matches that of her mother, but makes her choose not to have children. Later, in *Mr. Potter* she invents the story of her father whom she never met as a child and knows almost nothing about. In all of these novels, she combines autobiography with fiction in order to explore various realities that could have existed had

things turned out differently. In every case, her own life is the center around which the story revolves; they are not simply fictional musings but ways that she explores and attempts to understand her own reality.

When Kincaid does tell her own story in her own voice, it is in the context of other issues—colonialism in *A Small Place* and her brother's death from AIDS in *My Brother*. In each of these cases, she uses her story to bolster a political argument. These texts, however, also provide a means of telling her story without resorting to traditional autobiographical practices. Indeed, of all of her works, they are the most outspoken and straightforward about the damage that colonization has done to her country and, by extension, to her and her family. Thus, in the works where she speaks most directly about who she is and what she has experienced, the devastating effects of colonialism remain at the forefront.

[Antiguans] are very respectful since I've changed my name. Perhaps it buys me time forever. You know, I silenced them. (Qtd in Muirhead 45)

Like Alvarez, Kincaid has achieved a great deal of success through the publication of her serial autobiography. And, also like Alvarez, she has found that this success has had unexpected consequences. In both cases, these consequences have had a direct impact on the form of the serial autobiographical project. In Alvarez's case, her success in creating a home on paper resulted in the fear that she has come to live her life too much on the page. Not surprisingly, she channels this fear back into further writing where she continues to struggle with this issue. Kincaid's work took a similar turn when she became well-known and financially successful with the publication of her early works. Kincaid's entire project is based on what she calls her "obsession with [the] powerful and powerless" in which she, as

the colonized subject, identifies with the position of the powerless (Wachtel 64). Her literary success—first as a staff writer for *The New Yorker*, and later through the publication of her books—however, shifted this position, making her famous and no doubt much more financially comfortable (and, in her terms, more powerful) than many of her white American readers. Although she achieved such success, letting go of the identity of the powerless subject, which had been the very foundation of her work, was extremely difficult for Kincaid to do.

Her continued insistence in the face of tremendous success that she is among the powerless can seem at times to be rather far-fetched, even disingenuous. Consider, for example, the following statement from an interview conducted in 1994 for *The Kenyon Review* in which Kincaid relates the experience of being recognized by a sales clerk in an upscale Manhattan clothing store:

> [T]hat's all very nice, but basically I feel anonymous. I feel no one knows who I am. I feel no one has ever read anything that I have ever written. I feel that I have never sold one book. I always feel so poverty-stricken. I always feel very struggling. So if you are famous, shouldn't you have lots of ease? My life is not full of ease. It is a great struggle. (Ferguson 185)

Likewise, in spite of the phenomenal success of her previous books (*A Small Place*, for example underwent three printings in its first year) she said regarding *Lucy* in her 1992 interview with Bonetti that when she has a new book coming out, she "always assume[s] no one will read the damn thing" (141).

Somewhat later, in a 1996 interview with Eleanor Wachtel of *Malahat Review*, Kincaid acknowledges her success, albeit in a rather defiant way:

> I am someone who comes from the bottom of the world and I now find myself at the top of the world and I take my place quite nicely and with no regrets, and I hope I have a conscience but not enough to stop myself from enjoying more than my share of the world. I have lots. I have far too much! I live in a very big house, I have land, I have a garden, and I grow things organically, and I'm sure each tomato costs ten dollars the way I grow it, and I'm debating with myself whether I should grow food that is the diet of some poor Indians in Peru. But I just go right ahead and do all these disgusting things. I like my life; I only wish I had more of it. (57)

Later in the same interview, she discusses the many amenities she now enjoys: "I have all of it. And I don't support the means for getting it, like oppressing many people around the world, but once we've successfully done it, I simply line up and enjoy my share of it" (61). While, on the one hand, her awareness of the means of oppression by which many of the products we enjoy come about is commendable, the dismissive way that Kincaid speaks of oppression, given the themes at the heart of her work, is ironic and more than a little bit perplexing.

