

**TITLE PAGE**

Memoir Matters: Writing the Past to Discover Individual Truths

By

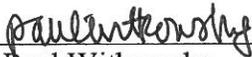
Danielle F. French

A thesis submitted to the faculty of Radford University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in the Department of English

Thesis Advisor: Dr. Paul Witkowski

April 2013

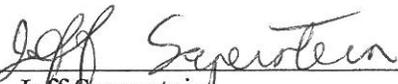
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## ABSTRACT

Substantial controversy concerning authorial intentions surrounds many popular memoirs. Still more problematic is the issue of historical events as represented in the memoir; often, the account of a well-known event in a memoir may differ from the “objective” historical version of that same event. With the increasing number of postcolonial memoirs making bestseller lists in the US, many well-meaning readers often oversimplify, essentialize, and fetishize a gender, race, ethnicity, religion, culture, or society, making the author’s experience and views decidedly “other.” Instead of applying postcolonial theory to each memoir, which can lead to unintentionally essentializing and fetishizing a race, ethnicity, religion, society, or culture, the reader concentrates on three different types of memoir: the trauma memoir, the coming of age memoir, and the academic memoir. Chapter One examines Maya Angelou’s *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* as a trauma memoir, illustrating the steps she takes to recovery after childhood abuse. Chapter Two focuses on coming of age in Marie Arana’s *American Chica: Two Worlds, One Childhood*, showing that human connections help bridge cultural divides and develop identity. Chapter Three studies Azar Nafisi’s *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books*, examining how this academic memoir draws parallels between the fiction in literature and the reality of life in Iran.

By revisiting what the genre of memoir and the work memoir entails and promises, readers can see that memoir authors are not promising a historically accurate, unbiased, or representative view of a culture, race, ethnicity, gender, society, or religion. Rather, these writers are re-experiencing their own lives through memory and showing how the fine line between fiction and non-fiction offers a multiplicity of realities, and in

this multiplicity, the reality of the “objective” historical events and the reality of the author’s experience can exist in the same space. By focusing on the genre of memoir, its purpose, and its responsibilities, readers can glean not just from the accurate relation of events but from their own experience in reading memoir.

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## **DEDICATION**

I wish to dedicate this work to the many people who have influenced and shaped me. To my teachers, thank you for your inspiring commitment to your students; without you, students like me might not have made it this far. To my family, thank you for your constant love and encouragement. You told me to choose a path that would provide the most opportunities. Thank you for enabling my journey. I love you.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

This thesis would not have been possible without the guidance, patience, and help of my thesis director, Dr. Paul Witkowsky, who extended his invaluable assistance in the preparation and completion of this study. I would like to thank the rest of my thesis committee, Dr. Jeff Saperstein and Dr. Rosemary Guruswamy, for graciously giving me their time, encouragement, and critique. Also, I would like to thank the entire Department of English at Radford University for their advice and support: you have pushed me to become a better writer and teacher. Thank you for investing in me.

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## Introduction

Substantial controversy concerning authorial intentions surrounds many popular memoirs. Still more problematic is the issue of historical events as represented in the memoir; often, the account of a well-known event in a memoir may differ from the “objective” historical version of that same event. Critics often become engaged in heated debates about the accuracy of historical events in memoirs and the reliability of the author’s depiction of gender, race, ethnicity, religion, culture, society, etc. in a memoir as representative of an entire society and culture’s views. These debates seem to become especially intense when analyzing postcolonial memoirs—memoirs that provide analyses and cultural representations in response to or in place of colonialism and neocolonialism.

With the increasing number of postcolonial memoirs making bestseller lists in the US, many well-meaning readers often oversimplify, essentialize, and fetishize a gender, race, ethnicity, religion, culture, or society, making the author’s experience and views decidedly “other.” Though readers may try not to impose their own cultural identity and views on a text, especially texts authored by writers different from the reader in some way, they cannot divorce themselves from their views. However, readers can open their minds to new ideas, theories, and experiences. By restricting the analysis of each memoir to only produce a postcolonial reading, the texts may be unnecessarily limited, and readers may miss out on important truths in the memoirs.

While not oversimplifying or dismissing the real concerns and issues critics have with memoir writing, by revisiting what the genre of memoir and the work memoir entails and promises, readers can see that memoir authors are not promising a historically accurate, unbiased, or representative view of a culture, race, ethnicity, gender, society, or

religion. Rather, these writers are re-experiencing their own lives through memory and showing how the fine line between fiction and non-fiction offers a multiplicity of realities, and in this multiplicity, the reality of the “objective” historical events and the reality of the author’s experience can exist in the same space. By focusing on the genre of memoir, its purpose, and its responsibilities, readers can glean not just from the accurate relation of events but from their own experience in reading memoir.

In order to define memoir, perhaps it is important to address what memoir is not. Although the terms are sometimes used synonymously, autobiography and memoir are not interchangeable. In *Memoir and the Memoirist: Reading and Writing Personal Narrative*, Thomas Larson notes that “critics have often conflated autobiography and memoir” and insists that “we need to sharpen their growing distinction” (17). Larson writes that in autobiography, “The author thus organizes the work in strict chronology [. . .] The author’s purpose is to set the historical record straight, an idea based on the assumption that there is a single record and that the person who lived it can best document it” (11). On the other hand, in the Author’s Note to *Memoir: A History*, Ben Yagoda believes memoir, autobiography, and memoirs “to mean more or less the same thing: a book understood by its author, its publisher, and its readers to be a factual account of the author’s life” (1). However, Yagoda does make a distinction between memoir and autobiography; he quotes Gore Vidal stating that, “A memoir is how one remembers one’s own life, while an autobiography is history, requiring research, dates, facts, double-checked” (qtd. in Yagoda 3). Thus, autobiography is generally seen as a truthful relation of historical facts, and since it chronologically progresses through life events, the autobiographer is usually older.

So, what is memoir? Judith Taylor writes, “I define memoir as primarily but not exclusively a literary genre that is written in first person and conveys a discrete life experience, in contrast to biography, which chronicles life” (709). Memoir focuses on a particular segment of time or a life event or series of life events, making this type of life writing available to authors of a variety of age groups. Rachel Blau DuPlessis and Ann Snitow add that memoir *is* a historical document, but they write that “it is partial, a lens, a work not just mediated in language but constructed by language” (23). Furthermore, DuPlessis and Snitow claim, “Writing any memoir is an act of shaping, selecting, combining, eliding, repressing, and reconstructing. Memoir raises questions of completeness, of veracity and the fictive, issues of privacy, of partiality, of mediation” (23). Not only is memoir understood to be historical and partial, meaning both part of a larger picture and subjective, but it is also assumed to be an accurate relation of events. Bill Roorbach simply defines memoir as being “a true story, a work of narrative built directly from the memory of its writer” (9). From these different points of view, the reader can assume that memoir is a combination of the definitions above: memoir is the truthful personal recollection of a life event, experience, or period of time from memory that is often partial and necessarily biased.

What is the purpose of memoir? Is it to simply delight the reader? Though readership is important and necessary for the success of published memoirs, the purpose of life writing is only not for the entertainment of the reader, but it is also a way for the author to rediscover her life. In “Public Statements, Private Lives: Academic Memoirs for the Nineties,” Nancy Miller writes, “Memory work, of course, engages not only the desire to uncover the truth of a lost person [. . .] It also bring us back to lost time and

places, often a place from which we are absent, even if remembered in public records” (1011). Furthermore, Miller notes that it is through the process of writing that knowledge comes to the writer, and this type of writing is a “practice of self-examination” (1011). Thomas Larson adds, “The whole point for the memoirist is to resist falsification and, at the same time, be aware that narrative embellishment can take any writer over the edge” (108). The author simply re-creates a space to examine his or her own experiences and invites readers into this space to experience and learn with the memoirist. Thus, the primary purpose of memoir writing is the self-discovery of the author through the experience of postmemory writing.

This brings up a serious point of contention in memoir writing: since memoir is primarily derived from memory and memory can be faulty, what is the responsibility of memoir to the truth? Jeanne Braham addresses readerly expectations of postmemory writing: “Surely at the heart of this controversy is the question of what constitutes autobiographical truth and the even thornier question of what we *expect* it to be” (45). Many readers and critics read memoir with the assumption that the stories, events, and experiences are historically accurate, meaning that they match the well-circulated and documented accounts of events, people, etc. The common misconception of many memoir readers is that, since it is non-fiction writing, memoir has the responsibility to tell the absolute, objective truth about historical facts and personal events, and this might be why so many critics give negative reviews and feedback. Amy Motlagh asks “what the responsibilities of memoir are to truth—or, more to the point, whose conception of truth prevails?” (17). James Atlas observes that just because “a book purports to be a true confession doesn’t mean it’s good—or, for that matter, true” (2).

Statements like these may even further blur the line between fiction writing and memoir writing. Vivian Gornick notes that fiction writing and memoir writing share “the obligation to lift from the raw material of life a tale that will shape experience, transform event, deliver wisdom” (5). Despite this similarity, Gornick writes that where the two forms of writing diverge is “in the way [memoir] approaches the task,” because “a fictional ‘I’ can be, and is often is, an unreliable narrator; the nonfictional ‘I’ can never be” (5). Bill Roorbach takes this idea even further, saying that memoir is “the territory of the writer, of the self, of an *I*. When I say memoir, I only mean memory put to the page and carefully arranged [. . .] a true story laid down with the understanding that memory can be faulty, that images fade, that the *I* itself is a construction, a kind of fiction, only capable of representing part of the writer at any given time” (10). Roorbach goes on to ask what the difference between “artistic license” and “lying” is: he says that the “border shifts writer to writer, story to story” (11). So, it seems to depend upon the author and the author’s definition of truth.

Accordingly, there are many different definitions and theories of postmemory truth. Gornick states that “[t]ruth in a memoir is achieved not through a recital of actual events; it is achieved when the reader comes to believe that the writer is working hard to engage with the experience at hand” (5). In addition, Gornick notes that it is not so much what happened to the writer that matters to the reader; rather, the most important factor is what the writer *makes* of what has happened to the author (5). Nancy Miller adds, “like psychoanalysis, the truth of memory is always a matter of interpretation” (996). In *Interpreting Women’s Lives: Feminist Theory and Personal Narratives*, the Personal Narratives Group draws on Luisa Passerini’s statement that “All autobiographic memory

is true. It is up to the interpreter to discover in which sense, where, for what purpose” (261). The Personal Narratives Group explains, “When talking about their lives, people lie sometimes, forget a lot, exaggerate, become confused, and get things wrong. Yet they *are* revealing truths. These truths don’t reveal the past ‘as it actually was’ aspiring to a standard of objectivity. They give us instead the truths of our experiences” (261). The Personal Narratives Group comes to the conclusion that “the truths of personal narratives are neither open to proof nor self-evident. We come to understand them only through interpretation” (261). However, this is not to say that truth is relative; rather, it is essential to understand that the reader’s idea of the “truth” may differ from the author’s version of the truth.

