

Sympathetic Ink:
Memoirs of Family Secrets

by
Molly Pulda

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in English in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

2013

© 2013

Molly Pulda

All Rights Reserved

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the
Graduate Faculty in English in satisfaction of the
dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

Nancy K. Miller

Date

Chair of Examining Committee

Mario DiGangi

Date

Executive Officer

Mary Ann Caws

Lyn Di Iorio

Supervisory Committee

Abstract

Sympathetic Ink:

Memoirs of Family Secrets

by

Molly Pulda

Director: Professor Nancy K. Miller

Derived from the Latin *secernere*, meaning “to separate, divide off,” secrecy comprises a process of drawing relational distinctions – a spectrum of communicative strategies to connect and separate. What secret keepers guard is not just the hidden content of a story, but its boundaries: where the private and the public intersect. This dissertation links family secrets in autobiography to contemporary political and cultural contexts, including the ethics of state secrecy, the relational stakes of genetic research, and shifting identity discourse in families, communities, and nations. It centers on the structuring effects of secrecy, for a secret’s effects depend more upon its form – how it is concealed and revealed – than its content. I suggest that identity is comprised of what we *don’t* know as much as what we know, and what we can’t or won’t tell about our loved ones as much as what we reveal. And secrecy is a form of communication that calibrates intimacy and distance in families and communities – including communities of readers. Readers are drawn into a narrative of family secrets by what I term its “mechanics of disclosure”: the formal and relational strategies through which a memoirist reveals secrets. This study tracks the textual properties of secrecy through comparisons of memoirs by eight contemporary writers: Susan Cheever, Linda Gray Sexton, Bliss Broyard,

Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Alison Bechdel, J. R. Ackerley, Maxine Hong Kingston, and Richard Rodriguez.

Studying how families keep and share secrets sheds light on how other institutions consolidate power through practices of selective knowledge, secrecy, and disclosure. Just as a second generation can inherit a family secret – through the hereditary properties of nescience, or unknown knowledge – secrets can also be passed down from governments to citizens. Attention to the mechanics of revelation in autobiography provides a formal language to interpret how state secrets are concealed and revealed. A currency of power in any institution, secrets delineate a spectrum of control over not just information, but structures of communication. It is the craft of disclosure that makes secrets legible, and that paves the way for public acknowledgment of open secrets.

Contents

	Page
Abstract	iv
Introduction	1
Chapter One. Serial Secrecy: Susan Cheever and Linda Gray Sexton	26
Chapter Two. Hiding in Plain Sight: Bliss Broyard and Henry Louis Gates, Jr.	64
Chapter Three. Portrait of a Secret: J. R. Ackerley and Alison Bechdel	112
Chapter Four. Secret Languages: Richard Rodriguez and Maxine Hong Kingston	151
Chapter Five. Unknown Knowns: State Secrets and Family Secrets	188
Notes	209
Works Cited	233

List of Figures

	Page
Fig. 1	124
Fig. 2	127
Fig. 3	128
Fig. 4	130
Fig. 5	132
Fig. 6	133
Fig. 7	136

Introduction

“We dance round in a ring and suppose, / But the Secret sits in the middle and knows”
(Frost 362).¹ This short poem by Robert Frost exemplifies how we commonly think about secrecy: an unknown knowledge that we circle in vain, trying to comprehend. We gravitate to the lure of an unknown: if only we could know, we could stop the dance of inquiry. What if we focus on the dance, instead of the unknown center? Contrary to Frost’s model of a capitalized “Secret” sitting passively and withholding something we don’t know, secrecy is better defined as a form of communication, an inherently interpersonal process. When we think about secrets, we often focus on their content: what information is hidden. But a secret’s relational effects depend more upon its *form*, how it is concealed and revealed, than upon its content. In a landmark essay, “The Sociology of Secrecy and of Secret Societies” (1906), Georg Simmel defines secrecy as “a universal sociological form, which, as such, has nothing to do with the moral valuations of its contents” (463). As a spectrum of control over discourse, secrecy is essentially neutral, neither a positive nor negative form.

Secrecy and autobiography theory

Contemporary memoirs have a reputation for spilling secrets. “Memoirs print whispered secrets on their covers in 24-point type,” according to Susan Cheever, a memoirist who writes about her father’s secrets (“The Morning After”). In the subgenre of memoirs of family secrets, writers disclose their parents’ secrets alongside their own. The eight memoirists analyzed within this study disclose a wide variety of parental secrets, including racial passing, homosexuality, mental illness, abuse, addiction, and immigration trauma. But if memoirs are printing those secrets “on their covers” (or inside flaps), as Cheever puts it, then readers don’t need to buy the books to find out what secrets they contain. Rather, a reader is drawn into an autobiographical

text by what I call its “mechanics of disclosure”: the formal and relational strategies through which a memoirist reveals secrets.

The chapters that follow focus on the structuring effects of secrecy: how secrets affect *form* and *relationality* within contemporary autobiography. Simmel, who calls secrecy a “form of commerce,” and a “structure of human reciprocities,” contends: “Every relationship between two individuals or two groups will be characterized by the ratio of secrecy that is involved in it” (464, 463, 462). Contemporary sociologists and psychologists, following Simmel, also define secrecy by way of form rather than content. Christena Nippert-Eng writes in a sociological study of privacy: “Sometimes the whole point of a secret is the sharing or not sharing of it. What matters most is the relationship it confirms, offers, or denies – not the secret’s actual content” (33).² The essence of a secret is the intimacy or distance it fosters, rather than the information it conceals or reveals.

Derived from the Latin *secernere*, meaning “to separate, divide off,” a secret comprises an effort to separate or connect, a process of drawing relational distinctions. (“Secret”). Jacques Derrida writes of secret sharing: “There is no secret *as such*; I deny it. And this is what I confide in secret to whomever allies himself to me. This is the secret of the alliance” (“How To Avoid Speaking” 26). Secrecy is a mark of relationality in progress, and its effects range from alliance to alienation. In this study, I focus on the juncture between theories of secrecy and theories of autobiography: both hinge on the essential role that others play within our lives and our stories. For the past three decades, autobiography theory has been built on a relational model that emerged from feminist theory. In 1980, Mary G. Mason led this critical shift in autobiography studies: from the supposedly autonomous “I” at the center of the text, to the self that exists in relation to others. Mason proposed that autobiography consists of the “delineation of identity by

way of alterity” (231), or the charting of a life shaped by significant others.³ In a revisionary perspective on relationality, I suggest that identity is comprised of what we *don't* know as much as what we know, and what we can't or won't tell about our loved ones as much as what we reveal. Discovering the “self boundary” – a psychological term for the understanding that we keep parts of ourselves separate from others, and that others keep secrets from us – is an essential step in becoming a relational self (Saltz 13).⁴ We spend our lives sorting out where our stories and our secrets intersect with those of others. Secrecy calibrates intimacy and distance in families, friendships, and communities – including communities of readers.

Structuring a memoir around a family secret provides a narrative payoff: an endpoint to a writer's quest for material and identity. “You've got to give me something to write about,” Bliss Broyard urged her father, finding the subject of a family memoir within his secrets (12). Memoirists mine their family histories not just for material, but for the emphases of a life narrative. Having a secret to share lends shape to a story, and it can also attract a readership. As “The Secret Sits” suggests, the promise of secrecy has a certain irresistible gravity. But readers can also be turned off by memoirists who “tell on” their families, exposing secrets that their elders tried to conceal. Nancy K. Miller argues that the reader can be considered the autobiographer's “most necessary other” (“Entangled” 545).⁵ The reader plays an essential role in not just the consumption but the construction of a life narrative. As the memoirist Richard Rodriguez writes, “There are things so deeply personal that they can be revealed only to strangers” (*Hunger of Memory* 200).

Through their mechanics of disclosure – how they give away secrets – writers attempt to build bonds of relation and trust with their readers, making intimate disclosures publicly palatable.⁶ By carefully exposing relational sources of shame, memoirists hope to make

themselves visible, recognizable, and relatable to readers. But in family memoir, parents' secrets are also subject to scrutiny. *Parere*, the Latin root of "parent," has a dual meaning: to "come forth," and to "be visible" (Douglas Harper). Memoirists "produce" their parents in print, making them visible and legible to readers. That question of visibility is key to the transmission of shameful secrets in this triangulation of parent, writer, and reader. Erik Erikson defines shame itself as centering on visibility: "Shame supposes that one is completely exposed and conscious of being looked at, in one word, self-conscious. One is visible and not yet ready to be visible" (qtd. in Dalziell 6). Just as secrecy is a structure of communication, so does shame communicate with others. Eve Sedgwick calls shame a "double movement... toward painful individuation, toward uncontrollable relationality" (37). A memoirist's narration of shame, therefore, is a performative act that renders her identifiable in two ways: visible, and subject to a reader's sympathy and empathy. Readers need writers to make themselves vulnerable in order to justify acts of disclosure. After all, as Sedgwick notes, readers put themselves in postures that resemble the affect of shame. Drawing on the affect theory of Silvan Tomkins, Sedgwick writes: "If, as Tomkins describes it, the lowering of the eyelids, the lowering of the eyes, the hanging of the head is the attitude of shame, it may also be that of reading" (*Touching* 114). Although the solitude of a reading experience can simulate the intimacy of a whispered secret, writing and reading are also communal acts around which social conversations begin and cultural taboos loosen. Readers may be positioned to consider shame privately, but sharing texts also helps alter categorical attitudes toward sources of shame and secrecy.

The ethics of ownership

The structuring effects of secrecy upon autobiographical form, familial relation, and readerly reception comprises the cornerstone of this study. How does a writer justify revealing a

parent's secrets in print? And how are those secrets transmitted from parent to child, and from writer to reader? Writers have always claimed the right to expose their own secrets; the poet Anne Sexton said about privacy: "I can invade my own... That's my right" (qtd. in Middlebrook 329). The ethics of transgressing another's boundaries of privacy are harder to parse. Janna Malamud Smith writes in her memoir about her father, the writer Bernard Malamud: "I have taped on the refrigerator a line clipped from a newspaper: 'May your house be free of memoirists. They cause such trouble'" (xi).

One issue in defining an ethics of family secrecy is determining the boundaries of "family." If secrets delimit insiders and outsiders, intimates and strangers, then secrets also lend perspective to the shifting definitions of family in the contemporary era, when notions of kinship are buffeted by political, historical, and scientific claims. As we learn more about the science and history of relation in a DNA-mapped world, claiming an ancestor assumes new stakes. Delineating a family becomes a political act, a claim not just to kinship, but to wider circles of affiliation. Darryl Pinckney writes: "Family has come to stand for community, for race and for nation. It is a short-cut to solidarity" (203). Orders against airing a family's "dirty laundry" in public carry communal and cultural interdictions as well. Writers have responsibilities to represent and to protect their families and communities. Broyard writes of her quest to discover her father's background: "It amazed me to realize that my family's story paralleled much of the country's larger narrative; to discover that we, the Broyards, were at once ordinary and emblematic" (157). That synergy between the ordinary and the emblematic makes for a good story: a family's particulars can illuminate aspects of a national narrative. But the boundaries between family and community can blur as we consider our responsibilities to others. As Barack

Obama writes in his memoir, *Dreams from My Father*, “you have to draw the line somewhere. If everyone is family, no one is family” (337).

Sociologists Carol Warren and Barbara Laslett define the family as “a unit with shared and enforced privacy” (47). Does a household have a right to enforce its privacy through secrecy? Issues of privacy and secrecy are interrelated, but worth briefly distinguishing. If secrecy comprises the communicative form by which individuals negotiate separation and connection, privacy is often the reason cited for secrecy. The most practical way to distinguish privacy and secrecy is by context and permission: a fact that seems private in one situation can be secret in other contexts and discourses.⁷ The legal distinction between privacy and secrecy has shifted over time. Literary and legal scholars often cite the precedent set in Samuel D. Warren and Louis D. Brandeis’s 1890 *Harvard Review* article, “The Right to Privacy,” which declares the individual’s right to an “inviolable personality,” and subsumes the privacy of the entire household under the patronymic name (205).⁸ But as Deborah Nelson demonstrates in *Pursuing Privacy in Cold War America*, contemporary notions of privacy are increasingly portable rather than household-based.⁹ And theories of relationality, which assert that our life stories are inherently interconnected, contradict the notion of any individual’s “inviolable personality.” Secrets, whether kept or disclosed, are the currency of the negotiation between privacy and relationality. We can’t simply choose between privacy and connection: we need both.¹⁰ We trade in secrets in order to calibrate privacy, to draw in intimates, to control the boundaries of our stories, and to protect ourselves, our loved ones, and our communities.

However, the paradox of a secret is that it is at once what is most private and what is most shared. Our secrets seem to set us apart, but they often conceal common sources of shame. Many families harbor the same “open secrets,” and similar skeletons lurk in different closets.

Secrets thrive at the nexus of what Leigh Gilmore terms “the singular and the sharable” (*Limits* 134). They show where our private stories touch communal narratives.¹¹ The family is also a private but permeable unit, limning the boundary between the individual and the shared. As a practice ground for community relations, the family serves as a threshold between personal and public experience.¹² A family guards its secrets in order to maintain – and to mask – its distinction from the wider community. The contours of family narrative, what sociologist Maurice Halbwachs terms “the framework of family memory,” serve as “the traditional armor of the family” (59). But that armor is not just regulatory and protective, but uniform; separate families suit up in the same armor of collusion. How a family secret is kept and told can illuminate the story of a community, shedding light on the silences and gaps that shape personal and shared identity.

That paradox of secrets-in-common points to a central problem of ownership: who has the right to tell a family secret that cuts across separate households? A private story can easily be put to public use, and someone suffering alone might take comfort in learning that others share a similar secret. As Mary Karr writes in her memoir *The Liars’ Club*, “the boat I can feel so lonely in actually holds us all” (xvi). Membership in an atypical family can rock that boat of commonality. Three of the memoirists analyzed here disclose the secrets of parents who were prominent literary figures: the fiction writer John Cheever, the poet Anne Sexton, and the critic Anatole Broyard. Each of their writing daughters – Susan Cheever, Linda Gray Sexton, and Bliss Broyard – seeks an ethical way to reveal the parent’s secret, especially when other life writers are eager to have the first crack at the parent’s untold story. Susan Cheever, for example, decided to write about her father’s homosexual history herself, after she found out that an unauthorized biographer was planning to write it first. She opted to pull what the critic Craig Howes has called

an “inside job”: to disclose her father’s secrets from an insider’s perspective in order to claim some control over a shared story (Eakin, *Ethics* 9). In contrast, Linda Gray Sexton gave her mother’s biographer, Diane Wood Middlebrook, access not just to her mother’s hidden stories, but to her own: Middlebrook was the first to publish Linda’s memories of sexual abuse. For Bliss Broyard, the struggle over ownership continued after her father’s secret became public. The literary scholar Henry Louis Gates, Jr. repeatedly used her father’s hidden race as an example of a national story of racial passing, the color line, and family betrayal. One life writer’s metaphor is another’s father: not every family wants its secret made public as a textbook case.

A memoirist struggles to give a particular family its due, while asking a wider readership to see itself within another family’s story. As writers from immigrant families, Maxine Hong Kingston and Richard Rodriguez feel additional pressure to represent entire ethnic communities in a fair and favorable light. In addition to family warnings against public exposure, these memoirists are asked to conceal community secrets, tiptoeing an impossible line between an exotic life story and a “representative” one. In addition to revealing the commonalities of open secrets, memoir can also put a unique face to shared experience, in order to particularize, and perhaps dismantle, broad cultural assumptions. Gates argues: “the experiences of the individuals in our families allow us to reconfigure our nation’s collective past, in a relationship of part for whole” (*In Search* 12). But who determines the contours of the “part” and “whole” – where do a family story and a cultural story overlap? Memoirs are subject to the problem of scale: determining where a family story fits into a larger community. Memoirists wrestle with the boundaries of their stories; they continually sort out their responsibilities to their families, their communities of origin, and their communities of readership.

The timeline of a secret

The ethics of disclosure often rely on the question of timing: when is the right time to reveal a secret? Five of the memoirists in this study waited until after the parent's death to write a first family memoir: Cheever, Sexton, Broyard, J. R. Ackerley, and Alison Bechdel. Only two of them, Broyard and Bechdel, knew their family secrets while their fathers were still alive, and both revelations and deaths occurred in quick succession. After losing a parent, a memoirist might seek what Bechdel calls "that last, tenuous bond" between parent and child: a reparative link between the present and the past (*Fun Home* 86). Identifying with the parent's secrets – what she never told you, and why – is one way to bridge the generation gap. If secrets can be passed down from parent to child, secrets can also be projected *up*, from memoirist to recreated parent. The living perpetuate the stories and legacies of the dead, and memoirists might be tempted to shape the identities of loved ones in their own image. Halbwachs writes of family memory: "The person who tells the story is obliged to translate his recollections so as to communicate them.... Even though it is a summary of collective reflections and feelings, it still projects a singularly vivid image on the screen of an obscure and unclear past" (62, 60). One danger of writing about a lost parent is the fallacy of filial projection: making the "singularly vivid image" of the parent more like oneself. The gay writer J. R. Ackerley, for example, found out several of his father's secrets after his death, including a second family, a fatal sexually transmitted disease, and a possible history of homosexual affairs. Ackerley structures his memoir, *My Father and Myself*, around that singular secret of sexual identity, "hoping still to drag him captive into the homosexual fold" (259). Bechdel keeps a similar eye on her identificatory motives in writing about her dead father; she concludes: "Perhaps my eagerness to

claim him as ‘gay’ in the way I am ‘gay,’ as opposed to bisexual or some other category, is just a way of keeping him to myself – a sort of inverted Oedipal complex” (*Fun Home* 230).

As Erikson observes, “the adult is able to selectively reconstruct his past in such a way that, step for step, it seems to have planned him, or better, he seems to have planned *it*. In this sense, psychologically, we *do* choose our parents, psychologically, our family history and the history of our kings, heroes, gods” (qtd. in Adams 108, italics in original). Any memoirist who writes about her family’s past seeks a piece of history that will illuminate her own life story today. Matthew Frye Jacobson terms this tendency “the personal quest for a usable past” (275). Kingston writes multiple versions of a family secret about her aunt’s suicide; if she can formulate the right narrative based on her aunt’s strength and agency, the aunt might give Kingston “ancestral help” (8). A selective view of one’s family history can also open new pathways of connection in the present day. Alondra Nelson, a theorist of genealogical and genetic narratives, terms this “affiliative self-fashioning,” or “the creation of identity from both facts and desire for connection to a community” (25). Relational theories of autobiography suggest an important corollary to Nelson’s theory: affiliative *other*-fashioning. That is, a memoirist bases her self-identity, in part, on the affiliations she believes she has in common with, or in contrast to, her loved ones. The identity and affiliations of another, particularly a parent, have important effects on self-identity.

When a memoirist decides to write about a family secret, she is already making structural decisions about how to tell the story: which hidden fact of the family led her, as a family member, to become a family memoirist. That teleology of family history necessarily excludes other stories and obscures alternate perspectives. Five of the memoirists in this study – Cheever, Sexton, Bechdel, Kingston, and Rodriguez – *serialize* their family secrets: they follow one

memoir of family secrets with another, providing further perspectives and versions of the family story.¹³ In reading memoirs of serial secrecy, we can track a memoirist's evolving filiations and affiliations. As a memoirist matures and moves farther from home, she often discovers new ways that her family history applies to social and political contexts. Halbwachs writes: "We change memories along with our points of view, our principles, and our judgments, when we pass from one group to another" (81). Cheever, Sexton, Kingston, and Rodriguez, in particular, increasingly emphasize their responsibilities to wider communities, including communities of readers, in their later works. For example, Cheever takes her father with her as she shifts cultural frames: in discrete stages of her serial secrecy, she identifies her father and herself as alcoholics and sex addicts. The story of a parent's most salient secret shifts, as a memoirist fashions new affiliations outside the family. But in changing the subject of secrecy, the memoirist runs the risk of alienating others who have a stake in her parent's memory. Susan Cheever's brother Ben said in an interview: "I always feel like she's marrying Daddy" (Bailey 673). Seriality gives Susan Cheever another chance to reframe the story of her relationship to her father, but not necessarily to get the story "right." Keeping a parent near the center of one's life story can be an act of homage: acknowledging the parent as an inspiration for serving a broader community and audience. But it can also be an act of distortion, of adapting a parent's identity and values to suit your own.

Memoirs of family secrets garnered new popular and critical attention beginning in the mid-1990s, when the contemporary "memoir boom" began, with a critical backlash close on its heels. For every bestselling memoir of the 1990s, from Karr's *The Liars' Club* to Kathryn Harrison's *The Kiss*, book reviewers responded with protests about salacious revelations by previously obscure writers. Gilmore notes: "This memoir boom did not prominently feature elder

statesmen reporting on how their public lives neatly paralleled historical events. Instead, memoir in the '90s was dominated by the comparatively young whose private lives were emblematic of unofficial histories" ("Limit-Cases" 128). The fraught reception history of the memoir boom suggests that identity and relation have political consequences. In memoirs of family secrets, claiming a parent as an *x*, no matter what hidden identity *x* stands for, reshapes a memoirist's position within wider communities.

These politics of identity and relation in memoir point to another interpretive parallel. Studying how families keep and share secrets can shed light on how other institutions consolidate power through practices of selective knowledge, secrecy, and disclosure. Family secrets and state secrets feature similar patterns of transmission, from parent to child and from government to citizen. And revelations of state secrets, from intelligence leaks to government admissions, have a strikingly similar reception history to memoirs of family secrets. State secrets had their own boom and backlash in 2010, when WikiLeaks, Julian Assange's controversial anti-secrecy organization, leaked several rounds of top-secret government communications. Memoirs, like intelligence leaks, can provide alternate versions of the official story, giving us a glimpse of what goes on behind closed doors. And leaks, like memoirs, are accused of telling us too much or not enough – for overhyping secret content, or for drowning us in a sea of information. Paul John Eakin notes of the memoir backlash: "Life writers are criticized not only for not telling the truth... but also for telling too much truth... The public airing of private hurt... was not universally welcomed; many of these narratives not only featured abuse as a primary content but also were perceived by some reviewers to *be* abusive in their candor" (*Ethics* 3, italics in original). Too much, not enough: it's the craft of disclosure that makes secrets legible, and that paves the way for public acknowledgment of open secrets.

The inheritance of secrets

Secrets can persist from one generation to another, even if they aren't revealed explicitly. Freud was fascinated by how we repress and express our secrets. He writes: "No mortal can keep a secret. If the lips are silent, he chatters with his fingertips; betrayal oozes out of him at every pore" (215). The "body boundary" can betray the self boundary, physically spilling the secrets of the unconscious (Saltz 12). In the 1970s, French psychoanalysts Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, building on Freud's theories of personal repression, proposed a new model of family secrecy. Abraham and Torok use the term "nescience" to describe the intergenerational inheritance of a secret. "Nescience" means "absence or lack of knowledge; ignorance" (*Oxford*). In a psychoanalytic context, nescience encompasses unknown and unassimilated knowledge – it is the "unknown known," the buried awareness that we cannot or will not confront directly.¹⁴ Abraham characterizes nescience as unconscious, intergenerational, and ghostly: it is "the living-dead knowledge of someone else's secret" (188). He elaborates: "What haunts us are not the dead, but the gaps left within us by the secrets of others" (171). That is, the secrets of one generation can be unknowingly and wholly transmitted to the next generation. In addition to the personal secrets we cannot face, we keep our parents' secrets – from ourselves. Abraham and Torok contend: "Should a child have parents 'with secrets,' parents whose speech is not exactly complementary to their unstated repressions, the child will receive from them a gap in the unconscious, an unknown, unrecognized knowledge – a *nescience* – subjected to a form of 'repression' before the fact" (140, italics in original).

In memoirs of family secrets, these "gaps" of nescience have structural effects upon narrative, as well as relational effects on readers. Many memoirists try to replicate the feeling of nescience as they experienced it, through textual strategies of hint and delay. Susan Cheever and

Linda Gray Sexton, for example, push their disclosures to the back of their memoirs, delaying the reader's experience of discovery in order to recreate the tension between known and unknown. This structure also keeps readers on the page, waiting for the intimate payoff that a memoir of family secrets promises. Sexton even begins her memoir *Searching for Mercy Street* with a red herring of discovery (she purports to find her mother's suicide note), in order to emphasize the contrast between a disappointed hope and the shock of a later psychological discovery. Instead of these common tactics of delay, Ackerley and Bechdel structure their revelations in a spiral formation. They studiously retread the ground of family memory, but never fully understand its sources of secrecy. Broyard recounts the dispelling of her nescience in her first chapter, in order to hasten the reader into a quest to discover her hidden roots. Broyard, Bechdel, and Kingston try to give nescience a concrete form by imagining a scene each writer could never have witnessed: the beginning, or fatal end, of a family member's secrecy. Through the mechanics of disclosure, memoirists craft the experience of nescience and extend it to the reader, substituting a reader's textual discovery for a daughter or son's familial one.

Perhaps the most heartbreaking form of nescience is also the most common. Particularly when writing about the dead, a memoirist must come to terms with all that she doesn't know, but might have found out. Readers can easily relate to this type of unknown: there are things we could have discovered if only we had known *how* or *what* to ask. Daniel Mendelsohn writes in *The Lost*, a quest to learn about his relatives who died in the Holocaust: "I'm pleased with what I know, but now I think much more about everything I could have known, which is so much more than anything I can learn now and which is now gone forever... you need the information that people you once knew always had to give you, if only you'd asked. But by the time you think to ask, it's too late" (73). Secrets can persist from one generation to the next, but knowledge can

also expire. In some cases, there is a rational reason not to inquire: protecting a loved one from having to articulate something painful. Esther Rashkin, a critic who applies Abraham and Torok's theoretical framework to fiction, explains this type of nescience: "the parent transmits to the child not only the unspeakable content of the secret, but also the unstated obligation to keep the secret invisible and unreachable and to prevent anyone from discovering it, including the child. A child haunted by a phantom thus inherits, along with the secret, the additional imperative to suppress any desire to know or understand its origin as a necessary means of maintaining the parent's and the family's integrity" (106). Janna Malamud Smith describes the dual inheritance of a parent's secret and the responsibility to guard it. Describing "the sense of 'stay away'" she often felt around her taciturn father, Smith writes: "I imagine that many people possess a version of this feeling – of being affected by an obscured foreign past, blocked from direct view but still present" (29, 28). This interdiction against uncovering secrets pervades not just families, but communal structures of knowledge and inheritance. Kingston writes: "I hated the secrecy of the Chinese. 'Don't tell,' said my parents, though we couldn't tell if we wanted to because we didn't know" (*Woman Warrior* 183). A second generation can inherit interdictions instead of cultural knowledge. Nescience can widen the gap between a writer and her forebears, or it can permit her the space to invent her own origins.

Nescience has political as well as textual implications; it structures the transmission of knowledge and power in families, communities, and nations. Family secrets and state secrets alike are transmitted in plain sight, with an interdiction not to inquire too closely. The open secrets of institutional power rely upon the nescience, silence, and tacit consent of a populace. As of this writing, in 2013, the United States' government has continued to sanction the secret use of drones against foreign and domestic targets. John O. Brennan, President Obama's nominee to

direct the CIA, responded to a question on drones during a Senate confirmation hearing: “What we need to do is optimize transparency on these issues, but at the same time, optimize secrecy and the protection of our national security” (Carr). That paradox of promoting transparency and secrecy points to the reception problem of nescience: how do we face what we don’t want to know? Summing up America’s nescience of drones, despite ample media coverage of the program, journalist David Carr argues: “If the Congress – and perhaps the public – doesn’t know about the drone program, it isn’t for lack of coverage. Perhaps the reason so many people are in the dark is because they want it that way. After all, if the bad guys are on the run without risking legions of boots on the ground, what’s not to like?” In the face of nescience, reading publics are ambivalent; we often don’t want to acknowledge the structures of institutions, from households to houses of government, that make silence more comfortable than speaking out. Family memoirs, like intelligence leaks, bear witness to implicit imbalances of power and knowledge. This is a primary reason to write and read memoir today: to disrupt the complacency of unknown knowledge. Those who speak out can dispel the shared nescience of a society’s open secrets.

This study analyzes memoirs published between 1968 and 2012, a watershed era of public disclosure. Many of these memoirists write about parents who came to secrecy during the early years of the Cold War in America, from World War II through the 1950s. These writers try to respect the generation gap and the historical contexts of their parents’ coming-to-secrecy. Janet Malcolm has described the 1950s as “a period that I still find troubling to recall, because duplicity was so closely woven into its fabric. We lied to our parents and we lied to each other and we lied to ourselves, so addicted to deception had we become. We were an uneasy, shifty-eyed generation” (15). Secrecy has different justifications in different generations, but it is always a calibration of selfhood, interpersonal intimacy, and access to communities and political

participation. That early Cold War generation gave birth to a baby boom generation that began a march toward greater access: to civil rights, to a public story, and to information about wars fought in their name. The year 1968 was a turning point for many of these struggles. While student protests raged in Europe, the Tet Offensive in Vietnam marked a shift in American attitudes against the war, public demonstrations were widespread, and the “credibility gap” grew between Lyndon B. Johnson’s administration and disenchanted voters. Second-wave feminism and civil rights gained ground that year, although two beacons of hope for greater social equality, Martin Luther King, Jr. and Robert F. Kennedy, Jr., were assassinated. The following year, Daniel Ellsberg, a former military analyst, began photocopying a top-secret history of the Vietnam War. When excerpts of those Pentagon Papers were published in 16 newspapers in 1971, state secrets made controversial front-page news. Richard M. Nixon’s administration began to unravel; the president’s attempts to smear Ellsberg, among other secret endeavors, came to light during the Watergate scandal of the early 1970s. Watergate marked a new era of public interest in what goes on behind the closed doors of government, not to mention publishers’ interest in first-person chronicles of political scandal. (At least 19 Watergate memoirs have been published to date.)

The chapters that follow track the textual and relational effects of secrecy, nescience, and disclosure in works by eight memoirists who publish during this contemporary period of controversial revelation. I approach these texts and their cultural dimensions through a diverse set of critical perspectives, all activated by my close reading: autobiography theory, feminist theory, psychoanalytic theory, cultural studies, psychology, and sociology. Each of the first four chapters compares a pair of memoirists who disclose similar secrets and approach disclosure through similar narrative strategies. In the case of memoirists of serial secrecy, I track the form

and use value of their family secrets through each memoirist's entire body of life-writing work. I also analyze diaries, by the parents and the memoirists, that partly inspire them to publish life writing in serial form. Parents' diaries, in addition to biographies written about them, also constitute chapters in their children's serial secrecy: other sides of the family story.

In addition to the comparison of two memoirists within each chapter, my first four chapters are also paired in a different way: the scope of analysis alternates between close textual reading and wider cultural application of the stakes of secrecy. The first two chapters define key terms: Chapter One defines *secrecy* through formal analysis of serial memoir, while Chapter Two more broadly explores the meaning of *family* in a genetically-mapped world. Both these initial chapters analyze secrets of public figures in order to highlight the blurred boundaries between familial and public ownership. Chapter Three returns to close reading, and close viewing, through analysis of two illustrated memoirs that present images of lost fathers. Chapter Four broadens to explore the familial roots of activism within American ethnic memoirs. Finally, Chapter Five, a coda, views secrecy through the widest lens, with a comparative reception history of family secrets and state secrets. In the chapter pairings and in the coda, the issues delineated in this introduction serve as interwoven thematic threads: form, relationality, identity, ownership, and nescience.

In Chapter One, Susan Cheever and Linda Gray Sexton attempt to protect a prominent parent's legacy while uncovering his or her secrets. Both John Cheever and Anne Sexton left behind troves of personal material that reveals more than their public images conveyed; John Cheever wrote about homosexual encounters in his journals, and Anne Sexton revealed herself most thoroughly in recordings of her therapy sessions. Faced with a multiplicity of secrets – and biographers eager to present these writers' private lives from “objective” perspectives – both

Susan Cheever and Linda Gray Sexton serialize their family secrets, framing their content and use value anew in multiple family memoirs. This serial secrecy presents the opportunity to analyze secrecy as a *form*, rather than by its content, since the subject of the family secret shifts from one volume to the next. Cheever and Sexton utilize serial autobiography as a venue for a performative vow: although each writes in order to preserve a bond with a lost parent, each refuses to perpetuate the chain of secrecy that served as the family's armor against a curious public. Cheever and Sexton write with their parents' legacies in mind – each parent aspired to what the poet Maxine Kumin called the “*vertical* audience” of entering the canon (Middlebrook 139). Linda Gray Sexton and Susan Cheever focus instead on a *horizontal* audience, and they perform speech acts of personal responsibility to a community of readers.

Bliss Broyard, like Cheever and Sexton, wanted to be the first to reveal her family secret publicly. Her father, the book critic Anatole Broyard, hid his mixed race from the literary community, from friends and neighbors, and from his own children. This is a particular kind of secret that we will also see in Kingston's memoirs: a secret kept *from* the younger generation, which inherits an interdiction instead of a connection to a community of origin. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. appropriates Anatole Broyard's story to a broader purpose: he relates the dead writer's secret as a representative case of the consequences of racial passing. The Broyard family secret, and how it comes to light, pits family knowledge against communal knowledge, personal history against public history, a parent against a metaphor, and representativeness against the felt truth of a relational bond. The mechanics of disclosure within Gates's own life writing – including a biographical profile of Broyard, a family memoir, and his genealogy-themed PBS television series – suggest that he strategically uncovers family secrets and community secrets in order to steer a public discourse of identity, kinship, and community. In the end, the ownership of a

family story, whether told in dusty archives, memoir pages, or strand of DNA, might come down to what Patricia J. Williams terms in the *Nation* the “emotional truth” of relationality, a felt connection that is subject to change over the lifespan of a family or community.

Gates writes that Anatole Broyard’s race was “written on his face” (*In Search* 390). The stakes of visibility, identity, and kinship – can others see who you are? – connect Chapter Two’s racial secrets to Chapter Three’s sexual secrets. In scholarly as well as popular discourse, a politics of visibility influences the language of kinship; physical likeness can be used as a shortcut to determining individual and shared identity. *Looking* like a member of a particular family, race, and/or ethnic group has personal, relational, and political effects, even if appearances often deceive. In Chapter Three, sexuality is put to the visibility test: can a memoirist see evidence of a parent’s sexual secrets in a family archive? Both J. R. Ackerley, in his posthumous memoir, *My Father and Myself* (1968), and Alison Bechdel, in her debut graphic memoir, *Fun Home* (2006), seek concrete proof of their fathers’ homosexual affairs. Bechdel and Ackerley scrutinize family photographs, hoping to build a visual archive that will align paternal secrets in closer parallel with their own, openly homosexual lives. Both memoirists run the risk of projecting their present-day identities onto a previous generation’s secret activities – of casting their fathers in their own, queer image. Although the quest to bond with a deceased father is doomed to fail, these writers forge a connection with their readers instead, through intimate gestures of personal disclosure and artistic process. Along with their father’s secrets, these memoirists share their own “secretions” in print: sexual fluids, artistic messiness, and the meted drip of daily life. And in their considerations of artistic process, Bechdel and Ackerley pay tribute to their mothers, from whom they inherited the impulse to preserve a family archive.

Chapter Four concerns the cultural and linguistic secrets of two ethnic serial memoirists: Maxine Hong Kingston and Richard Rodriguez. I employ the metaphor of a “secret language” in order to track textual intimacies within these memoirists’ declarations of separation from families, communities, and languages of origin. Both Kingston and Rodriguez came to prominence as memoirists who gestured at revealing family secrets, even though taboo content is not the central focus of *The Woman Warrior* (1976) or *Hunger for Memory* (1982). For each, writing in a second language comprises an act of translating the family, which necessarily distorts and adapts their intimate words and relationships. Their parents forbid these American-born writers to reveal “immigrant secrets whose telling could get us sent back” (*Woman Warrior* 183). But how can they reveal cultural secrets they do not understand? Unlike Kingston, Rodriguez permanently suppresses his first language of Spanish, attempting to separate his linguistic and cultural identity from his ethnic background. Further, Rodriguez *is* the secret within his family: his homosexuality hides in plain sight, a nescience throughout *Hunger for Memory*. Rodriguez and Kingston, rather than revealing specific family secrets, utilize gestures of secret sharing to foster intimacy with reading publics and to track their journeys toward political engagement.

Chapter Five, a coda to the pairings in previous chapters, takes a broader view of the nescience that perforates familial and public memory. In an exploration of the structuring effects of secrecy in contemporary culture, the coda conducts a brief reception history of family secrets and state secrets. I apply three themes from autobiography studies to the public reception of anti-secrecy initiatives: the ethics of revelation and perception of betrayal, the presumed transparency of “tell-all” memoirs and “data dumps,” and readers’ ambivalence as they begin to acknowledge open secrets of the family and the state. Formal analysis of the structures of secrecy and

disclosure within memoirs can help us understand corresponding structures of power and knowledge in governance. From the Pentagon Papers to the memoir boom to the WikiLeaks scandal, meaningful disclosure depends upon form: *how* secrets are kept and revealed, and the craft and care taken in interpreting disclosures.

Sympathetic ink

Every memoirist wishes for permission, explicit or implicit, to write about herself and her loved ones. But when the memoirist asks, she might not receive an answer, especially if she asks too late. A lost parent's permission can be *un-parere*: unapparent, invisible, and subject to invention. Scenes of permission generally aren't as dramatic as scenes of interdiction, in which a family member tries to protect her privacy from a writer. In *Fun Home*, Bechdel shows readers her mother's letter that first disclosed the father's homosexual affairs, even though "Her P.S. instructed me to destroy the letter" (78). Scenes of interdiction show the memoirist in the process of deciding the ethics of writing over another's agency. Kingston opens *The Woman Warrior* with her mother's interdiction: "'You must not tell anyone,' my mother said, 'what I am about to tell you'" (3). But the prohibition is actually permission; Kingston writes in a later volume: "In order to write *Woman Warrior*, I constructed 'Don't tell what I'm about to tell you' to mean that I could write it.... 'Don't tell' means 'Tell'" (*Through the Black Curtain* 5). If "don't tell" can mean "tell," how can memoirists sort out their parents' interdictions from permissions? How can a writer self-authorize, giving herself permission to write?

Colette, the iconic French writer, interprets a tacit authorization from her father after his death. She writes in her memoir *Sido* (1929) that according to family legend, her father also wanted to be a writer: "You are exactly what he longed to be, and in his lifetime he was never able" (195). Colette learns the extent of her late father's limitations when the family cleans out

his library. The room features a row of carefully crafted books that “bore no author’s name,” with bland, autobiographical titles that seem to chronicle the father’s military history: “*My Campaigns, The Lessons of ’70... Marshal MacMahon seen by a Fellow-Soldier*” (195). The father had lost a leg in battle, and his physical disability is reflected in a discovery within these books. Colette writes: “The dozen volumes bound in boards revealed to us their secret, a secret so long disdained by us, accessible though it was. Two hundred, three hundred, one hundred and fifty pages to a volume; beautiful, cream-laid paper, or thick ‘foolscap’ carefully trimmed, hundreds and hundreds of blank pages. Imaginary works, the mirage of a writer’s career” (195).

Colette’s family decides to repurpose the father’s blank pages of the thwarted “autobiography.” “My brother wrote his prescriptions on them, my mother covered her pots of jam with them, her grand-daughters tore out the leaves for scribbling, but we never exhausted those cream-laid notebooks, his invisible ‘works’” (196). Significantly, Colette interprets her father’s bound pages – the unwritten volumes of his life story – as not blank, but “invisible” (196). We could say that the books are written in “sympathetic ink,” which is an archaic term for the “invisible ink” used to inscribe secrets in confidential documents.¹⁵ (Lemon juice was my sympathetic ink of choice when I was a child; a flame waved under the page would “decode” the invisible message.) The father’s writing – and Colette’s subsequent justification to write about it – can be deemed invisible: present, but illegible to daughter and reader. Although Colette is the writer in the family, she is not the one who can decode her father’s sympathetic ink. She concludes:

At the time when I was beginning to write, I too drew on this spiritual legacy.

Was that where I got my extravagant taste for writing on smooth sheets of fine paper, without the least regard for economy? I dared to cover with my large round

handwriting the invisible cursive script, perceptible only to one person in the world like a shining tracery which carried to a triumphant conclusion the single page lovingly completed and signed, the page that bore the dedication:

TO MY DEAR SOUL,

HER FAITHFUL HUSBAND:

JULES-JOSEPH COLETTE. (197)

The message Colette's father inscribed in sympathetic ink is simple: his love for his wife, Sido. The "shining tracery" of his life story was written only for her (197). But Colette will write *over* those pages all the same, "dar[ing] to cover with my large round handwriting the invisible cursive script" (197). She must find her own legacy within his copious pages of invisible text. The bound pages serve as a palimpsest of parental permission, a layered work of authorization. Colette interprets these invisible texts as an invitation to write, to tell her family story in her own, bold hand.¹⁶

After I read *Sido*, I started finding traces of "sympathetic ink" in other memoirs. Writers want their parents to grant permission, however invisible, to tell the family story. In *Fun Home*, Alison Bechdel's father, an avid reader, seems to authorize her autobiographical impulse. He gives ten-year-old Alison a diary and gives her a "jump start" in his own handwriting. He writes in her first entry, "Dad is reading" (140). If the dad is reading, then the daughter is writing. The rest of the story is up to her to write, and she will use these childhood diaries as source material for her family memoirs. Roland Barthes also chooses to interpret a parent as granting permission. After the death of his beloved mother, Barthes keeps a "mourning diary," tracking his slow and incomplete recovery from her loss. He wavers in his resolution to chronicle his grief; he is wary of writing about his mother's death, for fear of writing *over* her. "I don't want to talk about it, for

fear of making literature out of it – or without being sure of not doing so – although as a matter of fact literature originates within these truths” (*Mourning Diary* 23). Barthes realizes that his mother would want him to keep writing; her maternal love was the invisible force that authorized his work. He writes: “A stupefying, though not distressing notion – that she has not been ‘everything’ to me. If she had, I wouldn’t have written my *work*. Since I’ve been taking care of her, the last six months in fact, she *was* ‘everything’ for me, and I’ve completely forgotten that I’d written. I was no longer anything but desperately hers. Before, she had made herself transparent so that I could write” (16, italics in original). Barthes’s mother is a transparent parent: she authorizes Barthes to have more than one “everything,” both familial intimacy and individual authority. Once a parent is lost, it falls to the writer to self-authorize, to write over the past, and to make a shared story *parere*: apparent to readers.

Chapter One

Serial Secrecy: Susan Cheever and Linda Gray Sexton

“The Cheever Letters,” an episode from the fourth season of the hit television series *Seinfeld* (1992), opens with Jerry Seinfeld and George Costanza sitting down to write an NBC sitcom based on their lives. They’ve put off this writing date for countless reasons, but today George’s complaint sounds more serious than run-of-the-mill writer’s block. George has to meet his girlfriend’s father for the first time, as well as break the news that their friend Kramer burned down the father’s country cabin with an errant lit cigar. George stammers to Henry Ross, his girlfriend’s father: “Eh, but, you know, Mr. Ross, if – if you look at the whole situation, what with it being your cigars, and everything, it’s really rather ironic – one might even say, in a sense, comical.” A shocked Mr. Ross fails to see the “comical” element in his loss. The next day, George and Jerry stop by the Ross apartment. George’s girlfriend Susan opens a charred box that survived the cabin fire. It’s full of letters, and she reads one aloud – it’s from John Cheever! The letter reads: “Dear Henry, last night with you was bliss. I fear my orgasm has left me a cripple. I don't how I shall ever get back to work. I love you madly, John. P.S. Loved the cabin.” Henry Ross snatches the letter from his daughter and cries: “Yes! Yes, he was the most wonderful person I’ve ever known. And I loved him deeply! In a way you could never understand.” Jerry and George make a hasty retreat, and the scene cuts to their next attempt at writing the autobiographical sitcom. During a break, George reads John Cheever’s novel *Falconer*, which features homosexual themes. “It’s really excellent,” George comments.

Jerry and George’s own writing is not so excellent: after a madcap day of witnessing the revelation of Henry Ross’s secret homosexual affair, they can’t seem to make the leap from life to fiction. All they manage to write are three lines of dialogue for their sitcom: “Hi... Hello...

How's it going?" Like the humorless Mr. Ross, they fail to spot the everyday ironies that make *Seinfeld* a blockbuster imitation of life. How do we recognize the material within our lives? How can we communicate the "comical" and tragic elements that lie on the threshold between personal and shared experience?

This *Seinfeld* episode aired in 1992, eight years after Susan Cheever revealed John Cheever's homosexual history in her family memoir *Home Before Dark* (1984), four years after Susan's brother, Benjamin Cheever, edited John Cheever's letters for publication (1988), and one year after the *New Yorker* and Knopf published excerpts of Cheever's journals (1991). Larry David, the creator of *Seinfeld*, chose Cheever for the episode simply because "he was a writer who was gay" (Bailey 672). As the journalist Charles McGrath noted in 2009, Cheever's literary reputation "was hijacked by revelations about his personal life."¹ Cheever was proud of his iconic status; according to Benjamin Cheever, "'I'm a brand name,' he used to say, 'like corn flakes, or shredded wheat'" (*Journals ix*). And Cheever was complicit in his own post-mortem outing, directing his son to publish his private journals after he died. The relationship between a writer's life and work – and the surviving children's stake in both – continues to evolve after the writer's death. Like the Cheevers, the Sexton family struggled with shielding a writer's secrets from the public. The confessional poet Anne Sexton was roughly John Cheever's contemporary; they met while teaching at Boston College in 1974, two *enfant terrible* writers who sipped spiked coffee in faculty meetings (Middlebrook 394). Both writers were the breadwinners of their hard-drinking, midcentury, suburban Northeast households, hiding behind constructed myths of Boston Brahmin origins and tony educations. Each of these iconic midcentury writers has a daughter who published family secrets in memoirs after the parent's death.²

Celebrity secrets are more than an idle curiosity for a reading public. Leo Braudy, a critic of celebrity studies, argues that the culture of fame serves as “a common coin of human exchange – code words more forceful (and easier to express) than mutual political or religious beliefs for establishing intimacy” (4). Joseph A. Boone and Nancy J. Vickers, co-editors of *PMLA*’s 2011 special issue *Celebrity, Fame, Notoriety*, also emphasize the communal value of celebrity to its consumers: “Such images and stories inform our notions of self and community; our sense of the intermingling spheres of public and private life; our fears, aspirations, dreams” (902). Family secrets, exchanged within a family and among a community of readers, have an analogous function of transactional intimacy. Though the hunger for celebrity secrets is not a new phenomenon, codes of self-disclosure have evolved in the contemporary era. Tabloid editor Robert Harrison complained in the late 1960s: “You couldn’t put out a magazine like *Confidential* again. You know why? Because all the movie stars have started writing books about *themselves!*... They tell all! No magazine can compete with that” (qtd. in Nelson 18-19, italics in original). Nor can paparazzi compete with the daughters and sons of celebrities who reveal the secrets their parents withheld from the public.

Sons and daughters of famous writers, seeking to follow in their parents’ footsteps, have produced some of the most artful family memoirs of the contemporary era. The occasion of an author’s death can inspire a memoir of memorialization, such as David Rieff’s *Swimming in a Sea of Death* (2008) and Alexandra Styron’s *Reading My Father* (2011). Other memoirs explicitly disclose a renowned parent’s secrets, such as Mary Catherine Bateson’s *With a Daughter’s Eye* (1984, revealing Margaret Mead’s bisexuality), Janna Malamud Smith’s *My Father Is a Book* (2006, disclosing Bernard Malamud’s extramarital affair), Bliss Broyard’s *One*

Drop (2007, analyzed in Chapter Two), and Margaret Salinger's *Dream Catcher* (2000, the rare family memoir published while the parent, J. D. Salinger, was still alive).

Memoirs of family secrets are typically published singly: the secret is revealed, and the memoirist moves on to other projects. But Susan Cheever and Linda Gray Sexton *serialize* family secrets, writing multiple memoirs that revisit and revise their parents' private lives. Cheever and Sexton demonstrate a mode of "serial secrecy" that changes the subject of the family secret from one memoir volume to the next. For Linda Gray Sexton, the secret of her first memoir, *Searching for Mercy Street* (1994), sexual abuse, is not the same as her second memoir, *Half in Love* (2011), the intergenerational legacy of suicide. And for Susan Cheever, the subject of family secrecy changes over the course of her four family memoirs, from her father's sexuality and marriage problems to the alcoholism and sex addiction that father and daughter had in common. Cheever and Sexton no longer keep their family secrets, but they keep secrecy as a defining theme of their familial identity and intimacy. Serial secrecy is repetition with a difference; the family secret shifts to suit the memoirist's life context and book project. Memoirs of serial secrecy demonstrate that the essence of a secret is not its content, but its mechanics of disclosure; that is, the way a secret is shared determines its relational currency, more so than the secret's facts. Since secrecy is a formal husk, a serial secret can shift with each telling; the content changes as the teller recalibrates levels of intimacy with her family and her readers.

My concept of serial secrecy builds from Leigh Gilmore's theory of "serial autobiography," which "challenges the limits of the genre by raising the specter of endless autobiography. That there will always be (another) autobiography means there will be no last words in a genre of last words" (*Limits* 96). A serial memoirist defines herself and her relationships anew in each volume. Serial secrecy signifies not just the "subject-in-process" of a

mutable self that Gilmore identifies, but a *secret*-in-process, in which the subject of disclosure shifts over time (97). Just as a serial memoirist matures from one volume to the next, so, too, does the represented figure evolve; even a long-dead parent is never a static figure. In family memoir, seriality can enact or counteract intergenerational repetition, questioning how similar a child should be to her parent as she grows into an adult, parent, and writer in her own right. Gilmore writes of Jamaica Kincaid's works of serial autobiography, which grapple with the relationship between the writer and her mother:

There is no true original mother upon whom Annie [a version of Kincaid in *Annie John*] is to model herself; the imperative to copy (or model or imitate) is already in place, having been assumed by her own mother. The crisis of individuation follows from realizing this.... But what of the mother's desire? Barbara Johnson has identified "the desire to create a being like oneself" as the "autobiographical desire par excellence." Implicit in Kincaid's serial autobiography is the danger posed by this project for both mother and daughter. The mother denounces the copy, her daughter, not for its failure (as a "bad" copy) but for its success (as a good or lifelike copy). (110)

Gilmore acknowledges that "metonymy can be read in two directions" (111); that is, the copy (daughter) can succeed the original (mother). In her emphasis on a daughter's process of individuation, Gilmore applies Barbara Johnson's comment on autobiographical desire to the mother, who has manufactured a copy in her daughter. But in the serial representation of a relational life, the dangers of imitation cut both ways. That is, a memoirist can also recast memories of her deceased parent in her own image, creating a new version of the parent – more like herself – each time she writes.

