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WHY TELL THE TRUTH WHEN A LIE WILL DO?: RE-CREATIONS AND
RESISTANCE IN THE SELF-AUTHORED LIFE WRITING OF FIVE AMERICAN
WOMEN FICTION WRITERS

by

PIPER G. HUGULEY

Under the Direction of Audrey Goodman

ABSTRACT

As women began to establish themselves in the United States workforce in the first half of the twentieth century, one especial group of career women, women writers, began to use the space of their self-authored life writing narratives to inscribe their own understanding of themselves. Roundly criticized for not adhering to conventional autobiographical standards, these women writers used purposeful political strategies of resistance to craft self-authored life writing works that varied widely from the genre of autobiography. Rather than employ the usual ways critiquing autobiographical texts, I explore a deeper understanding of what these prescient women sought to do. Through revision of the terminology of the field and in consideration of a wide variety of critics and approaches, I argue that these women intentionally employed resistance in their writings.

In *Dust Tracks on A Road* (1942), Zora Neale Hurston successfully established her own sense of herself as a black woman, who could also comment on political issues. Her fellow Southerner, Eudora Welty in *One Writer's Beginnings* (1984), used orality to

deliberately showcase her view of her own life. Another Southern writer, Lillian Smith in *Killers of the Dream*, employed an overtly social science approach to tell the life narrative of all white Christian Southerners, and described how she felt the problems of racism should be overcome. Anzia Yezierska, a Russian émigré to the United States, used an Old World European understanding of storytelling to refashion an understanding of herself as a writer and at the same time critiqued the United States in her work, *Red Ribbon on a White Horse (1950)*. Mary Austin, a Western woman writer, saw *Earth Horizon* as an opportunity to reclaim the fragmentation of a woman's life as a positive, rather than a negative space.

INDEX WORDS: Women's Studies, American Literature, Multi-Ethnic Literature, Autobiographical Studies, African American Literature, Western Literature, Judaic Studies, Gay and Lesbian Studies, Southern Literature, Immigrant Literature

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PIPER G. HUGULEY

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

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in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

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Introduction

In 1920 in the United States, women gained enfranchisement, which gave them a voice in their own government. As other women began to establish themselves in the United States workforce in the first half of the twentieth century, one special group of career women, women writers, began to use the space of their self-authored life-writing narratives as places to speak in their own voices and to inscribe their own understanding of themselves. These texts, heretofore labeled as autobiographical, led these women to resist forces in a society that had pre-established frameworks for their sense of self. By employing resistance as a technique in their self-authored life writing texts, these women writers inscribed themselves in their own way. They understood what women in the second half of the twentieth century later came to know: “Writing is one of the most rebellious, incendiary acts that an individual can perform” (Golden 184). The courage of writing women echoes across the years in the words of Marita Golden who articulates what she learned from Zora Neale Hurston: “It has taken years for me to define myself as and to become an author, one who imagines and creates with a sense of power and inevitability” (184-185). Certain women writers used purposeful political strategies to resist society’s definition of them as females even as they were roundly critiqued for creating impossible works or improbable autobiographies. These self-authored life writings should be foregrounded in the Foucaultian sense of resistance as a battleground where there are many points of confrontation amongst institutionalized forces (Bordo 1108). Examining their texts with this approach or understanding, rather than examining their lives for the usual “juicy bits” --to use a phrase Hurston used with Langston Hughes

-- of their lives of autobiographical writings or applying conventional standards of the genre to relationships, romance, and children, readers can be led to a deeper understanding of what these prescient women sought to do in their works.

In *Dust Tracks on A Road* (1942), Zora Neale Hurston constantly fought her publishers to establish her own sense of herself as a black woman who had opinions on world politics at a very difficult time, during World War II. Her fellow Southerner, Eudora Welty, in *One Writer's Beginnings* (1984), had to be pressed, but then used orality and a purposeful recreation of her childhood to showcase her own view of her achievement—to consider writing about her life—determined to “keep hands” off of a “tell all” approach in a life narrative. Another Southern writer, Lillian Smith in *Killers of the Dream*, used an overtly social science approach to tell the life narrative of all white Christian Southerners, to establish how she felt the problems of racism in the post World War II era should be overcome. Anzia Yeziarska, a Russian immigrant to the United States, used an Old World European understanding of storytelling to refashion an understanding of herself as a writer and at the same time sought to critique the United States in her work, *Red Ribbon on a White Horse* (1950), doing this at a time when the Cold War machinery determined that the United States had, and always did have, the best way of life. Mary Austin, a Western woman writer, used *Earth Horizon* to provide a direct critique of the way women were portrayed in self authored life writings and approached her new synthesis as an opportunity to reclaim the fragmentation of a woman's life as a positive, rather than a negative, space.

Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, two prominent autobiographical theorists, published a reader in 1998 titled *Women, Autobiography, Theory*. This was the first text to attempt to define the interrelatedness of these terms and to organize a comprehensive reader so that the field of women's autobiography might have a textbook. Their divisions of the field, via this compilation of criticism designed for classroom use, also meant that the field gained critical attention and respect, an important step toward acceptance. The eight divisions of the book are: Experience and Agency, Subjectivities, Modes and Genres, Histories, Voice and Memory, Bodies and Sexualities, and Politics and Pedagogy. Smith and Watson also prefaced the presentation of the criticism in the field with an introduction where they attempt to map the field of women's autobiography in historical procession. For them, the timeline starts first in Prehistory, a period covering hundreds of years, and includes any work that has been published prior to 1980. They acknowledge that the starting point for the study of the field should be placed in 1980 when Estelle Jelinek publishes her landmark text *Women's Autobiography*, calling this the time of "1st Forays." That period ends about 1989 when by the directive of the Personal Narratives Group, the chief shift occurred with the start of the use of the term "narrative" in relationship to autobiographical texts. Smith and Watson indicate "by the end of the decade, none of Jelinek's definitional parameters remained uncontested" (Smith and Watson 10).

A new phase may be in the offing in light of the concerns that I wish to explore. Although Smith and Watson do address resistance in the autobiography, Smith most directly in her article included in the Subjectivities section, the compilation misses the

boat in the omission of dealing with the portrayal of women's careers. The anthology is concerned most directly with the approaches of autobiography as a revelation of the subjects' affairs—especially the usual “juicy bits” of their lives, and the establishment of the subject finding a voice. In the introduction, they start to critique the use of the word “autobiography” itself, but ultimately drop off this concern for other scholars without full treatment of it. In their textbook, other theorists take up the concerns of autobiography, and deal with resistance, but not many have been concerned with exploring women's careers or the willful portrayal of themselves as careerists. With the movement of women into careers on all fronts over the past fifty years, this is a startling omission.

As a field of study, autobiographies themselves have been analyzed as critical texts only as recently as slightly less than thirty years ago. Autobiography critic Paul John Eakin points out that the 1980 publication of James Olney's anthology, *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*, “marks a milestone in the progress of autobiography studies toward critical maturity” (vii). However, what is most telling about this anthology is its exclusion of racial and gender diversity. Olney's omission of autobiographical writing by diverse women, as a field, is strange, because he is such a well-respected autobiographical scholar. Coincidentally, 1980 also marked the initial formal attempts to develop a theory of women's autobiography. Estelle Jelinek's previously mentioned central text, *Women and Autobiography*, was published the same year as Olney's text but has received far less critical attention. Even in Jelinek's work, the attention paid to the diversity in women writers in the world and, most pointedly, in the United States, is given short shrift. It was not until the mid-1990s, when Jeanne

Perreault felt compelled to write, “[f]eminist writers of all races, sexualities, and classes interrogate discourses of power, identity, and experience as alternative discourses become available through the speaking of greater numbers of women” (1-2), that women’s autobiography took on new importance and began to receive more critical attention.