Again, this does not mean that the author can make up whatever he or she would like, insist that it is the truth, and have it be memoir. Roorbach clarifies this by writing that “memoir is memory’s truth” (9). Though it is clear that the memory can be faulty, the author is required to be as truthful as memory can be. Can an author recall dialogue verbatim? Unless the author has had the foresight to record every conversation, it is highly unlikely that the author can recollect and recreate every conversation, event, or interaction exactly as it happened. Furthermore, though the memoirist may be willing to reveal highly personal details, must the author also reveal sensitive and personal information, which identifies the other characters? Does that mean that in order to be truthful, memoirs cannot change names to disguise characters for the safety and privacy of friends and family? In the Author’s Notes of *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books*, Azar Nafisi states, “The facts in this story are true insofar as any memory is ever truthful,” saying that she only disguises and renames her characters for their own

protection and so that “their secrets are safe.” Taking this into account, where should a memoirist draw the line between altering identifying details and actually changing the people in the memoir into fictional characters?

Truth is a thorny concept to define, especially when attempting to provide a singular denotation for truth in memoir. In “How Memoirists Mold the Truth,” an opinion piece in *The New York Times*, André Aciman addresses this issue and writes that memoirists “don’t distort the truth, they nudge it,” and he asserts that many writers “end up altering not the facts they’ve known, but their layout” (par. 3). This is an important differentiation because Aciman goes on to note, “Writing alters, reshuffles, intrudes on everything” (par. 7). Writing is not a linear process, and neither is memory, so how can recalling the past and pinning it down on paper be a singular or linear process? Aciman continues, “There is no past; there are just versions of the past. Proving one version true settles absolutely nothing, because proving another is equally true” (par. 13). So, if there are multiple accurate accounts of the past, what good does it do to debate about which version is more accurate? Aciman goes on to suggest, “We can have many pasts, just as we can have several identities at the same time, or be in two places in our mind without actually being in either” (par. 15). With this multiplicity of “truthful” versions of past events, which memories are suitable for recollection in memoir?

Thomas Larson makes an important distinction about this aspect of truth in memoir; he says that truth comprises both facts and emotion (112). Larson asserts that for the author, emotional truth is important for the author’s memoir to be authentic; for example, he talks about how changing his sons’ names, birthdays, or friends would be fine for him but changing their traits would cross the line because he might lose “the

actual emotion of our relationship” (104-105). The key is to ensure that the author’s emotional connection to and truthfulness about the characters remains intact and that the author is honest about his or her recollection of events, conversations, and interactions. Aciman relates two published versions of his final night in Alexandria, Egypt: one memory recalls a walk with his brother and the other version recounts this walk is solitary (par. 11-12). Which version is truer? Does it matter if the brother was there or not? Does it change Aciman’s emotional connection to this memory? Gornick observes that “the reader must be persuaded that the narrator is speaking truth” (5). In memoir writing, the reader must assume that the narrator, usually the author, is reliable and gives accurate accounts in the text.

Amy Motlagh refers to Phillippe Lejeune’s notion of an “autobiographical pact,” in which he “argues that because readers and authors of memoirs are bound by the ‘autobiographical pact,’ which compels authors to tell the truth as they know it” (18). She pushes this idea even further: “memoirs *do* uphold the relationship between the world inside the text and the world outside of the text *as it has been perceived by the author*” (18). In addition, Motlagh insists that the reader “must acknowledge that her sense of the truth or meaning of these places may diverge” from that of the memoirist and that “in the contest between these two experiences of perception, neither historical accounts nor the personal experience of a reader can necessarily mediate or provide definitive answers” (18). In other words, memoir is a remembered piece of a larger puzzle; it is not, nor is it intended to be, the ultimate authority on an event, a character, or a period of time.

Memoir is a space in which the author re-creates events and periods of time for self-discovery: the genre of memoir is not meant to challenge public records or to be representative of a culture, religion, race, ethnicity, society, etc. Thus, it is imperative for readers of memoir to remember that these texts are *subjective*. Lee Quinby refers to Maxine Hong Kingston, author of *The Woman Warrior*, when she “reemphasizes her work’s genre by stating that she is ‘not writing history or sociology but a memoir’” (297-298). Pushing this idea even further, whose recording of “the facts” is not subjective, biased, and colored by his or her own experiences? Therefore, readers need to keep in mind that even if a memoir claims to tell the inside scoop, it does not mean that this insight is objectively true, but rather an accurate relation of events from a specific and subjective point of view.

Aciman’s article brings up an important question: what is the purpose of the author writing down memories? Is it to discern what actually happened? Is it to prove something to the readers? Aciman writes,

Words radiate something that is more luminous, more credible and more durable than real facts, because under their stewardship, it is not truth we’re after; what we want instead is something that was always there but that we weren’t seeing and are only now, with the genius of retrospection, finally seeing as it should have occurred and might as well have occurred, and better yet, is still likely to occur.

(par. 14)

Inscribing one’s life by piecing together memories and re-memories in writing creates a space in which the author can not only make sense of what has happened, but she can also decide which version of her life, “that, given a few days, a few weeks, a few years, [.

. .] will be the only one worth writing and, therefore, worth remembering” (Aciman par. 16). It is not so much deciding which account of the past is more true than another; it is more of choosing which version of the past was, is, or could be most accurate and sharing it in the space of a memoir.

This aspect of memoir is apparent in three very different memoirs, all of which can be considered postcolonial, but they can also be distinguished by their subject matter: the trauma memoir, the coming of age memoir, and the academic memoir. Chapter One focuses on Maya Angelou’s *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, originally published in 1969. This memoir is first because it is set in the 1930s and 1940s American Southeast and West Coast; however, Angelou’s experience as an African-American female in the South distinctly sets her apart as an “other” for many readers. She works through physical and emotional trauma in her memoir, effectively breaking the silence about her abuse and showing how reading allowed her to be free in a society determined to oppress her.

Chapter Two turns to Marie Arana’s 2002 memoir, *American Chica: Two Worlds, One Childhood*. This is a coming of age memoir, and readers follow Arana from her native Peru through her transition to life in mid-20<sup>th</sup> century New Jersey. Arana’s memoir discusses the invisible line drawn between North and South America and deals with prejudices on both sides. Her struggle to decide her own identity as half-Peruvian and half-American is a main concentration in the book. Instead of focusing on obvious postcolonial aspects, the concentration is on the experience of Arana’s coming of age with two very different cultures and the struggle within herself to bridge those cultures,

underscoring that the importance of time and place is only strengthened by cultural duality.

Chapter Three concludes with an analysis of Azar Nafisi's 2003 memoir, *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books*. This memoir is about Nafisi's experience as a professor in Tehran, Iran, which takes us completely out of the comfort zone of Western culture and society. However, Nafisi writes a Western-style memoir about her life and teaching in Iran, which causes a great deal of tension between the memoir and its critics. This final chapter focuses on how Nafisi's memoir emphasizes the power of reading literature in a transformative and transportive way and how time and place influence the experience of reading and the perception of reality.

Chapter One—The Trauma Memoir: Abuse and Recovery in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*

When reading a memoir, readers do not just want to engage with the subject matter; rather, they want to engage with the author's memories and re-experience the author's life with her. These recalled events and experiences range from ecstasy to trauma, stopping at multiple points in/between. Perhaps the most poignant and affective memoirs deal with the author's feelings and memories of a traumatic event and how this event (or series of events) shapes her as a person. In "Stripping the Memoir," Patricia Foster writes, "In many ways the memoir—like poetry—is the genre of exorcism (173). By exorcising memories, any incidents and aftereffects of trauma are likely to surface. Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, for example, explores trauma and its consequences, ultimately illustrating the healing process of reclaiming both Angelou's body and her story through writing.

With regard to trauma memoir, even more speculation arises about what memories count as "truth," especially when dealing with recollections of rape and physical assault. In "Judith Herman and Contemporary Trauma Theory," Susan Rubin Suleiman stresses, "The most important subject of debate concerns the relation of trauma to memory and came about as a result of a number of legal cases in the 1980s involving recovered memory of sexual abuse" (277). In "Deconstructing and Locating Survivor Discourse: Dynamics of Narrative, Empowerment, and Resistance for Survivors of Childhood Sexual Abuse," Nancy Naples discusses the problems that survivors of sexual abuse encounter, paying careful attention to the ways in which class, race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality affect each survivor (1152). Noting how the feminist movement of

the 1960s and 1970s both challenged laws regarding abuse and encouraged consciousness-raising groups, Naples includes some negative results as well, primarily concerning accusations of incest and sexual assault by guardians (1154). She writes, “It also prompted a backlash from powerful quarters, more prominently illustrated by the False Memory Syndrome Foundation founded in 1992 by parents accused of child sexual abuse” (Naples 1154-1155). Despite these advances, groups like the False Memory Syndrome Foundation reinforce the need for external corroboration in order for victims to be believed, making it difficult for those who have suffered abuse to seek justice and to heal.

*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* recounts Angelou’s childhood from the time she arrives in Stamps, Arkansas, at the age of three to her cross-country move to San Francisco, California, where she gives birth to her first child at seventeen. This memoir is primarily concerned with issues of race, identity, and sexuality, but it is also clearly a trauma memoir. Because essentializing and fetishizing can easily occur when dealing with postcolonial and counter-memory works, with counter-memory referring to narratives written to provide alternative recollections and perspectives in response to other narratives, trauma provides a useful alternative to the more popular postcolonial approach. Though *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* is often interpreted by examining it as a coming of age memoir, there are surprisingly few articles analyzing this piece as a trauma memoir.

In order to analyze the abuse in Angelou’s memoir, it is vital to understand the nature of trauma. In *Trauma and Recovery*, Judith Herman writes, “The ordinary response to atrocities is to banish them from consciousness. Certain violations of the

social compact are too terrible to utter aloud: this is the meaning of the word *unspeakable*” (1). Accordingly, trauma can be defined as events or experiences that are deeply distressing and disturbing. In *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, the primary focus is on the trauma that results from childhood sexual assault, which Herman notes is both a physical and, perhaps more importantly, a psychological trauma (32). She continues, “Traumatic events are extraordinary,” not because of rare occurrences; rather, Herman states, “Unlike commonplace misfortunes, traumatic events generally involve threats to life or bodily integrity, or a close personal encounter with violence and death. They confront human beings with the extremities of helplessness and terror, and evoke the responses of catastrophe” (33). Rubin Suleiman adds,

A more neurologically based definition would be that a traumatic event—or ‘traumatic stressor’—produces an excess of external stimuli and a corresponding excess of excitation in the brain. When attacked in this way, the brain is not able to fully assimilate or ‘process’ the event, and responds through various mechanisms such as psychological numbing, or shutting down of normal emotional responses. (276)

Thus, traumatic events refer to extraordinarily distressing experiences rather than common hardships. Depending on the severity of the trauma, stress resulting from abuse can manifest in a variety of ways, ranging from lack of sleep to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) to multiple personality disorder (MPD).

