

ABSTRACT

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TO PERSONS LIVING OR DEAD: WORRY
AND FICTION IN CONTEMPORARY
AMERICAN LIFE WRITING

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At the end of the twentieth century and the opening of the twenty-first, American life writing remains both an unsettled form and an unsettling practice. This study addresses six representative texts that suggest a critique of life writing as they deploy self-conscious fictionalization, experiment, and suspicion of their own strategies. Three of the works under analysis signal a noteworthy change in contemporary U.S. life writing. As they interrogate the conventions of memoir and biography, they begin to insist on notions of self, history, and agency at odds with the poststructuralisms that shape their approaches to representing selves and histories. These instances of vexed life writing, having recognized and engaged the constructedness of experience, memory, and self, nevertheless struggle to operate as nonfiction.

Dave Eggers' *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*, Edmund Morris' *Dutch: A Memoir of Ronald Reagan*, and Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Fifth Book of Peace* are symptomatic instances of panic in contemporary American life writing. In each of these memoirs, the life writer supplements ostensibly nonfiction narratives with

metacommentary and fiction but posits neither the fantasy of an authoritative master narrative nor the *jouissance* of having abandoned the same. Obligated to what each memoirist identifies as his or her local responsibilities, these texts struggle toward representing freighted experiences.

I read these texts as uneasy heirs to three predecessors that adopt parallel methods to represent lives but make distinct arguments about life writing. Eggers' memoir echoes the form and epistemology of Mary McCarthy's *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood*. Morris' experimental presidential biography follows Gore Vidal's *Lincoln: A Novel*. *The Fifth Book of Peace* counters Kingston's own family memoir, *China Men*. As the contemporary examples of life writing adopt the postmodern forfeiture of stable representation, they do so under an anxiousness that McCarthy, Vidal, and the early Kingston evade. The presence of that worry in contemporary American life writing indicates the limits of this category of text and the native tension between postmodern indeterminacy and specifically obliged life writing.

PURELY COINCIDENTAL RESEMBLANCE TO PERSONS LIVING OR DEAD:
WORRY AND FICTION IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN LIFE WRITING

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	ii
Introduction: Contemporary American Life Writing's Critical Fictions	1
Chapter 1: "The book is thereafter kind of uneven...": The Limits of Metanfiction	22
Remembering Memory: Mary McCarthy on Mary McCarthy on Mary McCarthy	24
"Mendacity in the blood"	32
Unapologetic Fictions	40
"Trust the motives and hearts of your makers of things"	42
Writing for Community: "The Lattice"	46
Representativeness and the Bourgeois Everyday	55
Conclusion: Orphan Autobiographers	60
Chapter 2: Lincoln and Dutch: Executive Fictions and American Biography	67
The Imagination of Form	67
Playing President, Playing the Fool	94
The Doppelgängers' Debts	98
The Deadbeat President and the Childless Father	111
Realpolitic	114
Conclusion: Representative Costs	119
Chapter 3: "Things that fiction can't solve must be worked out in life": Maxine Hong Kingston's Obligated Nonfiction	121
Paper Sons Amid the Daughter's Paper Authority	126
The Authorities of Form	146
Life Writing After the Fire	153
Conclusion: Life Writing Against Loss	189
Bibliography	194

Introduction: Contemporary American Life Writing's Critical Fictions

In her memoir of being struck by lightning, *A Match to the Heart*, Gretel Ehrlich devotes a one-paragraph chapter to a figure for the unsettled meeting point of her experience, her text, and her readers:

I dreamed that the shape of this book should be a convection cloud, a rising bubble swarming with up and down drafts of electricity, moisture, and air. Inside, the narrative would zigzag like lightning and the pages would be laid end to end to resemble a tree trunk, a channel down which fire suddenly flows. Once the book had been read, the top of the cloud would explode leaving the reader holding a burned shell. (161)

The imagined book—a dreamed metaphor of life writing—rumbles and percolates until it immolates itself, depositing only remains before the reader, who is decidedly at risk.

Ehrlich's work meditates on the ephemeral nature of her shocked body, the physicality of her memories, and the difficulty of cohering both into memoir. The temporary, even restless states conveyed in the dream are symptoms of much life writing. Though the text adheres to the conventions of the recovery narrative, its tentativeness and its suspicion of permanence articulate questions about life writing as an authoritative version of things. *A Match to the Heart* opens in uncertain and ungrounded awakening as Ehrlich comes to after being struck—"Deep in an ocean. I am suspended motionless. The water is gray. That's all there is, and before that?" (3)—and while the memoirist's perception clarifies its command of her experiences, the ethereal first moments haunt what follows.

Another memoirist bound to a damaged self suggests something of the fragmentations of autobiographical production. Early in his brief account of hitting

bottom, “The Crack-Up,” F. Scott Fitzgerald offers the following aphorism: “Before I go on with this short history, let me make a general observation—the test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function” (69)¹. As a therapeutic foundation for mastering “things that are hopeless,” Fitzgerald’s observation affords remarkable control to the human agent. I would like to suggest, however, that as an introductory note to an autobiographical essay, it hints at the autobiographical burden of contradiction and the life writer’s tendency to produce work that is the manifestation of that difference—complex and contradictory, resistant to the ordering power of story. Fitzgerald does not here propose a resolution of the “two opposed ideas” but instead the measured sustenance of their opposition. In fact, maintenance of interior antithetical pressures—the real and the remembered, experience and invention, perhaps—signifies the best sort of mind. By extension, autobiographical tidiness might very well indicate only artifice.

One more telling moment from American autobiography. Ever attentive to the utility of public identity, Benjamin Franklin explains in his *Autobiography*, “In order to secure my Credit and Character as a Tradesman, I took care not only to be in *Reality* Industrious & frugal, but to avoid all *Appearances* to the Contrary” (73). This business of appearances will creep into his familiar “Project of arriving at moral Perfection” (90), and Franklin confides that there is virtue in *seeming* to have certain aspects of character:

For something that pretended to be Reason was every now and then suggesting to me, that such extreme Nicety as I exacted of myself might be a kind of Foppery in Morals, which if it were known would make me ridiculous; that a perfect

¹ I owe a debt to Stan Plumly, who reminded me of not only Fitzgerald’s observation but of its work as a comment on autobiographical writing.

Character might be attended with the Inconvenience of being envied and hated;
and that a benevolent man should allow a few faults in himself, to keep his
Friends in Countenance. (99)

He ultimately admits that, having failed to achieve humility, he may yet enjoy its benefits: “I cannot boast of much Success in acquiring the *Reality* of this Virtue; but I had a good deal with regard to the *Appearance* of it” (102). That an eighteenth-century American autobiographer articulates degrees of distinction between a performed self and a performing subject is not particularly remarkable. It seems, if anything, typical; his sense of an autonomous self who manipulates his image is of course in keeping with Enlightenment liberal humanism. The significance of his admission for the next two centuries of American life writing ought to give us pause, though. Having signaled its author’s efficacy as a self-conscious performer, Franklin’s autobiography argues that this version of a life may only be another, rhetorically conscious effort for an audience. Its indirect critique of self-representation might inform our approach to not only his autobiography but to others as well—more to the point, Franklin’s advocacy for appearances suggests a reading guide for autobiographical practice.

I introduce this study with brief notes on three exemplary autobiographical cases in the spirit of James Olney’s contention that the most compelling criticism of life writing is to be found in the work of its practitioners. In the life writer’s commonplace efforts to explain and situate his or her efforts, particularly by way of prefaces but hardly absent from the pages of the stories themselves, we encounter indications of the enterprise’s messy relationship with its subject matter. Memoir and autobiography, by definition exercises in self-consciousness, behave like an agent and a symptom of their own

deconstruction; biography's efforts to craft a life share this tendency to meditate on its own practice. Olney claims that "It has long been my conviction that theory of life-writing is best derived from major instances of the mode rather than from interchange with other critics. This judgment is generated neither by disrespect for such criticism nor by ignorance of it" (*Memory and Narrative* xiii). While a significant body of criticism informs my analysis, it takes for its foundations the rich reflection on autobiography, biography, and memoir suggested by examples of each.

A class of what might best be called informed life writing, works that prominently respond to the limits of their own practices and interrogate conventional strategies of representation in nonfiction, offers a rich source for analysis of all life writing. These are what Leigh Gilmore calls "limit-cases," on the peripheries of life writing, they "offer a means to think about the ways in which autobiography is partially structured through the proscriptions it places on self-representation" (131). They enact what Ruth Behar longs for when she testifies that "I think what we are seeing are efforts to map an intermediate space we can't quite define yet, a borderland between passion and intellect, analysis and subjectivity, ethnography and autobiography, art and life" (174). As Franklin's eighteenth-century autobiography makes clear, reflection on the practice is common in life writing. Certain instances, however, make possible an especially pronounced version of Olney's preference for the criticisms of the critiqued. Jack Kerouac's seventeen "true-story novels," which he regularly insists are authentic versions of experience, at times address their autobiographical function. *Big Sur*, his alcoholic's book of failing to achieve sobriety, includes especially uneasy reflections on the operations of his nonfiction novels in mid-century America: "...all over America highschool and college kids thinking 'Jack

Duluoz² is 26 years old and on the road all the time hitchhiking' while there I am almost 40 years old, bored and jaded in a roomette bunk crashin across that Salt Flat" (5). The autobiographical persona, constructed by Kerouac's own authoritative efforts as a verifier, only does itself in, and so a transgressive life writer engages in a confessional critique of how his works are consumed as nonfiction: "I'm supposed to be the King of the Beatniks according to the newspapers, so but at the same time I'm sick and tired of all the endless enthusiasms of new young kids trying to know me and pour out all their lives into me so that I'll jump up and down and say yes yes that's right, which I can't do anymore" (109). Read as the constitutive parts of an autobiographical catalogue, Kerouac's novels, essays, and criticism demonstrate an anxiousness over the ability to turn memories into books and to control the operations of those works.

Audre Lorde's experiment in "biomythography," *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*, resists the fantasy of an entirely distinct autobiographer, instead slipping across a community of identities: "I have felt the age-old triangle of mother father and child, with the 'I' at its eternal core, elongate and flatten out into the elegantly strong triad of grandmother mother daughter, with the 'I' moving back and forth flowing in either or both directions as needed" (7). Philip Roth opens *The Facts: A Novelist's Autobiography* with a letter to fictional Zuckerman. He explains that "every genuine imaginative event begins down there, with the facts, with the specific, and not with the philosophical, the ideological or the abstract. Yet, to my surprise, I now appear to have gone about writing a book absolutely backward, taking what I have already imagined and, as it were, desiccating it, so as to restore my experience to the original prefictionalized factuality" (3). The letter asks Zuckerman to assess the autobiography, and Roth concludes *The*

² Kerouac's sometime pseudonym.

Facts with the fictional character's response: "Dear Roth, I've read the manuscript twice. Here is the candor you ask for: Don't publish—you are far better off writing about me than 'accurately' reporting your own life [...] on the evidence of what I've just read, I'd say you're still as much in need of me as I of you" (161). Zuckerman's critique of all that precedes it leaves life writing vulnerable, and that Roth situates the critique interior to a fictional character only bolsters the interrogation.

This study addresses six representative texts, each of which turns to self-conscious fictionalization, experiment, and suspicion in order to suggest a critique of life writing. My analysis' three primary cases—Dave Eggers', Edmund Morris', and Maxine Hong Kingston's important and symptomatic memoirs—respond to loss, fragment, and uncertainty with vexed nonfiction, in which the self-conscious critique that has perhaps always been a familiar tendency in life writing offers little comfort. Eggers' *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*, Morris' *Dutch: A Memoir of Ronald Reagan*, and Kingston's *The Fifth Book of Peace* are representative instances of what I will argue is a significant worry in contemporary American life writing. In each of these texts, the life writer not only supplements ostensibly historical narratives with metacommentary and fiction but also leaves a text that posits neither the fantasy of an authoritative master narrative nor the *jouissance* of having abandoned the same. Obligated to what each memoirist identifies as his or her discrete responsibilities, these texts struggle toward representing freighted experiences. As they resist conventions of memoir and biography, while contributing to the catalogue of American life writing, they begin to insist on notions of self, history, and agency at odds with the poststructuralism that shapes their approaches to representing selves and histories. Paul John Eakin argues that "[a]s makers

themselves, autobiographers are primed to recognize the constructed nature of the past, yet they need at the same time to believe that in writing about the past they are performing an act of recovery: narrative teleology models the trajectory of continuous identity, reporting the supreme fiction of memory as fact” (98). This study takes on cases of life writing that not only recognize but acknowledge and wrestle with that constructedness. It is one thing to understand that life writing depends on fiction and quite another to make that dependence part of the project. These works sustain a mitigated conviction that, even after the dismantling wrought by poststructuralist criticism, they can report experience and identity, that they are even responsible to their stories. Their conviction that the stakes of each memoir are high, tempered by their resistance to nonfiction’s foundational conventions, indicates a profound unease in contemporary life writing.

The compulsive and substantial work invested in writing lives is not merely part of some native need to document them but is symptomatic of the inability to do so completely, accurately, and unproblematically. The declarations of the life writer and the very existence of a narration to represent a life indicate a belief in the text’s ability to exert control, and yet the point is often that control is not the point. As Joan Didion leads her reader through selected records of her experience in “On Keeping a Notebook,” she announces, “*How it felt to me: that is getting closer to the truth about a notebook*” (134). The gesture, faithful to Didion’s style, bears at least two telling lessons. First, it purchases authenticity because the author confesses that her account of what happened is the product of memory and not a perspective-less document. Second, it establishes

multivalence for Didion's reports of what happened. Although she will later distinguish her notebook pieces from "the kind of notebook that is patently for public consumption, a structural conceit for binding together a series of graceful *pensées*," and she will establish an objective—"Remember what it was to be me: that is always the point" (136)—the notice we have received informs the way we read her nonfiction. A straightforward claim about how things seem to those who record experience actually explains that this writing is anything but straightforward.

Frank Conroy asks, "Is it the mindlessness of childhood that opens up the world?" and responds, "Today nothing happens in a gas station. I'm eager to leave, to get where I'm going, and the station, like some huge paper cutout, or a Hollywood set, is simply a façade. But at thirteen, sitting with my back against the wall, it was a marvelous place to be" (107). This reader is inclined to ask, then, how that "mindlessness" manages to record the details of youth for *Stop-Time*'s so thorough account decades later. Conroy's memoir is, of course, by no means a lie, some obviously misleading version of things, but instead is the sort of record from memory that operates under memory's direction. Conroy's "faith in the firmness of time slips away gradually. I begin to believe that chronological time is an illusion and that some other principle organizes existence. My memories flash like clips from unrelated movies." His uncertainty leads him to "almost gratefully accept the delusion that I've lived another life, remote from me now, and completely forgotten about it. Somewhere in the nooks and crannies of memory there are clues. As I chase them down a kind of understanding comes" (21). Life writing does not simply report—it constructs from recollection. Conroy's navigation of those "nooks and crannies of memory," as he acknowledges, is a productive and uncertain business.

Most of the familiar paradigms of biography, autobiography, and memoir fail to adequately contain their various specimens, and the familiar shortcomings of genre confuse as much as they clarify. Is biography no longer biography when its author admits that some content is imaginary? When should biography be thought of as autobiography? Are fictionalized memoirs life writing or novels? Whose answers to these questions matter? One might reasonably respond that there is a recognizable class of writing about real life, and that these anomalies are just experimental hangers on, perhaps interesting, but certainly marginal. However, in keeping with the truism, the odd example may be the most telling. And what these tell, their lesson on life writing, is that this is an unstable class of nonfiction in which categories like authenticity, honesty, memory, and even history are under constant pressure from the texts that conventionally bear those descriptors. Didion and Conroy suggest recognition of that pressure, and their engagement with life writing's messiness seems only to bolster their efforts.

Gilmore identifies the problem of category in life writing: "Constructing autobiography as a genre has depended, at least in part, on domesticating its specific weirdness. Its doubled nature ['outside both fiction and history'] confounds definition through preexisting generic categories, even as the judgment of its duplicity follows from those categories" ("The Mark of Autobiography" 6). Olney responds to this uncertainty with neologism: "periautography"—writing around the self—which affords "lack of generic rigor, its comfortably loose fit and generous adaptability" (xv). The strangeness of autobiography Gilmore detects also informs Paul de Man's "Autobiography as Defacement," which, as Linda Anderson observes, "proposes that autobiography is not a genre at all but 'a figurative reading or understanding'" (12). De Man's "author reads

himself in the text, but what he is seeing in this self-reflexive or specular moment is a figure or a face called into being by the substitutive trope of prosopopeia, literally, the giving of a face, or personification” (12). This matters fundamentally to the study of autobiography in particular and life writing in general because “it reveals ... that all knowledge, including self-knowledge, depends on figurative language or tropes” (12-13).

Astonishingly, Jill Ker Conway, herself a celebrated memoirist, opens her study of autobiography, *When Memory Speaks*, by asking “Why is autobiography the most popular form of *fiction* for modern readers?” (3) (emphasis mine). The unsettled question of life writing’s relationship with fiction has been the fodder of autobiography criticism for decades. Timothy Dow Adams recently summed up the contemporary critical wisdom: “scholars working with [autobiography] have almost universally come to the realization that whatever else it is, autobiography is not simply nonfiction” (*Light Writing and Life Writing* xi). Adams’ observation takes its aim at first-person life writing, and we are wise to maintain distinction between writing about oneself and writing about others, yet this dethroning of nonfiction reflects the state of life writing’s many genres, nearly all of which have been subjected to a critique that refuses the false authority of nonfiction as the true account of some containable event.

Georges Gusdorf’s 1956 “Conditions and Limits of Autobiography” by most accounts signals the founding of contemporary thought in life writing. He contends that “in autobiography the truth of facts is subordinate to the truth of man, for it is first of all the man who is in question” (43). As striking as this hierarchy is Gusdorf’s acknowledgement that autobiography can be situated and historicized:

Moreover, it would seem that autobiography is not to be found outside of our cultural area; one would say that it expresses a concept peculiar to western man, a concern that has been of good use in his systematic conquest of the universe and that he has communicated to men of other cultures; but those men will thereby have been annexed by a sort of intellectual colonizing to a mentality that was not their own. (29)

Unsurprisingly, theorists who follow Gusdorf's turn from "the truth of facts" and his efforts to de-naturalize western autobiography raise just concerns over his colonial inclinations, as well as his notable omission of women and of all sorts of alternative strategies of self-representation. His essay nevertheless introduces principles that undercut naïve adherence to essentialist truth in life writing.

Olney and others recognize the significance of this move and suggest that life writing is the site of an autobiographical or biographical act, in which the life writer fashions a self with the text. Olney says "it is through that act that the self and the life, complexity intertangled, take on a certain form, assumes a particular shape and image, and endlessly reflect that image back and forth between themselves as between two mirrors" ("Autobiography and the Cultural Moment" 22). Mary Evans is rightly suspicious of the practice of imagining order out of a disorderly life; she checks the ostensible authority of the autobiographical act:

The form of auto/biography³ carries with it some considerable responsibility for allowing authors to convey the impression that lives are lived in orderly and coherent ways. Thus what has to be recognized in any account of auto/biography

³ The generic term for accounts of a first person and his or her "proximal others," in Eakin's phrase.

is the collusion, whether conscious or not, between writers of auto/biography and the deep desire of late twentieth-century society for order and stability. (134)

While insisting that life writing could be a vehicle for constructing a version of the self (Olney contends that life writing should be regarded as processual, a progressively constitutive operation), critics, particularly feminist theorists, note that the major forms of the mode, principally autobiography, sustain the primacy of a bourgeois humanist self, gathered too artificially by teleological narratives of education, improvement, and authority. In their remarkably thoroughgoing introduction to *Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader*, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson survey the several feminist critiques of autobiography, following threads of transgressive feminist life writing, autogynography, materialist theories, postcolonialism, postmodernism, theories of subjectivity, psychoanalysis, Marxian and post-Marxist approaches, cultural studies, queer theories, and theories of performativity. The volume demonstrates the activist potential for critically constituted life writing in which transgressive practitioners at once sustain efforts to report on lives and interrogate faiths in referentiality. Fundamental to any critique of life writing's claims to referentiality is Joan W. Scott's "Experience," in which she argues that "[s]ubjects are constituted discursively, experience is a linguistic event (it doesn't happen outside established meanings), but neither is it confined to a fixed order of meaning" (66). Foreseeing the sort of work accomplished by the texts studied below, she "advocate[es] ... a way of changing the focus and philosophy of our history, from one bent on naturalizing 'experience' through a belief in the unmediated relationship between words and things, to one that takes all categories of analysis as contextual, contested, and contingent" (68). Betty Bergland continues Scott's suspicion

of the self's ostensible stability in the text, arguing that "the desire to find a self in autobiography inevitably fails because of the impossibility of language to represent a whole" and that "[a] theory of the subject in autobiography must posit the existence of multiple and contradictory subjectivities as the effect of multiple discourses at a particular historical moment" (161).

Eakin nicely summarizes the dynamically constructive work of life writing: "[a]utobiographical truth is not a fixed but an evolving content in an intricate process of self-discovery and self-creation, and, further ... the self that is the center of all autobiographical narrative is necessarily a fictive structure" (3). In his discussion of the critical approaches that have attempted to take on life writing with a poststructuralist apparatus—literary-critical movements away from mimesis, critiques of the stable human self, and deflations of transcendental measures of literary goodness—Eakin observes that "[i]nterestingly, the existence of such theorizing has done nothing to inhibit the autobiographical pursuit; if anything, quite the reverse. The impulse to take the fiction of the self and its act as fact persists, a more than willing suspension of disbelief in which the behavior of writer and reader refuses to coincide with theory" (*Fiction in Autobiography* 26). There is a promising rationale for this phenomenon in Martin E. Gloege's case for the distinction between modern and postmodern fragmentation:

Although modernist and postmodern narratives share a formal concern with the fragmentation of the self, the rhetoric of such narratives changes radically after World War II. Modernist texts mourn the loss or fragmentation of the self; the poet or author holds or attempts to hold the self together despite threats of

fragmentation. But what modernist narrative mourned, postmodern narrative accepts, sometimes with resignation, sometimes with celebration. (59)

This study investigates the effects of that acceptance of indeterminacy, contingency, and ambivalence. The critical response to life writing has yet to attend to the knowing practices of Eggers, Morris, and Kingston, who seem to have consumed the criticism and made it foundational for their own work, yet struggled with its consequences. Much energy has been devoted to demonstrating the slipperiness of nonfiction, and while the sort of engaged life writing under analysis here would seem to cooperate with that critical work, their uneasiness with some of its antifoundational measures makes clear that questions remain. Once life writers deploy the mechanisms that dismantle their practices, what strategies remain to tell a life?

Eggers chronicles the loss of parents and the adolescent turn of his subsequent experiences, regularly interrupting to insist that the reported episodes are both true and heartbreaking; Morris argues for a version of Ronald Reagan as performative gesture *and* metaphysically inscrutable subject; Kingston fashions a speech act toward peace and against imminent war. The affected sincerity of each—and the occasionally resultant sentimentality—declines to enter the free float of radical poststructuralism and holds to the conventional importance of the documentary, while recognizing the incompleteness of any straight story. All three supplement instances of life writing with overt critique of the practice and with sometimes defensive articulations of their approaches. This is perhaps an unlikely collection, yet even as dissimilar memoirs from divergent life writers,

their complicity with a practice they critique, manifest in all three as anxious unease, argues for concomitant analysis.

While I hope to avoid the simplifying impulse of a false either/or, I read these three memoirs against the instructive context of predecessor texts that adopt similarly experimental methods to represent similar cases but make distinct arguments about the work of life writing. Mary McCarthy's *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood*, Gore Vidal's *Lincoln: A Novel*, and Kingston's own *China Men* precede Eggers, Morris, and *The Fifth Book of Peace* respectively and in significant respects—they inform my reading of the contemporary memoirs, and they make clear the contingent authority available to life writing comfortable in its fictions. McCarthy's memoir, like Eggers', follows a young person's experiences after the death of parents and supplements a primary narrative with commentary that at times wholly undermines the ostensible authenticity of the record. Vidal's history is an investment in novelistic imagination to represent the life of a U.S. President at more than a century's remove; where Morris will turn to experimentalism to fill in and flesh out a history, Vidal implies that serious authority is borne by fiction. It is perhaps odd to pair two of Kingston's works against each other. Both follow her model of multiple ways of telling histories, eschewing the conventions of a univocal record. However, the confident and comforting resignation with which Kingston's *China Men* articulates a complex representation of her family's men fails to shape *The Fifth Book of Peace*; the latter cannot sustain the nonfiction episteme of Kingston's earlier works.

All six are works after loss and from the fragments of history, but the contemporary three struggle toward an ontological coherence that the former set largely dismisses. Not simply instances of self-consciousness mastering the work of life writing,

A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius, *Dutch*, and *The Fifth Book of Peace* insist, almost obsessively, certainly defensively, that the business of life writing is fraught. *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood*, *Lincoln*, and *China Men* articulate to varying degrees their conviction that texts come apart and their ways of telling are contingent. McCarthy and Kingston afford those sensibilities a prominent place in their works, while Vidal's novel, by its nature as a fictional account of the Lincoln presidency, registers an argument against history as a transparent record bound to nonfiction's stabilizing conventions. All three make the case that this is one of several ways to tell histories. *A Staggering Work of Heartbreaking Genius*, *Dutch*, and *The Fifth Book of Peace* lack the same assuredness because they do not finally accept the most radical contingencies of poststructuralism—each not only believes in its stories, it openly *insists* that its frame is necessarily best. This belies the fear conveyed by all three, that readers will have no patience with a twenty-something orphan afraid of losing his community, that Reagan's life will not be properly told, and that there will be unstoppable war. As a result, none purchases the potential *satisfaction* of memoir, or at least the satisfaction available to the three former texts under review in this study. Instead, each conveys its worries to the reader.

This study's first chapter, "'The book is thereafter kind of uneven...': The Limits of Metanofiction," engages in comparative analysis of McCarthy's and Eggers' works. Though the more than forty years between them contributes to their differences, they respond to memoir writing with a shared urge to speak as editors within their own texts. McCarthy's collection of memoir and editorial comment admits paradox and makes the work of memory against actual experience a foundation of her stories. She confides early on that "there are cases where I am not sure myself whether I am making something up,"

and that the absence of parents to shape the growth of memory by repeating stories of childhood has left her without a complete record of her youngest years. The coincidence of a primary narrative (most sections are reproduced from prior sources) and responsive interchapters destabilizes the book's work as nonfiction. Eggers' "Mistakes We Knew We Were Making: Notes, Corrections, Clarifications, Apologies, Addenda," the upside-down appendix of *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* identifies the work as an unwitting heir to McCarthy—a friend responds to Eggers' description of the work-in-progress, "Oh, right. Just like Mary McCarthy." Eggers' popular memoir is perhaps the most panicked of works under scrutiny in this study. After supplementing so much of the main text with comment on the work of life writing, "Mistakes..." offers overt defense—sometimes in a paranoid style—against charges of an emptied and emptying postmodern aesthetic, imprecise accusations of irony, and those who would not "trust the hearts of your makers." Eggers' tone, in marked contrast to McCarthy's, is kinetic, a hyper-self-conscious rhetoric. McCarthy's confidence in the work of storytelling, manifest in a textual structure that Eggers will echo, is abandoned in the contemporary memoir for the fever of telling. *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* is life writing in a moment with little faith in the ability to capture meaningful experience adequately. The turn of the century is Eggers' time, and the saturation of reality television, the MTV aesthetic, and a thoroughgoing skepticism of fundamental narratives are the conditions that make possible Eggers work. While consuming the popular media produced under conditions that foster celebrity for the sake of celebrity and manufacture realities as *cinema verite*, Eggers compulsively reminds his readers that he does the best he can to convey the stories of his experiences, all the while incorporating the overtly fictional in his record of stories. The

memoir's title is resolutely *not* ironic, and its insistence begins to tell on the entire work's panic. A compulsion to tell infects the entire work, so thoroughly that it accomplishes something like hyper-honesty, telling what happened and telling about how that telling is and is not being accomplished.

In the second chapter, "*Lincoln and Dutch: Executive Fictions and American Biography*," I argue that Vidal and Morris turn from, even against, the dominant genre of U.S. presidential biography and, doing so, illuminate the fissures of conservative life writing. Vidal's novel makes the case that conventionally historical biography does not sufficiently contain the meanings of this historical life. His *Lincoln* takes the form of imaginative fiction even as it holds to the presumable weight of reported history. Vidal confesses in an afterward, "I have done some moving around [however] I have not done it at all with the Presidents," insistent that history can, at least in some controllable ways, be conveyed even while "moving around." The law of the novel arrests a version of *Lincoln* and his moment, and the book never forgets that the U.S. Presidency is ultimately a performance with varying characterizations and machinations. Paradoxically, Edmund Morris, given unprecedented access to and authority from the White House of a living President, declines both (his own) scholarly conventions of presidential biography and the conservative literariness of Vidal's, crafting instead a multivocal and multi-generic pastiche of Reagan. Among the distinct devices of *Dutch* are its fictional narrator (called "Edmund Morris"), film-script chapters, pencil sketches, facsimiles of handwriting, radio scripts, ersatz journal entries, overwrought metaphors for the task of writing presidential biography, and hundreds of footnotes, whose archival work counters the experimental form of the book. *Dutch* contends, amid its supplemental approaches to

a life, that Reagan cannot be sufficiently captured by this or any other text but nevertheless engages in not only biography but a worrying contention that some meaningful structure conditions the relationship between biographer and subject. Morris feverishly rushes after as many means as possible and finally demonstrates that while the illusion of a coherent and complete version is untenable, he cannot abandon the project of arresting Reagan in life writing. The performances that shade Lincoln—Vidal’s President grows a beard not because it is in keeping with idealized agrarian character, or because an apocryphal young girl suggests he do so, but because pols recommend its effect—prefigure the overdetermining work of Reagan’s careers as actor and politician. The first postmodern president gets his postmodern biography⁴, but Morris panics, adopting a hypersensitive posture in tortured worries over the work of being fair, of the biographer’s ethics, and of the challenge of containing “airhead”—and multiply signifying—Reagan. Morris figures the loss that informs his book as the disappearance of a fictional son, Gavin, driven to the Weather Underground by Reagan’s National Guard action in Berkeley. The move to embody absence with an imaginary lost son operates as the book’s second most telling moment, eclipsed by the overwrought confession in its last pages that the fictional narrator had been rescued years earlier by the teenage lifeguard Reagan.

Finally, Maxine Hong Kingston’s life writing, some of the practice’s most sophisticated work, is the subject of the last chapter, “‘Things that fiction can’t solve must be worked out in real life’: Maxine Hong Kingston’s Obligated Nonfictions.” The Kingston of *China Men* tells her father that he’ll just have to correct her if she gets parts

⁴ I would like to acknowledge my debt to Linda Kauffman’s discussions of *Dutch* as postmodern presidential biography, and particularly the ways Morris illustrates the performativity of Reagan’s presidency.

of his life wrong, but warns him that she controls this telling. The Kingston of *The Fifth Book of Peace*, whose father dies immediately before the book's opening moments, never settles its articulated battle between fiction and nonfiction and worries over the ways to report war in order to make peace. This is a compelling book, and its collective work is striking, but the tone of its last note betrays its faith in the need to accomplish a containable end: "Children, everybody, here's what to do during war: In a time of destruction, create something. A poem. A parade. A friendship. A community. A place that is the commons. A school. A vow. A moral principle. One peaceful moment" (402). *China Men* ends not in appeal but with forfeiture of authorial control in the face of stories her book cannot contain. In *The Fifth Book of Peace* Kingston's anxiety about the success of her writing workshops for war and anti-war veterans rests uneasily after the concluding move of *China Men*, to "watch the young men who listen." At the beginning of her account of the workshops, she says, "[t]hings that fiction can't solve must be worked out in life." Social justice, now tasked with making peace amid wars, therefore demands that she leave behind the fiction, which, she paradoxically explains earlier, "cares for others." That dictum follows the book's middle section, the recreation of a fiction (Wittman Ah Sing, antihero of *Tripmaster Monkey*, and his family in Hawai'i, in exile from the warring U.S. mainland) lost in the fire that burned Kingston's Oakland home. Clarified distinctions between the natures and operations of fiction and "writing diarylike" abandon the epistemology that founds *China Men*.

The Kingston of *China Men* at times offers some priority to fiction ("On Discovery," the story of Tang Ao, emasculated by Gold Mountain America) or nonfiction ("The Laws," a record of anti-immigration statutes from the early 19th to the late 20th

century), but its narrator never *explains* her theoretical posture, never offers a defense to the reader. One might say the stakes are high for a community moving inevitably to war, as the U.S. was while *The Fifth Book of Peace* was composed, that war footing demanded a less nuanced book, but *China Men*'s profound telling seems bolstered by its lack of articulated defenses. Its Kingston offers many ways of knowing the past and eschews any move to privilege a master version. At no moment does Kingston instruct her readers overtly. *The Fifth Book of Peace* marks a new moment in Kingston's long-form nonfiction. The newest book is symptomatic of real panic. This study will contend that Kingston writing about war during war is a different Kingston than the author of the retrospective *China Men*. Both works accomplish their implied goals of unsettling the art of history and waging against war with the notion of written and writing community. The burden of the latter, though, is a struggle for an author looking to prevent killing.

Morris, Eggers, and the turn-of-the-century Kingston each betray local sources of worry that push against the consolations to which their memoirs might cling. McCarthy, Vidal, and the earlier Kingston produce life writing that generally evades their heirs' anxieties, yet the contemporary works illuminate and, in a sense, tell on their predecessors, because they bring to the surface the uncertainties and the messiness of telling lives, of fashioning representations of experience, and of satisfying obligations to the subjects they tell. What Eggers, Morris, and Kingston illuminate for us is the trouble life writing faces as it accommodates the deconstruction of its faiths. All three, obliged to their stories and to their attendant responsibilities, attempt to reconcile life writing with the theorization that limits its authorities. The result is vexed and vexing.

Chapter 1: “The book is thereafter kind of uneven...”: The Limits of Metanfiction

The front matter of memoirs is a site of protection, elaboration, context, and, in many cases, ontological pronouncement. Prefaces, introductions, notes to the reader, acknowledgements, and dedications afford the memoirist a detached moment to announce that names have been changed, memories supplemented, and kinds of truths enlisted. These paratextual frames make possible a sort of secondary nonfiction, prior to the memoir itself. After explaining in her preface to *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*, “I am not sure what more I could tell you about these stories,” Joan Didion offers this concluding wisdom: “That is one last thing to remember: *writers are always selling somebody out*” (xv, xvi) The subsequent essays, we are to understand, are symptomatic of that notice. Sometimes these mediating passages announce autobiographical purposes, as when newsman Daniel Schorr introduces his *Staying Tuned* in grand terms: “I knew the memoir had to be written. For one thing, to help people remember an era fast disappearing from view in the miasma of ever new sensations [...] I feel a little like the recording secretary for my generation” (xi). In other cases, they establish a sort of contract between memoir and reader, as in Ernest Hemingway’s suggestive note to *A Moveable Feast*: “If the reader prefers, this book may be regarded as fiction. But there is always the chance that such a book of fiction may throw some light on what has been written as fact.” These are often the venue for guiding metaphor; Bobbie Ann Mason’s *Clear Springs* borrows from her grandmother’s process of baking cookies, which must “come in order” before being eaten; ““Coming in order”—an apt phrase for writing a memoir. My life is coming in order, as memories waft out of that cookie jar” (ix). Before

beginning his memoir of jazzman Buddy Bolden, an experiment in memory, poetry, and fiction, Michael Ondaatje reproduces a sonograph, “pictures of dolphin sounds made by a machine that is more sensitive than the human ear.” The last line before beginning his *Coming Through Slaughter*, which juxtaposes ways of communication, is Ondaatje’s explanation that “[n]o one knows how a dolphin makes both whistles and echolocation clicks simultaneously.” Audre Lorde’s biomythography, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*, includes a prologue in which Lorde introduces the work’s movement across women’s selves: “I have felt the age-old triangle of mother father and child, with the ‘I’ at its eternal core, elongate and flatten out into the elegantly strong triad of grandmother mother daughter, with the ‘I’ moving back and forth flowing in either or both directions as needed. Woman forever. My body, a living representation of other life older longer wiser” (7). Sometimes these notes defend against either/or readings for historical verifiability. Tobias Wolff’s *This Boy’s Life*, for example, “is a book of memory, and memory has its own story to tell.” Gore Vidal opens *Palimpsest* knowingly: “*A Tissue of Lies? Could there be a more persuasively apt title for a memoir?*” (3). He explains, “I’ve taken the memoir route on the ground that even an idling memory is apt to get right what matters most” (5). Even ostensibly fictional biographies explain in their prefaces. William Styron’s *Confessions of Nat Turner* admits, “in those areas where there is little knowledge in regard to Nat, his early life, and the motivations for the revolt (and such knowledge is lacking most of the time), I have allowed myself the utmost freedom of imagination in reconstructing events—yet within the bounds of what meager enlightenment history has left us about the institution of slavery.” Joyce Carol Oates’

Blonde “is a radically distilled ‘life’ in the form of fiction, and, for all its length, synecdoche is the principle of appreciation.”