The Center for Biographical Research started publishing a journal called *Biography* in 1978, and Jelinek’s and Olney’s texts in 1980 sought to place autobiography in a definitive critical category of its own through the compilation of different articles on the subject. In *Life-Writing*, also first published in 1980, Donald J. Winslow put together a compendium of terms and defined their use in light of their application to the realms of both biography and autobiography. Given their simultaneous years of publication, Winslow’s work probably had little, if any, access to the material contained in the two other works of autobiographical criticism by Olney and Jelinek. Hence by 1995, there was a need for an update and a second edition of Winslow, wherein he included twenty-three more pages of new terms on this subject—an increase of more than fifty percent. However, I am convinced that Winslow needs to update *Life-Writing* yet again, for the field has taken several turns in the eleven years since his second edition. Winslow’s definitions also still focus on the writing of predominately white male biographers and autobiographers. It may well be that given the proliferation of autobiography over the past ten years he should create a *Self Life-Writing* project separate from the considerations of biography. Reflections on the life writing of the self have grown that much in so little time.¹

This is not to say that Winslow's definitions of life-writing terms are useless; "life-writing" can be said to embrace biography and autobiography both. Now, though, it is time for a more pointed term, "self-authored life writing," for two reasons. First, the term "autobiography" is not taken seriously any more. I recall asking a book clerk for a book with autobiography in the title—indicating to him that it was a non-fiction text. The book clerk expressed skepticism. "I don't know," he said, "a lot of those books are really fiction, you know." Although a personal experience, one only has to glean the titles of recent novels to observe how fiction writers have taken the word and refashioned or reshaped it into the titles of their created works. The other reason is the sea change in the field itself. Far more than the traditional story of a life authored by oneself, current self-authored life writing has morphed into various acceptable forms worthy of study. Winslow explains the differences between memoir and autobiography: "Memoir ordinarily differs from autobiography in being less formally organized and in centering more upon social and historical background [and] less upon private life" (39-40). Autobiography, he argues, is "the writing of one's own history; the story of one's life written by oneself" (Winslow 3). These definitions, he admits, are based on the use of examples from the *Oxford English Dictionary*, and thus we might not be surprised that they do not fully reflect modern practice, especially the modern practice of diverse women who write from so many different perspectives.² Winslow's terms also fall short given the varieties of types of self-authored life writing—there are many works that fall somewhere in between the memoir and autobiography as defined by Winslow. I may still

use the term “autobiography” when historically appropriate, but it is time for an expanded view of the field.

The words *biography* and *autobiography* first appeared in the late eighteenth century, even though people have been writing works about themselves for far longer. In one approach, Winslow defines literary biography as a “descriptive term for the lives of men and women writers. [However] even as late as 1978, Justin Kaplin suggests that a strong case should be made for enlarging the term ‘literary biography’ to include books that have literary qualities and not necessarily literary subjects” (Winslow 37). This assessment of the difference appears to have presaged the growing acceptance of the autobiography as a literary form—a phenomenon that has grown exponentially since the late 1990s. Indeed, the autobiography or self-authored life writing is the kind of writing that is seen as more literary and more creative, perhaps in the sense that the book clerk meant, than the non-fiction synthesis that biography has become. Given the latest kaffuffle over the “truth” as presented in the autobiographical Oprah Book Club selection *A Million Little Pieces* by James Frey, there will always be those who are obsessed with the truth of these self-authored life writings. Those who participated in the outcry don’t understand the intention behind the creation of life writings, but Lacan did: “One is never happy making way for a new truth, for it always means making our way into it: the truth is always disturbing. We cannot even manage to get used to it. We are used to the real. The truth we repress” (203). Thus, these writings are the place where a new self and a new idea of the individual is created and thus allows for the emergence of a singular central heroic character.

Another major problem with Winslow's list, in either its earlier or later incarnation, is that it is incomplete and does not reflect the diversity of the world or United States population. For instance, he deals with black life writing in one definition of its own along with African-American life writing and the slave narrative. He mentions feminist life-writing in another definition, and gay life-writing in yet another. These beginnings, however, have grown so large that new terms have spun off or have been created within each. A large omission is the burgeoning growth of autobiography among female Hispanic writers such as Gloria Anzaldúa and Linda Chavez or among Asian writers like or Maxine Hong-Kingston, all of whom composed self-authored life writing projects that predated 1995, and in Hong-Kingston's case, as early as 1976.

Focusing on issues of gender, the Introduction of Smith and Watson's *Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader*, ruminates on further prospects for study in the realm of women's autobiography. Smith and Watson's compendium of articles in this text do seek to pay better attention to the issue of diversity, especially the notion that a white woman's point of view in her self-authored text will vary necessarily from that of a black woman or a Jewish woman. Class, Smith and Watson demonstrate, also impacts these varying viewpoints as well.

Since the days of the early nineteenth century and Hawthorne's "damned mob of scribbling women," writing had long been a career that certain women were able to embrace without leaving the confines of the home. However, that acceptability had been reserved for genteelly impoverished white women in the Northeast portion of the United

States. When women fiction writers who are not of the proper class and originate from other ethnic and regional strains dare to give voice to themselves, these inscriptions can become crucial guidelines for other women to find their own voices—regardless of their career aspirations. It is important to hear these voices, for the consequences can be severe. Audre Lorde states, “Unacknowledged class differences rob women of each others’ energy and creative insight” (631). However, regardless of money, race, age and sexual orientation, these five writing voices, just through their articulation, show other aspirants how the writing life is attainable for all.

With careful dissection of the self-authored life writing texts, these patterns of recreation and resistance can be better delineated for those who want to understand how other women found the resolve to define themselves at a time when options were limited to them. With these limitations, these women felt freer to engage in these projects beyond the conventional expectations of the genre. They subverted expectations of autobiographical works in various ways, some of which include: inserting politically driven treatises, footnoting and indexing their work, commenting on the text as it was created, omitting discussion of their personal business, and even including photographs as if the work were a biography. They used other strategies that could be dubbed political. Because in some way these women didn’t fit into Lorde’s construction of the “mythical norm of America”—that is, the realm of the white, thin, male, young, heterosexual, Christian and financially secure—these five women writers adapted innovative approaches that employed resistance against the conventional, mythical norm in telling their life stories. By applying various theoretical constructs, making

comparisons between the works and applying other case studies to these self-authored life writing texts, students of the craft of writing will be able to see how the narrative approaches of these five fiction-writing women work.

Whatever their origins and/or backgrounds, women fiction writers through their self-authored life writings are especially interesting to reflect upon because they have often had to make difficult choices in order to conduct successful writing careers. In her innovative book of criticism, *Silences*, Tillie Olsen discusses women workers of any kind who also have the added responsibilities of mother and/or wife in addition to their careers. For her, the writing voice that is often missing is that of her created term “the worker-mother-wife,” a woman who is silenced in society because of the demands of her various roles (Olsen 45). Olsen’s arguments and unofficial statistics are compelling still today. Focusing her concern on women’s opportunity to speak, she gathers by her “crude samplings” [her own words] that only one out of every twelve women writers has the chance to speak about her craft (Olsen 39). Even more rare in Olsen’s list are women of color—there are only four names out of the fifty that she lists. These few names of women of any ethnicity point to an even greater silence that exists.

Many of these “onlys,” a term Olsen borrows from Ralph Abernathy, have their writing creativity stymied in some way, such as by limiting their expression to writing children’s fiction or non-narrative—that is, lyric-poetry. Such small snatches of writing may allow only a taste of what these women might have been able to say if they had possessed the support and leisure to write full-time. Olsen terms this a “one-book silence” (Olsen 37), meaning that because of the demands upon them, such writers often

spend a married lifetime to nurture a single book or can never repeat a single early success. Olsen also mentions a percentage of the “onlys” who are not mothers, whose careers were affected by considerations other than marriage or child-bearing. Some of these women were able to work at their writing because they did not have the same obligation as the writer-mothers who had to give their writing energy to rearing their children, but nonetheless they were silenced in other ways simply because they were women in a male dominated culture. Patricia Klindienst agrees and couches these silences as sacrifices. For her, the onlys are victorious: “if the silenced woman artist serves as a sacrificial offering to the male artistic imagination [. . .] the woman writer and feminist critic seek to remember the embodied, resisting woman. Each time we do, we resist our status as privileged victim” (Klindienst 623).

Because they are even more apart from the mythical norm and far from privilege because of these life sacrifices, women writers of color are rare in her list of “onlys.” Olsen recognizes that the small numbers explain that these women have had an even more difficult road to building a writing career: “there [are . . .] countless others still lessened or silenced—as long as the other age-old silencers of humanity, class and/or color, prevail” (Olsen 46).