There are two camps of trauma theory with conflicting views of trauma and recollection of traumatic events. Though thorough examination of trauma theory is profitable, it is not necessary for this reading because the main point is focusing on how

Angelou survives her abuse and overcomes her past by writing it down. Rubin Suleiman writes, “Whatever camp one is in, finally I think it is important to understand that trauma is not only a drama of a past event, but also, even primarily, a drama of survival” (280). By its nature, the trauma memoir requires the narrator to believe the story and the reader to engage with the remembering. In “Agency Without Mastery: Chronic Pain and Posthuman Life Writing,” Leigh Gilmore states, “Autobiography makes ethical claims. It offers dynamic material from which to craft authority, offering the presence of the real person, speaking authentically of the value of his or her own life” (92). Memoir needs to be authentic in order to be of use to the author and the reader, meaning that the memoirist is honest and candid in her recollections. Additionally, in “Can the Psychology of Memory Enrich Historical Analyses of Trauma,” David Pillimer writes, “A personal event memory represents a specific episode that happened at a particular time and place, it contains sensory imagery that contributes to a sense of ‘reexperiencing,’ and the narrative believes in its truthfulness” (148). Thus, there seem to be two benefits of trauma memoir for Angelou. First, remembering traumatic events and recreating the experience in her own words helps her transition from a helpless victim to a survivor who has control over her story. Second, memoir is a mode of making meaning from fragments; by putting these fragments into order, she can make sense of her experiences and add to a collective memory about abuse, which might help other victims and create a sense of community dedicated to remembering the unspeakable.

In *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Maya experiences different forms of trauma throughout her childhood, including abandonment, self-loathing, and cultural/social oppression, but her sexual abuse is the most significant traumatic event, specifically

because of the after-effects of the abuse. When Maya is eight years old, she and Bailey, her brother, go to St. Louis to visit her mother. During her time there, she meets Mr. Freeman, who is her mother's boyfriend. She recalls three incidents of Mr. Freeman's abuse for her reader. Perhaps because of the stress of being in a new environment and reading "lurid tales" that give her nightmares, Maya sometimes spends the night in her mother's bed (72). One day, after Mother leaves for work, she wakes up to Mr. Freeman gripping her tightly and feeling his "thing" on her leg (72). At first, she is not very frightened initially, but her feelings move from apprehension to terror when he touches her and masturbates with her on top of him (73). During and after this event, she has conflicting feelings about Mr. Freeman: she is both frightened of and for him, but she also yearns for his closeness and thinks, "From the way he was holding me I knew he'd never let me go or let anything bad every happen to me. This was probably my real father and we had found each other at last" (73). Clearly, Maya is bewildered by the event, and she clearly does not understand what has happened but thinks that this is something that perhaps "real fathers" do.

After this incident, Mr. Freeman ignores Maya, and because she longs for acceptance and love (and still does not understand what happened between them), Maya begins "to feel lonely for Mr. Freeman" (74, 75). According to Herman, "Children who develop in this climate of domination develop pathological attachments to those who abuse and neglect them, attachments that they will strive to maintain even at the sacrifice of their own welfare, their own reality, or their lives" (98). Thus, it seems that Maya is developing an attachment to Mr. Freeman, and the reader can see that she vacillates between being scared of him and wanting to be near him. The second incident happens

one evening before Mother comes home from work. Bailey is entranced by a radio program, and Maya quickly sits on Mr. Freeman's lap. Pulling her close to his chest and moving her body against his genitals, Mr. Freeman uses her body to masturbate this time (75). Maya thinks that this is an act of closeness; she writes, "I buried my face in his shirt and listened to his heart, it was beating just for me" (75). Again, we see that Maya displays this pathological attachment that Herman discusses in which she is both scared of and lonely without her abuser.

The third and final incident with Mr. Freeman is the most powerful and terrifying. As Maya is heading out for the library, Mr. Freeman stops and rapes her. As she describes it, "The act of rape on an eight-year-old body is a matter of the needle giving because the camel can't. The child gives, because the body can, and the mind of the violator cannot" (78). Perhaps passing out because of the intensity of the pain, she eventually realizes she is in the bathtub: "I thought I had died—I woke up in a white-walled world, and it had to be heaven. But Mr. Freeman was there and he was washing me" (78). Still confused and stunned from her rape, Maya attempts to go on as if nothing has happened, but her injuries are debilitating, and when her mother tries to move her from bed to bathe her and change the linens, Mother sees evidence of the rape (79-82).

Because of the jump from blinding pain to being washed in the tub, it is unclear whether or not Maya has blacked out or if she cannot remember specifics about her abuse, or both. Perhaps she simply chooses not to tell her readers in this memoir. Another possibility is that her mind has repressed the memory of her rape. Repressed memories are traumatic recollections that are so horrific that the brain blocks them out for a period of time or indefinitely; on the other hand, false memory syndrome asserts that

suppressed traumatic recollections can be inaccurate and falsified, mainly in the case of adults remembering cases of child sexual abuse. The main page of the False Memory Syndrome Foundation website claims, “The professional organizations agree: the only way to distinguish between true and false memories is by external corroboration” (Freyd). Furthermore, Naples highlights the debate between supporters of “repressed memory” and those of “false memory syndrome”: especially when it comes to prosecution and after-effects of sexual abuse, those believing in repressed memories focus on further harm done to the victim by not being believed or being seen as “complicit in their abuse,” whereas advocates of false memory syndrome emphasize the harm done to a family unit and to the falsely accused by “misremembered” accusations (1162). Because memories alone are mistrusted, many survivors of child sexual abuse who do not have “legitimate” proof of their abuse are disbelieved and in some cases, disowned. Fortunately for Maya, her family accepts the evidence of her rape as truth, even when she is too scared to tell anyone what has happened.

With this intense physical and psychological trauma, Maya starts going through a cycle that seems to invariably follow abuse: silencing, shaming, and blaming. She is not just silenced by her rapist, but she is also silenced by culture and, perhaps the most damaging, by herself. After each incident of abuse, Mr. Freeman threatens Maya in order to keep her silent and ignores her. After the first episode, he says, “If you ever tell anybody what we did, I’ll have to kill Bailey” (74). This confuses Maya and frightens her, particularly because she does not know what they have “done”; she writes, “The thought that he might kill Bailey stunned me” (74). During her rape, Mr. Freeman moves from just threatening to kill Bailey to threatening to kill her. He says, “If you scream,

I'm gonna kill you. And if you tell, I'm gonna kill Bailey'" (78). Again, when Maya is in bed suffering from the injuries she incurred from his rape, Mr. Freeman leans over her, "his whole face a threat that could have smothered me," and repeats "If you tell . . ." (80). Alternating between neglect and threats effectively silences her for a period of time; she does not tell anyone about Mr. Freeman until Bailey begs her to tell him who raped her when she is hospitalized (83). However, two more instances of silencing affect her for much longer.

Silencing is not a singular action; rather, it is a constant choice. In Maya's case, Mr. Freeman's threats are enough to keep her from telling her family about the rape. Despite the possible repercussions of speaking out about abuse, many professionals insist that telling the story of sexual assault is a main step in recovery. According to Herman's model, the three stages of recovery for traumatic disorders are safety, remembrance and mourning, and reconnection (156). The second step involves telling the story "completely, in depth and in detail" (Herman 175). She writes, "This work of reconstruction actually transforms the traumatic memory, so that it can be integrated into the survivor's life story" (175). Though many professionals and organizations historically delegitimize personal recollections of traumatic events, it seems that some fields, such as psychology, are now welcoming and publishing these postmemory accounts. David Pillemer notes:

Twenty-five years ago research on autobiographical memory and narrative fell well outside the mainstream of scientific psychology. Laboratory studies focused almost exclusively on memory accuracy, and autobiographical accounts were viewed as imprecise, subjective and unworthy of publication. The scientific

climate changed when Jerome Bruner and Ulric Neisser [. . .] redirected attention and energy to the systematic study of narrative and autobiography. Today, flagship psychology journals publish papers on personal memoirs of life turning points, flashbulb memoirs of national tragedies, and cultural differences in autobiographical memory styles alongside paper using more standard experimental paradigms. (152)

So, even though there are many who discredit trauma memoir as a viable means of proving abuse, some fields are more accepting of these narratives and are even open to more controversial issues, such as vicarious trauma and collective memory.

In “The Daughter’s Seduction: Sexual Violence and Literary History,” Christine Froula examines continuities between fictional accounts of rape and silencing in the literary canon and actual accounts of rape and silencing in memoir. After analyzing Helen in Homer’s *Iliad*, Froula asserts that “women’s silence in culture is neither a natural nor an accidental phenomenon but a cultural achievement” (628). Froula connects this with the sentencing and death of Mr. Freeman in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. As defense lawyers commonly do, Mr. Freeman’s lawyer attempts to blame Maya for her rape and delegitimizes her allegations of rape (84). When she cannot remember what Mr. Freeman was wearing, the lawyer says, ““You mean to say this man raped you and you don’t know what he was wearing?” He snickered as if I had raped Mr. Freeman. ‘Do you know if you were raped?’” (84). Froula adds, “His [the defense lawyer’s] next question, as to whether Mr. Freeman has ever touched her prior to that Saturday, reduces her to confusion because her memory of her own pleasure in being held by him seems to her to implicate her in his crime” (635). Indeed, Maya thinks, “I

couldn't say yes and tell them how he had loved me once for a few minutes and how he had held me close before he thought I had peed in my bed' (Angelou 85). On the stand, she is caught between what she believes telling the truth would do (implicate her as taking pleasure in the entire exchange instead of just liking being held gently), and her desire to be truthful. So, she lies: "I said No. The lie lumped in my throat and I couldn't get air. How I despised the man for making me lie" (85). Furthermore, Froula points out that Maya "knows the cultural script and its hermeneutic traditions, which hold all female pleasure guilty, all too well, and so she betrays her actual experience with a lie" (635).

The third act of silencing is self-silencing. After Maya lies and is removed from the stand, Mr. Freeman is sentenced to "one year and one day," but he is somehow released that afternoon (Angelou 85). When a policeman tells Grandmother Baxter that Mr. Freeman has been found dead (presumably killed by her uncles), Maya feels intense guilt: "He was gone, and a man was dead because I lied" (86). Her thoughts continue, "I could feel the evilness flowing through my body and waiting, pent up, to rush off my tongue if I tried to open my mouth. I clamped my teeth shut, I'd hold it in" (86-87). Thus, we see the beginning of Maya's self-silencing, though doctors say that she is "healed" and her family believes that she is simply "morose" (88). Froula explains, "Taking his death as proof that her words have power to kill, she descends into a silence that lasts for a year," and argues that Maya's silence "speaks the hysterical cultural script: it expresses guilt and anguish at her own aggression against the father and voluntarily sacrifices the cure of truthful words" (635). The cultural expectations for women and girls to remain pure, chaste, and passive, do not address issues of speaking out against assault or rape or acknowledge female individuality, strength, or passion; these

expectations could lead to victims silencing themselves in an effort to maintain the specific feminine image that society demands and avoid being ostracized or punished.