Reading interviews with Kincaid that took place over time, one can also see a drastic change in some of her fundamental views. Compare, for example, the above-quoted passage about the English language from *A Small Place*, in which Kincaid says, "The language of the criminal can explain and express the deed only from the criminal's point of view. It cannot contain the horror of the deed, the injustice of the deed, the agony, the humiliation inflicted on me" with the following statement from 1996: "Ever since I can remember myself as a person I've had very anti-colonial feelings and very anti-British

feelings. But it's very odd because the only language I can express it in is the language of English, or of the language of my tormentors. It's sort of delicious in some way" (*A Small Place* 32, Wachtel 59). One can only assume from this choice of words that she somehow came to take some sort of perverse pleasure in the very thing that had once caused her "agony and humiliation." Describing the situation as "delicious" implies that it is something to be savored and enjoyed for its inherent irony, not the cause of actual suffering. In a similar vein, *A Small Place* is known for its palpable anger about the effects of colonialism, something that, in 1993, led Kincaid to declare, "I now consider anger a badge of honor" (Perry 132). Three years later, however, she explains her anger this way: "I don't see why even a person with everything desirable in the world shouldn't have anger—after all, one will die. That's enough to make me angry" (Wachtel 68). The switch from a very specific anger about a particular injustice to a declaration of anger about the one thing shared by every living being represents a radical shift in perspective, one that, for a seasoned reader of Kincaid's work, is difficult to accept.

This shift in perspective seems to stem from the conflict between her desire to continue to speak from the position of the oppressed while at the same time realizing that this designation no longer describes her. Like Alvarez, Kincaid works through the dilemma caused by success by incorporating it into her written works (although she is far less outspoken about the issue itself than is Alvarez). By reading Kincaid's works as a series, we are able to trace the development of this dilemma and the various means by which she attempts to overcome it.

The issue of Kincaid's newfound position among the powerful first arises in *Lucy*, her 1990 novel based on her first year in America. *Lucy* was published two years after *A*

Small Place, Kincaid's book that catapulted her from being a reasonably well-known author to being a famous one, so at the time she was writing it, she was already very well-established. By this time, she had made a name and a successful career for herself based upon her experience as a poverty-stricken woman from colonial Antigua. She continued to write about her life in this way, but in *Lucy* we can begin to see traces of doubt about her continued claim to this position. Her doubts come through most clearly in a question that Lucy repeats throughout the book. When her white employer, Mariah, claims to "have Indian blood," Lucy wonders, "How do you get to be the sort of victor who can claim to be the vanquished also?" (40-41). Earlier in the novel, she muses: "So Mariah is made to feel alive by some flowers bending in the breeze. How does a person get to be that way?" and "How do you get to be a person who is made miserable because the weather changed its mind, because the weather doesn't live up to your expectations? How do you get to be that way?" (17, 20).[41] She repeats the question two more times, directly to Mariah. While Kincaid never explicitly states as much, it is my belief that this is a question that she is working through in relation to herself. The question is obviously an important one, as it is repeated multiple times throughout the novel. Its significance as it relates to Mariah, however, is questionable, as she is far from a central character; she is merely Lucy's employer and sometime friend during her first year in the United States. Her main purpose as a character seems to be to serve as a foil for Lucy's thoughts and opinions. While from Lucy's perspective the question is about how white Americans can so easily grow accustomed to comfort and privilege, it is difficult to imagine that she could be unaware of how this theme relates to her own life as well. Reading between the lines of *Lucy*, then,

[41] While it is, of course, impossible to know whether or not Kincaid has consciously noticed this connection, it is interesting to note that she expresses these exact sentiments herself in her 1999 work, *My Garden (Book)*.

we can see Kincaid begin to question the validity of her continued stance as the "vanquished" subject.