According to Gilmore, “a serial autobiographer returns to the scene because she has left a body there which requires further attention” (97).³ Gilmore theorizes serial autobiography as a “limit-case” that challenges the legal dimensions of trauma and testimony, and she emphasizes the problem of testifying to the unspeakable: “Language is asserted as that which can realize trauma even as it is theorized as that which fails in the face of trauma. This apparent contradiction in trauma studies represents a constitutive ambivalence. For the survivor of trauma such an ambivalence can amount to an impossible injunction to tell what cannot, in this view, be spoken” (7). Alternatively, the memoirist can push back against these challenges to testimony and its impossibility by telling, over and over again, versions of that which has been silenced: a family secret. And the reader who witnesses these testimonies is no more a fixed entity than the deceased parent or the writing child. The mutable relationship between parent and memoirist necessarily affects the relationship between memoirist and reader. If a memoirist comes from a family in which secrecy calibrated intimacy, then she, in turn, measures intimacy with her reader on the same terms: secrecy and disclosure. As a reader consumes a volume of serial secrecy, lured by the promise of revelations, she catches glimpses of a mutable secret, adding another layer of interpretation to its disclosure.⁴

Private material

In *Pursuing Privacy in Cold War America*, Deborah Nelson identifies an American “privacy crisis” dating from 1959 to 1973, when the breakdown of the Cold War’s containment ideology intersected with the rise of “confessional culture” (xi-xii). The dates of this crisis are also, roughly, the span of Anne Sexton’s career and the most tumultuous years of John Cheever’s seesawing literary renown. “Fiction is not crypto-autobiography,” Cheever liked to say, though he often wrote in the third person in his journals, channeling personal experiences directly into

fictional sketches (qtd. in Susan Cheever, *Note* 26). Anne Sexton rarely kept a journal, expressing her myriad selves in published poems and carbon-copied letters to friends. “I can be deeply personal, but often I’m not being personal about myself,” she stated at a Radcliffe Institute seminar in 1961 (Middlebrook 158).⁵ “They think I am me!” Sexton once exclaimed (qtd. in Nelson 89). Like Cindy Sherman’s donning a fake nose for one of her photographic “self-portraits,” Sexton tried on personas. Biographer Diane Wood Middlebrook writes of Sexton’s public selves: “‘poet’ is an identity extrapolated from a published poem. The poem’s ‘I’ is real because it has become visible in the medium of print and circulated among those who are positioned to recognize it” (82-83). The significance of a writer’s first-person “I” changes with the apparatuses of biographical and autobiographical texts that shape the author’s identity in readers’ minds. And that readerly conception of a writer can hinge upon formal properties. For example, in *The Silent Woman*, a biography of Anne Sexton’s famed rival, Sylvia Plath, Janet Malcolm tracks the chronology of Plath’s shifting persona, from her poetry to friends’ memoirs to published letters and journals. Malcolm writes:

In exposing her daughter’s letters to the world’s scrutiny, Mrs. Plath not only violated Plath’s writer’s privacy but also handed Plath herself over to the world as an object to be familiarly passed from hand to hand. Now everyone could feel that he ‘knew’ Plath – and, of course, [Ted] Hughes as well. Hughes had retained the right of final approval of the book, and he was criticized for its editing; it was felt that he had taken out too much, that there were too many ellipses. But in fact *Letters Home* is remarkable not for what it leaves out about Hughes but for what it leaves in. (35-36)

An elision can be just as telling as a revelation in all “confessional” forms and genres: poetry, memoir, letters, and journals. All are strategically edited, shaped, trimmed, and oriented, first by the writer, then by editors. Nelson argues: “The confession that appears to ‘tell all’ hides all the more effectively for telling only some, and so renders a paradoxical privacy” (89). In poetry, for example, loose structure and conversational rhythms can make a poem feel accessible; in family memoir, sharing secrets makes a *family* feel accessible to the reader. But that feeling of access may be illusory, a product of the simultaneous intimacy and transgression toward which secret telling gestures. Secrecy, at once a hiding place and a mark of complicity, becomes all the more experimental in its serial form, which multiplies the sites of concealment and revelation. As Susan Cheever and Linda Gray Sexton separate themselves from their parents’ era of patriarchal privacy, they also shift the previous generation’s terms of the “privacy crisis”: from Cold War-era publicity and privacy to the contemporary era’s celebrity and secrecy.

Plum daughters, plum readers

When an interviewer asked the writer Mary McCarthy if she objected “to people playing the roman à clef game with [her] novels,” she replied: “What I really do is take real plums and put them in an imaginary cake. If you’re interested in the cake, you get rather annoyed with people saying what species the real plum was.” But what if that plum is your own species, and your reader is your own child? John Cheever often accused readers of “reducing literature to gossip” (Susan Cheever, *Treetops* 167). And a reader who is too close to the material might pay the price for looking for versions of herself. Susan Cheever recalls “knowing somehow that I was breaking the rules but not really knowing why,” when as a child she opened her father’s book *The Enormous Radio*. “The book fell open to a story called ‘The Hartleys,’” she writes (*Treetops* 152). Be careful what you look for, because you might find it: the story features a girl resembling

Susan who dies in a ski accident. A similar crypto-autobiographical coincidence occurred when Susan first acknowledged her late father's homosexuality while reading his journals: "I opened one of the notebooks and within five minutes I knew my father was gay... I just happened to look in the wrong, or maybe the right, part. I said, 'Thanks, Dad, I'm not doing this job for you,' and I stopped writing about him" (McGrath).⁶

"Never be a writer, Linda," Anne Sexton told her daughter (*Half* 5). But while their famous parents still lived and worked, Linda Gray Sexton and Susan Cheever were already on their way to becoming writers. Susan published three novels in her father's lifetime, to which his responses were always "polite but perfunctory" (*Home* 215). In her second memoir, *Treetops* (1991), Susan Cheever writes: "Neither of my parents read my first novel until it was in bound galleys" (135). (In *Home Before Dark*, she doesn't mention showing those galleys to her mother, only her father.) If "Fiction is not a competitive sport," as John Cheever liked to say, then why would a writer feel threatened by his own daughter (*Home* 29)? Susan Cheever declares in *Treetops*, her ode to the maternal side of her family: "My father taught me how to be a writer. My mother taught me something even more useful – how to live with a writer" (141). But how do you live with *yourself* as a writer? The Cheever legacy, maternal and paternal, comprises the struggle to write, the struggle to nurture, and – perhaps the most difficult of all – the struggle to nurture the self.

Anne Sexton wrote about Linda in "Mother and Daughter" (1972): "You've picked my pocket clean / and you've racked up all my / poker chips and left me empty" (*Complete Poems* 306). Both over-identification and individuation are fraught with dangers, as Gilmore emphasizes: "For the mother, 'originality,' even her identity, is thrown into crisis by the success of [the daughter's] modeling.... The danger here for both mother and daughter is annihilation,

figured throughout the narrative in the proximity of death” (110-11). And death does not end the rivalry between writers in the same family; the stakes get even higher when the surviving child has to take responsibility for her parent’s material as well as her own.

Indelible ink

Linda Gray Sexton was never asked if she wanted to be a literary executor. Anne Sexton handed her a letter in which she “nominated and legally named” Linda her executor on the daughter’s twenty-first birthday (Ransom).⁷ Middlebrook’s biography, *Anne Sexton* (1991), tells a more complete story of the executor’s song. First Anne Sexton approached Lois Ames to be her biographer in 1965, regaling Ames as she would later celebrate Linda’s birthday with the gift of her literary estate. Ames recalls that Sexton “telephoned me and with her usual exuberance said, ‘My Christmas gift to you is to make you my biographer.’ I replied only half-jokingly, ‘I’m not sure this is a present’” (Middlebrook 244). Later, as literary executor, Linda Gray Sexton would shift that so-called “gift”: after working with Ames on *Anne Sexton: A Self-Portrait in Letters* (1977), Linda chose Middlebrook, instead, as her mother’s authorized biographer. And the executor position also changed hands. Anne Sexton originally asked her best friend, Maxine Kumin, as well as the scholar J. D. McClatchy, both of whom declined. Linda’s birthday surprise was actually a third-hand present. In contrast, Susan Cheever didn’t have to worry about the dubious gift of managing her father’s estate; Mary Cheever, John’s wife, is still living and has done the honors, though not without legal difficulties.⁸ Susan Cheever writes in *Home Before Dark*: “I had always been proud of my independence from my father, and I never intended to become his biographer” (x). Indeed, John Cheever chose Susan’s brother, Benjamin, to be the guardian of his journals, although Susan negotiated the sale of the 28 notebooks for \$1.2 million in the late 1980s.

A literary executor wields some power over how the parent's material will be used, but she has no control over what she will find within that material. Benjamin Cheever, writing in his introduction to *The Journals of John Cheever* (1991), credits the allure of the journals to their legibility: "These pages – feverishly typed, with floating caps, misspellings, and cross outs – were nevertheless readable, and so they presented an extreme temptation. We were not supposed to read them. I don't recall his exact instructions, but they were sufficiently explicit, and expressed with an edge of menace" (*Journals* vii). Unlike the blank pages of "sympathetic ink" I traced in my introduction, John Cheever and Anne Sexton's journals were dangerously legible, typed in "indelible ink," as Linda Gray Sexton terms it (*Half* 51).⁹ Linda Gray Sexton writes that she read about her own physical abuse in her mother's journals: "Because I have no direct memories of these encounters, I had to read them, in her own words, in her journals, which she had entrusted to me before her death and instructed me to read, so that I could find them an appropriate home. How I wish she had destroyed the journals; to have to confront those events in the indelible ink of her pen felt like a terrible betrayal" (51). That feeling of voicelessness – the child who cannot remember or narrate her own abuse – continues into Sexton's adult years. Even some of the chapter titles in Linda's memoir *Searching for Mercy Street* – "Live or Die," "The Rowing Endeth" – are echoed titles of her mother's poems.

No matter how diligent a guardian may be, there are limits to controlling the family legacy. When Linda Gray Sexton decided to provide her mother's biographer with unrestricted access to recordings of Anne Sexton's therapy sessions, she decided: "I could not secret them away, for eventually my tenure as guardian would end" (*Searching* 232). David Rieff, son of Susan Sontag, makes a similar point in the preface to *Reborn*, the first volume of his mother's journals: "Either I would organize them and present them or someone else would. It seemed

better to go forward” (ix).¹⁰ An executor must think ahead to her own death, when the material of a parent’s life and work will no longer be in her personal control. Susan Cheever was already working on *Home Before Dark* when she learned that the writer Scott Donaldson was planning to reveal Cheever’s homosexuality and alcoholism in an unauthorized biography. As Charles McGrath puts it: “Susan pre-empted Donaldson by using *Home Before Dark* to out her father gently, dwelling mostly on his heroic victory over alcohol and his warmth and devotion as a family man.” But the legacy of *Home Before Dark* is not John Cheever’s “warmth and devotion”; it is his sexuality, and his daughter’s decision to do the outing herself.

Here, the chronology of Susan Cheever and Linda Gray Sexton’s serial secrecy diverges. Linda Gray Sexton’s first publication was not a novel, like Susan Cheever’s *Looking for Work* (1980), but an edited collection of her mother’s material, *Anne Sexton: A Self-Portrait in Letters* (1977). Both daughters spent the early 1980s writing fiction that drew upon their family lives, then published a first memoir about the parent: Cheever’s *Home Before Dark* (1984) and Sexton’s *Searching for Mercy Street* (1994). Definitive biographies of each parent, Middlebrook’s *Anne Sexton: A Biography* (1991) and Blake Bailey’s *Cheever: A Life* (2009) came out at different points in each daughter’s career, either prompting or following another volume of the daughters’ memoirs of serial secrecy.

Age forty

Susan Cheever and Linda Gray Sexton were both around 40 years old when they published their first memoirs. The age of 40 is common among non-serial or non-celebrity memoirists of family secrets, as well: Bliss Broyard, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Maxine Hong Kingston, Richard Rodriguez, Margaret Salinger, and David Rieff were all in early middle age (from late 30s to early 40s) when they published life writing about a parent. The confessional

poets of the previous generation – Robert Lowell, W.D. Snodgrass, Sylvia Plath, and Anne Sexton – were also in early middle age and new parents (all with daughters) when they began to write, as Middlebrook points out (“What Was” 636). These contemporary memoirists’ parents were usually around age 40 when their sons and daughters came of age. The memoirists often have children later than their parents did, bearing children in their 30s and 40s. Even if they don’t have children of their own, contemporary memoirists draw upon powerful memories of their parents in middle age. Rodriguez recalls from his adolescence: “In my own version of my life, I was not yet the hero – perhaps California was the hero, perhaps my mother. I used to lie awake in the dark and imagine myself on a train far, far away, hurtling toward the present age of my parents. Forty-six. Forty-six” (*Days of Obligation* 208).

Susan Cheever and Linda Gray Sexton mine the double vision of this middle-aged view, picturing the parent at age 40, when Susan was ten and Linda was 15, when each daughter didn’t understand the extent of a parent’s demons. And the progeny have the challenge of leaving an affluent family home. Susan Cheever writes, perhaps a bit too breezily: “In fact, the family house was so comforting and so much fun that it took us children a while to start our own families. My husband and I lived within five miles; my brother Ben moved to a house nearby. Fred was often home, even after he went off to Andover. None of us had children. Then, in the year my father died, we all got married” (*Treetops* 128). In *Note Found in a Bottle* (1999), that tether to the family hearth sounds a shade darker: “I had nothing better to do than hang around at my parents’ house on weekends” (124). At a younger age, Linda Gray Sexton wrote in a letter to her mother (whom she called “Muggy”): “Mug now in the newspaper they say ‘Mrs. Sexton’s 12-year-old daughter said.’ They can say instead ‘Mrs. Sexton’s teenager daughter said’” (Ransom). Do these secret sharing memoirists break that tie of filiality and subordination, or does writing pull the

daughter ever deeper into the dark material of the family? As Nancy K. Miller concludes, “It’s not easy to leave home, it seems, when you’re part of so many good stories” (*Bequest* 167).

Nescience

Susan Cheever writes about her first memoir, *Home Before Dark*: “When I wrote a memoir about my father that was published in 1984, there were no models. I could not find one single nonfiction book in which a daughter had written candidly about her father, and only two in which a son had written about a father” (*Desire* 14).¹¹ One formal model for the writing daughter is the parent’s own life and fictions. Cheever opens *Home Before Dark* with her father’s self-invented mythology, “a background of suggestions and half-truths that implied a happy youth and a slow but steady progress in his chosen career” (2). Structurally, *Home Before Dark* mimics that tension between her father’s myth of “steady progress” with his reality of a stop-and-start struggle for success: hundreds of short stories but no novel to crown John Cheever’s efforts throughout the 1950s. The chronology of *Home Before Dark* is mostly linear, mirroring the father’s fiction of a steadily growing career and brood. But each time the narrative approaches the gulf of secrecy in John Cheever’s life, the chronology is interrupted, leaving a section break as a visible rift as the narrative stutters, then resumes the teleological myth of the writer’s steady rise.

This juddering motion in *Home Before Dark* reveals the workings of Susan Cheever’s nescience: the knowledge she couldn’t acknowledge. Through nescience, according to the psychoanalytic theories of Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, the secrets of one generation can be unknowingly and wholly transmitted to the next. Janna Malamud Smith captures the uncanniness of nescience in her memoir about her father, Bernard Malamud. She writes:

“Reading a parent’s fiction is rarely simply a literary experience; it is, or can be, much more

bizarre. The characters often share intimate traits but then go off on their own. That's the more recognized truth, and the easier one. But the underlying themes possess an uncanny, sometimes creepy familiarity: they are the spooks of the familial unspoken returning to haunt. They know no walls and can invade with ease across years or decades" (240). The ghostly mechanics of nescience and retrieval are particularly familiar to mystery or suspense readers: deferral and revelation. Of course, thanks to jacket copy and media coverage, a reader almost always knows the gist of a secret before the title page. The payoff of reading is not the content of the secret, but its form: how the memoirist gives it away. Memoirists of family secrets often push their disclosures to the back of their memoirs, delaying the reader's discovery in order to recreate the author's lived experience of nescience and its dispelling.

Susan Cheever's narrative frequently stops and restarts at a clue of John Cheever's sexual secrecy. The first clue is a swift mention of her father's "fear of feminine behavior in men" (37). A few pages later, Susan Cheever quotes a dream from her father's journals of 1956: "And at 3 a.m. I seem to be walking through Grand Central Station... And the latch of my suitcase gives, spilling onto the floor the contents of my life and what do we have here?" (43) But the secret is not yet spilled. A section break signals a break in the chronology: it is now after John Cheever's death, and an unnamed writer (Frederick Exley, according to Bailey's biography) calls Susan to blackmail her with letters from Cheever that say "Terrible things... I could get some dough for these. I mean if he didn't want me to use them, why did he write me these letters?" (44). The caller hangs up, keeping his secrets to himself (and from the rare unsuspecting reader), and the chapter ends.

In a chapter of *Home Before Dark* that opens with John Cheever's struggle to cultivate a patrician image, Susan Cheever establishes the temporal frame for her memoir, linking it to two

phases she identifies in her father's life. She writes: "In many ways my father's life can be divided into two distinct parts. The first forty-five years or so were devoted to a struggle for stability... The last twenty years of my father's life were spent in a struggle to escape the trappings and traps he had so carefully constructed for himself" (155). Susan Cheever begins to narrate the latter two-decade period by considering her father's semi-secretive drinking. Then, at the end of the chapter, the secret word first appears. When John Cheever is hospitalized in the period of his most reckless drinking, the family doctor calls Susan: "'He told that one [psychiatrist] he was a homosexual!' The doctor laughed at this new example of my father's intransigence" (165). When Susan relates the doctor's story to her father on the telephone, "There was a little silence on the line, and then my father laughed too. 'I guess I just don't like psychiatrists,' he said" (165). In fact, most early mentions of homosexuality in John Cheever's letters and journals are ventriloquized, put in the mouths of psychiatrists, both real and imaginary.¹² The chapter ends on this cliffhanger, and the next chapter narrates the beginning of John Cheever's classes at Sing Sing prison, which provided inspiration for *Falconer* (1977). (Cheever said in an interview with Susan commissioned for *Newsweek*: "I didn't go to Sing Sing to gather material any more than I got married and had children to gather material" [qtd. in *Letters* 283]. Posthumous revelations could easily throw both these statements into doubt.)

With a third of *Home Before Dark* left (in close proportion to the last third of John Cheever's life, as Susan Cheever divides his self-making and unmaking), the secret is finally articulated: "There was a third contest in my father's life; a contest so intense and so secret that he kept all but oblique mentions of it out of his journals for decades; a contest that dominates his journal entries in the 1970s and 1980s and that was probably linked to his battles with alcohol and with my mother" (173-74). These battles – alcoholism, marital strife, and homosexuality, as

well as sex addiction – constitute the serial secrecy of Susan Cheever’s family memoirs, published at nearly regular intervals: *Home Before Dark* (1984), *Treetops* (1991), *Note Found in a Bottle* (1999), and *Desire* (2008). The scope of Susan Cheever’s life, as she ages and changes, determines her father’s most salient secret. As the delay mechanisms of *Home Before Dark* suggest, the primary secret here is John Cheever’s homosexual history. Susan Cheever writes that although “there were clues to his sexual nature everywhere... He didn’t want us to know – and we didn’t want to know” (177). She recounts her crowning moment of nescience, when she found out about her father’s sexuality without fully realizing it. In the mid-1970s, she found a letter from Dennis Coates, a young scholar studying John Cheever’s fiction, in which he gracefully declined the author’s sexual advances. Susan Cheever writes: “The odd thing is this: Although I have always remembered reading that letter – the way the light slanted through the small windowpanes, the musty smell of the pantry sink – it wasn’t until after my father died and I read his journals that I remembered what the letter meant” (177-78). Reading, seeing, smelling, but not recalling meaning: nescience can be a denial of interpretation, a secret kept from oneself.¹³ As well as an intersubjective negotiation, secrecy is an intrasubjective process. Regarding her father and his protégé “Rip” (a writer named Max Zimmer) Susan Cheever writes: “When my brother Ben told me that they were lovers, I didn’t listen, or I put the idea aside. It was only months after my father died, as I was reading his journals, that I found out. I guess what surprised me most was that I hadn’t already known” (209). But she *had* already known; she just didn’t know she knew.¹⁴

“Gentlemen do not read other gentlemen’s mail”¹⁵

The signposts of secrecy were not evenly distributed within the Cheever family. Ben Cheever was the only family member permitted to read his father’s journals in his lifetime. This

reading occurred in 1979, at least 20 years after John Cheever said that all his ancestors kept journals, with the understanding that “their oldest sons would burn the things once they were dead (Bailey 290).¹⁶ Ben Cheever recalls his own moments of willful nescience in his annotations to *The Letters of John Cheever* (1988). He quotes from his father’s novel *The Wapshot Chronicle*: ““And now we come to the unsavory or homosexual part of our tale and any disinterested reader is encouraged to skip.’ ... I guess I would have to be considered a disinterested reader. I read the book, I even read the parts I was encouraged to skip, but I avoided the conclusions I might have drawn. I was encouraged to skip and I skipped” (327). Like Susan, Ben Cheever misread his father’s work and his life. In his thirties, Ben had a revealing conversation with his father’s lover (anonymous in Ben’s account, but revealed as Max Zimmer in Bailey’s biography) about, of all things, journals. Ben asked him: “Did you ever notice... that you never know what’s important? You write down what you think is important, but when you look back a couple of years later you realize that you’ve recorded a dispute you were having with a plumber, and haven’t mentioned a near-fatal automobile accident” (328). Significantly, Zimmer’s response is not about self-misinterpretation, but about keeping secrets from prying eyes: “Once, when I was married, and my wife used to read my journal, I went out and spent a night with a black man I met at a bar. Every time we did it, he’d call me honeychild, and that was all I wrote for that day in my journal, ‘honeychild.’” Ben Cheever recalls: “I was shocked. I was worried. What if my father found out that his friend was a homosexual?” (328)¹⁷ Is John Cheever’s journal less a product of self-closeting and self-flagellation, as Susan Cheever characterizes it, than a document at first encoded against prying eyes, then gradually loosened? Ultimately, who does a journal-writer write for: himself, for secret readers, or for posterity? Once Ben Cheever agreed with his father that there would be an interested public readership for

the journals, Ben was allowed to see them. Cheever watched his son reading, “not sobbing, but tears were running down his cheeks” (*Journals* viii). Ben Cheever recalls: “There was a lot about homosexuality. I didn’t quite get it, or maybe I didn’t want to get it. I was also surprised at how little I appeared in the text” (ix). Susan was surprised, too, at “his lack of focus on his children in general and me in particular” in the journals (*Note* 153). Ben Cheever adds his own version of the hidden demons that tortured his father: “A simpleton might think that bisexuality was the essence of his problem, but of course it was not. Nor was it alcoholism. He came to terms with his bisexuality. He quit drinking. But life was still a problem. The way he dealt with that problem was to articulate it” (*Journals* x).

Serial secrecy

Susan Cheever seems to disagree with her brother’s diagnosis; in each of her four family memoirs, she articulates a new version of her father’s secrecy. By *Treetops*, Susan Cheever’s second memoir (1991), the “problem” with the family is the parents’ rocky marriage. In *Treetops*, Cheever attempts to flesh out the family narrative by including her mother’s side of the story. She writes that after publishing *Home Before Dark*, “I began to see that I had told only half the story – my father’s story. The myths he created about himself were part of a larger family legacy: a history passed on and embroidered to serve its members. This book is about family myths: what they reveal and what they hide” (*Treetops* ix). The vagaries of intimacy in the Cheever family is this memoir’s predominant theme. And in this volume, Cheever begins to tell her own secrets as a foil to her mother’s cool silences.

The present-tense voice of *Treetops* is dialogic. Seeking their input, Cheever calls her mother and brothers: “Like most of our personal conversations, this one takes place on the telephone” (96). Regarding her husband’s use of family material in his fiction, Mary Cheever

muses, “Maybe he *was* wicked” (165). Susan’s brother Fred concurs: “There’s absolutely no excuse for what he did to Mom... He did it on purpose. Vindictiveness was one of the characteristics he displayed in his art” (168). Susan plays devil’s advocate to her siblings’ condemnation: “‘But if the stories are great,’ I say, ‘doesn’t that make a difference?... What’s literary libel in 1950 is literary genius in 1990’” (168, 169). Susan’s side of the discussion devolves, but Ben provides insight: “‘Aaargh,’ I say. ‘I think it’s important somehow that he was homosexual,’ my brother says. ‘He was always dealing in secrets. There’s a level of deception required for homosexuals that the rest of us just can’t understand’” (170). Through these dialogues, Susan Cheever realizes that she has inherited her father’s style of “crypto-autobiography”: “I have never worried too much about the feelings of people who might be able – or inclined – to recognize themselves in my fiction.... I take what my father did with his family as a license for what I do” (171-72).

Susan Cheever attempts to break that chain of betrayal in *Treetops* through dialogic and stylistic fluidity. Instead of jerkily approaching and retreating from secrets as she did in *Home Before Dark*’s “Cheever-esque” vignettes, she seeks bridges between the book’s sections. Part Two of *Treetops* ends with a line from Hope Lange about her affair with John Cheever: “‘How serious could it be?’ she asked. ‘He always had to take the 5:20 train home’” (130). The opening line of Part Three picks up the thread of “home” and the woman who ruled it: Mary Cheever. Susan Cheever writes: “In 1984 I gave a reading from *Home Before Dark*, a biographical memoir about my father, at Books & Co., a bookstore on Madison Avenue. I invited my mother to introduce me, and she surprised me by saying yes” (133). Mary Cheever fields a question from the audience by responding “that she still did have secrets” (133). Those secrets include acts of selective disclosure within the family. Susan Cheever reveals in *Treetops*: “my mother had

recently been quoted in the press as saying that the book was inaccurate and that she wished I hadn't written it. Typically for our family, she had used a public medium to tell me something she had been reluctant to tell me in private" (134). Susan Cheever retaliates by relating their history of confidence without full revelation: "We actually confided in each other, although I never told her the two secrets that shadow those years when I remember them: the fact that I was in love with a married man I worked with, and the fact that my husband occasionally hauled off and hit me so hard that I saw stars and once had a black eye for a week. I told my students and my parents that I had walked into a cupboard door in the kitchen" (139). By her next memoir, *Note Found in a Bottle* (1999), Cheever has reoriented this secret of abuse to family complicity and to her relationship with her father: "Years later my mother said that my father had not believed me. He sat straight up in bed one morning, she told me, and said, 'He's hitting Susie! We have to stop it!' But no one stopped it. No one even talked about it" (88).

Mary Cheever denies that her daughter was ever an alcoholic, claiming that the addiction central to *Note Found in a Bottle* is "part of [Susan's] identification with her father" (Bailey 673). In this memoir, Susan Cheever picks up a thread of her father's secrecy, his alcoholism, that was tangential to his sexuality in *Home Before Dark*: "he seems to have needed the secret almost as much as he needed the drink" (*Note* 43). Those secreted bottles now take on a relational meaning:

But the real family secret was not my father's bisexuality, it was the drinking. My father's fear of exposure, his terrified reaction to others' exposure – in those years other men were discredited for the things he did – his intense, life-or-death desire to appear to be something he wasn't: that was nothing. That was a secret that could be discovered in an instant. It *was* discovered in an instant. I read my

father's journals and I knew and that was that. The drinking was a different kind of secret and a more dangerous one. It wasn't hidden, it was completely visible. Because it was completely visible, the drinking was a secret that we kept from ourselves. (186)

For Susan Cheever, a "real family secret" is a shared one: willful nescience in which the family is complicit. The collective effort and effects of secrecy upon the family supersedes any individual secret. By speaking out, she aims to extricate herself from her father's legacy of secrets, while still capitalizing on the famous name she inherited. Now that she is a mother of two, the stakes of intergenerational secrecy have changed. For example, she writes that despite her first child's chronic sickness, "I had also never heard that there was any connection between maternal drinking and a child's health" (*Note* 151). Although readers likely pick up *Treetops* and *Note from a Bottle* with some familiarity with John Cheever's secret sexuality, Susan Cheever changes the salient subject of the family secret with each volume. She recasts her father in her new mold, integrating him into her own story of alcoholism and recovery. If the serial memoirist writes in order to pay further attention to the "body" of a previous subject, as Gilmore contends (97), then that body is no more a static entity than the author herself, who matures and adapts to changing cultural codes of disclosure. If John Cheever was primarily a closeted homosexual in *Home Before Dark*, he is mainly a closet alcoholic, like Susan Cheever herself, in *Note Found in a Bottle*.

In *Desire: Where Sex Meets Addiction* (2008), Susan Cheever changes the subject of secrecy again, as she reinvents herself from a family memoirist to a cultural memoirist. Since *Note Found in a Bottle*, she has logged more works of life writing: *As Good As I Could Be: A Memoir of Parenting in Difficult Times* (2001, though predating the "difficult times" of 9/11);

My Name Is Bill, a biography of the founder of Alcoholics Anonymous (2004); and *American Bloomsbury* (2007), a collective biography of the Transcendentalists. Even the memoir in this grouping, *As Good As I Could Be*, has an eye to social commentary; her collective framework – the “we” and “us” of her authorial voice – has shifted from a Cheever daughter to multiple affiliations, from recovering alcoholic to working journalist to divorced mother. According to sociologist Maurice Halbwachs, “We change memories along with our points of view, our principles, and our judgments, when we pass from one group to another” (80). What Halbwachs terms “the framework of family memory” is mutable; a serial memoirist like Cheever takes her family memories with her as she shifts cultural frames. She writes in *Desire*, reiterating the pathbreaking work of *Home Before Dark* as a memoir of family secrets: “Today there are hundreds of memoirs about parents written by their children describing everything imaginable. The book you are reading at this moment, a straight look at some crooked feelings, would probably not have found a publisher twenty years ago. We have turned over the rock, and in the shadows underneath it we have often found addiction” (14). In *Desire*, Susan Cheever writes that she is a sex addict, as was her father. In reshaping her relational history, she is aware of changing the script of the family secret. She writes:

I can write that as the child of a respected and adventurous writer I was taken to Rome, where I played in the Roman Forum, and that I took tennis lessons on Nantucket and summered in New Hampshire, or I can say that my parents were miserable partly because my father was a closeted gay alcoholic and that he sometimes took it out on me. Even two or three details added together tell a story. The way we choose details and then the way we combine them has absolute control over the way we see our history and the way we see ourselves. (144)¹⁸

In *Desire*, Susan Cheever makes a leap from the inscribed circle of the family to a community of secret sharers. The “we” of *Home Before Dark* and *Treetops* was the Cheever family; the “we” of *Desire* is anybody who harbors a similar secret. Cheever writes: “This craving for connection with other people, people like us, people who speak our language and can understand our experiences, is the most fundamental human desire” (138). If “*An addict is a community of one,*” then people who harbor the same secret comprise micro-communities (139, italics in original). Cheever extends that metaphor of community to anyone who is interested enough in her secrets to read her work: “Audience is a kind of community” (141). For her, “sharing” a secret means communicating it on any scale, from individual listener to constellations of readers. Is Susan Cheever addicted not just to sexual desire, but also to the desire for community making through disclosure? Serial secrecy has brought her to a point of not just mutable identity – she is a daughter, a writer, an addict, a subject of continued self-examination – but a position of mutable relation, of choosing to create affiliative communities from the filial springboard of a famous name.¹⁹

Alicia Ostriker terms that expansion of the personal to include an audience the “transpersonal” (6).²⁰ She writes: “[Anne] Sexton saw readers and audiences as potential intimates, and consequently potential sources of pain, much as she sees the other beings who populate her poems” (9). Perhaps the most proximate reader of Anne Sexton’s poetry was her elder daughter, Linda Gray Sexton, who follows a remarkably similar trajectory to Susan Cheever as a family memoirist. But Sexton’s is a winding road of serial secrecy, with longer pauses between memoirs and longer sojourns of organizing her mother’s material as her executor. And unlike Susan Cheever, the more Linda Gray Sexton writes and the greater her transpersonal intentions, the deeper she seems to ensconce herself in the dyad of parent and

child. Both Sexton and Cheever harbored family secrets unconsciously for years and published those secrets after their periods of nescience ended. Both serialize secrecy, redefining the subject of the parent's secret to suit a current personal and cultural context. Just as Cheever recasts her father's salient secret from homosexuality to alcoholism to sex addiction, Sexton revises her family secret from sexual abuse to the intergenerational legacy of suicide. Sexton reveals these secrets in order to share with readers a type of testimony: breaking the chain of silence and sparing her children the traumas she suffered.

Susan Cheever and Linda Gray Sexton both inherited a last name and a determination to write. But Linda also inherited a middle name: "Gray," the family name associated with writing; Anne Sexton's great-grandfather and mother, a newspaper publisher and an amateur poet, respectively, had passed it down as a middle name.²¹ While John Cheever rarely spoke of his daughter's novels, Anne Sexton by turns encouraged and discouraged Linda to write and to identify with her as a fellow writer. Susan Cheever chose a title for her biographical memoir, *Home Before Dark*, that emerged from her and her father's "friendly competition about who could find or invent the best titles. When one of us came up with a good one, we would argue about who would get to use it. I don't know where he found the last one he came up with, in the summer of 1980, but it had a special resonance for both of us. It was *Home Before Dark*" (10). Although "writing is not a competitive sport," as John Cheever liked to say, he was undoubtedly a competitive writer (Bailey 228). And the other Cheevers seem to have mixed feelings about Susan's continued connection to her father through memoirs of serial secrecy. Ben Cheever says of his sister's string of marriages: "I always feel like she's marrying Daddy" (Bailey 673). In contrast to the Cheevers' title competition, Linda Gray Sexton fully allies herself with her mother in her memoir's title, *Searching for Mercy Street* (1991), which draws from Anne

Sexton's poem "45 Mercy Street" and off-Broadway play *Mercy Street*.²² A draft of "45 Mercy Street" from June 12, 1974 reveals Linda's hand in her mother's work; Anne's nearly illegible scrawl gives way to Linda's neat, looping script as the daughter rewrites the last lines: "I pull the dream off me / and slam into the cement wall / of the clumsy calendar / I live in, / my life, / and its notebooks" (Furst 16).²³ For Linda, taking charge of her mother's "life, and its notebooks" is a fraught process, one that pulls her life within collision distance of her mother's death.

Vertical audience

Linda Gray Sexton's search for an authorial voice, one worthy of her mother's praise, mirrors Anne Sexton's own quest for parental approval and literary influence. In her career, Anne Sexton aspired to recognition within two dimensions. The first is a "horizontal" audience of her contemporaries; she said, "I am popular with the masses: I have the common touch, I write about the middle class!" (Middlebrook 160-61) The second dimension is what her best friend and creative collaborator Maxine Kumin once termed a "vertical audience" (Middlebrook 139).²⁴ In early 1961, two events altered Anne Sexton's personal and professional life. In January, her therapist, Martin Orne, started recording their sessions. Devoted to transcribing those tapes by hand, Sexton completed few poems that year, but garnered plenty of acclaim; after the publication of *To Bedlam and Partway Back* in 1960, she attained a new level of critical recognition. Middlebrook narrates in her biography:

Louis Untermeyer requested permission to print some of [Anne Sexton's] work in a new edition of his poetry anthology, which Lowell had assigned as a textbook. Only a few living poets (including Lowell) were represented in the anthology. Maxine Kumin was elated by the news. "This is the audience we write for: the *vertical* audience," she told Sexton. "Think of the company – Hardy and Yeats!"

Every college has this anthology in its library!” Sexton confided another angle on this honor to Untermeyer: “I have felt sad since your letter came... a gripping longing, usually well repressed, to share all this with my parents.” (139, italics in original)

Anne Sexton narrated Kumin’s reaction in a therapy session recorded on February 9, 1961, and her letter to Untermeyer was dated the previous day. Two aspirations of the vertical dimension occupied Sexton’s mind. What Kumin called the “vertical audience” connotes canonicity. An acclaimed poet joins the “company” of her progenitors – “Hardy and Yeats!” – and also influences future generations of scholars at “every college” (139). But as the letter to Untermeyer demonstrates, Sexton’s ambition to the canon also sparked a longing for the approval of her deceased mother and father. Similarly, when Sexton won a fellowship at the Radcliffe Institute later that year, she told Dr. Orne: “If my parents were alive they’d be the ones to tell” (145).²⁵ Canon making and parent pleasing are the entwined aspirations of Sexton’s “vertical audience.” We might say that in her personal life, Anne Sexton suffered from a blurring of the horizontal and the vertical, intermixing fame, family matters, and sexuality. For Sexton treated her daughter Linda like a peer, a confidante, and even a lover, and she sought parent-like caretaking from her husband, friends, and even readers she befriended via their fan letters.²⁶ In her memoirs of serial secrecy, Linda Gray Sexton attempts to disentangle her own version of her mother’s blurred boundaries between family, peers, immediate fame, and lasting legacy. As a teenager Linda learned an important lesson from her therapist: “Dr. Shambaugh encouraged me to think for myself, to stop telling Mother my secrets, to spend more of my time after school with my peers” (*Searching* 133). The daughter tried to branch out to a horizontal audience, but there was a cost: “[I] grew obsessed with the idea that she might kill herself in retaliation for all that I withheld”

(136). Linda Gray Sexton wrote for and with Anne Sexton while her mother was alive; after her mother's death, she shares her family secrets in order to migrate from the verticality of canonicity and parental approval to the horizontal audience: a contemporary community of readers.

Linda Gray Sexton writes in a 1991 foreword to *Anne Sexton: A Self-Portrait in Letters*: “in revealing the heart's flow of her life through these letters, I had also begun to shape the course of my own life and writing career” (ix). Ben Cheever, too, describes the process of editing his father's letters as “the beginning of identity,” and he subsequently became a novelist, even straying from thinly-veiled plots about overbearing fathers after his first two novels (Bailey 667). To edit her mother's letters, Linda Gray Sexton spent hours working in the Boston College library, sifting through boxes of her mother's carbon-copied correspondence. The end result was, she recalls, a “veritable biography” (*Half* 32). She writes that Middlebrook used *Self-Portrait* as a “visual footprint” for her biography of Sexton (xiii). In contrast to Ben Cheever's light-handed annotations to John Cheever's letters, Linda Gray Sexton's editorial comments are often awkward; she narrates family events in the third person, as if she were a biographer rather than a daughter. Embarrassing revelations abound, particularly about her mother's opinions of other writers. Anne Sexton writes in one letter after making a new acquaintance in Paris: “For years James Baldwin came to Peter's twice a week for dinner in Paris because Baldwin was starving... now he makes about one million a year (and is not really a very good writer tho he is indeed in the headlines, even here, daily)... Poor Jimmy (they call him)... and yet, such luck, to be negro at that right time” (176, ellipses in original). And what Middlebrook terms Sexton's “long, leaky letters” to W. D. Snodgrass, an early mentor, are reproduced in full, replete with anxious analyses of her professional relationship to “Cal,” her teacher Robert Lowell (83).

After co-editing *Anne Sexton: A Self-Portrait in Letters* (1977) with Lois Ames, the poet's appointed biographer, Linda Gray Sexton defied her mother's living wish by authorizing Middlebrook to write *Anne Sexton: A Biography* (1991). She also granted Middlebrook unrestricted access to Anne Sexton's therapy tapes. Those tapes changed the course of Middlebrook's project; she recalls that after listening to them in 1985, "I abandoned the book I had been writing and started over" (xxii). While Middlebrook was writing, Linda Gray Sexton made some tapes of her own that would leave the biographer "shocked... but not surprised" when the daughter "exposed [herself] to Diane Middlebrook's tape recorder in private" (*Searching* 275, 264). Middlebrook's reaction of shock without surprise exemplifies the workings of nescience and its dispelling: the surfacing of something she didn't know she knew. Linda Gray Sexton recovered what she calls "cauterized" memories of sexual abuse in the 1980s, and she discloses them twice, first in interviews for Middlebrook's biography and then in her memoir *Searching for Mercy Street* (1994), which has the burden of telling a secret already told (106).²⁷ Certainly the majority of readers of *Searching for Mercy Street* already knew the family secret from the controversy surrounding Middlebrook's biography; there was no way for Sexton to recreate that shock of dispelled nescience in her own book. In order to conjure the feeling of finding out for her readers, Sexton begins her memoir with a red herring.

"Mother, have I borrowed too much from your book?"

In the opening scene of *Searching for Mercy Street*, Linda Gray Sexton, age 21, searches for a suicide note a few months after her mother's death in 1974. She recreates for the reader the suspense of finding something. "Had I found it? Had I at last discovered the missing suicide note my mother must have written just before shutting herself into her car and starting the engine?"

(3) The letter she finds is from a 40-year-old Anne Sexton and addressed to a future 40-year-old

Linda. Anne Sexton wants to say from beyond the grave: “I know. I was there once. I, *too*, was 40 and with a dead mother whom I needed *still*” (4, italics in original). Linda Gray Sexton explains: “This was no suicide note but rather a letter I had indeed seen before, back in 1969, even though I read it now as if for the first time... How odd, then, that this yellow sheet of paper had not set off any tremor of recognition... What revelations had it contained that frightened me into blocking its existence from my mind for nearly five years?” (5) By narrating the letter’s discovery in real time, Sexton aims to invoke the same feeling of suspense in the reader. This dramatic bait-and-switch – a letter written, delivered, read, and forgotten five years before Anne Sexton’s suicide – supplants a reader’s non-surprise at the memoir’s open secret of sexual abuse. And the forgotten letter establishes the memoir’s central theme of “cauterized” memory, the repressed knowledge that drove the daughter to write (106). Like the Cheever children, who admit to ignoring evidence of their father’s sexuality during his lifetime, Linda Gray Sexton suppressed painful memories. A third of the way through the book, she mentions (in an odd mixed-temperature metaphor) “one other memory that I cauterized deep inside a dark well, unremembered until many years later” (106). These preliminary allusions are to a secret that Sexton kept from herself – and will keep from the reader until the end of the memoir.

In her last chapter, Linda Gray Sexton reveals the open secret. As with the narration of the purported suicide note that opened the memoir, she relates this dissolution of nescience in real time, though without a date other than “one Wednesday” (265). In approximately the late 1980s, Sexton recovered a memory of her mother in a session of psychoanalysis:

“Seventh grade... Her tongue – it’s in my mouth. Wet and slimy... I want to scream – get off, get off, get off! I hate you! I’m going to throw up. Let me up! She’s following me to the toilet. I’m throwing up the poison but it burns. I’m

crying and she holds my head. Now she's being my mother again." I gagged, swallowing down a pool of saliva and tears. My chest ached as if I had vomited up an enormous stone – the stone was the words I never said all those years before. My mind had held time a prisoner; once memory was released from behind the bars I had so carefully kept in place all those years, I had been assaulted by the past. (265)

Earlier in the memoir, Sexton recalls seeing – and feeling – her mother masturbate next to her. But this cauterized memory crosses the line from inappropriateness to incest, perhaps because it had been powerful enough to warrant repression. Though he also identified this memory as incestuous, her psychoanalyst discouraged Sexton from telling her husband: ““Will he think I'm disgusting?” I asked my analyst in anguish. ‘Why would you want to let him know that you fooled around with your mother?’ he replied,” as if this violation could possibly have been a reciprocal or consensual act (268). Like Linda Gray Sexton, Margaret Salinger also details her experience of repressed secrets in *Dream Catcher* (2000). She recounts two traumatic incidents: her mother's miscarriage (a repressed memory she recovered while giving birth to her own child), and her mother's secret plans for an infanticide/suicide to escape her father, J. D. Salinger. “This is not something I grew up knowing about,” she writes. “The doctors who evaluated me noted that the bizarre symptoms I exhibited were common to the community of what they called ‘torture babies,’ infants who had experienced repeated and sustained trauma over time” (115).

In the late 1980s, the “memory war” was in full swing among purported abuse victims, the caregivers they accused, and the therapists who helped (or coached) patients to recover (or imagine) traumatic memories. And by the time Kathryn Harrison's controversial memoir of

consensual incest, *The Kiss*, came out in 1997, three years after Linda Gray Sexton's first memoir, the epicenter of memoir scandal had shifted from memory wars to "tell-all" squeamishness. In her memoir of recovered memory, *My Lie* (2010), journalist and false-memory syndrome sufferer Meredith Maran writes about the year 1986: "If I'd had a thousand dollars for every student who was writing an unpublishable incest memoir, I would have been in Donald Trump's tax bracket" (91). By 1993, a year before Linda Gray Sexton published *Searching for Mercy Street*, the tide of the memory war had begun to turn; Maran cites an article from *Mother Jones*, a leftist publication: "The simple solution is very attractive," says Dr. Richard Gardner, a clinical professor of child psychiatry at Columbia University. "You're thirty-five or forty and your life is all screwed up, and someone offers this very simple solution: "Ah, I never realized that I was sexually abused. That explains it all!" – it's a simple answer for the therapist as well as the patient" (138). Anne Carson expresses a similar sentiment in *Nox* (2010), a tribute to the brother she hardly knew in adulthood: "Always comforting to assume there is a secret behind what torments you" (n.pag). This is not to imply that Sexton's memories were implanted or false. But the structure of her memoir – built around a repressed memory recovered in middle age – closely mirrors a cultural trope of that era. As Sexton recalls from adolescence: "I would talk in code to the doctor about all this. She wasn't interested in delving into what was going on. Nobody believes there *is* such a thing as mother-daughter incest; it's not in Freud, it's not in the theories" (Middlebrook 325). Sexton and Middlebrook both conclude that incest is an intergenerational inheritance – either real or imagined in Anne Sexton's past, though one of her central creative concerns – that Anne Sexton passed on to her daughter. And Linda Gray Sexton confesses her fears of continuing the chain of abuse. She writes: "To this day, I sometimes feel the irresistible pull of my sons' unconsciously provocative behavior. A rain of tiny kisses from

my child's soft sweet-scented mouth can tempt me, tender unlike any other caress.... I love my children – and so I fight hard to guard against my own unconscious desire to re-create the past” (*Searching* 269). If incest is the built-up secret of *Searching for Mercy Street*, Sexton's remaining few pages provide an inverse structure for its transmission; that is, the secret is transmitted so the incest will not be. Most readers already knew about the Sexton family incest from Middlebrook's biography, but Linda Gray Sexton writes the secret in her own voice in order to hold herself accountable – not just to her family, but to her readers – to halt this intergenerational trauma. Memoir critic Janet Mason Ellbery writes of her own experience: “Every once in a while, I will have to stop and shout, metaphorically at least, to whomever will hear me – ‘Look! Watch me! I'm keeping my promises; I'm living my truth!’” (121) In a new kind of autobiographical pact, readers serve as a collective witness to a writer's performative vow.²⁸ Through memoir instead of poetry, Linda Gray Sexton's aspiration to a “vertical audience” yields to a horizontal community of here-and-now accountability.

Legacy of secrecy

Readers who opened *Looking for Mercy Street* looking for new information about Anne Sexton's life and death were likely disappointed. In fact, Linda Gray Sexton claims that she didn't know about the history of suicide in her family until she read Middlebrook's biography (*Half* 27). The crux of Linda Gray Sexton's first memoir is her struggle to represent her mother's life and work as Anne Sexton presented her own persona: “disrob[ing] verbally in public” (*Half* 32). And the Sexton family was often left holding the discarded clothes. But after *Searching for Mercy Street*, Linda Gray Sexton faced longer and deeper silences than she anticipated. She admits that Middlebrook's bestselling biography unnerved her: “I was envious of Diane's success – and Mother's as well” (283). And she faced a lot of anguish (and few critical

accolades) in the wake of Middlebrook's book. "What did I have to gain by releasing the [therapy] tapes? A loss of my own privacy, the anger of the family and many of Mother's fans. Releasing the tapes neither improved my life nor eased the anger I felt" (281). In the wake of Middlebrook's bestseller, Linda Gray Sexton certainly didn't benefit professionally; her agent and editor rejected her next two novels. Now 40 – the grown woman Anne Sexton addressed in the letter from 1969 – Linda Gray Sexton was depressed, suicidal, and unable to publish. There might not have been much else to reveal in the wake of Middlebrook's biography, but she would try, hoping to find reader interest in "the perspective of the daughter I would always be as well as from the perspective of the woman and mother I had become" (300).

Linda Gray Sexton writes in the introduction to *Half in Love* (2011), her second memoir: "*Searching for Mercy Street* was only a prelude. That book focused on coming to terms with my mother's life, while I had yet to learn how to come to terms with my mother's death" (xii). Setting aside earlier revelations of sexual abuse, here Sexton addresses another inheritance: a will to suicide that she shares with her mother. However, another unidentified legacy persists in *Half in Love*: secrecy as an enduring conduit for familial intimacy. Sexton details the pacts her family made to keep her mother's mental illness from reaching the public – promises that Anne Sexton's poetic and epistolary personas broke again and again. The inscribed circle of family confidence was not enough for Anne Sexton, or for Linda Gray Sexton. Both sought a wider audience for their confessions, fully knowing the cost to the family. Linda recalls from her childhood: "Family matters: dark and secret... *If you tell they will not love you anymore*" (*Searching* 21, italics in original). In *Half in Love*, when Sexton tries to talk to her sister, Joy, about their mother, Joy protests, "My memories are all I have left and I won't let you steal them!" (29) Selective silence is still a condition of communication in the Sexton family. But in

order to come to terms with suicide, Sexton feels she must communicate its power over her, since she is prone to keeping secrets from herself. She recounts participating in an alumni panel at Harvard: “Suddenly I blurted out something I hadn’t even anticipated: I missed my writing, I said, and real estate was curiously unfulfilling. Maybe I’ll quit, I added. For a moment I couldn’t believe that I had confessed something so personal to people I had never before met, and said something I didn’t even know I felt” (266). Confessing interpersonally dispels her intrapersonal secrecy.

Sexton tries to open up the conclusion of *Half in Love* to an array of family voices, just as Susan Cheever does in the latter half of *Treetops*. The effect in *Treetops* is dialogic and inclusive; in *Half in Love*, Sexton drives her family interviews toward a single topic, the legacy of suicide, and gives herself the last word. She generalizes after her interview with Joy: “So few are able to stop themselves from blaming their affected member – be it mother or child or sister” (302). Sexton writes about her mother: “But when I entered the hospital for the second time, I began to understand all the facts of her desperate situation: I stopped blaming her. My father and Joy, on the other hand, couldn’t bring themselves to understand her illness or death, because that might mean they would have to forgive us, and they were not yet ready for that” (209). In contrast to the transpersonal effect of Susan Cheever’s *Desire* and much of Anne Sexton’s poetry, Linda Gray Sexton’s *Half in Love* devolves into a writing “us” (Anne and Linda) versus a blaming “them” (Joy and their father). Linda Gray Sexton hammers this point home in her acknowledgments by thanking “Joy, who tries hard to forgive” (317).

If understanding and forgiveness are the antidotes to blame, how can anyone truly understand what it’s like to commit suicide, and live to tell the tale? Linda Gray Sexton cannot tell us the difference between a suicide attempt and death itself. Perhaps death is the ultimate

nescience, the unknown known that we all share. Janet Malcolm writes on suicide in *The Silent Woman*: “this is the paradox of suicide – to *take* one’s life is to behave in a more active, assertive, ‘erotic’ way than to helplessly watch as one’s life is *taken away* from one by inevitable mortality. Suicide thus engages with both the death-hating and the death-loving parts of us: on some level, perhaps we may envy the suicide even as we pity him” (58, italics in original). Anne Sexton writes in “Wanting To Die”: “But suicides have a special language. / Like carpenters they want to know *which tools*. / They never ask *why build*” (*Complete* 58). Linda Gray Sexton’s goal is to speak that “special language” and to translate it for others, so they can understand how it feels to be suicidal. Her attempt at translation corresponds to Nicolas Abraham’s psychoanalytic prescription of “staged words” to combat inherited secrets: “We must not lose sight of the fact that to stage a word – whether metaphorically, as an alloseme, or as a cryptonym – constitutes an attempt at exorcism, an attempt, that is, to relieve the unconscious by placing the effects of the phantom in the social realm” (176). In one of these public attempts at performative “staging,” Sexton writes letters about her suicide attempt to the police officers who rescued her. “The police chief wrote back,” she narrates,

saying he had always considered suicide to be a selfish act, and that it had never occurred to him that a suicide could be driven by intense pain. I had helped him, he said, to see that terrible aspect of the act. He would never again look upon it as he had before. To have helped even one person understand suicide better made me feel infinitely more useful, and perhaps it was then, without even recognizing it, that the first true seeds for this book fell on the thick loamy soil of my imagination. (*Half* 212)

This act of communication aligns Linda Gray Sexton with her mother's principles. Middlebrook writes of Anne Sexton: "If suffering like hers had any use, it was not to the sufferer. The only way that an individual's pain gained meaning was through its communication to others" (xxiii).