For Olsen, Margaret Walker best illustrates the writer-mother problem. It took Walker more than thirty years to complete her landmark novel, *Jubilee*, because of her responsibility to support her family and raise her children. In a section titled, “Writers, Mothers,” Olsen echoes Walker’s sentiment about the difficulty of the writer-mother: “It is humanly impossible for a woman who is a wife and mother to work on a regular

teaching job and write” (Olsen 209). Ironically, as if to illustrate Olsen’s point, Walker’s unpublished self-authored life writing languishes amongst her papers in Mississippi (www.jsums.edu/papers.htm). Olsen also cites Mary Austin as a “neglected writer,” out of print by the time that Olsen was thinking and writing about Austin’s work and an illustration of the issue that Margaret Walker raises: can a woman have both children and a productive, flourishing writing career? Walker had to wait until her children were close to grown before she could study poetry away from Jackson at the University of Iowa. These women are only a sampling of the problem given the larger questions at hand: Is it necessary to postpone a writing career for the sake of children? Is it possible to establish a writing career from the “trenches of motherhood” at all? A collection of essays by Marilyn Kallet and Judith Ortiz Cofer called *Sleeping with One Eye Open: Women Writers and the Art of Survival* provides some approaches for the late twentieth century woman. First begun as an inquiry by Kallet to Cofer as to how she managed to juggle all of her roles as a woman, the collection expresses how women writers of various ethnicities are able to cope with their responsibilities and still find expression. The continual fight to find time for this expression is a form of resistance that persists. One place to look for inspiration is from women who made a sea change in their life outlook—these women of the Progressive Era who came of age in the first twenty years of the twentieth century.

For the early portion of the twentieth century, when opportunities for women were only beginning to emerge, Austin’s and her contemporary Anzia Yeziarska’s self-authored life writing works present some answers to these questions. For women who

fell somewhere in between in time, like Margaret Walker, there was less opportunity because of multiple children, less time to write, and even racist restrictions on the research she wished to do for her novel, *Jubilee*.

Olsen discusses the lack of respect for women's writing work whatever the form-- that is, speculative creative writing by women, personal or fictional, is often not seen as work, but leisure or idleness. Olsen posits that if they had money, chance, and equity in family life to continue to write, women writers would have had more opportunity for success: "where [injustice] is forced because of circumstances for the sex into which one is born—a choice men of the same class do not have to make in order to do their work—that is not choice, that is a coercive working of sexist oppression" (31).

These concerns are not new. A writer of the Progressive Era, fiction writer and radical home economist Charlotte Perkins Gilman expressed the same concerns seventy years earlier:

We have so arranged life that man may have a home and family, love, companionship, domesticity, and fatherhood, yet remain an active citizen of age and country. We have so arranged life, on the other hand, that a woman must 'choose'; must either live alone, unloved, unaccompanied, uncared for, homeless, childless, with her work in the world for sole consolation; or give up all world-service for the joys of love, motherhood and domestic service. (qtd. in Kimmel and Aronson x)

Still lingering, these domestic concerns have meant that even advantaged women have had a long, hard, and grudging road to win respect in any kind of career, let alone as

creative writers. This is true even for women who write in other realms, like famous food journalist M.F.K. Fisher. Laura Shapiro observes that “during a period when she was overwhelmed with family demands and unable to write, she became convinced that her career was over and told her sister it was time to ‘hold a private funeral’ for M.F.K. Fisher.” Fisher reflects on the importance of these issues: “‘If I killed off Fisher, professionally at least, how would it affect me emotionally? Could I create enough other ways to satisfy my basically fertile nature?’” (qtd. in Shapiro 199).

Since Olsen’s manifesto in *Silences*, the rise of the women’s movement and the steady but gradual acceptance of women in other careers, it may be said that the progress that women of all persuasions made in the early seventies in writing careers has slightly diminished in effect because new and more profitable career choices that women make today may also complicate choices for a woman debating a writing career.

No matter the author’s origin, Sidonie Smith believes that women’s life-writings will always manifest worry about how a female in a male-dominated society may authorize her claim to speak about her life choices, indeed, about how the woman self emerges to find a voice when her role has been predetermined for her. Smith is concerned with the “double-voiced structure of women’s narratives as it reveals the tensions between their desire for narrative authority and their concern about excessive exposure” (Smith and Watson 12). Women who are both eager to reveal themselves in writing and reluctant to come to terms with what exposure means find themselves having to struggle with these considerations. Such concerns are especially weighted for women writers of color, who have to be concerned about another layer of double-voices—should

they write as women or as people of color? Is it possible to give adequate attention to both? Which voice takes precedence? How does a woman persist and insist across her many life roles, both assigned and resigned?

Such concerns are legitimate in light of investigating how women fiction writers have come to their careers and sustained themselves in the writing process. Concerns about time, priorities, language, the creation of self and space are all issues explored in self-authored life writings. To better understand how these issues play out amongst women of different ethnic strains, classes, background, and origins, I intend to explore this important subject using several very different women writers and several critical points of view. The works discussed below provide ideas that speak to my subject in its clearest sense. Scholars who deal generally with American women writers have proven very helpful, and several creative writers of both genders who have told their stories in fiction and in life writing have provoked ideas that led me to my conclusions.

In “The Creative Process,” James Baldwin stated the writer’s problem in one sentence: “Perhaps the primary distinction of the artist is that he must actively cultivate that state which most men necessarily must avoid—the state of being alone” (Baldwin 669). I keep the male-gendered pronouns to highlight the fact that finding enough “alone time” is problem enough for male writers, but even more so for women writers who may have responsibilities of husband, children, traditional housekeeping, and caretaking of elderly parents thrust upon them. To return to Olsen’s example, as an emerging young poet, Margaret Walker started a novel when she was nineteen years old in 1935. It took

her the better part of thirty years to finish this famous work, her only novel, *Jubilee*, published in 1966. Marriage, career, and four children intervened in those years. On a similar time line, Walker's Jackson, Mississippi, neighbor, Eudora Welty, who never married and who admits she came from a "sheltered life," wrote dozens of short stories and six novel-length works between 1935 and the late 1960's. However, even Welty endured a considerable gap in her writing life—fifteen years in which she published very little—because of her responsibility to care for her mother. These Mississippi women can be contrasted with a fellow state resident, Richard Wright, who published his first works in the late 1930's and early 1940's and enjoyed a literary career of some renown for the rest of his life until he died in the 1960's. Wright did not have an easy life, but he was free, even when married with children, to pack up and flee overseas to France to escape the places and situations that would have repressed his expression and prevented his writing.²

I had always read literary biographies with interest as a source of inspiration and for insight about the writing process. However, I thought of using the work of women writers to explore how they endured unjust treatment in various racial, class, and gender concerns in the first half of the twentieth century, and to look for common—and uncommon—features in how they represented themselves in their self-authored life writing because I began to suspect that these writers, artists familiar with patterns of fictive creation, wrote texts in which they used and manipulated certain life events to recreate themselves as heroic protagonists. This art of self-creation for these women in this time period formulates an act of great defiance because, as Carolyn Heilbrun writes,

such “women have been deprived of narratives, or the texts, plots, or examples, by which they might assume power over—take control of, their own lives” (Heilbrun 16-17).

Against great injustice and on the verge of opportunity, these women used their life writings to form writerly selves, and to present themselves as they wanted to be appreciated and perceived. These women took their own power to the page and employed resistance against those who might silence them.

One such heroic woman was Zora Neale Hurston. As an African American female, I have always felt a great affinity for Hurston’s work. Because the book was so unjustly received when first published, I begin with Hurston’s *Dust Tracks on a Road* (1942). As Toni Morrison argues in *Playing in the Dark*, the Africanist sensibility is a central shaping force in American literature. This is true for the concerns that Hurston takes up in her self-authored life writing. I have always believed that this work skirted attempts by society, not to mention the censors at her publisher, Lippincott, to define Hurston, that it is an intentional project to delineate her own view of herself. Of all the authors in this study, Hurston probably had to endure the highest price for her attempts in her work to create herself—ultimate silence.