In her next book, *The Autobiography of My Mother*, published in 1995, Kincaid embraces the perspective of the colonized and victimized subject completely. The book's narrator, Xuela Richardson, is a motherless child who grows up in colonial Dominica. As she ages, she grows increasingly embittered and angry at her situation as a colonized person, until near the end of the book when she says of her British husband (whom she married out of convenience but, of course, does not love), "When he laughed, his face opened with pleasure, grew wide as if about to split; but when he saw my own pleasure in his pleasure, he understood his mistake; we could not both be happy at the same time. Life, History, whatever its name had made such a thing an impossibility" (227). This declaration—that a colonized woman and her British husband cannot be happy at the same time, even for a moment—could hardly be stronger. Kincaid (via our narrator Xuela), however, does not offer to explain her reasoning behind it. In fact, we are not given an explanation for any of her opinions or a justification for any of her rage, even in specific situations, beyond the general fact of colonialism. Significantly, the entire novel is told from Xuela's point of view. Even the dialogue is paraphrased by her, so that we literally get no other perspective. Thus, we are not given the opportunity to judge for ourselves the extent to which her vitriol is justified. This makes us, as readers, unable to form our own opinions about, let alone disagree with, Xuela or, by extension, Kincaid. We simply have to accept her point of view.

The creation of a narrator who cannot be challenged or questioned in *The Autobiography of My Mother* is a particularly extreme version of a tactic that Kincaid uses throughout her entire serial autobiographical project—that of silencing any opposition before

it can begin. This method begins in *A Small Place* with Kincaid's direct interpellation of the reader as a tourist from "North America (or, worse, Europe)" who has invaded or plans to invade Antigua, a "tourist, an ugly, empty thing, a stupid thing, a piece of rubbish pausing here and there to gaze at this and taste that," and informs us that "it will never occur to you that the people who inhabit the place in which you have just paused cannot stand you" (4, 17). For the reader who is, in fact, from North America or Europe, the text leaves no room for disidentification with this characterization; Kincaid's address makes it clear that insisting that one is the exception to that rule (not to mention arguing that the stereotype is itself unjust) is not an option. To do so, it is clear, would be to further victimize Kincaid and her people by minimizing their pain, thus proving oneself to be the villain referred to in the text. It is an accusation from which there is simply no possibility of escape. The narrative structure of *The Autobiography of My Mother*—having the entire novel and all of its events filtered through Xuela's consciousness—allows Kincaid to employ this same tactic in fiction. It is as if in writing this novel, she defies the questions that began to make their way to the surface in *Lucy* and returns to the unadulterated anger of *A Small Place*.[42] And like the anger in *A Small Place,* one cannot argue or disagree with it without being made to feel that one is further victimizing the injured party.

Interestingly, although she cultivates such an adversarial relationship with her reading audience, Kincaid does not by any means avoid contact with it. She does extensive book tours with the publication of each new book, and as of 2005, she had participated in no fewer

[42] It seems that along with the return to the position of the victimized subject, Kincaid also took a step back from interrogating her own cultural position. *The Autobiography of My Mother* is the least strictly autobiographical book in Kincaid's serial autobiographical project. While some aspects of Xuela's background share similarities with that of Kincaid's mother, many others are radically different, not least of which is the fact, as mentioned above, that Xuela bears no children. Thus, there is no equivalent subject to Kincaid herself. (Xuela also does not emigrate to Antigua, as Kincaid's mother did.)

than 53 published interviews.[43] Her complete success in silencing opposition to (or even probing questions about) her work is evidenced by the fact that in not one of these interviews does the interviewer actually challenge her.[44] Even her most shocking and/or perplexing statements pass without comment. Rather than, for example, asking what seems an obvious follow-up question, such as "What do you mean when you say that you now find the paradox of being forced into the English language 'delicious'?" or "How do you differentiate your practice of 'simply lining up and enjoying your share of' the spoils of injustice from that of those who colonized your people?", in every case, her interviewer simply moves on to the next question. Observing the repetition of this phenomenon in interview after interview, one can see that Kincaid has indeed managed to effectively silence any and all potential argument that might come from her reading audience.