This cursory survey of biographical framing begins to indicate the significantly varying ways life writers approach their practice and, notably, the ways they announce their approaches. These frames suggest the prevalence of a compulsion to acknowledge the uneasy relationship between life writing and the lives ostensibly written about. And yet even the candor of these examples leaves their authors invested in some faith that a life can be represented well; these memoirists and biographers continue with their projects, implying the authority of the forthcoming record, one version of things, one collection of memories. What follows in this chapter is an analysis of two memoirs that sustain their paratextual work throughout the text. These are cases of life writing at once aware of the fictiveness of memory and memoir yet nevertheless dedicated to an autobiographical practice. Both encourage skepticism of nonfiction’s authority as they remain complicit with much of its foundations.

Remembering Memory: Mary McCarthy on Mary McCarthy on Mary McCarthy

In the first moments of her *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood*, Mary McCarthy complains that, among those who have read installments of her episodic memoirs in *The New Yorker* and *Harper’s Bazaar* between 1944 and 1953, “[t]he assumption that I have ‘made them up’ is surprisingly prevalent.” She surmises that her readers’ doubt has something to do with what we expect of novelists: “Can it be that the public takes for granted that anything written by a professional writer is *eo ipso* untrue? The professional writer is looked on perhaps as a ‘storyteller,’ like a child who has fallen into the habit and

is mechanically chidden by his parents even when he protests that *this time* he is telling the truth” (3). Readers have insisted that, among other unlikelihoods, Irish Catholic McCarthy could not possibly have had a Jewish grandmother and that her Dickensian guardian, Uncle Myers, was more terrible than any real person. Impatient with these allegedly bad readings, she introduces this collection of autobiographical fragments with a reasonable enough contention: *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood* is memoir, an instance of the sort of nonfiction writing every bit as available to the novelist as anyone else. McCarthy’s assertive, even condescending tone *would* found her collection on one side of a naïve border between fiction and nonfiction, were it not almost immediately followed by this admission: “Then there are cases where I am not sure myself whether I am making something up.” These are not “stories,” she insists—“Many a time, in the course of doing these memoirs, I have wished that I were writing fiction” (3)—yet the form of McCarthy’s *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood* will undermine this distinction. By the third paragraph of the book’s preface, “To the Reader,” McCarthy makes uncritical reading of her memoir nearly impossible and begins to agitate the very business of writing autobiographically. She concedes that because she “cannot recall whole passages of dialogue that took place years ago,” “the conversations, as given, are mostly fictional” (4). Readers have been asked to contend with, even resolve her assertions that this is not fiction, that some details are fictionalized, and that some aspects “seem to me now extremely doubtful” (4).

McCarthy’s movement between correcting mistaken readers and confessing memory’s uncertainty introduces a special case of life writing, in which a memoirist not only turns to the problem of writing memories but posits a criticism of the practice in

which she engages. *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood* collects eight brief memoirs, seven reproduced from earlier versions, and the contemporary memoirist pairs all but the last narrative with an italicized reflection in which she addresses instances of fictionalization and reflects on a younger version of herself reporting the experiences of an even younger version of herself. This conflation of memory and critique illustrates and amplifies an inescapable fictiveness extant in all memoir. Between *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood*'s memoir and its reflection on the same, neither gains primacy over the other. McCarthy exemplifies Paul John Eakin's observation that

[a]dventurous twentieth-century autobiographers [...] no longer believe that autobiography can offer a faithful and unmediated reconstruction of a historically verifiable past; instead, it expresses the play of the autobiographical act itself, in which the materials of the past are shaped by memory and imagination to serve the needs of present consciousness. (*Fictions in Autobiography* 5)

McCarthy's memoir, by suturing a remembered girlhood with an effort to explain the mechanisms of writing those memories, suggests an informed autobiographical act, aware of its own constructive work.

A foundational scene informs the text's attention to imagination, its urge to correct and explain, and the memoirist's sense of her unfixed self. On the morning of her first Communion, McCarthy absentmindedly drinks water, violating the proscription "that the Host be received fasting, on the penalty of mortal sin" (19). Tormented over her mistake and uncertain about the proper course, she cannot decide between the disappointment of announcing to her family that she must put off the rite and committing the sacrilege of Communion in an impure condition. After Communion "in a state of

outward holiness and inward horror” (20), she learns that hers is a commonplace mistake, yet the worry of having so fundamentally compromised her religious practice contributes to a lifelong sense of a split and unstable self. She reflects on the ongoing significance of her awakening:

I knew myself, how I was and would be forever, such dry self-knowledge is terrible. Every subsequent moral crisis of my life, moreover, has had precisely the pattern of this struggle over the first Communion, I have battled, usually without avail, against a temptation to do something which only I knew was bad, being swept by a need to preserve outward appearances and to live up to other people’s expectations of me. (20-21)

This convenient (and familiar) division between interior knowledge and exterior gesture, ostensibly sustained throughout the memoirist’s life, is dismantled by *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood*. By attempting to pull back the curtain on the process of making narrative of memory, she accomplishes something other than correction; she demonstrates the futility of ever capturing “how I was and would be forever” and the pervasiveness of imagination in life writing. As soon as the reader engages with this text’s admission that some of its narratives are insufficient, or even fictionalized, he or she cannot continue to look for an authoritative account. Eakin argues that, as we move between McCarthy’s memoirs and attendant interchapters, “we must discard any notion of the juxtaposition of story and commentary as representing a simple opposition between fiction and fact, since fiction can have for the author, as it does here, the status of remembered fact (remembering something that is not true—a frequent refrain in *Memories*)” (*Fictions in Autobiography* 17). On the whole, the authoring McCarthy

offers no unassailable reason to accept the italicized comments any more willingly than we believe the preceding sections. At first, the formal cues—italics, direct address to the reader, confession—seem to situate authenticity in the supplementary chapters, yet those same chapters, having undercut the authority of an earlier McCarthy, contend by extension that the contemporary collector-reviser of these memoirs is equally subject to suspicion. The blur and conflict between those narratives infects the entire work. The interchapters, even though they occasionally correct, more often contextualize and explain, sustaining the preceding versions of experience. McCarthy's text is a telling instance of life writing as productive mediation between experience, memory, and whatever sense of a coherent self memoir affords its practitioners. The work's paradoxical move—its ultimate refusal to select between the account of a correcting author in the book's narrative present and that of a fictionalizing prior memoirist—makes it an illuminating instance of attempting to lay bare the operations of life writing. In her interchapter comment on an account of a priest's arguments against atheism, she says, "even though I wrote this myself, I smile in startled recognition as I read it" (124). Even if only a gesture, this shock gets at the ability of storytelling to overwhelm memory; the mediating account—the story—stimulates the sensation of remembered experience as effectively as any primary documentary clue.

In keeping with the self McCarthy conveys, the text's interchapters take part in an informed dialogic construction of a Catholic Girlhood. *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood* is a patchwork account of McCarthy's parents' marriage, their nearly simultaneous deaths during the 1918 influenza epidemic, orphaned Mary's miserable period in the household of a bitter and brutal aunt and uncle, her early intellectual development in a Sacred Heart

school and subsequent atheism, the familiar horrors of adolescents among cruel peers, adolescent reflection on a Protestant grandfather's soul, sketches of a misfit teacher and Mary's strange efforts to befriend her, a fairly raucous teenage trip to visit school friends in Wyoming, and finally, the pained story of her grandmother's decline into old age. The text is a composite of a number of pieces published—with varying generic descriptions—over several years in different venues⁵. In no way does it follow the conventions of the reflective memoirist, settled in during old age to consider her experiences in order to produce a cohesive record. Instead, because of its confluence of fiction and recollection it is a polyvocal resistance to the concept of life writing as a means to document simply.

The presence of extended, and not merely corrective, memoir in the interchapters is most notable early in “To the Reader,” which actually deploys (even if well into the section) the most conventional of autobiographical openings, “I was born...” (8). In italics, what began as an address to the reader goes on to narrate a version of the memoirist's experiences and to fashion portraits of her parents. Italics, in other words, do not mean that the autobiographical act is deferred while McCarthy supplements and corrects. As an ambivalent exchange between several versions of events—of her memoirs of losing faith while attending a Sacred Heart school, she says, “[t]his story is so true to our convent life that I find it almost impossible to sort out the guessed at and the half-remembered from the undeniably real” (124)—the gathered memoirs implicitly make Eakin's case “that autobiographical truth is not a fixed but an evolving content in an intricate process of self-discovery and self-creation, and, further, that the self that is the center of all autobiographical narrative is necessarily a fictive structure” (*Fictions in*

⁵ Timothy Dow Adams notes that the patchwork collection “is a difficult book to classify, not only because of its form and content, but also as a result of its publication history. McCarthy's memories were published originally over an eleven-year period—from 1946 to the book's publication in 1957” (*Telling Lies...* 89).

Autobiography 3). McCarthy serves as an archetypal case of autobiographical production, capable of illustrating the ways narratives imagine versions of experience.

Of “The Blackguard,” a reflection on the uncertain theological state of McCarthy’s protestant (and therefore, to the girl’s mind, iconoclast) grandfather and on her affinity with the rebellious Byron, the memoirist says “[t]his account is highly fictionalized” (97). Yet a few lines later we read “the story is true in substance, but all the details have been invented or guessed at” (97). How does “highly fictionalized” settle with “true in substance”? What of the chapter is “substance”? Clearly, this is a matter of following the convention of the “spirit” of the story, rendered with fiction, yet consistent with some accurate core narrative. The significance of this comment is that it casts suspicion *and* makes McCarthy, in a sense, hyper-honest. It is not that these claims are mutually exclusive—to the contrary, they point to the co-constructedness of fiction and memoir. In the chapter, a devout Mary worries over her grandfather’s soul, having heard a sermon, delivered by a visiting missionary priest, in which the fate of baptized Protestants is addressed. Nuns and priests consult the theological literature and determine that if Grandfather Preston remains ignorant of Catholic faith, he will avoid damnation. Soon after her campaign to mute her faith while in his presence, she enjoys “the happiest day of [her] life” as a teacher interrupts McCarthy’s daydream: “You’re just like Lord Byron, brilliant but unsound.” Mary enjoys “glances of wonder, awe, and congratulations, as though I had suddenly been struck by a remarkable disease, or been canonized, or transfigured” (94). In the following italicized comment, we learn that her grandfather was no churchgoer at all and so not likely to be damned for Protestantism, and that she could not remember “what provoked” a nun to compare her to Byron.

Precisely how these episodes are “highly fictionalized” is not catalogued, and so what appears to be a fairly substantive claim, even if countered by “true in substance,” introduces not corrections, but supplemental memoir, details that elaborate the preceding narrative. Even after promising major distinctions, McCarthy’s autobiography declines to adequately respond to these perceived inconsistencies between memoir and interchapter—in fact, its effort points in an entirely different direction. The italicized notes are not authoritative corrections to an imperfect text but are instead participants in a multivocal, multivalent monument to memory. It serves us well to remember that the section of the work identified as the most accurate—“Yellowstone Park,” which McCarthy notes “is completely true” (192)—won an O. Henry prize for fiction (Adams *Telling Lies...* 89).

Declining—for the moment—to ascribe an explanation to her paternal grandmother’s distant behavior, McCarthy makes an odd observation: “Luckily, I am writing a memoir and not a work of fiction, and therefore I do not have to account for my grandmother’s unpleasing character and look for the Oedipal fixation or the traumatic experience which would give her that clinical authenticity that is nowadays so desirable in portraiture” (33). She will, in fact, suggest several theories to explain her character in the memoir’s last chapter. Enunciated effort to avoid a psychoanalytic reading seems unusual only in its too clear distinction between fiction and nonfiction in a work that does not trust that border. *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood* unsubtly implies that the distinction is not very useful in the end. In fact, McCarthy’s strong insistence that writing what one remembers cannot always be writing what actually happened renders her evasion of interpreting the grandmother’s behavior out of place. That the collection of

memoirs ultimately turns against that reluctance is representative of its sophistication as life writing.

“Mendacity in the blood”

As a teenager, Mary persuades her grandparents to permit a trip to Montana with school friends only on the grounds that a side excursion to Yellowstone Park would be educative; granted their approval, she instead spends the trip suffering through the education of learning to drink moonshine. Worried over her grandfather’s inevitable questions about Yellowstone, she confides, “I felt I owed my grandparents the courtesy of a well-put together and decently documented lie” (188). Duplicity bears exchange value; some payment for the license to travel with friends might be earned by a good story. In “To the Reader,” she aligns her fiction-making with her father: “My father was a romancer, and most of my memories of him are colored, I fear, by an untruthfulness that I must have caught from him, like one of the colds that ran round the family. While my [maternal] grandfather Preston was preternaturally honest, there was mendacity, somewhere, in the McCarthy blood. Many of my most cherished ideas about my father have turned out to be false” (11). This suggestion of lying “in the blood”—physiological metaphor—associates fiction with the cause of her father’s demise, infectious disease. This paternal connection effects an explanation, but it also authorizes the practice of making things up by naturalizing a family trait. Mary’s father is a conflicted persona, and his romantic paternalism prefigures the sort of imaginative work in which the memoirist will later engage. McCarthy’s apparent “mendacity” only sustains his grand character. It in fact submits a sort of safe tribute to her version of his persona. This blood-connection

naturalizes McCarthy's storytelling, but it also unsubtly informs our skepticism of the memoirist's tale. An anecdote about her father is amended with a thoroughgoing admission for any memoirist, "I have no idea whether this story is true or not" (14). In "To the Reader," he is "a recklessly extravagant man, who lay in bed planning treats and surprises" (10). His exaggerated persona is sustained when the narrator "remember[s] his coming home one night with his arms full of red roses for my mother, and my mother's crying out, 'Oh, Roy!' reproachfully because there was no food for dinner. Or did someone tell me this story?" (10).

The appeal to what she will call "the habit of writing fiction" certainly informs her addendum to the memoir of losing her parents and the orphans' introduction to their unbearable guardians, "Yonder Peasant, Who Is He?". She begins, "There are several dubious points in this memoir," and catalogues uncertainties about the family's train ride between Seattle and Minneapolis during the influenza epidemic, their arrival at her grandparents, and her introduction to Uncle Myers (47-49). What is most notable is her meditation on the motive for altering parts of the story:

The reader will wonder what made me change this story to something decidedly inferior, even from a literary point of view—far too sentimental, it even sounds improbable. I forget now, but I think the reason must have been that I did not want to 'go into' my guardians as individuals here; that was another story, which was to be told in the next chapter. 'Yonder Peasant,' unlike the chapters that follow, is not really concerned with individuals. It is, primarily, an angry indictment of privilege for its treatment of the underprivileged, a single,

breathless, voluble speech on the subject of human indifference [...] a kind of allegory or broad social satire on the theme of wealth and poverty. (49)

This assigned hierarchical value is an unsatisfactory summary of the relationship between versions. The primary distinction between the version articulated in “Yonder Peasant” and that of the following explanation seems to be that Uncle Myers was presented to the McCarthy children earlier than initially reported and that during that first meeting he “evinced a great deal of paternal good humor, taking my brothers, one by one, on his lap and fondling them.” Yet Mary “remember[s] the queer ebb of feeling inside me when I saw I was going to be left out. He did not like me” (48-49). Uncle Myers and Aunt Margaret are contemptuous in both chapter and interchapter, literary inferiority notwithstanding. In the latter, McCarthy speculates that her guardians embezzled the children’s support, and Margaret’s stern demeanor is evident immediately upon Mary’s arrival in her home: “one day I was there, and the next thing I knew, Aunt Margaret was punishing me for having spoiled the wallpaper in my room” (49). The claim to metaphor and satire is accurate but superfluous. Both accounts of the McCarthy children’s story, shaped by memory and arranged by fiction, register “an angry indictment of [...] human indifference.” McCarthy has “made a good story” from memory, and sustained the effect of experience.

The McCarthy children, newly dependent on harsh guardians, are not told of their parents’ death. Instead, among “a scandal of the gravest character, a coming and going of priests and undertakers and coffins,” they are offered the lie of comfort: “Mama and Daddy, they assured us, had gone to get well in the hospital” (36). The absence of both parents remains only guessed at, until “[s]oon we ceased to speak of it, and thus, without

tears or tantrums, we came to know that they were dead” (37). Their foundational sense of family is, therefore, born of a lie.

McCarthy in some ways preempts distinction between the honest and the dishonest by unsettling the very status of truthfulness in her work. The orphan Mary, if not a liar, certainly devotes herself to autobiographical performance, playing varying versions of herself. These episodes enact a symbiosis with the text’s implicit argument that memoir is a practice of imagination and production in which experiences available only through individual memory and collaborative reporting exist secondarily to those media. Just as Mary crafts her identities for guardians, teachers, and peers, life writing produces its selves. McCarthy’s approach to publishing these memoirs, which offer multiple Marys, has origins in the experience she reports. These performances regularly subsume their performer. In a representative case, she decides to turn atheist and inadvertently accomplishes the change by merely announcing her loss of faith. As an eleven-year old seventh grade girl in “*C’est le Premier Pas Qui Coûte*,” “[i]t was the idea of being noticed that consumed all my attention,” she writes (107). And so, as part of her project to “get myself recognized at whatever price,” after the school’s piano professor does not grant her notoriety by way of fantasized elopement,

The decision to lose my faith followed swiftly on this disappointment [...] the whole momentous project simply jumped at me, ready-made, out of one of Madame MacIllvra’s discourses. I had decided to do it before I knew what it was, when it was merely an interweaving of words, lose-your-faith, like a ladder made of sheets on which the daring girl had descended into the arms of her Romeo.
(111)

The responses of priests enlisted to win back her willfully lost faith are so disappointingly inadequate, she “seemed to have divided into two people, one slyly watching as the priest sank back into the armchair, the other anxious and aghast” (118). Having accomplished her atheism, she crafts “a pious effigy of myself” and plans “to pretend to be converted in the night, by a dream” (123). This performativity echoes her efforts to hide Catholicism to afford grandfather’s salvation. “I resolved to dismantle at once the little altar in my bedroom at home, to leave off grace before meals, elaborate fasting, and all ostentatious practices of devotion, lest the light of my example shine upon him too powerfully and burn him with sufficient knowledge to a crisp” (91). We also get a sense of adolescent Mary’s Catholicism in these autobiographical stagings. As she reflects on the efficacy of the Act of Contrition, by which baptized Christians purchase redemption in their last moments, she shares “the only one of all the confessions I made that I can remember almost verbatim,” having looked up “‘breast’ in the big school dictionary” (100). McCarthy’s girlhood Catholicism is always susceptible to the agency of the gesture. She says, “as a child I thought you would have to start saying the Act itself as rapidly as possible if you were hit, say, by an automobile while in a state of mortal sin. Great stress was laid on the prescribed forms by the priests and nuns who taught us” (98). As the adult memoirist understands, the most lasting confession, the most promising escape from damnation, is emphatically scripted.

McCarthy’s memoir of high school, in which she and a small cohort of high school classmates decide to become the disciples of an unlikely Latin teacher, continues her investment in performance. Miss Gowrie’s distant persona—her “first concern was to establish an ideal of the official. It required character to be a spoilsport on a privileged

day, but she rose to the painful occasion with a sort of pathetic, sporting determination, like a trout jumping to the cruel hook” (152)—seems only to bolster Mary’s determination to establish comradeship with her. In this case, “It was the whim of oddity, doubtless, that first decided me to ‘like’ Miss Gowrie. And the other class stars, who happened that year to be taking Latin, quickly fell in with that notion” (153). She observes that her “discovery of Miss Gowrie was disclosing, unbeknownst to me, certain strange landscapes in myself” (154), in this case a shared affinity for classical Caesar, yet the episode illustrates the clearest sort of effort to perform herself into a sustainable persona. McCarthy’s “whims” that “decide [her] to” adopt a belief and play a role demonstrate an embrace of the fiction. This mutability is founded in an ostensible agency over who Mary will be, and it is consistent with her autobiographical practice.

Timothy Dow Adams interprets McCarthy’s work as “bad confession,” because she enacts the ritual without its guilty binary between penitent and confessor. She is “without genuine sorrow” (*Telling Lies* 97). The aim of her work is not to cleave fiction and not fiction into bins labeled honest and dishonest or, crudely, right and wrong, but instead to present both as constituent parts of a remembered and remembering self. Those performances become an element of her identity—they are not subject to indictment—and, by extension, so do the “fictions” of her memoirs. They are, in fact, entirely consistent with the book’s model.

Leigh Gilmore suggests that McCarthy’s two forms of autobiographical practice, the reproduced memoirs and the subsequent comment allow two sorts of cooperative life writing:

One the one hand, [McCarthy] claims her account is the truth because it really happened. On the other, the fictions she creates to cover the gaps in history and memory have come to fit so neatly into her narrative that they attain the status of remembered fact. That is, the ability to ascertain the precise line marked by “more...than I know” has receded beyond her capacity to distinguish between the fiction in the text she has come to know—that is remember and believe—as fact and fact itself. (“Policing Truth...” 69)

While a collapse of fiction and fact fundamentally shapes the text, I would suggest that McCarthy’s “capacity to distinguish between” the two is finally secondary to her choice to collect and publish both in the same work and to produce an unresolved version of that collapse. And in that admixture of experience and imagination, McCarthy’s book is an instructive case of life writing.

The striking absence of a final italicized chapter guarantees the unresolved status of this text. *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood* ultimately accepts its own contingency and allows the narrating author to close the story without the corrective editing of what might be thought of as the “real” Mary, an implied author. This is not capitulation on the part of the latter, a surrender to the superior narrative of the former. Instead, it is a suture of the two Marys. The work of the interchapter narrator has been too thoroughgoing; our faith in the authenticity of the story is by now too compromised to read “Ask Me No Questions,” the collection’s closing memoir, uncritically. At the same moment, though, we notice the presence of her absence; structurally, she haunts the plain-text narrative. When we read the unsettling account of her grandmother’s botched plastic surgery and her compulsive isolation, punctuated only by regular trips to shop for clothes (both easily

read as efforts to control appearance), we recognize the presence of the autobiographer who, in concert with the inescapable grandmother, catalogues the varied ways to present one's image to the world and the inability to successfully control a coherent image, even as efforts to do so are accelerated by either plastic surgery or the autobiographical act. Young adult Mary begins to gather that adopting identities does not afford her the ability to observe and comprehend each of them as discrete parts of a stable self. Eakin wonders if she "recognize[s] that to write a life is in effect to embrace a strategy for translating the incommunicable self into a communicable substance, incommunicable because not finally knowable" (*Fictions in Autobiography* 55). As her grandmother forgets the word for mirror, McCarthy's text recognizes the impossibility of comprehending oneself with clarity, in other words, the inability of the autobiographical form to be a simple mirror.

Yet this is no flaw. The scene is enriched by the controlling aspect of *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood*: its author implies her acknowledgement of the contingency of memory and the mediating effect of narrative. Because she is a novelist and a storyteller, she takes on the problem of narrative representation of experience alongside a simultaneous attempt to tell what things happened to her in her youth. And the completed text presents engaged life writing that calls transparency into question, but still reflects on the author's lived experience. McCarthy's memoir does especially important work because this paradox of the real and the narrated is not part of the subtextual matter but is brought up to the surface of the work and deployed in the narrative. We are left with a memoirist whose memoir deftly operates between the necessary fiction of the novelist's memory and the subject's proclaimed objective to tell what happened.

Unapologetic Fictions

“To the Reader” concludes in McCarthy’s address to correspondents who have condemned her apostasy, as well as her reflections on those priests and nuns who write thoughtful and empathetic letters. She explains her sense of religiosity with remarkably confident abandon:

...as a lapsed Catholic, I do not trouble myself about the possibility that God may exist after all [...] For myself, I prefer not to play it safe, and I shall never send for a priest or recite an Act of Contrition in my last moments. I do not mind if I lose my soul for all eternity. If the kind of God exists who would damn me for not working out a deal with him, then that is unfortunate. I should not care to spend eternity in the company of such a person. (27)

I am particularly taken with Mary McCarthy’s tone. The autobiographer’s assertiveness throughout her memoirs betrays a confidence that begins to fuse the contingent narrators of the text as it accepts the impossibility of any single coalescent self. That is, while *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood* never unequivocally suggests that a best, truest, and consistent narrative of this childhood is tenable, its secondary narrator (that of the interchapters) adopts confidence to correct the misunderstanding of ostensibly naïve readers and supplies answers (even if speculative) with easy authority. It is one thing to admit the influence of memory and imagination on nonfiction writing; it is entirely another to do so with the sort of command that begins to initiate a subject made from the intersection of the actual and the imagined. Perhaps the most striking instance of McCarthy’s dismissive confidence follows her rearranged chronology of escapades in which she was caught violating school rules, she explains: “This is an example of

‘storytelling;’ I arranged actual events so as to make ‘a good story’ out of them. It is hard to overcome this temptation if you are in the habit of writing fiction; one does it almost automatically” (165). This of course undercuts the claim noted above, in which she makes plain the unproblematic ability of novelists to tell the truth; however, this is an aggressive acknowledgement of fiction.

While McCarthy’s complicit critique of autobiographical conventions is startling in its break with convention, insofar as it makes claims to objective remembering suspect and articulates its own interrogation of autobiographical practices, *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood* disdains excitability. There is little scandal, finally, in this self-critical symptom of life writing; if anything, McCarthy nearly dismisses the rebelliousness of her work: she almost sighs over tedious readers confused over the accuracy of her pieces. Inferring from the work’s introductory frustrations, we imagine an exasperated McCarthy explaining that *of course* some of this is invented—it probably should be noted that the work implies resistance to the sort of analysis at hand in this study, having set forth its own critique. That voice has to do with the authority purchased by a kind of secondary retrospect, looking back on looking back and authorizing uncertain memory and sustaining the juxtaposition of fiction and nonfiction as a barely latent argument that this admixture affords the soundest approach to life writing. In 1957, as the memoirist returns to uncollected episodes and lashes them together with explanatory and ostensibly corrective supplement, the coexistence of memory and fiction makes possible a critically reflective instance of life writing capable of informing the way we read all life writing. *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood* asserts the contingency of autobiographical writing without abandoning its confidence in the business of life writing. That paradox makes

McCarthy's memoir an ideal case by which we might theorize an approach to other instances of life writing.

"Trust the motives and hearts of your makers of things"

Among the works we might read by way of *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood*, none is more susceptible than Dave Eggers' memoir. In the opening of "Mistakes We Knew We Were Making: Notes, Corrections, Clarifications, Apologies, Addenda," the upside-down appendix to *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*, Eggers admits an anxious genealogy between his text and McCarthy's:

A version of [the appendix] was nearly complete, when its author made the mistake of telling a writer friend about it, with, let's admit, a certain smugness. I was, I figured, the first to think of adding a corrective appendix to a nonfiction work, one meant to illuminate the many factual and temporal fudgings necessary to keep this, or really any, work of nonfiction, from dragging around in arcane and endless explanations of who was exactly where, and when, etc. [...] But upon telling this writer-friend about the idea, she said, while looking much too ravishing over an open candle and with wet hair, "Oh, right, like Mary McCarthy." (5)

Surprised, Eggers confesses that *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood* is "a book about which I was of course unaware because I am a moron" (5). The likeness is enumerated: "Each corrective chapter, the writer-friend pointed out, began with something like: *Well, it didn't happen exactly that way...*" Eggers corroborates the connection between A

Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius and McCarthy's experiment: "this was exactly my goal in adding the appendix in the first place: it afforded the opportunity to be completely factual about things that in the narrative had to be compressed or altered slightly so the book could continue apace" (6). However, the comparison is inauspicious, because "after reading McCarthy's perfect execution of the idea, I abandoned my own appendix, not wanting to invest too much in a notion already used" (6). The appendix, indeed absent from the hardcover edition, reappears (with the above indictment of its unoriginality) and accompanies the paperback. It operates as McCarthy's interjections do, supplementing the telling towards a more thorough version; Eggers articulates the motivation for selected changes, engages in supplementary memoir, and posits his own literary criticism. However, there are meaningful distinctions between McCarthy's efforts to command her primary memoirs and Eggers' feverish metanfiction. In those differences, we are able to apprehend a contemporary worry over life writing as a communicative literature. Eggers' memoir is very much an heir to McCarthy's, and yet the contemporary text, a manic experiment in writing about memoir within memoir, cannot sustain McCarthy's command of life writing as the admixture of memory and invention. As *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* enthusiastically dismisses the possibility that all it tells is the way things were, it endlessly insists on the accuracy of its record. Eggers' memoir demonstrates a frantic need to tell.

A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius is Eggers' memoir of losing both parents to cancer within weeks of one another, becoming his adolescent brother's guardian, leaving suburban Chicago, and living in Berkeley and San Francisco during the early nineties. Eggers orients himself as an uneasily figurative single parent (his

experiences with Toph, the eight-year old brother for whom he is responsible, are inescapably adolescent), and among a group of Midwestern expatriates in the Bay area, he desires both what he calls a “lattice” of bonded friends and family and an audience to whom he can confide his story.

The catalogue of Eggers’ many formal eccentricities indicates the plurality of the memoir, constituting a sort of life writing heteroglossia. *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* includes, in addition to the ostensibly primary story, a meta-memoir of formal interruptions. Much of this work takes place outside the text proper, emphasizing a sort of formal explosiveness by which Eggers moves even further than McCarthy from the imaginary monolith of textual containment. Eggers’ epigraph, “THIS WAS UNCALLED FOR” announces a vexed memoir. A photograph of the author flanked by two dogs and a bird is captioned “...[the author and his brother] have no pets.” We are offered a page of six numbered “Rules and Suggestions for Enjoyment of This Book,” in which we are regularly advised that “There is no overwhelming need” or “overarching need to read” much of the book, that we “can also skip” everything after “page 123 or so, which is a nice length, a nice novella sort of length” because “[t]he book thereafter is kind of uneven.”⁶

Following the preface, Eggers includes a detailed thematic table of contents that consists of shorthand phrases that vaguely allude to narrated experiences. The last paratextual element before the conventional narrative begins is a lengthy and misleadingly titled “Acknowledgements” that includes an extended outline of “the major themes of this book” (including “The Knowingness About the Book’s Self-

⁶ Much of Eggers’ substantial front matter is unpaginated.

Consciousness Aspect” and the outline as a sort of topical flow-chart “graph form”), a budget for the book’s production, and an “Incomplete Guide to Symbols and Metaphors.” Reminiscent of McCarthy’s response to critics from within the memoir, Eggers opens his preface, “For all the author’s bluster elsewhere, this is not, actually, a work of pure nonfiction. Many parts have been fictionalized in varying degrees, for various purposes.” But that seemingly straightforward admission opens a preface that meanders across a number of reflections on revisions and lying and ends with a *non sequitur* series of rejected epigraphs (including Toph’s candidate: “Ooh, look at me, I’m Dave, I’m writing a book! With all my thoughts in it! La la la!”). The preface to the paperback edition turns on itself and instead of asserting a corrective version in which a hierarchy of more-authentic narratives is established becomes a reflection on the necessity of lies and the operation of fiction in memoir. Eggers explains,

All the individual words and sentences have been run through a conveyor, manufactured like so: 1) they are remembered; 2) they are written; 3) they are rewritten, to sound more accurate; 4) they are edited to fit within the narrative (though keeping with their essential truth); 5) they are rewritten again, to spare the author and the other characters the shame of sounding as inarticulate as they invariably do, or would, if their sentences, almost invariably begun with the word “Dude”—as in, for example, “Dude, she died”—were merely transcribed. It should be noted, however, that what’s remarkable is that the book’s most surreal dialogue [...] is that which is most true to life. (ix)

Eggers attempts to override this uneasy collaboration between fiction and nonfiction: “if you are bothered by the idea of this being real, you are invited to do what the author

should have done, and what authors and readers have been doing since the beginning of time: PRETEND IT'S FICTION.”

Beyond those markers of resistance to the illusion of autobiography's generic closure, there are direct challenges to the conventions of life-writing within the primary narrative. Toph observes, in diction hyperbolically beyond his years, “You're completely paralyzed with guilt about relating all this in the first place... you also know that Mom and Dad would *hate* it, would crucify you—” (115). John, the drug addict friend, revolts, “Screw it, I'm not going to be a fucking anecdote in your stupid book... Find someone else to be symbolic of, you know, youth wasted or whatever” (272-273). Also within his paratext, Eggers pointedly announces that “the lives of people in their early twenties...are very difficult to make interesting.” Quite significantly, one of the most popular contemporary memoirists, with tongue-through-cheek, confides that “there are perhaps too many memoir-sorts of books being written at this juncture, and that such books, about real things and real people, as opposed to kind-of made up things and people, are inherently vile and corrupt and corrupt and wrong and evil and bad, but...that we could all do worse, as readers and writers.” He admits that his approach to guardianship of his younger brother is “a campaign of distraction and revisionist theory” (88).

Writing for Community: “The Lattice”

The paperback's appendix appears “about eight brutal and then exhilarating and then more-brutal than-before months after the book was originally published” (6), the brutality, we read, having something to do with both the book's relative success and the relative surprise of those who populate it:

But why, then, have we changed most of the names in the book? Because I've lost my taste for this sort of courage. I thought it was courageous to write about these things, and I thought it was equally courageous for my friends and I to use our names and phone numbers, and to allow our exploits and sexploits to be recounted in print for the consumption of our parents and aunts and nephews. But now, when so many have asked for name-changes, and so many have been shocked by who/how many have seen all these words, I've decided to let most of the people—save the primary characters—breathe easier and live freer, by allowing them to slip backing into semi-fictional personae. It is not my right to tell anyone else's story, and they don't owe me the favor of allowing me to do so. (12)

Eggers' principle of forfeiting ownership of other's stories, symptomatic in its exhaustion, turns from his memoir's primary drive, to narrate his experiences with exceeding abandon. This loss of courage and recognition of an ethics of life writing, however, does not do much to dampen the text's hyperactivity. Eggers fights in frantic ways with which *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood* does not worry. The narrative of his mother's stomach cancer is among the memoir's earliest resistances to complacent memoir: "They took my mother's stomach out about six months ago. At that point, there wasn't a lot left to remove—they had already taken out [I would use the medical terms here if I knew them] the rest of it about a year before. Then they tied the [something] to the [something], hoped that they had removed the offending portion, and set her on a schedule of chemotherapy" (3-4). Bracketed absences signal the limitations of nonfiction as clearly as possible, and they arrest the primary text in its first moments; this *aporia* amid affect characterizes the work's paradoxes.