But even in her attempt in *Half in Love* to convey what suicide feels like, Sexton doesn't fully give that feeling away; she keeps some things to herself. Although her stated goal is to "help thousands of mentally ill and their families, who often have no voice of their own," her odd chronology can obfuscate that empathy (247). Several chapters after she details the first time she slashed her wrists, Sexton discloses an incident that occurred "just before [her] suicide attempt" (177). In this scene, her two Dalmatian dogs fight viciously in the living room: one dog dies from its injuries, and she is forced to euthanize the other. The violence of this incident devastates her; why must she tell it so late in her memoir, separate from her suicide attempt? The scene is reminiscent of Anne Sexton's 1966 poem "Live" and the fictions within. "So I say *Live* / and turn my shadow three times round / to feed our puppies as they come, / the eight Dalmatians we didn't drown, / despite the warnings: The abort! The destroy! / Despite the pails of water that waited / to drown them, to pull them down like stones" (*Complete* 169). "Live" is Linda's favorite Anne Sexton poem (though the poet denied its enduring worth [Middlebrook 382]). But Linda Gray Sexton reveals that the family never intended to kill the Dalmatian puppies, never set out those pails of water – a fact that she corrected in drafts of Middlebrook's biography (*Searching* 128-29).

A memoirist, too, takes poetic license. A secret requires an artful shape to elicit the empathy that a memoirist seeks from a reader. In their mechanics of disclosure, both Susan Cheever and Linda Gray Sexton funnel each serial memoir toward a singular family secret,

backloading each volume with the suspense and weight of revelation. This choice of form keeps readers on the page, waiting for the intimate payoff that a memoirist of family secrets promises. Secrecy becomes a strategy of intimacy in the narrative, just as it was a means of complicity within the family. Nelson argues that confessional poets like Anne Sexton actually preserve poetic structure, even as their lines seem to violate formal tradition: “They are, therefore, caught in the act of breaking out of the form, which makes their transgression of boundaries visible and audible.... What we consider private content may appear to be wholly emptied into the public sphere, but formal innovations in confession refresh the perception of crossing that boundary” (40). Like confessional poets, memoirists of serial secrecy transgress boundaries of family intimacy in order to preserve it, and to call attention to the bonds they extend to the reader in turn. By changing the content of their family secrets, they keep secrecy as a conduit of closeness between a daughter and her lost parent, between a memoirist and her reader.

Chapter Two

Hiding in Plain Sight: Bliss Broyard and Henry Louis Gates, Jr.

While secrecy is a form of communication that calibrates interpersonal relationships, the boundaries of the family are ever shifting, particularly in a contemporary era of genealogical and genetic discovery. The critic David Hollinger asks in *Postethnic America*: “How wide is the circle of the ‘we’? This may be *the* great question in an age of ethnos-centered discourse” (68, italics in original). Especially as notions of family are buffeted by political and genomic metaphors, the workings of secrecy and revelation can put boundaries of kinship and affiliation to the test. The Broyard family story illustrates the effects of secrecy not just on personal identity, but also on the calibration of relationality. For our self-conception relies, in part, on our loved ones’ identities. Bliss Broyard, author of the memoir *One Drop: My Father’s Hidden Life – A Story of Race and Family Secrets* (2007), grew up squarely in Cheever country, the affluent suburbs of Connecticut. Her mother, Sandy Broyard, was a blonde Swedish-American beauty. Her father, Anatole Broyard, was the daily book critic for the *New York Times*, an editor of the *Book Review*, and the notoriously blocked author of what John Updike called “the most famous non-book around”: a hotly-anticipated autobiographical novel commissioned in 1950 and never completed (“White” 74). Bliss Broyard was determined to become a writer, and she sought material within her life experience. “You’ve got to give me something to write about,” she urged her father (*One Drop* 12). Seeking an identity as not just a writer’s daughter but a writing daughter, Bliss Broyard found her subject within a family secret in 1990, when she was 24 and her father was dying of cancer. Anatole never told his children his (and therefore their) identity secret. Sandy Broyard told the children while their father was on his deathbed: Anatole Broyard

was a quarter African American, born to Creole parents in New Orleans and raised in the predominantly black neighborhood of Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn.

Bliss Broyard was not the first to reveal her father's secret in print; Henry Louis Gates, Jr., director of Harvard University's W. E. B. Du Bois Institute for African and African American Research, published an exposé of Anatole Broyard's racial passing in a 1996 *New Yorker* article entitled "White Like Me." Since the 1990s, Gates has tirelessly advocated, through scholarly and popular media, a reconsideration of family matters and their national implications. Gates reports that the African American community has repeatedly accused him of "lifting the family veil and telling family secrets – not only literally family secrets but, metaphorically, family secrets and racial secrets and ethnic secrets" ("Lifting" 109). When the family is invoked on the scale of race, ethnicity, or nation, the boundaries of family become as porous as the borders of the color line. And the delineation of family, community, and nation is strategically fluid in Gates's work, particularly in his life writing. Gates argues: "the experiences of the individuals in our families allow us to reconfigure our nation's collective past, in a relationship of part for whole" (*In Search* 12). But delimiting that "part" and "whole" can be problematic; the boundary between the particular and the general, family history and national history, is neither fixed nor objective.

The double-telling of the Broyard family secret in print, first in Gates's *New Yorker* profile, then in Bliss Broyard's memoir, reveals divergent approaches to family secrets and their corresponding silences in the American discourse on race. Within the Broyard family and the communities of literary New York, Great Migration-era Brooklyn, WASP Connecticut, and Louisiana Creole culture that surrounded them, the boundary of relation was sharply defined by secrecy. Although Anatole Broyard's mixed-race heritage was an open secret in many social and

literary realms, for over two decades that knowledge didn't reach the innermost circle of the family: Anatole's two children, Todd and Bliss. The youngest Broyards grew up an environment of nescience, where, as Bliss Broyard describes it, suburbanites "came to wrap themselves in the safety and comfort of bourgeois trappings" (429). The Broyard secret, therefore, is a particular kind of family secret: one hidden *from* the younger generation of the family for as long as Anatole Broyard lived to keep it.

Bliss Broyard writes in *One Drop* that when she learned the family secret, "The idea thrilled me, as though I'd been reading a fascinating history book and then discovered my own name in the index. I felt like I mattered in a way that I hadn't before" (17).¹ But who writes that history book? Who can chart that intersection between family story and public history? As theories of relationality have shown, our lives and identities are inextricable from those of others, and we try to present our identities as consonant with the communities with which we want to affiliate. Alondra Nelson coins the useful term "affiliative self-fashioning" to describe "the creation of identity from both facts and desire for connection to a community" (25). I would like to suggest that, at least in the case of autobiography, narrated identity also relies on affiliative *other*-fashioning. That is, a memoirist bases her sense of self on the identities she believes she shares with her loved ones, inside and outside the family. The identity of another, particularly a parent, has real stakes in self-identity.

Bliss Broyard, Anatole Broyard, and the public informer of their family secret, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., all redraw the line between family history and public history in their works of life writing. In his roles as televised historian, memoirist, literary critic, and biographical journalist, Gates takes charge of the *scale* of others' family stories, fitting them into common history according to the facts he finds within the archival "paper trail" and DNA's percentages of

blood. As the actor Don Cheadle tells Gates on an episode of *African American Lives 2*, Gates's 2008 genealogy-themed PBS television series, "You are what you have to defend."² Secrets comprise our choices to share and to separate, and what we guard is not just the hidden truth of a secret, but its boundaries: where a private story touches a wider community. Can we analogize the silences within one family to the gaps in a national discourse on identity? Who has the right to tell a family secret, when so many families are protecting similar secrets?

Secrecy hinges on interpersonal boundaries: who tells a secret, and the scale it assumes once revealed. When Sandy Broyard called a family meeting in 1990 and urged her dying husband to divulge his secret, Anatole Broyard protested: "I want to order my vulnerabilities so they don't get magnified during the discussion" (*One Drop* 12). "Order my vulnerabilities" – what else is the autobiographical act, but the ordering of personal vulnerabilities, handpicking the chronology and scale of personal weaknesses? Since a secret's *form* determines its relational impact more than its content, the way a secret is revealed is paramount to the secret keeper, who attempts to control the scale of its importance. But if we take too long to order our vulnerabilities, it falls to someone else to arrange them – to tell our secrets, out of order.

After Gates revealed Anatole Broyard's racial passing in the *New Yorker*, Bliss Broyard lost her sense of the scale of her father's secret; she couldn't measure its size and boundaries in relation to the public sphere. She writes: "The problem was, I had lost my sense of humor, at least on this score. I could no longer locate myself in the world I was raised in. I didn't have a perspective on the landscape anymore; I couldn't gauge how big anything was, or how small" (*One Drop* 113). A major goal in managing family secrets is to "demagnify the secret and enable other parts of their lives to come forward once again," according to family therapist Evan Imber-Black (199). The risk of telling family secrets is the allowing the scale of a story get away from

you. Nancy K. Miller writes of Susan Cheever's early memoirs: "These two books memorialize lives lived in family as though family were all that mattered, as though it were the larger world and not just a perspective on it" (*Bequest* 166). Bliss Broyard and other roots-seeking memoirists struggle with that sense of perspective, estimating where the boundaries of the family end and the larger world begin. Family, after all, is our first experience of community, and an outsized family legend can skew a daughter's perspective of the scale of a family narrative.

In order to trace the iterations of the Broyard family secret, I will briefly summarize its historical context: the theme of passing in contemporary American literature, the rise of popular genealogy studies since the 1970s, the ascendancy of contemporary "roots" memoirs that grapple with race and identity, and the use of family-centric rhetoric to frame racial communities. In contemporary America, a politics of visibility – external, sensory evidence of both kinship and racial identity – lies at the crossroads of scholarly and popular discourse. I will then move to the heart of the story: Bliss Broyard's recollection of learning her father's secret history of passing, and the struggle between Bliss Broyard and Gates for the right to initially reveal the secret in print. Further, Gates's life writing, including the 1996 *New Yorker* exposé and his 1994 memoir, *Colored People*, demonstrate how he strategically blurs the line between family, community, and nation. In the act of exposing Anatole Broyard's racial self-conception, Gates reveals a great deal about his own politics of secrecy, disclosure, and kinship. Finally, a sequence of PBS television series on genealogy put Gates in the biographer's seat yet again, endorsing a popular definition of kinship that will reach all the way to the White House lawn in 2009.

The politics of kinship

The significance of a family secret depends on its context: a secret that seemed taboo in one era can be an everyday subject in another. In the past half-century, interracial identity has

shifted radically in the American imagination, from a common source of secrecy to a potential source of proud affiliation. As Werner Sollors observes in *Neither Black Nor White Yet Both*, racial passing was a dominant theme in popular fiction and nonfiction from the 1850s through the 1940s. Nancy Frazier writes in a review of Sollors's book (which, she notes, was nearly concurrent with Gates's profile of Anatole Broyard in the *New Yorker*): "The period of which [Sollors] speaks ... reached a peak, in literature, between the 1920s and 1940s – not coincidentally the formative years for Broyard, who was born in 1920 and died in 1990" (156). In many literary narratives of passing, transgression is a central theme; those who choose to pass end up crossing familial, communal, romantic, and sexual boundaries. Nella Larsen's novella *Passing* (1929) is perhaps the best modern work on this theme. Larsen's passing character, Clare Kendry, justifies her decision to leave the black community: "For, of course, I was determined to get away, to be a person and not a charity or a problem, or even a daughter of the indiscreet Ham" (17).³ In the Bible, racial difference originates with a family betrayal: Ham's glimpse of his father's nakedness, when Noah was drunk and "uncovered." In the passage from Genesis, often invoked as a justification for slavery in previous centuries, Noah punishes Ham's betrayal by dooming Ham's son: "Cursed be Canaan; a servant of servants shall he be unto his brethren" (9:20-25). In other words, a familial indiscretion interrupts a fundamental Biblical whiteness and dooms the descendants of the transgressor to difference, darkness, and deference. And with the theme of transgression comes language of protection, hand-in-hand. Harlem-based Irene Redfield protects her friend Clare's passing, to a point. Irene muses: "It's funny about 'passing.' We disapprove of it and at the same time condone it. It excites our contempt and yet we rather admire it. We shy away from it with an odd kind of revulsion, but we protect it" (42).⁴

Daniel J. Sharfstein's book *The Invisible Line* (2011) demonstrates that passing is much more complicated than the iconic choice to betray one's family and community. Sharfstein writes: "Historians have told us that 'passing for white' entailed a radical change of identity, forcing people to abandon their families, alter their names, move far from home, and live in constant fear that their secret would be betrayed" (4). But the so-called "color line" was always more porous and less fraught with melodrama than popular narratives allowed. According to Sharfstein's case studies, communities redrew the color line all the time, acknowledging or not acknowledging the racial ancestry of their neighbors on an individual basis, due to innumerable factors of community standing. And "Creoles of color" like the Broyard family have an especially complex history; up to the 1850s they were considered an exception to the "one-drop rule" of black blood (Davis 58, 133), and inhabited a "middle-minority position" (181) until Jim Crow laws fractured the community.⁵ Tales of passing, or "passeblanc," are common in Creole culture. Bliss Broyard says that when she traveled to New Orleans to seek her father's roots, "I didn't need to explain. They would say, 'Oh, your daddy was passeblanc' – a very familiar story, a Creole thing" (Mehegan).

The civil rights era of the 1960s rendered the theme of passing passé in popular culture, as racial and ethnic pride movements became mainstream. But in 1997, Sollors predicted a return to the thematics of passing that had been out of literary vogue for nearly half a century. He writes in *Neither Black Nor White Yet Both*: "A generation later, as contemporary writers and artists may be returning to representations of racial passing, the time may be ripe for case studies of known individuals who passed as well as for a full-fledged cultural investigation of the period in which 'passing' was a significant feature" (284). Case studies of passing, according to Sharfstein, "provide an occasion to understand race in a different way and an opportunity to

acknowledge our enduring, if at times hidden, capacity to privilege the particular over the abstract, and everyday experience over what we have been told to believe” (324). In fact, the revelations of the Broyard family secret straddle Sollors’s 1997 prediction of passing “case studies” – Bliss Broyard learned about her father’s race on his deathbed in 1990; Gates published his article on Anatole Broyard’s passing in *The New Yorker* in 1996; and Bliss Broyard published her family memoir in 2007. Life writing, as the Broyard case demonstrates, is particularly suited to combating the conventional wisdom about passing’s transgressions. That is, the particularities of one family’s story in a memoir can counterbalance the broadness of the popular story of passing’s betrayal, anguish, and punishment.

In the contemporary era, outspoken concerns over secrets’ privacy and intimacy intersect with a renewed popularity of mixed-race narratives.⁶ In 2008, Barack Obama campaigned for the presidency in part on the particular mix of representativeness and uniqueness in his family history. Obama chose autobiography as the medium to convey the story of his background. And his campaign gained steam as his speeches alluded to the fullness of a life story that many supporters had already read in print, within his memoir *Dreams from My Father* (1995). When Obama spoke of his grandmother’s secret racism in the groundbreaking 2008 speech “A More Perfect Union,” many listeners felt they already knew and loved the woman he referenced. Addressing his controversial affiliation to a radical preacher, Reverend Jeremiah Wright, Obama declared: “I can no more disown him than I can disown my white grandmother ... a woman who once confessed her fear of black men who passed her by on the street, and who on more than one occasion has uttered racial or ethnic stereotypes that made me cringe.” Identity, personal history, and life writing were powerful forces in Obama’s first presidential campaign. Though Toni Morrison wrote in an open letter of support during Obama’s campaign, “Nor do I care very much

for your race[s]” (McGeveran, punctuation in original), others heatedly debated Obama’s racial self-definition. Randall Kennedy argues: “Many prophesied or prayed that his election heralded a postracial America. But everything about Obama, is widely, insistently, almost unavoidably interpreted through the prism of race” (3).

Even before Obama entered the political spotlight, autobiographies of mixed-race identity, including memoirs of family secrets, were already riding the 1990s “memoir boom.” Sollors’s 1997 prediction of a generational return to the thematics of passing was already coming true. In 1994, Shirlee Taylor Haizlip appeared on *The Oprah Winfrey Show* to discuss *The Sweeter the Juice*, a memoir that exposes relatives who, despite passing for white, came to less material success than the African American branch of her family. Gregory Howard Williams recalls in his memoir *Life on the Color Line* (1995) that he assumed he was white until the age of ten. And James McBride’s *The Color of Water* (1996) was a watershed in the memoir boom. In his tribute to a white Jewish mother who raised 12 mixed-race children, McBride writes: “My view of the world is not merely that of a black man but that of a black man with something of a Jewish soul” (103). Edward Ball’s *Slaves in the Family* (1999) won the National Book Award for charting where the lives of Ball’s ancestors, a prominent plantation family, intersected with the stories of their slaves.⁷ Although Ball’s father jokes that the five taboo subjects in the Ball family are “Religion, sex, death, money, and the Negroes” (7), Ball digs deep into these family secrets, as well as into his own psyche. He writes: “To contemplate slavery – which for most Americans is a mysterious, distant event – was a bit like doing psychoanalysis on myself” (13). That interiorized search for history – what Paul Gilroy terms “this post-modern discourse of ethnic inwardness” (196) – also informs Ball’s laudatory blurb for *One Drop*: “Bliss Broyard unwraps

her family's private enigma with beauty and understatement and palpable love, meanwhile undressing a national secret, that many Americans aren't what they think they 'are'" (n.pag.).⁸

How do personal mythology and communal history fit together in contemporary America? "Roots memoirs" are a popular subgenre of autobiography again, as a new, Internet-driven roots revival reaches critical mass. My father, after reading Daniel Mendelsohn's *The Lost* a few years ago, even tried to book a family trip to Lithuania, to seek out lost Pulda roots. (My aunts and uncle were less enthusiastic, so my father rereads *The Lost* every year from the comfort of his living room.) Matthew Frye Jacobson contends: "The story of the ethnic revival might begin with psychic interiors – the villages and ghettos of family legend that Americans privately looked back to with strange yearning – but finally it leads outward to the political culture at large... to wholly new ways of imagining the nation and articulating the individual citizen's place within it and relationship to it" (19). Jacobson identifies the 1970s as the first decade of a genealogy craze, citing *Fiddler on the Roof's* film release (1971), Alex Haley's *Roots* (1976-77), and Irving Howe's *World of Our Fathers* (1976), as well as feminist attention to the "world of our mothers" throughout that decade of consciousness-raising (312). In a cultural imagination invigorated by the blockbuster of *Roots*, family history becomes a crucial element of personal mythology, a source of cultural pride that runs through a family saga of struggle and perseverance. Never mind that family history comprises an endless series of authorial decisions, what David A. Hollinger terms the "Haley's Choice" of focusing on an African heritage instead of a coexisting Irish one (19).⁹ Jacobson defines the motivational core of the roots craze – from Ellis Island commemorations to *Roots*-inspired baby names to Ancestry.com subscriptions – as "the personal quest for a usable past" (275). That is, an individual seeks within her heritage a narrative that teleologically leads to her own

accomplishments, struggles, and visions of the future. Heritage is a present-tense form of relational construction, not an act of retrieval or memory (56). Citing the imprecision and wishful thinking that characterizes the popular science of DNA testing for diasporic connection, Alondra Nelson writes: “The diasporic relatedness resulting from ethnic lineage testing is genetic inference inspired by genealogical aspiration and enacted through social interaction” (33). That is, in its narration, family history becomes a voluntary mode of mythologizing, tailored to the individual’s present-tense needs. Memoir scholar Claire Lynch concurs that in genealogy as well as autobiography: “This is of an individual life to link the past with the future depends ... upon the selective fictionalization of fact in order for a satisfactory plotline to emerge” (116). Significantly, secrets have bonus value in the currency of a life story, adding a plot twist to the dusty monotony of official archives. In a new development on the roots craze of the 21st century, dredging up archival proof of family secrets is a new form of public entertainment. Lynch observes: “It is quite remarkable that documents like these, bigamous marriage certificates, or birth certificates proving illegitimacy, which would once have been destroyed in shame, are now brandished as a treasure, breaking the seal of privacy that would have once prevented the present from intruding on the intimate secrets of the past” (115).

In this age of popularized genealogical research, the study of family history involves giving a name to our ancestors, putting a personal face upon history. However, some autobiography theorists and practitioners have categorized genealogy and autobiography in opposing columns. Julia Watson writes in a 1996 essay: “Genealogy as a highly organized and codified set of practices for recording family history claims the disinterested objectivity of a science. It mistrusts ‘family secrets’ as a subjective record that contaminates the preservation and transmission of accurate family history” (299). Now that “roots-seeking” journeys have captured

the public imagination, the dichotomy between history and memory, between genealogy and autobiography, has significantly blurred. Indeed, any act of constructing the past is molded in the seeker's self-image. Bliss Broyard writes in *One Drop* of her archival search: "As I sifted through those traces, looking for the shape of my past, I was always sifting them through a screen fashioned in my likeness, so that my origins came to resemble nothing so much as my own wishful thinking about myself" (141). In memoir and in genealogy studies, the question remains: which stories are worth telling? Adding a name to the historical record has higher stakes when that name is a famous one – as Gates, academic turned prime-time genealogist, is well aware.

Particularly in African American communities during and after the Civil Rights Movement, choosing one's ancestors can be a political act.¹⁰ Ever since Daniel Patrick Moynihan wrote in his 1965 report "The Negro Family: The Case for National Action" that the African American family was a "tangled web of pathology," symbols have arisen to challenge that image of the broken black family and community. The hero of Haley's *Roots*, Kunta Kinte, lent a fierce and specific name to African American genealogy in the 1970s, standing tall as the ancestral patriarch supposedly missing from the black family. Kunta Kinte served as an African counterpart to the Ellis Island immigrant who symbolized the striving and success of other American ethnic groups (Jacobson 148, 204).¹¹ Darryl Pinckney traces a thumbnail history of black family rhetoric in a *New York Times Book Review* essay. He points to the resurrection of "the folk roots of black culture" to dispute Moynihan's characterization of the black family's father-lacking pathology, ultimately uniting a coherent family history with an immigrant bootstrap-style mythology. Pinckney writes: "The elevation of the fortified, striving family to a place of importance in black history rehabilitated the image of the South, the Old Country, as

James Baldwin called it, and the shift in emphasis from political agitation to the cultural heritage of survival and family strength meant the release of middleclass blacks from the penance of racial guilt.” Pinckney emphasizes the role of storytelling, and particularly autobiography, in perpetuating these narratives of a striving black family. But he notes a lack of confessionality in African American autobiography: “Though no writer is obliged to be confessional, perhaps black writers are more inhibited because of the strain of their historic mission, the unspoken stricture against airing dirty laundry, the admonition that they must not go off into the white world and embarrass where they came from... Sometimes the teller is more afraid than the told of the tale’s surprises.”

Like Pinckney, British scholar Paul Gilroy is troubled by amalgamated metaphors of family and community. Gilroy argues: “In this Americocentric alternative, a post-nationalist essence of blackness has been constructed through the dubious appeal to family as the connective tissue of black experience and history. Family has come to stand for community, for race and for nation. It is a short-cut to solidarity” (203). Gilroy challenges family-centric discourse as a viable means to cohesion within community and nation:

The family is not just the site of cultural reproduction; it is also identified as the mechanism for reproducing the cultural dysfunction that disables the race as a whole. The race is nothing more than an accumulation of families. The crisis of black masculinity can therefore be fixed. It is to be repaired by intervening in the family to compensate and rebuild the race by instituting appropriate forms of masculinity and male authority. (204)¹²

Claiming a black male ancestor – which Bliss Broyard effectively does in her memoir – has political as well as personal stakes, especially when the boundaries between family and

community and nation have become not just porous but metonymic. If secrets delimit insiders and outsiders, intimates and strangers, then secrets can also provide perspective on the shifting definitions of family in the DNA-mapped world of the 21st century. The story of the Broyard family secret – a secret kept *from* the youngest generation of the family, and that kept branches of the family apart – demonstrates the blurring of these boundaries of kin and community, personal story and public history. Sollors proposes “the possibilities of connecting the theme of passing to formal plays with truth-telling and authenticity” (271).¹³ Family secrets of passing destabilize not just the boundary of the color line, but also the limits of intimacy and knowledge. They highlight the stakes of making personal and political use of another’s hidden identity. Adrian Piper writes in an essay about passing in her family: “in the African American community, we do not ‘out’ people who are passing as white in the European-American community. Publicly to expose the African ancestry of someone who claims to have none is not done” (246). What happens when we start to name names, whether under the banner of autobiographical truth or of historical authenticity? What stories and communities become accessible through acts of boundary crossing or betrayal?¹⁴

An open secret, closed in the family

Bliss Broyard opens her memoir with an admission of nescience, the uncanny feeling of unknown knowledge. She writes: “Two months before my father died of prostate cancer, I learned about a secret, but I had always sensed that there was something about my family, or even many things, that I didn’t know” (3). Unlike Susan Cheever and Linda Gray Sexton, who delay revealing the contents of family secrets until the latter pages of their memoirs, recreating their years of nescience for the reader, Bliss Broyard names her father’s secret in her first chapter. Her period of nescience intensifies quickly in her narrative; she first learns from her

parents that there *is* a secret one afternoon when Sandy Broyard calls a family meeting. Three weeks later, as Anatole heads into risky surgery, Sandy overrides the father's wishes and discloses the family secret, which she'd learned shortly before their marriage, to their two children.

Bliss Broyard's identity as both a daughter and a writer hinges on the existence of a secret, as she discovers in those short weeks between nescience and revelation. She has proprietary feelings toward the material of her family: "I felt that because I'd come from my mother and father – been made up by their parts – that I had a right to know *everything* about them. I *was* them. And they were mine, for better or for worse" (4, italics in original). Miller captures the frustrations of nescience in the family, of not possessing one's parents – and perhaps, by extension, oneself – despite a perceived birthright. She writes: "most children desire to uncover their parents' truth. Wanting to know their story is central to the desire for self-knowledge that also drives the autobiographical project: How can I know who I am if I don't know who they are?" (*Bequest* 107-08) Bliss Broyard's identity becomes, in part, that of a seeker, as she commits herself to a decade-long project of uncovering family history. As Roger J. Porter puts it, "She makes her research and her writing an integral aspect of the identity, that, throughout the project, she is in the process of discovering" (185). She abbreviates the story of her nescience in order to get to the "quest" narrative, the heart of her book, more quickly. Fortunately, even before her father published a word, the Broyard name was well documented in Louisiana history: there is plenty of family material to uncover. Lively archives, of course, are not the norm of genealogical research. Facing a family archive full of gaps and mysteries, Miller realizes: "The truth of the past comes in pieces, but not all of the pieces fit together" (*What They Saved* 129).

Bliss Broyard recalls in *One Drop*: “I’d always imagined that I would eventually write about my father’s secret.... since this information about my identity had not been made public to me as I was growing up, the act of making it public always felt like my right” (104). She links her personal *right to know* with her reparative *right to tell*, as if her identity were at stake in this disclosure. And her use of the word “public” twice – “had not been made public to me... making it public always felt like my right” (104) – points to the tricky divide between intimacy and publicity in a prominent family. Bliss Broyard reasons that her membership in a private family entitles her to control over public exposure. And a family memoirist wants to reveal the very facts that were kept from her, the lure of the unknown within her life narrative. Memoir critic Craig Howes argues: “It’s not just that an autobiographer is in a sense pulling an ‘inside’ job on the people in his or her life... In autobiography the writer often takes and fences the one thing that the other person would not want taken and revealed” (Eakin, *Ethics* 9).¹⁵ In writing *One Drop*, Bliss Broyard mirrors that language of theft when she learns that a man she grew up calling “Uncle Ernest,” a close friend of her father’s, was the one who first revealed Anatole’s race to young Sandy Broyard before her marriage. Ernest van den Haag, a conservative sociologist and father figure to Anatole, urged a mutual friend to warn Sandy that her future children with Anatole might appear black (*One Drop* 419). Bliss Broyard writes of Uncle Ernest: “It felt almost as if [Anatole Broyard] had knowingly invited a robber into our house, someone who would rifle through our family albums and keepsakes, stealing and defacing things” (405). Faced with external threats of exposure, Bliss Broyard becomes all the more determined to pull a compassionate “inside job,” to find a personal form for a public revelation of her father’s secret.

Bliss Broyard describes the shift in family dynamics when she appealed to her dying father to authorize her, to give her a subject as an aspiring writer. She writes: “All these years

later, I can still recall the feeling of control I had over my father as he listened to me, perhaps because it was so unusual” (12). A secret, after all, epitomizes a struggle for control, for the authority to keep and to tell. When Sandy Broyard told her children about their father’s race weeks before his death, Bliss said, “That’s the secret? Daddy’s part black? That’s all?” (17) Anatole Broyard’s secret, at first, didn’t feel worth the half century of effort he put into keeping it. He couldn’t relinquish that narrative control, and never told the children the secret of his – and therefore their – identity. Bliss Broyard recalls asking her father about his background when she was an adolescent. “‘French,’ he said. ‘You know that.... Maybe a little Portuguese’” (75). Bliss Broyard emphasizes: “To my knowledge this is the only time my father ever specifically lied to someone about his background” (75). Anatole Broyard’s determination to control his identity seems strongest when he is with his family. It is unclear whether he was protecting himself from children who were too young to keep a family secret, or protecting the children from a potentially racist outside world. And Broyard’s friends, many of whom knew at least a little about his race, insisted on a distinction between actively and passively passing – they underestimated the managerial effort of keeping an identity secret. When Anatole asked his friend Harold Brodkey if he should write about his race in the early 1980s, this distinction comes clear. Bliss Broyard writes: “If my father had felt himself to be actively passing as white, Harold surmised, there would have been more of a gulf between my dad and my brother, my mother, and me, that the act of keeping a secret would have made my father seem more different” (442). More different than what, or whom? That patrician patriarch, secrets and all, was the only father that Todd and Bliss Broyard knew. One cost of finding out a family secret is learning that your father is not who you thought he was, that the family name means something other than you thought it did. Bliss Broyard recalls thinking in adolescence that “solving the mystery of my

father would allow me to move forward onto the next level of discovery. Years later I'd understand that a mark of adulthood is the ability to live with uncertainty" (10). And not just to live with uncertainty, but to rely upon it, to build a relational life upon those beams of shared silence. Sociologist Christena Nippert-Eng observes that "it's often the people who know us well who are the biggest threats to our privacy" (19). Bliss Broyard wonders after her father's death: "Even if he convinced us that his few drops of black blood didn't mean that he *was* black, would we nonetheless feel alienated by the drops of secrecy and conclude that he'd become a stranger?" (445)

The right to tell it first

Just as Bliss Broyard was getting her footing as a writer, she felt like her material was in danger of slipping away. After all, keeping a secret of this magnitude is even more difficult in a prominent family, where secrets are fodder for not just family memoir, but for others' projects, too. Gates, then the chair of Harvard's African and African-American Studies Department, wanted to tell the Broyard family secret in a different form: by writing a *New Yorker* profile of Broyard that would analyze the fundamental costs of passing. Broyard's secret was never airtight in the literary community, and Gates had heard from a mentor at Yale that Broyard was partly African American. Gates recalls: "I wanted him to have made it as a daily reviewer at the *New York Times* with everyone knowing his race" (*In Search* 394). In order to make that known, albeit retroactively, Gates bypassed Bliss Broyard's invoked right to tell family story first, and he published "White Like Me" in 1996, six years after Anatole's death and a decade before Bliss Broyard published her memoir. Gates and Bliss Broyard clashed not so much over the right to tell Anatole Broyard's story, but the right to tell it first. As we saw in Chapter One, the first person who frames a secret in a public light takes control of the official story. Susan Cheever

was already writing about her father in *Home Before Dark* when she learned that Scott Donaldson was planning to reveal his homosexuality and alcoholism in an unauthorized biography. Susan Cheever decided to tell her father's secrets first, her way. And although Linda Gray Sexton authorized Middlebrook to tell her mother's secrets first in her biography, *Anne Sexton: A Life*, she felt compelled to match Middlebrook's disclosures in her later works of serial secrecy.

By 1995, Bliss Broyard had already rebuffed one editor who heard about her father's secret and approached her to write a memoir. She narrates: "I put the editor off by explaining that I wanted to first work on a book of fiction so that I could try to find an audience on my own merit" (104). Like Susan Cheever and Linda Gray Sexton, Bliss Broyard would leverage her famous last name to publish fiction first, not memoir. Her story collection, *My Father, Dancing* (1999), was published three years after Gates profiled Anatole Broyard. The book was received as an African American interest title, read during a Black History Month event in Chicago and featured at the African American Book Expo.¹⁶ Four years earlier, while Bliss Broyard was in her twenties, working as a high-end housekeeper and dreaming of publishing her family history someday, Gates cold-called her and disarmed her with his casual conversational style. She recalls in *One Drop*: "before long I was perched on the kitchen stool, my elbows propped on the counter, relaying my story with my own saucy language: *So then my mother says, Your father is part black, and I'm like, That's the secret? Big fucking deal!*" (106, italics in original) On the phone with Gates, Bliss Broyard tested out telling the story her own way, choosing a tone and style to recount it. Through this conversation, she gained the confidence to write autobiographically – but not right away: "The notion of my life having a grand purpose swelled my chest, and for the next few days, as I cleaned the houses of the Vineyard elite, I imagined

them saying, years from now, *To think that the author of that book used to mop our floors!*" (107, italics in original) But Bliss Broyard's timing of "years from now" was too long; Gates called her back to share the "good news" that the *New Yorker* accepted his pitch of a profile of Anatole Broyard (108). When she explained "how important it was to me to be the one to publicly identify my father as black for the first time," Gates couldn't understand the terms of the argument: "I'm not trying to scoop you, Bliss," he responded (108). Bliss Broyard told Gates, "I'm not ready yet" (109). But these issues of temporality – the whens and hows of revelation – are anathema to Gates's practice. He writes in "Lifting the Veil," a 1998 essay about the controversy surrounding his own memoir's frankness about African American lives:

But I also knew that some black people would feel that I had lifted the veil too soon. Sometimes you get black people sitting around in a room and they'll say, "We can't afford to let The Man know this *yet*." The "yet" connotes time – the time when we're secure enough as a people, when a white racist won't use a book that we've written against us. That's totally bogus. It's a totally unjustified claim to the need for black writers to censor themselves. (114, italics in original)

Gates strategically blurs the boundaries of family and community in all of his life writing. Therefore, the "not yet" of family secrets is just as invalid as the self-censorship of keeping community secrets. Issues of protection and ownership are, to him, signs of insecurity as a family or as a people. Gates writes: "A lot of people have said, 'Did you fear that this was a risk: that you were lifting the family veil and telling family secrets – not only literally family secrets but, metaphorically, family secrets and racial secrets and ethnic secrets?' The answer is yes. But I wasn't any more honest about our culture or about my mother's family than I was about myself" (109). As a literary critic, genealogist, and life writer, Gates works to equate family secrets and

community secrets, and he exposes them all in order to foster a public discourse on identity. The distinctions of “not yet” and “my right” are incompatible with Gates’s leveled ground of family and community.

Bliss Broyard also muddled the terms of the conflict when she confronted Gates about the right to tell. She recalls in *One Drop*: “I told Gates that I felt I’d been done an injustice by having my father’s ancestry kept from me, and that it was unfair for him to wrest away control over my identity once again” (108). In his analysis of *One Drop*, Porter concurs with these stated terms of the conflict: “The competition to define both father’s and daughter’s identities goes to the heart of her project” (184). But Bliss Broyard takes it back, later realizing that at issue is not control over her identity, but control over a family narrative. She clarifies her new position while talking with Gates on a 2008 episode of *African American Lives 2*, his popular genealogy series on public television. Facing Gates for the first time since their argument a decade earlier, Bliss Broyard tells Gates: “When I first met you... I thought this step of outing him myself would allow me to regain control over my identity. But what I have come to realize is that I am not in control of the way that people see me or my dad. It’s always going to be a compromise between how I see myself and how the world sees me. Between how the world sees my dad and how I do” (*In Search* 383). By writing her memoir, Bliss Broyard tried to “order [her] vulnerabilities,” to use her father’s words (12). Her father’s vulnerabilities have already been “magnified” by Gates’s public scrutiny, but she attempts to reset the scale of her own relationship to her family’s past. Gates positions Broyard as a symbol of a broader American story of race, migration, and passing – one person’s family is another’s metaphor. Gates says that Anatole Broyard’s story “haunts me because of its typicality” (*In Search* 380). Bliss Broyard comes to a similar conclusion about the “typicality” and metaphorical possibilities within her family story. She

writes: “It amazed me to realize that my family’s story paralleled much of the country’s larger narrative; to discover that we, the Broyards, were at once ordinary and emblematic” (157). But she comes to that conclusion on her own terms, without answering to Gates’s paternalistic yoking of her quest. Gates writes in 2009 after reading *One Drop*: “Bliss’s research skills impressed me,” as if she were merely following in footsteps that he, as the public face of African American genealogy, had personally pioneered (*In Search* 390).

As Bliss Broyard read “White Like Me” in 1996 – reading, as she says, “for the ways that Gates had gotten my father wrong” – she worried that racial knowledge would surpass intimate knowledge (*One Drop* 110). She writes: “Years later I’d realize that my biggest fear was that Gates, a stranger who had never even met my father, would understand him better than I could, who had known and lived with him for most of 24 years; that I’d be shut out of the conversation by their shared language of blackness” (110). And Gates confirms Bliss Broyard’s fear when he writes in 2009 that she “did not, I believe, fully understand how culturally black her father and his father had truly been” (*In Search* 383). Gates’s search for the typicality of passing within Broyard’s secret pits family knowledge against racial knowledge, personal history against public history, a father against a metaphor. For Gates, the story worth writing was Broyard’s “typical” separation from a family and a community; for Bliss Broyard, the story worth writing, and worth living, was a history of relation.

Gates had the first crack at ordering Anatole Broyard’s vulnerabilities and framing them in the public imagination. Focusing on the toll of the secret upon Broyard’s family and his fiction writing, Gates characterizes his subject as “a Negro who wanted to be something other than Negro, a critic who wanted to be something other than a critic. Broyard, you might say, wanted to be something other than Broyard. He very near succeeded” (81). Bliss Broyard takes the

opportunity to rebut Gates's characterization twice, at a party the day the article came out, and again by recounting her words in *One Drop*: "'The exact opposite is true,' I said to anyone who would listen. 'He just wanted to be himself, without all the restrictions and stereotypes of being black'" (110). Gates, of course, positions it differently; he writes in "White Like Me": "A penalty was exacted. He shed a past and an identity to become a writer – a writer who wrote endlessly about the act of shedding a past and an identity" (66). Gates formulates Broyard's anguished failure to complete his autobiographical novel, an agonizingly unfinished project from the 1950s to his death, as "a paradox: the man wanted to be appreciated not for being black but for being a writer, even though his pretending not to be black was stopping him from writing" (76).

In *The Woman Warrior*, Maxine Hong Kingston's mother, Brave Orchid, proposes a similar theory of blockage and repetition; she tells her children: "The difference between mad people and sane people... is that sane people have variety when they talk-story. Mad people have only one story that they talk over and over" (184). French memoirist Annie Ernaux has a related superstition emerging from an early memory of family trauma; she writes in *Shame*: "I considered writing about it to be a forbidden act that would call for punishment. Not being able to write anything else afterward, for instance. (I felt quite relieved just now when I saw that I could go on writing, that nothing terrible had happened)" (15-16). In "White Like Me," Anatole Broyard's life becomes a metaphor for the terrible irony of secret keeping: the secret becomes the "one story" of madness, and he is paralyzed by not telling it. Gates writes: "Some people speculated that the reason Broyard couldn't write his novel was that he was living it – that race loomed larger in his life because it was unacknowledged, that he couldn't put it behind him because he had put it beneath him" (74).¹⁷

The paper trail

Gates's theory of race and writer's block – that an inauthentic approach to one's racial identity leads to a stagnancy of the creative impulse – is not just confined to his case study of Anatole Broyard. In a 2011 edited edition of Jean Toomer's novel *Cane* (1923), Gates and Rudolph P. Byrd investigate Toomer's complex racial self-definition. In their introduction, the editors emphasize the personal reasons behind the author's public stance on race. They write: "he became one of the earliest proponents of the theory that 'race' was socially constructed, even if his motives for doing so were quite mixed" (xxxvii). Byrd and Gates laud Toomer as a "pioneering theorist of hybridity, perhaps the first in the African American tradition" (xxxvii). But they also pointedly place him within that African American tradition, a cultural genealogy that Toomer vehemently objected to, maintaining that he was "neither white nor black" even after his publisher marketed *Cane* as an African American novel, without his permission (xxxvii). Significantly, Byrd and Gates's introduction emphasizes Toomer's inability to match his early triumph of *Cane*; he struggled to write throughout the rest of his life and died in obscurity in 1967.¹⁸ Byrd and Gates point to Toomer's "repeated failure to create anything that remotely approached [*Cane*] in sophistication throughout the remainder of his life, as he fruitlessly sought to find a language to express what being 'neither white nor black' actually meant, without the soul-base of region that the deep black South had provided him in *Cane* (lii). Gates deems Toomer, like Broyard, a man who enjoyed early literary success, then spent a lifetime wrestling with his identity and suffering the stultifying consequences, on blank page after blank page.

Gates's reliance on the "paper trail" to construct personal, familial, and national histories is a defining theme throughout his recent work, from "White Like Me" through *African*

American Lives and the *Cane* introduction. Gates and Byrd turn that genealogical lens on an array of “supporting materials” of Toomer’s racial history (lxvi). The editors’ introduction ends with reproductions of census reports, registration cards, and a marriage license that list Toomer’s race, variously, as Negro or white. The editors write: “It is our carefully considered judgment, based upon an analysis of archival evidence previously overlooked by other scholars, that Jean Toomer – for all of his pioneering theorizing about what today we might call a multicultural or mixed-race ancestry – was a Negro who decided to pass for white” (lxx).

Like Gates, Bliss Broyard is also fascinated by genealogical research. But even as she takes on the project of tracing the Broyard family history through public archives, she takes an emotional and imaginative approach to the paper trail. In the memoir’s singular moment of fictionalizing, set off in italics, Bliss Broyard takes an imaginative journey from her father’s perspective, narrating the moment her father applied for a Social Security card that had three different races inscribed: a crossed-out check next to “Negro,” a “C” next to “Other,” and a large check next to “White” (354). In her fiction, Bliss Broyard recreates the scene of seventeen-year-old Anatole (then nicknamed “Bud”) mulling over the racial choices on the form at the Social Security office. “*And yet... and yet... Bud drums his fingers on the countertop. These slips of paper have a way of trailing a person around – like a piece of toilet paper stuck to your shoe*” (350, italics and ellipses in original). As Bliss Broyard imagines it, “Bud” chooses to write “C” for “Creole” on his form, which a young female clerk begins to change to “Negro,” then to “White” when a supervisor corrects her: “*This gentleman’s color is white. That’s as plain as the nose on your face*” (353). This Social Security scene pushes the boundaries of memoir and history, demonstrating Bliss Broyard’s personal stake in picturing her father’s formative moments of self-determination.

Despite her penchant for chasing the paper trail, Bliss Broyard clashed with Gates over the stakes of official documents in forming an identity. After publishing “White Like Me,” Gates mailed her a package, “and it contained all the genealogy that had been collected to prove my father’s race” (*One Drop* 111). Gates encourages her to affiliatively refashion herself and her father’s memory, to alter family records in order to change her racial affiliation. Bliss Broyard writes:

Gates had advised my mother when they were discussing my objections to his article that the best thing she could do was to help me accept my blackness. He suggested that I could even petition the court in Connecticut to change my father’s race to “black” on the record of my own birth. As I filed away these papers with the rest of my genealogical data, I wondered how a man whose lifework was dedicated to the notion that a person’s race was the most signifying element about him could propose that switching sides was as easy as changing a word on a piece of paper, as simple as restyling one’s hair. (111)

Gates’s attitude toward the paper trail is somewhat contradictory in “White Like Me.” He opens the article with the story of a tenant at the Broyard house who discovered a doctored version of a 1950 issue of *Commentary* magazine on Anatole Broyard’s shelf. Broyard, author of an article called “Portrait of the Inauthentic Negro” in that issue, had cut out the contributor’s note, in which the editors identified Broyard, without his permission, as someone who knows the subject of his article – the Negro – “at first hand” (“White” 66). Bliss Broyard also writes about this razored article in *One Drop*. She recalls her father telling his children as he balked at revealing his secret: “*If you want to know me, then why don’t you read more of my writing?...* Once again here was my father picking and choosing about how he would be presented to the

world. Here he was hiding in plain sight. I don't know whether to feel thankful or regretful that I never stumbled on his secret while he was alive" (395, italics in original).

After explaining the missing contributor's note, Gates writes in "White Like Me":

Broyard was born black and became white, and his story is compounded of equal parts pragmatism and principle. He knew that the world was filled with such snippets and scraps of paper, all conspiring to reduce him to an identity that other people had invented and he had no say in. Broyard responded with X-Acto knives and evasions, with distance and denials and half denials and cunning half-truths.

(66)

Gates then begins to trace Anatole's personal history, using documents from Louisiana state archives and Broyard's personal and critical writing. "The circumlocutions are striking," Gates observes; "not that *he* was black but his birth certificate was; not that *he* was black but his family was. Perhaps this was a matter less of evasiveness than of precision" (76, italics in original). In a passage on identity near the end of the article, Gates writes:

The act of razoring out your contributor's note may be quixotic, but it is not mad. The mistake is to assume that birth certificates and biographical sketches and all the other documents generated by the modern bureaucratic state reveal an anterior truth – that they are merely signs of an independently existing identity. But in fact they constitute it. The social meaning of race is established by these identity papers – by tracts and treatises and certificates and pamphlets and all the other verbal artifacts that proclaim race to be real and, by that proclamation, make it so.

(78)

Gates, then, recognizes the individual's helplessness in the face of what Bliss Broyard calls "*These slips of paper [that] have a way of trailing a person around – like a piece of toilet paper stuck to your shoe*" (*One Drop* 350). Gates acknowledges that these documents constitute identity – often unfairly, inconsistently, or inaccurately – yet he continues to build an academic and popular career around publicizing those very same documents. As he encourages his African American readers and viewers to chart their own family trees, Gates argues: "Restoring the stories of the lives of the members of our extended families can directly transform the way that historians reassemble the larger narrative of the history of our people" (*In Search* 12). Is Gates *restoring* family histories, or is he *re-storying* them? As Carolyn Steedman reminds us, archives are "made from selected and consciously chosen documentation from the past and also the mad fragments that no one intended to preserve" (68). And Gates mines those archives for evidence that will "reassemble the larger narrative of the history of our people" (*In Search* 12) – with useful "metaphors" like Broyard, Toomer, and other famous names to fuel his vision of a revised national history.

Hiding in plain sight

Gates argues that he didn't so much expose Anatole Broyard as publicly acknowledge a secret that was hiding in plain sight, discernable to those who knew how to spot it. The jazz musician Charlie Parker once glimpsed Broyard and noted: "He's one of us, but he doesn't want to admit he's one of us" ("White" 69).¹⁹ To see is to know: Anatole Broyard even hints as much in his posthumously published memoir fragment, *Kafka Was the Rage* (1993), in which he writes cryptically of old family photographs: "To see them would be to know too much about me" (72). His memoir dramatizes the rite of passage when young adults cross not necessarily from black to white, but from dependence to freedom. Broyard writes: "The first impulse of adolescence is to

wish to be an orphan or an amnesiac. Nobody in the Village had a family. We were all sprung from our own brows, spontaneously generated the way flies were once thought to have originated” (29). He attributes this instinct of self-invention to an entire generation. For Manhattan-bound Broyard, the growing distance from his Creole-Brooklyn family might have been not so much racial as intellectual, as he grew “less intelligible” to his uneducated parents, as Bliss Broyard puts it (346). Did Anatole Broyard leave home not to be seen differently, but to be *read* differently, to be legible to a new generation of hipster intellectuals? But Broyard never really left home; he kept writing, in frustrated fragments, about the family he left behind.

The stakes of racial visibility are on display in one unforgettable family scene in *Kafka Was the Rage*. Broyard’s lover, Sheri Martinelli (called Donatti in the memoir), a protégée of Anais Nin, retaliates when Broyard tries to break off their affair. Broyard arrives for a visit at his parents’ house in Brooklyn to find Sheri sitting on his mother’s lap on a recliner, paging through the family photo album. Broyard writes: “The light in our family album was like the glare of truth... Because these pictures seemed to me to be absolute, artless, and true, I didn’t want Sheri to see them. To see them would be to know too much about me” (72). Though Broyard doesn’t mention it in his book, Sheri already knew about his race; her mother was also from New Orleans, and she was familiar with Creole culture (*One Drop* 383). But the exposure that this memoir passage dramatizes pits light against shadow, the “glare of truth” against Broyard’s preferred version of himself. In this passage, Broyard hints at the indelible visual evidence of familial and racial identity, as if he could never quite leave his past behind. Sheri raises the stakes of her surprise visit: she pushes the chair’s button to send her and Mrs. Broyard into a reclining position. “Sheri’s bare legs flew up, and in that split second while they rose, I thought that now we would see – yes, this was what she had come for. She had come to Brooklyn on the

subway, and had searched out our house on a map to show my mother and father that the woman I lived with wore no underpants” (77). Sheri exposes herself in the act of exposing Broyard, of uncovering the secrets of his family album.

These politics of visibility, in which the one who unveils another also exposes herself, could also apply to a seasoned professional at “lifting the veil”: Gates himself. What family secrets does Gates expose in his own memoir, and what does he reveal about himself in the act of unveiling others’ secrets? Gates’s investment in the visibility of race is clear; he writes that Anatole Broyard’s race was “written on his face” and that Broyard “looks, at least to my eyes, unmistakably black” in an early photograph (*In Search* 390, 383).²⁰ In turn, Gates’s own preoccupations with the politics of kinship and visibility are unveiled in his memoir. Although Gates, the country’s leading critic of African American literature, certainly knows that race is a construct, he does not allow racial passing to disrupt his politics of visibility. Amy Robinson argues that passing “jeopardizes the very notion of race as a biological essence, foregrounding the social contexts of vision by calling into question the ‘truth’ of the object in question” (241). The myth that racial passing serves to deconstruct, according to Robinson, is the idea that “appearance is assumed to bear a mimetic relation to identity, but in fact does not and can not” (250).

To see is to know

Even when we leave home, we take pieces of our family with us, in our memories and in our features. But what if we can’t see our own personal histories clearly? Gates’s memoir, *Colored People* (1994), suggests a key role of the community in identifying a personal past. He states in an interview: “I want to get into the educational DNA of American culture... I want 10 percent of the common culture, more or less, to be black.... I’m a tech geek. Whenever I read

about something new, I think to myself, How can I take this and make it black?” (Boynton 91) And before he turned to popular mass media, Gates experimented with his popular reach through a trade memoir that unearths the tangled roots of black families in his hometown of Piedmont, West Virginia.

Gates terms his personal writing a form of “autocritography,” a development of his critical point of view through personal history (“Writing” 40). Paul John Eakin similarly terms *Colored People* “auto-ethnographic” (*How Our Lives* 76), stressing the relational aspects of the memoir. Eakin points out that “Skip” Gates (as he is known among friends and family, in Piedmont and beyond) doesn’t assume a central role in the memoir until chapter seven (76). The real protagonist of *Colored People* is the community of Piedmont during the 1950s and 1960s, before integration fully took hold of the town. The maternal side of his family, the Colemans, experienced integration “as a loss... Within our family, integration anxiety played itself out broadly in terms of generations... A principal focus of the resulting tension was the raising of children – the issues of their rights and responsibilities and their relation to authority, both white and familial” (184). This generation-gapped version of Piedmont emerges late in the memoir; in its early pages, Gates recalls the town painted in shades of black, white, and sepia – the color of nostalgia for a time and place where Gates “learned to be a colored boy” (4). According to Eakin, this nostalgic palette is problematic: “sepia shows as the autobiographer’s luxury; there is nothing sepia about Mama,” whose postmenopausal decline dominates the latter half of the memoir (82).