Not only does Kincaid silence her American and European reading audience, she silences any Antiguans who would take issue with her works as well. As the epigraph above suggests, she made a conscious effort to do so. She makes the above statement in an interview, conducted in 1994 for *Clockwatch Review*, in which she discusses changing her name when she began to write. She says:

> [T]he people from where I'm from meet me as *Jamaica Kincaid*. They sort of have to accept the judgments I make on my life and on them as this person, whereas it would be much harder for them to accept it and much easier for them to slight me off if I had not done that....It's much easier for them to confront

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[43] For a list of these interviews, see J. Brooks Bouson. *Jamaica Kincaid: Writing Memory, Writing Back to the Mother*. Albany: State U of New York P, 2005.

[44] The same is true of the extensive critical work that has been written about her books in which it is extremely rare to find a critic who has anything remotely negative to say about them.

> that person with that name that they grew up with and know very well, but I never allow them to. They are very respectful since I've changed my name. Perhaps it buys me time forever. You know, I silenced them. (Muirhead 45)

Likewise, in a 1996 interview with Dwight Garner of Salon.com, she says, "I try not to corner my mother anymore. Because I have at my disposal a way of articulating things about her that she can't respond to" (2). Speaking to Brad Goldfarb of *Interview* magazine in 1997, she discusses the infamous family fights where her various family members refuse to speak to each other in person, "while conducting these enormous conversations with the person you're not speaking to in your head. In my case, of course, I carry on these conversations in books" (96). Through the way she has chosen to write her life, Kincaid has succeeded in creating a situation in which she is able to always have the last word.

Not only does she silence the people from her homeland, in her next book, *My Brother* (1997), she makes a point of distancing herself from them. In many ways, *My Brother* is the exact opposite of *The Autobiography of My Mother*. Unlike *The Autobiography of My Mother* in which Kincaid backs away from her own story, *My Brother* is her most autobiographical book up to that point. While the main issue in the book is her brother's death from AIDS and the sub-standard heath care system in Antigua, the book provides much more information about Kincaid's actual life, both past and present, than do her previous books. In addition, in *My Brother*, unlike any previous books other than *A Small Place*, she does not choose to fictionalize the story. *My Brother* is also very unlike *The Autobiography of My Mother* in that in it she does not identify with the "native" in the colonial situation. On the contrary, she repeatedly disassociates herself from the Antiguan people and traditions, many of which she presents as simple-minded and ridiculous. Over

and over, she makes condescending observations about the Antiguan people which almost read as if Kincaid is herself taking on the viewpoint of the colonizer. Take, for example, her comments about Dr. Ramsey, the Antiguan doctor who helps her brother:

> He agreed to meet me and at the time he said he would arrive, he arrived. I only mention this because in Antigua people never arrive when they say they will; they never do what they say they will do. He was something I had long ago thought impossible to find in an Antiguan with authority: he was kind, he was loving toward people who needed him, people who were less powerful than he; he was respectful. (32)

A later comment sounds even more like the patronizing view of an island population by a colonizing power: "[Dr. Ramsey] said that—you never knew when a cure might come along—and I could not tell if, in that, he was asserting native Antiguan foolishness or faith in science. Antigua is a place in which faith undermines the concrete" (35). She presents the Antiguan people as not only simple and inferior, but as unfeeling and cruel. Upon witnessing the interactions between people attending an AIDS awareness workshop, she says, "This was something very new to me: ordinary people in Antigua expressing sympathy and love for one another at a time of personal tragedy and pain, not scorn or rejection or some other form of cruelty" (37). It is as if she no longer identifies as an Antiguan. This represents a fundamental shift from the pervasive attitudes in every one of her earlier works.