Part of the ongoing project of graduate school is to teach emerging scholars how to use the work writers established in the canon to make arguments for works that are asking for canonical inclusion. In a prior African-American autobiography course, I used Welty’s *One Writer’s Beginnings* and Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own* to explain some of the elements in Hurston’s heretofore poorly received self-authored life writing. Since I had used Eudora Welty as a contrast to Hurston in the original project where my

idea was born, I felt bound to use her as the second author to be discussed. Her Southern perspective provided some interesting contrasts to Hurston then, as she does in this project. However, unbeknownst to me at the time, these writers shared some similarities as well. There was a certain amount of critical outrage against Welty's portrayal of her life in early twentieth century Mississippi in her self-authored life narrative. Welty, at first, seemed the most conventional of the authors that I chose to analyze, and the series of lectures that developed into *One Writer's Beginnings* (1983) provides a useful contrast to Hurston's viewpoint of the South. But *One Writer's Beginnings* has a good deal to say about the use of language to create the self, and closer investigation of Welty's reception and her biography reveals interesting parallels between Welty's career and those of other writers in this study. Hurston and Welty, who were aware of one another, publishing even in some of the same places in the 1930's and 1940's, for example, were very different daughters of the South, but display some interesting similarities in how they portray themselves, and both were criticized for their omissions and even for their presentations of their lives. Nonetheless, they both showed determination to define themselves regardless of critical feedback.

The third Southerner in this study is Lillian Smith, author of the novel *Strange Fruit*. Her self-authored life writing is an exemplary example of the feminist stance of the "personal as political." Smith's *Killers of the Dream* (1949, 1961) is only part traditional autobiography because it also functions as a confessional traditional political tract where she inscribes not only her self, but also the Southern self as well. She took up the work started in 1941 by her friend W.J. Cash and gave it a personal spin. In terms

of classification, her work is often shelved in libraries and bookstores under “race” rather than alongside her most famous novel, *Strange Fruit*, in the literature section. Even the title *Killers of the Dream*--though ostensibly about Smith’s presentation of religious hypocrisy and racial injustice in the South—seems to speak directly to those eleven silenced women that Tillie Olsen was so concerned about and who represent the classic woman writer’s dilemma. Recent biographers of Smith reveal the intimate relationship between her and Paula Snelling, who worked alongside her in the camp for girls that Smith had inherited. Smith’s conduct of her writing life while maintaining a lesbian relationship, managing the economic pressure of running the family’s girls’ camp, and engaging in her political activism all serve to highlight the miracle that was Smith’s writing career. The expressions of Smith’s politics in her own life writing were a calculated move to create an audience for her future work. Smith’s *Killers of the Dream* may provide a book length answer to the title question posed by Eudora Welty in her essay, “Must the Writer Crusade?”—though it reveals another form of pressure on the committed artist in a flawed culture, a pressure that Zora Neale Hurston as well as Welty tried to resist—that is, to make honest art as one chooses instead of as others demand.

The other two writers in this study can be loosely grouped into a confederation of their own: that of writers as mothers. Anzia Yezierska’s autobiographical novel *The Bread Givers* closely parallels the writer’s life she depicted in her memoir titled *Red Ribbon on a White Horse*. As a Jewish immigrant to this country, she details the growth and determination of someone who is bright and persistent and wishes to have an intellectual life at all costs. *Red Ribbon* is also full of reflections on the development of

the writerly self and the high costs of that development. Her interactions with men populate the context of her writing life; her affair of the mind with the philosopher John Dewey, while spurring her to write, may have dimmed her own writing light. It was especially difficult for women of her era to indulge in such an affair and still be taken seriously. Although her work encounters harsh critiques due to the sentimentality in it, Yeziarska's writing, still in the process of rediscovery, provides interesting instances of the sometimes desperate strategies required for a "modern" woman to conduct a meaningful writing life—in her case the price paid for having a powerful and famous male mentor.

Like Anzia Yeziarska, Mary Hunter Austin was a wife and mother who managed to write. She was also a true pioneer who helped to establish the genres of Western Literature and Environmental Literature. She is best known for her roman à clef, *Woman of Genius*, and her nature writing in *Land of Little Rain*. Her self-authored life writing, *Earth Horizon*, is an interesting mix of nature writing, fictionalized details of her life, and perspectives upon the conduct of a writer's life. In her text, she constantly reflects upon the arduous nature of the writing process. These various approaches to her self-authored life writing make Austin come across as almost a post modernist, even though her book was published prior to World War II. She deliberately speaks in two voices, calling herself in turn "I-Mary" (the cerebral part) and "Mary-by-Herself" (the vulnerable, emotional part). The dramatization of such a split allows the writer to reflect conflicts of how, as a woman writer, she makes unique choices and faces the barriers to her writing

life. Interestingly enough, Anzia Yeziarska and Mary Austin became mothers, but they gave up the task of raising their children to others in order to pursue their writing careers.

It cannot be emphasized enough that these women come from a wide range of experiences—racial, cultural, and class. To seek such diversity was my intention and raises important issues. Many critics, like Audre Lorde, have questioned the objectivity of those who called themselves feminist theorists to analyze women writers, believing that “women’s” theory inherently means “white women’s” theory. She states “By and large within the women’s movement today, white women focus upon their oppression as women and ignore differences of race, sexual preference, class and age” (Lorde 631).

Touching even Olsen and Smith, these are valid criticisms.

Toni Morrison’s *Playing in the Dark* provides a response to these issues. Even though she deals with novels, she develops her theory from her understanding as a writer reading those texts of creation. Since the self-authored life writings of these women are texts that are created and managed, her understanding can apply in this genre. She sees those created texts as a place to “consider what happens when other writers work in a highly and historically racialized society. For them, as for me, imagining is not merely looking or looking at; nor is it taking oneself intact into the other. It is, for the purposes of the work, *becoming*” (Morrison 4). For Morrison, it isn’t possible to neatly place these works into categories solely based on race.

Since we all exist together in United States society, the situations of racial difference exist across all texts, regardless of who wrote them. This is most certainly true

for the women whom I will discuss. They were concerned, in some ways, with racial and, for that matter, sexual difference, and they confronted these matters in their texts. For these women, difference exists as a key component to explicating their approaches to their lives' work—writing. For them it is not so much the road not taken, but the road they took that fits Robert Frost's cogent phrase, "that has made all the difference."

Notes

1. Winslow's book in the 1995 edition does not reflect the legions of changes in terms of autobiography since the early 1990's. Jill Ker Conway opens her book *When Memory Speaks* (1998) with the following question: "Why are so many people moved to write their life stories today" (3)? Conway's landmark self-authored life writing project, *The Road from Coorain*, was published in 1989. The works in this study were published prior to that year: *Dust Tracks on a Road* – 1942; *Red Ribbon on a White Horse* – 1950; *One Writer's Beginnings* – 1984, *Earth Horizon* – 1934; and *Killers of the Dream* – 1949 with a revision in 1961. Why was Winslow so unaware of the sea change in terms of the expansion of women's autobiography?
2. There are other self authored life writing projects that are written by men who are also concerned about this issue: *Black Boy* (1945) by Richard Wright, *The Big Sea* (1940) by Langston Hughes, and *Dawn* (1931) by Theodore Dreiser are three examples by American male writers that fit into this genre.

Chapter One

Studies in Self-Authored Life Writing

Since this project analyzes and explores the way in which women writers chose to create themselves on the page, I apply some theory from women's studies, primarily work by Virginia Woolf, Estelle Jelinek (whose touchstone dissertation established this field), and such newer critics in autobiography as Jill Ker Conway who impact the scholarship on the work of the women I have chose for my examples. Points of view on autobiography from traditional theorists in the field who are men, like James Olney, will be tested against these other critics and thinkers. The summaries that follow will explain the applicability of these theorists to my project, and then as the chapters are introduced, I will use them, among others not involved in theorizing self-authored life writing, to foreground the discussion of the self-authored life writing works that I have chosen.

A Room of One's Own, Virginia Woolf's famous exploration of a woman writer's needs, derives from two lectures given in October, 1928. While not outwardly a self-authored life writing project, it is a work of criticism that seeks to establish an economic context about how and why women writers are less able to write and to interpret events crucial to the development of the woman writer. The word "interpret" is important because this book is a veiled account of Woolf's own writing life. She does not feel it necessary to give a chronological narration of the events in her life. For instance, Woolf hardly touches on her concepts of love and marriage in *A Room of One's Own*. She does not suggest that a woman should marry to obtain the room and money that she believes a woman needs in order to write fiction, nor does she mention her marriage to Leonard

Woolf in great detail. She discusses arranged marriage as an impediment to a woman writer's career and sees repeated childbearing and child rearing by women as an important justification for why there are not more women writers or female creators of college endowments (Woolf 61). Love and marriage, for Woolf, aren't seen as sources of inspiration. Rather, love and marriage are seen as roadblocks to the creation of literature.¹

Woolf's audience in *A Room of One's Own* is men who have money, but she is also speaking to women who might find the means to begin their writing careers. Her main concerns are women of her own moneyed class who have no financial independence and cannot lead their own lives. She most vividly introduces her ideas on the repression of women in the fictitious example of Shakespeare's sister, Judith. She uses Judith to show a way of discussing how a woman of extraordinary genius could be sidetracked by everyday life. She ultimately concludes, "it would have been impossible, completely and entirely, for any woman to have written the plays of Shakespeare in the age of Shakespeare" (Woolf 48). Woolf partakes of some political activism and seeks to educate her moneyed male audience to solicit them to help correct these injustices in the twentieth century.² Regardless, Woolf is aware that money, or the lack of it, is a political issue. And as we shall see in the analysis of the texts that follow, fiscal concerns always appear as part of the resistance that these women employ in their texts and also play a role in the external resistance they face in pursuing their artistic endeavors. The "money issue" is a key factor in why 11 of 12 women in Tillie Olsen's example, are silenced or at

the very least it plays a crucial role in why women who are one book “only” stay that way.