That golden gloss of memory edges out some of the more nuanced shades between black and white; although stories of seduction across the color line serve as comic relief, racial passing is unreservedly condemned in *Colored People*. Gates notes that his father’s side of the family is

light-skinned, and some uncles crossed the color line, never to return. Gates writes with ironic understatement: “Passing is not regarded with great favor in our family. Which may seem curious since, until a generation ago, most of the Gateses qualified as octoroons – ‘light and bright and damn near white,’ Daddy said, turning the pages of the family album” (73). Gates’s grandfather married a light-skinned black woman, and Gates writes of their descendants: “these people wore the complexity of their bloodlines on their faces and on the crowns of their heads” (73). Blood, kinship, and race are salient physical features for Gates; therefore, racial passing must carry a price for betraying self and kin, who passed along their personal traits. Gates recalls watching the movie *Imitation of Life* with his family on television, in which a character decides to “break her mother’s heart, by passing, leaving the race, and marrying white... sold her soul to the Devil” (24). Similarly, Gates terms Broyard’s passing a “Faustian bargain” twice in the article “White Like Me,” implying that the cost was a betrayal of the family he came from and the family he created: his children, Bliss and Todd. Gates writes of the Broyards: “His children would see the world in terms of authenticity; he saw the world in terms of self-creation. Would they think that he had made a Faustian bargain?” (75)

Gates’s burgeoning interest in genetics is evident in *Colored People*, though he doesn’t yet have the scientific tools to map his hometown’s family trees. He assumes an authority in *Colored People* that resembles his role as television host a decade later: pointing out what others cannot see themselves, their hidden family histories. In *Colored People*, when Gates parses out what he inherits from the paternal and maternal sides of his family, he decides he is more Gates than Coleman, his mother’s side of the family. After Gates delivers an agnostic eulogy at his maternal grandmother’s funeral, infuriating the devout Coleman family, he feels his acute difference from the Colemans, and kinship with the Gateses:

I didn't know whether to laugh or cry. I just looked at the Gateses instead. I did it because we always knew when the break had come, always entered critical awareness together, a lockstep of the spirit, even me. That's what they specialized in: analyzing things when they were over, breaking things down one by one. Second-order consciousness. Metamouthing. Scrutinizing. Reading the signs. Expliciting the implicit. It was healing to do this. (169)

Claiming his Gates birthright in *Colored People* – which chronicles his decision to change his given name, Louis Smith Gates, to a junior version of his father's name, Henry Louis Gates – this memoirist does a great deal of “expliciting the implicit” by revealing his community's secrets. As with any relational autobiography, where significant others' stories amplify one's own, *Colored People* runs the risk of violating the boundaries of privacy in its mission of “expliciting the implicit.” After all, one basic definition of privacy, according to Warren and Brandeis's influential 1890 *Harvard Law Review* article “The Right to Privacy,” is “the right to be let alone” (193). Does sharing a household – or even a hometown – permit a memoirist to violate the right to remain implicit?

In *Colored People*, Gates does not differentiate among “family secrets and racial secrets and ethnic secrets” (“Lifting” 109). One reason for this parity is the interwoven structure of family and community in Piedmont. Gates writes: “People in Piedmont didn't have family trees, they had hedges and shrubbery, running long and wide” (*Colored* 176). In this “genetic chaos” of Gates's West Virginia hometown, a place he dubs “the Valley with No Secrets” (13), to see is to know: physical resemblance is public evidence of kinship across separate households. Gates recalls the gossip he used to hear among his father's friends: “That was the thing about overhearing genealogical conversations in the colored VFW. Once Pop or Mr. Roebuck Johnson

made a pronouncement, the evidence was generally as plain as the nose on your face – or some kid’s whose daddy wasn’t his daddy and the whole town knew” (56). Gates learns to do this kind of visual research himself; he writes: “there’s a lot of intermingling and intermarrying in hollows, because the gene pool there is so small and desire is so huge.... All you have to do is *look* at them; do your own genetic research, with your own eyes” (157, italics in original). All this evidence of “intermingling” may be plain to the observer, but it is rarely so clear to the children of these secret affairs. It takes an outside eye, amateur or expert, to read the genealogical history hiding in plain sight. Is this sign of kinship and identity invisible to the individual because it lies *behind* him or her? Family heritage, in its personal but visible nature, resembles a distinguishing physical feature that Gates writes about in *Colored People*, called the “kitchen.” In a chapter that unveils what he calls the “racial secrets” of kitchen-sink hair straightening (“Lifting” 109), Gates writes: “the ‘kitchen’ I am speaking of now is the very kinky bit of hair at the back of the head, where the neck meets the shirt collar. If there ever was one part of our African past that resisted assimilation, it was the kitchen” (*Colored* 42). For Gates, racial heritage can be as conspicuous as the “kitchen’s” telltale kink at the nape of the neck. But it takes someone else, such as a popular genealogist like Gates, to point it out, to “explicit the implicit” family history that is hiding in plain sight, just over one’s shoulder. In its visible but elusive nature, the “kitchen” resembles Virginia Woolf’s canny linkage of gender, class, and identity in *A Room of One’s Own*. Woolf writes: “For there is a spot the size of a shilling at the back of one’s head which one can never see for oneself. It is one of the good offices that sex can discharge for sex – to describe that spot the size of a shilling at the back of the head... A true picture of man as a whole can never be painted until a woman has described that spot the size of a shilling” (90-91).

Colored People reveals several prized Piedmont secrets, including a select few about Gates's ancestors.²¹ The "darkest, deepest family secret in the history of the Coleman family" is that Gates's maternal grandmother, known as "Big Mom," had another lover concurrent with her future husband, Daddy Paul (55). Gates writes: "As luck would have it, Big Mom herself had picked as the father of her child a man who turned out not to be the father of her child. It was between Daddy Paul and ole Griff Bruce. Fifty-fifty ain't good odds" (55). That is, Big Mom discovered she was pregnant and married Daddy Paul, but when her son, Jim, was born, she was proven wrong in her choice of mate by Jim's likeness to her other lover, Griff Bruce. Gates narrates his father's version of the story: "There Griff was, staring at me in Uncle Jim's face all those years, Daddy said, and I didn't even see it. But once his brother Lawrence told him, it was clear. No denying him" (56). As with the indelible "kitchen" at the nape of the neck, it takes an outsider to point out the truth of kinship, plain for the rest of the community to see, behind one's back.

Gates recalls: "I wrote *Colored People* because I was grieving for my mother" ("Lifting" 103). He originally composed the memoir as a letter to his two daughters, who were not old enough to remember their grandmother before menopause, when "a veil passed over her life, dimming her radiance, and then never quite lifted away" (*Colored* 127). By "lifting the veil" on family secrets, Gates attempts to conjure Mama's radiance during her heyday in Piedmont. Perhaps the greatest personal secret in the memoir is Gates's feeling of culpability for his mother's postmenopausal mental illness. The day she went to the hospital for the first time, 12-year-old Gates, highly superstitious, crossed his legs left over right, a direction he considered forbidden. He writes: "I could never shake the idea that if only I hadn't dared fate to punish me, by crossing my legs the other way around, Mama wouldn't have become sick and gone to the

hospital. It was a sense of guilt so enormous that I couldn't talk about it" (130). Gates, in part, exorcises that adolescent guilt by writing *Colored People*. Although he wishes to write it in the vernacular of Piedmont, he doesn't write the memoir in his mother's voice. He explains: "I wanted to create a portrait of my mother – for my mother, for myself, and for my daughters – in my father's vernacular voice, while my father was still living" ("Lifting" 104). But that choice of vernacular was actually an editorial decision Gates made in his second draft; after he wrote the memoir as a letter to his daughters, he made some changes: "I had made myself extremely vulnerable – I talked a lot about my sexuality and my loves and my hates.... I also cut down on some things I thought would be better left undisclosed. This time I tried to write in my father's voice... Of course it's also my voice – I use a black vernacular when I tell stories; I slip into it effortlessly" ("Lifting" 107).

Bliss Broyard, too, slipped into a "black vernacular" when she first told Gates about her family secret in 1995; like Gates, she tried on a colloquial voice for narrating her life. Gates observes three years later in "Lifting the Veil": "I've only met a few successful black people who talk the same way around white people and black people.... Vernon Jordan is one of the great storytellers; he tells the same jokes around white people and black people. But most black people will edit themselves for an audience. They'll say, 'I shouldn't.' They'll ask, 'How will my story be appropriated against the race?'" (116) To Gates, then, a sign of a good storyteller is a refusal to compromise one's form of narration. In an amusing parallel, Bliss Broyard received a bit of media flak after meeting Vernon Jordan at an event in 2003. *New York Magazine* dishily reports:

Looks like author **Bliss Broyard** (*My Father, Dancing*) will need to do some serious research for her upcoming book on her African-American heritage. She was inspired to write it after her dad – the late, legendary *New York Times* book

critic **Anatole Broyard** – revealed on his deathbed that he was part black. We’re told that at the June 5 party for **Gretchen Rubin**’s *Forty Ways to Look at Winston Churchill*, Broyard went up to **Vernon Jordan** and mistook him for **David Dinkins**, a close friend of her late uncle, civil rights leader Franklin Williams. Ever the smooth politico, Jordan played along, sending his regards to Broyard’s aunt. Meanwhile, the real David Dinkins was mingling with a crowd that included **Bill Clinton, Kitty Carlisle Hart, Gifford Miller, and Mort Zuckerman**. Broyard explained that she was misled by someone who pointed Jordan out as Dinkins: “In my book, I’m trying to look at questions of race that are more than skin deep. I hope the test of racial awareness goes beyond trying to spot the celebrity African-American of the moment out of the crowd.” (Malkin, boldface in original)

After the social faux pas of mistaking a tall black Southerner for a diminutive black mayor, Bliss Broyard is understandably defensive about her right to define her own identity. But the question of voice in storytelling is as important to Bliss Broyard as it is to Gates, who pays tribute to his father’s vernacular through the narrative voice of *Colored People*. A right to your own voice is a cornerstone of ordering your vulnerabilities, of putting your own story in your own words. And Anatole Broyard was someone who had great pride in his voice. Bliss Broyard imagines a pivotal moment of her father’s early life: “In a voice whose timbre took the full measure of his being, he announced that he was going to move to Greenwich Village” (*One Drop* 366). Half a century later, as Anatole Broyard heads into surgery a month before his death, Bliss Broyard recalls: “Just as he was going into the operating room, my father called out, ‘What’s happened to my voice? Listen. It’s lost its timbre. What’s happened to my voice?’ Then the doors swung closed

behind him” (20). Bliss Broyard closes her memoir with an anecdote about listening to her father’s voice on tape – once when she was 15, then as an adult. She chooses a recording of her father’s eulogy for his old friend Milton Klonsky, in which he breaks down and cries. She recalls that when she was 15, discovering the tape for the first time, “I’d never seen – or heard – him cry. And I’d thought that hearing such unrestrained emotion would reveal something essential about my father’s character that had been withheld from me so far” (464). Ever the seeker, Bliss Broyard sought a clue to her father’s secrets, but was disappointed: “And then I remember the anguish I’d felt as the tape rolled on and I glimpsed the boundary beyond which my father would always remain opaque. Seated at my desk in front of the tape player now, I find this idea less terrifying than consoling” (465). Listening to her father’s voice – and the moment it failed in grief – Bliss Broyard learns to accept her father’s right to his vulnerabilities, his decision not to reveal himself fully, to her or to anyone. She can now respect the timbre of his voice, and build a relational bond on the sturdy timbers of shared familial experience, despite the gaps of secrecy between them.

“You are what you have to defend”

“I conceived of these series as roots in a test tube,” Gates announced on television (qtd. in Lee). A *New York Times* review of Gates’s 2008 series, *African American Lives 2*, states that the series “belies its sleepy name with the poetry of history, the magic of science, and the allure of the family trees of Morgan Freeman, Chris Rock, Tina Turner, Don Cheadle, Tom Joyner and Maya Angelou.... Ms. Angelou said that she initially disliked the idea of using celebrities to reclaim history but realized that they would attract viewers to examine the complexity of this country’s roots” (Lee). Television is a new chapter that promotes Gates’s interest in familial and communal intersections, which he pursued in print with *Colored People*, “White Like Me,” and

“Lifting the Veil” in the 1990s. Gates created his own PBS series, *African American Lives*, in 2006, which was followed by “Oprah’s Roots: An *African American Lives* Special” (2007), *African American Lives 2* (2008), *Faces of America* (2010), and *Finding Your Roots* (2012). The two *African American Lives* series and *Faces of America* reached a combined audience of 25 million viewers. Noting the millions who watch his shows, Gates says: “It would take a thousand years for my book *The Signifying Monkey* to get to that many people” (Boynton 91).

Within *In Search of Our Roots* (2009), a book that compiles much of what the two *African American Lives* series and “Oprah’s Roots” revealed onscreen, Gates clearly states his motives for televising celebrity family histories – and bridging the divide between famous guests and at-home viewers. *In Search of Our Roots* predates the premiere of Gates’s first multiethnic series, *Faces of America*, so the book is directed squarely at African American viewers and readers. His introduction, “Family Matters,” demonstrates the political and historical stakes of those so-called family matters: the power of giving a name to an ancestor and writing him or her into common history. Noting the richness of experience within African American history, Gates writes: “But historians have not been able to generalize from these myriad experiences created by our ancestors, because their stories remain undiscovered, buried in dusty archives, seemingly unimportant to anyone but a distant family member” (7). That descendant – such as a reader of Gates’s call to action – can reconstitute a lost ancestor’s history: “Until their stories are reconstructed and told, these ancestors of ours will not exist as human beings, as agents, as actors in the great drama that is American history because under slavery our ancestors had no names; or no names that the law was bound to honor” (7). To Gates, then, having a name means having a story, and having a story means having a place within common history. By restoring those stories

through DNA that lead back to Africa, “we are able, symbolically at least, to reverse the Middle Passage,” Gates writes (10).

In some ways, biology *is* destiny, according to Gates’s research. But that destiny can easily be co-opted into a sound bite of marketed affiliation. A Coca-Cola advertisement that ran during *African American Lives* on PBS appealed to the pride of African American family history, intoning over an image of an African American woman, “She has her great-great-great-grandmother’s eye for adornment” – an “eye” that presumably draws her to a fashionable Coke bottle.²² Coca-Cola taps into what Lauren Berlant terms an “intimate public,” a feeling of communal belonging in which “the personal is refracted through the general” (viii). Bliss Broyard recalls being seduced by similar rhetoric of affiliation: “I had always bought into the idea of the American ‘melting pot,’ and now I was an example of it. The idea thrilled me... I felt like I mattered in a way that I hadn’t before” (*One Drop* 17). Bliss Broyard’s quest can be viewed as self-taught lessons in “how to live as an *x*,” in Berlant’s terms (viii). According to Berlant, “what makes a public sphere intimate is an expectation that the consumers of its poetic stuff *already* share a worldview and emotional knowledge that they have derived from a broadly common historical experience” (viii). Berlant’s theory of the intimate public resembles Alondra Nelson’s concept of affiliative self-fashioning, but Berlant emphasizes the class and economic consequences of buying into a particular identity.

In his genealogy programming, Gates constitutes those intimate publics of not just affiliation but filiation, refracted through star power and the promise of staking claim to a branch of America’s collective family tree. But that sense of belonging requires the stretching of individual stories to fit generalizations. Gates argues: “the experiences of the individuals in our families allow us to reconfigure our nation’s collective past, in a relationship of part for whole”

(12). Do we give up the uniqueness of a “part” story when subscribing to a “whole?” Gates’s mission of reconstituting America’s history is just that ambitious: “These tiny fragments of human lives illuminate both our selves and our society, who we are as individuals, who we are as families, who we are as a people and as a country” (14). Few scholars have challenged Gates and his family-centric discourse of reshaping history. Patricia J. Williams identifies the public’s desire for a scientific way to measure truth, particularly in an age of fabricated memoirs like James Frey’s *A Million Little Pieces*. She writes in the *Nation*: “The science du jour is, of course, DNA testing, and Professor Gates could not be more incautious about its salutary promise for African-Americans in search of a sense of self. Here is where the programs run into some rather careless uses of science” (14). Williams writes that in all personal stories, whether in memoir or on television, subjective or scientific, “There is something very human about the repetition of family stories until they become epic rather than literal, the burying of family secrets, the lying of ancestors, the reinventions of migrants, the accommodations of raw ambition, the insulations from terrible shame” (14). Specifically, Williams faults Gates for telling Oprah Winfrey on the PBS special “Oprah’s Roots,” “You’ve got education in your genes” – a metaphorical statement of intergenerational identity that feels perilously *less* metaphorical when Gates subsequently interprets his own DNA results: “I’m 50 percent white.” Williams protests:

But there is no more an allele for “whiteness” than there is for “education.”

“White” is a malleable social designation with a freighted history.... It behooves us to be less romantic about what all this DNA swabbing reveals.... The craving, the connection, the newness of those doors is in our heads, not in our mitochondria. Rather, it is the process of superimposing the identities with which we were raised upon the culturally embedded, socially constructed imaginings

about “the Other” we could be. The fabulous nature of what is imagined can be liberating, but it is a fable. If we read that story into the eternity of our blood lines, if we biologize our history, we will forever be less than we could be. (14)

Williams encourages us, instead, to choose our levels of interpersonal intimacy according to our own “emotional truth,” as she calls it, rather than percentages on a sheet of data.

Raised in a “Valley with No Secrets,” Gates proceeds to reveal the secret histories of an overextended American family on television. In episodes of *Faces of America*, Gates hands each of his celebrity guests a personalized scrapbook called the “Book of Life,” which charts his or her ancestry through public records and DNA analysis. (The Human Genome Project also chose the name “Book of Life” for its first complete genomic sequence in 2000.) But in his juggling of popular and academic discourses on race, Gates never differentiates between the “Books of Life” he compiles on television, and what he calls in his Broyard profile “the mistake... to assume that birth certificates and biographical sketches and all the other documents generated by the modern bureaucratic state reveal an anterior truth – that they are merely signs of an independently existing identity. But in fact they constitute it” (“White” 78). In his genealogy programming, is Gates “constituting” his celebrity guests? He is, after all, adding to a “world ... filled with such snippets and scraps of paper” that might lead a visually indeterminate man like Anatole Broyard to raze his way out of a labeled identity (“White” 66). Between the secrets of the archive and the fallibility of so-called expert interpretation, there can be no singular truth of a family’s history. The only palpable truth is the emotional truth of a relation, and its constant calibration within and through generations.

For Gates, the right to link a family name to public history trumps the ethics of privacy. He emphasizes the power to “give a name” to a common ancestor in order to forge connections

among individuals, making them “cousins,” however distant (Solomon). On *African American Lives 2*, Gates travels to Ireland to track his European roots: he is a distant descendant of a conqueror, Niall of the Nine Hostages, an ancestry that links Gates to three million new “cousins” in the Irish diaspora. In fact, Gates even claims as a distant cousin Cambridge Police Sergeant James Crowley, who arrested him on his own porch in 2009 for disorderly conduct, in an alleged case of racial profiling that culminated in a “beer summit” with President Obama on the White House lawn.²³ But as Obama himself learns from an African aunt in *Dreams from My Father*, “you have to draw the line somewhere. If everyone is family, no one is family” (337).

Bliss Broyard appeared on Gates’s 2008 miniseries *African American Lives 2*, gracefully facing him a decade after he published her father’s secret against her will. Gates intones during the introduction to his segment on the Broyards: “But what if, given the choice, you could escape the harshest and most painful aspects of being black in America? What would be the price of betraying your birthright?” These keywords – “escape,” “painful,” “betraying,” and “birthright” – are an accurate introduction to the tone Gates tries to strike in his interview. Gates focuses on Bliss Broyard’s feelings of anger, asking her, “What are you angry at your father about?” She responds: “I feel like I was cheated out of knowing my father’s family. He withheld part of himself because of this secret that I didn’t get to know, so there was a limit to what he shared with us. I feel I missed out on that.” Gates also focuses on anger when he writes about Bliss Broyard in his 2009 companion volume *In Search of Our Roots* – effectively giving himself the last word on the Broyard family secret. Gates narrates:

When I told her that I planned to write about her father, Bliss became quite angry at me. I was outing him a way, and that upset her. But as the years have passed,

Bliss's feelings seemed to have softened somewhat... When I read her book [*One Drop*], I discovered that she was *still* pretty angry at me! Nevertheless, when I began this project, I decided to ask her to participate, precisely because she was so angry and did not, I believe, fully understand how culturally black her father and his father had truly been. (383, italics in original)

Gates likely fuels Bliss Broyard's anger by expressing doubt about her research in *One Drop*, particularly the reverse passing of a white ancestor who married a Creole woman. Gates sums up his impressions of her memoir: "Her book is fascinating and helped me to understand her father better, yet the essence of his life – his decision to pass as a white man – remains something of a mystery. And that mystery, I think, is not his desire to break through the glass ceiling of race but the repudiation of his visibly black sister, Shirley, in the lives of his children" (383). Gates's version of Broyard's life insistently returns to the critic's chosen themes of visibility, betrayal, and loss.

In order to make Anatole Broyard's story fit into the narrative of *African American Lives 2*, Gates uses the theme of passing to transition between celebrity guests. After introducing the Broyard family story in one episode, Gates defines racial passing, in a voice-over, as "a form of exile from family and friends... abandoning a community that nurtured you." The episode veers into an exegesis on the meaning of home to African American families during the Great Migration. Gates builds a composite mythology around the dream of home: "Yet the hope that sustained our ancestors since slavery was built upon an *elusive* dream of a home, a place that sustained you, nourished you, reinforced your beliefs in yourself. A place where you felt safe" (emphasis added). Perhaps, though, that fable of a true home was not just *elusive* but *illusive*, a pipe dream to which not every African American subscribed. For a mixed-race man like Anatole

Broyard, which “home” could possibly feel originary: the New Orleans of his birth, the Brooklyn streets where he was tormented by blacks and whites, the hip Greenwich Village where he began to publish, or the affluent Connecticut where he became a father and respected critic? If the self is mutable and buffeted by relations and environments, then perhaps “home” can be no more than a portable concept, a place we take with us no matter where or with whom we choose to settle. Maya Angelou muses on *African American Lives*: “I don’t believe you can ever leave home. You take it with you. It’s in your hair follicles. It’s in the bend of your knees, the arch of your foot.” And the actor Don Cheadle has a similarly mutable conception of relation. He tells Gates in an episode: “You are what you have to defend.” As fascinated as we may be with our ancestors’ dreams and homes, in the end, we are what we choose to fight for. Miller writes of that struggle: “The challenge that faces autobiographers is to invent themselves despite the weight of their family history, and autobiographical singularity emerges in negotiation with this legacy” (“Entangled” 543).

On the last episode of each of his genealogy series, Gates reveals his guests’ DNA test results. Every guest but one agrees to this testing. Alessandra Stanley notes in a review of *Faces of America*: “[Louise] Erdrich... declines to have her genome sequenced and decoded, possibly for fear that DNA results would complicate her claim to Chippewa ancestry. She tells Mr. Gates that her relatives said that it was their DNA too, and not hers alone to share with the world.” In a previous season, Bliss Broyard seems prepared when Gates tells her that she has 17.2% West African blood. She responds: “I think race is the sum of experience and a state of mind... I don’t feel that I have earned the right to call myself black, since I wasn’t raised that way and I don’t look black. But, you know, at the same time, my father was black. I’m black. There’s just a lot of explaining to do” (*In Search* 393). Slyly repurposing Gates’s favorite word of relation, Bliss

Broyard calls herself a “cousin to blackness.” Perhaps relation, today, is less about percentages of shared blood, and more about who and what we feel “cousined” to, and how we attempt to order the story of our identities.

The scale of a secret

It is not so much the “drops of black blood” that fuel Bliss Broyard’s autobiographical impulse, but the “drops of secrecy” that serve as a lens to re-proportion how she sees herself, her family, and her affiliation to a community (445). What is at stake in revelation is not necessarily personal identity, but the boundaries of intimacy and narrative. In “scooping” the Broyard family secret, Henry Louis Gates did not determine Bliss Broyard’s identity. But he did, in part, determine how she would tell her family story. Identity is not constituted by the “snippets and scraps of paper” we accumulate over our lives (“White” 66); rather, it is the order we put those documents in, and the importance we assign to each. The order of our vulnerabilities is not always up to us, but the struggle for self-definition will always be the fight for control over their significance.

Bliss Broyard, like her father, tries to order her vulnerabilities in *One Drop*, and she exercises the right to excise some of them from her memoir. As several reviewers have noted, Bliss Broyard minimizes mention of the book that serves as many readers’ primary connection to the Broyard family secret: Philip Roth’s 2000 novel *The Human Stain*, with a protagonist, Coleman Silk, whose racial passing, postwar womanizing, and intellectual voracity bear striking resemblance to Anatole Broyard. Coleman is an African American man who passes for white, and he loses his academic job over an accidental racial epithet. He and Nathan Zuckerman (Roth’s serial narrator) draw each other out of their respective shells: “Indeed, the dance that sealed our friendship was also what made his disaster my subject. And made his disguise my

subject. And made the proper presentation of his secret my problem to solve” (45). Coleman’s decision to pass, aided by marrying a Jewish woman unaware of his race, is, like Broyard’s, a matter of scale: his wife “gives him back his life on the scale he wants to live it” (136). Even after Coleman’s story is fully unmasked, Zuckerman is left to wonder: “In what proportion, to what degree, had his secret determined his daily life and permeated his everyday thinking?”

(333) Like Gates, Roth constructs the passing story as a “Faustian bargain” with an enormous cost to the family (266). And like Gates, who studiously scrutinizes family resemblances in *Colored People*, Zuckerman has a revelation when he meets Coleman’s darker-skinned daughter, Lisa, who resembles her African American aunt more than her passing father:

It wasn’t a resemblance to Coleman that registered, and registered quickly, in rapid increments, as with a distant star seen through a lens that you’ve steadily *magnified* to the correct intensity. What I saw – when, at long last I did see, see all the way, clear to Coleman’s secret – was the facial resemblance to Lisa, who was even more her aunt’s niece than she was her father’s daughter. (317, emphasis added)

In life writing and in fiction, the stakes of family secrecy are the same: the magnification of the secret, and the scale it assumes in comparison to shared stories of community and nation.

By 2000, Anatole Broyard’s secret had been public knowledge for four years, so he could have been an inspiration for Coleman Silk, though Roth denies it.²⁴ Bliss Broyard mentions Roth once in her memoir, like a whispered code word for the public connection to *The Human Stain*.²⁵ Noting the contrast between his father’s secretive private life and his prolific critical life, Todd Broyard scoffs: “I’m supposed to understand my father by knowing his opinion on the latest Philip Roth novel” (11). The vulnerabilities that a memoir attempts to order are not just the facts

of identity that expose us, but also the borders between one story and another. Readers might protest *One Drop*'s suppression of Roth as another layer of secrecy, another example of "hiding in plain sight" (395). And readers count among the memoirist's significant others who judge the scale of a family story, and where it fits into the discourse of a community. In a sort of anti-review written for her father's former publication, the *New York Times Book Review*, Bliss Broyard notes the mutability of that reading experience. She writes: "In the end, whatever I might tell you about what I think the novel means is irrelevant. Its truths reveal themselves slowly and according to what each reader brings to the story. It keeps changing, like something alive" ("Martin").²⁶

Chapter Three

Portrait of a Secret: J. R. Ackerley and Alison Bechdel

Alison Bechdel and J. R. Ackerley, two memoirists separated by gender, two generations, and the Atlantic Ocean, both write about quests to reclaim secretive fathers through photographs. Bechdel, renowned author of the comic strip *Dykes to Watch Out For*, centers her debut graphic memoir, *Fun Home* (2006), around visual evidence of her father's secret sexuality and likely suicide. Ackerley's posthumously published memoir, *My Father and Myself* (1968), examines evidence of the father's multiplying sexual secrets: his refusal to marry Ackerley's mother until years after their three children were born; a hidden second family with a mistress; a case of syphilis, not cancer, that caused his death; and potential homosexual affairs during his service as a British guardsman. Working from vastly different standpoints – Ackerley's coming-of-age in interwar England; Bechdel's coming-out in post-Stonewall America – both memoirists chart their self-definition as homosexual artists in relation to their fathers' secret histories. Deploying different visual mediums, both build their memoirs around paternal secrets of homosexuality, an identity they define as fundamental to their own self-definitions. As we saw in the previous chapter, claiming a parent as an *x* – no matter what category of identity – has relational and political implications that extend beyond the family unit. Here, Bechdel and Ackerley ask readers to *see* their fathers as they have come to regard them, in the wake of sexual revelations.

Secrecy lends structure to the inchoate material of a reserved family. As Oliver S. Buckton argues about “secret selves” in autobiographical narrative, “the secret becomes an integral part of a given narrative rather than simply that which narrative seeks to conceal or expose. Accordingly, ‘confessional’ writing frequently reverberates with and reproduces the secrecy it claims or appears to eschew” (10-11). Particularly when confessing another's secrets,

that narrative can take the form of a quest, inviting the reader to discover and evaluate the evidence of concealment alongside the memoirist. Like Georg Simmel and other theorists who define secrecy by its form rather than its content, Buckton argues: “What is at stake... is not just the forbidden ‘content’ behind the ‘veil’ of secrecy but also the nature of the particular relationship between the rhetoric of a text and the sexual discourse of the wider culture: that is, to what aesthetic, erotic, and ideological ends the strategy of secrecy is deployed” (17). The form of disclosure, rather than its revealed facts, determine the structure of the narrative. Although Bechdel and Ackerley begin their inquiries from a perspective of identity – was or was not the father homosexual, as the author considers him- or herself homosexual – the frustrated relationship between parent and progeny more powerfully shapes these difficult questions about identity. It is the force of attachment to the father that causes *Fun Home* and *My Father and Myself* to revolve around secrecy and its relational impact, rather than a sexual identity that father and child may or may not have had in common. Though sexuality is the subject that these authors explore, the familial patterns of secrecy, reproduced for the reader as a textual process, lend structure to these memoirs of loss, identity, and missed connection.

Bechdel’s *Fun Home* frequently serves as a case study for a cluster of critics focusing on contemporary memoirs about fathers, such as Roger J. Porter, Thomas G. Couser (who coins the term “patriography” in his latest book), and Andre Gerard (who proposes the neologism “patremoir”). Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson observe in their overview of memoir scholarship, *Reading Autobiography*: “Narratives of family and filiation are often memoirs – *usually of a father, less often of a mother* – by a son or daughter whose parent was remote, unavailable, abusive, or absent” (155, emphasis added). Smith and Watson don’t explore this disparity between writing about a father or a mother here, but Couser explains it as follows: “One question

raised by filial narratives is why narratives of fathers (patriographies) outnumber narratives of mothers (matriographies) by such a large margin. Part of the answer seems to be that, for the baby boom generation, the structure of the nuclear family privileged fathers” (154). Regardless of the gender of the memoirist, autobiography critics have enumerated more narratives about fathers than mothers. Psychoanalytic theorists, including Jessica Benjamin, generally begin from a Lacanian perspective to differentiate the motivations behind paternal stories from maternal ones.¹ It is likely that many memoirists focus on a father, at least in a first volume, because he is the less “known” parent, especially when the mother is the primary or sole caregiver. The quest to discover him comprises a reparative narrative to recalibrate filial distance. And it is important to note that mothers almost always play a role within putative memoirs of the father. As serial memoirist Mary Gordon observes in her first family memoir, *The Shadow Man*: “I am ashamed, as a woman, that when I say the words ‘my mother’s body,’ I have feelings of revulsion, and when I say ‘my father’s body,’ I have feelings of joy and peace. It’s an old story. The love of the absent, of the not” (221).

As if in response to this critical assumption of paternal favoritism, Bechdel followed *Fun Home* with *Are You My Mother?* (2012), a graphic memoir devoted to her relationship with her mother, particularly in the wake of *Fun Home*’s disclosures of family secrets. As I argue later in this chapter, the conceit of *Are You My Mother?* is just as intricate as *Fun Home*, yet it takes a different trajectory to the same theme as the first memoir: the journey of becoming an artist. The “dad book,” as Bechdel terms *Fun Home* (*Are You* 65), is structured around the gaps of secrecy in her relationship with her father, while the second memoir conforms to what I am thinking of as a “diurnal” structure – mindfully attuned, like a diligently-kept diary, to the everyday labor and subtly shifting perceptions of self-study. The diary, of course, has long been an important

subgenre of life writing. Celebrity diaries, such as *The Journals of John Cheever*, make similar promises as memoirs of family secrets: a glimpse behind the veil of privacy into an untold life. The best writers' memoirs, however, also reveal the formal concerns of a writer's source material. In "A Sketch of the Past," a posthumously published diary fragment, Virginia Woolf notes an important formal discovery.² She begins an entry: "2nd May... I write the date, because I think 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 a platform to stand upon. It would be interesting to make the two people, I now, I then, come out in contrast" (75). Although diaries are commonly associated with unstructured free writing, a committed diarist like Woolf is always attuned to the structural possibilities of life writing, however private. Woolf is one of the heroines of *Are You My Mother?* and Bechdel's diurnal structure in this second memoir feels strongly indebted to her, as a diary-keeping literary predecessor. If *Fun Home*'s shape is best represented as a spiral around a core of the unknown – similar to Robert Frost's dance in "The Secret Sits" – *Are You My Mother?* borrows its structure from the incremental advancement and imaginative leaps of psychoanalysis and diary-keeping.

Ackerley, too, devoted years of his life to composing a memoir around his father's secrets – but all the while, he paid quiet tribute to his mother's influence within his personal writing: a diary published, like *My Father and Myself*, after the death of the author and his familial subjects. Ackerley's memoir owes a great deal to this journal-keeping, according to W. H. Auden, who writes in a review of *My Father and Myself*: "[Ackerley] discovered that he could not create imaginary characters and situations: all his books were based on journals, whether written down or kept in his head." For Ackerley as well as Bechdel, the diary serves as crucial source material for memoirs. And both these memoirists make their diaries public – Bechdel by

reproducing swaths of her diary within her memoirs, and Ackerley by bequeathing his private writings to a friend, Francis King, in order to keep them out of the hands of his sister, who might have destroyed them to preserve her own privacy. (Ackerley himself burned his father's desk and all the private papers within it, on the advice of his father's business partner, who assured the son that he was better off not knowing the contents. Ackerley later laments the loss of so much material by his father). Ackerley's diaries, like his memoir, were published posthumously, keeping not only the secrets that Ackerley's father asked him to keep, but also the possible homosexual secrets that the father never acknowledged.

The generation gap

In *My Father and Myself* and *Fun Home*, Ackerley and Bechdel put desire, death, and heredity into visual and sexual terms. Both texts are necessarily biography, autobiography, and incomplete family albums. If Anatole Broyard and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. utilize family albums as textual gestures toward their memoirs' secrets; then Bechdel and Ackerley put visual analysis at the very center of the autobiographical discoveries, however incomplete they may be. As Hélène Cixous writes of her fragmented family archive in *Rootprints*, "Old tattered album. Respect the tatteredness. The tatteredness is the secret: portrait of the family memory" (179). Ackerley (1896-1967), editor of the BBC magazine *The Listener*, lived in a British era bookended by Oscar Wilde's indecency conviction and the decriminalization of homosexual activity in the Sexual Offences Act of 1967 (McHugh 21). Reeling from the revelation of one secret in his father's will – that he raised three daughters with a long-term mistress, completely hidden from his first family, and never revealed to Ackerley's mother – he searches for another secret that will draw his father's life in closer parallel with his own.³ Ackerley begins that imaginative quest with his father's death, and tries to link his father's secret cause of death (the

return of his old case of syphilis, not tongue cancer, as he led both families to believe) to a hidden history of youthful homosexual encounters. Similarly, Bechdel tries to connect her father's presumed suicide to two sexual revelations: soon after she discovers her own homosexuality, she learns from her mother, four months before the father's roadside death, that he had several affairs with men, some of whom were underage. Like Ackerley, Bechdel compares her father's midcentury era of sexual secrets to her own adulthood of "out" sexuality. Bechdel states in an interview: "our two stories form a kind of longitudinal sociological study. He graduated from college a dozen years before Stonewall. I graduated a dozen years after" ("Conversation"). Bechdel's theory of her father's suicide bridges the generation gap; she inserts her own sexuality and coming-out into the causal narrative of her father's death, weaving what she calls "that last, tenuous bond" between father and daughter (*Fun Home* 85).

Guardians of their dead fathers' depictions, Bechdel and Ackerley attempt to build a visual archive that recasts an absent father in the author's own image. Like Susan Cheever and Linda Gray Sexton, Bechdel and Ackerley try to take memories of their parents with them as they discover affiliations outside the family sphere. Bechdel and Ackerley, however, rely on visual identity as a means to forge a new bond between deceased parent and writing child. As Marianne Hirsch demonstrates in her influential *Family Frames*, family photographs are uniquely "perched between life and death" (23). Inspired by Art Spiegelman's graphic memoir *Maus*, Hirsch introduced the concept of "postmemory," which she describes as "the experience of those who grew up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are evacuated by the stories of the previous generation shaped by traumatic events that can be neither understood nor recreated" (22). In instances of postmemory, the parent's past overshadows the progeny's present, and unspeakable trauma is passed on intergenerationally.

Postmemory can resemble nescience in its patterns of intergenerational transmission. However, unlike postmemory, nescience requires not necessarily a traumatic history, but any untold secret. Nescience leans on secrecy, while postmemory requires unspeakability. After all, the senior Ackerley's homosexual affairs, if they did happen, were likely not traumatic; the son suspects that his father traded up in class and wealth via a male lover. Nescience results from any personal secret, no matter its content or why it was concealed. Capturing the trauma of losing family stories, regardless of their content, Nancy K. Miller describes a sensibility similar to nescience as "unstoried memory," which she defines as "a story that *could have been told*, but never was" ("Grandmother" 331, italics in original). Unstoried memory is "an *absence* of story that leaves the ... heir feeling cut off from the familial narrative, the historical legacy that has nonetheless played an important role in an individual's formation. One is bereft, without a true subject of grief, but at the same time aware of a lost dimension, a phantom past" (332). This regret over lost memory, which combines elements of nescience and "known unknowns," can itself feel traumatic to the inheritor.⁴

All three models of intergenerational transmission – nescience, postmemory, and unstoried memory – inspire the son or daughter to try to imagine the earlier generation's untold experience. Ackerley and Bechdel's scrutiny of family photographs reflects what Hirsch calls postmemory's "imaginative investment and creation" (22). The child recreates the parent, reanimating his image through visual imagination. But Ackerley and Bechdel's process of recreating the father surpasses the inherited trajectory of postmemory, for their imaginations must give form to what they never knew about their fathers: their sexual secrets and identity. Ultimately, *My Father and Myself* and *Fun Home* demonstrate the *reverse* inheritance of the second-generation imagination: its powers of creative generation flow from the present to the

past, from the writer to the lost father. Picturing a parent's concealed secrets requires a slightly different act of imagination than postmemory. A child can fill in a parent's secrets with her own, making a parent more like her, and creating a narrative that explains why the writer is who she is today. This recreation of the parent reverses the order of what the critic Michael Warner terms "repro-narrativity," or "the notion that our lives are somehow made more meaningful by being embedded in a narrative of generational succession" (7). Through acts of looking and interpretation, the writer can flip the "repro-narrative": though still embedded in the generational story, she can fill in the parent's untold gaps with a narrative from her own experience or identity. These creative acts of love and regret defy the unidirectional linearity of generations; they resemble the "signifying space, a both corporeal and *desiring* mental space" that Julia Kristeva proposes in her feminist essay "Women's Time" (33, emphasis added). In short, the desire for knowledge and connection can supersede chronology and inheritance in the lineage of family secrecy.

But what are the stakes of remaking the lost parent in one's own image? Ackerley declares that in researching his dead father's past, he was "hoping still to drag him captive into the homosexual fold" (*My Father* 259). By placing homosexuality within the chain of lineage, Ackerley and Bechdel attempt to locate themselves within their fathers' mortal secrets. One function of the autobiographical act, in any medium, is to build a narrative bridge between generations separated by death and silence, serving as a gesture of familial reparation. Building that bridge on sexual commonality, however, has its risks. Kathryn Harrison writes in a review of *The Bishop's Daughter* (2008), Honor Moore's memoir of her father's secret bisexual history: "Even a writer who can assume a readership inured to every possible confession requires courage and the confidence of knowing and accepting her deepest self to acknowledge a sexual

interrelation – although one that is not improper, psychic rather than physical – between parent and child” (“Difficult”). A memoirist risks losing her readers’ sympathy when sex crosses the generation gap, even imaginatively. Additionally, for Bechdel and Ackerley, a confession of identity requires an investigation of heredity, an envisioning of hypothetical circumstances in which they would never have been born. As Roland Barthes writes in his visual and autobiographical analysis, *Camera Lucida* (1980), “I am the reference of every photograph, and this is what generates my astonishment in addressing myself to the fundamental question: why is it that I am alive here and now?” (84) In parsing that teleology, a father’s secret history of homosexuality troubles the progression of lineage. As she recalls looking up “father” and “beget” in the dictionary, Bechdel writes in *Fun Home*: “If my father had ‘come out’ in his youth, if he had not met and married my mother, where does that leave me?” (197) Gazing at her father’s photograph, she wavers between yearning to resurrect him through identification, and keeping a secret essential to her own conception. The risk of imaginatively repairing the gap of homosexual secrecy is the possibility of self-erasure. By placing her own sexual identity at the center of a paternal secret, the author, paradoxically, risks writing herself out of existence, at the very moment of the greatest imaginative identification with the father.

Can this projection of sexual identity respect the historical context of the father’s secrets? Edmund Gosse writes at the outset of *Father and Son* (1907), a founding text of family memoirs:

This book is the record of a struggle between two temperaments, two consciences and almost two epochs. It ended, as was inevitable, in disruption. Of the two human beings here described, one was born to fly backward, the other could not help being carried forward. There came a time when neither spoke the same language as the other, or encompassed the same hopes, or was fortified by the

same desires. But, at least, in some consolation to the survivor, that neither, to the very last hour, ceased to respect the other, or to regard him with a sad indulgence.

(5)

Gosse's memoir limns, mourns, and respects the generation gap between father and son. The presence of secrecy necessarily complicates that gap in *Fun Home* and *My Father and Myself*; relational distance comes to signify much more than generational difference. In the Ackerley and Bechdel families, based in the conservative milieu of Edwardian England and rural Pennsylvania, would sexual secrets *ever* have been shared between an older generation and a younger? Would a varied sexuality have constituted an "identity" for a father in his own era, as it did for the younger Ackerley, who rarely bothered to hide his contempt for women, or Bechdel, who built a career as a queer cartoonist?

According to Couser's overview of the genre, "the value of memoir and autobiography rely ... heavily on the identity claims they make" (92). Although critics like Couser and Porter center studies of paternal memoirs on questions of *identity*, I'd like to argue that, at least in the case of a parent's concealed sexual past, the consequences of intergenerational secrecy have more bearing on the family *relation* than the second generation's self-identity. For any exploration of intergenerational identity requires some respect for the generation gap: "my father" can never be the same as "myself."⁵ As Michel Foucault posited half a century ago, sexuality has not always been the focus of self-identity or the locus of secrecy that it is in the modern and contemporary eras. In *A History of Sexuality, vol. 1*, Foucault argues that in modernity, sex has been constituted as *the* secret, constantly concealed and revealed in a confessional society. He writes: "For us, it is in the confession that truth and sex are joined, through the obligatory and exhaustive expression of an individual secret" (61). Foucault

concludes on the status of sexuality as the fundamental secret: “Sex – that agency which appears to dominate us and that secret which seems to underlie all that we are, that point which enthralls us through the power it manifests and the meaning it conceals, and which we ask to reveal what we are and to free us from what defines us – is doubtless but an ideal point made necessary by the deployment of sexuality and its operation” (155).⁶ Sexual activity, then, is broadly interpreted as a sign of sexual identity, a defining force and a perennial secret. But rather than a reified key to identity, a secret is better defined a strategy of discourse – not an answer but a way of wondering. Secrecy is the dance, not the passive center of inquiry, contrary to Robert Frost’s “The Secret Sits.” In line with Simmel, who defines secrecy by its formal properties, Foucault writes: “There is not one but many silences, and they are an integral part of the strategies that underlie and permeate discourse” (27). A secret, which function as a form, is not necessarily an identity. We are not our secrets. Others, most certainly, are not us, and others are not our secrets. And to emphasize identity over relationality in autobiography is to replicate the intergenerational fallacy of filial projection. Bechdel writes: “Perhaps my eagerness to claim him as ‘gay’ in the way I am ‘gay,’ as opposed to bisexual or some other category, is just a way of keeping him to myself – a sort of inverted Oedipal complex” (*Fun Home* 230).

Digging for truth

In *My Father and Myself* and *Fun Home*, the mechanics of the quest for identity and relation assume similar structures. Bechdel and Ackerley begin their inquiries with their fathers’ causes of death, inquiring how they as progeny are scripted into these losses. Both writers return to scenes of missed connection, when they feel they could have bonded over shared experience with their fathers, but did not. Instead, each author is left scrutinizing family archives and reversing the pattern of intergenerational inheritance to project personal identity upon the

father's unknowable past. *Fun Home* and *My Father and Myself* are both recursive in structure, repeatedly returning to scenes of frustrated relation and inconclusive evidence. Similar to the subgenre of the "roots memoir" into which Bliss Broyard's *One Drop* fits, these quests invite the reader along on the journey to discover the father. The process of unearthing and examining the evidence of secrecy serves to bond memoirist and reader together.

Fun Home spirals around a cluster of related scenes: Alison's discovery of her homosexuality while in her college bookstore, and a phone conversation in which her mother says, in response to Alison's coming-out letter home: "Your father has had affairs. With other men" (203, 58). And teenage boys, as Alison soon discovers. "And with my father's death following hard on the heels of this doleful coming-out party," Bechdel ruminates, "I could not help but assume a cause-and-effect relationship" (59). The third repeating scene is from Bechdel's imagination: the split seconds before Bruce Bechdel jumped in front of a Sunbeam bread truck on a country road, ending his life. The closest Bechdel gets to picturing the actual collision is a close-up, half-page drawing of the looming truck on the memoir's last page, the grille, enlarged and symmetrical, resembling the gutter-and-frame rhythm of a comics page (232). This is the only scene from *Fun Home* that Bechdel draws from her imagination, rather than from evidence. Though it is not explicitly set off from the rest of the memoir, it resembles Broyard's italicized scene in *One Drop* of imagining her father accepting a "white" check on his social security form. For both these daughters, scenes of identity formation constitute the heart of the narrative.

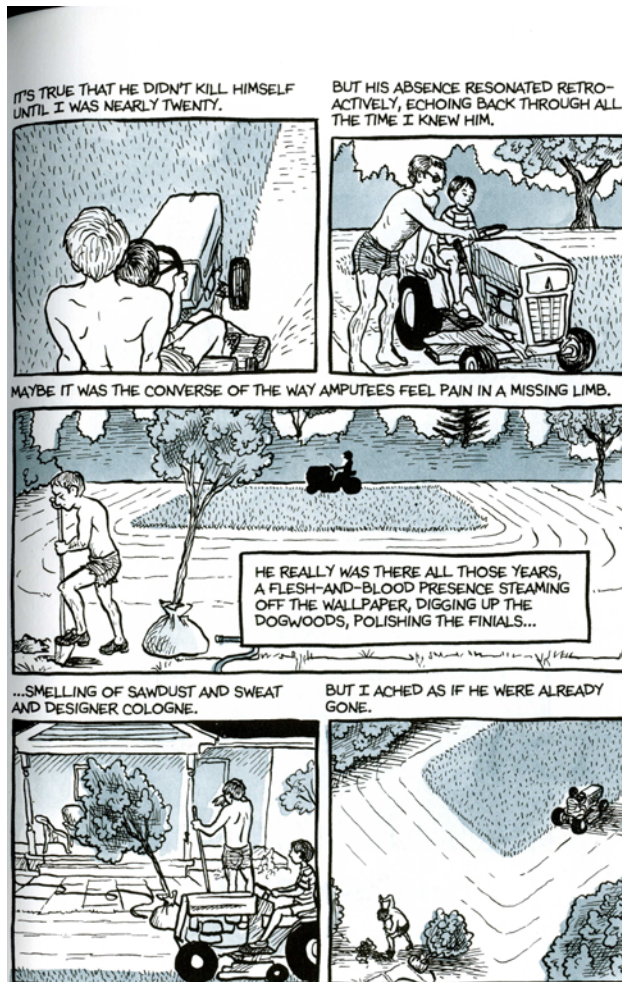


Fig. 1

Bechdel prefigures this circling structure and its frustrated interlocking of sexual identities in an early scene about mowing the lawn with her father (Fig. 1). First father and daughter ride the mower together; then the father shows her how to operate the equipment herself. Bechdel's drawings emphasize the careful grooming lines emerging on the lawn, especially next to Bruce Bechdel's tightly-muscled and well-preserved physique. The randomized stubble of uncut grass systematically gives way to neat rows of manicured lawn. The scene's last frame shows a tiny Alison, viewed from above at a nostalgic distance, circling the lawn alone, as though spiraling through a narrative that centers on her father, but necessarily

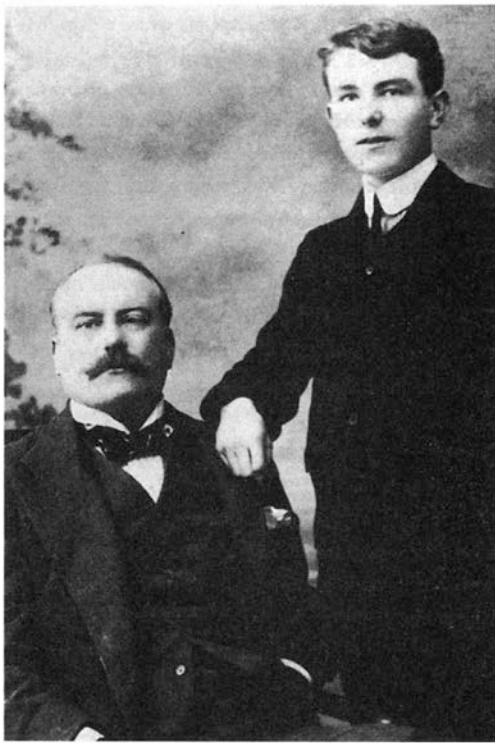
excludes him. The text above the last frame reads: “But I ached as if he were already gone” (23). That ache of prescient lack also signals the workings of nescience – Bechdel describes the pain of the father’s secrecy and absence, but her younger self doesn’t understand why she is doomed already to miss him. Bruce Bechdel has set this circling narrative in motion, but at its core lies his loss, his refusal to occupy a central position of identification with his daughter. The empty lawn signals the continuous loss and regrowth of the mourning cycle, as well as Bruce Bechdel’s constant efforts to maintain family appearances.

Ackerley employs a similar metaphor to explain the structure of *My Father and Myself*. While Bechdel mows around her and her father’s story in search of an elusive common center, Ackerley claims to plow over his father’s past methodically to unearth his secrets at regular intervals. “The excuse, I fear, is Art,” he writes, adding that “artistically shocks should never be bunched, they need spacing for maximum individual effect” (5). Ackerley’s proposed form, rather than a chronology, consists of “ploughing to and fro over my father’s life and my own, turning up a little more sub-soil each time as the plough turned” (5). *My Father and Myself* is all about form. Francis King, inheritor and editor of Ackerley’s diaries, suggests that the memoirist’s craft might have excluded potential answers to the mysteries the memoir poses, such as why Ackerley’s parents secretly married only after raising children together for over two decades. King speculates: “until approximately 1919, there may have already been an Ackerley wife, of whom we know nothing. I once put this to Joe; but no doubt *because it did not fit into the artistic scheme*, as formal as that of a novel, of the book that he was perpetually gestating up to the time of his death, he showed little interest” (11, emphasis added). Ackerley structures his memoir around his father’s hidden homosexual experiences, sidelining or excluding other secrets, even sexual ones, that don’t support his obsession. In *Fun Home* and *My Father and*

Myself, form is the driving force of personal narrative; each memoir's recursive structure reveals the meticulous, obsessive, yet doomed effort to reconnect to a dead father. Both Ackerley and Bechdel employ earthy metaphors – mowing grass, turning soil – to gesture toward the stakes of regrowth, regeneration, and artistic procreation within their family narratives. These structural metaphors also signal the constant effort of maintenance, of coaxing the wild messiness of relation to adhere to orderly rows of exposition and interpretation. In line with these verdant metaphors, it is perhaps no surprise that Ackerley's autobiographical play, *The Prisoners of War* (1925), features on a hero who, “unable to build on human relations, takes to a plant” as a companion (*My Father* 216) – a nonhuman predecessor to Ackerley's late-in-life soul mate, a dog named Queenie.⁷

In Ackerley's neat structure of relational inquiry, image and text are arranged in opposition. The photographic portraits within *My Father and Myself* are as “bunched” as the text's “shocks” are spaced; every image but one appears within the photographic insert, printed about a quarter of the way through the book (5). Here, one advantage of the graphic medium over the traditional text-and-photo-insert format of autobiography becomes clear: a graphic memoirist like Bechdel can expand, contract, and layer her narrative at will, signaling a fractured family chronology. Not just the pacing but the *spacing* of self-narrative is at play in a story of mourning the unknown. While Bechdel continuously presents and represents the visual evidence of her father's secrets, Ackerley's readers must flip back and forth between text and image to take in the full portrait of his father. In other words, Ackerley's to-and-fro “ploughing” evolves into Bechdel's multidimensional spiraling in the calculation of affective distance between child and father and between writer and reader. However, it is important to note that even while working in the graphic medium, in which text and image may be combined at will, Bechdel often

chooses to *separate* pictorial and verbal exposition in both memoirs. For example, she often develops an intertext, such as Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past* or Jung's *Four Archetypes*, in a text-box hovering above a childhood scene, such as gardening with her father or watching her mother repair a hole in her pants (*Fun Home* 93, *Are You* 80). This dense co-narration of memory and intertext builds a poignant counterpoint between a child's view of the world and the complicating (and not always illuminating) layer of adult interpretation.