The memoir attempts a long-form conversation between Eggers, his siblings, his friends, and his readers. And although its earnest sense of community is regularly undercut by knowingness, Eggers, perhaps severing an epistemological bond with McCarthy, sustains throughout the work a frantic longing to tell, and to have heard, his story. In *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood*, McCarthy defends the place of fiction in her autobiographical work; Eggers nearly pleads with an audience to bodily absorb the story. His memoir closes in a fevered and tortured appeal to connect:

Don't you know that I am connected to you? Don't you know that I'm trying to pump blood to you, that this is for you, that I hate you people, so many of you motherfuckers—When you sleep I want you never to wake up, so many of you I want you to just fucking sleep it away because I only want you to run under with me on this sand like Indians, if you're going to fucking sleep all day fuck you motherfuckers oh when you're all sleeping so many sleeping I am somewhere on some stupid rickety scaffolding and I'm trying to get your stupid fucking attention I've been trying to show you this, just been trying to show you this [...] I am willing and I'll stand before you and I'll raise my arms and give you my chest and throat and wait... (437)

I will address the appendix's defense of his aggression below, but the piercing request for physical meeting between story and reader concludes the memoirist's hyperbolic plea for community.

His story of the work's title—in the “Acknowledgements”—illustrates the memoir's concomitant frantic tenor and cool search for empathy:

Yes, it caught your eye. First you took it at face value, and picked it up immediately. “This is just the sort of book for which I have been looking!” Many of you, particularly those among you who seek out the maudlin and melodramatic, were struck by the “Heartbreaking” part. Others thought the “Staggering Genius” element seemed like a pretty good recommendation. But then you thought, Hey, can these two elements work together? Or might they be like peanut butter and chocolate, plaid and paisley—never to peacefully coexist? Like, if this book is, indeed, heartbreaking, then why spoil the mood with the puffery? Or, if the title is some elaborate joke, then why make an attempt at sentiment? Which is to say nothing of the faux (real? No, you beg, please no) boastfulness of the whole title put together.

Antic speculation easily marks Eggers’ resistance to the “puffery” risked by much of the memoir’s playfulness, but this note to the reader, particularly given its conversational pitch, signals a more important effort to be at once knowing and deflated. Moments later, we read that

On a different note, the author feels obligated to acknowledge that yes, the success of a memoir—of any book, really—has a lot to do with how appealing its narrator is. To address this, the author offers the following:

- a) That he is like you.
- b) That, like you, he falls asleep shortly after he becomes drunk.
- c) That he sometimes has sex without condoms.

- d) That he sometimes falls asleep when he is drunk having sex without condoms.
- e) That he never gave his parents a proper burial
- f) That he never finished college
- g) That he expects to die young

The list goes on, and its effect continues the memoirist's work toward fashioning an unromantic self while unashamedly asking that readers take him in as the work's critically aware author. The narrator Eggers' ambition as a sophisticated (and thorough) memoirist engenders restless life writing.

The lattice, he explains, "is the connective tissue. The lattice is everyone else, the lattice is my people, collective youth, people like me, hearts ripe, brains aglow" (211). This Utopian bond between the memoirist and his communities is sustained, but subject to critique. In a fictionalized interview with a casting director for the MTV series, *The Real World*, he pleads, "please let me show this to millions. Let me be the lattice, the center of the lattice. Let me be the conduit. There are all these hearts, and mine is strong..." (237). The interviewer asks, "And that will heal you?" to which an over-the-top Eggers responds "Yes! Yes! Yes! Yes!" The appeal for collectivity may be at the foundations of Eggers' work, but its manifestation's hyperbole signals the memoirist's knowing.

In his "Acknowledgements," among the catalogue of the book's rejected titles: "*Memories of a Catholic Boyhood* (also taken, more or less)." The others documented are "*A Heartbreaking Work of Death and Embarrassment* (true but unappealing); *An*

Astounding Work of Courage and Strength (Stephen Ambrose would have cause for action) [...] and *Old and Black in America* (risqué, some say).” Eggers tells us that of these titles, he “preferred the last one, alluding as it does to both aging and an American sort of *otherness*.” This absurd non-referentiality follows the author’s “acknowledg[ment] that because this book is occasionally haha, you are permitted to dismiss it. The author wishes to acknowledge your problems with the title. He too has reservations.” Having articulated his own resistance to both the seriousness of writing about his experiences in the wake of his parents’ deaths (by way of the text’s giddy play) and the work’s hyper-self consciousness (“While the author is self-conscious about being self-referential, he is also knowing about that self-conscious self-referentiality”), Eggers enlists the reader in his critique. The work’s introductory mechanisms—which begin, if not in the very title, then on the copyright page—attempt to make the reader an accomplice. He continues the note on “self-conscious self-referentiality”:

Further, he is fully cognizant, way ahead of you, in terms of knowing about and fully admitting the gimmickry inherent in all this, and will preempt your claim of the book’s irrelevance due to said gimmickry by saying that the gimmickry is simply a device, a defense, to obscure the black, blinding, murderous rage at the core of this whole story, which is both too black and too blinding to look at—*avert... your... eyes!*—but nevertheless useful, at least to the author, even in caricatured or condensed form, because telling as many people about it helps, he thinks, to dilute the pain and bitterness and thus facilitate its flushing from his soul...

This appeal to win the reader, while an unresolved business, informs Eggers' kinetic pace and the memoir's unending supplement to its core story. After explaining that "Random House is owned *in toto* by an absolutely huge German company called Bertelsman A.G., which owns too many things to count or track," and enumerating the author's height, weight, eye color, and other physical traits, the copyright page includes this telling play on legal conventions in publishing:

NOTE: This is a work of fiction, only in that in many cases, the author could not remember the exact words said by certain people, and exact descriptions of certain things, so had to fill in gaps as best he could. Otherwise, all characters and incidents and dialogue are real, are not products of the author's imagination, because at the time of this writing, the author had no imagination whatsoever for those sorts of things, and could not conceive of *making up* a story or characters—it felt like driving a car in a clown suit—especially when there was so much to say about his own, true, sorry and inspirational story, the actual people that he has known, and of course the many twists and turns of his own thrilling and complex mind. Any resemblance to persons living or dead should be plainly apparent to them and those who know them, especially if the author has been kind enough to have provided their real names and, in some cases, their phone numbers. All events described herein actually happened, though on occasion the author has taken certain, very small, liberties with chronology, because that is his right as an American.

As this easily overlooked passage⁷ demonstrates, *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* swims in Eggers' attentive playfulness. His appeal to truthfulness is never abandoned, and the pathos of the Eggers' family story purchases notable seriousness, even if "sorry and inspirational" are partially emptied by the book's multivalence. Eggers' memoir opens in an excess that announces its restlessness.

The appendix's analogous copyright page—"The author wishes to reserve the right to use spaces like this, and to work within them, for no other reason than it entertains him and small coterie of readers. It does not mean that anything ironic is happening. It does not mean that someone is being *pomo* or *meta* or *cute*"—initiates a story of the story, in which Eggers fills in details and occasionally corrects the memoir, but devotes himself to supplementing the motive for writing: "We share things for the obvious reasons: it makes us feel un-alone, it spreads the weight over a larger area, it holds the possibility of making our share lighter" (10). This memoir's resistance to the conventions of memoir cannot leave behind its insistence on meaningful telling among what it regards as a sustaining human community. Eggers' work worries in fits over its dependence on that supportive reader. In his appendix, he confesses that he "expected the worst from the book's readers, I expected claws and blood and teeth. The book ends with a plea for those who would tear into me to just go ahead and do it, because I wanted it to happen, finally. But then a weird thing happened: People were kind" (20). He refines the "lattice," now informed by an audience's unexpected sympathies: "The warmth of other people, their electricity, then the direction of that energy somewhere, if need be" (29). A

⁷ The copyright page mimics conventions carefully; the minutiae of copyright and bibliographic data are present in centered and compressed typeface.

Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius, in its juxtaposed resistance to complacent life writing and appeal to sentimentality, hopes to be as knowing as memoir will allow.

Each of Eggers' moves puts his work at risk of complaints about playfulness for the sake of playfulness, another in the too-large catalogue of postmodern *jeu*. Yet nearly every interrogation of nonfiction's authority as such is tempered by his insistence on the story's plain affect. In his furious (and perhaps timely) response to the misapplication of the label, "ironic," he notes:

...there were those who felt that the front matter was (and is) *pomo garbage*, and that, as a result, the entire story is being told with a tongue in its author's cheek, a wink toward the skybox—these people saying, in essence, Good God, why couldn't he simply have left the story, as poignant as it is, be? So. This book cannot win. For some, at least. And when this book is not winning, attached to it are labels: *Post* this, *meta* that. Here's a notion: These are the sorts of prefixes used by those without opinions. In place of saying simply, 'I liked it' or 'I did not like it' they attempt to fence its impact by affixing to it these meaningless stickers. Oh, we should free ourselves from these terms, used only to make confusing something that we already understand. Because honestly: everyone who actually reads this dumb book, or any dumb book, will understand it. So I beg of you: PEOPLE, PLEASE: TRUST THE MOTIVES AND HEARTS OF YOUR MAKERS OF THINGS." (34)

The romantically simplifying tendencies of these admonitions are recognized easily enough, but it matters that our playful life writer not only plays with his representation but anticipates the critical status of his representation. In other words, this text invests in

a serious effort at telling as much as he can—above and beyond truisms about the authenticity of imagination, *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* argues for hope against meaninglessness. Eggers’ “something that we already understand” is more easily understood when our narrator undermines his own form and reminds us how we might best understand memory’s products.

Of course, the wholeness of the work is in a way maddening, since the interior obsessions and compulsions of Eggers’ reported experience—including the experience of the autobiographical act—risks its appeal to readers not especially interested in the representational problems of life writing. Admittedly, there seems to be no shortage of readers put off by this autobiography’s precocity. Yet all of this work is more than literary gamesmanship, more than meta. Eggers’ interruptions and self-reflexivity are internal monologues of conflict, multiplicity, contradiction, and—paradoxically—a sort of coherence.

Representativeness and the Bourgeois Everyday

That Eggers includes an imagined interview in which he auditions for *The Real World* is indicative of the memoir’s registers of its moment. Before the interviewer breaks out of character, asking, “so tell me something: This isn’t really a transcript of the interview, is it? [...] This is a device, this interview style. Manufactured and fake [...] It’s a good device, though. Kind of a catchall for a bunch of anecdotes that would be too awkward to force together otherwise” (196-7), Eggers describes a bourgeois suburban childhood. He offers a strategic formula for the bland: “children in public schools are trained, have it pounded into them by their peers, that to stand out is to attract possibly

unfavorable attention [...] We all gravitated to the middle” (186). That effort at middle-class invisibility becomes an analysis of the community from which Eggers comes, including the Chicago suburbs of the 80s and the San Francisco Bay area of the 90s. The latter is “built with putty and pipe cleaners, rubber cement and colored construction paper. It’s the work of fairies, elves, happy children with new crayons” (296). He explains to the imagined interviewer: “I think what my town, and your show, reflect so wonderfully is that the main by-product of the comfort and prosperity I’m describing is a sort of pure, insinuating solipsism, ... in the absence of struggle against anything in the way of a common enemy—whether that’s poverty, Communists, whatever” (200-1). From this allegedly empty safety, “the cultural output of this time will [be] a lot of talking, whole movies full of talking, talking about talking, ruminating about talking about wondering, about our place, our wants and obligations—the blathering of the belle époque, you know. Environmentally reinforced solipsism” (202). This memoir, of course, perpetuates that model, but its search for meaningful community begins to tack away from this (however problematically) indicted solipsism.

When John, after whom Eggers often looks, makes one of several suicide attempts, Eggers confesses that he needs “the recognition of the value of [a friend’s attempted suicide] as both life experience and also as fodder for experimental short story or passage in novel, not to mention more reason to feel experientially superior to others one’s age” (270). John, who we are told is both suicidal and drug-addicted, diagnoses the autobiographer’s need to invent: “You grew up ... without danger, and now you have to seek it out, manufacture it, or, worse, use the misfortunes of friends and acquaintances to add drama to your own life. But see, you cannot move real people around like this, twist

their arms and legs, position them, dress them, make them talk— ” (424). John’s understanding certainly leaves behind Eggers’ loss of both parents, yet it does begin to outline an ethnographic analysis of the memoir as a record of response to banal middle-class experience. Eggers’s narratives survey a decidedly protected series of experiences. His family’s home, an artifact of suburban passivity, is described as a museum to the bland. Video games, lowbrow television, and the Eggers’ father’s jokiness are its entertainments. Remnants of the production of *Ordinary People* and the antics of neighbor Mr. T are Eggers’ childhood excitements. In his San Francisco, any venture is tenable, and risk seems limited to imagined episodes. Eggers hyperbolic descriptions of Frisbee throwing with Toph—superhuman balletic spectacles—get at the safety of their days.

Dave and his siblings are, for several years, unable to locate their parents’ remains. Both had unexpectedly donated their bodies to research, and as a result of the children’s placeless moves between rented homes, no research hospital had been able to deliver them. On what he describes as an “archaeological bender,” a homecoming trip to Lake Forest, Eggers almost inadvertently collects his mother’s “cremains” after a funeral home worker looking for the recipient’s contact information, finds them on a shelf. Eggers’ painfully unconfident choice is to throw the remains into Lake Michigan. In order to do so, he transports the small box of ashes on the floorboard of a rented car, and his paranoid monologue indicates the memoir’s uneasy response to death: “My sick head makes me see the face on the box. My sick head wants to make this worse. My head wants this to be scary and unbearable. I try to fight back, to know that this is normal, all this is normal, but I know that I am a monster” (382). He articulates exasperation with the

project: "...look what I'm doing, with my tape recorder and notebook, and here at the beach, with this box—calculating, manipulative, cold, exploitive. Fuck it" (395). And, once the dispersal of remains begins to go badly—ashes do not neatly float over the water but insinuate themselves in Eggers' clothes, on the rocks—self-indictment nearly overwhelms the scene:

How lame this is, how small, terrible. Or maybe it is beautiful. I can't decide if what I am doing is beautiful and noble and right, or small and disgusting. I want to be doing something beautiful, but am afraid that this is too small, too small, that this gesture, this end is too small—Is this white trash? That's what it is! We were always so oddly white-trashy for our town, with our gruesome problems, and our ugly used cars, our Pintos and Malibus and Camaros, and our '70s wallpaper and plaid couches and acne and state schools—and now this tossing of cremains from a gold tin box into a lake? Oh this is so plain, disgraceful, pathetic—

Or beautiful and loving and glorious! Yes, beautiful and loving and glorious! (399)

This tormented ambivalence over responding to death refuses ritual closure, and death infects much of the memoir. A friend's father immolates himself, startling the Lake Forest quiet. Eggers describes the scene in adolescent dialogue, reporting a boyhood friend's explanation that "Ricky's dad doused himself with gasoline and lit a match and then ran around the yard on fire, and then stopped running and then died right there, in front of the house" (195). A publicist for *Might*, the magazine Eggers and his friends found in San Francisco, dies suddenly after a virus infects her heart.

Might's guiding motive is to play the ironic jokester. An issue's cover story, "The Future: Is It Coming?" goofs off in deadpan: "It's fun to wonder about the kinds of things that will happen in the future. Who will do what? What will happen? Those are big questions that are really hard to think about..." (282). *Might* attempts a hoaxed celebrity death, at once "serving a higher purpose, that of satirizing the media's interest in celebrity death, parodying their eulogies" (314) and demonstrating the impossibility of controlling even staged death. Adam Rich, erstwhile child star of the sitcom *Eight is Enough*, agrees to take part in the hoax, but because the magazine attempts to foist their faked sourcing on *The National Enquirer*, and because they fax a news release to other publications' reporters, the exercise fails and the party, attended by Rich is painfully awkward.

The memoir's unresolved response to regular death informs Eggers' worry. In the funeral home where he locates his mother's long-neglected ashes, Eggers rails against the materiality of the body:

I will not be buried, I assure myself. I will disappear. Or maybe by the time I die, there will be machines, utilizing advanced laser technology and fiber optics, that will evaporate people shortly after they pass away, without actually burning them. Experts in the operation of they machine will enter shortly after a death, assemble the machine—it'll be highly portable—and with the pull of a few levers, the person will disappear, instantaneously. There will be none of the interment, no carrying bodies around, inspecting them, embalming them, dressing them up, buying holes in the ground for them, this building elaborate boxes for them, boxes reinforced, double thick— (379-380)

Alternatively, a hyperkinetic memoir attempts a disembodied immortality. Eggers suggests a “Memoir as Self-Destruction Aspect” in his front matter and appendix, and it is clear that the resultant text causes trouble for Eggers, yet the memoir finally suggests life writing’s productive work as a version of the author.

Conclusion: Orphan Autobiographers

Here, the most experimental postmodern life-writing rejects mimetic representation of experience, and Eggers most definitely destabilizes his version of things, but he does ultimately offer a whole, if incoherent, testament to his faith in “what happened.” This doesn’t mean we have to accept his unbelievable claim, offered under the Acknowledgements’ “C) The Painfully, Endlessly Self-Conscious Book Aspect,” that “the author doesn’t have the energy or, more important, skill, to fib about this being anything other than him telling you about things, and is not a good enough liar to do it in any competently sublimated narrative way.” But instead, we recognize his playful approach to transparent representation and realize that this memoir’s most pervasive authenticity is its hyperactive desire to establish a tenable way to tell what happened to his family.

We might entertain a lengthy discussion of ontological difference between multiply located subjects—a Lacanian hierarchy of subjects that are effects of the existence of the text: the writer in the present, the writer who composed the book in the past, and the writer who lived the experiences that make up the book’s content. That split subjectivity and the inability of the controlling author to ever give to the reader an unmediated report of a life are characteristic of all life writing; however, these texts don’t

seem limited by that condition. That is, while the project of life writing is presumably an effort to document univocally a whole, even if complex subject, these two examples demonstrate *and even thrive on* the shortcomings of that model. Eggers and McCarthy interrogate those multiple subject positions as they push against each other and the authority of at least one of the authors (the straight narrator of McCarthy's plain-text chapters and of the first third of *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*). By offering multiple and conflicting versions of experience, they produce life writing that openly admits its inability to suture the various subjects together in an uncritical and artificial whole. And that inability brings about not only carnivalesque multiplicity, but no little tension. The many Daves and Marys do not necessarily regard their shared responsibility as the cooperative accumulation of an authoritative record. Eggers' many textual interruptions create dissonance, and the implicit authority of the McCarthy who revisits the spurious narrative of her younger self is in a sometimes antagonistic (even if apologetic) business. However, the complex honesty of both texts is demonstrated by the inclusion of the to-be-corrected text, *sous rature*. Ultimately, the strength of this sort of life writing comes from its unresolved narratives, from the inability of corrective commentary to overwrite completely the constructedness of constructed memories it ostensibly seeks to revise. Between fact and fiction, informed life writing admits its imperfection, instead of futilely trying to ignore it.

Lest we find ourselves out of the mystification of archaeological objectivity and in a morass of imagination without any author in lived experience, we should remember that both Eggers and McCarthy regularly insist that their records are honest. As life writing appears progressively more postmodern and less invested in the project of

mimesis, McCarthy and Eggers attempt to narrate their lives in fairly humanist manner. It is overwhelmingly evident that both *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood* and *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* are testaments to life writing's ambitious objective in the face of the postmodern condition: sustaining the notion that any text reports remembered experience as an authoritative version. The paradox of humanism stowed away in twentieth-century textual playfulness illuminates, of course, the familiar shortcomings of broad historical and critical categories, but the basic faith that both pieces accord to the lives they represent holds at bay sweeping claims about the absolute loss of referential nonfiction. These works are very much the product of writers who recognize the impossibilities of discourse that captures and represents transparently, but they are also seriously invested in a sort of accuracy, honesty, and completeness. The result is an informed monument that recognizes the impossibility of nonfiction but still hopes to tell the whole story. This paradox asks that we do more than reevaluate the possibility of accurate representation—it effectively theorizes the project of life writing. Hardly the venue for absolute, confident, and objective narration at the end of a coherent life; this is instead a means by which the memoirist creates a text that is contingent, opaque, and dynamic. Regarding those traits as shortcomings helps us little beyond efforts to construct yet another tentative version, for the corrected text can never be any less contingent, opaque, and dynamic, so long as it consists of the same mediating representation of human experience. McCarthy's and Eggers' weird autobiographies are finally as instructive as they are representative—they draw the omissions and commissions of life writing's fictions into their stories so overtly that they begin to

reconcile the productive tension between the pressure of memory's history and the inevitability of biography's fiction.

The memoirs of a mid-twentieth century novelist's Catholic girlhood seem an unlikely candidate to pair with the *Tristram Shandy* excitability of Eggers' postmodern narrative of life in the middle-class suburbia and San Francisco bay-area sensibility of the 1980s and 1990s. The former's classical narrative of education and rebellion is archetypal. The latter's willful inattention to any past longer than twenty years conveys almost no long-term historical consciousness and absolutely revels in the self-absorption of MTV culture. These two orphan autobiographers experience dissimilar early lives, at the very least signaled by the distinct American cultures of their moments. However, the conflicted work of life writing directs both pieces so similarly that each compels us to theorize much more generally than individual readings of these discrete lives. Both raise what are indisputably deconstructive questions about the ability of texts to represent experience and perhaps even about the object of life writing. Both trouble the stability of the identity ostensibly at the center of the narration. Both are at play among the centuries-old challenges of the autobiographical form. Finally, and most importantly, instead of lamenting the inability of life writing to tell an authentic story, they both address that phenomenon and actually employ it to produce memoirs. The form of each resists the prescriptive and descriptive containments of genre.

Both of this study's memoirists place substantial emphasis on collaborative fact-checking and narration; that is, the memory of others is part of the text's structure. McCarthy goes so far as to discuss the necessity of communal history-making among orphaned siblings, who do not have the luxury of parents to provide a family story. She

regularly alludes to conversations with her brother in which she asks him to validate stories. McCarthy admits,

One great handicap to this task of recalling has been the fact of being an orphan. The chain of recollection—the collective memory of a family—has been broken. It is our parents, normally, who not only teach us our family history but who set us straight on our own childhood recollections, telling us that this cannot have happened the way we think it did and that *that*, on the other hand, did occur, just as we remember it, in such and such a summer when So-and-So was our nurse. (5)

Eakin notes that this “illuminates the problematical relationship to truth that links all of the various Marys past and present in the narrative: lying becomes a sign of her orphan condition, the making of fictions a function of her loss” (39). The result of those absent editors is both a willingness to admit the interventions of fictionalizing memory and the need for corroboration on the part of siblings and other family members. However, the supplementary work of collaboration hardly fosters a more stable authenticity.

Eggers’ relationship with the lives he tells proves less straightforward. The means by which the narrative is picked apart are the subjects whose stories are taken from them. In his preface, Eggers calls this “people break[ing] out of their narrative time-space continuum to cloyingly talk about the book itself.” Toph takes on the exaggerated and obviously fictional voice of a tenacious critic and explains the suspect accuracy of a passage: “it was almost as if it was too much to happen in one day, as if a number of days had been spliced together to quickly paint a picture of an entire period of time, to create a whole-seeming idea of how we are living, without having to stoop (or rise) to actually pacing the story out” (114). An imaginary casting interviewer with MTV’s *The Real*

World contends, “This is a device, this interview style. Manufactured and fake” (197). These characters, in the hands of the life writer, correct the insufficient narrator. The writing Eggers exerts final control over these figures, yet his method demands attention to the fact that his record is susceptible to indictment, if not immediate revision. And as monuments to lost parents these autobiographies do some biographical work—they engender a family.

Eggers and McCarthy understand that their texts are *not supposed to be* transparent records, but simply to abandon the life in the text in the wash of constructedness misses the brilliant work between allegiance to the individual’s story and postmodern resistance to that story evident in both. The reader finds a significant dialectic in these texts: the impossibility of just simply telling what happened only partly suspends a compulsive drive to tell. This is not a question of varying degrees of truth. Frankly, both autobiographers know better than to believe that any life writing will realize the fantasy of objective authenticity. Instead, these two understand the ways in which the work of life writing, turned upon itself, works to realize a sort of therapeutic (and functional) return of lost parents. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson point to the significance of Eggers’ implicit message, “[t]he apparent lack of contrivance in most memoirs...is implied to be a deeper kind of contrivance” (7). These texts indulge the desire to make that contrivance transparent. They contribute to what Adams calls “metaphorically authentic” and “narrative rather than historical truth” (*Telling Lies...*9-10, 12).

For all their shared theorization, the difference between McCarthy’s and Eggers’ life writing only perpetuates their critical work. McCarthy’s collection abides the work of

storytelling in the nonfiction—its uncorrected conclusion marks that confidence well enough. *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood* contends that memory is all the memoirist finally owns, and that its complex product accomplishes a satisfactory text. Eggers, however, of a different moment, amends and overrides because his work refuses a complacent conclusion. Its worry is an articulation of the memoirist’s uncertainty in a time of mass-manufactured “reality” genres, during which not even actual death purchases authority in the nonfiction record. His heartbreaking work supplements, corrects, overwhelms itself in an uneasy effort to write a life with precisely the sort of literary effort that interrogates the possibility of doing so.

Chapter 2: *Lincoln* and *Dutch*: Executive Fictions and American Biography

“All biography is, in effect, a reprojection into words, into a literary or kind of semiscientific and historical form, of the inert materials, reassembled, so to speak, through the mind of the historian or the biographer. His becomes the informing mind. He can only lay bare the facts as he has understood them, in a continuous and inquiring narrative.” Leon Edel, *Writing Lives: Principia Biographica*

“Contrary to legend, he was a first-rate actor, and before the war he starred in first-rate movies. When asked for the thousandth time how an actor could be president, he said, most sensibly, ‘I don’t see how anyone who is *not* an actor could get through this job’.” Gore Vidal, *Palimpsest*

The Imagination of Form

In August 2003, the online magazine *Salon* published an account of Vivian Gornick’s public confession, during a reading at Goucher College, that her memoirs were at least partly fictionalized. Gornick’s response, published eleven days later, includes the following insight:

To state the case briefly: memoirs belong to the category of literature, not of journalism. It is a misunderstanding to read a memoir as though the writer owes the reader the same record of literal accuracy that is owed in newspaper reporting or in literary journalism. What the memoirist owes the reader is the ability to persuade that the narrator is trying as honestly as possible, to get to the bottom of the experience at hand.

This promise of an honesty that is somehow more literature than journalism probably would not have satisfied those at Gornick’s lecture, who were, according to *Salon*’s Terry Greene Sterling, entirely uncomfortable with her unrehearsed reaction. Sterling, a Goucher MFA student, reports they were “miserable” and “stunned.” Life writing, these readers have been led to believe, in the face of so much evidence to the contrary, should document what really happened, and Gornick’s conversational admission that her work

sometimes accomplishes more (or less) than that standard very clearly upset her audience's expectations. Sterling assures us that the MFA faculty at Goucher and Gornick's audience included several accomplished figures—"some of the best writers in the East Coast"—so dismissing their unease as naïveté seems neither fair nor productive.

The trouble of course is that life writing's truths do not come easily, and so fleeting distinctions between Gornick's "trying as honestly as possible" and the Goucher audience's expectations are not very useful. The relationship between memoirs and authenticity resists easy formulas—we are perhaps likely to forgive minor liberties taken with actual experience, but we imagine that the spirit of the larger work is honest to something, that is, its aim is not to mislead the reader but instead to tell the best story of what happened. Third-person life-writing, the work with which the life of another is told, doubles the challenge of fashioning some adherence to "what happened" because the luxury of owning one's own story vanishes and is replaced by the responsibility of vigilance to another's. Edward Mendelson notes the relative scarcity of studies of biography compared to those of autobiography and explains that

far more theoretical energy is being expended on the problem of self-presentation than on the problem of presenting another self. So literary biography has been left to make do with a more or less undefined and unconscious theory—one too confused to withstand much scrutiny—based loosely on the analogy between the internal workings of interpreted self and the internal workings of an interpreted poem. (21)

It is not too reckless to contend that this paradigm can be ascertained more broadly; biographers of all sorts of subjects identify an interpretive key for the life under study and

explain their data as a means to solving the “problem” of the subject. Mendelson follows David Ellis’ less satisfactory naturalizing theory: “If there are certain rules or conventions in writing lives which most biographers follow more or less instinctively, how would it help if they were led to reflect more about what they were doing?” He immediately and dismissively answers his own question: “How biographies work, the habits of enquiry and explanation which so largely determine their form, can seem irrelevant when the publication figures over so many decades (and centuries) demonstrate so resoundingly that they do” (4). Ellis sees a native tendency to intuit a boundary between fiction and biography: “That so much biography is necessarily conjectural, and that its form is—with equal necessity—always more or less literary, confirm for [some critics] the insignificance of the separation between writing lives and writing novels. Yet readers seem to recognize the difference, and so do many writers” (15). There is too little critical work in this explanation, though. Is it possible that the form of the novel and the fact of the biography are so distinct?

Do biographers “owe the reader the same record of literal accuracy that is owed in newspaper reporting or in literary journalism”? “A writer of lives is allowed the imagination of form but not of fact.” This, the third of twenty aphorisms that constitute Leon Edel’s “Introduction, In the Form of a Manifesto” to his *Writing Lives*, demands a certain adherence to the verifiable. Those who make another self into a text may create the literature but not the content of history. This admonishment is in keeping with the major premises of conventional life writing: biography is a craft, and it is also a document. Perhaps uncritical readers of biography concern themselves less with the literary than the lived. Edel simply maintains the ostensible distinction between what

happened and how those happenings are interpreted and reported. He dictates that the latter is up for grabs, while the former is decidedly not. The biographer's product may be borne of some creative work, while the life's experience that provides a foundation for that product cannot be imagined. This sense, that the art is in the writing, and not in the history, informs the formula of excision presidential biographer Edmund Morris advocates in 1986: "...the art of biography [...] is to extract the essential from the unessential, so that truth shines forth. What is all art, indeed, but a refinement of the ore of life?" ("The Art of Biography" 29). Here is biography as archaeology, in which the technician provides a way to view what is obscured by the "unessential." Edel's inviolable law, though, is to keep imagination on the correct side of the balance—only making literature from what one knows is factual.

Edel's eighteenth aphorism relaxes biographical anxiety by turning from proscription to promise: "The biographer truly succeeds if a distinct literary form can be found for the particular life." This is axiomatic: books are capable of appropriately representing lives, and some degree of appropriateness can be measured. Nevertheless, some difficult questions hover. While it is entirely unlikely that Edel believes in a clear line between one sort of biography as an empirically verifiable artifact of a life and another sort of biography as a product of the vagaries of art, his separation of fact and form argues for some distinction between fact and fiction.

While Edel's notion of "imagination," when applied to the record of facts, implies clearly enough something like fiction, there is reason to push against the word. "Imagination of form" certainly means more than simply "making things up"; it indicates that the project of writing a biographical book demands more than copy-editing a

calendar's contents. At the core of imaginative form in life writing, narrative storytelling renders the matter of a life into a text. We also presume to be able to locate some artistic sensibility in Edel's imaginative form. He is straightforward about his distaste for editors of compendia who fail to recognize that "[b]iography is not an engagement book. It imitates life in the way of the novelist; neither the work of fact nor the work of fiction can afford to present the reader with chaos and clutter. In the quest for a continuous and flowing story, the anarchy of the archive needs to be thoroughly and completely mastered" (104-105). And he asserts clearly that "fact" is insufficient: "If biographers are destined to be obsessed with 'fact' they also need to remind themselves of what Coleridge said—'how mean a thing a mere fact is except as seen in the light of some comprehensive truth.' The biographer's moral oath has been to seek out comprehensive truth; beguilement into irrelevant byways must be resisted" (110). This life writer's guide intimates romantic Truth, requiring attention to the rightness of form, and wariness of the temptation to be careless with a life and its history.

Each standard-bearing word—truth, form, and history—leaves biographers with serious work to do. Truth's native and notorious flirtation with ambivalence and ambiguity, form's dependence on some recognizable connection between art and knowing, and history's profoundly contested record aren't easily settled problems. Edel comforts against those worries, though; his "new biography has learned what the old could never understand: that we are self-contradicting and ambivalent, that life is neither as consistent nor as intellectual as biography would have it be, and that when we come as close as possible to character and personality and to the nature of temperament and genius, we have written the kind of biography that comes closest to truth" (108). While

strangely dismissive of “the old,” Edel’s psychoanalytic paradigm would have biographers take on the myth that structures the subject and discern that structure by way of narrative interpretation of all the scraps, the letters, the matter that, in his model, clutters the biographer’s table.

Edel’s “new biography” is worth consideration not only as an exploration of the question of imagination and truth in biography, not only as a key to unlock Edel’s own practice, and not only as a method for writing real lives. It informs the following analysis because while it offers an astute thesis on the nature of fiction in life writing—that biography is an artful form, not simply a matter of presenting the facts, but that it had better not make up those facts—his foundational manifesto at once succeeds and fails. Biography worth our reading recognizes the challenge of representing lives and history, but litmus tests for the presence of “imagination” in “fact” offer too little promise. The trouble between form and history, remedied too easily with the either/or binary of Edel’s third aphorism, meets the optimism of his eighteenth in Edmund Morris’ life of Actor-President Ronald Reagan, *Dutch: A Memoir of Ronald Reagan*. Imagination of form and imagination of fact collide in *Dutch*, and the fires lit by the resultant sparks consumed the public discussion of the book. Morris, whose serial biography of Theodore Roosevelt grounds him as an eminent, if conventional, presidential biographer, simultaneously adopts and violates Edel’s premises; the result purchases a contextual, contingent authority as Morris develops an imaginative form for the life of a contemporary public subject. Reagan, whose overdetermined personae—structured by Hollywood and Washington mythologies—is the quintessential collusion of performance and history, gets the right form in *Dutch*. In addition to telling its story of the life, *Dutch* instructs

readers of all biography, because it understands and deploys life writing's most inescapable conditions: first, that the strictest nonfiction is finally not the only tenable way to approach a life; second, that history is an uncertain and unwinnable battle fought among competing narratives; and third, that the best biographer understands that, among the excess of information that accretes around any life, the unstable and fragmentary nature of life writing offers a promising locus of innovation. *Dutch* breaks with many conventions, not least of which is Edel's prohibition against imaginative facts, but its form's imagination makes the most authentic book of "Ronald Reagan," and its dedication to unearthing a figure Morris regards paradoxical domesticates the memoir's rebelliousness. *Dutch* cannot fully accept its experiment's wager, that its Reagan is too diffuse, too mediated to be subject to a unified account of a life. Morris' nonfiction is certainly committed to experimental and postmodern principles, yet too insistent on an affective faith in its subject's representability. He engages in knowing playfulness, but devotes himself to an unlocking (Mendelson's model of the life as an interpretable poem, perhaps) that betrays worry.

Reading *Dutch*, a restless text uncomfortable with generic boundaries, as a not entirely successful foil to an historical novel hardly seems intuitive, but I want to suggest that abandoning biography's conventional obligations to accuracy might make available to Morris the sort of epistemological argument inherent in the form of *Dutch*. Gore Vidal's *Lincoln: A Novel*, while a decidedly conservative adherent to its generic status, makes a case for presidential biography as literary interrogation. Edel insists that "[i]n a novel, the novelist knows everything about the hero or heroine. His [sic] characters are his own invention and he can do what he wishes with them. Novelists have omniscience.

Biographers never do” (15). Vidal and Morris each dismantle this simplifying principle, but the latter refuses to abandon what Edel calls “analy[sis of] his materials to discover certain keys to the deeper truths of his subject” (29).