For Woolf, obtaining the economic means to write is a political cause, and part of her job as a woman writer is to forward the cause of women's education and ultimately to press for more women's stories to be told. This may be why *A Room of One's Own* comes across as a treatise for the education of women. Woolf sees that throughout history women have been wasted as a resource. In presenting her lectures, Woolf's aim is to raise money to endow institutions of higher learning for women; however, she poses several questions that impact the study of women fiction writers: "Why was one sex so prosperous and the other so poor? What effect has poverty on fiction? What conditions are necessary for the creation of works of art?" (Woolf 54).³ Woolf's famous conclusion that a woman writer needs a decent annuity and a room of her own is a bit like asking for a fairy godmother and seems not to address the everyday realities of most women's lives. While some may question the validity of Woolf's "solution" and how it applies to the lives of women of any class or ethnicity, her irony is engaged to assert the problem that most women writers still face: personal independence, sufficient time, privacy, and freedom of mind to concentrate on the consuming work of authorship. In her circle of acquaintances there were many women who rebelled against convention, chose lives different from the Victorian norm, and found these struggles themselves—as well as their compromises and lapses—conditions that stifled art.

Estelle Jelinek takes up the phenomenon that Woolf did not anticipate—the increased political, artistic, sexual, domestic, and financial freedom in the lives of women

in the twentieth century-- more explicitly, in the form of a scholarly study. Jelinek finished her dissertation research in 1976 when women's lives were beginning to be investigated in greater depth across the disciplines. Jelinek's *Women's Autobiography* is a linchpin text in women's studies and autobiography. As she herself admits, there was no critical work written in the area of women's autobiography for study prior to 1980. The basic assumption made by scholars outside of the field was that a set of similarities existed among women's autobiographies (Jelinek xi), but Jelinek challenges this view. Jelinek argues that "women's autobiographies rarely mirror the establishment history of their times. They emphasize to a much lesser extent the public aspects of their lives, the affairs of the world, or even their careers, and concentrate instead on their personal lives—domestic details, family difficulties, close friends and especially people who influenced them" (7-8). Failing to perceive the metaphorical import of details of career concerns, Jelinek's assessment of her chosen texts does not fully consider the political or intellectual concerns of women's self-authored life writing and she gives scant attention to the issue of diversity—whether racial, class, or religious in nature. In this, she inadvertently commits the same type of exclusion that James Olney demonstrates from a male point of view in his landmark text *Autobiography*, which will be discussed later in the chapter.

Zora Neale Hurston's *Dust Tracks on a Road*, for example, was published in 1942, but in her assessment Jelinek does not address Hurston's concerns with her developing writing career. Anzia Yezierska had yet to be fully rediscovered at the time of Jelinek's publication; her autobiography, *Red Ribbon on a White Horse*, was published

to underwhelming reception in 1950 and remained shortly afterwards. Yeziarska's obscurity may have meant that Jelinek did not encounter her work. Lillian Smith's *Killers of the Dream* from 1949 and Mary Austin's *Earth Horizon* from 1934 were available for Jelinek's study but were not considered. Eudora Welty's *One Writer's Beginnings*, published in 1984, was probably available for Jelinek's later 1986 work, *The Traditions of Women's Autobiography*, but it was not considered there either. Career formation was not a central interest of Jelinek's work, and the tools to examine the concerns of these texts via feminist theory were not yet widely popularized, either.

Jelinek does introduce the notion in her later work that woman's autobiographies, regardless of ethnic or cultural origin, are not told in linear fashion but have a circular construct: "irregularity rather than orderliness informs the self-portraits by women. The narratives of their lives are often not chronological and progressive but disconnected, fragmentary, or organized into self-sustained units rather than connecting chapters" (17). Jelinek wisely attributes this style to the roles that women have to play in their lives. As mothers, daughters, caretakers, workers, and wives, they lack the time to write continuous narratives, she argues. It may also be, she surmises, that women, no matter their persuasion, operate in a different mode of creativity and that these self-portraits are rendered in a new and different way of thinking. Both these observations apply usefully to the writers and the texts in my project.

Kelly Mechling, in a 1999 Ph.D. dissertation, extends Jelinek's assessment of the circular writing pattern adopted by women and sees this style as a distinct advantage. She defines the style in *Dust Tracks on a Road*, for example, as a "montage

autobiography” that “veers off the unidirectional path of traditional autobiography, particularly in its shifting of topics as it strays outside ‘autobiography’ margins into other disciplines. [The montage autobiography] demonstrates a lack of progression from chapter to chapter. Chapters are ‘units’ unto themselves and stand more as essays” (Mechling 222-223). Mechling believes that this montage writing allows for a more truthful assessment of life events. Not only that, the freedom from thinking about the self in a binary or linear fashion means that the portrayals included come across as more rounded and life-like.⁴

Though she omitted much in overlooking consideration of race, class, religious diversity or careers in women’s autobiography, Jelinek is right when she considers the scant attention that the field received before her work. She reconsiders several prominent male critics who included only one woman in their entire group study of autobiography. For example, “James Olney’s *Metaphors of Self* (1972),” she writes, “devotes whole chapters to Montaigne, Fox, Darwin, Newman, and Eliot with not a single reference to a woman’s autobiography” (Jelinek 2).⁵ In Olney’s defense, he admits that he is interested only in a particular aspect of male autobiographical writing: “I am more interested in why men write autobiographies and have written them for centuries, and in why, after the lapse of those centuries, we continue to read them, than I am in the history of autobiography or in its form per se” (*Self* vii-viii). Is it possible that Olney, writing this book from Liberia in 1972, was oblivious to the woman’s movement at this time? Or was he merely justifying his interest in self-authored life writing only in its oldest sense? He sees autobiography as the culmination of the subject’s life work. The subject who

works is, in his view, male: “a man’s life work is his fullest autobiography and, he being what he is and where and when he is, neither the lifework nor the autobiography could be otherwise [. . .] A man’s autobiography is thus like a magnifying lens, focusing and intensifying that same peculiar creative vitality that informs all the volumes of his collected works” (Olney 4). Since Olney is considered a top critic of the genre, and his conclusions form the basis for theory in the field, his work bears closer examination.

The point might be made that Olney is using “men” in that old-fashioned way of writing, i.e., he means all humankind. The sentence quoted in the previous paragraph, however, does not give that impression. And the numbers speak for themselves. No female writers are on his list. How complete can his analysis be if he omits the other half of the human race? Unless, perhaps, he omitted the female half of the human race on purpose, because the style and content of women’s autobiographies did not suit his theory.

The nature of self-authored life writing in the modern era has, in fact, changed from the pattern Olney observes, that of the autobiography done near the end of a productive life. Though some important American women writers published memoirs of “lives” late in their writing careers, men and women who write now may prepare self-authored life writings early or late in their lives and even produce multi-volumed self-portraits. Although Eudora Welty waited a long time before setting down her life story, Zora Neale Hurston started hers at what she perceived to be an early point in her career. Lillian Smith’s self-authored life work effectively ended her writing career because of its frankness about Southern life, and she was only in middle age when it was published.

Anzia Yezierska lived twenty years after the publication of her self-authored life writing. Jelinek gives a list of *men* who wrote autobiographies when they were young, and she observes, “autobiography is no longer the sole province of older people looking backward reflectively and consciously on their past, for young people are recording their lives as they live them” (20). This was in 1980.