In addition to her refusal to speak, Maya might not know why to put her experience into words. Gilmore addresses the challenges of memoirists who write about chronic pain. Gilmore defines pain as “both a bodily sensation and emotion,” and though her essay deals with chronic physical pain, I think that some of her argument applies to childhood sexual abuse, as it involves emotional and psychological pain (86). Gilmore notes that many trauma theorists “assert that language is inadequate to the experience of trauma” (85). However, she insists, “Language about pain is material in that it has the capacity to shape knowledge about pain, about how it is suffered and endured, but it also represents a point of departure for some writers who transform the language of pain into a critique of the humanist subject and life story” (85). Accordingly, finding language that articulates traumatic experiences for the memoirist can help the author make sense of her trauma and also promote recovery. It is not until Maya learns the power of language and literature that she breaks her silence and is able to find the words to express her own trauma.

After silencing, the victim feels shame about the trauma, and it manifests itself in different ways. In Maya’s case, we see her ashamed of her body, her race, and her gender. Throughout most of the book, she describes herself as ugly, awkward, and “too big,” and it is clear that she does not find herself physically attractive (3). In “Reembodying the Self: Representations of Rape in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*,” Mary Vermillion discusses the idea of somatophobia, which she identifies as the “fear of and disdain for the body” (243).

Particularly affecting rape victims, somatophobia is even more difficult to overcome for women of color; Vermillion writes, “it presents a special problem for the black woman because of the meaning that hegemonic white cultures have assigned to her body,” primarily that of perpetuating the myth that the black female form is closely associated with illicit and exotic sexuality (244, 245). In most of her self-descriptions, Maya refers to the color of her skin, likening it to the color of mud and shit, which contributes to her shame at being a black woman. Additionally, she says, “If growing up is painful for the Southern Black girl, being aware of her displacement is the rust on the razor that threatens the throat” (4).

The culturally assigned attributes of the black female body, in addition to the trauma of rape, make Maya feel ashamed of both her body and her race. She even dissociates herself from the memory of her rape, saying that she “had generally come to believe that the nightmare with its attendant guilt and fear hadn’t really happened to me. It happened to a nasty little girl, years and years before, who had no chain on me at all” (159). Clearly, there is a disconnect for Maya when it comes to remembering her rape then, as opposed to her remembering as the adult memoirist. Finally, Maya is ashamed of her gender. Before her rape, she confides, “I read more than ever, and wished my soul that I had been born a boy” (75). The logic behind this was that the heroes of the stories that she read were all boys; also, perhaps Maya feels that she both could save herself if she were a boy and also not be quite so vulnerable to rape if she were not a girl (75). Most of these details are given before the recollection of her rape, which indicates that the retrospective picture Maya has of herself reinforces this shame as having almost a causal relationship to the abuse, which leads to self-blame.

Maya blames herself for not being aware of the earlier abuse and for the death of Mr. Freeman. Her bewilderment throughout each encounter with Mr. Freeman is clear, and she is confused by her simultaneous fear of and desire to be close to Mr. Freeman. Furthermore, Maya believes that Mr. Freeman's death is a direct result of her lie, and because his death is on her hands, she is past the point of forgiveness (86). Her effort to "atone" for her "sin" culminates in her thinking that her words will kill: "Just my breath, carrying my words out, might poison people and they'd curl up and die like the black fat slugs that only pretended. I had to stop talking" (87). Accordingly, she assumes the blame for her rape and for Mr. Freeman's death and decides that self-silencing will contain her "evilness" (86). This is the most damaging aspect of her rape: she believes that she is at fault for her rape and thinks she has essentially murdered an "innocent" man, which shows that she has internalized a cultural set of beliefs that privileges the rapist and condemns the victim.

Despite the depth of Maya's silence, shame, and blame, she does move toward recovery. She reclaims herself (physically and psychologically) when she is given power over language, which eventually leads to her writing and having power over telling her own story. When she meets Mrs. Bertha Flowers, Maya admires her race and gender, describing her skin as a "rich black that would have peeled like a plum if snagged" and her femininity, which resembles that of the women in English novels (93, 95). She even confesses, "It would be safe to say that she made me proud to be Negro, just by being herself" (95). Maya's fascination with Mrs. Flowers escalates when she is actually invited to Mrs. Flower's house. Emphasizing that language is the only thing that separates man from beast, Mrs. Flowers tells her, "Your grandmother says you read a lot.

Every chance you get. That's good, but not good enough. Words mean more than what is set down on paper. It takes the human voice to infuse them with the shades of deeper meaning" (98).

After this, the reader can see a clear change in Maya's thoughts and demeanor. Mrs. Flowers not only helps Maya gain confidence in her appearance and abilities, but Mrs. Flowers also introduces her to the power of language. It does not seem to be a coincidence that Maya learns the entirety of Shakespeare's lengthy *Rape of Lucrece*, which addresses the rape and subsequent suicide of Lucrece. Noting this, Froula stresses that by reciting this poem, "Maya, it appears, emerges from her literal silence into a literary one" (636). By reading the stories of others and engaging with the characters, she learns a "new language" when she immerses herself in books; after she meets Mrs. Flowers, it seems that her voracious appetite for reading confirms for her that words have power, and the reader sees this manifest in increasingly frequent references to and comparisons of her life with novels like *Huckleberry Finn* and *Jane Eyre*.

Ultimately, Maya reclaims herself by writing her story in memoir; however, she also reclaims her body at the end of the book. She takes control of her own sexuality and her body by asking a young man, "Would you like to have sexual intercourse with me?" (281). Vermillion writes, "In posing this straightforward question, Maya claims control of her body and her identity for the first time in the text" (255). When Maya recalls her brief, first consensual sexual experience, she takes control over the lack of choice in her rape: "Thanks to Mr. Freeman nine years before, I had had no pain of entry to endure, and because of the absence of romantic involvement neither of us felt much had happened" (282). This rather casual recollection of sex with the father of her first child

banishes the self-guilt and fear that she exhibited just after her rape. Now that she has had consensual sex, she questions the lacks of explosive emotion and her own normalcy, saying that she “had had a man” and “had been had” without seeming to count her rape in this equation (282).

Though she still questions her “normalcy” and sexual preferences, the most significant shift that the reader sees is the self-perception she has during her pregnancy and after childbirth. Instead of hating her body and thinking about the shame of both her rape and being a pregnant teen, she swells with love and pride at her “immaculate pregnancy,” easy delivery, and resulting beautiful son (288). Her main concern is accidentally hurting her son, but after affirmation from Mother, who tells her, ““See, you don’t have to think about doing the right thing. If you’re for the right thing, then you do it without thinking,”” she feels more confident in her ability to take care of her child (289). Vermillion characterizes this final scene in the book: “Presenting the mother/child bond as a symbol of Maya’s newfound autonomy, this closing scene reverses her earlier privileging of the verbal over the physical and celebrates the harmonious interaction of her body and will” (256).

By taking control of her body (and sexuality), Maya does not need to hide from her trauma; rather, she re-experiences it by writing her own story. By taking control of telling the story of her childhood, she takes control from cultural and societal oppression and from her traumatic experiences and makes sense of those events for herself and for her readers. Herman writes that the last stage of recovery involves the victim confronting “the possibility of rejoining a wider world and forming connections with a broader range of people” (235). By viewing her story “as one among many,” the victim emerges a

survivor by learning that “the trauma can be surmounted in active engagement with others; she is capable of being fully present in mutual relationships” (235). Angelou contextualizes her experience in the wider experience of young, black females in the memoir, publishes the recollections of her trauma, not to emphasize her “specialness,” and contributes to a larger group of survivor discourse, which ultimately points to her healing and provides an opportunity of healing for other survivors.

Chapter 2—The Coming of Age Memoir: Building Bridges in Marie Arana’s *American Chica: Two Worlds, One Childhood*

The coming of age memoir focuses on the maturation of the narrator. This type of memoir is similar to the *bildungsroman* in fiction in that we see characters mature in some way; often, this growth does not just refer to physical development, but it also includes spiritual, emotional, and mental development, as well. Along with other subgenres of memoir, the coming of age memoir can also follow the format of a *roman à clef*, in which the characters are based on real people, but the names are invented, such as Azar Nafisi’s *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books* when Nafisi relates the stories of real students but changes their names for protection. Ultimately, the coming of age memoir focuses on a period of time in the author’s life that shows how she has grown and developed physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually.

One such memoir is Marie Arana’s *American Chica: Two Worlds, One Childhood*. Though primarily focusing on her childhood and adolescence, Arana includes excerpts from her present, flashbacks and flash-forwards in time, and many details about her family members, especially her parents. In *Transnational Latina Narratives in the Twenty-First Century: The Politics of Gender, Race, and Migrations*, Juanita Heredia notes that Arana writes her memoir in English instead of Spanish, and because “Arana is located at the interstices of being a U.S.-based Latina and Latin American author, I suggest that she can be considered a cultural and literary translator of Peruvian society” (112). As a child, Arana shuttles between the United States and Peru easily, but in her adolescent years, she struggles to forge her identity with her cross-cultural background. Illustrating the difficulty of reconciling between two very different ways of life, Arana

continues, “There is a fundamental rift between North and South America, a flaw so deep it is tectonic. The plates don’t fit. The earth is loose. A fault runs through. Earthquakes happen. Walls are likely to fall” (3). She continues, “The reality is I am a mongrel. I live on bridges; I’ve earned my place on them, stand comfortably when I’m on one, content with betwixt and between” (301). The dominant and recurring image in *American Chica* is a bridge, and by constructing her own bridge with this memoir, Arana addresses the complexities of finding identity with a bicultural childhood when she is both Peruvian and American but neither one exclusively.

Through examining her parents’ relationship, Arana finds that though they are complete opposites in almost every way, her parents have managed to stay together for half a century. With her mother representing the United States with her individuality, self-reliance, and experience, and her Peruvian father hailing from a traditional Latin American family, Arana has two polar-opposite parents and cultural backgrounds. She writes, “They were so different from each other, so obverse in every way. I did not know that however resolutely they built their bridge, I would only wander its middle, never quite reaching either side” (3). Wandering around on the bridge of her parents’ relationship, Arana finds herself stuck in an in-between space of unbelonging. Though this space of unbelonging is confusing, Arana writes, “I love to walk a bridge and feel that split second when I am neither here nor there, when I am between going and coming,” showing her courage and willingness to explore the unknown (301). It is with this backdrop that Arana begins to construct her identity in retrospect.

With this focus on finding identity in a transnational, bicultural experience, it is important to define identity. What is identity, and what influences the construction of

identity? In “Theorizing at the Borders: Considering Social Location in Rethinking Self and Psychological Development,” Kelli Zaytoun addresses identity by focusing on developmental psychology: “the study of psychological growth across the lifespan” (54). Zaytoun writes, “According to traditional perspectives, one’s self-concept, or knowledge about the self as a distinctive being in the world, becomes more sophisticated as one learns to reflect on (not just perform) their actions and interactions in the world” (54). Noting that most of the early, prominent developmental researchers were “white, middle-upper class men,” she questions the after the fact consideration of race, gender, and ethnicity when determining the process of self-conception, or identity; instead, Zaytoun posits a preliminary consideration of “race, gender, and other socially constructed categories of identity, to raise new questions and perspectives on what constitutes and influences self-concept and psychological capacities” (54, 53).