The American president provides more than enough challenge for would-be biographers in need of a story. Edel winces at the magnitude of the archive:

We now build entire libraries to house the papers of our presidents; and thanks to the existence of carbon paper and photocopying we have in these libraries copies of letters, millions of them, which in other eras would be dispersed all over the world and in the possession only of the recipients. And I speak of even a later moment, when we possess not only the papers of the president but tape recordings of his speeches, kinescopes, movies—and all the records of public relations by which what we call the presidential “image” is created and recreated. And that is not all. (95)

He goes on to complicate that superfluity of Presidential data by reminding us of “the art of making everything seem public while the truth remains private” (96), but the historical deluge that rushes up at the mention of “Washington,” “Jefferson,” “Jackson,” “Lincoln,” “Teddy,” “FDR,” “JFK,” “Reagan,” “Clinton,” and, for the moment, “Dubya” risks drowning any fair aspiring biographer. Bill Clinton’s 883-page memoir seems about right. Even the “everyday” subject, who has managed to occupy the work of life writers, and the recovered figures, who should have been there all along, provide every bit as much indeterminacy, every bit as much pressure against the line between history and fiction as any U.S. president. Yet there is an opposite challenge in those cases. We know too little about the cloistered nun, the Renaissance courtier, the Himalayan porter who

paces ahead of his European explorer, and the obscure outsider artist, few of whom maintained much of an archive. We know too much about the president, because, more than most subjects of American life writing, that figure carries the weight of historical signification. This is not an argument for the historical primacy of George Washington and his heirs—it is inescapably important to understand that the previously unheard-of local subjects influence and are influenced by history; they tell tales of a moment, too. Instead, I am insisting that it is difficult not to acknowledge the fact that, for good and for ill, the U.S. hangs its history on the faces of its presidents. Even when the president is less familiar than Lincoln, Jefferson, Washington, either Roosevelt, the release of archival matter—as in the case of David McCullough’s *John Adams*—stimulates enough reconsideration to make that president another candidate for a national mall monument.

One volume among Vidal’s series of historical fiction, *Lincoln* is a novel’s version of the sixteenth president, and a record of the American Civil War and its uncertain puppet masters. Vidal’s Lincoln, a human character but a national actor, operates like a balance tasked with accommodating and negotiating the weight of a nation’s literally warring identities. Upon notice of Lee’s surrender at Appomattox, a confidant observes of Lincoln, “[i]t was if his old friend had ceased entirely to exist as a human being and in his place there was now, suddenly incarnate, an entire and undivided nation” (636). Lincoln’s personal secretary John Hay perceives a less pacific metonymy as the president delivers an address later that evening: “Hay suddenly saw Lincoln as a sort of human lightning conductor, absorbing all the fire from Heaven for all of them” (637). Surely one of the office’s most mythic selves, Lincoln arrives at Vidal’s text with almost one hundred and twenty years of cultural mass; adopting the novelist’s craft, and

moving into the interiority of Lincoln and his familiars, Vidal makes of the old president a character, not merely an amalgam of the Lincoln catalogue. Like Morris, Vidal insists that his subject comes from history; his afterward asserts, “[a]ll of the principal characters really existed, and they said and did pretty much what I have them saying and doing...” and that “[a]s for Lincoln and the other historical figures, I have reconstructed them from letters, journals, newspapers, diaries, etc. Occasionally, I have done some moving around ... I have not done this sort of thing often. I have not done it at all with the Presidents.” Even without the authority secured by footnotes, Vidal ostensibly finds the right imagination of form without imagination of fact—the novel’s promise of narrative control, subjective perspective, and a beginning and end make an otherwise hyper-signifying president, overwhelmed with ages of legend-making, containable with the fiction of order. By way of Vidal’s biographical act, Lincoln is at least as representable or manageable as any absent figure can be, at least as true as any absent self can be.

Vidal’s book’s entertains metabiographical questions much less often than Morris’, but the reader finds moments in which a winking novelist reflects on the nature of his project. John Hay and fellow secretary to Lincoln John Nicolay, who would ultimately complete their ten-volume *Abraham Lincoln: A History*, voice the challenge that Vidal takes on:

Hay and Nicolay had each had, on his own, the idea of writing a biography of Lincoln. Lately, they had been discussing such a book as a joint effort.

Nicolay shut his desk. “Upon the two of us, John, must fall the noble task of telling the world who Abraham Lincoln really was. This means that we are obliged to leave [fellow Illinoisan and “scrub”] Billy Herndon out.”

“But, Nico, do we know who he really was—or is?”

“We know what we know, which is a good deal, I think.”

“I wonder,” said Hay. “The Tycoon is a mysterious man; and highly secret.”

“That’s because he’s smarter than anybody else. Nothing mysterious about that.” (455-456)

Vidal’s regular shift in perspective preempts reductive efforts to identify Hay as an alter ego (though his literary aspirations lightly hint at identification). Nevertheless the “Tycoon’s” future biographers are faced with something not unlike Vidal’s conundrum. What can be told? What must be left out? (in a ten-volume life, clearly not much). And how could any writer possibly cut through the “mystery” to the self? Vidal offers more than dedication to objectivity, a not very useful standard. *Lincoln*’s dramatizing narrative of historical figures is no less close to its subjects than presidential biography that purports to avoid fiction’s mediation. Vidal’s novel does not abandon the possibility that Lincoln’s life can be reported, but its application of a fictional form to do so plants questions about the limitations of nonfiction biography. That is to say, while *Lincoln* is hardly a postmodern work, its willingness to favor the novel as the means to a life posits an epistemological contention at odds with “traditional” biography: knowledge of an historical life may be seriously conveyed without pretensions to the “objective” record. That, as Ellis points out, the form of the biography is often the form of the novel, only offers so much; Vidal’s version of Lincoln, having left behind the fantasy of presidential biography that informs popular works like Morris’ Theodore Roosevelt series and

McCullough's *John Adams*, makes possible speculative representation that is anathema to the sort of biography both Ellis and Edel ostensibly advocate.

Lincoln's president performs and, at least in the view of Hay (who learns to read Lincoln's gestures and mannerisms as often ironic performances for unwitting audiences of statesmen), suggests a biographical project. Beyond Hay's overt discussion with Nicolay, he recognizes that the president is capable of deploying varying already-written versions of himself. The elder Lincoln son Robert reports to Hay his embarrassment over the president's unrefined manner, but Vidal's Lincoln rarely if ever seems bound to some natural self. As a novel's character, he becomes an agent for his own mutable identities, each bound to his conviction that the nation's union is a constant condition. Nicolay, for instance, observes the president's mobile heritage, observing that he "has more states of origin than there are stars on the flag" (146). Vidal's Lincoln often seems to disappear into reverie, and to Hay, "He seemed to be staring at that wall of marble in his mind from which he read his finished texts," perfectly aware of his identity as an enduring historical character, subject to a catalogue of representation (357). More than a knowing wink, the biography-as-novel here reminds the reader that its hyperbolic subject, rendered discernible by means of the novel's tropes, escapes efforts to be commanded by a domesticating text. It is not that Lincoln is a too-grand figure who transcends the biographical enterprise; rather, Vidal's form illustrates the fantastic work of the fiction. Four years of Lincoln's life serve as an organizing principle for the novel, whose scope includes the Civil War, the political logic of Secretary of State William Seward, Secretary of the Treasury Salmon P. Chase, the Maryland Blairs, scheming congressmen, Mary Todd Lincoln's torments, the loss of a second Lincoln child, the ambitions of Hay,

the families of these figures, fetid backwater Washington itself, conspiracies to assassinate Lincoln, and even federal monetary policy. Only the novel could arrange those these threads, fashioning a narrative logic of history grounded in the mediating records. That our narratives of Lincoln allow traversal across personae—rural “scrub,” rail-splitting worker, folk lawyer, honest father, abolitionist, patient strategist, self-deprecating wit—makes possible the implicit argument of Vidal’s novel, that knowing a biography’s subject means recognizing that biography’s limits, bound by the biographer’s perspective.

Lincoln brings rail-splitting, honesty, emancipation, the Civil War, and stovepipe hats to the life-writer’s desk. Reagan brings California, cowboys, and, most significant, professional performance. Not only a president. An actor whose roles typify American sentimentalism. W.J.T. Mitchell outlines the play in which Reagan is situated: “The fact that Ronald Reagan began his career as an actor and has continually exploited the symbolic, theatrical character of the presidency only makes the links between aesthetic/semiotic and political forms of representation more unavoidable” (12). Or, Reagan signifies multiple signification—of an actor’s characters and a president’s nation. Lincoln’s death, in the balcony of the theatre, at the hands of an actor, perhaps an overwrought and overdetermining presage, nevertheless initiates a thematic line all the way across a century, from Ford’s Theatre to Warner Studio to the White House. Vidal’s Lincoln understands the fundamental connection between presidential politics and performance:

Even [Secretary of State William] Seward had difficulty separating the practical if evasive and timorous politician from the national icon that Lincoln and his friends

had so carefully constructed before and during the convention at Chicago: Honest Abe, the Rail-Splitter, born in a manger—or, rather, log cabin... Thanks to the telegraph and the modernization of the daguerreotype, Lincoln's managers had been able to impress an indelible image on the country's consciousness. Even the famous beard that Lincoln had grown on the train from Springfield to Washington had been a deliberate calculation and not, as Lincoln had said so sweetly if disingenuously at the time, the result of a letter from a little girl who liked whiskers. Actually, the letter had come from a number of influential New York Republicans who thought that a beard might give him dignity, something that they had found dangerously wanting in the quaint Western teller of funny and not-so-funny stories. So Lincoln had grown the beard. (232-233)

In "The West Wing of Oz," Joan Didion suggests that, at least in Reagan's case, this performativity is an eminently manageable phenomenon: "Defined as 'president,' or even as 'governor,' Reagan did indeed appear to have some flat sides, some missing pieces. Defined as 'actor,' however, he was from the beginning to the end of his public life entirely consistent, a knowable and in fact quite predictable quantity" (*Political Fictions* 169). A sound interpretive formula, in other words, is born of the fact that Reagan, unlike Lincoln, actually *was* an actor. Lincoln's beard may be compelling, and very likely astute political theatre, but Reagan's jellybeans only highlight the artifice. That distinction informs Morris' approach.

Morris' form is a polyphony of biographical strategies. Each supplements and complements the biography's major transgression, its author's decision to make himself a

fictional character in his “memoir” of Reagan. In the Modern Library’s Publisher’s Note for *Dutch*, he reflects on the challenge:

Reagan considers his life (quite wrongly) to have been unremarkable. He gives nothing of himself in private, believing that he has no self to give. Any orthodox quest for the real “Dutch,” then, is bound to be an exercise in frustration. Hence the dullness of so many of the books written about him, their inability to capture his peculiar magic. Since Reagan has been primarily a phenomenon of the American imagination—a mythical apotheosis of the best and worst in us—he can be re-created only by an extension of biographical technique. (vii)

Hoping to convey that “peculiar magic”—a phrase whose adoration, stashed away in an introductory publisher’s note to what Morris’ critics indicted as an attack on Reagan, is telling—the author invents an “Edmund Morris” whose experiences parallel and sometimes intersect those of his subject. Both spend boyhoods in northern Illinois; both attend Eureka College; both work in Hollywood; both serve in the military during the second World War. They meet casually a number of times before Morris begins work on *Dutch*, and Morris invents a correspondence in which he and a boyhood cohort wonder and chat about “Dutch” Reagan. We are assured that the “facts” of the presidential life are rigorously researched and documentable. If anything, then, Morris’ is presumably a sin of literariness and addition, not revision. No local lie is told, really; no detail of the subject’s life is imagined, except for the framing fiction, an imaginary character to narrate Reagan, “[m]ost public yet most private of men, [who] does not welcome undue familiarity with his past” (xxi). As readers, we are ostensibly to bear in mind that the eyes watching Reagan before the mid-1980s are a fiction.

The first indication that Morris' book takes on more than the telling of the subject's life, that it expresses the biographer's questions about narrating lives, appears as he wanders around the Ronald Reagan Birthplace Museum with its founder and owner, Paul Nicely. Morris confesses, "I wish I had a camcorder [...] to follow you around" (14). *Dutch's* most striking trope presents scenes from the life as film scripts, complete with set design, shooting directions, musical score selections and characterization, editing preferences, and emotive direction for each character. Immediately after Morris wishes aloud that he had the ability to film his perambulations with Nicely, the prose form shifts: "RONALD REAGAN BIRTHPLACE—AFTERNOON." A script and scene description follows:

[...] *CAMERA PANS* around front bedroom of Birthplace, overlooking Main Street. It *HOLDS* on a short, broad, cross-patched oak bed with heavily lathed and fluted posts. To one side stands a little wooden table and porcelain lamp. Two sickly religious prints hang on the wall.

NARRATOR: In this bed, at 4:16 A.M. on February 6, 1911, Ronald Wilson Reagan was born, feet first, after twenty-four hours' labor. Even in the womb, it seems, he plotted his entrance with dramatic effect. He weighed ten pounds. Perhaps it was this amplitude of flesh, and the *durchkomponierte* quality of his crying, that made Jack Reagan compare him to a "Dutchman." For the next twenty-six years, the boy would be known as "Dutch"—and "Dutch" he has remained to all who knew him in his Midwestern days.

(INSERT: a zodiac card)

Should the second of his wives be watching this documentary, she will be interested to know that at the moment of his birth, Mars was in 4° Capricorn conjunction, the Ascendant in the First House, the Sun was in 16° of Aquarius in the Second House, trine the Midheaven, and square the Moon in Taurus at the end of the Fourth House.

During the last sentence, a long, pianissimo D-natural is heard on violins: the first notes of the sunrise sequence from Haydn's Creation. It increases in volume and begins to mount the scale as CAMERA begins a SLOW ZOOM toward the bedroom's west-facing window. Dutch's cot stands beneath it.

NARRATOR: Was he already myopic, as he kicked in this cot and tried to focus on these luminous rectangles? Was his first field of vision similar to his last: a foreground buttressed with familiar shapes, each small, female, strong-jawed, authoritative—

NELLE REAGAN: *(firmly)* Ronald!

MARGARET CLEAVER: *(austerely)* Dutch!

JANE WYMAN: *(impatiently)* Ronnie!

NANCY REAGAN: *(snappishly)* Ronnie!

NARRATOR: —a middle distance wavering with taller, blurrier figures—

MAUREEN REAGAN: *(plaintively)* Dad?

MICHAEL REAGAN: *(plaintively)* Dad?

PATTI DAVIS: *(plaintively)* Dad?

RON REAGAN: *(plaintively)* Dad? *(The rising fanfare drowns them out)*

NARRATOR: —and, in farthest perspective, where the land rises to meet the sky, and intense concentration of light, a hint of towers and rooftops, a Shining...
Now his voice, too, is overwhelmed as the fanfare reaches its climax. CAMERA PASSES prismatically through the window, and Main Street, sunk in shadow, opens up below. (14-15).

Disrupting narrative coherence at once establishes authority, by opening up the array of representative strategies, and interrogates that authority, by declining to resolve tension between those strategies. The more ways Morris creates Reagan, the more thorough his story, we might imagine. We might also notice the absence of a monolithic form's stabilizing effect. More notably, Morris' approach parodies precisely the sort of script from which his subject takes his cues.

The fantasy script unsettles the complacency of representation in life writing. The scene's images remain captured in print, yet they prophesy a performance. Biography's sense that prose narrative captures the experiences and idealized "essence" of some life is checked here; Morris reminds the reader that the biopic exists, and that its generic relationship with book-form biography raises questions of visual representation, aural representation (here, the Haydn symphony, as well as the voices of characters), mimesis, and temporality. Wisely, though, the device does not incite a war between image and text. While it is not difficult to imagine competition between representation's forms—epic *paragone*, the unwinnable contest between words and images—*Dutch* does not force an impossible false choice between the two but instead incorporates several ways of knowing into a *bricolage* of life writing. Even if the film script remains arrested as text, its jarring break with the surrounding narrative, its parodic excess, and its generic cues

mark its difference. After prompting readerly disorientation, suggesting consideration and negotiation of the formal assumptions of written biography, the presence of the script simply juxtaposes options. Morris imagines, literally, the alternative control over story offered by a movie's script, and he signals the need for several means of storytelling. In the context of *Dutch*'s experiments, imaginary scripts contribute to a polyvocal whole.

And of course this move emphasizes early on the cinematic persona of Morris' subject: "Even in the womb, it seems, he plotted his entrance with dramatic effect." We begin to see the ways *Dutch* looks to satisfy Edel's hope for connection between form and subject. Possibly, the logic of that aesthetic-historical bond, carried to its conclusion, would demand that the life of Reagan (or at least a major part of it) take the form of a film. Yet the reach granted Morris by a seven-hundred page book, a reach that includes nearly the whole chronology of Reagan's life, calls for some larger literary structure that evokes the transformations of identity that a life entails. The filmed life of the film actor would be as incomplete and contingent as an uncritical book-form biography. Perhaps the Republican National Committee's rejection of the CBS miniseries *The Reagans* was just in its criticism of inaccuracy, even if for all the wrong, grossly reductive reasons.⁸

All of the narrativized shooting direction pulls back the curtains that would obscure the mechanisms of life writing, and attention to the camera's movements and

⁸ Chairman Ed Gillespie's letter to CBS (published at the now defunct "www.supportreagan.com," suggested, "[i]f your series contains omissions, exaggerations, distortions or scenes that are fiction masquerading as fact, the American people may come away with a misunderstanding of the Reagans and the Reagan Administrations ... the program is a fictional portrayal of the Reagans and the Reagan Presidency, and they should not consider it to be historically accurate. . . ."

perspective deconstructs the artifice of biography, even if with fairly heavy hands. This is not to say that Morris and the camera are analogous operators; in fact, we are more likely to imagine identification between him and the speaking narrator. Yet the camera acts as the site of recording, imagined into existence by Morris' observation, "I wish I had a camcorder." The biographer's imagination, the camera's eye, the score's dynamics, the script's direction, and the characters' attempts to name Reagan into being all warn against the temptation to read biography uncritically.

Morris, whose imagined alter ego is for some time employed as a Hollywood script doctor, returns to this method often. A summary of his subject's hometown is introduced with another film cue: "Were I to script a documentary called, say, *The Ronald Reagan Story...*". Plans for that film follow in regular prose form and, after he explains, "I'd have Dutch read from his own autobiography," the script begins (33). "Two epiphanies" from Reagan's adolescence, his first moments listening to a radio and his response to finding his alcoholic father passed out face down in the snow, "cry out for video treatment" (37). As a sort of visual intermission between scenes, Morris includes a detailed sketch of "Ronald Reagan's boyhood home, 816 South Hennepin Avenue, Dixon," the site of his father's overdetermined "dark form half hidden in the snow" (38).⁹ In the midst of textual representation of an imagined script for an imagined film, a hand-drawn image enlists another means of representation as both a carnivalesque filling-in and a self-conscious critique of staid presidential biography, a genre in which pencil sketches are less than authoritative historical data. The juxtaposition is further emphasized by the caption, "Again we see the little Dixon house with snow banked about

⁹ Reagan, as it happens, seems to have conflated his memory of his father in the snow with scenes from Harold Bell Wright's Practical Christian novel, *That Printer of Udell's: A Story of the Middle West* (40-42).

it,” language borrowed from the script’s setting notes. Clearly, no means of representation wins much authority amid this narrative noise.

“Down the Divide: Four Short Scenarios,” a chapter in four scenes presented as film scripts, illuminates Reagan’s almost-fatal 1947 acute viral pneumonia, the failures of his uneasy marriage to Jane Wyman, his cooperative testimony at HUAC (as well as his secret contributions as an FBI informant, “T-10”), and his destructive separation from Wyman. The chapter begins with self-conscious attention to the problems of cinematic narration, particularly in Hollywood film:

It is one of Hollywood’s most hackneyed narrative tricks: the dissolve from day into night. Then a hazy montage of images, double-exposed upon the feverish, tossing body of our hero. But what if the dissolve is real, the images true, our hero the man, not the actor? What if the screenwriter charged with rendering such a scenario tells it as *Reagan* has told it in memoirs and monologues, even to the extent of plagiarizing Reaganesque figures of speech? “Hazy montage,” for example. And “cocooned in blankets.” And “down the divide.” Would that make it authentic as well as cinematic, a suspenseful episode of *The Ronald Reagan Story*? (249)

The “hackneyed” expressions of subjects become knowingly deployed hackneyed scenes here. As that complicity between Reagan, Hollywood formula, and *Dutch* is named, though, Morris gestures an evasion of total responsibility:

Any director wishing to shoot the following material should apply to Reagan’s lawyers for permission, since these are his memories, not mine. All I have done is suggest a few camera angles and sound effects, and to insert some amplifying

details from other sources. I recommend black-and-white photography with soft-focus effects in Part I ('Fever'), deep-field detail of domestic objects in Part II ('Silence'), a grainy newsreel look to Part III ('Testimony'), and handheld, documentary-style tracking shots in Part IV ('But Mary Doesn't Love John').

(250)

Morris converts his authorial agency to "suggestions" and "recommendations," playfully forfeiting control. Uncertain authority is derived from "his memories," given their tentative origins in the subject's "memoirs and monologues." Our Reagan, as we see here, autobiographically adopts the Hollywood discourse, and Morris disavows it as he co-opts the same. Again, the life writer, charged with organizing a life into a readable structure, deploys an unconventional tactic. The effect is that the reader might fairly ask why Morris doesn't simply quote those memoirs and monologues in prose narrative, why he turns them into the guidelines for a film. The answer, of course, is that the interior motivations, explanations, and meanings of biography's subjects, no matter how temptingly close, cannot ever be more knowable than the means by which they are conveyed, a phenomenon *Dutch* deconstructs. The effect of form, here, is a critique of the subject as an authority. These are Reagan's memories made suspect by Morris' frame. "Down the Divide" captures both the primacy of the subject's language, the limited authority of the biographer's interlocutory status, and the imperative to consider more than one imperfect way to represent an historical person.

Morris deploys a number of images, including renderings of locations, photographs of scenes and characters (familiar enough data for nonfiction), facsimiles of newspaper headlines, a scene-card placeholder labeled "Intermission" midway through

the book, miniature yin-yang symbols between each subsection (these appear every page or so), and even the cartoon image of a “Simian philosopher” (offering, “whoever wants the answer must come to me”) on which Reagan had once penned a prediction: “I want to be the biggest man in the world” (269). Again, the incompleteness of narrative prose comes under vexing interrogation. The representational contributions of these images do more than supplement narrative prose—they begin to imply a complicit critique of life writing’s methods. Each bolsters the effort to narrate the subject’s life, while at the same time each highlights the instability of that narration—fragments are sutured together to approximate a unified life-story, but their disjointedness only sustains the fragmentation of the subject.

All this *jeu* does not simply discount the notion of nonfiction’s operations, though. Many conversations between the biographer, his subject, and others are conveyed by way of ostensibly unedited transcripts of tape recordings. These function as both descriptive and prescriptive artifacts. Their documentary value originates in the former and their aesthetic imagination in the latter. Dropping the presumed mediation of an interlocutor busy re-arranging data into a narrative, Morris substitutes with the mediation of potential theatre—these sections intimate performance and all the work accomplished by his fantasy film scripts. Importantly, they also invoke documentary history, presumably as clean records of the past. Morris’ inclusion of his and his subject’s frequent use of a hesitant “uh” is particularly important for the illusion of immediacy. Within the context of *Dutch*, so invested in a *bricolage* of documentary and narrative strategy, their formal presentation belies authorial distance.

RR ...And—did I tell you this story before?

EM Uh, you *did*, once, but—

RR (*disappointed*) Well—

EM (*weakly*) I'm pleased to hear it again! (111)

This exchange promises the performance of a storytelling scene as it narrates the past.

Both the character cues and the subject of Reagan as a (repetitive) storyteller who values an interested audience (but not enough to provide original material) highlight the biographical work of these “scripts;” they function as another representation of the actor-president. Others find themselves participating in Morris’ *cinéma vérité*, too. In an interview transcript, Nancy Reagan offers her fairly vindictive version of her husband’s marriage to Jane Wyman: “Ronnie, of course, didn’t... uh... want to marry, he was too... much too young, he was, uh, just playing around. So she sent him a suicide note and swallowed a whole, uh, lot of pills, and got herself taken to the hospital” (162).

Finally, some records of experience come by way of journal entries, implying the immediacy of observation without the problems introduced by long-term memory. Several of the entries are necessarily fictional, though, and that detail troubles the authority of those that appear authentic. Morris includes several entries from the president’s diaries in the chapter, “Album Leaves, 1987-1988,” which takes the form of collected fragments in chronological order but without any transition other than their short titles. These seem to afford some historical reliability in the midst of the structural tension created by the chapter’s form. They also testify to the unease surrounding Reagan and his White House in the doldrums of his presidency, including his clumsy and telling response to the Iran-Contra affair, his prostate surgery and subsequent denial (Morris reminds us more than once that Reagan continues to believe he did not have cancer, but

instead a “few cancer cells”), his troubling central staff changes, his aging, his unforgivably ignorant response to the onset of AIDS, his wife’s breast cancer, and his odd and frighteningly regular allusion to Armageddon. Sourcing so much angst from unpolished notes and diaries emphasizes and relies on the fragmentary nature of those documents; this chapter becomes a whirlwind of anxious data, an analogy for the turbulence of the moment.

The fact that Morris’ own diaries are at times those of the fictional narrator checks the reader’s inclination to read journal entries as windows on what happened. Because the imagination of form resonates throughout the entire work, what is ostensibly the historical record operates within its proper context of multivalent histories. *Dutch’s* structure fosters the comfort of readers, lulling us into its own history, in which several artifices tell a complete story. When Morris introduces a detail and assures the reader that it is taken from the president’s diary, that authority purchases some readerly faith, but the antithetical use of the author’s “War Diary,” – *Dutch’s* author was one year old and living in east Africa when the U.S. entered World War II – prohibits complacent reading. In other words, a form dedicated to both history and imagination stifles the presumed authority of either.

The Modern Library preface to *Dutch* advises Morris’ readers to keep in mind a stated allegiance to accuracy and authenticity:

All that *Dutch* asks of a first-time reader is that he or she be willing to accept, in its early pages, the presence of a fictional narrator. Every biographical fact is recorded, every one of Ronald Reagan’s words and thoughts and acts, are all the fruit of hard historical research. Only the *means* Edmund Morris employs

(deliberately varied throughout the book, to emphasize the fragmentary nature of Reagan's career) go beyond those of orthodox nonfiction. Yet close analysis of the notes will show that even the most apparently imaginary episodes are nothing more than imaginative in execution. They merely tell the truth in ways altogether new. (xii)

Edel's "imagination of form" becomes the Modern Library's "imaginative execution." That parenthetical aside, an interpretation of "deliberate variation" as an effort to thematize Morris' formal play, needs much more attention, not merely because it could fill in literary-critical blanks, but, more important, because it promises that the form of biography can radically adapt to fit the "nature" of its many subjects. This, again, is Edel's eighteenth aphorism. The limits of language, we are being assured, can be mitigated by the metonymy of form. The implicit question, of course, asks whose biography wouldn't benefit by an array of unorthodox literary methods. When pressed, it is difficult to imagine an "orthodox" life.

Dutch might be approached as an unlikely heir to Michael Herr's Vietnam masterpiece *Dispatches*, in which Herr often names the trouble native to telling history. Looking at a map in his story's opening moments, he reflects, "[w]e knew that the uses of most information were flexible, different pieces of ground told different stories to different people" (3). His explanation of the journalist's task might helpfully inform our reading of life writing:

Conventional journalism could no more reveal this war than conventional firepower could win it, all it could do was take the most profound event of the American decade and turn it into a communications pudding, taking its most

obvious, undeniable history and making it into a secret history. And the very best correspondents knew even more than that. (218)

Conventional biography, if such a thing exists, faced with Edmund Morris' work, might take Herr to heart. McCullough's generally straightforward work admits its author in much subtler ways than Morris' memoir. He makes a story out of Adams' interior: "And in this bleakest of hours, heading for Cambridge, and on to Philadelphia, Adams saw his way clearer and with greater resolve than ever in his life" (29). With or without an explanatory footnote (and this observation is without), this move into the consciousness of the subject violates the strictest notion of nonfiction. McCullough, whose biography proves most certainly conventional, moves into his Adams' head more than once. He will later assert that he "was perfectly honest with himself" (47), an interior event hardly available to the author several centuries after the moment of the subjective condition described. *John Adams* is an undeniably strong work, and I do not mean to imply that its author is in bad faith. Quite the contrary, these moves into narrative fiction (or to put it in a manner more likely to be acceptable to McCullough, narrative interpretation) increase the biography's success.

Instead of the futile struggle to arrest every detail of a life's facts in a linear and stable narrative, *Dutch* presents the *stories* of a life. The autobiographical novel, the fictional memoir, and the *roman á clef* are probably the most familiar generic expressions of life writing's weird middle ground. The critique embedded in Morris' book deserves attention, though, not just because it knowingly and publicly introduces fiction to biography, but because it knowingly and publicly introduces fiction into an "authorized" account of a living U.S. president, and not just any president, but one whose legend is

founded on the conflicted pairing of Romantic Individual and Hollywood Performer. This biographer is enthralled of both; his knowing memoir is obliged to the fluidity of the latter as it believes in the persistence of the former.

Playing President, Playing the Fool

Because Morris' unusual biography reflects and emphasizes the ways all biography represents, it is also a meditation on presidential biography as both symptom and diagnosis of the larger story. Presidents, in Malcolm Cowley's dichotomy of public lives, are "representative" of an age, and not "merely typical" (207). Given the many ways "Reagan" can function as a container of representative material—performing patriot, heroic face of "morning in America," an idealized metonymy for the United States, shortsighted warrior whose presidency signifies the nadir of progressive American politics—*Dutch's* form is ideal. The story of an actor-president is archetypal for subjects of presidential biography, because Reagan occupies and performs multiple roles. Didion fills in the trope of presidency-as-Hollywood vehicle, countering Dinesh D'Souza's efforts at a grandiose Reagan, by reducing the entire presidency to a series of archetypal American stories: "This was a president who understood viscerally [...] that what makes a successful motion picture is exactly a foolish enterprise, a lonely quest, a lost cause, a fight against the odds: undertaken, against the best advice of those who say it cannot be done, by someone America can root for. *Cut. Print*" (*Political Fictions* 118). Vidal is in on Reagan's game: "Contrary to legend, he was a first-rate actor, and before the war he starred in first-rate movies. When asked for the thousandth time how an actor could be

president, he said, most sensibly, ‘I don’t see how anyone who is *not* an actor could get through this job’” (*Palimpsest* 292)

Presidents offer good insight into biography and history because, as much as any other subject of life writing, these are momentary symptoms of a nation’s sense of self. Even if only fifty-one percent of the nation’s Electoral College determines which of two or three candidates will accomplish that identity work, the presidential persona operates as a national signifier. Hardly romantic synecdoche to resolve multivalent American cultures, these do register as containable micro-figures of U.S. identity, whose narratives are both producer and product of popular culture, political struggle, class ideology, and market formulae (easily demonstrated by the representational logic of any presidential campaign). Morris explains, “[p]residents, whatever their political symbolism, represent the national character of their era, and if we do not understand our leaders as people, we can never understand ourselves as Americans” (xxvi). Though this definition of the president’s cultural work leaves much unanswered and oversimplifies “the national character,” it does begin to theorize the presidency as a more than politically representative function. As subjects of biography, these are multiply representative figures. At the very least, they carry more than their own lives.

Heir to and master of the office’s performativity, Reagan moves about on his handlers’ stage. As Morris’ Colin Powell points out, while Reagan poses for cameras during his last moments in the White House, he plays his role as president—he is an actor: “Here we were, his senior staffers, all of us who directed him and scripted him and made him up and gave him his cues. And here were the cameramen, the sound guys, the light holders and the grips. And there, all alone against the backdrop of the Oval Office,

was Ronald Reagan shooting his last take” (652). The nation becomes a sound stage, as well, much to the disadvantage of those who did not do well by the studio player’s biggest performance. Significantly, Morris confides that by this point Reagan had already taken his leave of the oval office; he returned at the behest of a staff that “brought him back ... to pretend a little for the record” (651). The analogy is of course tiresome, and it is even dangerous, but it is Reagan’s.

Morris’ subject experiences early connections to the stage—both parents are amateur actors. Jack and Nelle Reagan “were evidently Tampico’s reigning theatrical couple when the tiny town was at its population peak of 1,276 souls” (19). Performance shapes Morris’ Reagan throughout his life, but one figurative expression of Reagan on stage anchors *Dutch*’s story: Morris’ Reagan leitmotiv, *der Reine Tor*, the pure fool of the Parzival myth. Morris imagines his subject as an archetypal Innocent Fool. “Parzival. Perceval. *Pierce-vale*—‘the way of dedication, of the Heart,’ John Matthews writes in *The Grail*. All his life, Ronald Reagan has ridden a long road dissolving, at the limit of sight, into something scintillant yet ethereal. His vagueness about that vision is the typical mythopoesis of Fools or mystics” (26). If Reagan ever lacks intellectual rigor, and it is abundantly clear that he at least occasionally seems to, Morris fashions that shortcoming into the operatic—this is mythic incompetence, indeed a nearly messianic role. The narrative effort to turn Reagan into myth—or, more accurate, to use myth to read Reagan—bolsters the import of his acting career for his identity (or lack thereof). The stage provides Morris his key, and *der Reine Tor* begins to operate as *Dutch*’s guiding logic.

Morris addresses the question of the actor's off-screen identity, and the analysis leaves his acting Reagan without much stability of self:

...the what-am-I-doing-here look. I have seen that same look on the faces of many screen actors between takes. It betrays their chronic loss of identity, re-emphasized every time the rush of Light and Speed and Action is "cut" from them. The spots snap off, the reels stop rolling. For an hour or an afternoon your poor player has to suffer the ordinary light of day, and the strains of unscripted dialogue. He does so with a sense of unreality, because to the actor, only artifice is actual. (209)

While not exactly a romantic excuse for his subject, Morris' *der Reine Tor* motif argues that the stage frames Reagan and, significantly, that he is not the agent of his place in history. Foolish, yes, but grandly so. Here, the implied performance of an identity, an after-the-text reification of the imaginary role, allows Morris more ambivalence, as his subject is both the half-noble Innocent Fool and the actor who exerts some degree of momentary agency over any given role. Ronald Reagan National Airport and The Ronald Wilson Reagan Building do not begin to contain that complexity.

In addition to accounts of Reagan's theatrical and cinematic roles—"Thyris" in a Eureka College production of Edna St. Vincent Millay's *Aria da Capo*, "Andy McCaine" in *Inside Story* (a film about a radio man who solves a gangland mystery, renamed *Love is on the Air*), any number of soldier-pilot-spies in any number of Warner Brothers World War II propaganda vehicles, and "Drake McHugh" in *Kings Row* (certainly his most celebrated)—the innocent fool perpetually marks Reagan as a performance. *Dutch* puts

Reagan on stage, by way of its playful use of scripts and set designs, and with its several cast lists from Reagan's many performances, it keeps him there.