My father and myself

Fig. 2

In *My Father and Myself*, Ackerley's interpretations of family photographs reveal his imaginative investment in the archive, as well as the limits of his investigation into his father's identity. In the first photograph in the memoir (Fig. 2), hands and eyes indicate the simultaneous entanglement and estrangement of father and son.⁸ The father's hands are outside the frame, and

only one of Ackerley's is shown, its fingers folded in, looking more self-protective than affectionate while resting on his father's shoulder. Intimacy between father and son is implied in the bodily contact, but refuted by the curled position of young Ackerley's hand and the disjointed gazes of the two subjects. The son looks just to the side of the camera, while his father, partially in shadow, avoids the lens. Ackerley explains his father's divided gaze: "In one of his eyes, which were wide and blue and greatly magnified by his horn-rimmed spectacles, he had a pronounced cast" (112). Ackerley then reveals that "my father held decided views, often stated, of where eyes should be placed and what they ought to do" (113). In light of these statements, the position of hands and eyes yield a clue to unraveling this son's verbal and visual portrait of his father, and the troubled relationship the memoir cannot quite heal.

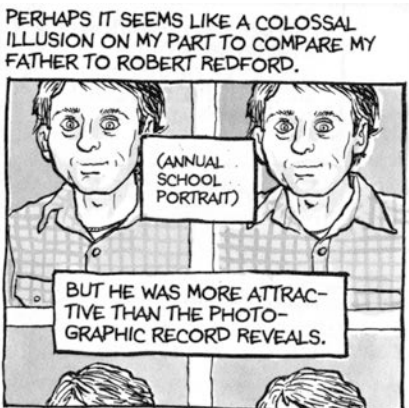


Fig. 3

Bechdel also turns to a formal portrait to examine her relationship with her father. Though she has a variety of snapshots to choose from (this is not the Edwardian era of Ackerley's youth, in which formal portraits were the norm) Bechdel revels in the artificiality of portraiture, which helps her explore the subjectivity of the photographic medium.⁹ Bechdel, like Ackerley, repeatedly holds up photographic evidence of the father's past to the reader's eye, though Bechdel's photographs are always redrawn, filtering the reader's possible interpretations

through her own eye, hand, and heart. One panel of *Fun Home*, depicting a set of school portraits (Fig. 3), reveals the emotional effort of Bechdel's search for meaning in her father's official image.¹⁰ The prints she recreates in her drawing are uncut from a sheet of duplicates. The even spacing of the prints recalls the gutter-and-frame format of comics panels, but the duplication refutes the construction of time and linear progress on which the comics form relies. As a static "comic strip," these panels point to the lack of narrative advancement in *Fun Home*, which Ann Cvetkovich terms its "queer temporality, one that refuses narratives of progress" (124). Bechdel points out: "if you don't count the subplot of my own coming out story, the sole dramatic incident in the book is that my dad dies. Everything else is this extremely involuted introspection about it all" (Chute, "Interview" 1008). Like a subject of an Andy Warhol portrait, Bruce Bechdel's wide-open eyes and pinched smile appear all the more duplicitous in duplication. Throughout *Fun Home*, he usually wears a scowling or distracted expression, with hooded eyes. In this unusual cropping, the top of the father's head is cut off, and the exact excision is preserved in the two bottom frames. The father is essentially scalped, with the top of his head floating beneath him, as if Bechdel hopes to extract secrets from his skull. Within the supposedly objective record of archival photographs, Bechdel asserts her artist's will within this cropping. The text narrates: "But he was more attractive than the photographic record reveals" (64). Bechdel's careful replication of her father's portrait airs the frustrations of an incomplete archive: though her hand labors to duplicate her father's image faithfully, her unusual cropping enacts the emotional force of her search for an image of her father's secrets. Bechdel, who prides herself on her faithful redrawing of family photographs, still controls the reader's view of the father – her choice of photographs and borders, and how these images differ in appearance from the rest of the graphic memoir, reveal aspects of her affective relationship to her father's loss.



Fig. 4

While Bechdel demonstrates her efforts to open up her father's head to the reader, Ackerley admits the limitations of his visual archive, acknowledging that his interpretations of his father are more revealing than the photographs he can display. And Ackerley's choices of which images to include in his memoir also shape the reader's view of the father.¹¹ After his father's death, Ackerley revisits an 1885 photograph of 22-year-old Roger Ackerley with three friends at a summer home in New Brighton (Fig. 4). Now that he suspects his father of youthful homosexual affairs, Ackerley deems the photograph "an innocent-looking affair, if only because there was safety in numbers" (250). In this group portrait, four friends lounge outdoors with a dog on a rough-hewn lion-skin rug. Perhaps Ackerley's affinity to dogs, well-documented in *My Father and Myself*, *My Dog Tulip*, and *My Sister and Myself*, influenced his choice to write about

this photograph. Part of the innocence of appearances here is that most of the figures face the camera frankly and openly, including two of the friends (and possible lovers of the senior Ackerley) and even the dog and lion's head. Ackerley's father, by contrast, sits in a cross-legged, closed-off position, eyes averted. In an interesting case of visual withholding, Ackerley calls Dudley Sykes, the figure on the right, "bold and roving-eyed," though, he writes in a footnote, "in the one [photograph] I have selected Mr. Sykes's eyes are invisible" (31). The choice of photographs is crucial here; Ackerley mentions more in his text than he can show in his selected image. For Ackerley has chosen this shot from two photos of the same group, and this photograph withholds Sykes's eyes in a blink, as if this possible suitor of the elder Ackerley might charm the viewer, too. In *My Father and Myself*, Ackerley keeps his father – and his reader – to himself by withholding this competitor's "bold and roving-eyed" gaze. This pattern of verbal exposition without visual evidence continues, as Ackerley narrates the image: "Behind them, along the sill of an open window, potted plants are ranged. Would that I had been able to peep and eavesdrop through that window and discover their secrets, if any. But I was not yet born" (32). Yet in the photograph Ackerley selected, just a corner of the windowsill is visible on the far left; the site of fantasized eavesdropping, the open window above the sill, is outside the photograph's frame. Ackerley is telling his readers more than he can show them – or perhaps showing them less than he potentially could, with a different choice of image. This doubly secretive position of eavesdropping – hidden from the portrait's subjects as well as the reader – troubles Philippe Lejeune's "autobiographical pact," or the agreement between autobiographer and reader that testifies to the spirit of truth in the narrative (3). In his choice of illustration, Ackerley leaves the reader out of the picture. He limits the reader's visual access to the tenuous bond between his father and himself, and the "peeping" methods he uses to form that bond. The

truncated relation between Ackerley and his father is translated into a selective flow of secret sharing with the reader. Although we readers are invited on the memoir's quest for the father, Ackerley limits our visual access to his father's secrets.

Visual recognition



My father as a guardsman

Fig. 5

Ackerley then shares with his reader the portrait of his father as a guardsman that inspired his epiphany of his father's sexuality (Fig. 5). "This old photograph," he writes, "made me sit up. The inherent absurdity of envisaging my father in the arms of another man had never really faded; it faded now. It is true that, studying the photograph of him in uniform, I decided that I would not have picked him up myself; but the picture was said not to do him justice, and the better one Uncle Denton claimed to have never managed to find" (256-57). Although the

photographic archive is again incomplete, it is sufficient to make Ackerley, who is attracted to men in uniform, “sit up” in interest and recognition. But what is visible to a viewer outside the family circle? “My father as a guardsman” is a full-body shot, but the father’s erect posture competes for attention with the busy background. A dated air of artificiality reigns here, with the pastoral backdrop and mysterious foreground elements, including a lampshade-like official cap that seems to float lightly upon an indistinct, fur-draped stool or chair. The furry piece of furniture is reminiscent of the dog and lion skin in the New Brighton group portrait – its animal-like presence hovers like a chaotic living thing. Clad in his form-fitting uniform and tall boots, the father appears larger than life, with his left foot exceeding the frame and his head reaching the very top of it. His gloved right hand holds the left glove loosely, hiding its fingers beneath the palm – a secretive or protective position that recalls young Ackerley’s folded hand in the father and son portrait. With so many bizarre elements competing for the viewer’s attention in this portrait, from the fur-draped chair to the conical gloves to the aggressively pastoral background, a reader will likely not experience the same level of sexual attraction that Ackerley does in viewing this odd portrait.

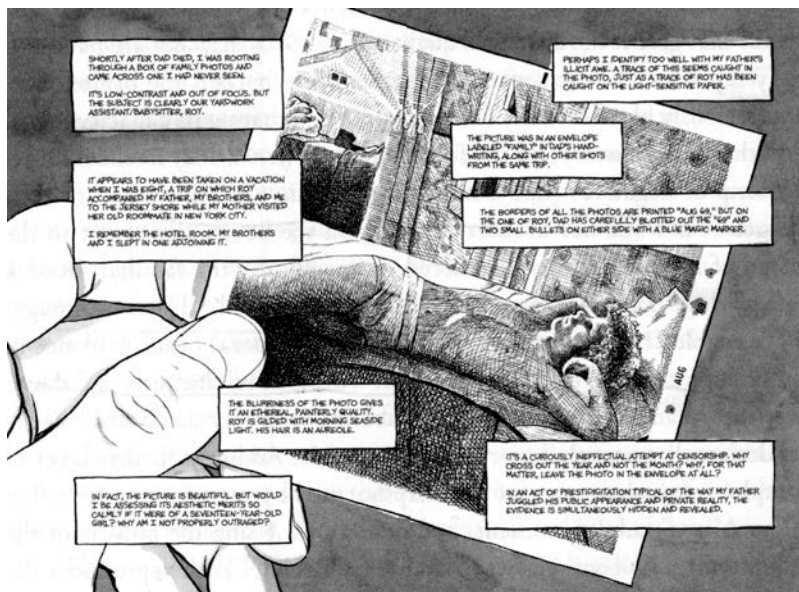


Fig. 6

In *Fun Home*, Bechdel has a similar photographic moment that makes her “sit up” with visual identification after her father’s death. Here, though, Bechdel depicts a photo not of her father, but of one of his teenaged lovers: the family babysitter, Roy (Fig. 6). Instead of poring over the father’s image, as both memoirists have been shown to do thus far, Bechdel tries to discover her father through his gaze: to see what he was through what he saw. Bechdel explains the formative impact of finding this photograph a year after her father’s death:

That’s when I ran across this photograph. It was a stunning glimpse into my father’s hidden life, this life that was running parallel to our regular everyday existence. And it was particularly compelling to me at the time because I was just coming out myself. I felt this sort of posthumous bond with my father, like I shared this thing with him, like we were comrades. I didn’t start working on the book then, but over the years that picture persisted in my memory. It’s literally the core of the book, the centerfold. (Chute, “Interview” 1006)

The comradeship between Bechdel and her father is necessarily limited, and not just because she found this photograph after his death. As a portrait of desire, this photograph of Roy is a glimpse into a different world – what another sexually secretive father, Paul Moore, delicately termed a realm of “*men without women*” in a letter to his newborn daughter, memoirist Honor Moore (86, italics in original).¹²

For Bechdel, the discovery of her father’s snapshot of Roy triggers an identificatory gaze. Bechdel draws the photograph as a “centerfold,” the only double-page panel of *Fun Home*. (She later reproduces this strategy of double-page panels in *Are You My Mother?* in which every section of the memoir ends with a centerfold, but the proliferation is not nearly as arresting as the

single image in *Fun Home*.) Plenty of text crowds the page around Roy's reclining figure, holding the reader's eye long enough to simulate Bechdel's ambivalent gaze. In this centerfold, Bechdel's narrative strategy is one of what Edward Said has called, in the context of Joe Sacco's graphic volume *Palestine*, "detainment" (v) – holding the father's gaze, as her and her reader's own, for as long as possible.¹³ If the father-daughter outing is the heart of *Fun Home*'s spiraling revelation, then this image is that spiral's border, against which her cycles of interpretation repeatedly carom. The photograph of Roy is the outer limit of the daughter's possible interpretations of her father: the furthest she can get from her own experience of their relationship, and the closest she can get to identifying with his desiring gaze.

A complex dynamic of revelation and protection inhabits this centerfold. On the photographic print, Bruce Bechdel has blotted out the year and the "bullets" printed on Roy's portrait, in "a curiously ineffectual attempt" to alter the evidence of his illicit gaze (101). Or, inadvertently, the date blotting might serve to make that erotic look timeless, as Bechdel imagines herself viewing the photograph today with the same awe as her father in 1969. The concealed-and-revealed date "69" points toward the slang for a sexual position, and also the legal stakes of the father's affair with a boy not yet of age. One caption reads: "The picture was in an envelope labeled 'family' in Dad's handwriting, along with other shots from the same trip" (101). Residing within the family archive, the father's secret hides in plain sight. The photo is a portrait of secret desire, of a sexual relation from which Bechdel was excluded but now begins to comprehend. The reader, in turn, feels a similar simultaneous mirroring and exclusion, thanks to Bechdel's formal strategies. For two artistic styles animate *Fun Home*: a cartoonish, generalized style for "diegetic" or narrative storytelling, and crosshatched, finely detailed "archival" style for drawn photographs. In a layering of these styles, Bechdel's life-sized, generalized, genderless

hand lies just next to the reader's hand that holds the page.¹⁴ Bechdel states in a *New Yorker* profile that cartooning's "aesthetic neutrality appeals to me. I'm always striving to be a generic person" (53). A generic hand, standing in for Alison's cartoon hand, beckons the reader into the text, to join her in her scrutiny of this picture of desire. Alison's hand is one step closer to the scene of the photograph, to the site of the secret, but still outside of it. The reader tries to see what the memoirist sees, as she tries to see what her father saw in Roy. Bechdel dramatizes the impossibility of grasping another's "erotic truth" (230), of entering a rarefied world of "men without women" (Moore 86).



Fig. 7

The diegetic hand of the daughter holding Ray's portrait echoes an image on the previous page of *Fun Home*, in which an adolescent Alison admires a centerfold in *Esquire* magazine, with her father looking over her shoulder (Fig. 7). Together they gaze at a fashion spread of a shirtless model in a three-piece suit, with a disembodied feminine hand caressing the model's

muscled chest. “The objects of our desire were quite different,” Bechdel writes: her father presumably desires the figure in the advertisement, while Alison desires to *be* that man, to inhabit that hard, masculine body with a desiring gaze and hand upon it (99). In the mirroring of these adjacent centerfolds – *Esquire* model and Roy the babysitter – Alison’s life-sized hand, holding Roy’s photo, displaces the female model’s hand; the site of desire is no longer the male chest or even the father’s lover, but the generational longing of a daughter, archivist, and artist. Bechdel’s artistic thumbprint on Roy’s photograph reminds the reader of the intergenerational and artistic stakes of uncovering a secret and attempting to share its implications outside the family. The scopophilic, gendered caress of the *Esquire* centerfold is transformed into an artist’s diligent penstrokes, as Bechdel seizes control of how these images will look and feel, and how her father’s secrets will be exposed to the reader. The question of a father’s identity becomes secondary to a writer’s control over a shared story. As Bliss Broyard told Henry Louis Gates, Jr. after he exposed her father’s race: “I thought this step of outing him myself would allow me to regain control over my identity. But what I have come to realize is that I am not in control of the way that people see me or my dad. It’s always going to be a compromise between how I see myself and how the world sees me. Between how the world sees my dad and how I do” (Gates, *In Search* 383). Since a father’s identities, however multiple, can never be fully known, Bechdel’s artistic hand marks the distances of familial desire and relation. That touch of artistic reproduction is as close as Bechdel can get to her father.

Identifying the lost parent with oneself may not repair the relationship between child and parent, but it can initiate new threads of relation, to readers. Two levels of confession intersect in *Fun Home* and *My Father and Myself*: the truncated confession of sexuality to parents, and the subsequent confession to readers. Bechdel notes that when she wrote her coming-out letter to her

family, “I had imagined my confession as emancipation from my parents, but instead I was pulled back into their orbit” (59). Similarly, Helena Gurfinkel identifies within Ackerley’s memoir “a figure of the artist who refuses to leave the father’s house” (555). Ackerley and Bechdel do, in fact, leave their fathers’ houses. Yet when they leave, they carry certain versions of their fathers within them, refashioning paternal secrets in their own image. Their departures are colored by shades of mourning and regret. Ackerley writes midway through his book: “It is the purpose of the rest of this memoir to explore, as briefly as possible, the reasons for our failure” (100). Ackerley is cut off mid-sentence when he tries to confess his homosexuality to his dying father: “‘I don’t really mind telling you. I went to meet a sailor friend...’ But he interrupted me with ‘It’s all right, old boy. I prefer not to know. So long as you enjoyed yourself, that’s the main thing’” (190). In *Fun Home*, Alison’s father also evades his daughter’s self-labeling, sidestepping the question of sexual identity by responding, “At least you’re human. Everyone should experiment” (100). Father and child cannot intersect in a moment of sexual confession. They can merely coexist within the open and evolving inquiry of sexual identity. As Bechdel writes, “the end of his lie coincided with the beginning of my truth” (210).

Nevertheless, even as these two memoirists mourn the gaps of secrecy within their relationships with their fathers, they acknowledge that secrecy produced the autobiography, in form and content. In the return home for the material of a story worth telling, the lure of what cannot be known is often the strongest. Miller observes that in her own case of unstoried memory, “this almost blank sheet of the past weighs on the present... *as if it were* inherited memory” (“Grandmother” 331, italics in original). Blank pages, as I showed in my introductory chapter, might be reimagined as an invisible text, a palimpsestic invitation for the next generation’s imagination. That force of inheritance, wishful or otherwise, is palpable in memoirs

of family secrets. After he discovers the military portrait of his father, Ackerley writes: “What fun it would be if I could add the charge of homosexuality to my father’s other sexual vagaries! What irony if it could be proved that he had led in his youth the very kind of life I was leading!” (257) The story of the secret becomes, as Ackerley writes, “the *raison d’etre*, of this examining and self-examining book; not the only *raison d’etre*, it must be admitted, for, being a writer, I perceived that I had a good story to tell, a story which, as it ramified, grew better and better” (214). In other words, proving his father’s homosexuality would satisfy him not only as a son but also as a writer. That writer’s irony, the satisfaction of a good story, however tragic, drives Ackerley’s autobiographical quest for sexual identification. However, neither Bechdel nor Ackerley succeeds in making a father’s secrets visually apparent – neither can produce what Barthes calls a “just image”: visual proof of a parent’s identity (*Camera Lucida* 70). The reader cannot see the secret, the father’s hidden patterns of desire. What a reader *can* see is a writer’s desire: the verbal and visual efforts to render and interpret a familial bond. Near the end of *Fun Home*, Bechdel writes: “‘Erotic truth’ is a rather sweeping concept. I shouldn’t pretend to know what my father’s was” (230). The “erotic truth” of a father remains unknown, but when combined with creative truth – the artistic quest itself – the result is akin to what Patricia J. Williams terms “emotional truth” in her criticism of Gates’s biological determinism on his television series. Perhaps we can think of it as “relational truth,” the marking of intimacy and distance from the father’s secrets.¹⁵

The flow of secrets

In *Camera Lucida*, Barthes writes in his search for a representative picture of his mother: “Photography thereby compelled me to perform a painful labor; straining towards the essence of her identity, I was struggling among images partially true, and therefore totally false” (66). Since

a reader cannot picture a parent quite like the son or daughter can, Ackerley and Bechdel turn to another representation of the parent's secrets. Secrets are a conduit of closeness, and no reader can tolerate an author's disclosure of her parent's secrets without a promise of textual intimacy in kind: some sort of affinity between author and reader. As a strategy of intimacy, both filial and affiliative, Bechdel and Ackerley distill their fathers' secrets in "secretions" – bodily fluids, photographic developing fluid – as they seek a solution of sexual identity developed in visual and bodily terms. Critic Daniel Hayes proposes that secrets, like bodily fluids, carefully shared or withheld, serve as a mechanism of regulating bonds between people. He writes: "Negotiating the space between people – determining levels of intimacy, closeness, separation, and distance – is a matter of controlling or not controlling the permeability of these thresholds, or, alternatively, governing the flow of secrets" (243). As Hayes points out, the verb "secrete" has two contrary meanings: "(1) to emit, as from a gland, and (2) to hide or conceal.... Those closest to our secretions are often those closest to our secrets" (243). Through images of fluidity that signify artistic and sexual works-in-progress, both Ackerley and Bechdel calibrate the family distances necessary to relate, separate, and create.

For Ackerley's father, the flow of secrets is limited to the realm of masculinity, of the backroom dirty jokes he calls "yarns." As Ackerley recalls, "to my young mind these yarns were seldom good and never single; one of them always reminded him or his cronies of another; they seemed to adhere together in their sexual fluid like flies in treacle" (129). The father's "cronies" were privy to the father's secret mistress and second family, while Ackerley was not. Excluded from his father's flow of yarns, secrets, and storytelling, Ackerley attempts to identify with the "fluid" of his father's bodily secret: the concealed case of syphilis that eventually killed him. Ackerley, in turn, writes about his own sexually transmitted disease, "a dose of anal clap" (180).

His Chlamydia-inflicted lover “unbuttoned his flies to exhibit the proof, squeezing out the pus for my enlightenment... I saw it as one of the highest compliments I had been paid” (181). Denied the “sexual fluid” of his father’s unshared stories, Ackerley instead shares the pus in pants’ “flies” with a lover and with a reader (131). Exhibiting the proof – sharing that fluid – is just what the photographic archive cannot do. Ackerley substitutes textual secrets for visual ones, and a reader for a paternal confidante. *My Father and Myself* takes a turn to the graphic, at least in a sexually explicit sense. Although Ackerley repeatedly laments the disappointment of his relationship with his father, the book ends on a note of sexual failure: “Sometimes I managed; often the very fear perhaps of the frustration and humiliation of failure caused me to fail” (283). He closes the memoir with his failure to ejaculate rather than his failure to relate.

In *Fun Home*, Bechdel relates the blocked flow of secrets to the difficulty of capturing what she calls her father’s “fluid charm, which eluded the still camera” (64). No single photograph can display his secrets; only Bechdel’s art can fill the gaps within the family story. And indeed, Bechdel’s artistic process and sexual process – her coming-out that began at age 19 and takes flight in the public record of *Fun Home* – hinge on the calibration of secrets’ flow. Bechdel’s fluids of both textuality and sexuality are a part of her visual process of storytelling. A few weeks after she begins menstruating, Alison experiences her first orgasm while working on a drawing of a basketball player. She codes both the orgasm and menstruation as a secretive “N” in her adolescent diary (169). These fluids are solitary; there is no interchange of secrets in the family – though plenty with the reader, when she opens her diary to scrutiny in the memoir. And even when father and daughter share the same atmosphere, their flow of secrets is dammed. Recalling when she experienced queer-friendly Greenwich Village for the first time, vacationing with her father at age 15, Bechdel writes: “It was like the moment the manicurist in the

Palmolive commercial informs her client, ‘You’re soaking in it’” (190). Bechdel and her father each “soak” separately in their secret sexuality; their secrets coincide, but never intermingle.

In *Are You My Mother?* sexual shame becomes an even more crucial subject. A pivotal moment of the memoir involves a sexual drawing that Alison sketched as a child, her anguish at her mother’s discovery of it, and the proposed connection between its content and her mother’s withholding of a bedtime kiss. Bechdel also reveals more about her diary’s coded chronicling of personal shame, a story begun in *Fun Home*. She writes that her earliest diary entries were “backfilled” after the day she began writing, including one entry about a shameful moment of vomiting that highlighted Alison’s persistent need for her mother (278). “Today I was sick,” young Alison’s diary entry for a Monday reads. Bechdel adds a red circle – a mark of shameful femininity, not unlike the “N” of her secret menstruation – and an arrow that points to a splotch of vomit on the bathroom floor (49). As Moore writes in her memoir, “Shame is powerful, I thought to myself, in the force with which it can divide us from what we know” (344). Indeed, as the dynamics of repression and nescience demonstrate, shame is a strong contributor to the secrets we keep from ourselves as well as others.

Bechdel also highlights the fluid process of photography: the developing solution that brings some evidence of her father’s sexuality to light. She captions *Fun Home*’s centerfold photo: “a trace of Roy has been caught on light-sensitive paper” (101). Developing the film – soaking it in solution – has yielded a lasting photographic trace of her father’s homoerotic gaze. The development from film to photograph, and then to drawing and text, allows for the belated flow of an identifiatory gaze from father to artist to reader. And photographic process is written into every panel. Bechdel, who calls herself a “method cartoonist,” sketches every character in every frame from a digital snapshot of herself in the pose she wishes to draw (“Conversation”).¹⁶

She embodies her subjects, recreating them in her own image. Both Bechdel and Ackerley's "secretions," then, point to the narrative process itself, the documented effort to identify with the father through visualizing and even embodying his sexual secrets.

"The thought of origins soothes us," Barthes writes, "whereas that of the future disturbs us, agonizes us" (*Camera Lucida* 105). Perhaps for the nonprocreative queer author, the process of writing and visually incarnating the past might ease the uncertainty of the future. Embracing an artistic life, both Ackerley and Bechdel carry on the family name in lines of print, not in bloodlines. Their creativity has an erotic and generative component. Bechdel writes that as a child she swore that in order to honor her parents' frustrated dreams, she would never marry, "that I would carry on to live the artist's life they had each abdicated" (*Fun Home* 73). That artistic calling produces books, "spawned" and "generated," in Bechdel's words, by the interchange of parental photographs and the second-generation imagination (Chute, "Interview" 1005-06).¹⁷ In similar language, Ackerley's friend King calls *My Father and Myself* "the book that he was perpetually gestating up to the time of his death" (11). For both nonprocreative authors, a memoir of the father captures their imaginations for several years. But at the same time, both Bechdel and Ackerley spent those same years writing in their journals – a diurnal form that becomes dominated not by memories of the father, but preoccupations with the mother.

"Well, it coheres"

In this tricky analogy of artistic generation between queer writers and fathers, where do mothers fit in? In *My Father and Myself* and *Fun Home*, each centered on a father's loss, the mother is a figure of ambivalence, who nevertheless quietly drives the writer's creative process from the memoir's margins. A year after the publication of *Fun Home*, Bechdel writes:

[My mother] didn't quite understand why I wanted to reveal all our sordid family secrets to the general public, but she never tried to talk me out of it. I know I hurt her by writing this book. She made that clear, but she also let me know that she grasped the complexity of the situation. At one point after *Fun Home* came out, she sent me a review from a local newspaper. It cited the William Faulkner quote, "The writer's only responsibility is to his art.... If a writer has to rob his mother, he will not hesitate; the 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' is worth any number of old ladies." Then the reviewer went on to say, "Rarely are the old ladies asked how they felt about it." Mom liked that – that someone was considering her side of the story. ("What Little")

In *Fun Home*, Bechdel's mother is the one who discloses her husband's sexual secrets, in response to Alison's coming-out letter. However, in drawing her mother's guarded but revelatory letter, held up for the reader's eye, Bechdel promptly disobeys her mother's interdiction: "Her P.S. instructed me to destroy the letter" (78). Had Bechdel obeyed her mother's instructions, there would have been no evidence, no drawing of it, and perhaps even no memoir. Ackerley, too, struggles with preservation and publication in *My Father and Myself*, and his mother, an object of scorn throughout much of the memoir, is nevertheless the one who preserves the family archive.¹⁸ Ackerley recounts rifling through his mother's possessions after her death, searching for more evidence of his father's sexual life, and instead finding her boxes chock-full of trash, enigmatic keepsakes, and scraps of paper. Although Porter likens Ackerley's digging to "a parody of useless evidence," there is a valuable lesson within these mounds of waste (145). From his mother, Ackerley learns to *preserve* what he does not and cannot know. The secrets of a family are neither

waste nor failure, but the material of a book. Ackerley writes about his mother's odd collection of scrap paper:

This was my mother's comment on life. It might serve also as a comment on this family memoir, which belongs, I am inclined to think, to her luggage. A good many questions have been asked, few receive answers. Some facts have been established, much else may well be fiction, the rest is silence. Of my father, my mother, myself, I know in the end practically nothing. Nevertheless, I preserve it, if only because it offers a friendly unconditional response to my father's plea in his posthumous letter: "I hope people will generally be kind to my memory." (268)

For Ackerley, the unknown takes the form of potentially meaningless scraps: the notes, receipts, and clutter that make up our everyday lives. And indeed, his diaries, published posthumously as *My Sister and Myself* (1982), reinforce the connections among Ackerley, his mother, and his daily material. In *My Father and Myself*, Ackerley briefly alludes to his mother's affinity for nonhuman creatures; a lifelong dog-lover, she even befriended a housefly in her doddering years (226). If Ackerley's father and his cronies told dirty yarns that clustered "like flies in treacle" (129), then the mother, perhaps is like one of those flies, the subject (and object) of a dirty joke. Mrs. Ackerley gets a much kinder tribute in her son's diaries. He writes of the canine love that mother and son had in common: "I see that, in this much, I have returned to her. Owing to some psychological failure in us, we were both unable to manage a human relationship and turned instead to dogs... My mother and myself.... My mother and myself" (25, 26). If Ackerley focuses his tightly crafted memoir on the relational failure between father and son, he devotes much of his unstructured daily writing – the necessary rehearsal for the memoir – to the

“psychological failure” that bonds mother and son. Ackerley claims he never intended to devote any creative time to his female relations; his mother, sister and aunt, all barely-tolerated females in Ackerley’s male-dominated life, insidiously take over his diary, which is meant to chronicle his life with his dog. He writes: “I meant only to write in this diary about Queenie, and the gay, lighthearted, joyful life we share together, the fun we have. But of course one can’t avoid people. They connect, and that’s all right, but they also interrupt and burst in one one’s pleasure, and that’s a bore. However, on with these relatives of mine I must go” (61).

Like Ackerley, it is within the “diurnal” form of diligent journaling that Bechdel rediscovers her mother. As I mentioned in the introduction, Bechdel credits her father with her diary habit in *Fun Home*. Ten-year-old Alison begins her first diary when her father gives her a calendar and gives her a “jump start” in his own hand: “Dad is reading” (140). But in *Are You My Mother?* Bechdel shifts from father to mother as a source of artistic inspiration. If Dad is a reader, and perhaps an invisible grantor of Bechdel’s story, then Mother is a *writer*, an imperfect but living model of the daily work of artistic creation and relation. In *Are You My Mother?* Bechdel revisits a scene from *Fun Home*: an obsessive-compulsive spell caused by an “epistemological crisis” of diaristic truth, which her mother abetted by inscribing Alison’s dictated entries (*Fun Home* 141, *Are You* 13). The emphasis on the father’s artistic role is lost somewhere between *Fun Home* and *Are You My Mother?* And the diary is the totem of this second memoir, a tribute to the tribulations of the living present. For Bechdel’s mother is the other dogged diarist in the family, and therefore the true example of the daily labor of self-reflection that fuels the daughter’s art. Within seriality – the rescrutiny of her childhood in print, and the constant seriality of diary-keeping – Bechdel finds the structure for *Are You My Mother?* The second volume is like a memoir-in-motion. Instead of the canonical fiction and domestic

ornament (her father's specialties) that dominate *Fun Home*, here Bechdel draws inspiration from psychoanalysis, theatrical performance, and the constant *rehearsal* that diary-keeping shares with those practices. Even as they talk on the phone, mother and daughter maintain a volley of daily record. As she secretly takes notes on her mother's side of the conversation, Bechdel argues: "I would have more scruples about this, I like to think, if I didn't suspect that she was not so much talking to me as drafting her own daily journal entry out loud. My mother has always kept a journal. She insists this is just a record of things she's done. Of external, as opposed to internal, experience. I share this compulsion for keeping track of life" (12). Unlike Ackerley, whose mother preserved the chaos and formlessness of daily scraps of life, Bechdel benefits from the rigorous diurnal organization that her mother taught her by example.

The diary brings its own set of ambivalences in *Are You My Mother?* In one of the memoir's frequent dives in the psychoanalytic writings of D. W. Winnicott, Bechdel notes that one of his patients, a middle-aged woman, at first kept a diary of her analysis, then decided to relinquish it.¹⁹ Winnicott writes: "The meaning of the diary now became clear – it was a projection of her mental apparatus, and not a picture of the true self, which in fact, had never lived till, at the bottom of the regression, there came a new chance for the true self to start" (qtd. in *Are You* 151). Bechdel writes of Winnicott's patient: "The woman was not able to feel something she described as 'not-knowing'" (151). The obsessive self-consciousness of diurnal reflection can be too strict a structural "apparatus," inhibiting one's ability to accept that there are things one will never know.

That morass of not-knowing takes another shape in Bechdel's psychoanalytic research: the spider, of which Alison and her mother are both phobic (and the generative symbol of an important dream Alison has about narrative form, which features an intricate spider web).

Bechdel depicts Winnicott as he theorizes that an arachnophobic patient's unmet expectations of her mother took the form of a gap: "A dark, lack... an absence. And as an infant you dealt with this in the only way you were able, by putting legs 'round it. And then it became a spider and you became afraid of it" (277). That spider serves as a transitional object for Bechdel, as she attempts to separate herself from her parents' history of artistic disappointments. As she learns from one of her therapists, aggression is a symptom of Bechdel's intense professional jealousy of other cartoonists, other memoirists, and anyone else working on projects remotely similar to hers. Her therapist identifies this aggression as a "reaction formation": "You got this from your parents. You inherited their unmetabolized fear and aggression. Their sense of threat about the artistic ability of others" (72). Like nescience, the unknown knowledge that is passed unwittingly from one generation to the next, this angry disappointment is a parental inheritance of unspoken emotion. Bechdel characterizes these second-hand emotions as resembling second-hand smoke, "absorb[ed] from our parents, like traces of nicotine" (73). Despite a slight slippage in the intergenerational transmission – second-hand smoke, though passed along, is not inherited – Bechdel accurately limns the gaps of unknown knowledge and unprocessed emotion passed on from generation to generation.

In *Are You My Mother?* Bechdel demonstrates that timing is everything. The "tacit permission" that she assumed she had from her mother to publish family secrets was illusory: "in fact I never asked for it and she never gave it to me. Our truce is a fragile one. And yet here I am, making another incursion" (200). Unlike Gates, who spurns the "yet" of waiting to write in order to protecting others, Bechdel quickly learns that writing about the living is radically different from writing about the dead ("Lifting" 114). In the complex ethics of writing and reading memoirs of family secrets, there can be no exposure of the dead without some intimate revelation

of the self; otherwise, the memoirist risks alienating her readers. For example, Bechdel records her mother as she rails against Joyce Carol Oates's memoir, *A Widow's Story* (2011), which suppresses mention of Oates's quick remarriage after her husband's death. Taking her ethics to task, Bechdel's mother muses: "If I were going to write about being a widow, what would I say? I had three teenagers, a job, the funeral home to run. You didn't hear me complaining. Except I don't write about myself. So that's that" (67). Alison responds wide-eyed, "I'll write about you," and imagines her mother rolling her eyes on the other end of the line (67). After the publication of *Fun Home*, mother and daughter sometimes find themselves on the same side of the ethics divide. In a moment solidarity, the mother cries over the phone, "Family be *damned!* The story must be served!" (284) A page later, as Bechdel searches for an elusive, tidy end to this present-tense memoir, she recalls the terse benediction that her mother gave after reading a draft: "Well, it coheres" (285). This second memoir wears the problems of coherence and timing like a banner; Alison (later pictured wearing a shirt advertising the bookstore The Strand) agrees with her mother's earlier criticism: "Ha! You have too many strands!" (28) With its focus on the living family, as well as the artistic conundrums of depicting a present-day struggle for personal and creative coherence, *Are You My Mother?* cannot self-justify with the excuse of subjective memory, of a personally inflected distant past. Bechdel cannot deny that her living mother has a right to her side of the family drama. Instead, she asks her mother, via pages of her memoir-in-progress, to give if not permission, then benediction; if not maternal care, then artistic mentoring. Rather than competing for the right to a familial past, Bechdel employs a diurnal form to reach out to her mother.

Bechdel and Ackerley seek in their fathers' portraits an essence of heredity, proof that something lives on in paternal absence. Their process of mourning calls for an image, a visual representation of the father's mortal secrets. What is revealed in their photographic quests may not be a visual secret, but simply the process itself, the negotiation of familial revelation that is extended to the reader. Ackerley spins the flatness of the photograph into a "yarn" of sexual confession. And Bechdel's process of representation materializes the artist's hand that sketches the intersection of death and desire. In *Camera Lucida*, Barthes, too, finds himself searching for a "just image" of his deceased mother (70). Moving far beyond Ackerley's partial withholding of gazes and grasps, Barthes declines to share that all-important childhood photo of his mother with the reader. He famously writes in parentheses: "(I cannot reproduce the Winter Garden Photograph. It exists only for me. For you, it would be nothing but an indifferent picture, one of the thousand manifestations of the 'ordinary' ... but in it, for you, no wound.)" (73) That open wound of loss is manifest in Ackerley and Bechdel's family secrets. Revealing a version of the father's "erotic truth," distilled through the author's incomplete memory, may not restore the father, but it can bond the author and reader in a sticky solution of secrets withheld and revealed. The quest to discover a lost parent, and the imaginative process that renders him, effectively hooks the reader into the artistic journey. Both relational and artistic process are continuously calibrated in these memoirs, and distances between memoirist and parent, and memoirist and reader, are measured in fluid ounces. And although mothers lurk in the shadows of these first memoirs of family secrets, they re-emerge as powerful forces in the authors' journals. If writing a family memoir calls out for a secret around which to structure it, then the diurnal form of a diary allows for the incremental rehearsal of nescience, newfound knowledge, and unexpected truces within the family.

Chapter Four

Secret Languages: Richard Rodriguez and Maxine Hong Kingston

Maxine Hong Kingston recalls in her first memoir, *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts* (1976), that her Chinese immigrant mother “would not allow anybody to talk while eating. In some families the children worked out a sign language, but here the children spoke English, which their parents didn’t seem to hear” (123). The use of a secret language among siblings is prevalent among families of all ethnicities and language groups. Among my father’s sisters, the secret language that served to exclude parents and brothers was Gibberish. (I first realized that my aunts didn’t invent Gibberish when I heard it spoken in a movie in my twenties.) And when my Lithuanian grandfather wanted to say something private to my grandmother within earshot of their children, he would speak in his native Yiddish, which my grandmother, born in America, didn’t speak but could understand. In turn, around his sixtieth birthday, my father decided to teach himself Yiddish, so he could speak the secret language he could not understand as a child. A secret language, whether invented or adopted, demonstrates the formal and relational properties of secrecy. The content of what’s said in a secret language need not be confidential or shameful – it can be as innocuous as “pass the rice” – but it thrillingly excludes the language’s nonspeakers, while creating a veil of intimacy around its confidants. Secret languages are an apt metaphor for the negotiation of intimacy between family members, as well as between a writer and her readers. How can a memoirist write publicly about the family without betraying its intimacies? What language of *secrere*, or separation, can measure the distances between the generations?

Kingston excels at putting a comic twist on “universal” experiences of childhood. The ethnic joke in this dinner table scene, of course, is that her American-born siblings’ secret

language is ordinary English. Other scenes of family play show just how typical *and* unique the immigrant family can be. Like Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*, Kingston's second memoir, *China Men* (1980), opens with a father-daughter scene of playing "airplane," with the father lifting a delighted daughter aloft. Bechdel's airplane scene shows how close she was to her father, when he bothered to pay attention to her. Kingston's scene starts as an idyll of family intimacy, but quickly devolves into an ominous memory of wartime: calling dragonflies "Hitler moths" during her World War II-era childhood. "We killed Hitler moths every summer of The War," she writes. "It was interesting to grow older and find out that only we called them that, and outside the family, things have other names" (7). What names are particular to one family, and which translate easily to other languages and other households? In a famous line about measuring the distances in individual, familial, and communal experience, Kingston inquires: "Chinese-Americans, when you try to understand what things in you are Chinese, how do you separate what is peculiar to childhood, to poverty, insanities, one family, your mother who marked your growing with stories, from what is Chinese? What is Chinese tradition and what is the movies?" (*Woman Warrior* 7-8).

Like Kingston, the Mexican-American memoirist and essayist Richard Rodriguez is concerned with the intimacy of familial language, and measuring its distances from public speech. Rodriguez's central scene of domestic intimacy in his first memoir, *Hunger for Memory* (1982), also involves a secret language. Unlike Kingston's scene of sibling solidarity, Richard's scene excludes him from the circle of family intimacy.¹ After Rodriguez's Mexican-born parents switch their family's home language from Spanish to English, at the urging of the children's American teachers, Rodriguez recalls: "The scene was inevitable: One Saturday morning I entered the kitchen where my parents were talking in Spanish. I did not realize they were talking

in Spanish however until, at the moment they saw me, I heard their voices change to speak English. Those *gringo* sounds they uttered startled me. Pushed me away” (20-21). The parents’ shared intimacy in Spanish, then switch to “public” English when their son joins them, has the charge of a primal scene. He learns the difference between parental and filial intimacy, and between Spanish and English. Rodriguez states in an interview about that formative moment: “I remember the story I always tell people, and now I’m beginning to think maybe it never happened because I’ve said it so often and the lines are so smooth now in the telling” (Torres 171). Further, those “*gringo* sounds” will soon become Richard’s only spoken language – Spanish becomes not just his parents’ “secret” home language, but his forgotten language, as this “dormant bilingual” loses his native tongue (Lim 519). Spanish becomes a kind of nescience, or unacknowledged knowledge, for Rodriguez, as his growing shame reflects not just embarrassment at his inability to communicate with members of his own family, but discomfort at having that forgotten language still alive within him. Spanish is a “living-dead knowledge,” a nescience of linguistic identity Rodriguez can neither renounce nor remember (Abraham 188).

These two scenes of “secret language” within the immigrant family reveal the roots of Kingston and Rodriguez’s cultural, linguistic, and political identities. Both memoirists are mindful of their decisions to write in their second language, English, instead of their native languages of familial intimacy. Gloria Anzaldúa writes in her groundbreaking multilingual memoir *Borderlands / La Frontera*: “Ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity” (59). How do these “twin skins” shape practices of disclosure in contemporary ethnic American autobiography? For both Kingston and Rodriguez, personal narrative and political activism are inextricable, and both are linked to their ethnic and linguistic identities as second-generation immigrants. These memoirists’ early works comprise departures from and returns to familial

roots, while their later memoirs focus on delineating their personal identities as American activists. Kingston, a celebrated feminist and pacifist, has devoted much of her time (as well as space within her most recent memoirs) to writing workshops with Vietnam War veterans. On the opposite end of the political spectrum, Rodriguez is well known as a print and television commentator who denounces American policies of affirmative action and bilingual Spanish-English education. In his later works, he also explores the paradox of practicing Catholicism as a gay man. Rodriguez and Kingston intervene in politics *with* and *against* the grain of their ethnic identities. Kingston, an Asian-American woman, remains acutely aware that her appearance can vivify veterans' traumatic memories of combat in Vietnam. Rodriguez, a Mexican-American man, relishes the ironies of being a brown-skinned man criticizing policies meant to provide opportunities for people of minority backgrounds. Kingston and Rodriguez's ethnic identities speak directly, in visually contrastive ways, to their activist discourse. Both Kingston and Rodriguez add a political message to the general expectation of an ethnic memoirist to write "as a" writer from a particular community.

Despite their polarized political agendas, Kingston and Rodriguez come from similar places, geographically and generationally. The distance between their origins is merely four years and fifty miles. Kingston was born in Stockton, California in 1940 to Chinese parents. Rodriguez was born in Sacramento, California in 1944 to Mexican parents. Both sets of parents began their American lives as working-class; Kingston's father managed an illegal gambling house and owned and lost two laundry businesses; Rodriguez's father rose from janitorial work in a factory to casting false teeth in a dental office. The economic mobility of both families depended in part on working mothers: Rodriguez's mother had a clerical position in the governor's office, and Kingston's mother, unable to use her Chinese medical degree, worked in

the family laundry as well as in tomato fields in California's Central Valley. Through long hours and the prioritization of their children's education, both families achieved a middle-class standing. Both Kingston and Rodriguez come to autobiography to honor their parents' sacrifices in building a life in America, but also to track their educational, political, and emotional separations from their forebears. These second-language memoirists gesture toward betrayal by translating their parents' verbal discourse into published English, even when the familial intimacies they reveal are not actually secret.

Serial translation, serial betrayal

Kingston and Rodriguez became famous through debut memoirs in a multicultural age hungry for first-person ethnic voices. Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* (1976) weaves a complex narrative knot of family life, fantasy, and feminism, and Rodriguez's *Hunger for Memory: The Education of Richard Rodriguez* (1982) teeters between political argument and lyrical nostalgia for a lost domestic paradise. Like Susan Cheever, Linda Gray Sexton, and Alison Bechdel, both Kingston and Rodriguez are serial memoirists, reframing their personal histories anew in subsequent volumes. Kingston has written four autobiographies, including one, *I Love a Broad Margin to My Life* (2011), completely in verse. Rodriguez's *Hunger for Memory* is the first in a trilogy, followed by *Days of Obligation: Arguments with my Mexican Father* (1992) and *Brown: The Last Discovery of America* (2002). However, Kingston and Rodriguez's motivations to publish serially in the genre likely differ from the other authors we've examined. Cheever, Sexton, and Bechdel published fiction first, and their debut memoirs found established audiences: literary celebrity for Sexton and Cheever, a cult comic strip for Bechdel. Sau-Ling Cynthia Wong writes in her excellent reception history of *The Woman Warrior*: "To borrow a phrase [by James Olney] applied to early African-American writers, Chinese-American writers

‘entered into the house of literature through autobiography’” (261). Ethnic autobiographers negotiate a set of expectations that differ slightly from other writers in the genre. Publishers anticipate mainstream readers’ desire for an “authentic” cultural interpreter who can offer representative insight into an ethnic community. Significantly, familial disclosure can be a shortcut to authenticity and reader intimacy: Rodriguez’s editor urges him after reading a draft of *Hunger of Memory*: “Let’s have more Grandma” (5). As Wong explains, ethnic confessionality also carries a cost within the ethnic community, which also demands authenticity and representativeness. In the “pen wars” that followed the publication of *The Woman Warrior*, male Chinese-American critics, including Frank Chin, protested that if Chinese-American literature is, as Wong interprets their argument, “distinguished by emasculation... then Chinese-American writers cannot afford to wash the culture’s dirty linen in public” (255). We have seen similar language in African American communities’ wishes to suppress common secrets, such as passing, in order to present communities of origin favorably. Darryl Pinckney writes: “perhaps black writers are more inhibited because of the strain of their historic mission, the unspoken stricture against airing dirty laundry, the admonition that they must not go off into the white world and embarrass where they came from.” Every family has dirty laundry, and every memoirist must decide whether her family’s laundry stands in for a community’s. To what extent is her cultural inheritance “authentic” and unique, and to what extent is it universal and “representative?”

This problem of communal laundry is exactly Kingston’s subject. In *The Woman Warrior*, she writes of the common desire of second-generation children to leave home: “Before we can leave our parents, they stuff our heads like the suitcases which they jam-pack with homemade underwear” (87).² And as King-kok Cheung astutely observes, Kingston “betrays”

Chinese culture by translating it “badly”; that is, imaginatively. Cheung writes: “If we stick close to a conservative meaning of ‘translation,’ so that merit consists in close adherence to the original, then *The Woman Warrior* offers a poor – inaccurate – rendering of Chinese material. To translate, then, is also to traduce, to speak falsely, to betray – a charge that has been leveled repeatedly against *The Woman Warrior*” (96). The final line of *The Woman Warrior* – “It translated well” (209) – therefore cannot be taken at face value; translation is always a form of transformation, and thus violates readers’ dual demands of ethnic representativeness and authenticity.³ The conflicting responsibilities of protection and representation call out for seriality. Because no memoir can fulfill readers’ desires for an authentic and representative portrayal of a community, the memoirist returns to autobiography to track the particularities and universals of her own experience, again and again. In short, the ethnic memoirist *stays* in the “house of autobiography” to answer these public demands in an evolving personal and political context, as she tries to sort out her responsibilities to family, community, and nation.

Both Kingston and Rodriguez emphasize the importance of their serial writing. Kingston states of her first two memoirs: “To best appreciate *The Woman Warrior*, you do need to read *China Men*.... ‘I’ am nothing but who ‘I’ am in relation to other people. In *The Woman Warrior* ‘I’ begin the quest for self by understanding the archetypal mother. In *China Men*, ‘I’ become more whole because of the ability to appreciate the other gender” (qtd. in Cheung 101). In a similarly long view of his seriality, Rodriguez looks back on the themes of his life-writing trilogy. He writes:

Two decades ago, I wrote *Hunger for Memory*, the autobiography of a scholarship boy. Ten years later, in *Days of Obligation*, I wrote about the influence of Mexican ethnicity on my American life. This volume completes a trilogy on

American public life and my private life. *Brown* returns me to years I have earlier described. I believe it is possible to describe a single life thrice, if from three isolations: *Class. Ethnicity. Race.*” (*Brown* xiv, italics in original)

Rodriguez and Kingston’s serial memoirs result from – and yet play with – reader expectations, ultimately providing a political message in place of ethnic “authenticity” or family laundry.

Rodriguez cannot give us the representative story of a Mexican-American child, but he will try to deliver “the life of a middle-class man” from various perspectives of identity (*Hunger of Memory* 6). Kingston might have grown up in Stockton’s tiny Chinatown, but she will take her readers on an extended tour of not just her family’s village in China, but the sites of so many American soldiers’ trauma in Vietnam. By taking a wider view of Kingston and Rodriguez’s projects of serial autobiography, we can trace the evolution of family ties, activism, and the politics of disclosure within their work. A serial view of their life writing – rare in the criticism surrounding two of the most written-about memoirists of the contemporary era – reveals that Kingston and Rodriguez are deeply invested in crafting a “secret language” that can communicate intimately with a broad swath of readers, applying the particularities of a single ethnic family to the political stakes of nations.