In Olney’s edited collection, *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical* (1980), one of his contributors, Roger Rosenblatt, presents an essay entitled “Black Autobiography” where he makes this startling statement: “Each autobiography, black and white, is an extended suicide note: both announcement and vindication of the event. The life recorded is the life complete to a specific point, and is therefore as good as dead.” Rosenblatt also claims that, “[e]ach autobiographer tells us what a fictional character would not need to tell us—that no further growth will occur. Each has chosen a point in his life where he could see a pattern of the whole. Having seen it, he isolates it and lays it to rest through the act of autobiography itself” (178). These incredible statements may be true for the selection of male authors that Rosenblatt has chosen to write about, but they are short sighted regarding the medium or what motivates people of either gender to write their own life stories or what people’s lives may or may not become after an autobiography. When Estelle Jelinek collected her articles for *Women’s Autobiography*, she certainly imagined different motivations for writing autobiographies than Rosenblatt’s “Goodbye cruel world.” No matter their origins or class or cultural considerations, her subjects have a wide variety of motives in writing their life stories, among them financial interest, political investment, reinvigorating their own writing, or

answering questions from readers. None of them saw themselves as wrapping up a life well (or badly) lived. In fact, very often, growth is occurring as they write, giving these writers more voice from which to speak.

Although Olney's approaches are very narrow, he makes some valid points in his arguments about self-authored life writing. He correctly divines the authority of the creative person when he uses an analogy to a great cosmographer: "This is what the painter, the poet, the speculative philosopher, and the natural scientist do, each in his own fashion," he writes. "Each makes this cosmos and its construction the pivot of his emotional life, in order to find in this way the peace and security which he cannot find in the narrow whirlpool of personal experience" (Olney 8). This important insight applies especially well to creative writers who are skilled in combining setting, event, characterization, dialogue, and plot.

As an historian, Jill Ker Conway has an interesting viewpoint on the origination and purpose of women's autobiographies. Conway's critical ideas arise from her success as an autobiographer herself. Her opening question in *When Memory Speaks* is key in any reconsideration regarding the purpose of autobiography by female writers. Conway asks: "Why is autobiography the most popular form of fiction for modern readers?" (Conway 3) This bold interrogative sentence immediately posits the notion that invention and creation rule self-authored life writing. Conway concedes that the initial concerns of women's writings about themselves arose from early Christianity—only one of a few arenas where women were traditionally permitted a sphere of influence as put forth in the self-authored life writing of Dame Julian. Women then were able to move on

to concerns with family, love, and marriage in their life writing—again spheres conceded to women where they exert a certain amount of influence (Conway 13). In women's life writing prior to the twentieth century, religion, family, love, and marriage predominate as subjects, she observes. Conway points out, however, that women in the nineteenth century expressed a longing for something more than domestic concerns. She cites examples of frontierswomen and pioneer women who "openly acknowledged the wish for power and depicted writers as political beings" (Conway 16). However, a submissive social role is in direct conflict with the desire of the autobiographer--to interest and influence others. As Conway writes, "every autobiographer wants to persuade others to learn from his or her life" (16). Even in modern society, for women, she argues, this desire has to be conveyed in covert terms because of the position of women. A departure from the expected norms that is too radical will lose audience and thus also lose influence.

However, even here, Conway is remiss in addressing issues of diversity. Her white Australian heritage appears to have made her oblivious to considerations of the life experiences of women who have differing viewpoints because they are minorities or stand apart from the dominant culture in some other way. These different perspectives, along with class considerations, have a tremendous impact on how a life is lived.

Echoing the implications of Virginia Woolf's essay, Conway goes on to claim that "the complex interplay of economic, emotional and demographic forces with understandings of gender also fosters a common narrative approach for women writers, since they are both products and chroniclers of the cultural conventions to which they

conform, even in the act of writing” (43). Conway’s emphasis, “even in the act of writing,” highlights the fact that the action of writing is a rebellious one, as Marita Golden, as her statements were expressed earlier, would concur. More than we realize, the texts in the realm of life writing by women are by those who dared to believe that their own lives were of sufficient importance to be documented, a radical and political claim under the aspect of a society in which women were historically diminished, disenfranchised, or, at best, ignored.

Conway’s observation is a telling one, and its significance applies directly or ironically to the examples of women’s life writing I have chosen to investigate in this study. These examples are especially important, I believe, not only because they are well written lives by accomplished women writers, but because they specifically valorize the life of a woman writing and focus in on the careerist moves that they make in their work. This, we shall see, helps explain not only what they put in, but also explains the silences or what they leave out of their self-authored life writing texts.

Notes

1. Economic need formed an impetus for several of these women to create these self-authored life writing projects. *Dust Tracks on a Road* is full of economic concerns while *One Writer's Beginnings* came from oral speeches where Welty seemingly just wanted to impart career advice. Though many people thought of Welty, at 75, as being at the end of her life in 1984, she lived for almost another 20 years. It also remains to be seen if the period of time toward the end of her life was entirely unproductive. Her friend, Reynolds Price, has hinted that her estate contains several unfinished and in-progress works.
2. The creation of fiction is often seen as something mysterious by the layperson, and whether or not it is mystical, the process of creating fiction does not become any easier with further study, though the elusive business of telling people how to put pen to paper and come up with memorable, let alone readable, fiction has generated many thousands of dollars for publishing companies such as *Writer's Digest*.
3. This is also true of the women's autobiographical projects. Critics, for one reason or another, have often dismissed women's writing projects out of hand—a fact that is not lost on Tillie Olsen. For instance, she uses a great portion of *Silences* to “rescue” [her word, not mine] the work of Rebecca Harding Davis in order to show the worthiness of the writing.

4. Mechling's approach applies now, as a new understanding has been shed on these unappreciated documents. If the idea that women autobiographers are only concerned about home and hearth is discarded, then it can be better understood by more scholars that the interests of women are already multidimensional.
5. Olney includes one essay in his later work, *Autobiography*, from a female autobiography critic, Mary G. Mason, who focuses on four women writers from England and Early America: Margaret Cavendish, Dame Julian, Margery Kempe, and Anne Bradstreet. In "Autobiography of Women Writers," Mason admits that the scope of her study in women's autobiography is limited: "The four models discussed here by no means exhaust the possibilities. For some women writers, it is not a man, or man, or a community but a woman, or women who provide the other of identity" (Mason 244). Mason's study is valuable because she presents her four women as archetypical models of the conduct of the writing life. Because her women are from different times, however, from the 14th century to the 18th century, these models do not specifically fit women who have 20th century concerns. Her statement that women who write may find "the other of identity" in the writing of other women is a crucial insight that does apply to the twentieth century, as the poet Adrienne Rich, among others, helped to demonstrate in the 1970's. Olney's inclusion of Mason into his text, although short-sighted in the assumption that the inclusion of the single essay was enough to showcase a diverse point of view, sheds light on how much work had to be done in the field.

Chapter Two

Dust Tracks: Zora Neale Hurston's created self

In her article, "Speaking in Tongues," Mae Henderson uses the title of an anthology to characterize the black women's dilemma: *All the Women are White, All the Blacks are Men, But Some of us are Brave*. She uses and extends Mikhail Bakhtin's idea of dialogism to show that black women writers are privileged because of their various voices as more than one social minority: "black women writers [are] 'privileged' by a social position that enables them to speak in diagonally racial and gendered voices to the other(s) both within and without" (Henderson 345) No doubt Zora Neale Hurston, who once lamented that black women are the "mules of the world," might have been thrilled with the idea of black womanhood as a privileged status. In Hurston's *Dust Tracks on a Road*, she writes from the understanding that her own experience has privileged her in many ways. For a woman of her time to write in this way represented bold acts of resistance that must be unpacked and better understood. Crispin Sartwell puts it well: "Zora Neale Hurston's work stands as a monument of resistance to all impositions of specific forms of visibility" (123).

Zora Neale Hurston is one of the primary black woman writers of the twentieth century, rescued from out-of-print status more than thirty years ago to receive recognition as an important voice in American literary history, regardless of racial and gender origins. Her most famous work, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, has been moved into the established canon of American literature, her anthropological work is used more widely than before, and more recently because of the films she took while doing her

anthropological work, she is regarded as a visionary-- as one of the first black female movie directors of the documentary in the United States. However, her self-authored life writing, *Dust Tracks on A Road* (1942), has been widely overlooked because of the contents of her work, although there is much to appreciate in a work that Alice Walker called “false” --one of the harshest terms that can be applied to a text, especially one that is supposed to be a depiction of a life story. In Hurston’s self-authored life writing project, she “privileges herself,” as Henderson would put it, as a writer and insists on asserting her right to self-definition.