Screen actors are adept at moving from one production to another—sometimes between different productions shot simultaneously on neighboring sound stages. Hence, I suppose, the fabled shortness of Dutch's later attention span, which an exasperated aide would compare to that of a fruit fly. Both the fable and the simile strike me as unjust: he was generally a serious, even dogged study. Yet Ronald Reagan remained all his life an actor, a man of exits and entrances. (181)

The Doppelgängers' Debts

To those readers who will seize on [Reagan's apparently poor short term memory] as evidence of incipient dementia in the White House, I reply: *You do not understand that actors remember forward, not backward.* Yesterday's take is in the can; today is already rolling: tomorrow's lines must be got by heart. Writers are different. Their stock in trade is past experience (particularly past rejections!), and their whole instinct is to turn it to literary account—make art out of life, as the cliché goes. (181)

The contract offered to readers of Morris' book requires that we accept that those who elect to write the story of another person's experiences are not external arrangers of facts but come under the influence of that other person's life. This phenomenon of dialogic, possibly sometimes dialectical, life writing makes possible a mutual identification, in which the text is a meeting point for an authoring subject and an authored subject. It

would be more accurate to think of both as subjects authored in the text. I do not mean, in the manner of the most radical poststructuralisms, that the text precedes the living Edmund Morris or Ronald Reagan—and yet the point is not that the text is a precise representation of either, dependent on the precedence of some true self. Rather, *Dutch* constructs, represents, and conveys two subjects named Edmund Morris and Ronald Reagan. While *Dutch*'s narrator can observe, “Something about [Reagan’s] intent stillness suggested that he had already forgotten who I was, if indeed he ever knew” (543), the reader is often reminded not to neglect Morris. Reagan believes, at least for the moment, that he can afford to forget his biographer. He should not and we cannot. The biographer, in other words, comes to be at least in part defined by his or her composition of a life, and *Dutch* signifies that definition.

Dutch's Publisher's Note, perhaps borrowing a metaphor from Morris, offers its readers a prefatory observation about what may be the most perplexing condition of life-writing: “After years of interviews and close scrutiny of diaries, letters, and old photographs, all biographers become *doppelgängers* of their subjects, vicariously living the very lives they tell” (vii). This theoretical introduction to Morris' biography of Ronald Reagan seems simple enough—biographer Stephen B. Oates, reflecting on the role of the form as history, has put the familiar need for “compassion and empathy” between subject and biographer quaintly: “It is an effort to experience another human being, by seeing the world from his view, feeling his feelings, and thinking his thoughts. To be properly empathetic, the biographer must be prepared to walk many a lonely mile in his subject's footsteps” (12-13). But the Modern Library's hyper-empathetic model deserves reflective pause for at least three reasons.

First, we have been notified by the publisher that “[t]he author himself had assured Random House in the fall of 1985 that he was a writer, not an ideologue. ‘I want to make *literature* out of Ronald Reagan,’ he said” (v-vi) (emphasis mine). This authorial detail asks the reader to accept the premise that literature and ideology are not at all co-constructive, or that they are at least distinct products, and that the biographer can maintain the difference. It is reasonable to ask how a President’s *doppelgänger*, the oppositional phantom twin of a politician, could not be an ideologue. We are not bound to believe that all literature is merely an ideological vehicle to ask how any presidential biographer can simply drop the ideologue’s mantle (or, in some cases, his or her badge) and move around freely in the aesthetic wilderness. Morris will be ideologically informed, even without writing an agitprop book.

Second, the conventional role of the biographer has, even if naïvely, been perceived as that of interlocutor or intermediary between life and reader; the biographer constructs a way to cross back and forth between the lived past and the reader’s present, and the writer’s task is not to self-indulgently compose his own secondary, mirrored life. The function of the *Doppelgänger*, however, is not necessarily to translate for those who seek to understand the primary identity. Neither is a mediator; neither has primacy. Here, of course, the *doppelgänger* writes its own memoirs in which its partner’s story is included, a circuitous means to biography, Morris’ forking path.

Third, the distinction between the ostensible subjectivity of the subject and objectivity of the biographer is supposed to be the foundation of historical nonfiction. Imagining the experience of a life removed from its subject and located in the imagined subjectivity of the biographer—and this is finally what we are told Morris has done—

does away with the chimera of objectivity entirely. This is Morris reflecting on the experiences Reagan had from Morris' partly imagined perspective, a literary trope but the historian's poison. This model is the biographer's fantasy, in which Morris fashions a double subjectivity for himself in order to "live alongside" Reagan, all the while maintaining a discrete subjectivity for himself in the real world.

The Modern Library (and the Morris of the Publisher's Note, it turns out) seems to have gotten it wrong. It has done so by virtue of the fact that Morris generally gets the project itself right. This introductory note strives to *excuse* Morris' weird method by arguing that the biographical subject is the stable figure who is able to take on an ephemeral twin. Instead, *Dutch*, in its willingness to be part literary experiment, part presidential biography, argues for the collage of subjectivity that populates much life writing, and it highlights the agency of the third-person biographer facing the task of translating a life into a book. This book, not simply about the apparent inscrutability of Reagan, turns to the perplexing task of the biographical endeavor and the odd persona of the biographer. In folk tradition, contact with one's own *doppelgänger* functions as a death omen. Here, neither author nor subject will die, nor will he have total control over the other.

Biography as the cooperation of *doppelgängers*, even if an imperfect model, answers more completely than Morris' own metaphor for his uneasy pairing with Dutch:

Memory. Desire. What is this mysterious yearning of biographer for subject, so akin to a *coup de foudre* in its insistence? Yet so fundamentally different from love in its detachment? Dutch has intrigued me, on and off, most of my life, but until 1985 I never thought of being his bard. Even now, as we approach the end of

our aloof intimacy, we are two bodies from remote systems, one a mere chip of rock, one huge—history cannot deny Ronald Reagan’s *mass!* —asteroids whose trajectories briefly interlocked. Yet still I feel that gravitational drag, the product as much of disproportion as convergence. Before we recede to our respective darkness, I must allow these floating fragments, these dusts of myself, to sparkle in his waning light. (xxix-xxx)

The grandiosity of the conceit, begun at the Prologue’s conclusion, and repeated intermittently throughout *Dutch*, registers the cold of masses in space and the inevitability of decaying orbits, but its theorization of the biographer-subject relation inadequately accounts for the work of the biographical enterprise. Its essentializing romanticism, however, infects the promise of Morris’ experiment. *Dutch* is ultimately obliged to arrest his multivalent Reagan, a president whose ostensible indeterminacy does not—as it presumably *should* not—evade the responsibility of his actions. This is the inescapable worry of the project, that Morris’ text offers a multiply-knowable and paradoxical subject, yet its compulsion to judge a real politics ground that biographical playfulness. Morris occasionally recognizes that people pay for *der Reine Tor*’s works.

This biographer regularly frets about his presumed need for distance. In his early chapter, “The Land of Lost Things,” his name for “that vast yet well-stocked territory roamed by historians, biographers, and other refugees from reality” (8-9), he excuses and dismisses his own past: “I am attempting, you see, to get myself out of his biographical way, before it develops its own improbable, burgeoning momentum” (9). Much later, he worries about the effect of meeting with Reagan after the onset of his Alzheimer’s. Yet,

as his book progresses, he often crosses the lines separating him from Reagan. Feeling anxious for his President, he actually attempts to intercede with prayer:

Less willingly then [at Bergen-Belsen] than now [with colon cancer], he had subjected himself to emergency treatment—allowed “physicians of memory” to do what they would with him for the general good. For that agony, and for the agony beyond agony of Elie Weisel, and whatever pain Dutch was suffering now, and for the general good, I prayed until the church’s heat became unbearable.
(539)

Morris even throws a party for the Reagans on the anniversary of their first meeting. Asking Nancy Reagan for some minutiae from that 1949 moment, he goofily jokes, “Great! Now we can make this evening tax-deductible” (629). In a fit of stargazing, Morris will surrender his authorial advantage a million-fold to a Reagan he imagines in the heavens. Through a friend’s back-porch telescope, he scans the visible cosmos and identifies bodies and configurations “symbolic of” phases in Reagan’s life (246-247). The uncanny connection mapped between amateur astronomer and “Star Power” actor-president risks a trite metaphor of biographer and subject—Morris wonders whether it is “astrological foolishness,” and we are tempted to nod.

Morris surfaces self-consciously on the first page. While biographers’ reflections on life writing regularly occupy their books’ introductory moments, this prologue means “Edmund Morris” every bit as much as it means Ronald Reagan. In its first scene, the narrator reflects on providing Reagan with a material cue—in this case, a photograph of an oak tree underneath which a teenage Dutch took breaks from his Lowell Park, Illinois lifeguard job—and negotiating the reminiscence that follows. Reagan, we are told, “does

not welcome undue familiarity with his past” and had flashed “blue anger in his eyes” when Morris suddenly “boasted that I had tracked down his first fiancée” (xxi). The writer establishes, at the book’s very first moment, that there is an unsettled relationship between his project and his subject: “Perhaps his youthful readings in Calvin Coolidge taught him not to encourage interlocutors. *It only winds them up for twenty minutes more.* Even as a teenager, he had taken no personal interest in people. They were, and remained, a faceless audience to his perpetual performance” (xxii). In his Reagan’s mind, every moment’s performance stabilizes an identity; “undue familiarity” with the documents of personal history troubles that actor’s power over the consuming audience. Someone is trying to peek around behind his proscenium and upsets the sheen of solipsism. An asocial Reagan enjoys the protections afforded by absentmindedness and *Star Wars* SDI fantasy. Unwilling to settle at the feet of his subject, not having fallen in love, as Edel reminds us biographers so often will, Morris refuses the role of audience without agency. He situates himself opposite his Reagan, and asks the reader to begin with that tense uncertainty. Morris aggressively enters and contributes to the movie perpetually projecting in Reagan’s mind. There, he contributes a legend to the personal canon:

That hard, splendid body, those bruising arms and knees, the prickle of wet wool are so manifest that I can feel them—as one skinny-dipper did on August 2, 1928, in the nocturnal rescue that gave “Dutch” Reagan his first newspaper headline. **PULLED FROM THE JAWS OF DEATH.** A sudden empathy with the drowning boy (who gave his name as James Raider) makes me want to retch, as if the Rock River’s brackish waters are in my nose and throat, and my consciousness, too, swirling. (xxii)

Six hundred and seventy pages later, in the book's last lines, we will learn that the rescued "James Raider" is, unsurprisingly, "Edmund Morris," who "felt bound to testify, in prose if not speech, that I owed these last seven decades to Dutch" (672). A lifetime after providing the future President with his public premiere, our author has come full circle and returned the favor of rescue. Thankfully, *Dutch* takes that many pages before it so handily (and heavy-handedly) codifies the obligations of the biographer to the legacy of the told life. Each re-births the other: Morris from the suffocating brackish river and Reagan from presidential over-signification. This version of the actor-president's life recognizes and capitalizes on the inescapable conditions that structure efforts to turn his experience into a book.

Yet this rescue is imaginary. Morris' contribution to the Reagan story is allegory—a story to explain what structures life writing. Morris' trope, an invented version of himself, whose fictional experience can lend shape to the presumably lived experiences of Ronald Reagan, allows an artful confession of life writing's fundamental condition: objectivity isn't really the point at all. The point of *Dutch* is that the best record of Reagan's life admits that there is uncertainty, indeterminacy, ambivalence, and performance. All of this critically contextualizes "Cowboy Ronnie's" iconographic status as the bedrock of contemporary American conservatism, hardly enamored of doubt. We should therefore not be surprised by the venom *Dutch* incites, yet its last moment valorizes its subject with a striking absence of critical heft.

Because Morris participates in the performance, this biography's foundation is doubly dialectic: document and story struggle toward synthesis, and biographer and subject operate as the two halves of *Dutch*'s conflicted whole. The prologue includes a

record of a Valentine's Day Dinner in 1983 at Oregon Senator Mark Hatfield's home, attended by the Reagans and a number of presidential scholars. Over the course of the evening, we are told, each guest is taken under the sway of Reagan's need to win over everyone in his audience, including even Princeton Professor Arthur Link, editor of *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, whose "detestation of the Gipper was legendary in academe" (xxiii). The Senator asks each dinner guest to send a written summary of the evening, under the pretense of selecting an official presidential historian, a sort of in-house scribe. Morris' submitted narrative includes the thesis included above: "[p]residents, whatever their political symbolism, represent the national character of their era, and if we do not understand our leaders as people, we can never understand ourselves as Americans" (xxvi). Here, Edmund Morris names and affirms his identity as an American biographer of American presidents. Such an unproblematic subscription to the register of "leaders as people" betrays Morris' foundations. Vidal's Lincoln, couched in the novel, is a character finally safe from the "objective" standards of biography. Morris creates a polyvocal form that cannot escape the notion of a discernible, single voice by which Reagan authors himself and influences a national identity. It will later be revealed that the White House had long since selected him as its "chronicler." He declines for a number of years, citing the pressing need for work on the second volume of his Theodore Roosevelt biography, but he eventually accepts the bargain and immediately begins the subtextual tease toward the rescue-scene revelation: "*Ironia ironiarum*, that I of all people should be charged with rescuing the old Lifeguard from the chill current of history!" (xxvi-xxvii). Morris' figure of adolescent rescue narrativizes his tie to the biographical subject, yet there is ultimately little irony in this literary relationship. In fact, Morris' book of Reagan demonstrates the

entirely regular dialectic between writer and subject. *Dutch* recognizes that common purpose and admits it into the project's surface, enabling a metanarrative to address the conditions in which all life-writers find themselves.

As it happens, *Dutch* is only one of at least three works that complicate the relationship between the writer and the "real" Reagan:

The only book he ever wanted to write was his middle-aged memoir, *Where's the Rest of Me?* (1965). Even that text, eloquent and frank to begin with, shows signs of creeping collaboration (he co-wrote it with Richard G. Hubler), and its overall didactic tone both cloys and annoys. *An American Life* (1990) is a ghostwritten work, undertaken at the behest of Mrs. Reagan, and may safely be described as the most boring book of its kind since Herbert Hoover's *Challenge to Liberty*.⁹²

Morris couches his own work as an appropriate heir and response to those in which his subject is supposed to have been speaking with his own voice. Life writing's Ronald Reagan, predictably, is always already an uneasy collaboration between subject and biographer. Under the "dread title of Authorized Biographer" (xxix) Morris, the storyteller locked in mutual determination with his storied subject, aspires to the sort of life writing that accepts those twin pressures. His prologue teaches the reader that this memoir will attempt to take on the biographer's version of the autobiographical act. Here, a life writer, institutionally tied to his subject by his White House authorization, thus an inevitably complicit agent, takes on the task of making a life, making his own self, and making biography. *Dutch* makes literature of the tie. Fictionalizing aspects of the author's life, hardly an abuse of some fantastically transparent, knowable history in this case, signifies the dialectic between life writer and life. It also attempts to name the

responsibility taken on by the writer. Morris may wistfully connect Reagan the lifeguard to the “rescue” of a nation, but that scene births the impulse that will ultimately make a text out of Reagan. The narrative of *Dutch*’s production becomes a sort of fable, a causal chain beginning with the rescue and ending with the book’s publication.

The coupling of Morris and Reagan finds several expressions besides the lifeguard’s rescue of his future biographer. While Reagan fears flying, Morris makes himself a pilot. Reagan the actor will read copy composed by Morris the script doctor and advertising writer. Reagan’s nearly vagabond family moves about north-central Illinois prairie land while Morris and his fairly wealthy parents live on Lake Shore Drive— Morris wonders whether they ever crossed paths on family drives. Perhaps most significant, Reagan’s absentee-parenting of his son, Ron, offers agonizing antithesis to Morris’ fictional son’s disappearance underground following Governor Reagan’s shocking response to the 1967 Berkeley student political uprising.

The very young Reagan, “imprisoned inside the crumpled roof” of a crashed auto, develops claustrophobia, which prefigures a longtime fear of flying (18). A quarter-century later, “[t]ossed about the sky in a seaplane the next day [on his way to a Warner Brothers screen test], Dutch doubted he would live long enough to reach Avalon. He had never flown before, and childhood claustrophobia, combined with the sight of whitecaps rising and sinking beneath him, made him regret that he had invested in a return ticket” (130). A few years later, traveling on a Hollywood publicity tour with Jane Wyman, “he vowed never to fly again after a snowstorm tossed them about on a descent into Chicago. It was his claustrophobic experience in the amphibian to Santa Catalina repeated, but with zero visibility and vomiting co-passengers ... Ronald Reagan remained earthbound

for the next twenty-five years” (164). “Edmund Morris,” who learns to fly and works as a pilot, deploys the vertical opposition of that depth model as a narrative device when he fantasizes, “[w]here, I wonder now, was Ronald Reagan on June 27, 1925? What if (the passage of seventy-four years allows a certain measure of daft speculation) I had hijacked a dirigible and floated westward while time stood still? What bird’s-eye view might I have gotten of Dutch’s little world, under that same June sun?” (49). He imagines a flyover and even includes a sketched map of “Ronald Reagan’s World, 1911-1933.” Like all maps, this one fantasizes tidiness in the messiness of space. As he passes above his subject’s childhood haunts, Morris enacts the biographer’s control over the life described, here, a “scrawny figure running along the sidewalk, desperately looking up at me? ... Even as I stare down, the boy leaps and makes a convulsive contraction of his whole body, as though something has socked him in the stomach. Then he lands, straightens, and mimes a casual throw. A football fantasy!” (51). Morris’ authority is teased with subservience and shirked off in favor of an adolescent’s earthbound attentions. As the narrator speculates about his subject’s mind below, he begins to recognize and identify both the antagonism between himself and his subject and the agency of the latter: “Or perhaps he is a Warlord of Mars, and is about to deploy that planet’s Strategic Defense Initiative against my dirigible” (52). As a pilot for a company whose task was to maintain navigational ground beacons for mail-carrying flights, he again reflects on Reagan’s life below. “A few times we flew over Dixon, its pinprick lights stippling the frozen bend of the Rock River. Even the grimmest of cities looks magical at night. I would rather not think what it must have been like down there for Dutch...” (113).

Reagan, who has played a pilot on screen, will of course fly again, submitting to the demands of American political life, but his travel at thirty-five thousand feet never affords the perspective Morris enjoys. On Air Force One, he asks Morris,

“Why aren’t you writing?” ... It was his standard joke whenever he saw me without a pen in my hand. “I’m contemplating your murky origins, Mr.

President.” I drew an imaginary arc in the distance, on a course roughly parallel to our own. “Somewhere out there in that haze are all the towns you lived in as a boy. Monmouth, Galesburg, Tampico. Dixon—” He leaned past me, giving off a whiff of Royal Briar cologne, and peered down at the green-gold checkerboard, shaking his glossy head. “Darned if I know where we are.” (24)

“Edmund Morris” the pilot narrates from above this story of his Reagan below, and Reagan, unable to read the mundane signs of a miniature landscape, makes clear his need for an interpreter. Morris the pilot will have to write his life. The art of reading landscape from far above had brought Reagan and Morris together in 1944, as the actor providing voice-over narration and as an aviation consultant for a top-secret Army motion picture project in which a detailed miniature model of Japan is constructed in order to make a training film for bomber pilots. In this case, Reagan’s skill is of course fastened to his performed reading of lines—on a studio set, script in hand, he commands the ability to interpret space (212-214). As soon as his script is taken away, he will be resigned to “Darned if I know where we are.”

The Deadbeat President and the Childless Father

The dialectic of a subject afraid to fly and a professional pilot biographer neatly models the tension and resolution native to third-person life-writing. Morris' treatment of fatherhood, by way of his imagined son's tragedy and by way of his vexed interaction with Ronald Reagan, Jr., poses a more perplexing relationship, though. In this coupling, the muddiness between biographer and subject offers no clear paradigm of responsibility, objectivity, or cooperation and shatters Morris' ambivalence. If anything, the balance is upset, and Morris condemns his reproachable subject.

Whatever biographer's affection he has for Reagan shatters most profoundly at the end of "Reagan Country,"¹⁰ an account of Governor Reagan's National Guard action at the University of California. Gavin, Morris' invented son, serves as the memoir's gadfly, Reagan's perennial critic, and his filial correspondence is regularly included as a deferred savaging of *Dutch's* subject. Having heard a tape of Reagan's 1958 speech to The California Fertilizer Association, which Morris composed, Gavin writes, "Dear Dad—Thanks for the tape, I think. 5 mins. about as much as I could stand. Persuasion my ass. That's Big Bully Business talking" (311). He calls his father's Reagan, "your Yahoo classmate, higher education's worst enemy" (338). His most clear anti-Reagan manifesto:

Dad, this is urgent. I just can't spare the time to come over [to England] & see you all, not thru the election anyway. Reagan has got to be stopped. Men who speak of morality but really mean thought control, who talk in parables that sound comforting but actually subtly reinforce prejudice, who allow buzz phrases like "our city streets are jungle paths after dark" to transmit a subliminal image of

¹⁰ This is Tom Wolfe's term for "the suburban, homogenous communities" of "positive and trusting" Americans who would adore the future President (359).

African savages, are using rhetoric to spread lies, & only words, hard words in black & white, will throw the lies back at them. (340)

Morris' discomfort with Gavin's connections to SDS, the Free Speech Movement, and the Black Panthers, as well as with his reading in Frantz Fanon for a Ph.D. on Camus and revolution mitigates the critique. And yet Morris' defensive response to Gavin's interpretation of Reagan collapses when he travels to Berkeley and fails to locate his son amid the conflagration. Gavin disappears.

Gavin cannot have been the only Weatherman to 'drop out'—awful phrase—as the Sixties became history. Hundreds of other old men, I'm sure, nurture querulous hopes that one day their graying sons will come back home from Sweden or Vancouver. But Gavin won't. Child of the south, beach boy, desert lover, he never took to northern light. Going underground, where there was no light at all, meant the same to him as to any ancient Greek.

And it was you, Dutch, who sent him there. (365)

It is not surprising that Joan Didion calls Gavin “in many ways the most interesting and realized figure in the book” (5). An otherwise inscrutable subject authors all-too-discernible trouble at Sproul Plaza. The fictional son and his loss personify not only the horror of Reagan in Berkeley but the inescapable—sometimes devastating—antagonism between biographer and subject. Reagan most certainly does harm to his biographer. Morris' form tempts the reader to forget that some of *Dutch* never happened, and the pathos of his loss sounds the work's depth. At this point, the pressure of history, the documentary need to tell what happened, is swept away amid the loss of a representative child. At this moment, the memoir cannot sustain its uncertainty and indulges in entirely

grounded indictment. The memoirist dedicated to unsettling biographical practice and interrogating the foundations of nonfiction cannot abide the sins of its subject. Morris' record of the Berkeley madness overwhelms the text's reluctance—he creates a character, a representative figure, one of the “graying sons” and daughters who will carry the meaning of the moment. Here, the fiction conveys the actual. Morris is obliged to catalogue his subject's act, and the life writer ignores the direction to maintain distance and resists the urge to withhold judgment of his subject.

A halting palliative to Morris' loss—and a correlative indictment of his subject—occurs at Reagan's Geneva summit. Morris spends time in the company of Ron Reagan, and the two of them—father without son and son without father—observe the president:

Before the second plenary started at two-thirty-five, I stood in the grand salon chatting with Ron Reagan. His tall athleticism reminded me of the young Dutch, but his soft handshake and his eyes were Nancy's. We became so engrossed in our conversation that we did not notice that the President had entered through the far door.

“The literary set!” Dutch called out, pointing at us and laughing. His entourage smiled primly.

“Uh-oh,” I murmured to Ron, “I'm in danger of losing my objectivity here.”

“That can happen. He represents good things.”

“Like what?”

“Kindness. Honesty. Decency.”

“You really believe that, don't you? It's not because—”

“He’s my father?”

“And President of the United States.”

He shook his head, and held up a finger and thumb, millimeters apart. “I love my dad, but our relationship is about this deep.” (563)

Morris and the younger Reagan spend the next few hours watching the summit from a distance, peeking through half-closed doors and listening for dialogue. The scene illuminates the impossibility of patrimony in this biography. Reagan’s legacy is the abandonment of his own sons and daughters and the end of another’s. Morris’ time with Ron, removed from but able to observe his subject, figures the rupture of both families as well as the conflicted tie between author and subject. Morris’ Reagan may be born of the mutability of shooting scripts, expert at adopting grandly moral roles, yet *Dutch* clarifies the local result of Reagan’s apparent investment in surfaces, and it cannot evade its obligations to comprehend its subject’s works. Morris at least momentarily contends that the absentee father, committed to depthlessness, makes orphans and childless parents of a nation. Consequently, the memoir’s concluding announcement of Morris’ imaginary debt to Reagan is unsatisfactory.

Realpolitic

Morris’ relationship with his subject is, of course, not merely a literary adventure in a vacuum. *Dutch* faces the wide community of readers who bring determined preconception, expectation, and ideology to their reading—in this case, much of that audience expected something else from the first Authorized Biographer. Not surprisingly,

Morris' unconventional willingness to write about life writing as he writes about Ronald Reagan incites a sort of warfare.

What is sometimes Morris' hagiography finds little welcome in the responses of self-described "idol worshipping" Reaganphiles who expend quite a lot of energy trashing the author and his project. The structural weirdness of the biography may be an apt metaphor for the culture warrior Actor-President, but to suggest a mutable and tentative record for this legend clearly unsettles his admirers. Mickey Craig's hyperpatriotic review, "Edmund Morris' Contempt for Ronald Reagan and America" is representative:

The only thing for which Morris has more contempt than Reagan seems to be America, or at least that part of America which hasn't read post-modern philosophers such as Sartre, Nietzsche, and Heidegger. Edmund Morris is a modern intellectual who can't believe that anyone could possibly believe what Ronald Reagan so genuinely and simply believed: that America is "a shining city on the hill" and that he, Reagan, could carefully say what he believed to the American people, trusting them as Abraham Lincoln did before him, assuring them that America's future is bright so long as America remains true to her principles and her Constitution. Reagan was no mere actor, even though he actively sought the consent of the American people to address the problems America faced. Morris can only say that the more he studied Reagan, the less he understood him. (<http://www.ashbrook.org/publicat/onprin/v7n6/craig.html>)

The intensity of vituperation and the romanticism of adoration (couched in the archaic device of the gendered nation) likely stem from *Dutch*'s most incendiary moment: the

narrator's suspicion that his subject may be an "airhead." Morris' sin, in the minds of many readers, is manifest in the following confessional moment: "Yet the magic of [the] Geneva [summit with Mikhail Gorbachev] had faded. Dutch remained a mystery to me, and worse still—dare I entertain such heresy, in the hushed and reverent precincts of his office?—an apparent airhead" (579). This observation is of course counterintuitive. Its simplicity neglects the complexity that *Dutch* makes. Even if it is a fair assessment, and it may very well be (Morris goes on to describe Reagan's troubling over-reliance on note cards and a frustrated staff), its meaning is undercut by the text's multivalence. *Der Reine Tor* returns. Morris will remain conscious of Reagan's "apparent" lack of intellectual vigor as his second term progresses.

His "heresy" ignited a furor indeed. Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the contemporary American political narrative of reductive halves—abbreviated by the unforgivably meaningless red/blue—easily half of Amazon.com's customer reviews of *Dutch* are indignant. Reader Joshua Steans forgives the biographer for his "largely inconsequential use of a fictional first-person narrator," but Chris Moore rails, "[t]he writing style of the author is thoroughly annoying and obscures the substance of the Reagan presidency." The latter is not alone. V. Ryan complains, "I didn't want an autobiography of Edmund Morris, but that's what I got. And in it, I learned about the hoity toity fuddy-duddy old fart who hates the fact that he never got to know Ronald Reagan. Perhaps Reagan sensed that this weirdo couldn't be trusted." Brendan Cheeves apprises us of his tastes: "I love Presidential biographies and can read/listen to them for days, but this book is bad! I mean really bad ... if you like traditional bio[graphie]s, you had better pass this one up." Brendan Collins complains, "Reagan is viewed not as a man,

but as the central character to a pretentious, convoluted student film.” In a fit of rage, Chari Krishnan: “...a bad novel, and a major disappointment to all the Reagan idol worshippers like me who expected so much after all the advance publicity about DUTCH, which should have been subtitled, THE PRESIDENT’S BIOGRAPHY IS MISSING!!!” The frustration of these readers gets its most cogent literary-historical theorization from Earl Holt, whose response not only catalogues conventional generic expectations for readers of biography but also addresses the ways those conventions are aggressively violated by Morris. His review is worth including at length.

The biographer’s task is to compile the facts, utterances, and experiences of a lifetime and, after thoughtful sifting and weighing of their importance, to draw conclusions and offer insights about that life. By these and many other criteria, DUTCH, the only authorized biography of former President Ronald Reagan, is a strangely flawed and disappointing book. There is no clear delineation between fact and fiction ... his use of the fictitious young Edmund Morris character is intrusive, and grants the author equal billing with Reagan when recounting their early years ... this former ad-writer nearly strains himself trying to impress his literary peers with his erudition ... making even the careless reader only too aware of the biographer’s intrusive presence ... Morris’ worst failing, however, is the fact that his attitude toward his subject is primarily one of contempt, and he reveals an even greater contempt for small-town America, whose values and culture nurtured and shaped the character of Ronald Reagan. ... A plausible explanation is that the book is aimed at an audience consisting of the literary

“elite” or liberal “intelligentsia,” whose validation and awards Morris craves, but whose envy and hatred of Reagan are legendary.

Holt’s criticism provides a foundation for reactions like George R. O’Connor’s less patient response, “the thinnest excuse for biography since the average 3rd grade book report ... fiction is too kind a term.”

These reviews are noteworthy not for their insight as literary criticism (Holt’s analysis is particularly difficult to corroborate with the text), but because they are a measure of the role popular nonfiction plays in contemporary political America. Holt offers all the familiar criteria: biographers should remain in the background; admiration for one’s subject is imperative; literary play only obscures history. These responses indicate just how reverent the American reader can be about overtly ideological public figures on the pages of literature. It is no great news that postmodernism and the unsettling of the subject are not warmly met outside of the university’s reading society, but Morris positions his life writing in a particularly dangerous orientation to its readership. V. Ryan deploys the jargon when he guesses that Reagan might have thought of Morris as a “weirdo,” one of Holt’s “liberal ‘intelligentsia’.”

Not much about the antagonistic readers’ reactions is surprising. Morris understands early on that his method could not possibly satisfy a reader looking for a mythic straight story, but his work does not bother to account for its missed opportunity. There is reticence over eschewing conventional biography but instead notice that, since the disproportionate “asteroids” of his and Reagan’s lives have nearly collided, he “must allow these floating fragments of myself...to sparkle in his waning light” (xxx). These representative reviews nevertheless miss at least one mark. They loathe Morris’ knowing

experimentalism yet neglect his compulsion to ground that *bricolage* with Reagan's fatherly neglect and his domestic military intervention. Morris' attempt to articulate his and a nation's debt by way of an invented water rescue is, paradoxically, the problem.

Conclusion: Representative Costs

As the germ of this chapter was conceived, our national media's short attention spans narrated the California gubernatorial candidacy of Arnold Schwarzenegger, wistfully turning another actor into another Reagan by ushering structures of affinity between the two. While those efforts miss much about each subject (the now-governor of California's abysmal polling and failure to see his ballot initiatives succeed comes to mind), they do reaffirm the performativity of the American politician. Reagan, as Morris understands, is something like Josiah Bartlett, the fictional president of the fictional television series, *The West Wing*, whose popularity rivals that of any historical U.S. president. Democratic candidate Howard Dean's website, *Dean for America*, conveniently echoed the television president's campaign motto, "Bartlett for America." As this chapter was completed, *The West Wing* leapt into the dubious territory of live "reality" television; its Democratic and Republican candidates to succeed Martin Sheen's Bartlett took part in a live debate. The day after, in cross-promotional fluff, MSNBC anchors interviewed expert guests, earnestly suggesting that the devices of the fictional debate (both characters agree to abandon agreed-upon rules) might someday take place "in the real world." Zogby even polled for preferences between the two candidates after the episode (de Moraes). Much is always made of the American president's personality,

or his character, and many are more likely to retain the symbolic economies of Reagan's jellybeans, the elder Bush's undiplomatic vomit, the Clinton impeachment carnival (particularly his televised denial of "sexual relations with that woman"), and, now, the younger Bush's aircraft carrier landing. In a *Village Voice* review of Showtime's *DC 9/11: Time of Crisis*, J. Hoberman suggests that the sway of the presidential script only grows: "DC 9/11 is ... the spectacle of Reagan in reverse: Rather than being a professional actor who entered politics, Bush is a politician who has been reconfigured, packaged, and sold as a media star—dialogue included." As Vidal's *Lincoln* reminds us, this hardly began with the Nixon-Kennedy debate. And it has hardly been resolved—the Reagan state funeral enacted the performance of ritual and the ritual of performance and was executed with such dense choreography its status as a national show was inescapable.

Dutch, like Oliver Stone's *Nixon*, understands the concert of multiple selves all presidents contain. Its imagination of form is symptomatic of the office, a role that not subject to much simplification, even when its performers seem to thrive on their own simplification of things. *Dutch*, as a treatise on life writing—built into a treatise on Reagan's life—opens up several means to accommodate those challenges and, doing so, becomes an accidental manifesto. Its force is lessened by the overt turn to easy morality on the final page. That effort to tidy things up, to resolve his "debt" to his subject, cannot adequately situate biography within neat boundaries. His book's subject and his book's project continue to explode their own discourse from within.

Chapter 3: “Things that fiction can’t solve must be worked out in life”: Maxine Hong Kingston’s Obligated Nonfiction

When I write most deeply, fly the highest, reach the furthest, I write like a diarist—that is, my audience is myself. I dare to write anything because I can burn my papers at any moment. I do not begin with the thought of an audience peering over my shoulder, nor do I find my being understood a common occurrence anyway—a miracle when it happens. My fantasy is that this self-indulgence will be good enough for the great American novel.

Maxine Hong Kingston, "Cultural Mis-readings by American Reviewers" (1982).

You know, what I wish that people could appreciate, they could see that what I’m doing is riding that border between fiction and nonfiction. You know, we have a land of fiction and there is a land of nonfiction; there’s a border in the middle. Well, what I’m doing is making that border very wide, and I am taking into consideration I am writing about real people and these real people have powerful imaginations. They have minds that make up fictions constantly, and so if I was going to write a true biography or an autobiography I would have to take into consideration the stories that people tell. I tell the dreams that they have and then when I do that, that border becomes so wide that it contains fiction and nonfiction and both going toward truth.

Laura E. Skandera-Trombley, “A Conversation with Maxine Hong Kingston” (1998).

Life—the life that precedes and flows into mine—has been one long war, forever, that I have to sort out. I’m still trying to figure out which refugees ran from which world war.

Maxine Hong Kingston, *The Fifth Book of Peace* (2003).

Maxine Hong Kingston, leading a group of war—and antiwar—veterans in a series of writing workshops, confesses a recuperative wish for those who have known battle: “Each one of the veterans has had a moment when life blew apart. [...] If he or she could write the explosion, its every smithereens, and narrate what led to it and came from it, the self and the world would become whole. They only need an ethos, a simple set of positive ethics as ground and base” (*The Fifth Book of Peace* 336). This measure of writing, that it might fix what has been fragmented, shares with Kingston’s own work an

insistence that memoir ought to accomplish more than recounting. Her major nonfictions *The Woman Warrior* and *China Men* write among and against ways of knowing experience and history, and both contend that the stakes of the reportorial are high and that contributing to the record means recognizing and being mindful of the chance to make things better. And yet the business of activist nonfiction never works simply in Kingston's books, which argue against easy representation and rarely if ever abide either/or resolutions. Thus, a clearly articulated longing for mechanically restorative writing—that veterans of battle might write toward repaired selves—as well as its unmistakable faith in wholeness, signals a break with almost all of Kingston's writing¹¹. This therapeutic paradigm articulates a rhetorical move away from her foundational sense of contingency and contradiction, as well as from the comfort her works have taken in that open-endedness. Until the restorative writing heals, selves remain smithereens, war fragments awaiting discrete guidelines for reconstructing themselves with narrative. Kingston's hope that her writer-veterans are re-gathered follows *The Fifth Book of Peace*'s founding "set of positive ethics": the author, long engaged in her own traditions of rebellious life writing, finds herself compelled, even *chosen* to become a writing teacher for veterans and to construct a book against war.