A gesture of disclosure

Both *The Woman Warrior* and *Hunger of Memory* are riddled with gaps, silences, and untold stories. Yet compared to the kinds of secrets revealed by the authors in previous chapters – incest, addiction, abuse, and racial and sexual passing – there are few parental secrets revealed in Kingston or Rodriguez’s memoirs. Kingston cannot even verify the truth of the secrets she suspects: her aunt’s murder-suicide, one or both of her parents’ illegal immigration. Kingston takes her not-knowing as the subject of her multiple memoirs. Rather than particular family

secrets, both Kingston and Rodriguez mostly reveal broader “cultural secrets,” such as sexism, racism, insularity, poverty, and shame associated with difference. Kingston and Rodriguez transgress the boundaries of familial privacy, not quite secrecy. According to sociologists Carol Warren and Barbara Laslett, “a family may be viewed as a unit with shared and enforced privacy” (47). Although they define “family” by its privacy, not all families can afford its protective provisions; Warren and Laslett concede: “Secrecy would be most likely where persons are morally stigmatized or where they have inadequate financial or other resources to provide themselves with privacy” (49). Kingston and Rodriguez’s immigrant families, lacking the socioeconomic assurances of middle-class privacy, protect their families’ stories *as if they were* secret, through explicit injunctions against “telling on” the family publicly. Their desire for privacy, and the lack of resources to protect it conventionally, stands in for family secrecy in these memoirs. Both memoirists, therefore, *gesture* toward the act of disclosure, acknowledging the violation of revealing familial particulars in print. And yet, especially in *Hunger of Memory*, the gesture of secret sharing is a husk with no content, primarily a strategy of creating distance between family and writer and intimacy between author and reader. Rodriguez states in an interview: “I do not forget, moreover, that I violated my parents’ Mexican culture when I wrote *Hunger of Memory*. It’s an *American* book about a *Mexican-American* childhood” (Randy Rodriguez 45, italics in original). Even as Rodriguez points to Spanish language and familial intimacy as the costs of his American identity, he trades them for another identity secret, his sexuality, which he keeps under wraps until later memoirs. Language and family become public fronts for the personal secret that Rodriguez is not yet ready to reveal.

In another gesture of familial disclosure, Kingston focuses on all she *doesn’t* know about her family history in *The Woman Warrior*; everything she reveals is merely the visible tip of an

iceberg of unknown and unverifiable knowledge. For Kingston, too, then, “telling” and “telling on” are largely gestural. *The Woman Warrior* famously opens with a mark of transgressive disclosure by quoting her mother: “‘You must not tell anyone,’ my mother said, ‘what I am about to tell you’” (3). Yet Kingston explains in an obscure, slim volume called *Through the Black Curtain* (1987):

In order to write *Woman Warrior*, I constructed “Don’t tell what I’m about to tell you” to mean that I could write it. As long as the words I used were different from the words she used. (Which wasn’t so difficult to do since she talks-story in Chinese.) ... The talking women start their best gossip with “Don’t tell” to make the listener feel extra special, and to give the story importance. And to free themselves to tell. “Don’t tell” means “Tell.” (5)

By using “different” words in translation, Kingston and Rodriguez simultaneously translate, betray, and honor their parents’ first-language speech. Even when they’re not telling parental secrets, these authors draw upon the communicative power of secrecy – injunctions, disclosure, intimacy – in order to mark their differences from their families and to draw in their readers.

In their later works of serial memoir, Kingston and Rodriguez fill in some of the gaps of nescience in their debut memoirs. Kingston explores other sides of her family history, and Rodriguez reveals the secret of his sexuality. And both authors broaden their scope, narrating a story of cultural, linguistic, and national mixture to a hybridized American readership. But while Rodriguez attempts to “perch on a hyphen” (*Days of Obligation* 159) and investigates the interstices of his in-between, “brown” identity, Kingston obliterates hyphenated identity altogether. She states: “We ought to leave out the hyphen in ‘Chinese-American,’ because the hyphen gives the word on either side equal weight, as if linking two nouns.... Without the

hyphen, ‘Chinese’ is an adjective and ‘American’ a noun; a Chinese American is a type of American” (qtd. in Cheung 17).⁴ Writing in a “secret language” of intimacy to English-speaking readers, Kingston and Rodriguez gesture toward separations from their families, but ultimately honor parental bequests of American hybridity and activism.

“Writing is one thing, family is another”

Rodriguez dedicates *Hunger of Memory* “For her and for him – to honor them” (n.pag.). The memoir begins with this apologia and declaration of intentions: Rodriguez claims he writes to honor his parents, not to betray them. Yet many of the family scenes in the memoir comprise a measuring of the division between the author and his parents, which ostensibly began when English entered their Spanish-speaking home. That gap has only widened since, and it is the “secret” that Rodriguez ostensibly discloses in *Hunger of Memory*. He names his final chapter, “Mr. Secrets,” after his mother’s nickname for him: she knows so little about his life and his writing. When she first reads the seed of what will become this memoir, she writes him an admonishing letter, and he prints excerpts translated into English. According to common textual patterns of memoirs of family secrets, this should be where Rodriguez reveals the unspeakable within his family: toward the end of his memoir, within a chapter named for secrecy, in his mother’s “private” voice of a personal letter in her native language, reprinted without permission. And yet there is no secret; Rodriguez merely restates the problem – familial distance – he has been working over for the entirety of the memoir. He writes:

I am writing about those very things my mother has asked me not to reveal.

Shortly after I published my first autobiographical essay seven years ago, my mother wrote me a letter pleading with me never again to write about our family life. “Write about something else in the future. Our family life is private.” And

besides: “Why do you need to tell the *gringos* about how ‘divided’ you feel from the family?” (189)

Reprinting the mother’s letter is a *gesture* of violation and revelation. But there is actually nothing to reveal here but privacy itself: his parents’ desire to avoid public exposure and to keep personal words confidential. Rodriguez claims: “I was very much the son of parents who regarded the most innocuous piece of information about the family to be secret” (194). For Rodriguez, any communication that leaves the family circle is a violation of his parents. He translates from his mother’s letter: “Just keep one thing in mind. Writing is one thing, family is another” (193). Rodriguez writes in order to distinguish himself from the family as a writer, and to mark and mourn that loss of intimacy. Yet his family memoir exposes little about his parents’ private lives – and displays even less curiosity find out. “What would be her version of this book?” Rodriguez inquires mildly;

What are my parents unable to tell me today? What things are too personal? What feelings so unruly they dare not reveal to other intimates? Or even to each other? Or to themselves... but I do not give voice to my parents by writing about their lives. I distinguish myself from them by writing about the life we once shared. Even when I quote them accurately, I profoundly distort my parents’ words. (They were never meant to be public.)” (201-02)

In line with Cheung’s helpful etymology of “translation,” Rodriguez acknowledges the distortion of both translating and printing his mother’s private words. He twists an intimate correspondence into an emblem of his own autonomy. Although he wonders about his parents’ lives in this section, his “translation” and distortion make clear that his parents’ secrets are a known unknown, something he expresses no desire to investigate in print.

As opposed to the “known unknown” of the Rodriguez family’s privacy, there is an “unknown known” – a nescience – that permeates *Hunger of Memory*. Hints of it appear in this text, but Rodriguez’s sexual secret is never named in this memoir. In terming Rodriguez’s sexuality a “nescience,” I am straying from its psychoanalytic context – Abraham and Torok describe nescience as a secret passed down through generations – in order to trace a different sort of transmission: from text to reader. Rodriguez did not publicly come out in writing until 1990, eight years after *Hunger of Memory*’s publication. That *Harper’s* essay, “Late Victorians” (reprinted in Rodriguez’s second memoir, *Days of Obligation*), states outright: “To grow up homosexual is to live with secrets and within secrets. In no other place are those secrets more closely guarded than within the family home. The grammar of the gay city borrows metaphors from the nineteenth-century house. ‘Coming out of the closet’ is predicated upon family laundry, dirty linen, skeletons” (30). Notably, the Rodriguez family is not invited into the Victorian/gay architecture of “Late Victorians” – the essay stays in San Francisco and leaves the Rodriguez family in Sacramento.

The omission of sexuality from *Hunger of Memory* likely replicates the very lie of omission within the Rodriguez family – both the memoir and the Rodriguez family discourse feature red herrings to distract from clues to Rodriguez’s homosexuality. The inheritance of this nescience in the Rodriguez family is *reversed* in this instance: it flows from son to parents in the same pattern of secrecy as from text to reader. By protecting his parents from uncomfortable knowledge, further division, and a public revelation, Rodriguez misleads his readers. Within the “Mr. Secrets” chapter, the reader can feel Rodriguez’s parents and siblings eyeing him, unpartnered at Christmas dinner. He tries to throw his family and his reader off the scent. Twice in the chapter “Complexion” he mentions sexuality and the female gaze, as if to link the two. He

writes: “I felt my dark skin made me unattractive to women.... At Stanford, it’s true, I began to have something of a conventional sexual life. I don’t think, however, that I really believed that the women I knew found my physically appealing” (134, 140). Even within a mention of male-female communication, he hints at an alternative vision of sexuality, modeled on D. H.

Lawrence: “At seventeen, I may not have known how to engage a girl in small talk, but I had read *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*” (136).⁵ He hints at a separate language of pure intimacy, a fantasy unconnected to the messy reality of girls and small talk. In interviews, Rodriguez has expressed surprise that readers object to his secret sexuality in *Hunger of Memory*, his hesitation to come out in writing. When one interviewer, Hector Torres, mentions critics’ dissatisfaction with his secrecy (though the memoir does “drop beads” of sexual hints) Rodriguez replies: “They are? I didn’t know that. See, I don’t even read them. I didn’t know that’s the case. ‘Dropping the beads?’ You can say that there’s a deliberate refusal to come to terms with my homosexuality. This is at a time in which I was living quite consciously as a homosexual man” (186).

Although Rodriguez does not say either way (for he protects his family from his public coming-out), I suspect that the personal secrecy in *Hunger of Memory* is attributed to a closeted identity within the family. *Hunger of Memory* is a family memoir; Rodriguez’s sexuality was likely not part of the family discourse; therefore, the memoir replicates that unspeakability.

Henry Staten unpacks the ironies of Rodriguez’s hidden sexuality: “Rodriguez’s logic turns on a simple equivocation: his equation of the ethnic group with privacy, individuality, separateness – as though it were merely the home writ large rather than another public sphere... and intermediate circle of sociality between the home and the crowd” (109-110).⁶ Indeed, the memoir itself functions as a family dynamic writ large: with the same nescience just below the surface. If Rodriguez is protecting his parents from his secret, then, according to his own cultural

categorizations, *Hunger of Memory* is more private and “Mexican” than Rodriguez claims it to be: not quite the American “life of a middle-class man” that he proposes (6).⁷ Even while gesturing toward the violation of his parents’ privacy, he keeps the family secret of his sexuality, protecting them from the dual alienation of acknowledging a literary *and* gay son. Richard Blanco, the Inauguration Poet of 2013, captures the intricacies of remaining in a “literary closet” while publicly focusing on ethnic identity. He writes of his work: “I remained safely locked inside the literary closet. Though lately I’ve come to think it was a cultural closet I was hiding in. Since I couldn’t even begin to entertain writing about my sexual identity, I focused my work on issues of cultural identity and negotiation as Cuban American instead.” Rodriguez’s closet in *Hunger of Memory* is similar: his focus on linguistic and cultural identity, though a gestural violation of his family’s privacy, keeps the secret of sexuality from his family and from his readers.

Hunger of Memory is rife with clues to the unacknowledged fact of Rodriguez’s sexuality. He recalls one summer of working construction with *braceros*, or manual laborers from Mexico. He writes: “I was unwilling to admit the attraction of their lives. I tried to deny it by looking away. But what was denied became strongly desired” (135). As Anne Anlin Cheng writes, in an apt overlap with Rodriguez’s chapter title “The Education of Desire,” “the education of racism is an education of desire, a pedagogy that tethers the psychical inextricability to the social. Political domination is reproduced at the level of personal experience” (19). And Rodriguez’s descriptions of labor are rapturously autoerotic: “There was too much pleasure in the physical labor. Especially early in the day, I would be most alert to the sensations of movement and straining... I would feel my body resist the first thrusts of the shovel.... I would feel my chest silky with sweat in the breeze” (141-42). Even in “Late Victorians,” with its open

explorations of gay San Francisco, Rodriguez emphasizes the solitary pleasure and pain of the body. He narrates the architecture of the gay community but maintains his loneliness in that landscape, from his empty apartment to the gym to a celebration of AIDS activism at his church. While survivors and volunteers approach the altar to honor loved ones lost to the epidemic, Rodriguez keeps his seat: “These learned to love what is corruptible, while I, barren skeptic, reader of St. Augustine, curator of the earthly paradise, inheritor of the empty mirror, I shift my tailbone upon the cold, hard pew” (47). Even after coming out, Rodriguez won’t take the leap of affiliation; he rejects the gay community of San Francisco as thoroughly as he separates himself from the Chicano community of his origin.

Skin and husk

Anzaldúa’s comment – “Ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity” (59) – is especially applicable to Rodriguez’s narrative of identity formation in *Hunger of Memory*. That is, he goes to great lengths to analyze and ultimately deny both his linguistic and cultural identity. Since that moment in childhood when English became the family’s home language, Rodriguez’s only language has been English, and his primary culture has been American. In a psychoanalytic formation, we could say that Rodriguez “swallowed” Spanish, and it lives on, as a melancholic reminder of his repressed cultural and linguistic identity, within him. But Rodriguez adamantly divorces both language and skin from culture, community, and politics. He tries to demonstrate in *Hunger of Memory* that both language and skin can be content-free, apolitical – much like the memoir’s gesture of family disclosure that has no content but privacy. Rodriguez writes: “My skin, in itself, means nothing” (148). After all, Rodriguez has been mistaken for tan, for a vacationer recently returned from the beach or mountains (147-48). Skin,

like a secret, is a formal husk – though Rodriguez’s statement neglects the *relational* effects of secrecy in the prioritization of its formal properties.

In his efforts to depoliticize language, Rodriguez takes us through the steps of his own education, beginning with his early, erroneous belief that Spanish is inherently a private language and English a public one. He further divides both private and public language into “sound” and “word.” Spanish is a language of sounds to young Richard, and those sounds convey intimacy. He recalls: “Those sounds said: *I am speaking with ease in Spanish. I am addressing you in words I never use with los gringos. I recognize you as someone special, close, like no one outside. You belong with us. In the family. (Ricardo.)*” (15, italics in original). The parentheses provide a sort of textual hug to Richard’s Spanish name, long dormant, in a loved-one’s mouth. (Daniel Challener cleverly terms Rodriguez’s uses of parentheses “parent-thesis” [134].) But when Richard learns to communicate comfortably in “public” English, he temporarily loses that attention to sound, intimacy, and separateness. He forgets, in short, the pleasure of a “secret language” of verbal differentiation and relation. Rodriguez writes, with another intimate “hug” of parentheses: “The fact is that only in private – with intimates – is separateness from the crowd a prerequisite for individuality. (An intimate draws me apart, tells me I am unique, unlike all others.)” (26). The cost of learning public language, then, is the loss of familial intimacy – the distance that Rodriguez proposes, at least through textual placement, as the “family secret” of *Hunger of Memory*. In exchange for that loss comes insight, “the deepest truth about language and intimacy: *Intimacy is not created by a particular language; it is created by intimates.... It depends not on the word but on the person.... Intimacy is not trapped within words. It passes through words. It passes*” (32, 37, 40, italics in original). Rodriguez captures the formal paradox of secrecy: a secret’s intimate effects depend primarily upon how it is told, rather

than upon its content. A secret language can be any language. Yet what is the cost of emphasizing his thesis so doggedly? The reader is led to believe that language is the root of distance within the Rodriguez family, while sexuality remains the dormant secret, both within the family and within the memoir. Therefore, in his argument about language, Rodriguez captures the *formal* function of secrecy, but he neglects its *relational* effects: the intimacy and distance that secrecy can foster.

In later memoirs, when Rodriguez is more forthcoming about his sexuality, he also opens up language, ethnicity, and the body to relational as well as formal considerations. *Hunger of Memory*, with its insistence on the lack of meaning within skin and language, invites exclusively a formal reading, an emphasis on the husk of signification. But in *Brown*, his 2002 memoir, Rodriguez begins to consider, at least within the intimate enclosure of parentheses, effects beyond the formal. He writes: “There is no such thing as Hispanic blood. (*Do I not bleed?*)” (106, italics in original) Blood, in and of itself, has no ethnic content, but blood signifies *bleeding*, a human wound. Skin and blood are not signifiers of a particular identity; like a whisper in a secret language, they can seem meaningless. But skin and blood can also convey the relational costs of personal repression and cultural oppression.

“I never expected to form a ‘we’ beyond my family”⁸

When Rodriguez’s skin and language *do* speak in tandem in *Hunger of Memory*, they serve as signs of alienation, particularly from the family romance. There is a complementary scene to the one of his parents speaking Spanish without him. That “primal scene” of parental intimacy and linguistic exclusion is matched by another scene of explicit sexuality. Rodriguez writes:

My first conscious experience of sexual excitement concerns my complexion. One summer weekend, when I was around seven years old, I was at a public swimming pool with the whole family.... My mother, I noticed, was watching my father as he stood on the diving board, waving to her. I watched her wave back. Then saw her radiant, bashful, astonishing smile. In that second I sensed that my mother and father had a relationship I knew nothing about. A nervous excitement encircled my stomach as I saw my mother's eyes follow my father's figure curving into the water.... I heard her shout over to me. In Spanish she called through the crowd: 'Put a towel on over your shoulders.' In public, she didn't want to say why. I knew. (132-33)

Like Kingston in her scene of a secret language at the dinner table, Rodriguez manages to capture a common type of nescience: the unknown knowledge of a parental sexual relationship.⁹ For Rodriguez, however, this primal scene is not just exclusionary, but cast in racial and linguistic terms. After identifying with his mother's desiring gaze on his father's body, he is doubly singled out in public: as Spanish-speaking and dark-skinned. Indeed, preference for a lighter complexion is one of the few familial and cultural secrets that Rodriguez reveals. In interviews, he recalls his mother's shame when his Caucasian friends would visit: "on Monday nights, my mother, like other immigrant mothers, would run to the kitchen. Would put lids on everything. So, she was embarrassed by our ethnicity, by... how Mexican our food was every night" (Moyers). Rodriguez is the only member of his family with a dark complexion; his parents' immigration papers list them as white (*Brown* 140).¹⁰ Rodriguez states in an interview: "in my middle-class Mexican family *indio* was a bad word, one my parents shy away from to this day. That's one of the reasons, of course, why I always insist, in my bratty way, of saying, *Soy*

indio! – ‘I am an Indian!’ ... Mexico has to confront her Indian face, and yet she refuses to do so. When you turn on Mexican television, it’s like watching Swedish TV: everyone is blond” (London, italics in original). Rodriguez adopts this broader view of race in his third memoir, *Brown*, which the *Los Angeles Times* calls “a meditation on America’s family secrets.” Rodriguez links the family secret of *indio* lineage to the foundational mixture that created America: the intermingling of European, Native American, and African lives, cultures, and bloodlines. The book is a meditation on liminality and mixture: a “perch on a hyphen” (*Days of Obligation* 159). In *Brown*, Rodriguez hails “Richard Nixon, the dark father of Hispanicity,” for creating the five categories – white, black, yellow, red, brown – that artificiality divided minority from majority, and minority into ethnic category (xii, 94). As the assimilated son of parents who achieved middle-class economic standing, however, Rodriguez denies his membership in any minority category. His view on class is absolute and deracialized, even as his view of race allows for hybridity.

Unlike Kingston, who mines her nescience of her family’s history for creative license, Rodriguez views his parents from a distance, avoiding any imaginative leaps into their past. He considers his parents’ photographs in order to see his own class status more clearly. He writes: “The dandy. I wear double-breasted Italian suits and custom-made English shoes. I resemble no one so much as my father – the man pictured in those honeymoon photos. At that point in life when he abandoned the dandy’s posture, I assume it.... For my parents, however, those symbols became taunts, reminders of all they could not achieve in one lifetime. For me those same symbols are reassuring reminders of public success” (*Hunger of Memory* 146). Class advancement masks and mourns the failure of Rodriguez’s private life. His opposition to affirmative action is supposedly based on the class realities of America, not his own ethnic

background. Lyn Di Iorio's observation about the novelist Rosario Ferre is applicable to Rodriguez's performed loss of language, family, and community. She writes: "If such self-conscious assimilation kills off the Hispanic origin, it also chooses to keep on carrying and showcasing the corpse" (61).

Even at one of his loneliest moments, after turning away from the "gray, timid faces" within academia, he maintains a clinical distance from his family and the culture they stand for (75). "Living with my parents for the summer, I remained an academic – a kind of anthropologist in the family kitchen, searching for evidence of our 'cultural ties' as we ate dinner together" (172). The late critic Tomás Rivera best articulates a common criticism of *Hunger of Memory*: "His parents are the thesis of his statement. Sometimes he feels frustrated because they have not read Garcia-Marquez, Ruben Dario, but then he never read these writers to them. He hungers for a memory that could be so close, yet he doesn't seem to realize that satisfying this appetite is within reach" (13). While in *Hunger of Memory* Rodriguez ostentatiously betrays his family's privacy, he writes in *Brown*: "I do not betray 'my people.' I think of the nation entire – all Americans – as my people" (128). With no particular community to betray with his confessions, Rodriguez devotes the last chapter of *Brown* to his most contradictory, "hyphenated" identity: a homosexual Catholic. When a student tries to broach the lack of sexual forthrightness in Rodriguez's writing, the author contemplates: "I never say. I am often enough asked how it is I call myself a gay Catholic... The tension I have come to depend upon. That is what I mean by brown. The answer is that I cannot reconcile" (224). From the radical binaries of *Hunger of Memory* – Spanish and English, public and private, said and unsaid – Rodriguez arrives at a balancing act of acknowledging a desire that his religion forbids. He writes at the end of *Brown*: "My brown paradox: The church tells me to understand love, the church that taught me well to

believe love breathes – also tells me that it is not love I feel, at four in the morning, in the dark, even before the birds cry” (230).

No name stories

For Rodriguez, unknown history is a sign of his distance from his family’s unrecoverable past.

For Kingston, nescience is a spur to the imagination, an invitation to begin a dialogue to fill in the gaps of the family story with myths, fictional versions, and invented linkages between history and possibility. Kingston worries about the costs of telling secrets, even if she makes them up.

Her mother admonishes her for revealing “immigration secrets and ruin[ing] families” (*Fifth Book* 55). Kingston writes in response: “So people talk about me, and it’s gotten back to my mother. They say that I betray them. I meant to honor them, and keep their history, but I hurt them. They’d rather I write PR, do them some good, not bad-luck tragedy. I’m sure the people who hate me haven’t read me. They are nonreaders” (56). Unlike the nonreaders in the Chinese community, Kingston’s family does read her memoirs, though in Chinese translation. Kingston’s father encourages his daughter’s writing, not only reading her work, but responding with his own art, in his own language. Kingston writes in her memoir-in-verse, *I Love a Broad Margin to My Life*: “My father wrote to me, poet to poet. / He replied to me. I have goaded / him: I’ll tell about you, you silent man. / I’ll suppose you. You speak up if I’ve got / you wrong. He answered me; he wrote / in the flyleaves and wide margins of the Chinese / editions of my books” (18).¹¹

Kingston’s father, who was a poet, scholar, and teacher in China, accepts his daughter’s challenge: she invents countless versions of his migration story in *China Men*, daring her father to correct her fictional versions of all she cannot know about him. These acts of invention comprise Kingston’s approach to nescience, the familial and cultural history she can never fully know. The price of inventing history, though, is the anxiety of getting it wrong – Kingston will

revise her family's history again and again, accepting that subsequent versions might be no closer to the truth.

Kingston first displays the workings of nescience in her family in "No Name Woman," the opening chapter of *The Woman Warrior*. The memoir begins with Brave Orchid's famous interdiction: "'You must not tell anyone,' my mother said, 'what I am about to tell you'" (3). The narrator learns that her father had a sister who has been consigned to silence: in China, she bore an illicit child (either from rape or an affair; Kingston explores both narrative possibilities), and drowned herself and the baby in the family well after villagers raided their home. In her "talk-story," the mother-daughter form of collaborative storytelling that comprises much of *The Woman Warrior*, Kingston narrates her slow progress from keeping silent to publishing her aunt's story. At first, she tried to protect her father: "I have believed that sex was unspeakable and words so strong and fathers so frail that 'aunt' would do my father mysterious harm" (15). But in fact, as her second book, *China Men*, demonstrates, Maxine's father says so little during her childhood, due to a crippling depression, that there is no way to know if the aunt's story is actually secret. In "No Name Woman," Maxine realizes that the aunt's story will never be completely known, because she has not known to ask about her, to fill in the narrative gaps. "But there is more to this silence: they want me to participate in her punishment. And I have. In the twenty years since I heard this story I have not asked for details nor said my aunt's name; I do not know it" (16). This, perhaps, is the most common form of nescience: not knowing *how* or *what* to ask, or realizing after a family member is gone that he or she could have told you more. Daniel Mendelsohn, in his memoir *The Lost*, recalls telling a friend the family history of the Holocaust that he uncovered on a quest to Europe. The friend bursts into tears while listening to Mendelsohn's story and says: "*I'm crying because my grandfather died two years ago and now*

it's too late to ask him anything" (486, italics in original).¹² The dark side of the "not yet" of protecting the family from pain, is the "too late" of realizing the costs of colluding in silence. There is no right time to ask about a painful past, just as there is no right time to publish. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. neglects this relational negotiation of timing, when he calls for writers to abolish considerations of "yet" in lifting the veil on "family secrets and racial secrets and ethnic secrets" ("Lifting" 109).

Although she fills in many of the holes in the story of her aunt, Kingston leaves some room for "the never-said" (10). One thing she can't figure out is why the aunt, married to a man working in America, was living with her own family at the time of the raid. She writes of the aunt's parents-in-law: "But they had sent her back to her own mother and father, a mysterious act hinting at disgraces not told me. Perhaps they had thrown her out to deflect the avengers" (8). In a separate story about her father's family in *China Men*, Kingston relates that her grandfather desperately wanted a daughter when the youngest son, Maxine's father, was born, and went so far as to try to swap him for a neighbor's daughter (15). Did the aunt's birth fill a hole in the family of sons, replacing the wished-for daughter who was switched back? Kingston instead chooses to emphasize a storyline that gives her "ancestral help," illuminating her own failures of intimacy in America (8). In an echo of Rodriguez's Lawrencian wish for a "third language" of pure, intimate communication, Kingston invents a romantic yearning within her aunt's story: "Children and lovers have no singularity here, but my aunt used a secret voice, a separate attentiveness" (11). To speak in a secret language, even if it is just pillow talk, is to differentiate a lover from a kinsman. The aunt might have mastered skills that elude young Maxine in her crowded immigrant house: "how to make attraction selective," and how to have, at least temporarily, "a private life, secret and apart" (12,13). The privacy and intimacy of a secret

language violates the power structure of the village. Kingston, too, wavers in her version of her aunt's story, unwilling to commit her aunt to heroism. At the end of the chapter she veers from telling the story to "telling on her, and she was a spite suicide, drowning herself in the drinking water" (16). Years later, when she visits her family's village in China, Kingston finds out that not even the fatal end of the story is certain. Gazing at the family well, she realizes: "My aunt / with the baby couldn't possibly have jumped into / a well this shallow, and drowned" (*I Love* 168-69). If the aunt didn't drown herself in the well, how did she die? Did she commit suicide elsewhere, was she murdered, or does she live on? Here, the aunt's story interweaves with the legend of Fa Mu Lan, the heroine of Chinese myth who inspired the second chapter of *The Woman Warrior*, "White Tigers." If the aunt's heroic suicide is no longer certain, the warrior Fa Mu Lan's unhappy death supplants hers. Kingston discovers in China a sad parallel to her pacifist mission in America: "Now / I know: [Fa Mu Lan] killed herself. / She had P.T.S.D.; her soldier's heart broke, / and she fell on her sword. This month, / May 2009, more American soldiers died by / their own hand than killed by Iraqis and Al Qaeda" (*I Love* 211).

Inventing America

As the unfolding talk-stories of the no-name aunt and Fa Mu Lan suggest, Kingston's memoirs are most productively considered together, as volumes of a serial work. The memoirs gradually fill in, revise, and reimagine the gaps within the Hong family history, sometimes confirming or disproving other versions of the same story. Kingston's revisionary aesthetic suggests that even within one family, there is no subjective truth: stories change as their use-value changes. Kingston's strategy of imagining potential storylines for her drowned aunt – possibilities that cannot all be true, and reveal more about the narrator than the aunt herself – repeats throughout *China Men*. This volume imagines the lives of her male ancestors, beginning

with her father's depressed silences during her childhood. As with her father's sister, Kingston doesn't even know her father's name for sure. She knows his Chinese name is Think Virtue, but she believes his American name is Ed (self-named after another "cunning, resourceful, successful inventor," Thomas Edison), while she calls him Tom in *The Fifth Book of Peace* (*China Men* 69, *Fifth* 26). As in "No Name Woman," knowing or not knowing someone's name can reveal deeper gaps in knowledge and understanding of another's subjectivity. Names are a powerful cultural secret in Kingston's works. She avoids naming herself in *The Woman Warrior*, cleverly casting doubt on the autobiographical pact between writer and reader, which traditionally testifies to the truth value of the narrative through the matched name of autobiographer and narrator. A father's name is one of the many "immigration secrets" the daughter is forbidden to know or to tell: "There were secrets never to be said in front of the ghosts, immigration secrets whose telling could get us sent back to China. Sometimes I hated the ghosts for not letting us talk; sometimes I hated the secrecy of the Chinese. 'Don't tell,' said my parents, though we couldn't tell if we wanted to because we didn't know" (*Woman Warrior* 183). Keeping a common secret can mean keeping it *from* second-generation children; they inherit the interdiction – a nescience – in place of cultural knowledge. A "roots" memoirist like Bliss Broyard will use the interdiction as a reason to begin a quest to fill in historical knowledge and forge a present-day bond to a lost community. But Broyard doesn't let her imagination fill in much: she invents a single scene of her father's passing while applying for a social security card. Kingston, in contrast, devotes an entire serial oeuvre to imagining a past and linking unknown familial traumas to her present-day affiliation as a peace activist.

Kingston addresses her father in *China Men*: "You say with the few words and silences: No stories. No past. No China" (14). In the absence of a verifiable version of her father's China,

she invents one: “I want to compare China, a country I made up, with what country is really out there” (84). Like Rodriguez, who claims a founding history of America in *Brown* on the “meeting of the Indian, the African, and the European in colonial America” (xii), Kingston creates a founding story of Chinese America in *China Men*. (The minimal presence of early-American Asians in Rodriguez’s *Brown* only supports *China Men*’s thesis about the erasure of Chinese migrants from American mythology.) For Kingston, there is no difference between inventing and discovering America; she writes of her paternal ancestors: “How could they not go to the Gold Mountain again, which belonged to them, which they had invented and discovered?” (39) By the same token, China “belongs” to Kingston; she can invent, discover, and write about both her ancestral countries, even before she visits her parents’ homeland herself. Lacking a foundational myth, Kingston presents several versions of the “chinamen” in her family: her father’s (likely illegal) immigration, her grandfather’s work on railroads in the American West, and her great-grandfather’s labor in sugar cane fields in Hawaii. “I think this is the journey you don’t tell me,” Kingston writes to her father, inventing the story of his daring journey from Cuba to New York, hidden in a shipping crate (49). Switching to a general address, she then recants this family secret of illegal migration: “Of course, my father could not have come that way. He came a legal way” (50). But no matter how he came, Kingston cannot deny the toll of immigration on her father. Traumatized by a series of business failures and conflicting reports of his relatives’ starvation in China during the Cultural Revolution, he sometimes turns on his own family, attacking the children he has been laboring to feed.¹³ Kingston and her sister have different memories of the event that broke their father’s years of domestic silence. Kingston first tells the story as she remembers it, then revises it: her sister angered their father, and he broke a door down to catch and beat her. Yet neither sister will admit to being the object of their father’s

rage: “My sister has the same memory. Neither of us has the recollection of curling up inside that room, whether behind the pounding door or under the bed or in the closet” (253). Their memories reflect one another, and the scene behind this mirroring, the hidden room of familial violence, is lost.

Eye/I control

Kingston details her own history of silence and violence in *The Woman Warrior*, destabilizing presumptions that silence is passivity and self-expression is victimless. She fails kindergarten and her IQ is measured at zero because she is silent in class – even though she speaks, shouts, and plays freely at her Chinese-language school in the afternoons.¹⁴ Her silence does not reflect inability, but an exertion of control. At school, Maxine creates a series of all-black paintings not to indicate sameness or emptiness, but to symbolize possibility: “I was making a stage curtain, and it was the moment before the curtain parted or rose. The teachers called my parents to school, and I saw they had been saving my pictures, curling and cracking, all alike and black.... I spread them out (so black and full of possibilities) and pretended the curtains were swinging open, flying up, one after another, sunlight underneath, mighty operas” (165). Those black curtains conceal rich, multivocal, chaotic Chinese operas – a delightfully messy contrast to Rodriguez’s solitary and single-minded “Aria,” the title of *Hunger for Memory*’s opening chapter.¹⁵ However, the black curtain of Kingston’s rich imagination cannot protect her from darker plots. The same curtain appears earlier in *The Woman Warrior*, when Maxine tries to block out her mother’s story about eating a live monkey’s brain in China. “I’d overhear before I had a chance to protect myself. Then the monkey words would unsettle me; a curtain flapped loose in my brain.... The curtain flaps closed like merciful black wings” (91, 92).

One lesson from American school that helps Maxine control the trajectory of stories is learning to place herself in relation to others. The two words she cannot master in English are “I” and “here.” These are the hallmarks of an autobiographical self: placing “I” in a place and time (167).¹⁶ Maxine practices her control over “I,” her mastery of subjectivity, by minimizing others: “First grade was when I discovered eye control; with my seeing I could shrink the teacher down to a height of one inch, gesticulating and mouthing on the horizon. I lost this power in sixth grade for lack of practice, the teacher a generous man” (183). In a twist on the traditionally predominant “I” of autobiography – a masculinist notion of the genre advocated by theorists like Georges Gusdorf, until feminism reshaped the critical field¹⁷ – Maxine slowly unlearns this “I” control and allows other subjects their full-size existence, and her importance as a self-in-relation.¹⁸ However, the most memorable scene in *The Woman Warrior* shows how difficult it is to rein in one’s “I control,” and the dangers of projecting one’s own subjectivity and subjection onto another. Maxine tries to teach an even quieter Chinese girl the mechanics of “I” and “here” by torturing her into speaking. The quiet girl, with her “China doll hair cut,” complete wordlessness, and classic hallmarks of the “Chinese-feminine,” only cries when Maxine pokes, prods, and finally pleads with the girl to speak (173). Maxine begs: “If you don’t talk, you can’t have a personality... You’ve got to let people know you have a personality and a brain” (180). Shocked by her own violence, directed at an external version of her own self-hatred, Maxine collapses after the torture scene: “The world is sometimes just, and I spent the next eighteen months sick in bed with a mysterious illness.... It was the best year and a half of my life. Nothing happened” (181-82). At first emboldened by the “I control” she developed during her own silence, the narrator realizes the porousness of her sense of self, and her susceptibility to injury by injuring others.¹⁹

From talking to listening

In *The Woman Warrior*, Maxine's "throat burst open" with the adolescent pain of needing to share her own secrets (201). Her solitary life behind the black curtain is so painful that she worries her secrets could isolate her permanently. But in fact, the secrets she wants to tell are all minor infractions, such as killing a spider, or wishing for a horse or dress in the forbidden mourning color of white. She doesn't desire absolution as much as the *connection* that secret sharing can provide: "If I could let my mother know the list, she – and the world – would become more like me, and I would never be alone again" (198). We can't really blame Brave Orchid for talking over these confessions, reminding her daughter, through the clamor they make together, that her demands for privacy and connection are common and often at odds. "And suddenly I got very confused and lonely because I was at that moment telling her my list, and in the telling, it grew. No higher listener. No listener but myself" (204). Kingston levels the "listeners" in her text – self, other, and even reader – none of whom can satisfy the eternal desire for connection and autonomy toward which secrecy gestures.

If the possibilities and dangers of self-expression are a defining theme of *The Woman Warrior*, dominated by "champion talker" Brave Orchid (202), then listening is the guiding theme of *China Men*. This second text emphasizes that secrets, even those whispered to no one in particular, do not disappear. In 1850s Hawaii, Bak Goong, Kingston's great-grandfather, harvests sugar cane for long hours and almost no pay, and he is prohibited from talking on the job. His throat could have burst open, like Maxine's, but he finds an alternate form of vocal release and community making. Kingston reworks the Greek myth of King Midas, whom Apollo punishes by giving him donkey ears, into a story of immigrant solidarity.²⁰ Frustrated at his enforced

silence and loneliness, Bak Goong tells his fellow workers a story about a king whose son was born with cat ears. The king cannot resist confessing his own family secret:

The king never mentioned the cat ears, so the secret grew large in his chest and mouth. One day when the boy was almost grown the king could not hold the secret inside himself any more. He walked alone in a winter field, where he scooped out a hole. He shouted into it, “The king’s son has cat ears. The king’s son has cat ears.” He shouted until he was empty of his secret, and satisfied, relieved, he pushed the dirt back into the hole and stomped it down. In the spring, grass grew in that field, and when the wind blew through it, the people heard words.... It grew into a song. (116-17)

Bak Goong’s story implies that every story has a listener; even the best-kept and strangest secret is a song that can resonate in others’ ears. Significantly, Bak Goong’s fellow workers use his story to invent their own tradition of secret telling. The immigrant workers dig a hole in the ground, like the king’s, and shout greetings to their families: “Hello down there in China!” (117) They confess their small betrayals, such as spending money meant for their families. “They dug an ear into the world, and were telling the earth their secrets.... Talked out, they buried words, planted them. ‘Like cats covering shit,’ they laughed” (117, 118). Their leader, Bak Goong, consecrates their raucous mass confession as a new ritual, commemorating their loneliness, frustration, and pioneering spirit in America. “‘That wasn’t a custom,’ said Bak Goong. ‘We made it up. We can make up customs because we’re the founding ancestors of this place’” (118). Further, this “shout party” into the earth has tangible results for the workers: their bosses are frightened by the commotion and lift the restriction on talking while working (118). The workers’ secrets, therefore, turn into a song of protest and commemoration, and future

generations will hear the song of their suffering. As Cheng puts it in her comparison of African American and Asian American “sorrow songs” of protest, “If we are willing to listen, the history of disarticulated grief is still speaking through the living, and the future of social transformation depends on how open we are to facing the intricacies and paradoxes of that grief and the passions that it bequeaths” (29).

“You have no idea how much I’ve fallen coming to America”

Despite its applicability to the politics of *China Men*, Cheng’s influential analysis of Kingston’s work in *The Melancholy of Race* focuses solely on *The Woman Warrior*, arguing that Brave Orchid’s immigration trauma is the formative event of the narrator’s life. In an interpretation similar to mine, Cheng points out that the “No Name Woman” is not necessarily a family secret. Building from the gestural secret of “No Name Woman” to the greater losses within Brave Orchid’s past, Cheng writes:

We can actually see this moment as the text acting as its own therapist, catering to a psychoanalytic model of confession by staging both the burial and unearthing of a “family secret.” The novel is, after all, a story *constructed* to be such a confession, with all its revelatory and transgressive impact. But this “outing” does not really reveal a secret... That is, there is *another* loss being buried here and another fantasmatic identification being established: not the loss of the dead aunt that is being flaunted by the narrator but a loss that is truly inarticulable between mother and daughter – a loss that extends beyond inevitable, expected parent-child losses to whole cultural, national, and historical losses that the mother herself has endured, is herself barely processing, and has in fact passed on to the

daughter.... *The mother is the mourner in the text, and the daughter the melancholic repeater of her grief.* (85-87, italics in original)

Cheng's argument – that Kingston's narrator has inherited, and holds onto, her mother's trauma of immigration – is rooted in Abraham and Torok's work of introjection, in which they also theorize the intergenerational properties of nescience. Cheng uses the psychoanalytic concept of introjection, the assimilation of inherited grief without the traumatic effects of melancholia, to tease out the "*relationship between grief and survival that assimilation stages*" (96, italics in original). At the heart of Cheng's argument about racial melancholia is the prevalence of inherited loss in *The Woman Warrior: Brave Orchid* has suffered unspeakable trauma in her immigration, and she transmits unarticulated memories to her daughter. This form of nescience, as unspoken and inherited trauma, is akin to Marianne Hirsch's "postmemory" and Nancy K. Miller's "unstoried memory." Postmemory, like nescience, involves an "imaginative investment and recreation," as Kingston's fantasy-fueled memoir abundantly demonstrates (22). From another perspective, Di Iorio identifies a version of traumatic ghostliness permeating Latino/a literature in English. She writes: "The magical irrupts in the U.S. Latino/a Caribbean texts not as full-fledged magical realism that dominates the text with an atmosphere of strangeness, but as an archetypal, often vestigial sign of the maternal" (11).²¹ All four of these versions of intergenerational trauma – Cheng's racial melancholia, Hirsch's postmemory, Miller's unstoried memory, and Di Iorio's ghostliness – emerge from analyses of ethnic literature, suggesting that there truly is something ghostly, unresolved, and inheritable in the immigration experience, no matter the country or culture of origin. As Janna Malamud Smith observes in *My Father Is a Book*, her memoir of her father, the Jewish writer Bernard Malamud: "There seemed to have been a dybbuk inhabiting him from beyond the Pale, suggesting the phantom endurance of

disembodied familial traditions, severed during immigration but extant in an invisible continuity with the past” (16).

The Woman Warrior is certainly replete with loss. “You have no idea,” Brave Orchid tells her daughter, “how much I’ve fallen coming to America” (77). Foremost among Brave Orchid’s losses is the death of her two firstborn children in China. In *The Woman Warrior*, Kingston’s narrator knows almost nothing about these ghostly siblings, who have robbed her of her title as “practically a first daughter of a first daughter” (109). According to a parenthetical aside by Brave Orchid, the children died after their father immigrated to America without his family: “(‘They were three and two years old, a boy and a girl. They could talk already.’)” (60) Brave Orchid doesn’t specify how these babies died, though in *China Men*, an aunt mentions that they were killed by firecrackers (208). Although Cheng argues that Brave Orchid is “barely processing” the loss of family, career, and social standing since she left China, to my ear, Brave Orchid primarily bequeaths the power of self-expression to her daughter (86). For example, the narrator’s voice and her mother’s voice are blended in much of *The Woman Warrior*, and yet often distinct. In the “Shaman” chapter, which reproduces a talk-story of Brave Orchid’s education in China, the mother’s present-tense interjections – how she tells her own story – are put in parentheses, whether explaining the significance of the zodiac’s dragon “(‘my totem, your totem’)” or hinting at her homesickness “(‘That is the same moon that they see in China, the same stars though shifted a little’)” (67, 68). As we have seen in Rodriguez’s memoirs, parentheses can isolate a parent’s speech, but they also commemorate, providing a textual embrace of another’s point of view. Kingston honors her mother’s way of talking-story, allowing their two voices to intermingle and to separate. The perspective in *The Woman Warrior* is purposely adolescent; the young narrator is desperate to “get out of hating range” (52). That

desire for freedom coexists with a fierce love and protectiveness toward her aging mother. On a single page of the memoir, in the present-tense of a grey-haired narrator visiting her parents for a weekend, we witness in quick succession the narrator's restlessness, her spoken grievance, and her mother's benediction to leave. Kingston writes: "[Brave Orchid] pries open my head and my fists and crams into them responsibility for time, responsibility for intervening oceans" (108). She tells her mother about her sickness when she comes home, and relative health as she finds "some places in this country that are ghost-free" (108). Brave Orchid's response is uncharacteristically tender, and she authorizes the narrator to do exactly what she has been doing: to leave, but to carry her inheritance within her. Using her favorite nickname, she tells her daughter, "Of course you must go, Little Dog" (108). Additionally, Kingston's full project of serial autobiography provides a clearer picture of her familial and cultural inheritance. We find in later memoirs, which focus more on Kingston's adult life, that mother and daughter have remained close. Kingston still translates for her mother in public, *still* feels ashamed of her mother's loud and demanding ways. But she is open to working through her relationship to her mother, her past, and her mother's past. She writes in *I Love a Broad Margin to My Life*: "I am guilty for leaving my mother. For leaving / many mothers – nations, my race, the ghetto" (28). But for every "mother" she leaves, she takes something with her, particularly lessons about self-healing through political action.

"The big family"

The Fifth Book of Peace demonstrates that Kingston's commitment to pacifism is a maternal inheritance. Kingston writes: "My mother comes to me in dreams. She is at her largest and most powerful, midlife, my age now. She says, 'What have you been doing to educate America? What have you done to educate the world? Have you taught everybody yet?' The

Chinese idiom for ‘everybody’ is ‘big family.’ ‘Have you taught the big family yet?’” (241) *The Fifth Book of Peace* was published in 2003, the same year that Kingston was arrested during an International Women’s Day protest of the Iraq War in Washington, DC. This memoir most explicitly lays out Kingston’s pacifistic tenets; it is named after another “Book of Peace” that she lost in a 1991 fire in Berkeley, a tragedy that she links to American bombings during the Vietnam War and the Iraq War. She writes: “Life – the life that precedes and flows into mine – has been one long war, forever, that I have to sort out” (60). Kingston is especially moved when she realizes that her losses, including a home, a novel-in-progress, family heirlooms, and her mother’s immigration documents, are also others’ losses: she is inundated with concern and well-wishes from readers. In turn, Kingston sets out to “educate the world,” the “big family” that her dream-mother urges her toward (241). Her detailed narration of writing workshops with Vietnam veterans do not make for easy reading (we get a play-by-play account of her nervousness before, during, and after one workshop in Berkeley, for example) but her mission is clear: “We are writing vet lit, and no one wants to read us” (355). Her mission is to help others set the unspeakable to paper, as difficult as it may be to write and read. Kingston writes about combat veterans and survivors of World War II Japanese internment camps: “The cousins who had gone to war didn’t talk about what they had seen or done, just as the AJA’s [Americans of Japanese Ancestry] didn’t mention the camps. They must have been too ashamed. They might have talked among themselves, and shut up in front of an outsider like me, not a soldier, not an AJA” (274). As an adult “outsider” – an aging Asian woman – Kingston uses her very otherness to elicit the most painful stories of war.

As Rodriguez memorably states in *Hunger for Memory*, “There are things so deeply personal that they can be revealed only to strangers” (200). Just as it is possible to inherit a secret that is not your own, through the intergenerational properties of nescience, postmemory, and cultural “ghostliness,” it *is* possible to work through collective traumas that you did not experience directly. Through serial autobiography, both Kingston and Rodriguez return to the page to consider anew their responsibilities to protect and represent their families and communities. While Kingston discovers the maternal source of her activism, Rodriguez marks his distance from familial experience by emphasizing the American problem of class over the closer-to-home issues of language, ethnicity, and race that marked his upbringing. Their particularity as “outsider” Americans – writing from a second-generation perspective about issues that affect the “big family” of their nation – is what motivates both Kingston and Rodriguez to keep writing in an autobiographical and political voice.

Chapter Five

Unknown Knowns: State Secrets and Family Secrets

In an opinion piece in the *New York Times*, published on the last day of 2011, Geoffrey Wheatcroft employs the phrase “unknown knowns” to sum up a host of contemporary woes, from the Iraq War, to the subprime mortgage collapse, to the Jerry Sandusky scandal at Penn State. Wheatcroft borrows the term “unknown knowns” from the Irish writer Fintan O’Toole, who extrapolated it, in turn, from Donald H. Rumsfeld’s infamous musings on “known knowns” and “known unknowns” during a 2002 press briefing.¹ In his 2011 memoir, *Known and Unknown*, Rumsfeld even lengthens that speech, in brackets: “Reports that say something hasn’t happened are always interesting to me because as we know, there are known knowns: there are things we know we know. We also know there are known unknowns: that is to say we know there are some things [we know] we do not know. But there are also unknown unknowns – the ones we don’t know we don’t know” (xiii).² Rumsfeld goes on to define “known knowns,” “known unknowns,” “known knowns,” and unknown unknowns” at some length (and somehow clarifying none of them) (xiv). The late, great critic Barbara Johnson also defines some of these categories in *The Critical Difference* (1980): “It is not, in the final analysis, what you don’t know that can or cannot hurt you. It’s what you don’t *know* you don’t know spins out and entangles ‘that perpetual error we call life’” (xii, italics in original). Rumsfeld’s calculus of unknowns, sadly, is much more frequently cited than Johnson’s deft observation. Neither Rumsfeld nor Johnson, though, addresses the category of unknown knowns, or nescience: what we don’t realize or acknowledge that we know. Nescience is just one of several concepts that link the intimate realm of personal narrative to the broader realm of politics. So far, we have seen that nescience powerfully influences our notions of identity: how we think of ourselves, our loved

ones, our communities, and where our loved ones fit into our chosen communities. All of these identifications constitute political acts. This chapter argues that state secrets consolidate institutional power in ways that strongly correlate to the inheritance and enforcement of family secrecy. Though they might seem incommensurate at first, family secrets and state secrets resemble each other in their mechanics of disclosure. They also elicit similar public reactions, albeit on a different scale of impact. Revealing family secrets made memoirist Kathryn Harrison a bestselling author, while revealing state secrets put Private First Class Bradley Manning in prison. But considering the dynamics and reception of one type of secrecy helps us understand the other. In what follows, I utilize memoir theory to interpret the reception and criticism – or “epitext,” to borrow Gérard Genette’s critical term (Whitlock 14) – surrounding the public reaction to the anti-secrecy organization WikiLeaks.³ In the case of WikiLeaks, the epitext serves as a public primary text, as the leaks themselves, from the Afghan War Diary to “Cablegate,” were scantily read in full, but consumed via media reports of the data and their effects. How do readers respond to the disclosure of others’ secrets, from a domestic to global scale?

Although 2010 might have felt like the Year of the Secret, as WikiLeaks released three huge troves of secret government documents throughout the year, these disclosures were not unprecedented. Julian Assange, the iconic and controversial founder of WikiLeaks, acknowledges Daniel Ellsberg, leaker of the Vietnam War’s Pentagon Papers, as his predecessor and mentor. In the fall of 1969, Ellsberg, a former government official and a consultant for the Rand Corporation, began photocopying a 7,000-page top-secret government report, “History of U.S. Decision-Making Process on Vietnam Policy,” spanning from 1945 to 1967. After several Congressmen hesitated to introduce these “Pentagon Papers” in official proceedings, in 1971 Ellsberg leaked portions to the *New York Times* and 16 other newspapers. President Richard M.

Nixon filed a national security exception to halt publication, but newspapers defied the injunctions, which were subsequently struck down by the Supreme Court in a split decision, *New York Times vs. United States*. Ellsberg admits that he would have published more quickly in today's era: "I wouldn't have waited that long. I would have gotten a scanner and put them on the Internet" (Cohen). (WikiLeaks is named after the lightning speed of revelation on the Web; "wiki" derives from a Hawaiian word for "fast.") If Ellsberg was the "most dangerous man in America" in 1971, according to Henry Kissinger, Assange is the today's "anti-American with blood on his hands," at least according to Sarah Palin's widely broadcast Facebook post (qtd. in Ellsberg 434, Beckford). Although the analogy between the Pentagon Papers and WikiLeaks has been made in the press and by the two leakers, public discussions of these two flashpoints of disclosure have not sufficiently illuminated the politics of secrecy in the contemporary era. How are readers consuming secrets, and how can the epitext of memoirs of family secrets shed light on contemporaneous anxieties surrounding state secrets? Secrecy itself, its mechanics and reception, becomes an apparatus worthy of structural analysis in a contemporary age characterized by a deluge of secrets, both personal and political. And citizens implicitly consent to an "apparatus of secrecy," as Ellsberg terms it, on the level of household and houses of government, that exceeds the content of any single leak (43).