My Brother represents a new phase in the process of attempting to find her place as a successful, westernized writer in relation to her past and the country and people she left behind. This new phase was spurred, at least in part, by her return to Antigua to visit and help care for her sick brother. The following observation, made in the context of watching

two separate families grieve at a funeral, provides a clue to the shift in Kincaid's thinking: "[T]o see someone suffer in a moment when you are not suffering can inspire such a feeling, superiority, in a place like Antigua, with its history of subjugation, leaving in its wake humiliation and inferiority; to see someone in straits worse than your own is to feel at first pity for them and soon better than them" (*My Brother* 186). Although Kincaid is not referring to her own situation in making this observation, it bears a striking resemblance to a description of her feelings upon observing her brother on his deathbed:

> I was thinking of my past and how it frightened me to think that I might have continued to live in a certain way, though, I am convinced, not for very long. I would have died at about his age, thirty-three years, or I would have gone insane. And when I was looking at him through the louvered windows, I began to distance myself from him, I began to feel angry at him, I began to feel I didn't like being so tied up with his life, the waning of it, the suffering in it. I began to feel that it would be so nice if he would just decide to die right away and get buried right away and the whole thing would be done with right away and that would be that. (89-90)

Kincaid is uncomfortable in her brother's presence, not because he is sick or because his illness manifests itself in a number of gruesome and horrifying ways. (These Kincaid takes in stride.) She has the sudden feeling that she wants nothing more than to distance herself from him because she sees in him the person she could have been had she remained at home. Thus, she tells his story—and, at the same time, her own—in a way that illustrates the extent to which she is has become a different person from the one she could easily have been.

This distance from her past as a citizen of Antigua remains in Kincaid's two last books to date, *My Garden (Book)* (1999) and *Mr. Potter* (2002). While *My Garden (Book)*

mentions colonialism on a number of occasions, it is Kincaid's least political book. Its content is mostly about the garden at her home in Vermont and a trip she took to China to collect plants for this garden. Much more than in any of her other books, we see Kincaid as her adult, American self with almost no reference to her past in Antigua. *My Garden (Book)* also represents Kincaid at her most approachable. In it, she lets her customary guard slip somewhat, and one gets a rare glimpse of her settled and largely comfortable life as a writer and an amateur gardener.

Mr. Potter is the fictionalized story of Kincaid's father, whom she did not know growing up. Because she was not able to know him as a child, she invented a history for him and published it as a novel. Although the novel tells the story of a real person and, unlike in her other fictionalized novels, its characters share the names of her real life family members, *Mr. Potter* is, in many ways, the least revealing chapter of Kincaid's serial autobiography. Reading this novel by itself, one can get a sense of life in colonial Antigua in the early part of the twentieth century, but in terms of Kincaid's serial autobiography, it does not offer much information about Kincaid herself that the reader of her other works does not already know.

Mr. Potter does offer a clue into Kincaid's state of mind regarding her relationship to her past as she wrote her later works. She increases the distance between herself and her past that became evident in *My Brother*, to the point where in *Mr. Potter* she makes the following, rather startling claim:

> Mr. Potter had no patrimony for he did not own himself, he had no private thoughts, he had no thoughts of wonder, he did not have a mind's eye in which he could wander, he had no thoughts about his past, his future, and his present which lay in between them both—his past and future—and he was not ignorant, he was not

> without a conscience, *he could not write and he could not render the story of life*, his own in particular, with coherency and I can read and I can write and I am his daughter. (130, italics mine)

She repeats this claim multiple times throughout the novel, asserting again and again the notion that a person who cannot write cannot process, much less rationally understand, the world around him. Leaving aside the point of how incredibly insulting this idea is to those who do not share Kincaid's privilege and way of life, her stance on this point is extremely telling in terms of how she has come to relate to her background. The repetition of this idea throughout the novel is her way of stating, "This is where I came from, but this is not me." Along with the above claim about the rational capabilities of the illiterate person, she repeatedly makes the point that her father could not write but produced a child who could do so and could write his story for him. Thus, she repeatedly reinscribes distance she feels between the family and background from which she came and the life she created for herself as an adult.