The Fifth Book of Peace sustains Kingston's characteristically experimental nonfiction. Its five parts are generically divergent; it engages in deconstructive critique;

¹¹ Kingston's catalogue of published works includes a number of candidates that inform this discussion, but my emphasis will be on *China Men* and *The Fifth Book of Peace* for reasons made clear below. *The Woman Warrior, To Be the Poet* (a meditation on becoming a poet and finishing the practice of writing "longbooks"), *Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book* (a novel, and probably Kingston's most conventional work, though it echoes and is echoed by scenes in her nonfictions), and *Hawai'i One Summer* (a collection of short essays, most published as columns in *The New York Times*, and many of which relate experiences that will reappear in *The Fifth Book of Peace*) all reflect the author's innovations and her attention to the subtle crossings between fiction and nonfiction. A longer study would take into account Kingston's complete works as interrogative nonfiction.

its fictions and nonfictions are not entirely distinct; it invests in simulacra and performativity. However, a discernible turn from the epistemology of her early nonfiction raises questions. *The Fifth Book of Peace* betrays a sort of panic much less apparent in either *The Woman Warrior* or *China Men*. After postmodernism—perhaps at least the postmodernism signaled by what Jameson identifies as the waning of affect—*The Fifth Book of Peace* signals both the possibilities and limitations of an activist nonfiction in the midst of war. Simply, Kingston's book of peace attests to the proscriptions of praxis in life writing. Kingston's other history, *China Men*, figures an auto/biographical success unavailable to *The Fifth Book of Peace*. *China Men* operates knowingly under Kingston's resistance to the straight story, while the latter adopts—and is bound by—the faiths of what Kingston identifies as a morally obligated rhetoric. *China Men*'s justice cooperates with its multiplicity—there is, in fact, an ethics co-constitutive with its form—while the threat of war and the devastation of fire appear to preclude that epistemological openness in the latter work. *The Fifth Book of Peace*'s objective abandons the rigorous theorization that makes the more sophisticated *China Men* its own politically effective work.

Kingston's instructive nonfictions fashion a contingent and fragmented order. *The Woman Warrior*, *China Men*, and *The Fifth Book of Peace* interrogate the disciplining work of nonfiction in general and life writing in particular. Against tendencies to clarify and simplify with memoir and biography, they suggest varying means of representing lives. Each warns against the straight story and suggests that readers should deploy skepticism when encountering claims to authoritative best versions. In her review of *China Men*, Linda Kauffman aligns Kingston with an unlikely, but apt predecessor: "Like Faulkner, she acknowledges the presence of the past but sees the impossibility of

reconstructing the past with factual accuracy; instead she portrays the movement of the heart and the mind from memory to imagination” (223). Looking back through the contradictions of memory and family anecdote, she dismisses what we might fairly call conventional biographical authority. She instead asserts her case for multivalent nonfiction best conveyed by a super-generic work without the weight of the either/or. This study identifies her works *China Men* and *The Fifth Book of Peace* for analysis because, more than Kingston’s other texts, they operate as group memoir, even if reluctant representatives of any distinct genre. Both follow and convey the experiences of their subjects, arguing for an historical place on behalf of a family’s men, war veterans, and the author herself.

Laura E. Skandera-Trombley, in her valuable collection, *Critical Essays on Maxine Hong Kingston*, catalogues Kingston’s generic mix: “contemporized myth, autobiography, memoir, history, fiction, magic realism, fact, and biography” (1). Her Kingston “continually conflates, deconstructs, and problematizes standard conceptions of genre categories” (5). The effect of that play, according to Debra Shostak, is to “complicate our understanding of what constitutes memory, how memory can document the past, and how the past itself is plural” (51). Kingston’s generic experimentations, that is, interrogate meaning making, as well as the subjective locus of experience. Her critical status as an antifoundational life writer and historian is evident in discussions of postmodern American life writing. Kingston’s work has stimulated a significant body of criticism, including substantial attention to its feminisms, its place in the catalogue of U.S. immigrant literature, its resistance to literary convention, and its distrust of institutional history. *The Woman Warrior*, we hear, appears on more undergraduate

literature department syllabi than any other text, securing Kingston a not inconsiderable place in the canons university-educated readers read (Skandera-Trombley 2). Her nonfictions have earned the attention of the most prominent (and varied) contemporary students of life writing: Sidonie Smith, James Olney, Julia Watson, Paul John Eakin, and G. Thomas Couser have each responded to her texts. In fact, *most* extended analyses of women's life writing, of life writing and fiction, of "ethnic" life writing pay attention to Kingston. This is symptomatic not of her representativeness as an ideal spokes-memoirist but of her generic inventiveness and idiosyncrasy. In the wake of Frank Chin's insistence that Kingston's autobiographical approach commits an assimilationist sin and breaks with Chinese lore, some critics have struggled with whether or not Kingston's work is "authentic," though questions of authenticity seem at odds with Kingston's works, given their overt dismissal of the singular, proper, and corrective story. These texts rarely, if ever, concede to an epistemological togetherness that overrides and explains difference, contradictory memory, and national identity. Instead of laying a corrective master narrative, she contends that a series of tentative narratives posits a truer approach to engaged nonfiction, and this is an argument of the largest order. Her works are in every sense pedagogic guides to life writing.

In one of Kingston's many forthright interviews, she laments, "[f]rom the very beginning, of course, [critics] wanted to figure out how to categorize [my work]. And so there were lots of reviews and papers just figuring out what genre it was, and that kept them from looking inside the book for a long time [...] Yeah, and no review looked at anything else but genre" (Skandera-Trombley 34). In the same interview, Kingston fantasizes a trans-critical operation for her books: "What I hope is that my work will

change criticism and not critics trying to cut my work up in order to fit their critical theories” (33). The author of *The Woman Warrior* and *China Men*, two works of nonfiction that resist the stodginess of classification, is never reticent about her books’ hope for outsider status. Kingston may very well aspire to be life writing’s bad girl¹². This notion that any text can supersede informed critical discussion bespeaks Kingston’s trouble with orthodoxy. Her wish to transcend “critical theories” seems not to acknowledge much of the poststructuralist critique of genre, which, after Barthes and Derrida anyway, embraces precisely the sort of text Kingston would produce. Many of the critics noted above submit readings very much consistent with her stated hopes. Kingston’s dismissal of criticism perhaps neglects the efforts of critics to identify her as an outsider, yet it is in keeping with a general dismissal of literary institutions. My point here is not that Kingston actually transcends the work of literary criticism, but that her work argues for an approach to reading and writing consistent with a critical theory that is also suspicious of generic conventions.

Paper Sons amid the Daughter’s Paper Authority

China Men refuses the collection of personal histories into boundaried narratives. Its stories constitute what might be thought of as a paradoxical attempt at *uncollected* history; they convey varying understandings of the past, but decline to operate as the parts of a whole. *China Men* is Kingston’s approach to public history by way of private

¹² Discussions of Kingston’s extra-textual persona are, strictly speaking, beyond the reach of this discussion. In fact, efforts to “understand” a prior author’s motivations and characteristics seems entirely inconsistent with Kingston’s nonfiction, except perhaps to assert that her life writing suggests this memoirist/historian’s resistance to straightforward representations of self. And yet the tone of her interviews, particularly the example cited here, certainly contributes to a sense of the outsider author with little patience for the domesticities of some literary criticism.

story. It collects the lives of her great-grandfather, who travels from China to Hawai'i and labors on a sugarcane plantation; her grandfather, who blasts tunnels and lays tracks for the transcontinental railroad before disappearing in the 1906 San Francisco earthquake and fire; her father, who immigrates from China to California to manage a gambling house and own a laundry; and her brother, a high school teacher who enlists in the Navy during the Vietnam war. Kingston submits her family history in a generic soup of *ersatz* Chinese myths, recollected fragments, legal history, and immigrant legend. Bound together tenuously, the parts register against a whole story, yet they lead from the experiential residue of one family to the representative work of that family's men as several of an undocumented class of Americans.

Kingston has said that the work's aim is to claim America for the Chinese immigrant men who contributed to its development. *China Men* asserts a disruptive role for itself among a larger class of U.S. histories; the book's title figures the relationship between Kingston's family memories and a nation's. The racist slur "Chinaman" operates *sous rature*, as a palimpsest underneath "China Men," which names distinct and discrete subjects from China and, in complicated ways, of China. As ever, Kingston's language does not accommodate the either/or: her subjects both illuminate and lament U.S. racism, and they get beyond efforts to contain them semiotically. Representing a group uneasily, she resists assertions about the homogeneity and representability of ethnic groups, and she disrupts sustained oral traditions in which core narratives are repeated with minor variation. Donald C. Goellnicht has demonstrated that Kingston hardly makes unproblematic characters of her forefathers, father, and brothers:

...[Linda Ching] Sledge and [Alfred S.] Wang have fallen victim, I believe, to thinking in binary oppositions: if Hong Kingston lambasts—as she does—the white racists for their behavior and attitudes, then, in her sympathy for the hero-victims, she must be supportive of the traditional family structures that have come under fire. This kind of thinking is anathema to Hong Kingston's feminist argument, which critiques all systems that establish social relationships as hierarchies of power and which is perfectly capable of a both/and approach instead of an either/or one. (194)

Claiming America means for Kingston an article of ambivalence, not hagiography. Rachel Lee adds that “[w]hile rectifying a warped historical record and underscoring Chinese Americans’ legitimate place in U.S. labor history, Kingston complicates her own endeavor by adopting a contradictory attitude toward male heroism as defined through violent, civilizing acts” (150). The narrating daughter affects an uneasy reckoning between her father’s experiences and her stories about those experiences. *China Men* writes against the histories that left these men out or made them cartoons. In doing so, it posits a paradox very likely more consistent with experience than either the cartoon or the heroic version. Goellnicht illustrates Kingston’s ambivalence about her father, BaBa:

the symbolic order of Confucian patriarchy inscribes for women these positions of inferiority, degradation, nonbeing, and BaBa’s self-hatred stems from seeing his position in racist America mirrored in the subjection of women in traditional Chinese culture. To be fair, Hong Kingston does not always present the father as morose and abusive in America. In a temporal reversal that may constitute a deliberate attempt to ameliorate the reader’s and the narrator’s opinion of him, she

presents earlier, more attractive memories of the father in the second half of the text. (202)

No Kingston characters, possibly not even the overtly fictional ones, and certainly not the living ones, are refined to an either/or. All are subject to the multivalent text in which they operate. An eminently sophisticated response to a whitewashed history of the U.S., the book suggests several narrative approaches to the available histories of China Men in California, Hawai'i, and Alaska in the 19th and 20th centuries.

“The Father from China,” the book’s first extended biographical section, introduces dialogism to Kingston’s project by way of its occasional address to her father: “Father, I have seen you lighthearted” (11). As both apostrophe and history, the text intimates a voice for BaBa while it introduces accounts of his experiences as a young man in China, as an immigrant traveler, and as a patriarch-businessman in Stockton. The narrating daughter invites her father to contribute to the telling, but the gesture can only be that—only the daughter authors, here. The chapter’s address to “you” concretizes the father rhetorically; it figures a dialogue between two subjects, but it cannot actually enact that conversation. We will learn much later in *The Fifth Book of Peace* that BaBa writes back to her in the margins of *The Woman Warrior*, that his lost poetry returns, and a dialogue between father and daughter is possible (256). Her address and the challenge to “speak up with the real stories if I’ve got you wrong” operates dually as the daughter’s authority to tell without her father’s sanction and as an unsettling of the text as the truest version of things. A confident narrator proceeds with her records of history, embracing their constructedness and assured by having offered BaBa his right to correct things if necessary. Goellnicht reads *China Men* as a conflicted offering to BaBa: “...the gift Hong

Kingston attempts to give her father is polyphonous fabulation as a powerful form of shared rebuttal to the monological voice of dominant white history, which has attempted to erase Asian American experience” (206). While gesturing an invitation to participate in the “polyphonous fabulation” sustains the book’s work against the monological, welcoming “the real stories” names the book’s seriousness—it takes on more than recreational memoir and argues for a fuller revision of U.S. history. Kingston knows better than to write a univocal story of her father and situate that among the conventional authorities of historical discourse, yet her work draws on and reifies weighted experience. As purposeful argument, *China Men* contends on behalf of its subjects, men known privately, that versions of their lives ought to have been heard and that even if those men did not engage in lasting autobiographical production of their own, this daughter is well suited to writing for their lives.

China Men tentatively maps a site on the border of known history, distanced experience, and withheld memory. Its narrator tells as much as she is able, and she admits other ways of telling and knowing what precedes and what does not precede her book. The book’s origins are silences and the apocryphal: a father who will not speak and fragments of legends about uncles, grandfathers, and great-grandfathers. In the tradition of public testimony for quiet and quieted subjects, Kingston’s history of Chinese men in the U.S. writes amidst and from the trouble of knowing what was withheld and what was never certain. She explains in an interview, “I wrote the characters so that the women have memories and the men don’t have memories. They don’t remember anything. The character of my father, for example, has no memory. He has no stories of the past ... He is so busy making up the present, which he has to build, that he has no time for continuity

from the past” (qtd. in Goellnicht 202). This poverty of stories necessitates supplement, imagination, and, finally, the narrator’s invitation to the father to amend. The book *produces* from fragment and aphoria. Goellnicht argues, “the father has no voice; therefore, it must be a pure gift, an act of restoring something he lacks” (205).

“On Fathers,” the book’s second section, and its first autobiographical moment, announces BaBa’s indeterminate identity. “Waiting at the gate for our father to come home from work, my brothers and sisters and I saw a man come hastening around the corner. Father! ‘BaBa!’” (6). The arriving man is not BaBa, but the narrator’s mother authorizes the confusion: “No, that wasn’t your father. He did look like BaBa, though, didn’t he?” (7). Having introduced her China Men with “On Discovery,” the mythic story of Tang Ao, lost in the unmapped Women’s Land and transformed from man to woman, Kingston offers no confidence that life writing’s subjects are easily gotten at. “On Fathers” articulates much that is representative of Kingston’s work. It privileges memory; it stylizes a foundationally gendering narrative of a father’s daily return to wife and children; it establishes immediate family as a site at which meaning is made. Forever ambivalent, though, Kingston’s memoir interrogates what it perpetuates: the scene bears as much uncertainty as it does authority, and unknowingness is satisfactory. The man’s identity, and by extension that of the real father, are secondary to the drama of the homecoming, whose meaning is founded in return and paternal promise—the children ask their stand-in father what treats he has brought home from work. The older Kingston is hardly unkind to her mistaken child self and siblings and mother, all of whom participate in the incorrect greeting. Instead, she allows them the authority of introducing BaBa. They convey the uncertainty of identity, the harmlessness of confusion, and the

strong work of childhood memory. Simply, there is nothing wrong with the moment; not even the stranger seems particularly bothered by what could easily be read as a devastatingly undetermined family.

BaBa's proximity as a father hardly makes him well known. The introductory apostrophe of "The Father from China," "Father, I have seen you lighthearted," establishes the experiential authority of the narrator, but the past tense places this characterization at a remove (11). The nostalgic longing of her announcement identifies BaBa *after* lightheartedness, a mood consigned to memory. What follows the narrator's invocation is an idyllic childhood scene, in which father and children lasso a series of pet dragonflies. This is only a momentary father, though. "But usually you did not play. You were angry. You scared us. Every day we listened to you swear, "Dog vomit. Your mother's cunt. Your mother's smelly cunt." You slammed the iron on the shirt..." (12). Furious, the father is inarticulate: "You screamed wordless male screams that jolted the house upright and staring in the middle of the night" (13). That absence of decipherable language—his series of obscenities and "wordless" noise—proves not to be the authoring daughter's worst version of BaBa, though. She says, "[w]orse than the swearing and the nightly screams were your silences when you punished us by not talking. You rendered us invisible, gone" (14). Looking for the stories of her father's life, she indicts his quiet: "You say with the few words and the silences: No stories. No past. No China" (14). BaBa's reticence to narrate will not preclude Kingston's dedication to claiming America with his few stories. Silence of course becomes one of those stories.

The daughter-narrator invents pasts for BaBa, confessing, "I tell everyone he made a legal trip from Cuba to New York" (48). With this sentence, she suggests that any

true version of his immigration story is, at least initially, secondary to her imagined narrative. Immigration, one of the book's—and her subjects'—most contested episodes, is for Kingston a liminal state in which identity is both under critique and capable of transformation. Immigration officials are “Immigration Demons” and Chinese men and women rehearse fictional stories to perform, in order to pass inscrutable immigration standards and gain entry to the U.S. She resumes her ongoing conversation with BaBa—“I think this is the journey you don't tell me” —with a second immigration story, and narrates a stowaway journey to the U.S, in which the father crosses oceans in a small shipping crate and under the care of a smuggler. At sea and bound by his confines, he imagines uninterpretable stories about his crossing as it takes place: “He heard a new language, which might have been English, the water's many tongues speaking and speaking. Though he could not make out words, the whispers sounded personal, intimate, talking him over, sometimes disapproving, sometimes in praise of his bravery” (51). After his ordeal, BaBa, immediately American, orders a self: “The father walked off the ship and onto the Gold Mountain. He disciplined his legs to step confidently, as if they belonged where they walked” (53). Having implied, by virtue of its superseding narrative place, that the second, corrected version must be authoritative, she again breaks off, leaving her story of the father and confiding, “[o]f course, my father could not have come that way. He came a legal way, something like this...” (53). The following version's authority as the concluding word of her father's immigration story bears the weight of final correction, yet it only furthers ambiguity, because it includes one of Kingston's foundational scenes, the act of constructing and performing a narrative that coalesces a self for U.S. immigration officers:

The men spent the long days rehearsing what they would say to the Immigration Demon. The forgetful men fingered their risky notes. Those who came back after being examined told what questions they had been asked. "I had to describe all the streets in my village." "They'll ask, 'Do you have any money?' and 'Do you have a job?'" [...] "What's the right answer?" asked the legal fathers. "Well, last week they liked 'No job' because it proves you were an aristocrat. And they liked 'No money' because you showed a willingness to work. But this week, they like 'Yes job' and 'Yes money' because you wouldn't be taking jobs away from white workers." The men groaned, "Some help." (55)

On the borders, at Angel Island, BaBa and his cellmates practice the autobiographical business of making selves from writing and investing in that performance. David Wyatt details the threat against which these autobiographical acts are crafted:

Immigrants arriving at Ellis Island were asked, typically, twenty-nine questions; at Angel Island those seeking entry could be asked from two hundred to one thousand. The answers they gave had to be corroborated by witnesses. The Chinese kitchen staff on the island surreptitiously helped families keep their stories straight by ferrying messages to and from the city. By the 1920s the average period of detention lasted two to three weeks, although in some cases it could stretch into months or even years. (116)

Creating an efficacious version of oneself, deploying autobiographical practice to material ends as one holds to varying stories, is the common practice of both Kingston's father as an American and Kingston as an American life writer. The artifact at that intersection is the immigration scroll, a written account of an invented or altered Chinese

life, fashioned to satisfy arbitrary immigration measures, which appears regularly in Kingston's works. Her novel, *Tripmaster Monkey*, even introduces a model immigration village, crafted to represent a coherent fictional history. The exigencies of authoring a version of oneself from imagination prefigures Kingston's experiments with life writing, in which life stories evade the authority that would contain them with consistency. The significance, here, comes not from the ability to perform for an audience of officials with arbitrary and racist criteria; the authority of immigration officials to sanction a version of a life is secondary to the constructive work of the autobiographical act. A China Man able to author an effective story wins a small victory. This by no means indicates that men in this community put racist immigration codes behind them or that they author a naturalizing version of self capable of settling subjective ambiguity, but that they are at times able to trick the Immigration Demons by their own life writing, undercutting the xenophobia that keeps them bound to Angel Island. *China Men* participates in that testimony as it echoes it. Kingston guesses at explanations as she asserts his mastery of immigration: "He had passed the American examination; he had won America. He was not sure on what basis they let him in—his diploma, his American lineage (which may have turned out to be good after all), his ability to withstand jailing, his honesty, or the skill of his deceits" (60). This uncertainty is consistent with the variable migration narratives that precede it, yet the success of his narration overrides searches for a determinate cause. Kingston enfolds that uncertainty in her claim that "he had won America."

"The American Father" opens:

In 1903 my father was born in San Francisco, where my grandmother had come disguised as a man. Or, Chinese women once magical, she gave birth at a distance, she in China, my grandfather and father in San Francisco. She was good at sending. Or the men of those days had the power to have babies. If my grandparents did no such wonders, my father nevertheless turned up in San Francisco an American citizen. (237)

“Or” may well be Kingston’s foundational word, and “some say” her richest phrase. This passage’s multiple explanations address the means by which BaBa appears in San Francisco in 1903, and not whether or not he was, in fact, there; as important, it unsettles origins and undercuts the authority of openings. Kingston’s speculative introduction to BaBa’s origins is doubly suggestive: not only do its repeated substitutive explanations work against a stabilizing narrative; they also interrogate place (the ubiquitous grandmother who magically “sends”) and gender (fathers who give birth) (a grandmother’s cross-dressing disguise). The resignation of the last sentence’s conditional phrase does not override the playfulness of the preceding stories. “Nevertheless,” sounds an ironic turn for the passage. Kingston’s multiple speculations seem to have less to do with the possibility of magic and the physiology of birth than with the knowing insufficiency of “turned up in San Francisco an American citizen.”

Having tentatively offered the father’s experience in China as a miserable school teacher—his students are frighteningly uncooperative and even violent, “[t]here came to be small difference between his day life and the nightmares” (39)—and his first years on Gold Mountain (the Chinese immigrant name for California), Kingston moves backward from her proximal father and crafts versions of her great-grandfather and grandfather’s

lives, neither of whom the narrator meets in the text. The story of Ah Goong, “The Grandfather of the Sierra Nevada Mountains,” figures the experiences of Chinese American men in the western U.S. during the mid- and late-19th century. The grandfather dynamites tunnels and lays tracks for the transcontinental railroad. He labors among the Chinese American immigrants who alternately construct the railroad and suffer “Driving Outs” during which entire immigrant communities are forcibly removed. While the cartooned China Man persisted as a racist stereotype in the popular imagination¹³, the Grandfather of the Sierra Nevada’s life story in the American west had been left in silence.

The narrator’s introduction to her grandfather situates him in a shared family story that cuts against the railroad’s conventional semiotics: “Once in a while an adult said, ‘Your grandfather built the railroad.’ (Or ‘Your grandfathers built the railroad.’ Plural and singular are by context.)” (126). The narrator reads the work of constructing the railroad as a meaningful effort to communicate: “Grandfather left a railroad for his message: We had to go somewhere difficult. Ride a train. Go somewhere important. In case of danger, the train was to be ready for us” (126). The intercontinental railroad, very much the capital of an American mythos to which white U.S. identity, as well as the notion of American progress, is bound, takes the form of Maxine Hong Kingston’s grandfather’s local message to his descendants, a voiced material artifact. No longer the signal for Manifest Destiny, it offers refuge for grandchildren, who “believed that it was that very railroad, those trains, those tracks running past our house; our own giant grandfather had set those very logs into the ground, poured the iron for those very spikes

¹³ Even if ostensibly ironic, a fairly mainstream contemporary example is the case of the Abercrombie & Fitch “Wong Brothers Laundry Service –Two Wongs Can Make It White” T-shirt.

with the big heads and pounded them until the heads spread like that, mere nails to him. He had built the railroad so that trains would thunder over us, on a street that inclined toward us” (126). This fantastic revision outgrows a child’s misunderstanding, and contributes to Kingston’s claiming on behalf of her China Men as well as to history’s susceptibility to critique; family legend reads against and across a national narrative.

The intersection of the public (*i.e.*, the railroad’s historical weight) and the private (*i.e.*, the family message) arrests and collects the mythic with the remembered. Kingston perhaps risks sentimentality here, but her recasting of the railroad asserts her grandfather’s claim to it. LeiLani Nishime notes the tendency of Kingston’s men to supersede a single subject position and the resultant dispersal of private memoir across public understanding:

China Men at first appears to be a private family history populated by the narrator's grandfathers, but soon it becomes clear that she has more than is biologically possible. While the “Grandfathers” are individual people with their own personalities and personal histories, they also are a type or a generic forefather whose story is representative of many Chinese-American immigrants.

(2)

That slippage between family history and shared history maps the scope of the work at hand. Kingston begins with the reportorial and applies her grandfather to China Man Grandfathers in general. She takes a public myth, makes it private, and then opens it to a reading community. We might recall that the grandfather of the railroad, who as a young man masturbates as he hangs over cliffs to dynamite tunnels, declaring “I am fucking the world” (133) and who—we learn from *The Woman Warrior*—as a senile old man

(bayoneted in the head by Japanese soldiers) exposes himself at the family dinner table (10-11), also resists boundaries between public and private acts. In order to claim America, this life writing participates in that traversal between specific and general, personal and public. Ah Goong's sexual and bodily exposure operates alongside the narrator's exposure and similarly dismantles staid propriety.

The ethical work of *China Men* as a testimonial document is articulated most clearly by Kingston's reintroduction of the Chinese American authors of the transcontinental railroad nearly a century and a half after history literally removed them from the picture:

“Only Americans could have done it,” they said, which is true. Even if Ah Goong had not spent half his gold on Citizenship Papers, he was an American for having built the railroad. A white demon in top hat tap-tapped on the gold spike, and pulled it back out. Then one China Man held the real spike, the steel one, and another hammered it in. While the demons posed for photographs, the China Men dispersed. It was dangerous to stay. The Driving Out had begun. Ah Goong does not appear in the railroad photographs. (145)

Kingston puts her grandfather back into the record. Clearly, the prominence of the golden spike photograph in U.S. iconography makes it particularly vulnerable to critique¹⁴.

Merely noting the absence of Chinese Americans in the photograph would limit Kingston

¹⁴ General Electric, in its problematic “Ecomagination” series of television ads, has recreated the scene to introduce its “Evolution” locomotive. The commercial, which approximates the period’s film stock and dramatizes the photograph, relies on exclusively white actors. Of course, it is worth noting that in the same series, another ad, “Model Miners,” is a tableau of sweaty supermodel coal miners, posing in a mine with axes and shovels. The ad’s soundtrack is the vastly inappropriate “Sixteen Tons,” whose narrator “owe[s] [his] soul to the company store.” While an extended discussion would be peripheral to this study, one might fairly ask about the distinction between Kingston’s multiple representations of history and General Electric’s. The latter, it seems safe to contend, is an effort to simplify the material conditions of coal mining with beauty—an energy industry wish fulfillment, certainly—while the former works to illuminate the opposite, the difficulty of sorting out and understanding what has happened.

to an either/or, present/absent response to the record (there were people at the scene who are not in the photograph). Instead, she notes the fiction of the photographic document and supplants it with family memory and local anecdote to surround the narrative that absented China Men in the first place; she interrogates the very business of keeping records. That is, Ah Goong's granddaughter talks back to the photograph that left him out. Ah Goong is not a narrative analogue to the photograph, but instead a typically indeterminate Kingston subject, not sufficiently bounded by any one history.

Ah Goong's identity percolates through the concluding notes of "The Grandfather of the Sierra Nevada Mountains": "Some say he died falling into the cracking earth" of the great earthquake (150). In the resultant fire, "[t]he Hall of Records burned completely...Any paper a China Man could not produce had been 'burned up in the Fire of 1906.' Every China Man was reborn out of that fire a citizen" (150). The otherwise destructive fire actually produces subjects able to author an identity without authorizing immigration documents. After the burning of records, Ah Goong's life is occluded. Perhaps he had died in the fire, but "[s]ome say the family went into debt to send for Ah Goong, who was not making money..." (150). This vague family legend is immediately undermined by Kingston's cherished "maybe," here suggestively implying the sort of transcendence available to China Men freed not only from immigration-scroll versions of themselves but from the very category of citizen. The narrator wonders, "[m]aybe he hadn't died in San Francisco, it was just his papers that burned; it was just that his existence was outlawed by Chinese Exclusion Acts" (151). Finally, Kingston closes her catalogue of fragments: "[h]e had also been seen carrying a child out of the fire, a child of his own in spite of the laws against marrying. He had built a railroad out of sweat, why

not have an American child out of longing?" (151). This question, the closing line of Ah Goong's chapter, makes an American place for Kingston's family. The existence of the apocryphal American child finally matters less than the right claimed by the American granddaughter. Kingston's grandfather at once exceeds the closures of subjecthood and articulates at least five trajectories of a self: death by earthquake, death by fire, poverty, paper-son indeterminacy, marriage, and fatherhood. The private and partial stories of each, connected by "some say" and "maybe," are collected in Kingston's efforts toward unfinishable and tentative life writing.

Traveling west, "to compare China, a country I made up, with what country is really out there," Kingston has "gone east, that is, west, as far as Hawai'i, where I have stood alongside the highway at the edge of the sugarcane and listened for the voices of the great grandfathers" (87-88). Hawai'i is a liminal space, an interstitial stopping-off between China and America, contested, registered inadequately by U.S. paradisiacal fantasy¹⁵. Kingston's great-grandfather, Bak Goong, learns the progress of geography from an agent of the Royal Hawaiian Agricultural Society: as a contract laborer, "[y]ou get free passage as far as the Sandalwood Mountains, where you can stay as long as you want, and you invest a little of your profits in passage to California. You'll get there before the Gold Rush is over. Why, in Hawai'i, you're already halfway there" (92). *China Men's* Hawai'i is a sugarcane plantation labor camp where her Great Grandfather of the Sandalwood Mountains cannot commit the autobiographical act of speaking: "The men who had come earlier also said that the plantation had a rule that they not talk at

¹⁵ In the preface to her collection of reprinted essays, *Hawai'i One Summer*, Kingston observes that during her family's seventeen years on the islands, "Hawai'i was a good place for writing about California and China, and not for writing about Hawai'i" (xii) and that "In 1980, I was recognized as a living treasure of Hawai'i" (xiii). I will return to Kingston's Hawai'i below, but any discussion of "The Great-Grandfather of the Sandalwood Mountains" ought to note Kingston's own autobiographical relationship with Hawai'i.

work, but this rule was so absurd, he thought he must have misheard tones” (99-100). This is among the clearest cases of silencing in Kingston’s histories, rivaled perhaps only by *The Woman Warrior’s* No Name Woman. Unlike BaBa, Bak Goong wants to talk story. “He suddenly had all kinds of things to say. He wanted to tell the men who worked beside him about the rewards to look forward to, for example, chewing cane for breakfast... And one day—he could not help it—he sang about the black mountains reddening and how mighty was the sun that shone on him in this enchanted forest and on his family in China” (100). He is punished for violating the enforced silence, but finds ways to speak, including coughing in Cantonese “‘Take—that—white—demon. Take—that. Fall—to—the—ground—demon. Cut—you—into—pieces...’ His sentences shortened, angry pellets that shot out of him” (114). There is activism in his language play. Collapsing words into coughs shares with Kingston the work of making language cut against those who ostensibly order (and prohibit) it. Muting translates to sickness: “Uncles and Brothers. I have diagnosed our illness. It is a congestion from not talking. What we have to do is talk and talk” (155). Bak Goong’s remedy is mythic. He tells the story of a king who hides the secret of his son’s cat ears by shouting it into a hole and burying his words. When grass returns, the secret is announced. The men of the sugar plantation adopt the folktale’s paradigm and dig a hole into which they talk to their families. “They had dug an ear into the world, and were telling the earth their secrets” (117). The hole becomes a receptacle not only for communication to distant family but for all talk, now hidden from white masters.

Shouting into the earth preserves stories for listening heirs, yet it can only secure retelling by way of material mediation. Kingston’s publication of Bak Goong’s stories

takes an interlocutory function, retrieving and communicating them to another audience. Yet finding and reporting the great grandfather's messages is difficult and must abide uncertainty. Listening to the Hawaiian ground, she admits, "the cane is merely green in the sunlight; the tassels waving in the wind make no blurry fuzzy outlines that I can construe as a message" (88). But later, "I have heard the land sing. I have seen the bright blue streaks of spirits walking through the air. I again search for my American ancestors by listening in the cane" (90). "Great Grandfather of the Sandalwood Mountains" suggests the agency of life writing as a remedy for institutional silencing. Kingston's mediating work collects Bak Goong's experiences among others' as she harvests deposited stories, almost literally, though to read the planting and harvesting as a single process of storage and retrieval would neglect the uncertainty and tentativeness that inheres in Kingston's work. Shouted into the ground, messages mutate. They communicate across temporal and spatial distance after seasons of growth, and they bear the residue of the folkloric—after all, a supernatural story about a prince with cat ears founds the trope of gathering secret words from the ground.

"The Great Grandfather of the Sandalwood Mountains" testifies on behalf of muted historical subjects, but perhaps the most indicting of Kingston's China Men stories are her Alaskan "China Joes," whose interchangeable archetypal narrative signifies the emptying mutability of Chinese men in American history. Legendary China Joe's ability to provide food to white workers in bad winters purchases his exemption from the annual Driving Outs, during which Chinese workers are set adrift from Juneau into the Gulf of Alaska. This character is a type, a loyal subaltern persona whose local performer may shift. There are two discernible China Joes in "Alaska China Men": the first, a Juneau

baker who “had saved the miners in the Cassiar District from starvation in bad winters by giving bread away” (161), and the second, “who owned a laundry and a big garden. He had provided vegetables during the bad winters” (162). The short chapter ends, “As French Pete was probably the name of more than one man, as were Dutch John and Missouri Frank and Arkansas Jim and French Charley, Dago Joe and Indian Joe—one of the Citizenship Judges himself was named French Pete—perhaps any China Man was China Joe” (162). This ironic note—two discrete China Joes have been identified—overdetermines China Joe and affords Kingston sustenance of the figure as she undercuts its patronizing work. The bottomed-out subjectivity of China Joe conveys an absence in U.S. history and operates as a flat scapegoat, whose ability to evade exile only sets Driving Outs in clearer relief. Kingston’s account demystifies China Joe and, against a sentimental reading of the typified character, indicts the two-dimensional portraiture by which Chinese American men came out of the 19th century American west.

“Alaska China Men” suggests the possibility that stories ostensibly of the individual are capable of leaving that individual behind; it also reminds us that the import of Kingston’s life writing has something fundamental to do with its how it treats lived experience in material conditions. As she plays with means of representing lives, she illuminates what is at stake in doing so. This is a signature characteristic of Kingston’s life writing: stories vary and suggest skepticism, but the conditions that foster them and the memories that convey them matter. “China Joe” stories simultaneously overlook the conditions of the China Men driven out and sustain a version of race in 19th-century Alaska. *China Men* and *The Woman Warrior* do not abandon the notion that actual lives can be written about and somehow refracted through a story; they only check any sense

that one story works best. In other words, Kingston's life writing imagines that she can leave behind the conventions of historical narrative (*i.e.*, a single, thorough version of events can be conveyed by measuring evidence and marshalling details in support of that version) while sustaining the business of political representation. If she cannot, then her books will have let down their subjects and their histories. If she is able, she will have crafted subjects while remaining obliged to the meaningfulness of their experiences.

China Men articulates life stories that have always been extant and accomplishes identity work on behalf of those selves. "Making Americans"—doubly accomplished by self-authoring predecessors and by Kingston's writing—and claiming America are inextricable tasks for *China Men*. In both cases, more than an historical record is conveyed. Kingston's writing becomes a functional biographical act, and the resultant selves begin to win a sort of authority in an American narrative. In this case, life writing does much toward the work of re-claiming America for her subjects. David Leiwei Li argues, "[f]or Kingston, writing itself is none other than a performance of discovery: it is the taking up of the abandoned claims her Chinese forefathers made in the American mining West and the establishment of their ethnic American identity" (486). The constructive practice of life writing—in Kingston's works at once a postmodern and a Romantic humanist move, in which discourse opens up the mutability of the self and an autonomous subject plays in that discourse—operates in her men's experiences *and* in the text itself. The biographer's control of those stories as representations of experience is uncertain, but her ability (and her subjects' ability) to suggest a varying self by way of imagined stories does secure tentative political agency for both the subject and the narrator.