Memoir and betrayal

"There is no betrayal, as there is no love, like the first one," writes Patricia Hampl in an essay, "Other People's Secrets," that recalls a past revelation of her mother's secret illness in an autobiographical poem (218). Family constitutes our "first love," our first experience of care and reciprocity. As Georg Simmel writes in his essay on secrets, "Every relationship between two individuals or two groups will be characterized by the ratio of secrecy that is involved in it"

(462). Secrecy, a form of communication that negotiates interpersonal boundaries, demonstrates relationality in action. Family secrets, in particular, exemplify the relational structures of silence and disclosure. Jacques Derrida writes of secrecy:

Having the force of law, this secret is always the power of someone. There would be no secret without a pledge to the other. Without swearing. As such, this other, this person, this so-and-so, is the secret and insists on secret.... such-and-such a secret always hangs by some thread *{fil}*, and more than one thread, by threads *{fils}*, to the genesis, the genealogy and the genre, namely to that which has force of law in the matter of filiation or in the family phylum. (*Geneses* 21)

Relational memoir, by its very definition, requires a negotiation of the boundaries of privacy. By including our loved ones in our life stories, we must calibrate how deeply we delve into their personal affairs. Secrets, whether kept or disclosed, are the currency of that negotiation between relationality and privacy. As a currency, secrecy is essentially neutral, despite frequent outpourings of disapproval regarding secrecy and disclosure. Regardless of the information revealed through a memoir's disclosures, the reader, whom Nancy K. Miller calls the "autobiographer's most necessary other," is implicated in the formal and relational properties of secrecy when he or she consumes secrets in print ("Entangled" 545). The reader, then, also buys into the currency of secrecy, negotiating her intimate engagement with the text.

Even in our post-second-wave age of the personal and the political, autobiography doesn't always get its due as a genre with political possibilities. Lauren Berlant, a theorist of intimacy in narrative, has included popular memoir within a category she terms the "juxtapolitical, flourishing in proximity to the political because the political is deemed an elsewhere managed by elites who are interested in reproducing the conditions of their objective

superiority, not in the well-being of ordinary people or life-worlds” (3). Yet memoir theory has taken a decisive turn toward the political. The following passage by Leigh Gilmore applies equally to memoirs of family secrets and, as I argue below, first-person accounts of state secrets: “memoir ... [is] engaged in a process through which personal history gains interpretive leverage on dominant history and [is] thereby laid bare to a kind of scrutiny that characterizes the politics of truth telling... Such scrutiny is central to the emergence of scandal and serves to inhibit the prepoliticized ‘I’ of memoir from achieving its politicization or, equally, to short-circuit the emergence of a ‘we’ politicized in its response to the ‘I’” (“Jurisdictions” 699). That politicized “we,” the community of readers, judges a memoir’s ethics of secrecy by its mechanics of disclosure. Form and genre trump content in the reception and judgment of autobiographical disclosures.

Memoir and transparency

The calibration of transparency and aesthetics in memoir, like secrecy itself, is also a question of form. Much criticism of the genre hews to an aesthetic paradox: memoir is always too transparent, and yet always not transparent enough. The memoir backlash, which began almost concurrently with the memoir boom in the early 1990s, has charged the genre with two opposite complaints: salaciousness and tedium. In their attempts to recreate the rhythms of real life, memoirists must negotiate between mimesis and invention.⁴ And some reviewers invoke contradictory crimes in order to argue that though “tell-all” memoirs have exposed every corner of private life, they haven’t shown us anything we don’t already know. Neil Genzlinger writes in the *New York Times Book Review*:

A moment of silence, please, for the lost art of shutting up.... That you had parents and a childhood does not of itself qualify you to write a memoir. This

maxim... is really a response to a broader problem, a sort of grade inflation for life experiences. A vast majority of people used to live lives that would draw a C or a D if grades were being passed out — not that they were bad lives, just bland. Now, though, practically all of us have somehow gotten the idea that we are B+ or A material; it's the "if it happened to me, it must be interesting" fallacy.

Genzlinger's 2011 review (down to the letter grades) echoes William Gass's 1994 critique in *Harper's*, dating from the beginning of the memoir boom and concurrent backlash. Gass inquires: "Why is it so exciting to say, now that everyone knows it anyway, 'I was born... I was born... I was born'? I pooped in my pants, I was betrayed, I made straight A's." Gass puts the onus of material and aesthetics on the memoirist; in contrast, Daniel Mendelsohn, in a 2010 *New Yorker* article, focuses on readers' expectations of transparency in memoir. Mendelsohn writes of the genre's reception history: "pretty much from the beginning, people have been complaining about the shallowness, the opportunism, the lying, the betrayals, the narcissism.... Indeed, the reactions to ... memoirs often tell us more about the tangled issues of veracity, mendacity, history, and politics than the books themselves do." The backlash against the genre's mechanics of revelation underscores the expectations of readers, rather than the ethics of the memoirist or the worthiness of her life experience.

If memoir is accused of revealing too much, it is also charged with revealing too little; this is a law of inadequate transparency that will apply equally to memoir and to intelligence leaks. Even memoirs that haven't been deemed hoaxes are faulted for stylizing the translation of personal experience into narrative. For example, Harrison's *The Kiss* (1997) has drawn some of the harshest critiques of the memoir backlash. *The Kiss*, about the memoirist's consensual affair with her father in her early twenties, exemplifies what Michael Rothberg terms, in the context of

the Holocaust, “traumatic realism,” in which “the extreme is always intertwined with normality and the everyday” (12). Setting her incestuous romance in the “nowheres and notimes” of anonymous airports and bland motel rooms, Harrison writes: “Our protracted good-byes are consumed along with magazines and junk food by the weary, bored travelers who surround us, slumped in molded plastic chairs” (4, 25). The reader’s discomfort at witnessing salacious acts is modeled by the bystanders’ consumption of the extreme and the everyday – forbidden romance alongside junk food and plastic. These airport witnesses function as a parody of “bad” readers of autobiography, who ogle but don’t inquire or intervene in any way. In her bestselling memoir of family secrets, *The Liars’ Club* (1995), Mary Karr positions her childhood neighbors as similarly shallow “readers,” consumers of her family drama. She writes: “When I stepped out the front door into the sunlight after a night of [my parents’] fighting, the activities of the neighbors who looked up from their trash cans or lawn mowers always seemed impossibly innocent. How could people fill their days with those kinds of chores?... I felt like the neighbors’ stares had bored so many imaginary holes in our walls that the whole house was rotten as wormy wood” (39). These background characters in *The Kiss* and *The Liars’ Club* warn readers to look more closely, to regard others’ lives more carefully than their magazines, gossip, or other transient forms of human entertainment. Memoirs of family secrets train readers to analyze productive intersections between the extreme and the everyday, between daily traumas and daily chores.

Not all reviewers of *The Kiss* caught on to the dreamy mundaneness that Harrison employs as an aesthetic enclosure for her traumatic experience. James Wolcott writes in the *New Republic*: “The first thing that strikes one about *The Kiss* is how airbrushed the writing is, how fadeaway. Its sentences leave wistful little vapor trails of Valium... After all, if you’re the glassy-eyed victim of a fever or a drug, you’re not truly responsible for your actions” (33, 34).⁵

Wolcott misreads the memoir's aesthetics of traumatic realism as a dismissal of personal agency. Memoir scholars have rebutted this type of criticism about shaky ethics and wispy aesthetics by reminding us that narrative must be crafted in order to be sharable. It's the aesthetics that interpellate a reader, inviting her to consider and interpret another's point of view. Writing about memoir and trauma, Miller and Jason Tougaw point to "the paradox of confessional memoir, a genre that exposes secrets only to re-conceal them through aestheticization" (16). For all that it confesses, memoir also elides, rendering unspeakable subjects sharable through formal experimentation. Susie Linfield's *Los Angeles Times* review captures the workings of reader interpellation in *The Kiss*. She writes: "*The Kiss* turns us into collaborationists in the worst way. Harrison implicates us in grisly truths we don't want to know (but we do, we do)... Like all good literature, *The Kiss* illuminates something that we knew already, while also teaching us things we had not even suspected." Although critics have tried to enclose memoir in a can't-win loop of revealing too much *and* too little, readers keep coming back to the genre, filling aesthetic gaps with their own interpretations, identifications, and disidentifications.⁶

Memoir and nescience

Laura Kipnis, "a self-appointed scandal theorist," makes a similar point about readers' attraction to open secrets ("Leaking" 1086). Kipnis writes: "scandals expose open secrets and things we already know... and it's the author's failure to have known something crucial about himself... that generates the story" (*How* 13, 184). The generative failure of knowledge that Linfield and Kipnis identify – a form of nescience – will comprise my third application of literary theory to WikiLeaks' reception. Nescience is the "unknown known," the buried awareness that one cannot or will not confront. The concept of nescience is especially helpful in parsing the relational negotiations within the disclosure of others' secrets, from intimate family

memoirs to global intelligence leaks. Derrida describes the workings of nescience when he writes: “Giving a secret away may mean telling it, revealing it, publishing it, divulging it, as well as keeping it so deeply in the crypt of a memory that we forget it is there or even cease to understand and have access to it. In one sense a secret kept is always a secret lost” (*Geneses* 20). And according to Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, one’s secrets can be wholly inherited, without knowledge or understanding, by one’s children. Nescience can protect a daughter or son from open secrets, the knowledge that a family cannot openly acknowledge. In turn, memoirists can dispel readers’ nescience about a society’s open secrets. As Paul John Eakin inquires, “Are memoirs... now courageously speaking hitherto unspeakable things, things that we have held in silence precisely because we have refused to accept them as part of knowledge?” (*How Our Lives* 143)

These three applications of memoir scholarship – the ethics of revelation and betrayal, the calibration of transparency and aesthetics, and the inherited gaps in knowledge that constitute nescience – speak directly to the reception history of state secrets. Although the link between the personal and the political is not neglected in academic criticism, the correlations between family secrets and state secrets yield new ways to understand the workings of secrecy in contemporary culture. Secrets, a currency of intimacy and power in any institution, delineate a spectrum of control over not just information, but structures of communication. As *New York Times* editor Max Frankel observed on the 25th anniversary of the Pentagon Papers’ publication, “even harmless secrets were coins of power to be hoarded.” Those coins of secrecy purchase entry into another’s confidence, renegotiating the boundaries within an interpersonal relationship. Secrets bond as well as separate; as Daniel Hayes observes: “Those closest to our secretions are often

those closest to our secrets” (243). “Leak,” too, has connotations of fluidity and separation, of boundaries permeated.⁷ Conventional wisdom holds that that “governments are the only vessels that leak from the top,” yet a torrent of leaks, from high and low, characterizes our contemporary era. Ben Zimmer notes in a *New York Times* “On Language” column, that “rupture” could better describe the flood of intimate communication in the current age; “rupture” invokes “a wound that can’t clot, that is not self-healing.” Indeed, secret spilling is not self-healing; contrary to popular talk-show wisdom, the truth shall not necessarily set you free. Secrecy is an inherently interpersonal process, and the greatest hopes of “leaking” or “rupturing” are to reveal patterns of communication and relation.

“All memoir is prostitution,” Assange announced, when he unsuccessfully campaigned to cancel his memoir contract with Canongate (“Leaker’s Leak”). Assange has already spent a £1.5 million book advance on legal fees, as he battled two separate 2010 sexual assault charges in Sweden, a country he condemns as “the Saudi Arabia of feminism” (Carmon).⁸ Assange’s 2011 “unauthorized autobiography” (a first in the genre) as well as Ellsberg’s 2002 memoir *Secrets: A Memoir of Vietnam and the Pentagon Papers*, serve as rich source material for linking the personal and the political in their motivations to publish leaks. Like a diverse range of politically active citizens, from Maxine Hong Kingston to Sonia Sotomayor, from Barack Obama to Richard Rodriguez, Assange and Ellsberg turn to autobiography to analyze the familial roots of their political interventions. In Assange’s *Unauthorized Autobiography* (2011), in which he frequently rails against the “patronage networks” of powerful institutions, he also recalls freeing himself from the “patronage” of his estranged father (123). Discovering in 2006 (the same year he founded WikiLeaks) that that his long-lost father’s library is filled with titles nearly identical to his own, Assange writes: “But maybe I did better not to be surrounded by his books and his

patronage. I had to fend for myself and find my own ground, not being able to rely on the established power network of my father and all he stood for” (128).⁹ Ellsberg draws a gentler autobiographical connection between a patriarch and government power. He links two traumatic events of the mid-1940s: President Harry S. Truman’s decision to drop an atomic bomb on Hiroshima in 1945, and the accidental death of Ellsberg’s mother and sister, killed when his father fell asleep at the wheel in 1946. Ellsberg writes:

But looking back now, at what I drew from reading the Pentagon Papers later and on my citizen’s activism since then, I think I saw in the events of August 1945 and July 1946, unconsciously, a common message. I loved my father, and I respected Truman. But you couldn’t rely entirely on a trusted authority – no matter how well-intentioned he was, however much you admired him – to protect you, and your family, from disaster. You couldn’t safely leave events entirely to the care of authorities. Some vigilance was called for, to awaken them if need be or warn others. They could be asleep at the wheel, heading for a wall or a cliff. (“Hiroshima Day”)

Leaks and betrayal

Partly due to Assange’s controversial practices of disclosure, the backlash to WikiLeaks has been sizeable. Several congressmen accused Assange and Manning of treason or dangerous betrayal (Leigh and Harding 202-03). Some news analysts have argued that WikiLeaks’ efforts have ultimately backfired in its attempts to promote transparency in governance. In the most explicit link between intelligence leaks and memoir’s secrets, Albert R. Hunt concludes in *Bloomberg News*: “The result, short-term at least, will be to discourage candor in cables, just as the immediate aftermath of kiss-and-tell books is to discourage dialogue.”¹⁰ This type of

prediction can sound eerily like Harrison's father in *The Kiss*, when the daughter tries to end their affair. He states in the memoir: "You've done what you've done, and you've done it with me. And now you'll never be able to have anyone else, because you won't be able to keep our secret. You'll tell whoever it is, and once he knows, he'll leave you" (188).

As in memoir, the perceived betrayals within disclosures of state secrets can be more about form than content. Bill Keller reminds *New York Times* readers that diplomatic cables "are versions of events. They can be speculative. They can be ambiguous. They can be wrong" ("Dealing"). The content of the cables released in 2010's "Cablegate" need not be taken as revelatory truth; they are markers of ever-shifting international relations. On the subject of those delicate relationships, Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates stated: "The fact is, governments deal with the United States because it's in their interest, not because they like us, not because they trust us, and not because they believe we can keep secrets" (Bumiller). Although critics rightly pointed to the structures of confidence upon which interpersonal and international relations are built, WikiLeaks' disclosures have not necessarily resulted in the lost diplomacy or lost lives that many predicted. It's the act of betrayal, rather than its leaked content, that has drawn the most ire. Bradley Manning, the army private who allegedly supplied WikiLeaks with its biggest cache of documents, could face a life sentence for 22 federal charges, including "aiding the enemy."¹¹ Manning's betrayal felt significant, even if the secrets he leaked were sometimes less so. As Simmel warns, "Out of this secrecy... grows the logically fallacious, but typical error, that everything secret is something essential and significant" (465).

If there wasn't much we didn't already know in the cables released by WikiLeaks, why was their 2010 publication so controversial? Journalist Scott Shane writes: "It was true that the cables added mostly what journalists dismiss as mere color. But what I had underestimated was

the political power of mere color to expose the foibles of the powerful, and thereby embolden a growing movement to out oppressive regimes” (“Designated” 34). Memoirs, too, can be dismissed as “mere color,” a subjective version of Gass’s litany of banal births and unremarkable families. Or, they can be lauded for adding perspective and texture to common realms of experience, and for challenging the silences that can reinforce reflexive power.

Leaks and transparency

The law of inadequate transparency from the memoir backlash – memoir is always too transparent, and yet not transparent enough – also holds true for intelligence leaks. Critics charged WikiLeaks with disclosing too much *and* too little, ultimately revealing nothing we didn’t already know. Memoir’s “tell-alls” are analogous to the perceived meaninglessness of WikiLeaks’ so-called “data dumps.” Louis D. Brandeis famously argued in 1914: “sunlight is said to be the best of disinfectants; electric light the most efficient policeman” (92). Accordingly, WikiLeaks and organizations like the Sunlight Foundation have launched a campaign against secrecy in government, promoting transparency and accountability through citizen awareness. However, like memoir readers, citizens require the analysis and perspective that make primary experience – and primary texts – legible to others. Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan predicted in a 1997 report on official secrecy: “The central concern of government in the future will not be information, but analysis. We need government agencies staffed with argumentative people who can live with ambiguity and look upon secrecy as a sign of insecurity” (qtd. in Sifry 135). Citizens and readers, too, increasingly rely on analysis in an information age.

Ultimately, what made the WikiLeaks disclosures legible was the analytical work of mainstream media partners, including the *Guardian*, the *New York Times*, and *Der Spiegel*, which painstakingly redacted, summarized, and explained the data. Their coverage fostered a

public discussion that could have been clouded by the scale of data in so-called “naked transparency” (Lessig). Revelation, therefore, deserves as much craft and care as secrecy. And as Keller notes, readers differ in their reactions to leaks and redactions. He writes: “The Guardian, whose readership is more sympathetic to the guerrilla sensibilities of WikiLeaks, was attacked for being too fastidious about redacting the documents: How dare you censor this material? What are you hiding? Post everything now! The mail sent to The Times, at least in the first day or two, came from the opposite field. Many readers were indignant and alarmed: Who needs this? How dare you? What gives you the right?” (“Dealing”). As Mendelsohn suggests about memoir readers, the expectations and reception of secrecy and disclosure are perhaps even more significant than the material of the primary text.

Like memoir, WikiLeaks has been charged with not just telling all, but also aestheticizing its material. When WikiLeaks released a video in 2010 that documented the aerial shooting of Iraqi civilians and Reuters employees, the organization was widely criticized for appending a controversial title to the video, “Collateral Murder.” Former WikiLeaks employee (and founder of a now-shuttered rival organization, OpenLeaks.org) Daniel Domscheit-Berg recalls in his memoir: “‘Collateral Murder’ might have been a good title in a literary sense. But we also got a lot of criticism for it. We had give up our position of neutrality.... Nonetheless, in my view, this strategy for stirring up public interest was a mistake. A lot of people immediately watched the video only to feel, when they examined it more closely, that they were being led around by the nose” (162-63). Both a leak and a memoir require an audience’s willing participation, the lay analysis and subjective judgment that Assange has termed “scientific journalism” (240).

Leaks and nescience

My final application of memoir theory to WikiLeaks reception returns to the concept of nescience, or unknown knowledge. Working from Abraham and Torok's model of inheritance, I propose that nescience is passed on not just from parents to progeny, but also from governments to citizens.¹² Certainly Nixon's administration did all it could to suppress the Pentagon Papers, invoking "prior restraint," or censorship before the fact, in its injunctions against Ellsberg-partnering newspapers in 1971. "Prior restraint" adheres closely to Abraham's definition of nescience as "unknown, unrecognized knowledge ... subjected to a form of 'repression' before the fact" (140). This sort of preventative silencing occurs frequently on several levels of governance. In fact, WikiLeaks' greatest source, Bradley Manning, was motivated to leak, in part, by the arrests by Iraqi Federal Police of protesters who printed pamphlets alleging corruption in Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's cabinet. The young private was disturbed by his commanding officer's response: "He told me to shut up and explain how we could assist the [Iraqi] police in finding MORE detainees" (Leigh and Harding 30-31). Manning also reportedly chafed at the military's enforced nescience of sexual identity, through the former Don't Ask Don't Tell policy. It is not such a leap to imagine such willed silences about identity inspiring into a politics of guerilla transparency about military matters.

More broadly, the open secrets of institutional power rely upon the nescience, silence, and tacit consent of the people. When nescience is dispelled, reading publics can acknowledge how they are implicated in institutions they take for granted. Slavoj Žižek writes the following about the revelations of WikiLeaks in the *London Review of Books*:

Didn't we learn exactly what we expected to learn? The real disturbance was at the level of appearances; we can no longer pretend we don't know what everyone

knows we know. This is the paradox of public space: Even if everyone knows an unpleasant fact, saying it in public changes everything.... Through actions like the WikiLeaks disclosures, the shame – our shame for tolerating such power over us – is made more shameful by being publicized.

The discomfort of witness and complicity is one that memoir theorists have long considered. This is a primary reason to write and read memoir today: to confront nescience. Memoirists, pointing out the emperor's new clothes, bear witness to open secrets that smooth over power imbalances in families, communities, and nations. Questions of complicity must be asked about state secrets, as well. For one, individual confrontations with political nescience can have personal consequences. Ellsberg's defense attorney, Leonard Weinglass, captures the discomfort of citizens in the face of dispelled nescience. According to historian Howard Zinn, Weinglass said in 1973, as Ellsberg and his co-conspirator, Anthony Russo, began their trial: "You don't want on this jury men of middle age, because these are people who in their course of their lives might possibly have sacrificed principle for the sake of career, for the sake of family, and the lived with that compromise. They will have a lot of disdain, even contempt, for two men who did it for the sake of principle and took the risk" (*Most Dangerous*). Like the innocent bystanders in *The Kiss* and *The Liars' Club*, these potential jurors could make for "bad" readers, judging their own inaction in the guise of evaluating others' disclosures. Nescience at once attracts and repels audiences, interpellating them in a process of identification and disidentification. Kipnis observes: "The uniting feature in most scandal cases is some major blind spot, some form of splitting... This element of self-obliviousness, and what it implies about the willingness of otherwise rational people to volunteer for public pillorying, is not exactly reassuring. But are we in the audience so much more self-knowlegeable? One suspects not" ("Leaking" 1087-88). It is

the reader or citizen's commensurate lack of knowledge that draws him or her to the source of scandal, whether family secret or political conspiracy.

In a new ethics of witnessing, following Žižek, readers and citizens move from personally shaming any individual memoirist or leaker, to collectively acknowledging the shame of non-acknowledgement. These ethics are akin to Senator J. William Fulbright's retrospective statement, long after he voted for the Tonkin Gulf Resolution of 1964, which authorized President Lyndon B. Johnson to use military force in Vietnam. Ellsberg recalls: "I noted that in previous hearings Fulbright had said that he felt 'shame' for his part in obtaining the congressional resolution after this incident. I said that the word had leapt out at me 'because I had not remembered seeing an American official use such a word in any way imply a sense of personal responsibility to that degree'" (*Secrets* 342).¹³ A blasé reception of secrets' content and suspicion toward leakers might mask a larger issue: secrecy is a structure of power and knowledge, however neutral, to which citizens and family members consent, on an implicit and daily basis. Travelers go back to their magazines, and neighbors steal glimpses while taking out the trash. But deeper readings and analyses become possible through acts of public disclosure, media interpretation, and social conversation.

Although excessive disclosure is not necessarily a solution, excessive secrecy is part of the problem. Government communications that are "born classified" are reflexively hidden from the public, yet 4.2 million people currently hold security clearance (Moynihan 156, Greg Miller). President Obama's record on state secrecy is quite mixed to date. Though he issued a memorandum on an Open Government Initiative on his first full day of office in January 2009, Obama has since employed the state secrets privilege six times – more than all previous presidents combined (Keller, "Postscript"). There was a 40% increase in document classification

in 2010 versus 2009 (Goitein). Wiretapping without warrants has continued, and leaks have been prosecuted aggressively. In September 2010, memoir entered the fray, as the National Security Agency destroyed all first-run copies of Anthony Swofford's memoir, *Operation Dark Heart*, then published a heavily redacted version (with some eliminated information widely available via public sources like Wikipedia). Original copies quickly appeared on eBay for as much as \$4,995; readers' hunger for secrets was stoked, not slaked, by the Pentagon's decision to censor. In a postmodern twist, the CIA redacted first-person pronouns "I" and "me" from Ali H. Soufran's 2011 memoir, *Black Banners: The Inside Story of 9/11 and the War against al-Qaeda* (Shane, "C.I.A."). However, the impulse to government secrecy is nothing new, and not always a function of institutionalization. A passage from Ellsberg's memoir captures the mental loop of secrecy's attraction. In 1968, Ellsberg warned Kissinger about the dangers of attaining new and rarer security clearances. Ellsberg recalls telling the future Secretary of State:

First, you'll be exhilarated by some of this new information, and by having it all – so much! incredible! – suddenly available to you. But second, almost as fast, you will feel like a fool... In particular, you'll feel foolish for having literally rubbed shoulders for over a decade with some officials and consultants who did have access to all this information you didn't know about and didn't know they had, and you'll be stunned that they kept that secret from you so well. You will feel like a fool, and that will last for about two weeks. Then... you will forget there ever was a time when you didn't have it, and you'll be aware only of the fact that you have it now and most others don't... and that all those *other* people are fools.... In the meantime it will have become very hard for you to *learn* from anybody who doesn't have these clearances. Because you'll be thinking as you

listen to them: ‘What would this man be telling me if he knew what I know?’

Would he be giving me the same advice, or would it totally change his predictions and recommendations?’ And *that* mental exercise is so torturous that after a while you give it up and just stop listening. (*Secrets* 237-38, italics in original)

Ellsberg’s warning captures the stages of nescience. A newly initiated subject quickly cycles through obsessions with the unknown unknown, the unknown known, and, perhaps most damaging, the known unknown – arrogance in the face of others’ presumed ignorance.

Transparency of information, therefore, may not alleviate the problem of government secrecy; there will always be differentials of power and knowledge, within the state and among citizens.

In his memoir, Ellsberg briefly refers to Vietnam soldiers’ “magical notion that having weapons in their own hands made them safer from enemy fire” (*Secrets* 151). Is partial knowledge through transparency initiatives, including WikiLeaks and the Sunlight Foundation, a similar false inoculant? The dispelling of nescience calls for a formal analysis of not just information, but the structures of secrecy and disclosure. Analyzing memoirs of family secrets can illuminate a systematic attention to form, not just content.

In addition to the issue of state officials’ power over public knowledge, there are equally important questions to be asked about how those secrets relate to citizens, in both their content and form. What is our nescience about the workings of the state? How much do we want to know – and acknowledge we know – about what governments do in our name? How do elected officials make decisions without the knowledge or consent of their constituency? What Joan Didion terms political “insider baseball” sheds light on the eternal and internal loop of “process” in governance. According to A. O. Scott, writing about 2011 cinema in the *New York Times*, the

quotidian nature of insider decision-making is, like Freud's uncanny, at once comforting and frightening. Scott writes:

And this is the ultimate reassurance offered by the insider narrative.... once you pierce the veil of illusion you find regular people doing their jobs.... It's a reassuring picture, right? No mystery here. No insiders or outsiders. Just the familiar world of work, presented at a more dramatic pitch. But hang on.... [They] don't seem to have a clue about what they're doing. They are driven, for the most part, by panic, instinct and wishful thinking. So in that regard they — the people with power, the insiders working the mechanisms that shape the world as we know it — really are just like the rest of us. Which is terrifying.

Political nescience can lull citizens into forgetting the fallibility of those in power. The human face of the “insider,” therefore, is an uncanny revelation. Ultimately, all modes of revelation, from memoirs of family secrets to leaks of state secrets, require some ambivalence on behalf of the public. Neither secrecy nor transparency can claim definite higher ground. Public judgment depends upon form: *how* secrets are kept and revealed, and the craft and care taken in interpreting their disclosures. Of course, we cannot be fully responsible for what we do not know.¹⁴ But not knowing can be a defense, or it can be a spur to readerly connection, political education, and social inquiry. In proposing a pedagogy that includes not knowing, Barbara Johnson writes: “In a negative sense, not knowing results from repression, whether conscious or unconscious. Such negative ignorance may be the necessary byproduct – or even the precondition – of any education whatsoever. But positive ignorance, the pursuit of what is forever in the act of escaping, the inhabiting of that space where knowledge becomes the

obstacle to knowing – *that* is the pedagogical imperative we can neither fulfill nor disobey”

(182).

Notes

Introduction

¹ Frost's "The Secret Sits" was originally published as "Ring Around" in 1936. The poem has been interpreted as invoking Niels Bohr's 1913 model of the atom (Cady and Budd 160). Stuart Firestein's *Ignorance: How It Defines Science* offers another scientific model to that "dance" of knowing and not knowing. Firestein asks: "What if we cultivated ignorance instead of fearing it, what if we controlled neglect instead of feeling guilty about it, what if we understood the power of *not* knowing in a world dominated by information?" (12, italics in original)

² Anita E. Kelly writes in an overview of the psychology of secrecy: "predicting whether a [family] member will keep a secret does not seem to be enhanced by knowing what type of secret it is.... Rather, such predictions are enhanced by looking at the *functions* of the secret and at the *relationships* between the secret keepers and the people to whom the secrets pertain" (14, italics in original).

³ See Miller's "Representing Others" and the second chapter of Eakin's *How Our Lives Become Stories* for concise surveys of relational autobiography theory. Both Miller and Eakin credit Mason for spearheading a feminist response to Georges Gusdorf's 1956 theoretical model, which emphasizes the autonomy of the autobiographer. Other autobiography theorists working in the relational mode include Sidonie Smith, Julia Watson, Susan Stanford Friedman, Bella Brodzki, and Celeste Schenck.

⁴ Psychoanalysis identifies the self boundary as forming at age four, as the child learns the concepts of personal identity, secrecy, individuality, and sex difference (Saltz 12-13). In

adolescence, the motivations for secrecy shift again, from issues of ownership to concerns about relationships and social demands (15).

⁵ Miller's consideration of the reader's relational role was a milestone in autobiography studies, which previously focused on readers' evaluation of the truth value of autobiography, following Philippe Lejeune's influential "Le Pacte Autobiographique" (1975).

⁶ Kelly reports on psychological studies that investigate when it is considered socially acceptable to reveal other people's secrets. She writes: "people may excuse their closest friends for telling them other people's secrets" (17). The memoirist's challenge, then, is to ensure the reader's trust, a temporary friendship that must last, at least, until the final page of the memoir.

⁷ Kelly provides the psychologist's perspective on the distinction between privacy and secrecy: "whether information is merely private or is secret depends on the expectations that the people in a particular relationship have about what should be disclosed. This distinction is central to understanding the essence of secrecy and its contextual nature" (5).

⁸ Autobiography scholars who cite Warren and Brandeis include Eakin, Timothy Dow Adams, G. Thomas Couser, and Roger J. Porter. Eakin comes to conclusions similar to mine about the incompatibility of an "inviolable personality" and relationality. He writes: "A right to privacy, at least in the United States, has proved to be not only legally ineffective as a bulwark against invasive life writing but also conceptually problematic, for it carries with it an assumption of autonomous individualism that is inadequate to model the experience of selfhood in our intensely interpersonal lives" (*Ethics* 6).

⁹ Deborah Nelson captures the complexity of chronicling the relational self in an era in which privacy is individual, rather than subsumed by the household: "Emphasizing one's family

relationship – seeing oneself in relation to another – paradoxically entails subjecting that relationship to scrutiny; permitting the ‘other’ his/her privacy subordinates both individuals to the family unit. Putting the privacy interests of different family members in conflict explodes the unit, releasing the writer from the group identity of the proper name, but at the cost of violating an intimate’s control over self-disclosure” (71).

¹⁰ Legal scholar Alan F. Westin defines privacy in his influential *Privacy and Freedom* (1967) as a continuous process of negotiation: “the claim of individuals, groups, or institutions to determine for themselves when, how, and to what extent information about them is communicated to others.... Thus each individual is continually engaged in a personal adjustment process in which he balances the desire for privacy with the desire for disclosure and communication of himself to others, in light of the environmental conditions and social norms set by the society in which he lives” (7).

¹¹ Writers and readers have always communed over the sharing of secrets. Ralph Waldo Emerson writes in “The American Scholar”: “The poet, in utter solitude remembering his spontaneous thoughts and recording them, is found to have recorded that, which men in crowded cities find true for them also. The orator distrusts at first the fitness of his frank confessions, — his want of knowledge of the persons he addresses, — until he finds that he is the complement of his hearers; — that they drink his words because he fulfils [sic] for them their own nature; the deeper he dives into his privatest, secretest presentiment, to his wonder he finds, this is the most acceptable, most public, and universally true. The people delight in it; the better part of every man feels, This is my music; this is myself” (384).

¹² Halbwachs writes about the intersection of family and community: “Each family ends up with its own logic and traditions, which resemble those of the general society in that they derive from it and continue to regulate the family’s relations with general society. But this logic and these traditions are nevertheless distinct because they are little by little pervaded by the family’s particular experiences and because their role is increasingly to insure the family’s cohesion and to guarantee its continuity” (83).

¹³ Among the eight memoirists of primary focus in this study, only one, Bliss Broyard, has authored a single work of life writing. (I count Gates’s genealogy-themed work on television and in print as life writing.) J. R. Ackerley is a serial memoirist, but not of family secrecy; his memoir *My Dog Tulip* (1956) is about his dog, not his family. In Chapter Five, I cite another memoirist of serial secrecy, though I analyze her work’s reception rather than textual patterns: Kathryn Harrison, author of *The Kiss* (1997) and *The Mother Knot* (2004).

¹⁴ The psychoanalytic theory of nescience originates in Abraham’s work on the “phantom,” which is the haunting trace of a deceased loved one’s secret. Abraham writes of the entombing of a significant other’s secret: “Crypts are constructed only when the shameful secret is the love object’s doing and when that object also functions for the subject as an ego ideal. It is therefore the *object’s* secret that needs to be kept, *his* shame covered up” (131, italics in original).

¹⁵ I discovered the term “sympathetic ink” within the *Oxford English Dictionary’s* definition of “secret.”

¹⁶ Miller writes of this scene in *Sido*: “His energy was absorbed by making a fetish of a writer’s tools. In this sense, the daughter’s writing takes the form of reparation, fulfilling the father’s dream in her own life’s work. At age fifty, she makes her father’s name, the patronymic which is

also a woman's name, her signature. Despite the signature, however, the legacy is more parental than simply paternal. Colette's mother, Sido, also wrote" (*Bequest* 5).

Chapter One

¹ Attention to a dead writer's life versus work is a critical issue in an age of self-conscious biography and auto/biography, which examines the relationship between the life, the work, and the writer's relationship to her subject. In *The Silent Woman*, Malcolm quotes from vituperative correspondence between Ted Hughes, Sylvia Plath's husband, and Al Alvarez, a friend and publisher who wrote an article and memoir about Plath. Hughes writes: "Nobody knows better than you that your article will be read with more interest than the poems ever were, and will be used more by the wretched millions who have to find something to say in their papers" (qtd. in Malcolm 128). Alvarez tells Malcolm in self-defense, "The death had kind of put her into public domain, do you see what I mean?" (131)

² Susan Cheever and Linda Gray Sexton are longtime friends and mutual supporters. The acknowledgments page of Sexton's *Half in Love* thanks "Susan Cheever, who was always there to cheer me even on the darkest days" (317). In *Desire*, Susan Cheever's lengthy and alphabetized acknowledgments include "Linda Sexton" in such eminent company as Cher, Judy Collins, John Irving, Erica Jong (a mutual friend of Sexton and Cheever), and John Updike.

³ Many scholars have addressed the issue of trauma and repetition. For example, Judith Herman writes: "long after the danger is past, traumatized people relive the event as though it were continually recurring in the present" (86).

⁴ Different volumes of serial secrecy can appeal to different readers. Susan Cheever's *Note Found in a Bottle*, for example, might attract readers interested in alcoholism, while *Desire* might appeal to those interested in sex addiction. The seriality does not require reading the volumes in order, though each utilizes secrecy as a method to lure readers.

⁵ Similarly, Sexton said in a *New York Times* interview regarding her privacy: "I can invade my own... That's my right. It's very embarrassing for someone to expose their body to you. You don't learn anything from it. But if they expose their soul, you learn something. That's true of great writers" (qtd. in Middlebrook 329).

⁶ At various points in their works of life writing, Susan and Ben Cheever assign the labels "gay," "homosexual," and "bisexual" to John Cheever, with little distinction among them.

⁷ See Linda Gray Sexton's *Searching for Mercy Street* and *Half in Love*, Middlebrook's biography, and Alan Furst's photography book for other versions of this story of Linda's appointment as her mother's executor.

⁸ See McGrath for a history of the Cheever family's lawsuit against Academy Chicago Press, which attempted to publish previously uncollected stories by John Cheever, possibly without Mary Cheever's informed consent (though she did sign a contract). After the Cheevers won the lawsuit, publisher Anita Miller wrote a memoir about the experience, *Uncollecting Cheever: The Family of John Cheever vs. Academy Chicago Publishers* (1998), in addition to the newly vetted (and fully redundant) collection of early stories in the public domain, *Thirteen Uncollected Stories by John Cheever* (2005).

⁹ The Morgan Library Museum in New York City presented a wonderful exhibit of "The Diary: Three Centuries of Private Lives" in 2011 that detailed early methods of encoding or hiding the

content of a diary. Adele Hugo wrote particularly private sections of her diary in scrambled words, and Thorvald Thollesen inscribed his confidential thoughts in “mirror writing,” or backwards characters. The exhibit also included a portable diary from 1609 that was fully erasable, to destroy and rewrite one’s thoughts daily.

¹⁰ At a conference entitled “The Scandal of Susan Sontag” at the Graduate Center in March 2011, the filmmaker Nancy Kates and other knowledgeable audience members agreed that some of Sontag’s papers housed at UCLA were restricted until 99 years after the writer’s death. The transcripts of Anne Sexton’s therapy tapes, held in the Ransom archive at the University of Texas, were restricted during the lifetime of her ex-husband – Kayo Sexton died in May 2012 – although Linda Gray Sexton allowed Dawn Skorczewski to listen to them in full for her book *An Accident of Hope* (2011).

¹¹ One model for *Home Before Dark* was J. R. Ackerley’s *My Father and Myself* (1968), which I discuss in Chapter Three. Edmund Gosse’s *Father and Son* (1907) is likely the other. Select American memoirs of a celebrity father that predate *Home Before Dark* (1984) include *Life with Groucho* (1954) and *Son of Groucho* (1972) by Arthur Marx, and *Lou’s on First* by Chris Costello (1981). Memoirs of a famous father that followed *Home Before Dark* include *John Wayne: My Father* by Aissa Wayne (1991), *The Way I See It* by Patti Davis (1992), *Black White and Jewish* by Rebecca Walker (2000), *Experience* by Martin Amis (2000), *A Paper Life* by Tatum O’Neal (2004), *Dear Senator* by Essie Mae Washington-Williams (2005), *My Father Is a Book* by Janna Malamud Smith (2006), *Twin* by Allen Shawn (2009), *High on Arrival* by Mackenzie Phillips (2009), *Lies My Mother Never Told Me* by Kaylie Jones (2009), *Townie* by

Andre Dubus III (2011), *Reading My Father* by Alexandra Styron (2011), *My Father at 100* by Ron Reagan (2011), and *Yossarian Slept Here* by Erica Heller (2011).

¹² See John Cheever's *Letters* 331 and *Journals* 217 and 324.

¹³ See Sissela Bok's chapter "Secrecy and Self-Deception" for a variety of theories about keeping secrets from oneself, from Freudian models to Jean-Paul Sartre's theory of "bad faith."

¹⁴ Miller writes about *Home Before Dark*: "In some ways the memoir is the revenge of a poor reader: having failed to read the signs in her life, she makes a work of art out of her reinterpretation" (*Bequest* 146).

¹⁵ Secretary of War Henry Stimson wrote this to justify ignoring select intelligence reports (qtd. in Deborah Nelson 51).

¹⁶ In 1973, when Cheever was nearly drinking himself to death in Iowa, he instructed Allan Gurganus: "If I die... I want you to come and get these journals out of here, because I'm afraid they'll fall into the wrong hands" (Bailey 477). On the other end of the privacy spectrum, Bailey also discovered that a 1967 journal fragment Cheever sent to Brandeis University was actually rewritten for potential posterity (669).

¹⁷ Bailey tells this story quite differently in *Cheever: A Life*. In Bailey's version, which seems cobbled together from Ben's version in *Letters* and an interview with Zimmer (Bailey's notes are vague on sources here), Zimmer picked up a black hitchhiker (not a bar patron) and tried out a homosexual act to compare it to his unpleasant sexual experiences with Cheever. According to Bailey, the black lover called Zimmer "you sweet thing" (not "honeychild"). More significantly, in Bailey's account, the phrase in Zimmer's journal was not encoded against his wife's snooping, but written in "a kind of 'shorthand' or 'trigger phrase' rather than exhaust a memory by evoking

it in detail” (604). For an ostensibly straight married man like Zimmer, the threat of prying seems more likely than the threat of memory-exhaustion.

¹⁸ Susan Cheever reiterates in her “personal biography” *Louisa May Alcott* (2010): “Even autobiography is storytelling; facts *chosen* can manipulate the narrative as powerfully as facts *imagined* manipulate the narrative of a fictional story” (63, italics in original).

¹⁹ See Edward Said’s “Secular Criticism” for his distinction between filiation and affiliation.

²⁰ Estelle Lauter also uses the term “transpersonal” to describe Sexton’s work, tracking the move from the personal in Sexton’s early work to an “archetypal psychology” in her last five books from 1970 to 1974 (24). Miller writes about the “transpersonal” in the genre of memoir, defining it as “the links to others that we establish with generations past and present” (“Getting” 166).

²¹ Even nominally, Susan Cheever was a disappointment to her father. “He’d wanted a ‘frail daughter,’ after all, a ‘wraith’ with long blond hair who drove a sports car and went by the kicky name of Susie” (Bailey 198).

²² *45 Mercy Street* is also the title of a manuscript that was mostly finished when Anne Sexton committed suicide. Linda Gray Sexton edited the poems for publication in *The Complete Poems*, though “Certain poems have been omitted, however, because of their intensely personal content, and the pain their publication would bring to individuals still living. As she commented in February of 1974, ‘Part of *45 Mercy Street* is still too personal to publish for some time’” (480).

²³ These last lines of “45 Mercy Street” changed somewhat in the final version, which reads: “*Next* I pull the dream off / and slam into the cement wall / of the clumsy calendar / I live in, / my life, / and its *hauled up* / notebooks” (*Complete* 484, emphasis added to indicate words added since the draft). Read retrospectively, the addition “hauled up” intensifies the aquatic imagery (in

the previous stanza, “fish swim back and forth / between the dollars and the lipstick” in the narrator’s purse) and the foreboding feeling of a descent into oblivion.

²⁴ See Miller’s “Feminist” for a portrait of the working friendship between Sexton and Kumin.

²⁵ Susan Cheever also alludes to entwined literary and family legacies in *Louisa May Alcott*; after the deaths of Alcott’s parents, “Although she had millions of readers, she had lost her first and truest audience” (253).

²⁶ For example, Anne Sexton said of her husband in a 1964 therapy session: “He said he is aware that one of our problems is that I see him as a father... we’re supposed to be husband and wife (Skorczewski 148).

²⁷ In contrast, Susan Cheever was already writing *Home Before Dark* when she learned that Scott Donaldson was planning to reveal her father’s sexuality and alcoholism in an unauthorized biography. Cheever was able to “out” her parent’s secret first, whereas Sexton first revealed her family secret in Middlebrook’s biography. Both families’ secrets, then, were bound to emerge anyway, with or without the daughters’ memoirs.

²⁸ Philippe Lejeune’s autobiographical pact is an agreement “signed” by the autobiographer on the title page testifying that the name of the autobiographer is equivalent to the “I” of the text’s narrator (12).

Chapter Two

¹ In his analysis of *One Drop*, Porter terms this sentence “the terms of [Bliss Broyard’s] future project” (180).

² See Lynch for a brief history of genealogy-themed television programming, or “biogravision,” which gained popularity after the 2004 debut of the British BBC series, *Who Do You Think You Are?*

³ See Sollors’s chapter “The Curse of Ham; or, From ‘Generation’ to ‘Race’” for an analysis of the historical implications of the Biblical story of Ham and Noah.

⁴ Other notable works about passing include James Weldon Johnson’s pseudo-memoir *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912), George Schuyler’s satire *Black No More* (1931), and Fanny Hurst’s novel *Imitation of Life* (1933), which spawned two successful films in 1934 and 1959. In all these, passing is portrayed as a conscious choice to betray family and community.

⁵ See Sollors for a detailed history and analysis of the one-drop rule, by which evidence of a single “drop” of African American blood determined one’s racial identity.

⁶ Sollors notes the cultural background to tropes of mixed-race identity: “The shifts in focus from interracial (or mixed-status) founding couples to biracial descendants, from parents to their children, and from slavery to race, were central to the rise of the figures that have become known collectively as the ‘Tragic Mulatto’” (222-23).

⁷ These examples only scratch the surface of contemporary multiracial literature. A *New York Times* article, citing a 32 percent increase in multiracial identity in the 2010 census (since the 2000 census, which was the first that allowed census-takers to check more than one box), points to a glut of book clubs, festivals, exhibitions, and publications that take multiracial identity as their subjects (Lee).

⁸ *Booklist* echoes this universalizing sentiment in its review of *One Drop*: “And her remarkably perceptive and well-wrought saga of blood ties denied and nurtured celebrates the grand diversity and true interconnectivity of the entire human family” (*One Drop* n.pag.).

⁹ Haley’s subsequent popularization of his ancestry, the 1993 novel and television miniseries *Queen: The Story of an American Family*, based on his grandmother, did not set the airwaves ablaze like *Roots*, despite that decade’s greater receptivity to mixed-race narratives.

¹⁰ Steven Pinker notes in the *New York Times*: “two of the groups who were historically most victimized by racial pseudoscience – Jews and African-Americans – are among the most avid consumers of information about their genes.”

¹¹ Watson concurs on the collective uses of the novel and miniseries: “*Roots* offers a mode of historical authentication replacing the traditional practice of genealogy with an older, oral tradition that is unverifiable in written documents but functions nonetheless as collective autobiography” (314).

¹² Kennedy also uses the discourse of family in his analysis of President Obama’s race. He writes: “When Americans elected Obama to the presidency they selected him to become to head of the American political family. He is expected to do for the American political family what any decent head of any household does... Every American president becomes, temporarily, the father (or one day soon, the mother) of the country. That is why there is more intimate emotionality associated with the election of a president than with any other office in American politics” (193-94).

¹³ As Sollors points out, one of the 20th century's most famous autobiographical hoaxes was Johnson's *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, published anonymously in 1912 and rereleased in 1927 as a Harlem Renaissance classic (271).

¹⁴ See Phillip Brian Harper for a cogent argument that “the terms of entry and access... are at issue in the practice of racial passing” (388). Similarly, Anne Anlin Cheng argues that passing is a mode of invisibility or disguise, and “‘Disguise’ has become a *mode of sociability* rather than survival” (554, italics in original).

¹⁵ Howes was responding to a quotation by Janet Malcolm, who likens a biographer to a “professional burglar, breaking into a house, rifling through certain drawers that he has good reason to think contain the jewelry and money, and triumphantly bearing his loot away” (qtd. in Eakin, *Ethics* 9).

¹⁶ According to a *New York Times* article on the writing sons and daughters of famous authors, *My Father, Dancing* sold more than 20,000 copies: “This probably figured into Little, Brown’s decision to pay a six-figure advance for her forthcoming memoir, ‘Mixed Blood’” – which Broyard renamed *One Drop* (Angel). Other writing offspring mentioned in the article include Gautama Chopra, Adam Bellow, Carol Higgins Clark, Brian Herbert, Kiran Desai, Marcel Theroux, Ivan Solotaroff, Christopher Rice, Molly Jong-Fast, Andre Dubus III, David Updike, and Katie Roiphe.

¹⁷ The prepositional phrase “beneath him” belies the fair-minded tone of most of Gates’s article; another hint of Gates’s attitude toward Broyard’s implicit racism seeps through in this sentence: “He must have wondered when the past would *learn its place*, and stay past” (75, emphasis added).

¹⁸ Larsen, another mixed-race writer of the Harlem Renaissance whose work contained themes of identity, also died in obscurity.

¹⁹ Anatole Broyard writes of Charlie Parker in his memoir, *Kafka Was the Rage*, “While he could be brilliant, I found in Parker’s style a hint of the garrulousness that would soon come over black culture” (70).

²⁰ In a *New York Times* article about *One Drop*, Mimi Read writes: “Any New Orleans Creole could have spotted him as one of them in a flash.”

²¹ Jill Nelson writes in a review in *The Nation*: “Like a novice striptease dancer (or an aging pro), *Colored People* shyly refuses to take it off, take it all off. We are allowed few glimpses of the layers underneath. In effect, Gates is still wearing a topcoat” (794).

²² Unless otherwise noted, quotations from *African American Lives* and *Faces of America* have been transcribed from viewings on television and/or DVD.

²³ When asked about Gates’s arrest, Obama stated: “the Cambridge police acted stupidly in arresting someone when there was already proof that they were in their own home,” and went on to cite “a long history in this country of African-Americans and Latinos being stopped by law enforcement disproportionately” (qtd. in Kennedy 226). As Kennedy emphasizes, Obama stopped short of directly accusing Crowley or the Cambridge Police Department of arresting Gates for discriminatory reasons.

²⁴ Charles Taylor writes in his Salon.com review, “The thrill of gossip become literature hovers over ‘The Human Stain’: There’s no way Roth could have tackled this subject without thinking of Anatole Broyard, the late literary critic who passed as white for many years.” Roth stated in a 2008 interview: “There was much talk at the time that he was based on a journalist and writer

named Anatole Broyard. I knew Anatole slightly, and I didn't know he was black. Eventually there was a *New Yorker* article describing Anatole's life written months and months after I had begun my book. So, no connection" (Hilferty).

²⁵ *The Human Stain* appears in the bibliography of *One Drop*, but Roth's name is not in its index.

²⁶ In the interest of full disclosure: in 2001, Bill Broyard wrote a negative review of my husband Gary Sernovitz's first novel, *Great American Plain*, in the *New York Times Book Review*.

Chapter Three

¹ See Benjamin's "Father and Daughter" for a feminist analysis of a father's place within family dynamics.

² Woolf famously invented the generic term "life writing" within this diary fragment. She writes: "if we cannot analyse these invisible presences, we know very little of the subject of the memoir; and again how futile life-writing becomes" (15).

³ See Diana Petre's memoir, *The Secret Orchard of Roger Ackerley*, for the story of the father's hidden second family. Petre is one of Roger Ackerley's secret daughters. According to her, J. R. Ackerley and his sister discovered the second family before the father's death, not after, despite the contrary version in *My Father and Myself*.

⁴ Trauma theorist Cathy Caruth observes: "If Freud turns to literature to describe traumatic experience, it is because literature, like psychoanalysis, is interested in *the complex relation between knowing and not knowing*. And it is, indeed at the specific point at which knowing and not knowing intersect that the language of literature and the psychoanalytic theory of traumatic

experience precisely meet” (3, emphasis added). The trauma of not knowing the father’s sexual secrets after his death sparks each of these memoirist’s artistic powers of recreation.

⁵ Kristeva also challenges the notion of sexual identity (somewhat futuristically) in “Women’s Time.” Proposing a “demassification of the problem of *difference*” by dissolving “personal and sexual identity itself,” Kristeva asks: “What can ‘identity,’ even ‘sexual identity,’ mean in a new theoretical and scientific space where the very notion of identity is challenged?” (33-4)

⁶ In the same volume, Foucault defines the family as “the interchange of sexuality and alliance” and “the most active site of sexuality” (108, 109).

⁷ Ackerley wrote copiously about his emotional attachment to his dog Queenie in his diaries, in the book *My Dog Tulip*, and at the end of *My Father and Myself*.

⁸ All images From *My Father and Myself* are reprinted by permission of David Higham Associates. Copyright © 1968 The Executors of the Estate of J. R. Ackerley.

⁹ Chute argues, similarly, that Bechdel’s use of family photographs indicates an “interest in depicting photographs as used, worn, studied archival objects as opposed to presenting them as windows into reality” (*Graphic Women* 179).

¹⁰ All images from *Fun Home* are reprinted by permission of Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company. Copyright © 2006 by Alison Bechdel. All rights reserved.

¹¹ Although *My Father and Myself* was published posthumously, I believe that Ackerley personally chose which photographs would appear within the text, since he discusses those photographs within the body of the memoir.

¹² Like Bechdel, Moore discovered evidence of her father’s homosexual affairs through a photograph of a lover. This was the moment when, as Moore recalls it, “I had encountered, and

repressed, the fact of my father's homosexual desire only once" (251). Similar to Susan Cheever, who first discovered her father's homosexual affairs through another man's letter to him, the contents of which she quickly repressed, Moore quickly relegates this evidence to the realm of nescience, or unknown knowledge. See also Susan Bergman's memoir of her father's secret sexuality, *Anonymity*, for a different view of exposing the father. Her father, like Moore's, was a religious figure, but his secret sexuality had mortal consequences: he died of AIDS. Bergman writes: "The more I write about him, the more I feel like Noah's son who, finding his father drunk and without clothes, held back the flaps of his tent and laughed. I'm not uncovering my father's nakedness, I'm getting some air" (14).