In an interview with Susan Walker of *The Toronto Star*, conducted around the same time that *Mr. Potter* was published, Kincaid makes a similarly revealing statement to her claims about her illiterate father in the novel: "Always I'm writing about these actual people in my past. I don't write about them to know them in any biographical way. I like to think of them in some sort of existential way" (E4). By the end of her serial autobiographical project (as of this writing), she has distanced herself so far from her past that, while it still makes up the majority of the content of her work, she has come to think of her family as ideas, rather than as real people.

Sometimes there is no escape, but often the effort of trying will do quite nicely for a while. (*Lucy* 37)

Jamaica Kincaid's works provide a particularly compelling example of a serial autobiography because, more than any of the other authors discussed here, the person she is changes drastically from the time she begins writing to when she writes her later works.[45] Each of her books on its own can tell us a great deal about her, about colonialism, and about her feelings regarding growing up as a colonized subject, but it is only through reading her works as a series that we can trace the evolution of her ideas—and the struggles she has with them—as she changes from someone who feels victimized and angry to someone with a lifestyle that no longer fits this self-characterization. Over time, we can track the various changes in perspective and attitude as she grows more comfortable with her position as an established author and begins to distance herself from the past she once embraced. It is also fascinating to observe the means by which she is able to accomplish this transformation in a public setting while effectively silencing any potential opposition.

The most significant change that occurs as a result of Kincaid's serial autobiographical project is that regarding her own view of her selfhood. Roughly the first half of her autobiographical project is built on the premise that she is unable to identify as a stable self due to the effects of colonialism. Reading her autobiography over time, however, we can see that Kincaid does begin to embrace a definitive self—that of writer—which becomes the basis of her later autobiographical writings. The turning point in this notion of selfhood and its relationship to Kincaid's colonial past can be traced to an observation she makes midway through *My Brother*. Regarding her brother's habit of speaking in patois,

[45] Another factor that sets Kincaid apart from all of the other authors discussed here is the fact that while each of the other authors wrote works—novels or political treatises—that did not deal with autobiographical issues, Kincaid has not. Every one of her published works is a piece of her serial autobiography, which is why a chronological look at her body of work, book by book, is valuable, whereas a less linear and comprehensive approach to the works of the other three authors is more useful.

Kincaid describes his language as "the English that instantly reveals the humiliation of history, the humiliations of the past not remade into art" (108). By remaking her humiliations into art, Kincaid is able to work through them to the point where she is finally able to claim a self that is her own and in which she can take pride.

As of this writing, eight years have passed since the publication of Kincaid's latest book. This gap in time is much longer than that between any two of her previous works. There is, of course, no way to know if Kincaid's serial autobiography is finished; a definitive quality of serial autobiography is the very fact that, until the author's death, there is always the possibility that it will continue, and a new book could be published at any time. This observation must, then, be offered as a provisional one, but it seems reasonable to suspect that perhaps Kincaid's project of writing herself into existence is complete.[46] Her long silence after *Mr. Potter* may very well indicate that with the novel in which she actually declares the separation between herself and her background, she has arrived at a place in which she can rest comfortably and thereby let go the project of exploring her self through autobiography. While it is hard to imagine that Kincaid will ever stop writing on the subject of colonization, it is this writer's suspicion that she may no longer do so with regard to her own intimate past. Kincaid once described her writing practice this way: "I just write. I come to the end, I start again. I come to the end, I start again. And then sometimes I come to the end, and there is no starting again" (Bonetti 126). Whether *Mr. Potter* marks the end of Kincaid's serial autobiography, or whether further writings will ultimately reveal a new layer of self-exploration, only time will tell.

[46] The irony of the idea that Kincaid would stop writing after embracing a self *as writer*, while undeniable, is largely beside the point.

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