The Authorities of Form

Exclusionary codification of Americanness and its xenophobic threat is constant in *China Men*, but Kingston typifies and critiques the measurement of institutional American identity at least twice in especially jarring ways. First, “The Laws” catalogues anti-Chinese law and legislation beginning in the mid-19th century and through immigration quota revisions in 1978. In this chapter, the record of a government’s racism marks *China Men* as decidedly subaltern, and the force of language announces institutional control over what “Chinese American” would and would not mean. “The Laws” is a sort of legislative book of days. Its clinical entries, arranged and identified by years, are set against the larger work’s play with history. While Kingston accepts the essential unknowability of “China Joe,” rehearses his stories as performance, suggests alternative explanations for her father’s immigration narrative, and contextualizes the entire work with a formally mythic opening section, this survey of immigration laws enlists the curt tones of a juridical history, illustrated by these representative excerpts:

1878: California held a Constitutional Convention to settle ‘the Chinese problem.’ Of the 152 delegates, 35 were not American citizens but Europeans. The resulting constitution, voted into existence by a majority party of Working Men and Grangers, prohibited Chinese from entering California. New state laws empowered cities and counties to confine them within specified areas or to throw them out completely. (153)

1917: Congress voted that immigrants over sixteen years of age be required to pass an English reading test. (156)

The timeline situates *China Men*'s stories in material conditions and precludes ahistoricity. Amid an otherwise polyphonous, even tentative prose, the form of "The Laws" renders the insidious work of official racisms all the more relentlessly. Kingston says, "I put the information in the middle of the book, so people have to go through it" (Jaggi). Goellnicht notes Kingston's mimicry of legal idiom and characterizes the effect: "...the section carries an ironic undertone: by imitating the monological voice of authorizing History—the history imposed by the dominant culture that made the laws—this section uncovers both the dullness of this voice and the deafness to other, competing voices." (196). Goellnicht identifies the rift between the form of "The Laws" and the "variegated/multivalent/polyphonous narrative" of the rest of *China Men* and concludes that "[p]aradoxically, the imagined/fictional history proves more truthful than the official version" (196).¹⁶

A juridical measure for identifying Americans as such returns to Kingston's family during the Vietnam War. "The Brother in Vietnam," Kingston's account of her brother's work as a high school teacher and as an enlisted Navy sailor completes the series of family memoirs and, turning to the most thorough, deeply institutional sanctions of Americanness levies a critique of war as identity. The unnamed brother undergoes the Q Clearance review necessary for a promotion, a process that delivers legal resolution for Kingston's family: "The government was certifying that the family was really American, not precariously American but super-American, extraordinarily secure—Q Clearance

¹⁶ Brook Thomas, in his instructive "*China Men, United States v. Wong Kim Ark, and the Question of Citizenship*," identifies at least two minor liberties Kingston takes with this straightest history: "she lists the victory of *Yick Wo v. Hopkins* as 1896 instead of 1886, and her account of this case and of the 1879 constitution is a bit misleading" (417. n.4.). Thomas argues convincingly that Kingston's imaginative treatment of citizenship and identity ought to be read by way of an informed legal history and that her *China Men* and U.S. law are co-constructive of their status as American citizens, not that citizenship is a static concept to which Chinese Americans were helplessly subject.

Americans. The Navy or the FBI had checked his mother and father and not deported them” (299). The brother declines the post because he recognizes that it will require interrogating Vietnamese prisoners of war. A “cleared” identity operates perilously close to alliance with the worst of this war—too close for the brother, who has rationalized an acceptable complicity in which almost any exchange of goods, services, or money indirectly contributes to war: “In a country that operates on a war economy, there isn’t much difference between being in the Navy and being a civilian” (284). Kingston’s account of his experience in the classroom, in Vietnam, and home again articulates a means to selfhood that relegates Q Clearance to the secondary. The brother succeeds and the family passes, authorized, but the suggestive rendering of his experience as an enlisted sailor conveys Kingston’s critique of war’s work: “While his services were needed for the undeclared American-Vietnam war, the family was safe” (299). At war, his identity remains diffuse. Family nostalgia drives him to seek out an apocryphal relative’s home in Hong Kong, but the homecoming gesture disappoints: “Perhaps they did live in one of the shacks upon the hill and had put a fake address for their relatives not to worry [...] It was just as well he hadn’t found them” (303). Each scene’s contribution to the brother’s, and the family’s, American identity is interrogated by a suspicious sister. Kingston makes a history of her brother’s experiences without indicting him, instead fashioning biographical fragments that illustrate the futility of relying on those experiences (military service, travel to southeast Asia) for a resolute story—the brother gets his clearance, makes peace with enlistment, sees Asia, even rides along on a bombing run. Kingston narrates a brother of several conflicted experiences. The brother’s Company Commander orders other recruits to shine boots, but repeats his one question to

the Brother: “Where you from?” “It was a racial slur, all right, as though he were saying, ‘Remember you’re not from Vietnam. Remember which side you’re on. You’re no gook from Vietnam.’ That’s right, he wasn’t” (286). The Chief’s racist sadism, familiar enough synecdoche for military discourse, signifies handily the Brother’s trouble in the U.S. One hundred years after codified Americanness is withheld from Kingston’s family, her brother earns it in a vexed procedure. Kingston critiques Q Clearance because it is superfluous; her family has been making America all along. Her life writing, which claims America, dismisses the written language of *The Laws* and Q Clearance, which closes off the possibility of alternative Americas.

Before turning to the epistemic change marked by *The Fifth Book of Peace*, I would like to address the generic play of *China Men*. After opening, “Once upon a time,” much of “On Discovery,” that first piece of the book, follows a folkloric form (3). Kingston, in an interview, explains that “[a]ll the mythology in *China Men* is from what the Chinese call the small tradition, not the greatest literary traditions, but those of lower class people” (Islas 12). Kingston’s traditional mode has affinity with “talk story,” a form approximated in all her nonfiction, described by Linda Ching Sledge as “a conservative, communal folk art by and for the common people, performed in the various dialects of diverse ethnic enclaves and never intended for the ears of non-Chinese” (143). Talk story, a practice of both of Kingston’s parents, operates like folktale and legend, not necessarily bound to believability, but generally more complex than easily read morality tales. Echoing talk story in her written work allows Kingston variation, play, and, even irony (she ends “The Ghostmate,” a legendary narrative of a young man lost in a storm and detained at the home of “the most beautiful woman he has ever seen,” abruptly, tongue in

cheek: “Fancy lovers never last” (81)). Founding *China Men* in folk tones, enlisting nothing like nonfiction’s authoritative mannerisms, Kingston indicates that her representation of the past will continue the nonfiction paradigm of *The Woman Warrior*. She claims to be “treating seriously myths of the old world I’d never seen,” distancing herself from experiential authority but approaching a literary tradition as an object of respect (Jaggi). David Leiwei Li explains that “On Discovery,” however, “is actually a creative adaptation of one of the most famous episodes of the eighteenth-century Chinese classic, *Mirror Flower Affair*” (486). *China Men* begins between folklore and discrete literary artifact: “Once upon a time” invokes the anonymity that inheres in folklore but the tale turns to an authored text (albeit one most likely unfamiliar to most U.S. readers). Readers must immediately come to terms with already upended genre—is this myth, history, parody?—and all that follows is informed by that introductory phrase. Li’s reading of the book’s form registers its multiplicity: “*China Men* starts out to subvert this genre of monolithic history through its discovery of a collective mode; its stories are episodic and pluralistic in the pure sense of the words. History, as this talk story mode implies, is a discovery of many equal stories, not a solo appearance but a choral performance” (497). “On Discovery” concludes its two-page legend of Tang Ao, the explorer lost in the Women’s Land, with speculative uncertainty in keeping with folk forms: “Some scholars say that country was discovered during the reign of Empress Wu (A.D. 694-705), and some say earlier than that, A.D. 441, and it was in North America” (5). “Some say” names the book’s rhetoric and throughout provides Kingston’s best authority. This is one of the Chinas from “a country I made up” (87).

China Men's twelve intertexts do not simply metaphorize biographical nonfiction; their contextual operation haunts those episodes. Resistant even to their own generic types, they take more than one form, each fragment furthering the multivalence of the work. "On Discovery," "The Ghostmate," "On Mortality," "On Mortality Again," "The Adventures of Lo Bun Sun," and "The Li Sao: An Elegy" follow the conventions of the legendary, and sometimes the supernatural. "On Fathers," and "On Listening," are autobiographical fragments. "The Laws," "Alaska China Men," "The Wild Man of the Green Swamp," and "The Hundred-Year-Old Man" are largely historical or documentary fragments. This exercise in classification very likely flies in the face of Kingston's efforts to dispose with the disciplines of genre, and each of the twelve certainly overrides the laws of its parent form, but my catalogue should indicate some resistance to cohesion. Situating each alongside the other in a manner even more radical than that of *The Woman Warrior* (which similarly blended conventions) posits an unsettled life writing, resistant to the collecting strategies of nonfiction. Sledge argues, "[i]n short, the legends are more than heroic analogues to the chapters on family history: they are paradigms of the storyteller's art, sanctioned and enriched by repetition within an immigrant community and family, and giving order, purpose, and historical authority to the roughly drawn biographies of family patriarchs" (147). Mareen Sabine argues for the familial work of the quasi-Chinese interchapters of *China Men*, efforts toward a homecoming for BaBa:

The daughter narrator fears that her own father is a "dead man walking"—a man who has lost his soul in America—and is equally concerned to devise some means of calling him back to life. In her narrative of "The Father from China," she tries to recuperate a Chinese cultural imaginary that gave meaning to his early life and

delineate his psychic affiliation with this figurative world, even if he never returned physically to his homeland. (189)

Yet these fragments cannot be read as unproblematically Chinese. Sledge notes their resistance to easy forms: “Kingston creates [...] a gallery of diverse heroes from different periods and literary or historical contexts. The structure of the narrative is serial, for one scene or story leads to another, without logical transitions or narrative bridges” (151). My sense is that the authority of several intertexts comes from their antagonism to the settling forms of chronological biography—these moments interrupt and critique the practice with which they are complicit, family memoir. Admittedly, they may suggest the gravity of the legendary, but their overt detachment from ostensible experience unmoors them from any illusions about the authority of the first person and the reportorial.

The book’s most representative moment is its last, which enacts the argument of the entire text, that these stories remain open and contested. *China Men* closes in resigned and peaceful observation. At a party, the narrator listens to young Chinese American men and a Filipino scholar tell apocryphal stories of Chinese exploration for gold in the Philippines, in the U.S., in Mexico. These last pages are those of a comforted historian, watching her subjects listen to stories the preceding work is not obliged to contain. No master narrative summarizes, and no correct version of experiences commands history. Instead, the text accepts, with satisfaction, the sustenance of contradictory stories. The book’s activism survives—thrives on—its ambivalence. “On Listening” matters so fundamentally to *China Men* because it infinitely sustains the epistemology that founds the entire work. Kingston’s last note, “Good. Now I could watch the young men who listen” (308) attempts to forfeit the implicit authority inherent in any book’s last page,

that an inevitable material conclusion offers some end to what precedes it. Goellnicht: “...one suspects that she now listens for the next generation of young men to respond with their own dialogical voices, to lay claim to their America” (206). *China Men*, consistent with its faith in the openness of biography, history, memory, and experience, abandons its voice and becomes an observing agent, secondary to the auditory participants who take in the varying China Men histories offered at a casual party.

Life Writing After the Fire

The Fifth Book of Peace, less a restorative history than a pacifist act, offers no such irresolute ending. Its closing chapter insists that Kingston’s writing workshop communities have “stopped wars years hence. We made myriads of nonwars. We have ended wars a hundred years from now. The war against Iraq, which began the same year as the Oakland-Berkeley fire [in which Kingston loses her home and book-in-progress], is still occurring. But the peace we make also continues, and fans, and lives on and on” (398). The hopefulness of that account is followed by an epilogue, a survey of her community’s responses to the September 11 attacks and an appeal to readers: “The images of peace are ephemeral. The language of peace is subtle. The reasons for peace, the definitions of peace, the very idea of peace have to be invented, and invented again. Children, everybody, here’s what to do during war: In a time of destruction, create something” (402). The first three of these four sentences, definitions of peace, maintain Kingston’s thoughtful sense of ambivalence and change and her embrace of the indeterminate. The closing sentence, however, articulates the suggestion of order, of procedural conclusion, of protection from the unresolved. War drives Kingston’s life

writing to a discrete purpose, and multivalence becomes subordinate to the specificity of that purpose. *China Men*, most certainly engaged in social justice, makes its arguments—that the U.S. has erased Chinese American men from its Histories and replaced them with cartoons, that the stories of parents and grandparents are subject to the effects of fiction, that translation obscures, that myth is mutable—by way of contingent narratives and multigeneric fragments. It makes no clear plea to its readers but instead tells stories that answer silence. *The Fifth Book of Peace*, a response to fire and to war, requests with clarity. Its stories are obliged to a preventative purpose; even as they push against the boundaries of life writing, they are means to an end.

That change is significant. While Kingston's contemporary work holds to her bricoleur's style, with its varying genres and figurative connections between parts, all fragments coalesce in the book's mission against war. The open end of *China Men* is, in other words, impossible under the determinate argument of *The Fifth Book of Peace*. That turn in Kingston's work is indicative of the rigors of praxis and symptomatic of activism's effect on life writing. Kingston's discernible anxiety, regularly evident throughout *The Fifth Book of Peace*, does not oblige her to conventional life writing, but it does begin to arrest the sort of openness, and perhaps even the sort of work accomplished by *China Men*.

A newspaper feature reports Kingston's wish to be in a community of writers after losing her house and manuscript in the 1991 Oakland-Berkeley urban wildfire; she seeks "people who'd been hurt in wars. I was testing my faith that the art of writing could lead us out of our pain and losses and we'd come home from the wars to a hard-won

peace” (Jaggi). Discussing her work in progress toward the Book of Peace, she contrasts its obligations and *China Men*’s:

The sense of mission in *China Men* is that I was responsible for history. *China Men* was written in order to give us a history and to educate everyone as to our Chinese American history. And I saw my mission that I needed to educate a very ignorant America. Creating the self also means to create oneself as a good citizen, a citizen of America and a citizen of the world. There’s a social and political responsibility. I think I express it in *China Men* and in *Tripmaster Monkey*.

(Simmons 164)

Here, responsibility and citizenship make *China Men*’s work. The histories produced in that book are bound only by Kingston’s pedagogical tenet: teach people about her *China Men* by telling them the stories they need to hear. She continues,

And that same sense of mission is now global. I think that the only way I can integrate East and West is thinking about global politics or a global peace-making mission, and so what I’m working on now has to do with: How do you make peace in the world? How do you stop war? How do you write a book of peace? And of course this brings up all kinds of literary problems. I think a lot about Aristotle writing about action, and that dramatic action comes from conflict. So does conflict have to be violent? Does conflict have to be war? I see myself writing counterpoint to *The Odyssey*, which is about a human consciousness that finds its heroism in war. So how do I write about woman warriors, peace warriors? (Simmons 164)

The “responsib[ility] for history” is satisfied by *China Men*’s narrative work, but the weight of “mak[ing] peace in the world,” among veterans and amid “people who’d been hurt in wars” founds the latter effort. The questions she raises have to be answered, and that condition means a notably more vexed project. The educational history of *China Men* gathers its authority from its unsettled narratives. Looking forward, unsettled ambivalence will not wholly suffice.

The Fifth Book of Peace situates itself with a table of contents announcing several voices. The annotated ordering commits the following text to distinctions between truth, fiction, and nonfiction:

Fire

The author tells about herself running through the Oakland-Berkeley hills, which are on fire. All her material goods, including her novel-in-progress, are burned. A true story.

Paper

The history of lost Books of Peace, and the quests for them.

Water

A re-creation of the burned book. A fiction set in Hawai’i, where Wittman Ah Sing and his family seek sanctuary during the War in Viet Nam.

Earth

A nonfiction during which the author and her husband live in temporary homes while their new house is being built. She sends out a call to war veterans to help write a literature of peace.

Epilogue

The first notes of “Fire,” the narrator’s search for home in an urban wildfire, are disorienting; A survey of the peace book tradition in China, “Paper” adheres to the author’s reticence about historical authority (its first word is familiar to Kingston’s

readers: “Supposedly”); “Water” is a fictionalized echo of Kingston’s family’s experience in Hawai’i and a coda to *Tripmaster Monkey*. As “Earth,” the story of her writers’ workshops, progresses, it becomes clear that the author has taken on a moral obligation to her subjects and it conveys wariness about that responsibility. By the end of the section, and well into the Epilogue, Kingston’s familiar multivalence seems unable to survive panic over not only the condition of her writing community, but the threats of a contemporary world at war. At the very least, the comfort offered by *China Men*’s last scene is now absent.

In a survey of her writing sangha¹⁷ after 9/11, she insists, “Peace leads us. Moral principles do not change. A moral principle is neither relative nor conditional; it does not depend on the time, circumstance, or situation” (399). This concretization gains no hold in *China Men* and *The Woman Warrior*. Even though the former claims America and the latter works toward a translatable voice between women and between generations, neither announces a singular axiom. Fixed principles—unconditional principles—found the source of this book’s anxiety. Subject to the demands of fostering that global peace, this nonfiction writer worries. This Book of Peace prescribes a specific palliative to specific people who have specific experiences, and Kingston’s objective, as she leads writing workshops for veterans, is to heal. Writing for Kingston is now recuperative not in its multivalence, but in its ability to make whole from fragments: “You are now ready to gather the smithereens, and narrate them into story” (260). “Meditation and writing, and silence, are ways to gather the self together again” (261). That obligation structures the bricolage of her most recent text, not least because it pleads a discrete response of its readers. She prescribes, “[i]n a time of destruction, create something. A poem. A parade.

¹⁷ Community.

A friendship. A community. A place that is the commons. A school. A vow. A moral principle. One peaceful moment” (402). The urgency of that appeal—the wars that open and close the book, both U.S. interventions in the Middle East, are deadly—is echoed in the worry persistent throughout the work.

Kingston rarely strays into the colloquially political. Her writing has always been too knowing for the overwrought jeremiad, and so her activism is interrogative and suggestive, not coercive. In *The Fifth Book...*, she explains “[a]bstract terms such as ‘nation’ put me into despair” (390), and “[i]deology is what got us in trouble in the first place” (330). Yet there are inescapably political stakes throughout her works. Amy Tan identifies the object of Kingston’s purposeful books: “Maxine infuses her work with a strong morality; it’s art that moves people to think in a different way” (Jaggi). The recuperative efforts of the nonfictions turn to sustaining indeterminacy: warrior Fa Mu Lan is a blend of parody and mythic-heroic forms, and no fundamental history of Kingston’s men orders things. Kingston’s winning epistemology, almost literally under the gun at the turn of the century, has to accommodate war’s damage and its threats. *The Fifth Book of Peace*, tasked with more than “mov[ing] people to think in a different way,” focuses, refines, and gathers its subjects into the cohesion her other works forfeit.

In a symptomatic moment, Kingston tells us that Tang Ao, left indefinitely in the Women’s Land at the end of *China Men*’s “On Discovery,” “was gone for so long that his daughter, Little Jug, incarnation of Fairy of a Hundred Flowers, went in search of him. She searched twenty-nine fabulous lands— island paradises, mountain paradises, cave paradises. In each place, she heard that he had come and gone. She found him, a captive in the Land of Women, rescued him, and brought him home” (49). This will be a

book of conclusions, answers, resolutions. Welcome resignation to an unclosed text has been overridden by the requirements of specific praxis. *The Fifth Book of Peace* is best approached as an obliged text, bound by the demands of its relatively narrow end and anxious that the end will be satisfied. Obligated to healing (even if the narrating Kingston paradoxically shies from “that New Age word. It implies that something’s wrong, that they’re unwell, and need fixing” (265)), the new book cannot abide the fragmentation of selves in need of restorative gathering.

Both *China Men* and *The Fifth Book of Peace* respond to destruction, loss, and absence. The former’s fragmentary stories make a contingent history of Chinese American men. In *China Men*, the 1906 fire unbinds Paper Sons, China Men identified by mutable immigration scrolls and Immigration documents, from their obligation to a documentary record—they win a sort of agency by that fire. The fires of *The Fifth Book of Peace*, however, require remedy. Houses and books burn. Soldiers napalm and are firebombed. Kingston turns fires into stories—she does not invent those episodes to dramatize known lives. This matters, because the temptation to abandon all experiential precedent is always at the edges of her life writing. None of these conflagrations are metaphors, though. Papers, homes, and bodies actually burn; her nonfiction responds to the breaking point brought by each fire—each produces and destroys, but none submits to an easy literary register. Multiply understood burnings operate along different valences, nonetheless, when Kingston looks back to her family’s history than when she looks forward to the prevention of ongoing war.

False comfort fails Kingston during the first moments of the book. Her travelogue account of a deferred homecoming during the urban wildfire is matter-of-fact. Instead of

grand descriptions, she lists facts: “A firestorm blew over the Oakland-Berkeley hills in October of 1991, and took my house, things, neighborhood, and other neighborhoods, and forests. And the lives of twenty-five people” (3). Instead of the rhythm of overflowing panic, “I was driving home from funeral ceremonies for my father. I have lost my father. He’s gone less than a month; we were having the full-month ceremony early, Sunday day off” (3). The economy of the reportorial persists in her description of trying to get around police roadblocks, of finding a lone fireman stationed at a street corner. Clipped sentences—“It was the middle of the afternoon, about two o’clock. Too late. Too late. The sky was black. The sun was red. Leaves of burned black paper wafted high and low among the buildings. Ashes from a forest fire were falling and blowing in downtown Oakland” (4-5)—are the register for sense making in a scene of catastrophe. “Anyway, only now, as I write, am I coming up with the words for things that were making wild appearances and disappearances” (6).

The contemporary Kingston writes against not some conceptual, recollected warring but a material conflict whose dire threat menaces her world at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Her *Book of Peace* begins aphoristically: “If a woman is going to write a *Book of Peace*, it is given her to know devastation” (3). A friend phones,

her wonder-filled voice talking to me about loss. “Maxine, please don’t think of this as if it were Pollyanna speaking, but I think that if you’re going to write the *Book of Peace*, you have to have lost absolutely everything. Everything.” I’ve got to hang up and write that down. Goodbye, Phyllis. I stood at my little patio table, where the notebook from Africa that Bessie gave me lay open, and wrote down

what she said: If a woman is going to write a Book of Peace, it's given her to know destruction. (40)

This principle orders a chronology and a progression for *The Fifth Book of Peace*, its genesis in loss.

The memoirist initially reads the fire as both a sign from her recently-deceased father, dissatisfied with her family's premature funeral rites, and a reckoning for the 1991 U.S. Gulf War. The search to identify a metaphysical cause for the destruction signals a subject who hopes for determinate stories. The Oakland-Berkeley fire's meaning is finally unknowable, something the narrator acknowledges, but only after suggesting a discernible causality. Reflecting on other public disasters, Kingston insists that "our fire is not as bad, not tragic, because not evil; fire is morally neutral, an accident, a storm of nature" (19-20). Yet her initial drive to ascribe meaning and agency to destruction codes the other meaning-making function at work: veterans writing their memoirs toward thoroughgoing peace. "These ideas—that the fire is to make us know Iraq, and that my father caused the fire—came to me when I stood still in the center of devastation. For 360 degrees, everything was flattened except chimneys, columns of chimneys two and three stories high. Each burned-away house had left its tomb stone" (17). Having made her way to the site of her lost home and having found "a black, negative dimension, where things disappeared, and I might disappear" (10), interpretability is hard to come by. The narrator's sense making is founded in negative comprehension: "I did not have a sudden moment of knowing that my house and all that was in it were no more. I stood there reasoning, If I can see that flag from here, then I am also looking through the place where

my house was. I was laying eyes on it without registering which piece of blackened land amidst all this blackened land was exactly my piece” (12).

Years later, moving away from a threatening Los Angeles fire, she asserts that “[f]ire is not apocalyptic. Los Angeles is burning, but the fire is not the Fire Next Time. It’s not the Day of the Locust. Earthquake, fire—it’s just weather” (313). Whatever fire’s interpretability as a source of destruction, what it leaves behind demands physical and psychic repair. Kingston’s home is rebuilt, her manuscript is rewritten, her community re-gathered. Fire comes to mean destructive force generally, and its wages are writerly—making stories from fire and from war is both therapeutic and preventative work.

My recurring dream from smallkidtime is that bombers and missiles fill the sky, steadily moving, like words on a page; I can prevent the bombing by finding the Three Lost Books of Peace. Three Books of Peace came into existence, it’s said, when Chinese civilization began, and were somehow lost. We must find them.

We need them. Now. (38)

As the architect of a timely Book of Peace, Kingston no longer needs to isolate the Oakland-Berkeley fire’s meaning. She locates purpose-giving Idea amid the destruction and orders her new book in its wake.

Much of the contemporary book’s work (as well as its anxiety) is in keeping with, and perhaps in a representative relationship with, the memoirist’s subjectivity. As soon as she realizes that the fire has destroyed the fourth book of peace, she “felt coming into me—oh, but here all along inside chest and stomach and all around me and out of the smoking ground—Idea. Idea has weight and life; I can feel it” (13). Without a home and working to rewrite the book of peace—obliged to tradition—she becomes manifest idea,

a guide, an authorizing and ultimately authoring presence. As her writers craft their stories of the Vietnam War and the experiences of the antiwar community, she seeks to order their work, enacting a literary determinacy as she worries about the workshops' schedules and execution, anxious about the needs and temperaments of her writers, unsure of their willingness to take meditative practice seriously. Kingston's mother, who dies between the fire and the publication of *The Fifth Book of Peace*, visits in dreams and asks, "What have you been doing to educate America? What have you done to educate the world? Have you taught everybody yet?" (241). Kingston explains, "[t]hat is my charge from my mother. My calling and vocation" (242). The fire orients her purpose and self.

As important to the project are the veterans who answer her search for the peace book tradition. "Because I asked everywhere for Books of Peace, and I told everyone that I had lost the one I was writing, veterans of war began sending me their stories" (242). Communication between war veterans and the aspirant peace-book author begins to cohere her place as a recuperating force, as strangers begin to correspond: "Local veterans I don't know are writing me letters of sympathy and apology. They are sorry that they did not come to my rescue during the fire" (243). Fire's force compels that letter writing, and fire operates as the filament between the writer and the veterans: "Fires, past and current, set the veterans to writing me. They have flashbacks, and they recall bombings, but also moments and islands of peace. Paul Woodruff [...] came back from Viet Nam feeling 'like a fire had burned my past life'" (244). The dependence that structures an activist writer's relationship with veterans of war follows the clearest articulation of the book's route to peace. The narrator observes that "[m]en in war and

men in prison hear their mothers talking to them” (242). In times of peril, then, men and women talk across distances; in the case of Kingston’s brother in Vietnam, his mother “scolded him not to get hurt” (242). But men talk from war, too:

Among the letters, one Anonymous Veteran wrote explaining to me why veterans need to report to women. Yes, women are sanctuary; women bring soldiers home. But also women need to hear the war stories. “Native Americans consider war an altered state for which warriors were prepared with ceremony, and from which warriors were welcomed back with ceremony. In this way the entire community (women, children, old people, the ill and handicapped) participated in the war. They shared the risk and responsibility, the suffering and loss, the victory or defeat, and then went ‘home’ together. I have met many men for whom women were the way home.” (248)

The Book of Peace, of course, follows that tradition, if uneasily. The obligations of that ritual work, taken on by Kingston, who ultimately becomes a “way-shower” to veterans, are tremendous: “How should I reply to all these people? In person. I have to look in their eyes and faces, and tell them, You are home. Thank you. I have to give them something, reciprocate gifts. *And happy-end the wars.* (248) (emphasis mine). Writing workshops are to serve as the site of those happy ends. Kingston makes herself responsible for righting the losses—and preventing more loss—suffered by her writing veterans. She accepts a contract: “Now that I have entered their lives with promises, I better stay. I can’t be another one who abandons them. I feel a vow coming on—that I will be the writing teacher of the veterans for my whole life. I will help them write until the stories full of explosions keep quiet” (314). Teaching, prescribing a specific palliative to a specific

group of people, structures the memoirist's subjectivity. Kingston has fastened herself to a *raison-d' être*.

The book's most unsettling fire at once informs all other fires and sets in relief the disciplining work of storytelling to make sense of a scene that should, one imagines, not be part of human experience, private or shared. A writing veteran, Roman "Hopper" Martinez, conveys the horror story of smelling burning human flesh during the Vietnam War. Kingston tells us that Roman "composes by speaking to his wife, Miriam, and she types in all caps on his Purple Heart stationery" (328). The narrative, read aloud to the group, is here at a remove, dictated from the typed iteration of the oral, composed in clinical all-caps, set against the clean regalia of the Purple Heart. These narrative markers should signify the sterility of a story separated from its antecedent experience, yet its gore works to undermine any effort to domesticate Hopper's experience with narrative order. "I WAS OVERWHELMED TO FIND OUT THAT THE SMELLS THAT HAD ME SALIVATING WERE COMING FROM MY COOKED BUDDIES. THERE WAS A PILE OF ASHES WITH 3 LUMPS IN IT; THE LUMPS WERE THE AIR CREW. ... THEY WERE COOKED JUST RIGHT; ROASTED IN A MAGNESIUM FIRE." The author of "Hopper's Last B.B.Q.," concludes the short narrative, crafted from a report with which he had appealed for V.A. support to treat his PTSD, "THE REMEMBRANCE OF THIS OCCASION BRINGS ON A DEPRESSION, AND SOMETIMES A RAGE. THE SMELL OF HOT METAL (SUCH AS A HOT SKILLET) OR BURNED BARBEQUE MEAT, BRINGS BACK ALL THE EMOTIONS..." (328-329). In shock, the writing group remains silent. "We are all of us in horror, disgust, sorrow, rage. What to do? What to do in war's aftermath? *Make a story. Tell the story*

until a happy ending” (329) (emphasis mine). And this is precisely *The Fifth Book of Peace*’s mission, to take the uncontrollable and the devastating and submit them both to a cleansing and preventative narrative. The Book of Peace will not undo or explain the fires that bring it about, but its reactive work looks to limit imminent conflagration.

The surrender to story at the end of *China Men* and that book’s treatment of history does not survive the Oakland-Berkeley fire. Of course, neither does the book of peace in progress in 1991. The fire not only takes that manuscript away, it supplies new purpose and new focus to the work. What had been a short fiction in which the antihero of *Tripmaster Monkey* and his wife, Taña, and child, Mario, exile themselves to Hawai’i to evade the draft and the U.S. war in Vietnam becomes a multipart, multigenre amalgam and, Kingston clearly hopes, a fuller antiwar act.

Kingston’s description of what she finds in place of her lost book is archetypal border-writing—the manuscript is between several states, and this artifact signifies what is for Kingston something like a synthesis of idea’s thesis and matter’s antithesis. The manuscript’s remains are physical but too light to be constant. Parts of the book are electronic, their materiality melted in two destroyed computers, and “you had to be an expert to guess which mangled piece of machinery was a computer, which the television set, the small TV, the radio, the nonworking Victrola, the other radio, the tape deck, the lawnmower motor” (34). Objects are burned of their difference. The book’s remains are measurable, but not containable:

The ashes of my Book of Peace were purely white, paper and words gone entirely white. The temperature here in the middle of the alcove had been hotter than by the wall. I held in my hands the edges of pages, like silvery vanes of feathers, like

white eyelashes. Each vane fanned out into infinitely tinier vanes. Paper had returned to woodgrain. I touched the lines. And they smeared into powder. I placed my palm on this ghost of my book, and my hand sank through it. Feathers floated into the air, became air, airy nothing. (34)

This is the remembered residue of a book, discernible but not at all determinate. Its interstitial status between matter and memory shapes the present text's uncertain handling of the relationship between things and ideas.

As she surveys the fire's remains, charred of their reference, "I'd forgotten to keep noticing Idea. Yes, it's here, I can feel it, a solidity at the center. But would it exist if I were killed? What if 'Idea' were just my life, me feeling my life? [...] I'm the only one who knows about and works on the Books of Peace. Its idea depends on me—small, slow, forgetful. Things gone, Idea remains" (21). Kingston's mother will insist that "[t]hings don't matter. Don't *hun* things" (23). Yet Kingston makes homecoming pilgrimages and collects remaining objects.

No sooner did I imagine my jade heart than it appeared, green and gold on a cushion of ashes. I held it flat between my palms, wanting to heal it against my skin. It was hurt; green veins had grayed, and there was a black burn in its setting, the very middle of the gold flower. I willed a life force—the pain in my hands, pent-up chi energy—from out of my hands into the jade. (32)

This is no ordinary object: "When mother gave each of us our jade, she told us about the symbiosis between true jade and human flesh. 'Wear it on your chest. It breathes with you, and beats with your heart' (32). Reclaiming the jade heart, "a sign of being Chinese," contributes to Kingston's grand mission; it means "I have to pacify the world"

(32). She suffers fire below her feet—a friend’s feet actually bleed as he looks for her lost book—for things: “the ground itself was burning and breathing. The soles of my boots heated up, and burned my feet” (33).

Her brother George collects detritus from her burned house and creates art objects. He “took melted glass, and phoned for me to save him some more. He liked the interesting forms and colors. I hadn’t wanted glass until George did; then I collected glass. I got hoardy, didn’t want to give him the best pieces, though he’s the one who knew to see them as beautiful” (35). And the urge to collect grows: “Each time I returned, I hoarded more things” (35) and “I quit collecting stuff when I realized that I could end up carrying all of it, the entire contents of the lot, all of the ashes, even the burned dirt...” (36). Attending a conference after the fire, Kingston takes comfort in the things her friends give to her (42).

Thought and matter achieve a sort of reconciliation at the site of language.

Kingston posits a grand unifying theory of peace, language, and body:

Peace begins in thought. Thoughts enworded go from mind to mind, and mind makes the world. Peace, illusive, abstract, negative Yin, dream, would take a long writing-out to make real. Its book has to be longer than war books—longer than bumper sticker, longer than a sound bite. As we read, neuropeptides in the brain grow longer, longer than in nonreaders. Thought becomes body. Sudden fast change is a method of war. The logic of peace has to be spoken out at length. (54)

Here, the matter of language becomes a processional strategy for the book. No longer at war with one another, thought and body progress toward informed peace. This is perhaps Kingston’s highest idealism—that the Book of Peace operates with spiritual agency,

gathering minds and bodies in Utopian resolution. As she wanders her burned neighborhood, she tells a bicyclist that her book has been lost. “He tapped me on the forehead and said, ‘You’re alive, and it’s up here.’ I decided to take this touch of a human finger to be a blessing upon me, and his words to be a testimony.” She corrects his assertion, but holds on to his line between idea and matter, even beyond her own corporeality: “It’s not up here in my head; I feel Idea at center, heart, stomach. And it’s all around and underfoot” (19). After the openness, the irresolution of an earlier project in which language and body and peace are hardly co-conspirators toward a happy *telos*, this moment signals a changed Kingston.

Kingston places books and fires in a long tradition. “Book-burnings go on to this day and age—the Cultural Revolution, the destruction of six thousand temples in Tibet—six thousand libraries” (45). She explains that “[s]upposedly, a long time ago in China, there existed Books of Peace. They were Three *Lost* Books of Peace, lost in deliberate fires” and, more specifically,

A Thousand years ago, on the Silk Road in Western China, the mayor of Dunhuang ordered books burned to keep them out of the hands of the invading Xianxian tribe. Heroic readers saved twenty horseloads of books [...] And I have heard that it is possible that a Lost Book of Peace was among the books taken away on horseback. A Book of Peace, existed, then, until the eleventh century, in the Sung period. Diana T. Wu, professor in the business school at St. Mary’s College in Moraga, pooled these facts at a dinner party. [...] I am not the only one who knows of them. (45).