¹³ Said writes in the introduction to *Palestine*: "Sacco's art has the power to detain us, to keep us from impatiently wandering off in order to follow a catch-phrase or a lamentably predictable narrative of triumph and fulfillment. And this is perhaps the greatest of his achievements" (v).

¹⁴ For a very similar layering of diegetic and archival styles see Spiegelman's early comic *Prisoner from Hell Planet*, reprinted in *Maus*. Spiegelman depicts his cartooned, grotesque hand holding up an actual, archival photograph of his mother and himself. As Hirsch argues in *Family Frames*, non-cartooned, archival photographs break the narrative frame of history and seep into the present day (33).

¹⁵ Susan McHugh identifies canines as the figure that measures the sexual distance between Ackerley and his father (26). Analyzing a scene from the memoir in which Ackerley and his father regard a dog's feces on the sidewalk in order to sidestep a discussion of sex, McHugh argues that dogs are "marking the distance between Ackerley's father's likely sexual relationship with [an] older man and the son's biographical attempt to extrapolate from these circumstances a

queer identity for his father” (26). I argue instead, taking the contents of the diary into account, that Ackerley associated canine love with his mother, rather than his father.

¹⁶ Similarly, Marjane Satrapi posed for all the reference shots for the 2007 film version of her graphic memoir *Persepolis*. She says: “I play all the roles, even the dog” (Hohenadel 2007).

¹⁷ Chute argues that in *Fun Home*, “a book becomes [Bechdel’s] child too, and the repetition compulsion she enacts through making the book becomes literally productive, procreative” (*Graphic Women* 213).

¹⁸ Clayton J. Whisnant calls Ackerley’s misogyny toward his mother, sister, and other women “a wedge that Ackerley used to force apart gender and sexuality” (138).

¹⁹ See Benjamin’s introduction to *Shadow of the Other* for a contemporary rethinking of Winnicott’s work, which emphasizes the intersubjective effort of what she terms “mutual recognition.” Benjamin writes: “My point of departure is Winnicott’s radical rethinking of how otherness can be accepted by the self when the attempt to psychically destroy the object is resolved through the other’s survival. I have elaborated this idea by proposing that a symmetry is necessary in which both self and other must own the burden of subjectivity, the tendency to assimilate or deny the difference of the other (destruction)” (xix).

Chapter Four

¹ For other critical comparisons of *The Woman Warrior* and *Hunger for Memory*, see Couser, Melchior, and Rose. Challenger, Cutter, and Wyatt also address both books, without comparing

them directly. None of these critics, however, addresses both authors' projects of serial autobiography.

² Hayes writes about secrets in *The Woman Warrior*: "The drama of life, and perhaps of autobiography as well, has to do with the inevitable 'baggage' and what you do with it or the degree to which you become comfortable in your own underwear" (252).

³ Cheng writes of *The Woman Warrior*'s final line, "It translated well" (209): "The hypochondriacal fantasy of 'translating well,' as in the fantasy of a perfectly healthy body, staves off the nagging fear that a poor 'translation' would mean the loss of the mother, for this story of the barbarian reed, too, is inherited from the mother" (90). However, I argue that in a broader perspective on Kingston's serial autobiography, the narrator's losses and gains include the father as well as the mother. For example, in *I Love a Broad Margin to My Life*, Kingston closes with her father's version of the barbarian reed pipe story, not the mother's.

⁴ Kingston also says in a 2009 interview: "When you think of Chinese-American or African-American, so often there's a hyphen put in there, and I'm trying to say, 'Wait a minute – the hyphen should not be something that separates but something that joins. Let's integrate everybody and everything'" (Schuster).

⁵ See Lim for an analysis of Rodriguez's approach to lovers' speech and liturgical Latin as potential "third languages" that are purely intimate.

⁶ Staten's statement of ethnicity as "the home writ large" (109) dovetails well with Miller's observation on the blindness to extrafamilial community in Susan Cheever's early memoirs: "These two books memorialize lives lived in family as though family were all that mattered, as though it were the larger world and not just a perspective on it" (*Bequest* 166).

⁷ Wyatt makes a similar point, connecting personal and national history in Rodriguez's closeted prose. He writes: "It is history – not prophecy – that his country needs, a sense of the past leading back to the fact that it has always been brown, just as Mr. Secrets will make the discovery and disclose, through his writing, that he has always been gay. Unacknowledged intimacies become, then, the theme of the national story, as they are of the author's life" (309). However, Rodriguez claims he was "out" in his personal life while writing *Hunger for Memory*; he already knew that he had "always been gay," as Wyatt puts it, and he revealed, but did not "discover" it, in later writings.

⁸ Rodriguez writes in *Brown*: "The reason I am interested in brown history today is because, as a boy, I was embarrassed by my sexual imagination. I was looking for the world entire. I suspected dimensions I could not find – by find I mean read about, I suppose. I never expected to form a 'we' beyond my family" (203).

⁹ Perhaps the most common open secret in families is that the parents share more than a bed. In February 2013, my father read in the newspaper that it was the 35th anniversary of the "Blizzard of '78," which buried my hometown. My father emailed me that morning to wish me a happy "birthday": I had been conceived on that snowed-in day, as my father remembers with accuracy.

¹⁰ Similarly, Piri Thomas's classic memoir, *Down These Mean Streets*, addresses race and secrecy from his perspective as a dark-skinned Puerto Rican. Thomas faults his father, Poppa, for ignoring his own dark skin and possible African heritage, turning the father's and son's dark complexions into a family secret.

¹¹ Kingston identifies "one more task" to her long career: "translate and publish Father's poems" (*I Love* 218). In *The Fifth Book of Peace*, Kingston mentions with pride her written dialogue with

her father: “He’d written commentary and poems in answer to me, and they will be kept forever in the [Berkeley] university library. He said in English to the crowd, ‘My writing’” (256).

¹² See Miller’s *What They Saved: Pieces of a Jewish Past* for an in-depth exploration of her pain of realizing all that she could have known about her lineage, if she had asked her elders in time.

¹³ See Pankaj Mishra for an overview of the secret political strategies that caused mass starvation in China during the 1950s.

¹⁴ See Cheung for an excellent analysis of the “differences in cultural evaluations of silence” in Maxine’s American and Chinese classrooms (82).

¹⁵ Melchior describes *The Woman Warrior* as dialogic, “an ongoing discourse of ‘I’s’ and ‘you’s’” (286).

¹⁶ I owe this point to Cheng (74), although other critics have made similar observations about Kingston’s notions of “I” and “here.”

¹⁷ Gusdorf terms autobiography “the mirror in which the individual reflects his own image” (33), emphasizing the singular “I” as the subject of the text. See Mason for a feminist revision of that solitary “I.”

¹⁸ See Lee Quinby for an analysis of the narrator’s “ideographic selfhood” in the English and Chinese “I,” and an argument for the distinction of “memoir” from masculinist “autobiography.”

¹⁹ In *The Melancholy of Race*, Cheng exhumes the dark side of that “best year,” theorizing Maxine’s illness as “nostalgia for yet allergy to her own racialized body [which] reveals hypochondria to be a form of melancholic self-allergy” (65). See also Eng and Han for another theorization of racial melancholia in Asian Americans.

²⁰ See Cheung (110) for alternate versions of the Midas story that Kingston reworks in *China Men*.

²¹ See also Kathleen Brogan, who argues in her book *Cultural Haunting: Ghosts and Ethnicity in Recent American Literature*: “Ghosts in contemporary American ethnic literature function similarly: to re-create ethnic identity through an imaginative recuperation of the past and to press this new version of the past into the service of the present” (4).

Chapter Five

¹ O’Toole defines “unknown knowns” as “things that were understood to be the case and yet remained unreal” (183). Wheatcroft interprets O’Toole’s definition as “things that were not at all inevitable, and were easily knowable, or indeed known, but which people chose to ‘unknow.’”

² Couser writes that Rumsfeld’s memoir, an example of the apologia form of the genre, is “remarkably devoid of any acknowledgement of mistakes on his part. He moved directly from the department of defense to that of self-defense” (40).

³ Drawing from Genette’s concept of the “epitext,” Whitlock emphasizes: “what readers do with texts, and how texts circulate as commodities, must become vital components of autobiography criticism” (13). Whitlock also explores the work of scandal in the genre, convincingly arguing that scandal “brings into view the expectations and contracts that bind readers, publishers, and writers” (110).

⁴ Couser outlines the backlash against the “nobody memoir, produced by a person, hitherto obscure, who has the audacity to depict a life that lacks the distinction that at one time might

have justified the act – and the literary artistry to give luster to that life.” However, he also “readily acknowledge[s] that the novel has been, and continues to be, more inventive and experimental than the memoir – in part because memoir is more firmly rooted in the real world, life as we know it” (48).

⁵ For an overview of the backlash and defense of Harrison’s memoir, see chapter four in Eakin’s *How Our Lives Become Stories*. Numerous critics have written about *The Kiss*, but Gilmore’s analysis most closely aligns to my present argument. She writes: “In her refusal of the confessional position, Harrison insists she is no victim. Victims confess; memoirists, and this is disturbing, can effect a different kind of agency: they can get revenge; they can be narcissistic; they can obliterate comfortable assumptions about childhood, kinship, violence, and love; and they can offer a nonconfessional, extrajudicial testimonial ‘I’ that calls a ‘we’ to witness” (714).

⁶ See Chute’s *Graphic Women* for a similar argument about identifications and disidentification, applied specifically to graphic memoirs that depict personal trauma.

⁷ See Kipnis’s “Leaking All Over the Page” for excellent insights into links between leaking and writing.

⁸ Tim Melley presents a cogent argument on gender roles in conspiracy theory, which could easily apply to Assange’s statements about the Swedish case. Melley points out: “postwar culture... frequently represents social controls as *feminizing* forces, domesticating powers that violate the borders of the autonomous self, penetrating, inhabiting and controlling it from within” (32, italics in original).

⁹ See David Leigh and Luke Harding for a theory that links computer hackers and traumatic family histories (40).

¹⁰ See Keller's "Postscript" and Wolfgang Ischinger for similar arguments; both term a subsequent increase in government secrecy a "paradox" of WikiLeaks.

¹¹ It is worth noting that the United States has no equivalent of a State Secrets Act to invoke in meting out punishment for leaking.

¹² Ellsberg writes about the dangers of passive complicity, a form of nescience and inaction: "Nearly all evildoing... like nearly all coercive power, legitimate and illegitimate, depends upon the cooperation, on the obedience and support, on the assent or at least passive tolerance of the people. It relies on many more collaborators than are conscious of their roles; these include even many victims, along with passive bystanders, as in effect accomplices. Such cooperation could be withdrawn with powerful effect" (*Secrets* 213).

¹³ These ethics are in direct counterpoint to Powers's interpretation of the fallout of the Pentagon Papers' revelations about the Vietnam War: "Opponents of the war... could now absolve themselves of guilt... The public had been out of the loop and so was born a new history of the Cold War. It had been a secret history, and secrecy had brought it into the open" (33). Žižek, in contrast, encourages the nescient citizen to acknowledge, speak, and act in the wake of explicit revelation of the known.

¹⁴ Bok argues: "We are obviously not responsible for much that we do not know, or do not know that we should look into; the less so if we have no duty in the first place to respond to the situation of which we are ignorant – either because we have no power to change it, or because it lies outside our reach" (68).

Works Cited

- Abraham, Nicolas and Maria Torok. *The Shell and the Kernel: Renewals of Psychoanalysis*. Vol.1. Ed., trans., and intro. Nicholas T. Rand. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1994. Print.
- _____. *The Wolf Man's Magic Word: A Cryptonymy*. Trans. Nicolas Rand. Foreword by Jacques Derrida. Minnesota: U of Minnesota P, 1986. Print.
- Ackerley, J. R. *My Father and Myself*. 1968. New York: New York Review Books, 1999. Print.
- _____. *My Sister and Myself: The Diaries of J. R. Ackerley*. Ed. Francis King. London: Hutchinson, 1982. Print.
- Acocella, Joan. "A Dog's Life: How a Writer Discovered His Greatest Subject." Rev. of *My Father and Myself* by J. R. Ackerley. *The New Yorker* 7 Feb. 2011. Web. 9 Feb. 2011.
- Adams, Timothy Dow. *Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography*. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1990. Print.
- African American Lives 2*. PBS. WNET, New York. 2008. Television.
- Angel, Karen. "Fruit from the Literary Tree; Young Authors Find Their Parents' Fame a Boom and a Bane." *New York Times* 25 Apr. 2000. Web. 21 Oct 2011.
- Anzaldúa, Gloria. *Borderlands / La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. 2nd ed. 1987. San Francisco: Aunt Lute, 2007. Print.
- Assange, Julian. *The Unauthorized Autobiography*. London: Canongate, 2011. Print.
- Auden, W.H. "Papa Was a Wise Old Sly-Boots." Rev. of *My Father and Myself*, by J.R. Ackerley. *New York Review of Books*, 27 Mar. 1969. Web. 14 Mar. 2009.
- Bailey, Blake. *Cheever: A Life*. New York: Knopf, 2009. Print.
- Ball, Edward. *Slaves in the Family*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1998. Print.

- Barthes, Roland. *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. Trans. Richard Howard. New York: Hill and Wang, 1982. Print.
- _____. *Mourning Diary*. Trans. Richard Howard. New York: Hill and Wang, 2010. Print.
- Bateson, Mary Catherine. *Composing a Life*. New York: Atlantic Monthly P, 1989. Print.
- _____. *With a Daughter's Eye: A Memoir of Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson*. New York: HarperCollins, 1984. Print.
- Bechdel, Alison. "A Conversation with Alison Bechdel." Houghton Mifflin press release, June 2006. Web. 3 Mar. 2008.
- _____. *Are You My Mother? A Comic Drama*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2012. Print.
- _____. *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2006. Print.
- _____. "What the Little Old Ladies Feel." *Slate*, 27 Mar. 2007. Web. 29 Mar. 2009.
- Beckford, Martin. "Sarah Palin: Hunt WikiLeaks Founder Like Al-Qaeda and Taliban Leaders." *Telegraph*, 30 Nov. 2010. Web. 1 Dec. 2010.
- Benjamin, Jessica. "Father and Daughter: Identification with a Difference – A Contribution to Gender Heterodoxy." *Psychoanalytic Dialogues* 1.3 (1991): 277-99. *Psychoanalytic Electronic Publishing*. Web. 20 June 2012.
- _____. *Shadow of the Other: Intersubjectivity and Gender in Psychoanalysis*. New York: Routledge, 1998. Print.
- Berg, Beatrice. "Oh, I Was Very Sick." *New York Times*, 9 Nov. 1969. Web. 17 June 2011.
- Bergman, Susan. *Anonymity: The Secret Life of an American Family*. 1994. New York: Warner, 1995. Print.
- Berlant, Lauren. *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American*

- Culture*. Durham: Duke UP, 2008. Print.
- Blanco, Richard. "Making a Man Out of Me." *Huffington Post*, 20 Jan. 2013. Web. 21 Jan. 2013.
Rpt. from *Who's Yer Daddy? Gay Writers Celebrate Their Mentors and Forerunners*.
Ed. Jim Elledge and David Groff. Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 2012.
- Bloom, Lynn Z. "Living to Tell the Tale: The Complicated Ethics of Creative Nonfiction."
College English 65.3 (2003): 276-89. Print.
- Bok, Sissela. *Secrets: On the Ethics of Concealment and Revelation*. New York: Pantheon, 1982.
Print.
- Boynton, Robert S. "The 10 Percenter." *New York Times T Style Magazine* (16 Oct. 2011):
91. Print.
- Brandeis, Louis D. *Other People's Money: And How the Bankers Use It*. New York: Frederick
A. Stokes, 1914. Print.
- Brogan, Kathleen. *Cultural Haunting: Ghosts and Ethnicity in Recent American Literature*.
Charlottesville: UP of Virginia, 1998. Print.
- Broyard, Anatole. *Kafka Was the Rage: A Greenwich Village Memoir*. New York: Carol
Southern-Crown, 1993. Print.
- Broyard, Bliss. *My Father Dancing*. New York: Knopf, 1999. Print.
- _____. "Know the Territory." Rev. of *Great American Plain*, by Gary Sernovitz. *New York Times
Book Review*, 21 Oct. 2001. Web. 14 Aug. 2012.
- _____. *One Drop: My Father's Hidden Life: A Story of Race and Family Secrets*. New York:
Little, Brown, 2007. Print.
- _____. "Think Inside the Box." Rev. of *Martin Sloane*, by Michael Redhill. *New York Times Book*

Review, 7 July 2002. Web. 2 Dec. 2011.

Buckton, Oliver S. *Secret Selves: Confession and Same-Sex Desire in Victorian Autobiography*.

Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1998. Print.

Bumiller, Elisabeth. "On Disclosures, Gates Takes the Long View." *New York Times*, 30 Nov.

2010. Web. 30 Nov. 2010.

Byrd, Rudolph P. and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. "Introduction." *Cane*, by Jean Toomer. Ed.

Rudolph P. Byrd and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. 2nd ed. New York: Norton, 2011. Print.

Cady, Edwin H. and Louis J. Budd, eds. *On Frost: The Best from American Literature*. Durham:

Duke UP, 1991. Print.

Carmon, Irin. "Assange: 'Sweden Is the Saudi Arabia of Feminism.'" *Jezebel*, 27 Dec. 2010.

Web. 31 Dec. 2010.

Carr, David. "Debating Drones, in the Open." *New York Times*, 10 Feb. 2013. Web. 10 Feb.

2013.

Carson, Anne. *Nox*. New York: New Directions, 2010. Print.

Caruth, Cathy. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Baltimore: Johns

Hopkins UP, 1996. Print.

Challener, Daniel D. *Stories of Resilience in Childhood: The Narratives of Maya Angelou,*

Maxine Hong Kingston, Richard Rodriguez, John Edgar Wideman, and Tobias Wolff.

New York: Garland, 1997. Print.

Cheever, John. *The Journals of John Cheever*. New York: Knopf, 1991. Print.

_____. *The Letters of John Cheever*. Ed. Benjamin Cheever. New York: Simon & Schuster,

1988. Print.

- _____. *The Stories of John Cheever*. New York: Knopf Doubleday, 1978. Print.
- _____. *Thirteen Uncollected Stories by John Cheever*. Ed. Franklin H. Dennis, intro. George W. Hunt, S. J. Chicago: Academy Chicago, 2005. Print.
- Cheever, Susan. *American Bloomsbury: Louisa May Alcott, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Margaret Fuller, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Henry David Thoreau: Their Lives, Their Loves, Their Work*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006. Print.
- _____. *As Good As I Could Be: A Memoir of Raising Wonderful Children in Difficult Times*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001. Print.
- _____. "The Column That Fueled a Nation's Fervor: Time to Take the Anonymous Out of A.A.?" *The Fix*, 7 Apr. 2011. Web. 19 May 2011.
- _____. *Desire: Where Sex Meets Addiction*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2008. Print.
- _____. *Home Before Dark: A Personal Memoir of John Cheever by His Daughter*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984. Print.
- _____. *Looking for Work*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1980. Print.
- _____. *Louisa May Alcott: A Personal Biography*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010. Print.
- _____. "The Morning After." Rev. of *Lit: A Memoir*, by Mary Karr. *New York Times Book Review*, 11 Nov. 2009. Web. 20 Sept. 2010.
- _____. *My Name Is Bill: Bill Wilson: His Life and the Creation of Alcoholics Anonymous*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004. Print.
- _____. *Note Found in a Bottle: My Life as a Drinker*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999. Print.
- _____. *Treetops: A Family Memoir*. New York: Bantam, 1991. Print.
- Cheng, Anne Anlin. *The Melancholy of Race: Psychoanalysis, Assimilation, and Hidden Grief*.

New York: Oxford UP, 2000.

____. "Passing, Natural Selection, and Love's Failure: Ethics of Survival from Chang-rae Lee to Jacques Lacan." *American Literary History* 17.3 (Fall 2005): 553-74. *Project Muse*. Web. 14. Aug. 2012.

Cheung, King-kok. *Articulate Silences: Hisaye Yamamoto, Maxine Hong Kingston, Joy Kogawa*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1993. Print.

Chute, Hillary. "Comics as Literature? Reading Graphic Narrative." *PMLA* 123.2 (2008): 452-65. *Modern Language Association*. Web. 29 Mar. 2009.

____. "An Interview with Alison Bechdel." *Modern Fiction Studies* 52.4 (2006): 1004-13. *Project Muse*. Web. 29 Mar. 2009.

____. *Graphic Women: Life Narrative and Contemporary Comics*. New York: Columbia UP, 2010. Print.

____ and Marianne DeKoven. "Introduction: Graphic Narrative." *Modern Fiction Studies* 52.4 (2006): 767-82. *Project Muse*. Web. 29 Mar. 2009.

Cixous, Hélène and Mireille Calle-Gruber. *Rootprints: Memory and Life Writing*. 1994 Trans. Eric Prenowitz. New York: Routledge, 1997. Print.

Colette. *My Mother's House and Sido*. Trans. Una Vincenzo Troubridge and Enid McLeod. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002. Print.

Collins, Patricia Hill. "Like One of the Family: Race, Ethnicity, and the Paradox of U.S. National Identity." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 24.1 (2001): 3-28. *SocINDEX*. Web. 14 Aug. 2012.

Couser, G. Thomas. *Memoir: An Introduction*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2012. Print.

- _____. *Vulnerable Subjects: Ethics and Life Writing*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2004. Print.
- Cutter, Martha J. *Lost and Found in Translation: Contemporary Ethnic American Writing and the Politics of Language Diversity*. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2005. Print.
- Cvetkovich, Anne. "Drawing the Archive in Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*." *Women's Studies Quarterly* 36.1-2 (2008): 111-28. Print.
- Dalziell, Rosamund. *Shameful Autobiographies: Shame in Contemporary Australian Autobiographies and Culture*. Melbourne: Melbourne UP, 1999. Print.
- David, Larry, Elaine Pope, and Tom Leopold. "The Cheever Letters." *Seinfeld*. NBC. 28 Oct. 1992. Television.
- Davis, F. James. *Who Is Black? One Nation's Definition*. 1991. University Park: Penn State UP, 2001. Print.
- Derrida, Jacques. *Geneses, Genealogies, Genres, and Genius: The Secrets of the Archive*. Trans. Beverley Bie Brahic. New York: Columbia UP 2006. Print.
- _____. "How to Avoid Speaking: Denials." *Languages of the Unsayable: The Play of Negativity in Literature and Literary Theory*. Trans. Ken Frieden. 1987. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1996. 3-70. Print.
- Di Iorio Sandín, Lyn. *Killing Spanish: Literary Essays on Ambivalent U.S. Latino/a Identity*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004. Print.
- Didion, Joan. "Insider Baseball." *New York Review of Books*, 27 Oct. 1988. Web. 21 Dec. 2011.
- Domscheit-Berg, Daniel. *Inside WikiLeaks: My Time with Julian Assange at the World's Most Dangerous Website*. Trans. Jefferson Chase. New York: Crown, 2011. Print.

- Eakin, Paul John, ed. *The Ethics of Life Writing*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2004. Print.
- _____. *How Our Lives Become Stories: Living Autobiographically*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1999. Print.
- _____. *Living Autobiographically: How We Create Identity in Narrative*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2008. Print.
- Ellerby, Janet Mason. *Intimate Reading: The Contemporary Women's Memoir*. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse UP, 2001. Print.
- Ellsberg, Daniel. "Hiroshima Day: America Has Been Asleep at the Wheel for 64 Years." *Daniel Ellsberg's Website*, 6 Aug. 2009. Web. 21 Mar. 2012.
- _____. *Secrets: A Memoir of Vietnam and the Pentagon Papers*. New York: Viking, 2002. Print.
- Emerson, Ralph Waldo. "The American Scholar." *The Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson, vol. 3*. 1903. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1984. Print.
- Eng, David and Shinhee Han. "A Dialogue on Racial Melancholia." *Loss*. Ed. David Eng and David Kazanjian. Berkeley: U of California P, 2003. Print.
- Ernaux, Annie. *Shame*. Trans. Tanya Leslie. New York: Seven Stories, 1998. Print.
- Faces of America*. PBS. WNET, New York. 2010. Television.
- Firestein, Stuart. *Ignorance: How It Drives Science*. New York: Oxford UP, 2012. Print.
- Frankel, Max. "Top Secret." *New York Times*, 16 Jun. 1996. Web. 31 Mar. 2012.
- Frazier, Nancy. "Mixing Metaphors: The Theme's the Thing." Rev. of *Neither Black nor White Yet Both*, by Werner Sollors. *MELUS* 24.3 (Autumn 1999): 155-62. *JSTOR*. Web. 13 Aug. 2012.
- Foucault, Michel. *History of Sexuality: An Introduction*. Vol. 1. Trans. Robert Hurley. 1978. New York: Vintage, 1990. Print.

- Freud, Sigmund. *The Freud Reader*. Ed. Peter Gay. New York: W. W. Norton, 1989. Print.
- Frost, Robert. *The Poetry of Robert Frost: The Collected Poems, Complete and Unabridged*. Ed. Edward Connery Latham. New York: Holt, 1979. Print.
- Furst, Arthur. *Anne Sexton: The Last Summer*. New York: St. Martin's, 2000. Print.
- Gass, William. "The Art of the Self: Autobiography in an Age of Narcissism." *Harper's*, May 1994: 43-52. Web. 1 May 2009.
- Gates, Henry Louis, Jr. *Colored People*. New York: Knopf, 1994. Print.
- _____. *In Search of Our Roots: How 19 Extraordinary African Americans Reclaimed Their Past*. New York: Crown, 2009. Print.
- _____. "Lifting the Veil." *Inventing the Truth: the Art and Craft of Memoir*. Ed. William Zinsser. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1995. 141-159. Print.
- _____. "White Like Me." *New Yorker* 72.16 (17 June 1996): 66-81. Web. 14 Aug. 2012.
- _____. "Writing, 'Race,' and the Difference It Makes." *Loose Canons: Notes on the Culture Wars*. New York: Oxford UP, 1992. 43-70. Print.
- Genzlinger, Neil. "The Problem with Memoirs." *New York Times Sunday Book Review*, 30 Jan. 2011. Web. 30 Jan. 2011.
- Gerard, Andre, ed. *Fathers: A Literary Anthology*. Vancouver: Patremoir P, 2011. Print.
- Gilmore, Leigh. "American Neoconfessional: Memoir, Self-Help, and Redemption on Oprah's Couch." *Biography* 33.4 (Fall 2010): 656-679. *Project Muse*. 4 Jan. 2011.
- _____. "Jurisdictions: *I, Rigoberta Menchu*, *The Kiss*, and Scandalous Self-Representation in the Age of Memoir and Trauma." *Signs* 28.2 (Winter 2003): 695-718. *JSTOR*. Web. 29 Feb. 2012.

- _____. "Limit-Cases: Trauma, Self-Representation, and the Jurisdictions of Identity." *Biography* 24.1 (Winter 2001): 128-138. *Project Muse*. Web. 12 Feb. 2013.
- _____. *The Limits of Autobiography; Trauma and Testimony*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2001. Print.
- Gilroy, Paul. "It's a Family Affair: Black Culture and the Trope of Kinship." *Small Acts: Thoughts on the Politics of Black Cultures*. New York: Serpent's Tail, 1993. 192-207. Print.
- Ginsberg, Elaine K., ed. *Passing and the Fictions of Identity*. Durham: Duke UP, 1996. Print.
- Goitein, Elizabeth and J. William Leonard. "America's Unnecessary Secrets." *New York Times*, 7 Nov. 2011. Web. 7 Nov. 2011.
- Gordon, Mary. *The Shadow Man: A Daughter's Search for Her Father*. 1996. New York: Vintage, 1997. Print.
- Gosse, Edmund. *Father and Son: A Study of Two Temperaments*. 1907. Ed., intro, and notes by Michael Newton. New York: Oxford UP, 2009. Print.
- Gurfinkel, Helena. "My Father and Myself: J. R. Ackerley's Marginal Modernist *Künstlerroman*." *Biography* 31.4 (2008): 555-76. *Project Muse*. 12 Jan. 2009.
- Gusdorf, Georges. "Conditions and Limits of Autobiography." 1956. *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Practical*. Ed. James Olney. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1980. 29-48. Print.
- Gustines, George Gene. 2009. "Arts Beat: Introducing *The New York Times* Graphic Books Best Seller List." *New York Times*, 5 Mar. 2009. Web. 5 Mar. 2009.
- Haizlip, Shirlee Taylor. *The Sweeter the Juice: A Family Memoir in Black and White*. 1994. New York: Free Press, 1995. Print.

- Halbwachs, Maurice. *On Collective Memory*. 1952. Ed., trans., intro. Lewis A. Coser. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1992. Print.
- Haley, Alex. *Roots: The Saga of an American Family*. New York: Doubleday, 1976. Print.
- Hampl, Patricia. "Other People's Secrets." *I Could Tell You Stories: Sojourns in the Land of Memory*. New York: Norton, 1999. 208-30. Print.
- Harper, Douglas. *Online Etymology Dictionary*. 2012. Web. 17 Feb. 2013.
- Harper, Phillip Brian. "Passing for What? Racial Masquerade and the Demands of Upward Mobility." *Callaloo* 21.2 (1998): 381-97. *JSTOR*. Web. 14. Aug. 2012.
- Harrison, Kathryn. *The Kiss*. New York: Random House, 1997. Print.
- _____. *The Mother Knot*. New York: Random House, 2004. Print.
- Hayes, Daniel. "Autobiography's Secret." *A/B: Auto/Biography Studies* 12.2 (1997): 243-60. Print.
- Herman, Judith. *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence – from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*. New York: Basic, 1997. Print.
- Hilferty, Robert. "Philip Roth Serves Up Blood and Guts in 'Indignation.'" *Bloomberg News*, 16 Sept. 2008. Web. 25 Oct. 2011.
- Hirsch, Marianne. *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1997. Print.
- Hohenadel, Kristin. 2007. "An Animated Adventure, Drawn From Life." *New York Times*, 21 Jan. 2007. Web. 10 Mar. 2009.
- Hollinger, David. *Postethnic America: Beyond Multiculturalism*. New York: Basic, 2006. Print.
- Howe, Irving. *World of Our Fathers*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976. Print.

- Hunt, Albert R. "WikiLeaks Backfires by Exposing Hidden U.S. Virtue." *Bloomberg News*, 5 Dec. 2010. Web. 15 Apr. 2012.
- Hurst, Fanny. *Imitation of Life*. 1933. Intro. David Itzkovitz. Durham: Duke UP, 2004. Print.
- Imber-Black, Evan. *The Secret Life of Families: Truth-Telling, Privacy, and Reconciliation in a Tell-All Society*. New York: Bantam, 1998. Print.
- Ischinger, Wolfgang. "The End of Diplomacy as We Know It?" *New York Times*, 3 Dec. 2010. Web. 1 Oct. 2011.
- Jacobson, Matthew Frye. *Roots Too: White Ethnic Revival in Post-Civil Rights America*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2006. Print.
- Johnson, Barbara. *The Critical Difference: Essays in the Contemporary Rhetoric of Reading*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1980. Print.
- _____. "Teaching Ignorance: *L'Ecole des Femmes*." *Yale French Studies* 63 (1982): 165-82. *JSTOR*. Web. 21 May 2012.
- Johnson, James Weldon. *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*. 1912. Mineola: Dover, 1995. Print.
- Karr, Mary. *The Liars' Club*. New York: Viking, 2005. Print.
- Keller, Bill. "Dealing with Assange and the WikiLeaks Secrets." *New York Times Magazine*, 26 Jan. 2011. Web. 26 Jan. 2011.
- _____. "WikiLeaks: A Postscript." *New York Times*, 19 Feb. 2012. Web. 20 Feb. 2012.
- Kelly, Anita E. *The Psychology of Secrets*. New York: Kluwer Academic / Plenum, 2002. Print.
- Kennedy, Randall. *The Persistence of the Color Line: Racial Politics and the Obama Presidency*. New York: Pantheon, 2011. Print.

- Kingston, Maxine Hong. *China Men*. New York: Knopf, 1980. Print.
- _____. *The Fifth Book of Peace*. 2003. New York: Vintage, 2004. Print.
- _____. *I Love a Broad Margin to My Life*. New York: Knopf, 2011. Print.
- _____. *Through the Black Curtain*. Berkeley: Arion, 1987. Print.
- _____. *The Woman Warrior*. 1976. New York: Vintage, 1989. Print.
- Kipnis, Laura. *How To Become a Scandal: Adventures in Bad Behavior*. New York: Metropolitan, 2010. Print.
- _____. "Leaking All over the Page." *PMLA* 126.4 (2011): 1085-91. Print.
- Kristeva, Julia. "Women's Time." Trans. Alice Jardine and Harry Blake. *Signs* 7.1 (Autumn 1981): 13-35. *JSTOR*. Web. 16 May 2012.
- Kuhn, Annette. *Family Secrets: Acts of Memory and Imagination*. New York: Verso, 2002. Print.
- Larsen, Nella. *Passing*. 1929. Mineola: Dover, 2004. Print.
- Lauter, Estella. "Anne Sexton's Radical Discontent." *Women as Mythmakers: Poetry and Visual Art by Twentieth-Century Women*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana UP, 1984. Print.
- "Leaker's Leak." Rev. of *Julian Assange: The Unauthorized Autobiography*, by Julian Assange. *Economist*, 1 Oct. 2011. Web. 15 Apr. 2012.
- Lee, Felicia R. "Famous Black Lives Through DNA's Prism." *New York Times*, 5 Feb. 2008. Web. 12 May 2010.
- _____. "Pushing Boundaries, Mixed-Race Artists Gain Notice." *New York Times*, 5 July 2011. Web. 27 Oct. 2011.
- Leigh, David and Luke Harding. *WikiLeaks: Inside Julian Assange's War on Secrecy*. New York: PublicAffairs, 2011. Print.

- Lejeune, Philippe. *On Autobiography*. Ed. Paul John Eakin. Trans. Katherine Leary. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1989. Print.
- Lessig, Lawrence. "Against Transparency: The Perils of Openness in Government." *New Republic*, 9 Oct. 2009. Web. 25 Apr. 2013.
- Lim, Jeehyun. "'I Was Never at War With My Tongue': The Third Language and the Performance of Bilingualism in Richard Rodriguez." *Biography* 33.3 (Summer 2010): 518-542. *Project Muse*. Web. 10 Aug. 2012.
- London, Scott. "A View from the Melting Pot: An Interview with Richard Rodriguez." *Scott London*. 2008. Web. 11 March 2008.
- Lowell, Ivana. *Why Not Just Say What Happened? A Memoir*. New York: Knopf, 2010. Print.
- Lynch, Claire. "Who Do You Think You Are? Intimate Past Made Public." *Biography* 34.1 (Winter 2011): 108-18. Print.
- Malcolm, Janet. *The Silent Woman: Sylvia Plath & Ted Hughes*. New York: Knopf, 1994. Print.
- Malkin, Marc. S. "Ignorance Is Bliss." *New York Magazine*. 23 June 2003. Web. 29 Aug. 2011.
- Maran, Meredith. *My Lie: A True Story of False Memory*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Wiley, 2010. Print.
- Mason, Mary G. 1980. "The Other Voice: Autobiographies of Women Writers." *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*. Ed. James Olney. Princeton: Princeton UP. 207-35. Print.
- McBride, James. *The Color of Water: A Black Man's Tribute to His White Mother*. New York: Riverhead, 1996. Print.
- McCarthy, Mary. *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood*. 1957. New York: Harvest-Harcourt, 1974.

Print.

___ and Elisabeth Sifton. "Interview: Mary McCarthy." *The Paris Review* 27 (Winter-Spring 1962). Web. 6 March 2011.

McCloud, Scott. *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*. New York: HarperCollins, 1993.

Print.

McGeeveran, Tom. "Toni Morrison's Letter to Barack Obama." *New York Observer*, 28 Jan. 2008. Web. 21 Oct. 2011.

McGrath, Charles. "The First Suburbanite." *New York Times*, 27 Feb. 2009. Web. 31 Jan. 2010.

McHugh, Susan. "Marrying My Bitch: J. R. Ackerley's Pack Sexualities." *Critical Inquiry* 27.1 (2000): 21-41. *JSTOR*. Web. 29 Mar. 2009.

Melchior, Bonnie. "A Marginal 'I': The Autobiographical Self Deconstructed in Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*." *Biography* 17.2 (1994): 281-95. *Project Muse*. Web. 10 Aug. 2012.

Melley, Timothy. *Empire of Conspiracy: The Culture of Paranoia in Postwar America*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2000. Print.

Mehegan, David. "Bliss Broyard: Crossing Back Over the Color Line." *New York Times*, 8 Nov. 2007. Web. 21 Oct. 2011.

Mendelsohn, Daniel. "But Enough About Me." *New Yorker*, 25 Jan. 2010. Web. 31 Jan. 2010.

_____. *The Lost: A Search for Six of the Six Million*. New York: HarperCollins, 2006. Print.

Middlebrook, Diane Wood. *Anne Sexton: A Biography*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1991. Print.

_____. "What Was Confessional Poetry?" *The Columbia Encyclopedia of American Poetry*. Ed.

- Jay Parini. New York: Columbia UP, 1993. 632-49. Print.
- Miller, Anita. *Uncollecting Cheever: The Family of John Cheever vs. Academy Chicago Publishers*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998. Print.
- Miller, D.A. *The Novel and the Police*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1988. Print.
- Miller, Greg. "How Many Security Clearances Have Been Issued? Nearly Enough for Everyone in the Washington Area." *Checkpoint Washington*. *Washington Post*, 20 Sept. 2011. Web. 15 Apr. 2012.
- Miller, Nancy K. *Bequest and Betrayal: Memoirs of a Parent's Death*. New York: Oxford UP, 1996. Print.
- _____. "The Entangled Self: Genre Bondage in the Age of the Memoir." *PMLA* 122. 2 (March 2007): 537-48. Print.
- _____. "I Killed My Grandmother: Mary Antin, Amos Oz, and the Autobiography of a Name." *Biography* 30.3 (Summer 2007): 319-41. *Project Muse*. Web. 19 June 2012.
- _____. "Representing Others: Gender and the Subject of Autobiography." *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 6.1 (Spring 1994): 1-27. Print.
- _____. *What They Saved: Pieces of a Jewish Past*. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 2011. Print.
- _____ and Jason Tougaw, eds. *Extremities: Trauma, Testimony, and Community*. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1992. Print.
- Mishra, Pankaj. "The Hungry Years." Rev. of *Mao: The Real Story*, by Alexander V. Pantsov and Steven I. Irvine and *Tombstone* by Yang Jisheng. *New Yorker* (10 Dec. 2012): 84-88. Print.
- Mitchell, W. J. T. *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation*. Chicago: U of

Chicago P, 1994. Print.

Moore, Honor. *The Bishop's Daughter: A Memoir*. New York: Norton, 2008. Print.

The Most Dangerous Man in America. Dir. Judith Ehrlich and Rick Goldsmith. Kovno Communications, 2009. Film.

Moyers, Bill. "Transcript – Richard Rodriguez – A Bill Moyers Interview." *NOW on PBS*. 14 Feb. 2003. Web. 11 March 2008.

Moynihan, Daniel Patrick. *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*. 1965. United States Department of Labor. 2011. Web. 2 Dec. 2011.

_____. *Secrecy: The American Experience*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1999. Print.

Nelson, Alondra. "The Factness of Diaspora: The Social Sources of Genetic Genealogy." *Rites of Return: Diaspora Poetics and the Politics of Memory*. Ed. Marianne Hirsch and Nancy K. Miller. New York: Columbia UP, 2011. 23-39. Print.

Nelson, Deborah. *Pursuing Privacy in Cold War America*. New York: Columbia UP, 2002. Print.

Nelson, Jill. "Almost Heaven." Rev. of *Colored People*, by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. *The Nation* 6 June 1994: 794-97. Print.

"Nescience." *Oxford English Dictionary*. 3rd ed., Sept. 2003; online version March 2011. Web. 31 May 2011.

Nippert-Eng, Christena. *Islands of Privacy*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2010. Print.

O'Toole, Fintan. *Ship of Fools: How Stupidity and Corruption Sank the Celtic Tiger*. London: Faber and Faber, 2009. Print.

Obama, Barack. *Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance*. New York: Times,

1995. Print.
- _____. "Obama Race Speech: Read the Full Text." *Huffington Post*. 17 Nov. 2008. Web. 2 Dec. 2011.
- "Oprah's Roots: An *African American Lives* Special." *African American Lives*. PBS. WNET, New York. 24 Jan. 2007. Television.
- Ostriker, Alicia. "Anne Sexton and the Seduction of the Audience." *Sexton: Selected Criticism*. Ed. Diana Hume George. Chicago: U of Illinois P, 1988. Print.
- Petre, Diana. *The Secret Orchard of Roger Ackerley*. London: Hamish Hamilton, 1975. Print.
- Pinckney, Darryl. "Aristocrats." *New York Review of Books*, 11 May 1995. Web. 4 Nov. 2010.
- Pinker, Steven. "My Genome, My Self." *New York Times Magazine*, 7 Jan. 2009. Web. 22 Nov. 2001.
- Piper, Adrian. "Passing for White, Passing for Black." *Passing and the Fictions of Identity*. Ed. Elaine K. Ginsberg. Durham: Duke UP, 1996. 234-69. Print.
- Porter, Roger J. *Bureau of Missing Persons: Writing the Secret Lives of Fathers*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2011. Print.
- _____. "Finding the Father: Autobiography as Bureau of Missing Persons." *A/B: Auto/Biography Studies* 19.1-2 (2004): 100-117. Print.
- Powers, Richard Gid. "Introduction." *Secrecy: The American Experience* by Daniel Patrick Moynihan. New Haven: Yale UP, 1998. 1-58. Print.
- Quinby, Lee. "The Subject of Memoirs: *The Woman Warrior's* Technology of Ideographic Selfhood." In *De/Colonizing the Subject: The Politics of Gender in Women's*

- Autobiography*, ed. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1992. 297-320. Print.
- Rashkin, Esther. *Family Secrets and the Psychoanalysis of Narrative*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1992. Print.
- _____. *Unspeakable Secrets and the Psychoanalysis of Culture*. Albany: SUNY P, 2008. Print.
- Read, Mimi. "A Daughter Discovers Branches of the Family Tree Pruned by Her Father." *New York Times*, 7 Nov. 2007. Web. 27 Aug. 2009.
- Rieff, David. *Swimming in a Sea of Death: A Son's Memoir*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2008. Print.
- Rivera, Tomas. "Richard Rodriguez's *Hunger of Memory* as Humanistic Antithesis." *MELUS* 11.4 (Winter 1984): 5-13. *JSTOR*. Web. 10 Aug. 2012.
- Rodriguez, Randy A. "A Conversation with Richard Rodriguez." *Journal of American Studies* 27 (1996): 36-50. *JSTOR*. Web. 10 Aug. 2012.
- Rodriguez, Richard. *Brown: The Last Discovery of America*. New York: Viking Penguin, 2002. Print.
- _____. *Days of Obligation: An Argument with my Mexican Father*. New York: Penguin, 1992. Print.
- _____. *Hunger of Memory: The Education of Richard Rodriguez*. Boston: D. R. Godine, 1982. Print.
- Roediger, David R. *How Race Survived U.S. History: From Settlement and Slavery to the Obama Phenomenon*. New York: Verso, 2008. Print.
- Roth, Philip. *The Human Stain*. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2000. Print.

- Rothberg, Michael. *Traumatic Realism: The Demands of Holocaust Representation*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2000. Print.
- Rumsfeld, Donald H. *Known and Unknown: A Memoir*. New York: Sentinel, 2011. Print.
- Said, Edward. "Homage to Joe Sacco." Intro. to *Palestine*, by Joe Sacco. New York: Fantographics, 2002. i-x. Print.
- Salinger, Margaret. *Dream Catcher: A Memoir*. New York: Washington Square, 2000. Print.
- Saltz, Gail, M.D. *Anatomy of a Secret Life: The Psychology of Living a Lie*. New York: Morgan Road, 2006. Print.
- Schuster, Mark. "All of Us Can Write Beautifully: An Interview with Maxine Hong Kingston." *Abominations: Marc Schuster's Random Musings*. 12 March 2012. Web. 10 Jan. 2013.
- Schuyler, George. *Black No More*. 1929. New York: Modern Library, 1999. Print.
- Scott, A. O. "Inside Knowledge for All You Outsiders." *New York Times*, 6 Oct. 2011. Web. 6 Oct. 2011.
- "Secret." *Oxford English Dictionary*. 3rd ed., Sept. 2003; online version March 2011. Web. 31 May 2011.
- Sedgwick, Eve. *Epistemology of the Closet*. 2nd ed. Berkeley: U California P, 2008. Print.
- _____. *Touching, Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*. Durham: Duke UP, 2003. Print.
- Sexton, Anne. *The Complete Poems*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981. Print.
- _____. Papers, bulk 1953-1974. Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, U of Texas, Austin. Accessed 30 April 2011.
- Sexton, Linda Gray. *Half in Love: Surviving the Legacy of Suicide*. Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2011. Print.

- _____. *Searching for Mercy Street: My Journey Back to My Mother, Anne Sexton*. New York: Little, Brown, 1994. Print.
- ____ and Lois Ames, eds. *Anne Sexton: A Self-Portrait in Letters*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1977. Print.
- Shane, Scott. "C.I.A. Demands Cuts in Book About 9/11 and Terror." *New York Times*, 25 Aug. 2011. Web. 25 Aug. 2011.
- ____. "The Designated Redactor." *Page One: Inside the New York Times and the Future of Journalism*. Ed. David Folkenflik. New York: PublicAffairs, 2011. 23-34. Print.
- Sharfstein, Daniel J. *The Invisible Line: Three American Families and the Secret Journey from Black to White*. New York, Penguin, 2011. Print.
- Shawn, Allen. *Twin: A Memoir*. New York: Viking, 2011. Print.
- Sifry, Micah L. *WikiLeaks and the Age of Transparency*. New York: Counterpoint, 2011. Print.
- Simmel, Georg. "The Sociology of Secrecy and of Secret Societies." *The American Journal of Sociology* 11.4 (Jan. 1906): 441-498. EBSCO. Web. 4 Jan. 2009.
- Skenazy, Paul and Tera Martin. *Conversations with Maxine Hong Kingston*. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1998. Print.
- Smith, Janna Malamud. *My Father Is a Book: A Memoir of Bernard Malamud*. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2006. Print.
- Smith, Sidonie and Julia Watson, eds. *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*. 2nd ed. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2010. Print.
- Sollors, Werner. *Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Culture*. New York: Oxford UP, 1986.

- _____. *Neither Black Nor White Yet Both: Thematic Explorations of Interracial Literature*. New York: Oxford UP, 1997. Print.
- Solomon, Deborah. "After the Beer Summit." *New York Times Magazine*, 14 Feb. 2010. Web. 19 Feb. 2010.
- Sontag, Susan. *Reborn: Journals and Notebooks, 1947-1963*. Ed. David Rieff. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2008. Print.
- Soufran, Ali H. *Black Banners: The Inside Story of 9/11 and the War Against al-Qaeda*. New York: W. W. Norton, 2011. Print.
- Spiegelman, Art. *The Complete Maus*. New York: Pantheon, 1996. Print.
- Stanley, Alessandra. "Genealogy for a Nation of Immigrants." Rev. of "Faces of America." *The New York Times*, 10 Feb. 2010. Web. 19 Feb. 2010.
- _____. "Poet Told All; Therapist Provides the Record." *New York Times*, 15 July 1991. Web. 1 Apr. 2011.
- Staten, Henry. "Ethnic Authenticity, Class, and Autobiography: The Case of *Hunger for Memory*." *PMLA* 113.1 (Jan. 1998): 103-116. *JSTOR*. Web. 10 Aug. 2012.
- Styron, Alexandra. *Reading My Father: A Memoir*. New York: Scribner, 2011. Print.
- Swofford, Anthony. *Operation Dark Heart: Spycraft and Special Ops on the Frontlines in Afghanistan – and the Path to Victory*. New York: Thomas Dunne, 2010. Print.
- Taylor, Charles. "Life and Life Only." Rev. of *The Human Stain*, by Philip Roth. *Salon*, 24 Apr. 2000. Web. 25 Oct. 2011.
- Thurman, Judith. "Drawn from Life: The World of Alison Bechdel." *New Yorker*, 23 Apr. 2012: 48-55. Print.

- Thomas, Piri. *Down These Mean Streets*. 1967. New York: Vintage, 1997. Print.
- Toibin, Colm. *New Ways to Kill Your Mother*. New York: Viking, 2012. Print.
- Torres, Hector A. and Richard Rodriguez. "'I Don't Think I Exist': Interview with Richard Rodriguez." *MELUS* 28.2 (Summer 2003): 164-202. *JSTOR*. Web. 10 Aug. 2012.
- Walker, Rebecca. *Black White and Jewish: Autobiography of a Shifting Self*. New York: Riverhead, 2000. Print.
- Warner, Michael. "Introduction: Fear of a Queer Planet." *Social Text* 29 (1991): 3-17. *JSTOR*. Web. 14 Jan. 2009.
- Warren, Carol and Barbara Laslett. "Privacy and Secrecy: A Conceptual Comparison." *Journal of Social Issues* 33.3 (1977): 43-51. *SocINDEX*. Web. 1 Aug. 2011.
- Warren, Samuel D. and Louis D. Brandeis. "The Right to Privacy." *Harvard Law Review* 4.5 (15 Dec. 1890): 193-220. *JSTOR*. Web. 6 Jan. 2013.
- Washington-Williams, Essie Mae. *Dear Senator: A Memoir by the Daughter of Strom Thurmond*. 2005. New York: HarperPerennial, 2006. Print.
- Watson, Julia. "Ordering the Family: Genealogy as Autobiographical Pedigree." *Getting a Life: Everyday Uses of Autobiography*. Ed. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1996. 297-323. Print.
- Westin, Alan F. *Privacy and Freedom*. New York: Atheneum, 1967. Print.
- Wheatcroft, Geoffrey. "A World in Denial of What It Knows." *New York Times*, 31 Dec 2011. Web. 31 Dec. 2011.
- Whisnant, Clayton J. "Masculinity and Desire in the Works of J. R. Ackerley." *Journal of Homosexuality* 43.2 (2002): 124-142. Print.

- Whitlock, Gillian. "Autographics: The Seeing 'I' of Comics." *Modern Fiction Studies* 52.4 (2006): 965-79. *Project Muse*. Web. 29 Mar. 2009.
- _____. *Soft Weapons: Autobiography in Transit*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2007. Print.
- Williams, Gregory Howard. *Life on the Color Line: The True Story of a White Boy Who Discovered He Was Black*. New York: Dutton, 1996. Print.
- Williams, Patricia J. "Emotional Truth." *Nation*, 6 Mar. 2006. Web. 14 Aug. 2012.
- Wolcott, James. "Dating Your Dad." Rev. of *The Kiss*, by Katherine Harrison. *The New Republic* (31 Mar. 1997): 32-36. Print.
- Wong, Sau-ling Cynthia. "Autobiography as Guided Chinatown Tour? Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* and the Chinese-American Autobiographical Controversy." *Multicultural Autobiography: American Lives*. Ed. James Robert Payne. Knoxville: U of Tennessee P, 1992. 248-79. Print.
- Woolf, Virginia. *Moments of Being: A Collection of Autobiographical Writing*. Ed. Jeanne Schulkind. 1976. New York: Harvest, 1985.
- _____. *A Room of One's Own*. 1929. New York: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1989. Print.
- Wyatt, David. *Secret Histories: Reading Twentieth-Century American Literature*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2010. Print.
- Zimmer, Ben. "On Language: The Language of Leaks." *New York Times*, 20 Aug. 2010. Web. 22 Aug. 2010.
- Žižek, Slavoj. "Good Manners in the Age of WikiLeaks." *London Review of Books* 33.2 (20 Jan. 2011): 9-10. Web. 4 Apr. 2011.