The pull between a European aesthetic and Black folk culture characterizes the life, language, and work of Zora Neale Hurston as an African-American. W.E.B. DuBois articulated the overwhelming nature of this pull as the “double-bind” for the black American artist, and this can be seen as an important key to understanding Hurston’s expression of her recreated self. This “double-bind” found expression in her life in many ways. One way was her dual careers. The belief held by Robert Hemenway, whose 1977 biography served to recover Hurston because he believed in her literary talent, was that Hurston developed a vocational schizophrenia because she was part artist and part social scientist. She crafted the *Eatonville Anthology* in 1926, and of it Hemenway said himself that “it is hardly fiction at all. It is pure Zora Neale Hurston: part fiction, part folklore, part biography, all told with great economy with an eye for authentic detail, and a perfect ear for dialect” (Hemenway 70). Without early attempts like the *Eatonville Anthology*, Hurston perhaps would not have had a springboard for her self-authored life writing in *Dust Tracks*, with its sometimes blended genres.

Her posture as a woman writer is outlined defiantly in a chapter titled “Research,” where Hurston explained it best: “I needed my Barnard education to help me see my people as they really are. But I found that it did not do to be too detached as I stepped aside to study them. I had to go back, dress as they did, talk as they did, live their life, so that I could get into my stories the world I knew as a child” (Hurston 196). Hurston’s acquisition of the clothes, lifestyle, and language of her Barnard college education is the dislocation from the past that helps her understand that her writer’s voice and the talk of her characters will be radically different. This adaptation of theatricality here allowed her to use the perspective of the white world where she was educated to re-enter the lives of her people, whose language and perspectives she had absorbed as a child. Hurston’s genius emerges when she crafts her own unique blend of the two languages in her works—something that the most successful African American writers have had to do. One need only read the opening pages of *Their Eyes were Watching God* to see this duality at work. Hurston’s detachment belongs to the realm of the social scientist, but her empathy comes through the engagement of the fiction writer. White objectivity and black subjectivity meant that Hurston could play all of the parts with full understanding.

With this pull between two worlds, her first biographer, who was attempting to clarify “inaccuracies” about her life as well as restore her literary reputation (xx), concludes that it was never possible for Hurston to become a social scientist of the first order:

Zora never became a professional academic folklorist because such a vocation was alien to her exuberant sense of self, to her admittedly artistic, sometimes

erratic temperament, and to her awareness of the aesthetic content of black folklore. If there is a single theme which emerges from her creative effort during the thirties [. . .] it is that eventually immediate experience takes precedence over analysis, emotion over reason, the personal over the theoretical. (Hemenway 213)

Hemenway's assessment of the lesser importance of anthropology in Hurston's life may be correct. But she used the one career to nourish and augment the other rather than "be grateful" for a professional career. This was a strategy of resistance that enabled her to be innovative in her fiction writing. However, her experiences with an academic career were necessary for her to grow and improve. The Barnard degree, the work with the famous anthropologist "Papa" Franz Boas, and the repeated collecting trips, all functioned as grist for her writing mill. This legitimacy was crucial for a black female writer in the 1920s and 1930s because her scientific approach meant that her later work had a strong foundation that could give her the confidence to write her own life story with a new approach.

Part of Woolf's argument in *A Room of One's Own* is that money makes a difference in determining which writers are heard. It is a recurring theme in *Dust Tracks*. In her forward to Hemenway's *Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography*, Alice Walker makes plain another of the lessons that Zora Neale Hurston's hard life teaches: "Being broke made all the difference. Without money of one's own in a capitalist society, there is no such thing as independence. This is one of the clearest lessons of Hurston's life, and why I consider the telling of her life a 'cautionary tale.' We must learn from it what we can" (Walker xvi).¹ Some of the harshness and poverty of Hurston's life put her in

touch with cultural reality that informed her work, but in the end it also compromised her writing energy. Hemenway describes her attitude at the end of her life: “What ate away at the ‘delirium of joy’ [that Zora reflected about while living in Eau Gallie, Florida] was the absence of cash.” Hemenway recounts from an interview with Hurston’s literary agent that Hurston could write “like an angel” but like many authors, from Poe and Melville to Faulkner and Fitzgerald, she could not write as well when she felt financial pressure (Hemenway 341). In a vicious cycle, she could not write publishable material when she needed money; and yet in order to make money, she had to write saleable work. What one might call the “Virginia Woolf problem” was decidedly hers.

Especially during the latter part of her career, Hurston “made a way out of no way” and worked several jobs, including both menial and teaching jobs, to make ends meet, hoping to buy time to write. This tiring struggle eventually compromised her work. In every instance where the quality of her writing is mentioned, anything that she wrote in the way of prose after World War II was considered lesser work and indeed was, in many instances, unpublishable. After *Seraph on the Suwanee* was published in 1948, she attempted to submit several works to her publishing house, Scribner’s, but all were turned down or discouraged. When she was rediscovered working as a maid in the 1950s she indicated that she was doing it “for research purposes” and that she was attempting to start a magazine “for and by domestics” (Wall 977). Was she serious? In any case, the “research” and the magazine never came off because Hurston was not business minded and it is unlikely that she could have obtained funding given the position of African American women at the time. Obviously, this was before the days of *Essence* or *O*

magazine. More likely her claim was some kind of joke reflecting her propensity to be jocular in her attitude towards life. Domestic labor seemed a daunting comedown for someone who had been one of the great writers of the Harlem Renaissance and a successful anthropologist and folklorist as well, but she had taken similar work early in her career with the novelist Fanny Hurst.

Hurston's resort to one of the few professions open to black women is a tragic comment on her times, though she also tried to pass off maid's work as a type of vacation. "You can only use your mind for so long," she said (Wall 200); she was temporarily "written out." Really, Hurston's work as a maid in a Florida home was a bizarre twist of fate for someone who had once written for that middle-class staple, *The Saturday Evening Post*. James Lyons, the writer who exposed her, was obviously ignorant of the truths of a serious writer's life, particularly a writer who was a dual minority (Wall 201), but her hardships never kept Hurston down. She tried to make the best of her life in whatever circumstances.

Like her life and a lot of her writing, *Dust Tracks on a Road* was increasingly misunderstood as Hurston herself failed to produce new work and generally faded from the literary scene. Up until the 1990's *Dust Tracks* generally received negative comment. It is critical to understand this poor reception and the way *Dust Tracks* might otherwise be perceived to best apply the lessons that might be learned from Hurston's life as she created it in her text. Alice Walker is the most prominent Hurston adherent disappointed in *Dust Tracks*: "For me, the most unfortunate thing Zora ever wrote is her autobiography. After the first several chapters, it rings false. One begins to hear the

voice of someone whose life required the assistance of too many transitory ‘friends’” (Walker xvii). Seeing Hurston as a literary foremother, Walker appears to have so much invested in Hurston that she apparently finds the book’s style and substance disturbing and, worse yet, false.²

Cheryl A. Wall, who edited both Zora Neale Hurston volumes for the Library of America, is a well-known Hurston scholar and also one of many who are disappointed with *Dust Tracks*. Wall states: “Hurston’s muddled perspective in *Dust Tracks* inspired no adherents. The fact that the book won the Anisfield-Wolf award (sponsored by *Saturday Review*) for its contribution to race relations says more about the state of race relations than about the clarity of Hurston’s views [. . .] most of the book’s glints and gleams shone less brightly” (Wall 198). Wall does bring up an interesting point about *Dust Tracks on a Road*. With Hurston’s constant need for sources of income, the autobiography that her publisher requested ended up as a hodgepodge of essays, various writing styles and remembrances, and was heavily edited at the publishing house. It wasn’t until the full text was restored in 1996 that anyone could begin to see what Hurston’s full purpose was.³ But still Wall feels that no editor could have found a sustained perspective within the materials that Hurston submitted (Wall 198). As I read it, the fragmented structure of *Dust Tracks* itself is a testament to Hurston’s resistance against the structure of conventional autobiography for the time. This is one reason, among others, why there is much more in Hurston’s text to be appreciated than Walker and Wall perceive.