Furthermore, she calls for “more cross-cultural critique and exploration of foundational concepts within development,” which is where Arana’s memoir becomes particularly salient (55). Arana searches for a place, a sense of belonging in her memoir; when one is from both places and belong to neither, where does one live? One important point Zaytoun makes forwards Judith Jordan’s notion of the “relational self” perspective, based on studies of women’s psychological growth, which emphasizes that humans ‘thrive in being in connection’” (55). In *American Chica*, this concept of the relational self is a primary foundation for the understanding of identity, because it is by retrospective consideration of external influences and making human connections that Arana constructs her identity as a Peruvian American. Accordingly, Arana must consider

the factors of how race, culture, social status, and gender interact and influence her when trying to determine what her “self-concept” is.

In *American Chica*, Arana questions the idea of race quite a bit. Since her parents represent the two Americas for her, Arana finds herself a mix between the two, especially when it comes to color and nationality. At the train station in St. Louis, there are “*Colored*” and “*Whites*” ladies’ restrooms, and Arana is confused by the idea of color and the cultural assignments for people with different shades of skin (173). Though she has no African blood, Arana is still a darker hue than what many consider “white,” despite her mother’s insistence. Using words like “*ocher*,” “*hazelnut*,” and “*chocolate*” to describe the skin tones of her Peruvian friends and family, Arana determines that though Vicki, her older sister, can pass as white, there is no way she would be considered “white” (174). Later, when she is in Rawlins, Wyoming, she determines, “There was nothing white about me. I was colored, for sure,” which further pinpoints her dilemma of being colored enough to not be considered white but not colored enough to be black (193). Heredia points out that her mother complicates the process by asserting that her children are American, instead of half-American and half-Peruvian (116). Heredia continues, “By negating their Peruvian heritage, she [Marie Campbell] may think that she is protecting them, but she may also be causing further confusion, which may be problematic and lead to an identity crisis when they become adults” (117). With this cross-cultural, biracial focus in mind, Zaytoun submits, “There is much research that suggests that people of color have multiple consciousnesses and knowledge systems due to experiencing the world as a minority” (67). Though she understands shades of color in Peru, Arana confides, “Here in March of 1956, in the St. Louis train station, however,

where black and white was spelled so boldly—where colors were carved on doors with directives—I do believe that for the first time I feared a little for myself” (175). Thus, Arana, somewhere between the stark white and black contrast in the US, must determine where she fits, or if she fits at all.

The racism Arana sees is not just in the United States, but it is also in Peru.

Recalling her first consideration of race, she writes,

I had not yet turned seven, but I knew what race meant. There were Peruvians who measured color with what seemed the precision of laboratory calipers, but I had never suspected that any of it would pose a danger to me. I had balked at not being permitted to invite an *india* to my birthday; I had pressed my ear against the bedroom doors to hear the scandal of the laundress’s daughter, I had been humiliated by a schoolteacher who didn’t think I was sufficiently brown. But race in Peru was a subtler issue than in the United States. *Indios* came down from the mountains, in from the jungle, went to convent schools, mixed with *mestizos*, and then their *mestizo* children mixed with the *blancos*, mixed with the *chinos*, mixed with the *sambos*, moved to the cities, mixed it up more. (174-175)

Though she understands the idea of racial difference in a Peruvian context, when she arrives in Rawlins, Wyoming, Arana and her brother, George, are confused by their icy reception. When an old man confronts them for no other reason than overhearing them speak to each other in Spanish, he immediately insists that they are “[o]n the wrong side of town,” saying, ““They just sittin’ there spick-a-da Spanish. What they doin’ here anyway? They got a school over there fer these varmint”” (192). It is after this incident that Arana begins to see that color is not seen in gradients as it is in Peru; the fact that she

is not one hundred percent white makes her “colored” and confines her to that side of town, school, and experience, though she is shunned there for not being “colored” enough.

Clearly, Arana understands that there is racism and color in the world, but because of the more subtle distinctions of color and ethnicity that she sees in Peru, she is completely unprepared for the very deep racial lines in the mid-twentieth century US. Heredia also highlights this issue: “Arana draws attention to the fact that the United States perceived itself as a ‘black and white’ nation, therefore obliterating the incorporation of any ethnicities, cultures, and races that differed from these two models” (117). Because Arana is neither white nor colored enough, she is left hanging in the balance by the fixed color segregation in the US. However, Zaytoun draws on Nadine Dolby’s argument: “identity is produced and reproduced” because “race and other categories of identity are not fixed entities but are contingent on political and historical context” (56). Because socially constructed categories and how they are privileged in a particular culture can change, it seems to be even more difficult to develop a self-concept when you “come from” two places. This is Arana’s struggle—how to reconcile her feelings about herself in the context of Peru and the United States.

Arana identifies as being culturally both Peruvian and American. She writes, “I knew, with a certainty I could feel in my bones, that I was deeply Peruvian” (7). With her mother’s influence and teaching, Arana begins to develop an “American indoctrination,” in which she begins to “see the world through a foreign scrim, feel apart” and “become the creature of a place I’d never smelled or seen” (114). Thus, Marie Campbell, her mother, begins to assimilate her children into an American culture, though

they are still residing in Peru. Moving to a completely American context, after living in New Jersey for a while, Arana declares, “As for us children, we were Americans now. We hardly thought of our pasts; we hardly spoke Spanish. As the months went by, I shucked Peru entirely, referring to it only when I thought it would give me a moment’s advantage, a teacher’s attention” (280). However, when she talks to her father about a social studies project on the Andes and tells him that she is *Peruana*, her father replies, ““No, Marisi. You’re a gringa, like your mother. You’re not a Peruvian anymore”” (282). Pinpointing this dilemma, Zaytoun notes, “Culture determines the possibilities and boundaries for how an individual perceives themselves in relationship to their surroundings’ (58). With two very different cultures privileged at different points, Arana’s identity crisis seems to be an important feature in her life, because instead of the stability of a dominant culture, there is a competing, bicultural experience, and she must determine how to reconcile the two. At this point, the reader sees her struggle to hold on to her Peruvian self while trying to assimilate and become an American.

When Lucilla, an African-American girl who bullies Arana, calls her a ““wiggly-butt wetback”” and tells her, ““You oughta go back where you belong,”” Arana explains, “We were the ‘neither-here-nor-there people’: one thing when here, the other when there. Or forever from some other place. We were neither; we were both” (283). However, the culture in America is very different, and Arana struggles with her childhood perception of Rawlins, Wyoming, and her move to Summit, New Jersey. She says, “Summit was nothing like Mother, really, nor was it anything like the American school in Lima, nor like Rawlins, Wyoming, whose lingo we heard in our dreams” (265). Because of the drawling, Western English she heard before, Arana adopts this accent

when speaking English in New Jersey (266). It is only after Suzi, a friend, points out that Arana is ““talking weird”” and saying ““things all wrong”” that she modifies her English (266). This is mirrored when numerous American characters accuse her of being Mexican; although this is most likely just a racial stigma, it also might be because these characters only associate speaking Spanish with Mexico and are unable or unwilling to differentiate between a Mexican and a Peruvian accent. However, Arana and her siblings learn to differentiate between the culture of the rural Western US and that of urban New Jersey. Flashing forward to the present, Arana calls out Lucilla: “There are nearly forty million of us in your country now, Lucilla. We belong here. Just like you,” and with that, the reader finally sees Arana embrace both places, belonging to both here and there (283).

Adding another layer, the categories of social status and class also affect Arana’s development of identity. In Peru, she is set apart in Cartavio as the daughter of the young engineer in a US owned town, and the family resides in a gated house that is “impervious to vendors, to factory workers, to ordinary Peruvians, to the sprawl of humanity that struggled a few hundred feet from the door” (9, 10). She also notes that her Abuelita is “a thoroughly social Limeña” who loves parties and dressing up “in her velvets and satins” to attend socialites’ weddings and have tea with relatives (120). Overall, Arana comes from an aristocratic family in Peru, and this is highlighted when she is not permitted to invite certain kinds of children to her birthday party and in how she is expected to act when she stays at Abuelita’s house for three months (174, 119-122). However, in New Jersey, bills pile up while her father is in Peru, and Mother takes a job at a dress shop, which is something that her father would never approve of (292).

Addressing how identity and social setting interact, Zaytoun states, “The self is intricately embedded in relationships not only to other people, but to aspects of the world that include social groups, communities, and inanimate and spiritual entities that are deemed important to the individual according to social influence and identity categories within which they relate” (59). Going from being the daughter of an American-trained engineer in Peru to the only Latina in public school in New Jersey, Arana struggles with belonging to different social classes in two hemispheres.

Finally, gender constructs also affect Arana’s self-concept, and two different female constructs are seen in two women who play a special role in her life: Mother and Abuelita. Arana muses, “The difference between my mother and my grandmother—I know it now after all these years—was not one between woman and woman. It was the difference between an Anglo’s daughter and the mother of a Latin male. It was a difference between men and men” (65). Arana describes how the Latin male is groomed and coddled by his mother; it is this fundamental difference that drives Abuelita and Mother apart, though they are physically very different, as well (65-66).

Mother is described as being fair, big-boned, and dressing in loose, silky clothes, which is different from the form-fitting attire of Peruvian *señoras* (15, 13). However, it is Mother’s demeanor that is most intriguing and mysterious; Arana describes her as having a “hardness behind her glow” and being very closed when it comes to discussing her past, though she is clearly devoted to her children (13). Mother’s mysterious past is closed to Arana until she is in her forties; even then, Mother remains a bit of a mystery to her (33-34). Abuelita is very social, as opposed to Mother’s quiet independence (120). Dressing in European finery and socializing with her daughters in tow, Abuelita is a

beloved matriarch, and perhaps because of the absence of her husband, her status in the family is heightened, and she is not used to being crossed. She trains her daughters to be good Peruvian girls who “lived monitored girlhoods, in aesthetically pleasing places, with carefully selected playmates, and someday they would pass into chaperoned young womanhood, during which their virtues would be guarded like family jewels” (144).

This is in stark contrast to the reader’s introduction to Marie Campbell’s rather racy past with her three marriages, sexual experience, brashness, and self-reliance (33, 31).

Mother is clearly not the type of woman that Abuelita would have chosen for her son, but it is not until Mother starts to have children that she and Abuelita really disagree.

Marie Campbell does not conform to the cultural customs of Peru and offends her mother-in-law when Vicki is born. The cultural custom of family celebration and heavy involvement during labor and the early infancy of a child is foreign and frightening to Mother; instead of bowing to the pressure of the Arana Cisneros, “She digs in, marks her turf” (60). Because Abuelita considers Vicki “an offering to the family matriarch,” Rosa demands most of the time with the newborn, only relinquishing Vicki to Mother for feedings (62). In response to this treatment, Mother writes a “declaration” of sorts, explicitly telling Abuelita and the rest of the family to back off, which creates a *pleito*, “that inching toward fury, that lingering grudge to the grave,” which Arana finds difficult to navigate, even as an adult (62, 63).