However, Kingston's requests that peers and students and friends search for traces of the Lost Books of Peace seem not to yield results¹⁸. In China herself, she asks after the books and finds "turtle books," is told about "oracle bones" and "sky books." She explains to "Two learned men" that The Books of Peace "must have been in my mother's talkstory—in her war stories—but then I would hear 'Three Lost Books of Peace' in her voice, in Chinese" (51). One of the men, Wang Meng, ex-minister of culture for China, "gave his voluminous smile, and tapped himself on the head. My father used to do that, and the man at the fire had tapped my head. 'You yourself imagined Books of Peace. And since you made them up, you are free to write whatever you like. You write them yourself'" (52). Wang Meng offers significant authority, here. Kingston can pilot the Peace Book tradition.

Other book burnings are significant to *The Fifth Book of Peace*. In the 1991 fire, she loses her family's immigration scroll, surreptitiously taken from *Brave Orchid* to be photocopied. I have discussed the signal role of this artifact above, but its loss here deserves attention, because it follows Kingston's conversations with her mother over the family's authoritative "genealogy book—the real lineage, not the fake info for Immigration" (57). She says, "the book is the size of a ream of typing paper. The last time I asked my mother for the Hong genealogy book, she handed me a thin booklet. She'd deleted 'all the bad people,' keeping the teachers and poets, and recent generations, relatives she knew personally. Immigration scroll and genealogy book—gone" (58). But Kingston tries to recover the book: "she helps me remake my lost book. She tells me what to write and what not to write. 'Your father told you not to harm anyone in your

¹⁸ Kingston introduces Books of Peace in *Tripmaster Monkey*, too: "There used to be three peace books, too," Wittman tells Taña. "They were found in a cave by a wind wizard, and now they're lost" (170).

writing. Don't tell our Benefactor's name, or anything that would hurt his reputation. Don't tell about the gambling house.' Too late" (58). Then, "MaMa also tells me her real ancestry, not the fake genealogy on the scroll [...] She's not making this up, it is documented: My father wrote it in her funeral eulogy" (58-59). The willfully fictional scroll burns. Kingston asserts a single, "documented" family history.

She learns from her mother that BaBa had written and lost six books of poetry, carelessly burned by a nephew in China who "coveted the book box. He dumped the poems, and took the box. Your father wrote to me to send him the six books, and I had to tell him that his mother burned them." The daughter's understated response fashions the line between BaBa's work and her project: "'Oh.' My father had six books burn, unpublished" (28). Her lost fourth book of peace joins her father's burned works, the intentionally burned first three books of peace, as well as

T.E. Lawrence, Aldous Huxley (a California fire), Hemingway (a fictional fire), Ken Kesey, Gogol, Kafka, Goethe, Lao She, Gerard Manley Hopkins, St.-John Perse, Louisa May Alcott (maybe fictional), William Carlos Williams, Ralph Ellison, Bharati, Mukherjee and Clark Blaise, Al Young, Toni Morrison, Rita Dove, Robert Nichols. Josephine Miles told about a Berkeley fire in which every poet in town claimed to have lost a masterpiece. Five years later—ta-da—the Berkeley Renaissance. (277-278)

The history of burned and lost books satisfies at least two ends: the enduring identity of the familiar authors she lists and the futility of writing for permanence.

At least one book burning destabilizes the register of fire as destruction and suggests that a sort of teaching can be found in the ashes. "The second summer after our

fire, we arrived at the Grand Canyon and saw that its little library had burned down the previous night but hours before we got there. For years, burned pages blew about and landed in the forests of the high desert. I identified charred paragraphs from *The Mill and the Floss* [sic]" (286). Though the burned fragments are spread across a desolate space, they are there to be gathered, sewn but not destroyed. *The Fifth Book of Peace* affects its own gathering of burned and spread papers. Just as Kingston collects and identifies the Grand Canyon fire's burned fragments, she recalls the burned fourth book, the narrative remains of soldier's wars, and the history of the Books of Peace.

Yet the promise of the Book of Peace follows fundamental loss. Baba has died, and his absence is significant for the daughter, engaged in a writing relationship with him. He lost his poetry in a fire and lost his poet self upon coming to the U.S. She writes to him in *China Men*, and he writes back in her margins (256). The narrator's ascription of the fire to her father is a lament: "My father is trying to kill me, to take me with him. At this morning's funeral fires, we burned gifts and provisions for him, but it was not enough, and he's angry. He wants more—my book, all my books, my house, and neighborhood—and is taking more—my cities, Berkeley, where I teach, Oakland, where I live" (14). She describes his medical treatments regretfully and confesses, "we shouldn't have let them push him screaming into the MRI machine ... we should have declined the loud respirator, which pumped air into him. How to breathe like the Buddha when the machines are forcing you? They tied his wrists and ankles with strips of cloth to the bed rails" (16). Her despair over BaBa's last days "came to me when I stood still in the center of devastation" (17), and she ultimately decides "it was a mistake to have the red ceremony today—too early. We did it just because Sunday is convenient. We

shouldn't have hurried our father" (18). Kingston loses father, home, and book. Her Mother dies "in the writing of this Book of Peace" (397).

Brave Orchid's death is accompanied by natural phenomena—"The days and nights of her dying, the San Joaquin flooded"—and follows one of the book's only satisfactory closures: Kingston was able to tell her that a sangha had been created among her writers, and she celebrates the heavenly reunion of Baba and Brave Orchid. She announces, "I had been able to tell Mother that I built a sangha. I pronounced it Soo Hong, the name of the community house she wanted" (397). The community, necessary part of the program toward peace, signals the work's best achievement and "[i]f the world, time and space, and cause-and-effect accord with my mother's teachings—her Tao—then we have stopped wars years hence" (397-398). The ongoing sustenance of that community, necessitated and guaranteed, the Epilogue documents, by the September 11th attacks, indicates an at least partially satisfied objective, and its promise of "end[ing] wars a hundred years from now" names Kingston's best hope. Yet it is a hope bound in worry and ultimately a limit on Kingston's nonfiction model.

Kingston, never reluctant to supplement her primary life writing in interviews, offers the following satisfying approach to writing:

When I write most deeply, fly the highest, reach the furthest, I write like a diarist—that is, my audience is myself. I dare to write anything because I can burn my papers at any moment. I do not begin with the thought of an audience peering over my shoulder, nor do I find my being understood a common occurrence

anyway—a miracle when it happens.¹⁹ My fantasy is that this self-indulgence will be good enough for the great American novel. "Cultural Mis-readings..." (102)

Here, an idealized author retreats into the romantic personal and creates for herself. The cultural work, reception and reaction and perhaps even public praxis are secondary, serendipitous. The Great American Novel might be borne of literary turning-inward, but that prospect is—perhaps rightly—treated as happy coincidence. Kingston is self-effacing, here, pointing to “self-indulgence” only comprehended by way of the miraculous. Even still, what she identifies as her deepest, highest, furthest writing can be gotten only without a community of readers. In the middle of *The Fifth Book of Peace*, that aloneness is indicted and sworn off at the work’s most striking moment:

After the fire, I could not re-enter fiction. Writing had become a treat for my own personal self, as it was when I was a kid and it first came to me, for nobody to read but me. Say any manner of thing. For my own benefit. Retreat into the Yin mother darkness. Oh, the necessity and comfort of writing “I...I...I...I...I...,” the selfish first person, author, narrator, protagonist, one. Freedom—to write diarylike, okay to be formless, no art, no good English.

Fiction cares for others; it is compassion, and gives others voice. It time travels the past and the future, and pulls the not-now, not-yet into existence.

¹⁹ This preemptive defense against readers has had no measurable effect on the quantity of efforts to “understand” her works, of course.

The garret where I wrote, which was just my height, burned. A sign. I do not want the aloneness of the writer's life. No more solitary. I need a community of like minds. The Book of Peace, to be reconstructed, needs community. (61-62)

Banishing diaries coincides with a mandate for social justice that certainly structures *The Woman Warrior* and *China Men* but here follows a more transparent rhetoric. *The Fifth Book of Peace* names its object, peace, and aligns its various genres, fragments, and assertions on a trajectory toward that communal end. The privacy of an ideal diary that might someday transform into Great Literature seems not to fit in the formula of the *Fifth Book of Peace*. The playfulness and the experiments of early Kingston have here been cast off for the seriousness of her chosen obligation. The record of losing her home and book to fire, the history of the books of peace, the adventures of the Ah Sings in Hawai'i, the account of extended writers' workshops, and the concluding clarion call for making peaceful things, committing peaceful gestures, and documenting that making seem all contingent on Kingston's condition at the beginning of the twenty-first century in the U.S. Now at war and having lost father, book, and home, *The Fifth Book of Peace* operates—paradoxically, in Kingston's conventions—as an appeal for control, singular agency, and even for order. The fear of war, the remains of destruction, and an obligation to veterans all make the comfort of “diary-like” “self-indulgence” anathema. The strains of each populate this text.

Several telling moments from the workshops deserve attention. Generally anxious about the business of her writers returning to the Vietnam War and its contexts, and about the relative importance of orderliness itself to her Buddhist-meditative workshops, she often articulates her worries. Early in the first workshop at the University of California

faculty club, she confides, “I am so excited—the meeting of veterans is beginning—that I don’t hear [one of the veterans introducing himself]. I can’t retain what he’s saying”

(261). A few minutes later, the workshop is troubled:

Tom greedily talks story; the sentences are so complex, poetic, trippy, I can’t retain them. Sherdyl doesn’t try to curb him, so I interrupt: Please give time to everybody else. We’re just having introductions now; there’ll be more time for stories... They’re impressionable. I have to be careful what I say. Quit suggesting sensational things—that it’s possible to forget being in war, then wake up decades later. (262)

When a participant writer tells the group “I am writing myself back to health...Poetry writing and journal writing are instruments in my healing,” Kingston confesses her unease: “*Healing*. I avoid that New Age word. It implies that something’s wrong, that they’re unwell, and need fixing” (264-5). Later, defensive, “I give instruction on how to meditate. I mustn’t confuse it with praying or worshipping. And nobody’s trying to convert or save anybody or any soul. The Community of Mindful Living is not a mind cult” (265). After offering elementary instruction in meditation, the worry begins to overwhelm:

We are on time, but how to keep up? Everybody else also has a handout sheet with the schedule in front of him or her. But they aren’t motivated to help move it along. I am crazy over time. Time drives me crazy. I can’t wait until this day is done. Rush, get it over with, so I’ll know how things turn out. I forgot to tell them to enjoy the peace and quiet we’re making. (266)

Leading the group in walking meditation, her internal narrative continues,

I hope they're not embarrassed doing this weird, slow, silent walk amid the public. No, they're tough veterans; they can take social embarrassment. But it's the Berkeley public they're walking through; many people fear and dislike Berkeley, hold things against Berkeley, formerly the other enemy. I continue my worrying. *Worrying is my basic state of mind.* (269) (emphasis mine)

In preparation for silent eating, "I am trying to tell them of a profound Buddhist practice. They don't know how much planning went into deciding on those fifteen minutes of silent eating" (270). The ethical obligations of a workshop leader with participants who are turned toward their wars rears suddenly, when "[t]oday, for the first time, I think about PTSD—post-traumatic stress disorder," and though she pushes herself—"I should quit worrying"—the panic continues (274). Tom again needs controlling, so "I have to interrupt this waterfall of consciousness" (274-275). And, finally, near the first workshop's conclusion, Hong Kingston's self-critique is full-blown. As a friend leaves a workshop

I say, "George." He looks up, expectant. But I don't have a wise enough thing to say to him. "You say you haven't reconciled yet. Reconciliation isn't something you do once and for all. You have a lifetime to do it in." Then I think, What a dumb thing to say. That he has to struggle forever. I feel bad, putting George through meeting Viet Nam vets, who must have been young brutes to him, gooked by White GIs and Black GIs. (279-280)

After he leaves, "I say, again inadequately, 'Asian Americans have special pain over Viet Nam, Asians against Asians.'" And the next day she insists to her psychotherapist, "I've induced nightmares in the veterans. I made them worse. I should have warned them"

(283). The writing community itself is hardly always cooperative. When poet Ted Sexauer reflects, “I wonder what our counterparts, the writer veterans in Viet Nam, are thinking?” The question meets with rage: “Clarence jumps down his throat. ‘What do you *think* they think? Invaders out of nowhere bombing them, tearing their country apart, killing their family and friends and neighbors...” (279). When “Eager Tom” reads his letter to Kingston to the workshop, “I want to reel Tom in. I’d rather hear about his down-to-earthly life in the streets” (293).

Perhaps the most difficult, even angst-ridden episode takes place when Kingston invites Grace Paley to participate in a workshop. “The room is tense, upset. Ted is angry at Grace. Who is she anyway? Is Maxine trying to foist Jane Fonda off on us?” (345). Given Kingston’s approach to the workshops and their development, even in light of the anxiousness they produce, it is surprising to read that “Woman Vet lets loose wrath at Grace and ‘hippies from Berserkeley’” (345). And during this workshop, a participant even suggests that Kingston’s project exceeds possibility:

Kim Redeemer, Buddhist from Thailand, addresses me. She questions my incessant push for the happy ending. ‘Maxine, you’ve told the group that writers have a responsibility to inspire hope.’ In her soft, determined voice, she quotes me: ‘Too many veterans have killed themselves and too many have written suicide endings. Today, let’s write a happy ending. (347)

Redeemer shares the story of a friend, a “competent therapist, who was able to help her suicidal clients choose life,” who “took a handful of her sleeping pills and then walked into the ice waters of the Bay.” She says, “I want to believe that happy endings will inspire our readers to see light at the end of the tunnel. Please tell me how I could write a

happy ending for Jean's story" (347, 348). Kingston does not reply and waits for Paley, who talks about local activism. It is prototypically Kingston's nonfiction to introduce a contradictory note like Redeemer's, yet this critique is thoroughgoing. One could leave the scene understanding that while the local happy ending, appended to each story, is not tenable, a larger ending—specifically, to war—might be. And yet Redeemer's question, and Kingston's silence, particularly as part of a troubled meeting, testifies to the worry inherent in her task's demands.

At an early workshop, Kingston discovers her most well-known fictional character: "Mike Wong same-same Wittman Ah Sing. I made him up, and he's appeared. He's real, only Mike went to Canada, not Hawai'i. He has hardly aged, hair yet black, thin black mustache, tall and skinny in jeans and plaid shirt. I can feel him listen to me. He looks to me for cues on what to do next. May he still be idealistic." This real Wittman is "Chinese American brother writer, the loudest, liveliest voice in the room. Loud and proud, a man on the margin functions in many countries at once, soldier *and* hippie" (297). Identification across what for Kingston has always been the permeable line between fiction and nonfiction testifies to the agency of both Wittman and Mike. They only reassert one another. Yet that willingness to pass between fiction and nonfiction does not survive the work Kingston takes on. This same narrator has insisted "things that fiction can't solve must be worked out in life" (241), and so during what would have been the last workshop, were it not for September 11th, we read, "I confessed that I'd kept seeing him as Wittman Ah Sing, but now know that he is not a jumpy monkey. 'You're a solid citizen, using statistics and logic and evidence to substantiate peace. Your peace and your faithful true love for our country, for us, for Jade, fill me with hope. You have the

most amazing full life, *better than any imagined character's*. You've done it all" (396) (emphasis mine). Kingston's confession, and her sense that Wong, as a friend, supercedes a fictional character, seems the right thing to do, of course, and while it may diminish Ah Sing as an "imagined character," were there a shared standard of measurement between truly fictional characters and known people, its primary work recognizes the comparative complexity of the latter.

Nonetheless, in this book, the articulated tension between the fictional Ah Sings and the real people of Kingston's memoir of fire and writing illuminates anxious questions that Kingston's prior works would very likely leave satisfactorily unanswered. I would like to conclude this study with an analysis of *The Fifth Book of Peace's* fictional core, "Water," the rewritten Fourth Book of Peace, in which the Ah Sings establish sanctuary in Hawai'i. This section conveys notes that echo and write against the context in which it appears, and with the possible exception of "Fire"'s opening survey, it is the book's most compelling aspect. The Oakland-Berkeley fire, the Book of Peace histories, the writing workshops, and the epilogue each prize nonfiction and writing in community. "Water," properly a novella, is a fiction, though its rough parallels of Kingston's family's experience in the war years ward against easy application of that term.

In the 1998 preface to the paperback edition of her essay collection, *Hawai'i One Summer*, Kingston says "[f]or me, Hawai'i was a good place for writing about California and China, and not for writing about Hawai'i" (xii). While living on the islands, she worries about appropriateness and ownership of Hawaiian stories: "My great grandfathers, one on my mother's side, one on my father's side, and my paternal grandfather lived and worked in Hawai'i. Even so, they were not kama'aina [native], and

I am not kama‘aina” (xii). Kingston left Berkeley and traveled to Hawai‘i with her husband and son in 1967. Her short essay, “War,” one of several originally published in the *New York Times* in 1978 and collected in *Hawai‘i One Summer*, provides an autobiographical antecedent to “Water.” Her reading of the war economy sounds not unlike the rationalizations of *The Brother in Vietnam*: “We did not look for new jobs in Hawai‘i. It was the duty of the pacifist in a war economy not to work. When you used plastic wrap or made a phone call or drank grape juice or washed your clothes or drove a car, you ran the assembly lines that delivered bombs to Vietnam” (15). Wittman and Taña, on the airplane from California to Hawai‘i, determine that, in order to survive, one will have to earn money while the other paints (Taña) or writes (Wittman), but Wittman’s job will be “trudging to the Unemployment office” (72). The Kingstons contribute to the creation and sustenance of a sanctuary for AWOL soldiers at the Church of the Crossroads, and Kingston describes an experience with one, who answers her question about shooting model cars he’d assembled: “‘It felt good—like when I was a door gunner on the chopper in Nam. Thousands of bullets streaming out of my gun.’ Silence. Don’t tell me about the gooks you shot, I thought. Don’t tell me about the hootches you torched” (18-19). Uncomfortable proximity to killing shapes the fictional characters’ experiences, too. Wittman and Taña will, like Maxine and Earll, learn that they “had not, of course, escaped from the war, but had put ourselves in the very midst of it, as close as you could get and remain in the United States” (16).

Near the conclusion of “Paper,” Kingston explains that the Fourth Book of Peace—what has become “Water”—“had to be fiction, because Peace has to be supposed, imagined, divined, dreamed” and that “[f]iction cares for others; it is

compassion, and gives others voice” (61, 62). This story of the story leads into “Water” in a graceful collapse of autobiography and fiction: “*Letterature D’America* mentions a writer named Maxine Hong Fiction—must mean me. I should be able to write again about the time during war when Earll and I took our son, Joseph, and left to live in Hawai’i...” (62). *The Fifth Book of Peace*’s core, its fictional heart, really, accomplishes what its vexed memoir seems unable to do. It accepts a fictional account of the historical, investing in contradiction, and deploying those fictional analogues to convey the successes and disappointments of a life’s episode. Taña, Wittman, and Mario are an exile into fiction and imaginative metonymy for Kingston’s own exile from the mainland U.S. Their experiences, like those of BaBa and Kingston’s grandfathers in *China Men*, engage in a dialogic relationship with the conventions of nonfiction. The strengths of the section as a meditation on failing to leave behind war, on developing a sanctuary from war, and on making home in a strange place are almost wholly undercut when at “Earth”’s beginning Kingston tell us she “found no happy ending” and that “[f]iction won’t tell me what’s happened to [...] people Earll and I knew in our real Hawai’i years” (241). Announcing, “[t]hings that fiction can’t solve must be worked out in life” draws the sort of border that would seem to have no purchase in *China Men*. Destruction, fire, and war arrest the fiction.

In Hawai’i, Mario Ah Sing determines, “[m]y name be ‘Ehukai. Now call me ‘Ehukai” (140). He explains:

“‘Ehukai—that’s me. Da kine—the kind people—my *hanai* family—found me and I found them today. They *hanai* me. ‘Ehukai is my real true name. I am ‘*ehukai*, you know. See?” He pulled his hair up and bent down for his mother and

father to look at him. “See this red? Like the kind rooster comb. *And* like the top of the wave when the red sun *comb* it. That’s why I be ‘Ehukai. ‘Ehukai *goes* with how I *am*.” There are Hawaiians called ‘*ehu* people. They have reddish-brown skin; their hair is black at the roots and shades out to red at the tips. Wittman noticed that his son’s Chinese black hair had turned brownish, with a hint of red [...] He got straight with his offspring’s outgrowing the name he’d given him.
(140)

Mario/‘Ehukai asserts the agency of language as an identifier, as clearly as Paper Sons did. A child undercuts the stability of documentary language and opts to become someone else; he even adopts the local dialect. His father attempts to make his place as Hawaiian, as well. He tells a passenger on the flight over, an attorney decidedly frustrated with the Ah Sings’ plan to be unemployed in her Hawai’i, that he is “‘almost a Hawaiian person myself, you know.’ He could work up a case for Hawaiian ancestry; his apocryphal PoPo came from or through Hawai’i. *Free-choose your ethnicity*” (77) (emphasis mine). Here is the episteme of *China Men*, in which the storyteller plays and names selves freely.

Kingston’s fiction is decidedly not the inadequate fantasy for happy endings. Its disappointments make a clear case that fiction conveys the complexity that informs her otherwise contradictory writing. Hawai’i disappoints the Ah Sing family. They meet fellow Californians Gabriel (minister to the Ah Sing’s wedding ceremony) and Lena, who operate The Shooting Gallery, a venue for safe drug use. These mainlanders, who “thought of themselves as generous, rudely and antisocially shut themselves off” at Wittman and Taña’s troubled housewarming party. Lena pleads with Taña, “I’ve got to

get off this rock. I've got rock fever. Something's wrong with the place" (172). Wittman, circumnavigating the island comes across a "haole madman and his shack sharp against the sky," who actually opens fire on Wittman as he approaches, seeking idyllic talk story (123-4). Earlier, Wittman finds himself on an artillery range. When 'Ehukai reports having seen a Menehune, a sort of frightening spirit, the parents wonder, "[m]aybe they shouldn't have left Berkeley, where Mario would have grown up to be an intellectual, where he was indigenous, fourth-, fifth-generation Californian. Uprooted from the mainland, their child was lured by spirit-soft Hawai'i. The price of war-evading was reality-evading. Their child was paying the price" (148). Hawaiian neighbors steal from the Ah Sings, an inscrutable act that leaves them confused, uncertain about how much they can afford to give, unhappy that they are unable to determine the motives of those who take from their few possessions (157-159). Their housewarming party is markedly uncomfortable; other parties are planned for the same evening, guests are unsure of their responsibilities, and so the Ah Sings worry over what sort of food and drink to offer. A neighbor, Big Eustace, whose personality leads Wittman to "fill and refill [his] plate, keeping the vet's mouth full, keeping his war stories stuffed up. So he wouldn't say 'hootch' and 'gook,'" laments the loss of color in Hawai'i, having fought in Vietnam (177). The Ah Sing family learns a traditional chant for the party, but "[n]obody joined in. Nobody sang along. The Hawaiians had been through lots of cultural revolutions and gotten rid of this stuff" (178). During the party, guests hear nearby Samoan families sing "on and on, something epic without a break. We were returned to the time when language was one long word [...] all-holding music. Impossible glory was coming from the Samoans, who have nothing" (179). And yet, we read that "the kid of the host family" is

constantly threatened with cries, “Junyah! Gonna kill you Junyah! I kill you!” (179). The narrator wonders, “[h]ow odd to be raised like that—giants yelling to kill him, and then surrounding him with that music” (179). One of the Ah Sings’ most disturbing findings is the brutal racism that drives Sheraton and Clifton, black VISTA volunteers, out of town during the night of rioting that follows the party. They overhear reports of “Black haoles. Bad enough White haoles—we get black haoles.” And “Fuckeeng black, those Popolos.” “Out of town on a *rail*.” “Lucky for them, not get killed” (188). Moments of respite from war, moments of familial safety, and moments of community are not unknown to the Ah Sings in Hawai’i, but their fiction conveys the thoroughgoing disappointments that would not be part of an imagined naïve exile from warring.

Wittman, Kingston’s poet-playwright, shares her work’s objective: “And he had something to write—the poem, the play that would stop war” (72). Wittman’s own *Book of Peace* evades him, though. “Poems and plays were not coming to Wittman. No speech that he could hear came out of this ground” (145). His literary intervention, like his author’s, is predicated on war veterans’ experiences. At the worst of their Hawaiian dystopia, after the night of riots, the troubled party, after the racist banishment of Sheraton and Clifton, a group of AWOL soldiers open a sanctuary at the Church of the Crossroads. Wittman’s place echoes Kingston’s own attempts to hear veterans tell stories. Taking part in the sanctuary, “Wittman listened to the AWOL GIs go back over their lives, figuring out how they got to be who they were and how they came to be here, in this present place. Reviewing their paths, they saw where they’d lost their way” (216). Wittman chooses to produce “*Viet Rock (A Folk War Movie)* by Megan Terry, a blueprint outline, or ‘pretext,’ for actors to improv” (204). Each rehearsal and each performance

changes, and the aesthetic consistency with both Kingston's nonfiction and Wittman's plays in *Tripmaster Monkey* sustains the unsettling business of storytelling.

"Water" ends with Mario's rejection of "[g]irl graduates [who] were talking the guys into joining them in the volunteer Army/Navy/Air Force/Marines" (237). This is the sort of locally satisfactory victory available in the fiction and so, "Wittman and Taña hugged each other for joy" (237). The AWOLs hosted by the Ah Sings' home sanctuary have given up and returned to base, reminding Wittman to collect his reward for driving them back. On his way home, "[h]e walked to Kahalu'u, which is not a town, or any kind of official place. It's nowhere, a place for fugitives and refugees to keep coming" (236). The nowhere of fiction might very well be the site of Kingston's best arguments against war. By articulating a measurable difference between fiction and nonfiction and insisting on the primacy of the latter, Mario's choice winds up subsumed by the panic of keeping nonfiction—that is, real—children out of war. It seems perhaps clear that this task cannot be accomplished by either fiction or nonfiction, yet by closing off the agency of one for the other, Kingston leaves behind her richest contribution to nonfiction, as well as some of nonfiction's richest contributions to U.S. literature.

In her recent meditation, *To Be the Poet*, published one year before *The Fifth Book of Peace*, Kingston addresses the obligations of her work:

I have almost finished my longbook. Let my life as Poet begin. I want the life of the Poet. I have labored for over twelve years, one thousand pages of prose. Now I want the easiness of poetry. The brevity of the poem. Poets are always happy. I want to be always happy. No plotting any more plots. For the longbook (about the long wars in Viet Nam and in the Middle East), I sacrificed time with my child,

grown and gone, and my husband and family and friends, who should have been loved more. The longbook has got to be done soon, and I'll be free to live. I won't be a workhorse anymore; I'll be a skylark. Free of obligations. (3)

When the book is complete, "I will be selfish. There's a wonderful moment I have on the verge of sleep—I have nothing to do but feel my feelings, look at the pictures behind my eyes, and go to sleep. Consider no one but myself. Rest from the social responsibility of prose. Don't care about people's antics anymore. I will be socially irresponsible. I will be a Poet" (11). The responsibilities to leading the veterans home to cohesive selves, to participating in—to enlivening—the Peace Book tradition, to remembering and rewriting the Fourth Book of Peace, to "stopping wars hence" could only be overwhelming. The labor and sacrifice that constitutes *The Fifth Book of Peace* is inseparable from its responsibilities, and, nearing its completion, Kingston shares her desire to return to the sort of writerly aloneness that might produce a Great American Novel—or Great American Poem—if only by coincidence. Her alliance between irresponsibility and the short form of poetry cries against the weight of making "one thousand pages of prose" in order to limit war, even if no shortage of poets might share a contradictory sense of their art's demands. This wish to indulge a writer's life, leisurely in its detachment, makes clear the strain of *The Fifth Book of Peace* and contributes to this reading of its panic. Kingston the "workhorse" pleads for concluding release from the demands she adopts when her manuscript burns, when BaBa dies, when her mother tells her to educate the world, when she begins looking for origins of the Books of Peace, when she assigns herself the responsibility to help veterans write themselves out of war.

The Epilogue's penultimate scene includes the confiscation of cameras of reporters covering Code Pink antiwar protests before the current war began. A Pacifica Radio correspondent observes, "'If an event—an arrest—is not witnessed and photographed by the media, it did not happen.' The police lines that blocked off Pennsylvania Avenue turned away journalists from *The Washington Post*, the *New York Times*, and ABC television" (402). Representation begets existence in this phenomenological formula, yet it is significant that Kingston cuts through that model and observes that a handful of participants *did* witness the scene and are therefore obliged to report it. The *Post* and the *Times* and ABC make events and arrests consumable for an external world of detached, uninterested, often suspicious Americans. Kingston clearly hopes to change the world in which that audience might not elect to seek out news of an antiwar protest. *The Fifth Book of Peace* seeks to accomplish the sort of ends the Code Pink activists cannot achieve without an activist communication; it operates against war and against an uncritical discourse. As an intervention to recuperate veterans of war and to sustain a tradition of literary antiwar acts, it remains bound to the responsibilities of both objectives and therefore can afford neither the satisfaction of *China Men's* multiplicity nor the satisfaction of the writer's solipsism.

Conclusion: Life Writing Against Loss

Nonfiction's weird place alongside fiction and poetry unsettles and resists literary-critical explanation in messy ways. Invested in and faithful to language as a meaningful mediation between a life and a readership, those who purport to write about what happened offer texts that push against efforts to dismiss their aspiration to be products—and measures—of experience. Joan Scott's critique of experience as an essential category certainly wards against naturalizing a series of antecedent phenomena that author an unproblematically referential text; and yet we should be careful to avoid implying that life writing is not, at least in some ways, the effect of having had a life. The easy naivety of the biographical fallacy and the temptation to read all literature as autobiographical residue help out very little. This is not a matter of intent—what the memoirist hopes to communicate is, for our purposes, secondary to what she has written—but of function. Inevitably, these texts take on the varying weight of lived lives. They are both archaeological and constructive practices; they lay claim to something other than invention alone. Biography, memoir, autobiography, auto/biography, periautography, autogynography, biomythography, biographical novels, autobiographical essays, and the rest of the more than three hundred entries that constitute Donald J. Winslow's *Life-Writing: A Glossary of Terms in Biography, Autobiography, and Related Forms*, persist in their insistence that lives and fiction, while co-constructive, are distinct phenomena. Attempts to map the border between the two, as I hope the preceding analysis shows, are futile enterprises, but writing off nonfiction's dependence on a sense of material conditions seems no more promising. This is life writing's obligation: it is a consequence of selves and it has consequences for selves; no matter how we theorize the

self, these texts are untenable without their lives. The six texts surveyed above register that dependence between experience (no matter how subservient to memory, language, and fiction) and their texts.

Six cases cannot bear the weight of all life writing, and I do not intend to suggest otherwise. McCarthy, Vidal, and 1980's Kingston can only illustrate so much of their moment's approach to life writing; Eggers, Morris, and 2003's Kingston are similarly specific instances. Nevertheless, these works are collectively symptomatic of the instability of efforts to craft lives and narrate experiences. They follow postmodernism's antifoundational suspicions of historical narratives. Nevertheless, in certain respects, most recognize Jameson's critique of "the fashionable conclusion that because history is a text, the 'referent' does not exist." Their thoroughgoing attention to biographical practice uneasily frets over his consequential claim that "history is *not* a text, not a narrative, master or otherwise, but that, as an absent cause, it is inaccessible to us except in textual form, and that our approach to it and to the Real itself necessarily passes through its prior textualization, its narrativization in the political unconscious" (*The Political Unconscious* 35). Making stories of historical lives means for this study's examples recognition that that this making may as well be part of the story. Above, I suggest in passing the unwieldy term, "metanofiction." Recognition and acknowledgment of the constructive work in which these efforts engage—in overt discussion of nonfiction's limits, in clear fictionalization, in literary self-deprecation—bolsters their sophistication and, significantly, fills in their efforts to be, for lack of a more nuanced notion, honest. As knowing and informed cases for the mode, their messiness and their irresolution seems more consistent with the matter they seek to

report. Aphoristically, undomesticated and multivalent lives beget undomesticated and multivalent life writing.

What happens, then, when these texts attempt to reconcile their critical interventions with their commitments to an ending or solution? As McCarthy, Vidal, and Kingston thoughtfully illustrate, it is possible to supersede the limits of nonfiction's conventions and suggest ways to write a life. Yet there is something pained, even broken, in the contemporary texts above, and that condition, while illustrated by only limited evidence in this study, may show us something about the struggle of an activist practice in postmodern life writing. I hope to avoid the bad teleological impulse—life writing at the turn of the twenty-first century is not somehow closer to transcendent biographical practice than earlier texts. The way anxiety negotiates deconstructive turns does however indicate the trouble of nonfiction that bears the poststructuralist critique. Kingston loses her father, her mother, her home, and her book, and she worries that her veterans' stories will not do their recuperative work and that war will come. Eggers loses his parents and worries that his stories will not be believed, that other friends and family will die, that his response to death has been inappropriate, that loving and local community fades. Morris invents a son in order to lose him and worries over judging an imminently subject-to-judgment Reagan. Given the damage from which these three tell their stories, it is breathtaking that Kingston resists "*Healing* ... that New Age word. It implies that something's wrong" (265). These three works are bound to their anxieties over meeting their obligations; all three express a longing for nonfiction practice with material agency well beyond their texts. Something *is* wrong, each contends. Simply, what is the potential

for an instance of life writing that acknowledges its contingency to accomplish its recuperative work?

It would be reckless to insist that three disruptive memoirs represent general movement in contemporary U.S. life writing—certainly not all instances from the past decade are pained over the ways they will be faithful to a story as they signal familiarity with postmodern literary playfulness. Their struggle between experimentalism and nonfiction is nevertheless telling. These works, in their pressure against the edges of their conventions, begin to suggest lessons for our approach to that larger catalogue of memoir, autobiography, biography, and other representations of self. The opening of discourses to Derridean, Foucauldian, and Barthesian structuralist and poststructuralist critiques promises critical theory's primary shared operation, insofar as its adherents can be said to share: a sort of pulling back the skin from the machinery. After those exacting analyses, life writers must determine a means to purchase their objective. I do not mean that postmodernism and life writing are incompatible—Kingston demonstrates easily enough the ways they are able to contribute to each other. Eggers' impatience with those who regard his work as "pomo garbage" hardly precludes its postmodernisms. His resistance to any critical apparatus seems only to articulate the strains of postmodern life writing against the limits of postmodernism. If anything, these works mark a fuller postmodern effort in which the polyvalence of discourse shakes up the commitment to what precedes the text, which in turn limits the free-float that follows the most radical break with authority.

Eggers seems able to argue for a community—and by all accounts his celebrity and the success of his periodical *McSweeney's* are indicative of a rich literary circle in

which he operates—and his frantic memoir relates an affecting story with considerable devotion to both uncertainty and a tangible community of friends and family. Kingston's appeal against war has significant work ahead, given the prognosis of contemporary international relations, though the convictions of its last moments compel against war—its insistence that peace should follow a changing path by changing means guarantees its freedom from the constrictions of an either/or Kingston has always avoided. Morris indicts his subject for his sins as he implies that Reagan's story is a performative operation, bound primarily to its allegiance to varying roles in varying media. He does finally suggest a subject as unstable as his text, though. And yet each mitigates its work with worries that are at odds with their experimentalist approaches. What we are able to take from these vexed cases is a critical conundrum for contemporary life writing. It is not that one must commit to either poststructuralist dismantling or nonfiction's authorizing structures. Rather, informed life writing with obligations to praxis, no matter how local, is subject to its own critiques. Eggers, Morris, and Kingston, while attentive to the limits of life writing, make clear the stresses of obligation under critical scrutiny.

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