The reader sees Arana’s struggle with Peruvian and American gender constructs particularly in her marriages. After becoming “Peruvian again in college,” she marries and describes herself as: “a good Latina in my first marriage, going to the altar with the first man who ever touched me, hanging my future on his, never reaching for him in bed”

(145). Heredia points out that it is during those years in Asia, specifically in Hong Kong, Malaysia, and Singapore, that she teaches, obtains degrees, and eventually finds her career aspiration of being an editor (110, 122). She recalls her second marriage: “And then I was a good gringa in my second [marriage], throwing out all the rule books and following my heart” (145). Not only does she become more in control of her sexuality and her heart, but Heredia notes that Arana also follows her career aspirations (122). Furthermore, Heredia stresses, “Essentially, Marisi Arana grows into an ‘American chica’ from experiences in both marriages as she redefines the limits of her gender as well” (122). Ultimately, Arana embraces both cultures in her name; she does not retain her full Latina name (Marie Elverine Arana Campbell), but she clearly publishes under Marie Arana. Thus, she claims her father’s name, which is an American/European practice, but decides to keep her family name instead of taking her husband’s name, Yardley, which hints at her Latin roots.

So, how does Arana navigate these socially constructed categories of race, culture, social status, and gender to determine her identity? Zaytoun suggests that a “sense of relationship to, or oneness with, community *and* the desire to act for the betterment of the community, could be explored with further research” (64-65).

*American Chica* does just that because it is through Arana’s human connections and eventual work on Peruvian history that she really discovers herself. Just as Mother finds friendship in another outsider, Carmen, Arana finds companionships and connections with many outsiders including Eddie, Antonio, Tommy Pineda, Kit, Carol, and Erika (164-166).

Eddie is described as being a “Blackamerican” (93). After finding out that his great-grandfather had been fathered by a slave owner, Eddie returns a different man; Arana writes, “When my friend got back on his motorcycle for the ride home, he did it with the eerie understanding that he would never again feel something so simple as pure, racial anger. He was black. But he was also white. He was master; he was slave” (93). She recalls Eddie’s story specifically to connect Eddie’s calling to Virginia to her own calling to Antonio (94). Antonio is a servant in her household and an “indigenous Peruvian, high-browed, straight-necked, with skin the color of cinnamon bark,” and Arana is entranced by him (83). By being indigenous and a servant, Antonio is an outsider to her, but because he treats her as an equal, she seeks him out and asks him countless questions (83-84). It is from Antonio that she learns about traditional, indigenous Peruvian beliefs, not just the Catholicism of Abuelita, and it can be argued that her time with Antonio is what really links Arana with Peru.

Her experience with Tommy Pineda, a local boy in Paramonga who has a mental disability, builds on the Peruvian beliefs she learns from Antonio. Perhaps simply because of his mental disability, Tommy is large, drools, and is the subject of many superstitious rumors, making him very much an outsider. When their beloved German shepherd, Sigurd, is found dead in a molasses pit after an earthquake, locals believe that Tommy is to blame (160). However, it is not until Mrs. Birdseye confronts Arana about the truth of Tommy that she learns to distinguish between Peruvian beliefs and local superstitious gossip (168). After actually meeting Tommy, she thinks, “It struck me how impossible it would have been for this docile colossus to kill a dog, suck it dry, float it out in the country-club pool to be screeched at by servants” (168). He gives her a tiny,

perfect seashell as a gift, and she takes this as foreshadowing her first journey from Peru to the United States. From Tommy, she learns the fine line between superstitious beliefs and truths, and through his difference, Tommy's kindness overshadows her fear of him. With this experience, she is able to navigate among several different belief systems and emerge with remnants of each. Though she is thrown into several religious ideologies, she seems to hold on to Antonio's *historias*, *qosqo*, and *leyandas*.

When she moves to the United States, Arana connects with three girls with very different cultural backgrounds. Arana recalls, "My first best friend was Kit, a pale, black-Irish beauty, wan as the tragic heroine that hung on my grandmother's wall. She was big-brained and cameo-delicate. Musical. Wicked. And she shared my passion to scare" (286). Connecting her childhood love of discussing *apus* and the supernatural, she and Kit become fast friends, bonding over reading Poe, having séances, and staging fits (268). This is the first time that the reader sees her connect her American friend with something from her Peruvian heritage; however, after being bullied at school, Arana struggles with both halves of herself.

Arana sees Carol, an African American friend, switching between cultures and using "two dialects, two personalities, two senses of humor, two ways of shaking a hand, two ways of saying hello—one for the world you're trying to make a way in, another when you're home with your kin" (271). Carol is an outsider in that she is a black woman who fears that "she'd always thought that whites who saw her in her other context wouldn't understand it. She worried they wouldn't trust her when she resumed standard English" (271). After Arana sees Carol act completely different with her black friends, they both agree that despite their different backgrounds, "the fear of being called

a faker, an impostor, had meaning for both of us” (271). Thus, Arana examines her own cultural duality, observing her shift between being Peruvian and American for different contexts, and decides to “invent” a whole new person (272).

Finally, she connects with Erika, a German immigrant with a single mother, Minna (285). Both Erika and Arana are bullied about their cultural backgrounds, but while Erika is clearly mocked as a German with faux-Hitler salutes, Arana’s heritage is less certain, and she is often mistaken for being Mexican (286). Arana admires Erika’s “twoness,” and Erika holds on to her cultural background, replying to taunts by saying that “German dolls are prettiest” and the like (286, 291). However, what she learns most from Erika and Minna is that she is “no foreigner” (290). Because she finds herself “deeply and indelibly American, from this hemisphere, taught Americanness from infancy,” she learns that though she looks different, she can be both Peruvian and American (290). Thus, with each human connection she makes, she becomes stronger and learns more about her self-concept. By going outside her family and connecting with other outsiders, she is able to turn those connections into a bridge, which links her identity from North to South America.

At the end of the memoir, Arana brings up the image of the bridge again: “It connects points that might never have touched. Perhaps it is simply that a bridge depends on two sides to support it, that it is a promise, a commitment to two” (301). Thus, it makes sense when she writes, “I count both cultures as my own. But I’m happy to be who I am, strung between identities, shuttling from one to another, switching from brain to brain. I am the product of people who launched from one land to another, who slipped into other skins, lived by other rules—yet never put their cultures behind them” (301).

With this statement, the reader sees her “palsy of the double-soul” melt into a rich bicultural, transnational heritage that she has created for herself (292). Early in the text, she writes, “Connections are everywhere if I can make them,” but by the end of the memoir, Arana has matured before the reader’s eyes and has connected small pieces of both cultures into a bridge, and she confides, “The connections have not always been easy to follow. But they are there when I look for them. They are there” (73, 303).

Cross-cultural coming of age memoirs like *American Chica*, grappling with difference and identity, contribute to the larger global discussion about privilege and who fits in where. Much like the trauma victim’s need for community and support in order to heal, the need for community is key to constructing an identity for those with multi-cultural backgrounds. Arana’s memoir addresses the complexities of race, culture, social status, gender, and the questions of self when one is simultaneously both and neither. She is an *American chica*: she is a bridge (305). This bridge, both her memoir and herself, is not just for herself but for others, too. It is only when one is on this bridge, an in-between space hanging between two places, that one can examine both destinations and reconcile the differences between the two. Perhaps one day, there will be no need to “live” on these bridges as Arana does; rather, people may stroll across to an equally privileged cultural experience, but until then, we must rely on bridges, like *American Chica*, to transport us from place to place and show us how to navigate the in-betweens.

Chapter 3—The Academic Memoir: Fiction as Counter-Reality in *Reading Lolita in Tehran*

An academic memoir concentrates on the life and experience of an academic, generally a college professor. This type of life writing is usually concerned with the memoirist's content area(s), teaching, university policies, as well as students, friends, and family while teaching at the post-secondary level, though many memoirs are written by academics teaching at the primary and secondary levels. Often, these pieces focus on less than desirable circumstances or events regarding demanding university policies, personal struggles with peer interaction or teaching, and the challenges of continuous publication and research. Azar Nafisi has written an academic memoir entitled *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books*, in which she cites the difficulties she has during the last part of her time as a professor in Iran. As stated in Chapter 2, she changes the names of characters but maintains the veracity of her story, much like a *roman à clef*. In the Author's Note, Nafisi affirms, "The facts in this story are true insofar as any memory is ever truthful, but I have made every effort to protect friends and students, baptizing them with new names and disguising them perhaps even from themselves" (ix).

*Reading Lolita in Tehran* recounts the fall of 1995 and other events pertinent to the reader's understanding, during which she invites seven female students to her house every Thursday morning for a book club (3). As the memoir progresses, Nafisi shares intimate details about her experience as a female professor of English literature at Tabatabaïi University in Tehran from 1988 to 1995, her family and childhood in Iran, her education in the United States, and the Revolution of 1979. With all of this information providing exposition and background for the reader, Nafisi mainly focuses on her reading

group and the books they read. Her academic background is particularly noticeable, not only because she discusses teaching and students, but also because her content area, British Literature, reflects her feelings and becomes an escape for her and her students. She explains the climate of the university saying, “What I remember most distinctly about the university now is that green gate [. . .] Yet that green gate was closed to her [Yassi], and to all my girls” (29). Instead of simply walking through the gate and onto campus, female students and faculty go into a “small, dark room to be inspected” for minute traces of immodesty (29). Shortly after mandated veiling and increased demands on faculty, Nafisi leaves, but just after leaving Tabatabaai University, she confesses, “I think that was what drove me to create the class. My main link with the outside world had been the university, and now that I had severed that link, there on the brink of the void, I could invent the violin or be devoured by the void” (24). The memoir’s personal account of her love affair with the Western literary canon and the experiences of her students in the memoir highlight the transformative and transportive power of fiction.

Very heated controversy surrounds *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, specifically about the representation of Iran. Because of the memoir’s popularity in America and its negatively tainted reminiscences of Iran, many Iranian-American critics have argued that Nafisi’s memoir is “New Orientalistic,” undermines feminism in the Islamic Republic, omits the good and positive aspects of Iran, and glorifies a dominant American ideology, and this is especially seen in Fatemeh Keshavarz’s countermemoir *Jasmine and Stars: Reading More Than Lolita in Tehran*. Furthermore, critics claim that the targeted audience demographic (white, middle-class Americans) has taken this personal account and the views Nafisi expresses as representative of Iranian society and culture. In “Why

Americans Love Azar Nafisi's Reading Lolita in Tehran," Anne Donadey and Huma Ahmed-Ghosh believe that Nafisi's memoir can "easily lend itself to interpretations that reinforce a dominant western, especially U.S., ideology" (624). Also, in "Reading Nafisi in the West: Authenticity, Orientalism, and 'Liberating' Iranian Women," Mitra Rastegar identifies the most prominent binary as the oppressed (or repressed) existence of women in the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Western and liberating democratic ethos Nafisi promulgates is "implicit" in the Western novels the women read in the memoir (108). Rastegar writes that though Nafisi does seek to "deterritorialize" democracy and freedom, she argues that Nafisi's book can reinforce the binary of West/East and promote the superiority of the West (Orientalism) which effectively "others" the East (109). Furthermore, in "Introduction: Writing Iranian Americans into the American Literature Canon," Persis Karim and Nasrin Rahimieh say that Nafisi's memoir has "become the center of a controversy that suggests that representations of Iranian women could be put in the service of a political agenda hostile to Iran" (13). Because this memoir claims to show the liberating power of literature, the authors suggest that the reasons for the widespread popularity for Nafisi's book lie in the connection of "political challenges" and its claim to show this liberating power of literature (14).

In order to understand the specific debate about Nafisi's text, it is important to ascertain the climate for this type of memoir, specifically postcolonial memoirs authored by females in the late 1990s and early 2000s. In "Confessing for Voyeurs: The Age of the Literary Memoir Is Now," James Atlas writes, "nearly two dozen memoirs are being published this spring [1996], with more to come" (1). He observes that this "urgency to get at the facts—or what are presumed to be the facts—has a long tradition," which, until

this time, has been manifested in the form of narrative in novels (2). This long tradition that Atlas refers to has been intensified by the emergence of reality television in the late 1990s, which promises unadulterated and unscripted “reality” for voyeuristic viewers, and it seems as if the writing of the times has naturally followed this course.

In addition to observing this boom of memoirs on the American literary scene, Atlas also notes *who* is writing these memoirs and says that “even academia has got into the act” of memoir writing (1). In 1997, Nancy K. Miller narrows this distinction even more by noting that memoir writers are largely “cultural critics, poets, and most of all, women academics, writing in and out of school, feminists with enough institutional prestige and security, of course, to run the risk of self-exposure” (982). Carolyn Heilbrun perceives that these “new memoirists” are not only female academics writing memoirs, but female academics who are also writing memoirs about their private lives in the public sector, the publication of which confers public fame (54). Nafisi, though published in the academic world, was not well-known until after the publication of *Reading Lolita in Tehran* in 2003. These women overcome anonymity by publishing their experience in the public sector and achieve the inverse of the traditional memoir process in which only the already famous produce memoirs.

Another aspect of the popularity of memoir in the United States is what the voyeuristic readers want to read about—in short, the topic or focus of the memoir must be provocative and intriguing. Not only can we trace the rise of memoir from being about the famous to the academic, but especially after the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, the publication of memoirs in the U.S. skyrocketed along with a boom in book clubs, specifically women’s book clubs. Perhaps because of the spotlight trained on the

inner lives of people in the Middle East, memoirs promising intimate details of the lives of women in Kuwait, Iran, Afghanistan, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia are among the most popular books in America. Amy DePaul looks at the explosion of book clubs (especially women's book clubs), the boom of personal memoir in the US, and the American's new awareness of Iran after 9/11, all of which contributed to the major success of Nafisi's memoir (74).

Many critics have been puzzled by Nafisi's choice to write "a memoir in books." This may be because Nafisi, a female academic, avid reader, and memoirist, believes that it is only through books that you can truly understand the experience of another person. She says, "It is only through literature that one can put oneself in someone else's shoes and understand the other's different and contradictory sides and refrain from becoming too ruthless" (118). Nafisi's audience will likely be other literary scholars, book lovers, and non-fiction readers, and she writes about her experience in memoir form because it is the way which Nafisi believes the readers will be able to understand and appreciate the intimate details she relates. Additionally, her career is teaching literature, and the memoir is primarily focused on the "class" she holds in her home. With her continuation of teaching after leaving the academy in Iran, Nafisi still desires to examine fiction to teach and to learn from her students, which makes the memoir's sections on the works of Vladimir Nabokov, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Henry James, and Jane Austen creative, insightful, and appropriate.

Pointing to the title and major theme of the memoir, Part I is titled "Lolita." This section of the memoir focuses on the last year Nafisi teaches at the university and the very beginning of her book club. The tone of this section is subdued but angry, and the

Russian literature that she uses to illustrate her life reflects the loneliness, loss, and anger that she and her students are feeling. She also mentions other texts, and she compares Nabokov's *Lolita* and *Invitation to a Beheading* and Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Notes from the Underground* with events and experiences in post-revolutionary Iran. Linking pieces of these texts together, Nafisi recreates her last few years in Iran. Much like her students, Cincinnatus C., the hero of *Invitation to a Beheading*, is "imaginative and lonely," and what is most frightening about the book is the scene in which he is forced to dance with his jailer before execution (20, 76). Nafisi asserts that this waltz represents the progression of the book; as long as Cincinnatus accepts the jailer's rules, he is confined to the restricted movements his jailer permits (76). She continues, "Dancing with your jailer, participating in your own execution, that is an act of utmost brutality. My students witnessed it in show trials on television [. . .] They had not become part of the crowd who watched the executions, but they did not have the power to protest them, either" (76-77). While she and her students accept the terms of a totalitarian government and live in the "sham world" Iranian officials impose, they are confined to those same circular patterns (76).

How is it possible to break out of the circle? Though leaving the country seems to be an easy fix, leaving a way of life and family behind are the least of the problems. With increasing security measures and turbulence in the Middle East, even getting passports and other travel documents is difficult, let alone trying to emigrate to a new country. The majority of Nafisi's students are women, and that alone makes escaping nearly impossible. So, when you have nowhere to go and are unhomed in your native land, what do you do? Nafisi claims, "The only way to leave the circle, to stop dancing

with the jailer, is to find a way to preserve one's individuality, that unique quality which evades description but differentiates one human being from the other" (77). Since their "jailers" have "invaded all private spaces," there is nowhere to go but underground, tying their experience to *Notes from the Underground*, in which the narrator, the Underground Man, is retired at forty and so disillusioned with society that he withdraws from it completely. In order to write, the Underground Man is a recluse, a peripheral observer instead of a participant. In the final moments on the scaffold in *Invitation to a Beheading*, Cincinnatus "repeats his magic mantra, 'by myself'" (77). Nafisi writes, "This constant reminder of his uniqueness, and his attempts to write, to articulate and create a language different from the one imposed upon him by his jailers, saves him at the last moment, when he takes his head in his hands and walks away [. . .], while the scaffold and all the sham world around him, along with his executioner, disintegrate" (77). For both protagonists, solipsism is the only way to cope with brutal realities. Building on this idea, Nafisi is not pushing this type of solitary existence; rather, she encourages her students to escape into themselves and into their books to cope with their own realities.

What then is the significance of reading *Lolita* in Tehran? Making it clear that *Lolita* is not a "critique of the Islamic Republic," Nafisi chooses this book because it goes "against the grain of all totalitarian perspectives" (35). What interests her is the memories she has about reading, analyzing, and discussing *Lolita* while in Tehran; she writes that her memoir "is the story of *Lolita* in Tehran, how *Lolita* gave a different color to Tehran, and how Tehran helped redefine Nabokov's novel, turning it into this *Lolita*, our *Lolita*" (6). Thus, she compares Lolita's life with those of her female students.

Nafisi writes, “Like my students, Lolita’s past comes to her not so much as a loss but as a lack, and like my students, she becomes a figment in someone else’s dream,” and she asserts that because of Humbert’s ultimate control over Lolita’s restricted life, Lolita is not remembered without her connection to Humbert (37). She points out, “Lolita’s image is forever associated in the minds of her readers with that of her jailer. Lolita on her own has no meaning; she can only come to life through her prison bars” (37). This is the point of the book: on their own, Nafisi and her students have no meaning, no story devoid of their connection with their jailer, but if they band together, just maybe their sham world will disintegrate. Nafisi pleads, “I need you, the reader, to imagine us, for we won’t really exist if you don’t” (6). By first creating a book club and then this memoir in books, Nafisi immortalizes her memories in her “escape” and leaves them in the postscript, where they wait for her to return, re-read, and remember them.

Begun shortly after she leaves the university, Nafisi’s book club is held in her living room. The attendees are Manna, Mahshid, Nassrin, Yassi, Azin, Mitra, Sanaz, and Nima, and they gather together nearly every Thursday morning for two years to discuss everything from Persian classics like *One Thousand and One Nights* to Western literature by Nabokov, Austen, and James (5, 6). She says, “The novels were an escape from reality in the sense that we could marvel at their beauty and perfection, and leave aside our stories about the deans and the university and the morality squads in the streets” (38). It is through these works of fiction that the members of this class reconstruct their lives, even imagining what it might be like to live something other than their reality. It also explains the choice of readings in the memoir; Nafisi insists that great literature is “meant to make you feel like a stranger in your own home” and pushes readers to examine what

has been overlooked or taken for granted in the real world (94). For her, novels are not static and fictitious; rather, she believes that great fiction transports the reader to a different space and time and transforms the present, the reality.

This theme of blurring the line between fiction and reality is a focal point for her. Looking at the truth of reality, she expresses how much of her experience (and the memoir itself) resides in the grey area between fiction and reality; she says that “everyday life sometimes took on the quality of make-believe or fiction” (60). She confides that she “felt light and fictional” and how a “new feeling of unreality” permeated her life (167). In an effort to escape these new harsh realities (or unrealities), Nafisi retreats into her books “in order to survive” and like Nabokov’s *Cincinnatus*, she also slips into solipsism to cope with reality (170, 77). Because she lived more in books than reality, it seems as if books started to become her reality (183). Thus, the choice not only to write about her experience to make sense of it but also to write a memoir about reality in books does not seem far-fetched. It is not so much that Nafisi has had such an extraordinary life or provides tantalizing tidbits about true historical events, but that the writer illuminates and garners truth from personal experience of true events that inspire, challenge, and delight the reader.

The process of self-discovery is evident in this memoir. She reflects that “[i]t was as if the sheer act of recounting these stories gave us some control over them” (30). Thus, in writing her memoir, she is not only trying to discover herself, but also trying to make sense of and gain power over her experience for her and for her students. She writes, “we had become the figment of someone else’s dreams” (28). In an effort to reclaim her own experience and the experiences of her girls, she seeks to show that they

have “both a real history and a fabricated one” (27). What matters is not which history is true or real, but which one she and her characters act upon.

Nafisi writes about how she is “like an emissary from a land that did not exist, with a stock of dreams, coming to reclaim this land as my home” (89). Because the land had actually changed during her absence, Nafisi’s only defense against this displacement is to reclaim her home, mainly through the use of reading and writing literature. This “taking back” or retelling of experience is why Mitra Rastegar sees Nafisi’s memoir as a prime example of autoethnography, which, quoting Mary Louise Pratt, she identifies as “instances in which colonized subjects undertake to represent themselves in ways that engage with the colonizer’s own terms” (qtd. in Rastegar 110). By writing a Western memoir, Nafisi adopts the “colonizer’s own terms” to redefine her experience to herself and to her readers. In “Reading beyond Jasmine and Stars: Reading More than Lolita in Tehran,” Maniheh Mannani writes that Nafisi, in writing her memoir, has done so as a Westernized Iranian (or simply a Westerner); accordingly, Nafisi has written her memoir in a Western fashion. Mannani draws on William Hanaway’s ideas of Western memoir: “in the work of a Western autobiographer, ‘weaknesses and darker aspects of the life are not suppressed’” (323). Furthermore, the Western autobiographer does not write about past events to teach or edify the public but to try to make sense of those events for herself (323). Accordingly, Nafisi’s memoir is gritty and raw because she does not hide from painful parts of her past or heritage; in order to truly make sense of these realities, she must re-experience all parts of her life, which forces her to examine the painful underbelly of unrest in Iran. This is the source of much of the tension surrounding the memoir.

For instance, in *Jasmine and Stars: Reading More than Lolita in Tehran*, Keshavarz writes that she believes Nafisi's memoir is a "selective and exaggerated account of life in postrevolutionary Iran" which "enforces a harmful, widespread stereotype of Iranians so distorted as to make them seem subhuman" (6). Furthermore, Keshavarz shares her fear that if she "told you only about the grasshoppers, you would never look for the stars or the jasmine" (15). She writes that her hope and overall purpose in writing is that her American readers will read her memoir and that it will plant "the seeds of interest" about life in Iran "not yet known to most American readers" (7). However, as Mannani points out, Keshavarz writes in the manner an Eastern writer would, in that she is "concerned with the image projected in the work (not just of herself, but also of Iranian society at large)" (323). Mannani observes that Keshavarz follows the model of most Persian works in that they are, in the words of Ira Nadel, "'an example or model of moral and didactic value for readers'" (qtd. in Mannani 323). So, the Eastern memoir has the responsibility of maintaining a positive outlook on life in that country, culture, or society, while imparting didactic and edifying information to the readers; in other words, Eastern literature does not simply delight the reader, but it teaches the reader good things about that culture, society, religion, or country.

These Eastern expectations of literature are illustrated when Nafisi's class puts F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* on trial for teaching immoral values. Nafisi writes that this trial is "not merely a defense of *Gatsby* but of a whole way of looking at and appraising literature—and reality, for that matter" (122). Mr. Nyazi, the prosecutor, argues, "Imam Khomeini has relegated a great task to our poets and writers [. . .] He has given them a sacred mission, *much* more exalted than that of the materialistic writers

in the West” (124). He asserts that the novel commits a “sinister assault on the very roots of our culture. What our Imam calls cultural aggression. This I would call a rape of our culture” (126). Without “a single virtuous woman in the whole novel,” Mr. Nyazi questions, “What kind of model are we setting for our innocent and modest sisters [. . .] by giving them such a book to read?” (127). When literature is read in this context, the text teaches negative values instead of challenging the reader to examine his belief systems; however, as Zarrin, the defense for *Gatsby*, points out, “He [Mr. Nyazi] can no longer distinguish fiction from reality” because he is unable “to read a novel on its own terms” (128). Similarly, when Nafisi writes a Western memoir about her life in Iran, she does not need to emphasize the moral values of Iran; rather, she is able to question cultural belief systems without necessarily reinforcing negative cultural stereotypes or perspectives. After all, the fact that memoirs offer a subjective story about a culture, a society, or historical events does not mean that that it is the *only* version of the story that really is true to the author.

As Nafisi notes in her discussion of *Daisy Miller*, the experience changes the protagonist and reader, whether or not the experience was real or imagined (198). The experience of reading the novel and comparing it with the realities in Iran unhinges her students and makes “them not know what was right and what was wrong” (196). Nafisi also finds correlations between the fiction and the reality of Henry James’ life; she asserts, “His true country, his home, was that of the imagination” (216). Citing World War I as a main catalyst to James’ disillusionment, Nafisi quotes from his letter to friend Lucy Clifford: “We must for dear life make our own counterrealities” (216). This is exactly what Nafisi does in her text. Because of the unpleasant memories and

uncontrollable realities of so many of her students, she captures pleasant snapshots of her students in her memory and in her writing so that they might not overlook the bad but make sense of it while remembering the good (217).

Memoir writing is not just writing about reality but discovering reality through imaginative memory; therefore, her memoir suggests that there is a multiplicity of realities. Nafisi observes that the reality of the lives of her girls colors the fiction they read; this can sometimes lead to the point when the reader “can no longer distinguish fiction from reality” (108, 128). After one of her students urges her to focus on creating “democratic [. . .] personal and creative spaces,” Nafisi admits, “Fiction was not a panacea, but it did offer us a critical way of appraising and grasping the world—not just our world but that other world that had become the object of our desires” (282). In developing her skills and imagination through reading and analyzing literature, Nafisi eventually creates her own reality: this memoir is a counter-reality for herself and her students.

Juxtaposing the experience of reading fiction with her real life events, Nafisi is able to construct a space where both can interact. Citing her diary entry for June 23, 1997, she recalls,

We speak of facts, yet facts exist only partially to us if they are not repeated and re-created through emotions, thoughts and feelings. To me it seemed as if we had not really existed, or only half existed, because we could not imaginatively realize ourselves and communicate to the world, because we had used works of imagination to serve as handmaidens to some political ploy. (339)

It is only after being able to bring the fiction she teaches to life that she is able to make sense of her own life events and experiences. Eventually, Nafisi is able to “write about Austen and Nabokov and those who read and lived them with me” (339). Because she has “lived” the novels, their fiction *is* part of her reality, just as much as the characters in the memoir.

## Conclusion

Three significant subgenres of the memoir are: trauma memoir, coming of age memoir, and academic memoir. The trauma memoir is exemplified by Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. Her experience as an African-American female in the South distinctly sets her apart as an "other" for many readers, and instead of concentrating on the postcolonial experience of the "other," the focus is on the trauma of childhood abuse and how it connects to perceptions of self. Reading her memoir alongside Judith Herman's *Trauma and Recovery*, enables us to pinpoint different moments leading to Angelou's recovery, which offers another option to the more common postcolonial and feminist readings. Furthermore, this reading highlights how she works through physical and emotional trauma in her memoir, effectively breaking the silence about her abuse and showing how reading and writing allowed her to be free in a society determined to oppress her. The space of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* allows Angelou and her readers to examine this version of her past without getting caught up in issues of false and repressed memory syndromes; rather, she is able to explore her trauma in a way that leads to recovery not only in the memoir but possibly also after writing the text.

Marie Arana's *American Chica: Two Worlds, One Childhood* is a coming of age memoir. With the focus on the notion of developing a self-concept or identity, readers do not have to be experts in Peruvian culture or society, as they might in a more intense postcolonial reading. As seen in this text, prejudice is a universal practice, regardless of geographical context. Developmental psychology suggests that identity is more than simply self-concept: identity also refers to a relational self, which depends on societal

and cultural influence. Thus, her struggle to create her own identity, being culturally both Peruvian and American and neither fully, is underscored by her struggle to maintain both her North and South American heritages and identities. She uses her memoir as a bridge between them. With the concentration on the experience of Arana's coming of age rather than a comparison/contrast of specific cultural, societal, and gendered responsibilities, this reading allows the memoir to be a space where she can go to make the vital human connections that ground and help her determine who she is and who she wants to be.

Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books* is an academic memoir. A postcolonial reading would focus on her portrayal of Iranian society and on the question of "truth," but because she writes a Western-style memoir about her life and teaching in Iran, her emphasis is not on an Eastern-style celebration of her homeland. Rather, the memoir explores how to still be a teacher when she feels unhomed in her native land. When betrayed by her reality, she turns to her academic escape: books. By grounding her memories of her last time living and teaching in Iran in Western novels, Nafisi creates a space for her and her students to go when there is nowhere else to turn, and she writes them into a Western context by creating a memoir in books. This reading shows that Nafisi's purpose is not to demonize Iran; instead, this memoir is simply a version of a cultural past in which she escapes from her present in novels, and by drawing parallels between the fiction in literature and the reality of her life in Iran, she is able to write herself and her students into a new reality.

There will always be controversy over memoir writing. Though the majority of memoirists compose honest texts, there are always a few authors who invent memories

and fabricate a memoir. Without overlooking the valid concerns that many have about the genre, readers must understand that memoir is a space created to pinpoint and examine a version of the past; though the author is expected to be honest, there are different pasts and different versions of the past: which version is more true than others? The tricky concept of truth seems to be where most critics take issue with the genre; however, what is truth? Can there be different versions of truth? Does every person have a singular past and, therefore, a singular truth? In Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, characters question whether or not McMurphy actually exists. However, whether or not McMurphy is a real person or a projection of Bromden and the other men's imagination does not matter. What does matter is that because the men believe McMurphy is real and follow his lead, Bromden and the others are spurred into "real" action. He says, "It's still hard for me to have a clear mind thinking on it. But it's the truth even if it didn't happen" (13). Though this is a novel, the concept also applies to memoir.

People remember and misremember facts all the time. Often, the stories that are read and heard become part of a person's real life experience. For example, as Nafisi reads and relates to the fictional characters in a book, her memories of that time in her life are stored in books, interconnecting and haphazardly thrown on the shelf. Chronological arrangement in the memoir is not a main concern, and she weaves her past with that of her students' and connects both to her present. The purpose in creating this tapestry of memory is not to disprove other accounts of life in Iran; rather, the purpose is to pin down fleeting memories in order to examine and analyze them.

This is not to say that lies can be relabeled as memories. André Aciman addresses this issue and writes that memoirists “don’t distort the truth, they nudge it,” and he asserts that many writers “end up altering not the facts they’ve known, but their layout” (par. 3). This is an important differentiation because Aciman goes on to note, “Writing alters, reshuffles, intrudes on everything” (par. 7). Writing is not a linear process, and neither is memory, so how can recalling the past and pinning it down on paper be a linear process? He continues, “There is no past; there are just versions of the past. Proving one version true settles absolutely nothing, because proving another is equally true” (par. 13). So, if there are multiple accurate accounts of the past, what good does it do to debate about which version is more accurate? Aciman writes, “We can have many pasts, just as we can have several identities at the same time, or be in two places in our mind without actually being in either” (par. 15). With this multiplicity of factual versions of past events, why quibble over proving which memory, recollection, or memoir is more accurate than another?

Memoir is a space where differing memories of events and experiences can exist in multiple realities or pasts of the memoirist. According to this genre, the memoirist is simply required to be as accurate as memory can be. What about those “misremembered” events? Does it matter whether or not all versions of the experience match? With different perspectives and emotional memories, there is little chance that these versions would provide a singularly defined memory. Does that negate the validity of individual recollections? Because the author acts upon her recalled memories (real or imagined), these memories help shape her present and future by influencing the choices she makes and the beliefs she holds. Thus, memoir provides a necessary space for the

author to dissect, reassemble, analyze, and form her past, which helps her work through traumatic events, determine her place in the world, and immortalize a place in the world and in time that no longer exists.

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