The perceptions of *Dust Tracks on a Road* have undergone a shift in the 1990's. To me, it is clear that Hurston intended to write an autobiographical compendium of the cumulative effect of certain forces on particular portions of her life and not a synthesis of her life experiences. She says in the chapter entitled "Love," "Don't look for me to call a string of names and point out chapter and verse. Ladies do not kiss and tell any more than gentlemen do" (Hurston 203). This quaint-sounding Victorian remark originating from the usual in-your-face Zora Neale Hurston is pure resistance and a key to unlocking an understanding of this self-authored life writing. This is not a "tell-all" book about a woman's everyday existence or her bohemian life. It is Hurston's vision of the important events that created her own writing self.

It is well known that Hurston, like William Faulkner and many other writers, was not concerned with the "facts" of her life. In *On Writing*, Stephen King claims that a good fiction writer has an inherent inability to tell the difference between truth and fiction (King iv). Hurston had the same problem. She admits this after her extensive retelling and reshaping of the Pender saga in chapter five, writing, "My phantasies were still fighting against the facts" (Hurston 60). The inconsistencies about her birth year were reconciled long after her death when her younger brother corrected the record and "told" on her. The facts of her life and her account of them are criticized precisely because she took the common liberties of a fiction writer and applied them to the "truth" of her life. *Dust Tracks* is the imaginative version of Hurston's life that reveals how selected events and personalities contributed to the writer she eventually became.

Dust Tracks on a Road also took an especially tough hit from some critics because of Hurston's identity as a black female. We must keep in mind that this autobiography was published a scant two years after Hattie McDaniel tearily stated in her Oscar acceptance speech that she wanted to be "a credit to her race" (Jackson 52). Hurston rebelled against such expectations of black women, something central to her individualism. Hurston always resisted any expectations to be seen as "up front," "representative," or "symbolic" about race issues in her texts, just as she refused to tell all about her private life. She thus understood something about self-authored life writing that her critics missed-- that in such works authors are seeking an understanding of themselves as artists, as writers, and will be selective about what details are part of their text. In *Writing a Woman's Life*, Carolyn Heilbrun uses the illustrious French theorist Roland Barthes to illustrate this point, quoting Barthes's maxim that "biography is a novel that dare not speak its name" (Heilbrun 12). This understanding must apply to self-authored life writing as well. The construction of such texts requires that the writer select details to arrive at an understanding of the subject, which in Hurston's case is not a pedestrian factual account of her existence, but an impression of how she came to be the writer who is now composing this book. The biography, though heavily influenced by *which* details the author can find to create a portrait of the subject, is filtered through the understanding of the biographer, but the "biographer" is a novelist, a fiction writer, and one can often tell just as much about the "writer" as about the "life."

In the self-authored life-writing text, the "biographer" and the "subject" are one and the same. The "author" of these works, who presumably knows everything about her

subject—herself— in any event will select, arrange, and compress as well as compose and invent. The self-authored life writing is *always* subject to question in terms of the absolute “truth” of a life. Hurston worked especially hard throughout her life to subvert those expectations of what she “should” reveal about herself. Robert Hemenway discusses Hurston’s notorious bent to protect her private life: “She had told neither of her sponsors about [her] marriage, maintaining a closeness about her private affairs that she would persist in all her life” (Hemenway 93). Even Hurston’s own relatives did not know much about Hurston’s turbulent life. The fact that Hurston died alone in a welfare home was attributed to her close-mouthed nature and her pride.⁴ To the end of her life, Hurston maintained her own privacy. Why wouldn’t she do the same on paper when given an opportunity? But privacy is perhaps not the issue here. The writer of fiction not only purposefully confuses fact with invention but also truly has a special story to tell about the creative and imaginative life. This would inevitably carry over to her life story and, I assert, is part of her strategy of resistance that exhibits her determination to tell her own life story in her way.

Cheryl Wall argues that sometime in the 1950’s, as Hurston’s career went into deep decline, one of the many texts that Hurston was beginning to write was a sequel to *Dust Tracks* (Wall 972). However, since she had published only one novel after *Dust Tracks* was written, she perhaps felt she had nothing left to say. She might have elaborated how she had struggled to continue writing despite the hostility shown to her by reviewers and the Black literati—finding piecemeal work in the Black press, offering books and stories that were rejected by supposedly “friendly” publishers -- and then, how

she had to work as a maid, substitute teacher, and librarian just to keep food on the table. That story might have been a little too much truth for her audience and was certainly not in keeping with Hurston's spunky worldview. She was much more optimistic than pessimistic and, I suspect, would have found it difficult to write a story of failure and decline. As we shall see later, Yeziarska does incorporate the harsh costs of the writer's life in her work, but there still must be triumph. Hurston felt the same too. Thus, *Dust Tracks on a Road* is what we have, and it is, I maintain, primarily and firmly a positive account of how she became a writer.

Hurston does not record her birth until Chapter 3 in *Dust Tracks*, because she first examines her hometown place as central to the development of her writing life. She begins *Dust Tracks* by discussing this important influence:

Like the dead-seeming, cold rocks, I have memories within that came out of the material that went to make me. Time and place have had their say. So you will have to know something about the time and place where I came from, in order that you may interpret the incidents and directions of my life. I was born in a Negro town. I do not mean by that the black back-side of an average town. Eatonville, Florida, is and was at the time of my birth, a pure Negro town--charter, mayor, council, town marshal and all. It was not the first Negro community in America, but it was the first to be incorporated, the first attempt at organized self-government on the part of Negroes in America. (Hurston 1)

In their psychological research on early childhood memory, Robyn Fivush and Katherine Nelson point out the way in which the collective community informs the memory of young children in cultures outside of the West. This African emphasis in the style of memory might have included the all-African-American Eatonville: “[these] cultures define the self as an interdependent part of a social group, regulating its actions, emotions and outcomes in relations to others (Fivush and Nelson 576). Thus, it is crucial to appreciate the lesson that Eatonville taught Hurston and to understand the writer’s chronotope—“the place where the knots of narrative are tied,” the place “that makes narrative concrete” (Bakhtin 250). The poet June Jordan points to Eatonville as “a supportive, nourishing, environment’ which underlies Hurston’s ability to convey a total, Black reality where Black people do not represent issues: they represent their own, particular selves”(qtd. in Hassall 161). Mary Katherine Wainwright affirms the value of this start: “the importance of self is shaped by the community; that the self is relational and multiple, not singular, autonomous or unified;[. . .] that the self and community are engaged in a reciprocal process of creating and integrating each other” (Wainwright 119). Both critics see, but do not fully grasp, that Hurston’s highly selective fiction-making depiction has fed upon the kind of environment that makes a writer. These are the primary scenes from which a writer’s life—not an “ordinary” life—will unfold. Hurston is continuously remaking herself, constantly subverting societies’ expectations of African American women. Without understanding the insight that Hurston derived from her community, it is impossible to understand Hurston at all, but it is important to note that she was helped to this perception, because by the time she wrote *Dust Tracks*, her

anthropological training in cultural relativity under Franz Boas had affected her viewpoint about the primary importance of community, and so had her successes and ambitions as a writer.

Certainly the Hurston family was central to the Eatonville community and her family had a large impact on Zora as the developing writer. The most well-known story circulated from *Dust Tracks on A Road* is where Hurston's mother, Lucy, encourages her child to "jump at de sun." The grown up, educated Zora Neale Hurston selects and recreates this moment to show the importance of encouragement to a child, but also, in its echoing of the Icarus-Daedelus myth from Greek mythology, wants to warn of the risks of such instruction.⁵ To be sure, Lucy Hurston could not have imagined the writerly life for her daughter, yet she wanted something more than the existence that the Hurstons eked out on John Hurston's pay as a handyman and sometime mayor of Eatonville. The positive influences of her mother encouraged Zora to aspire regardless of her dual minority status. Fivush and Nelson point out the role of the mother in providing 'linguistic scaffolding' for the child's early reminiscences and formation of language: "[the] linguistic 'scaffold' that helps to focus the child's attention and organize the event into a coherent whole" (574). As we shall see later, Lucy helped form the young Zora's first interaction with language that she found so wondrous.

Thus, the death of her mother is a devastating, dramatic turning point in Hurston's life. Joanne Braxton states: "When her mother dies, these ties are cut, and Hurston's link with place and tradition is broken; the magical inner world of Eatonville is destroyed" (Braxton 147). Community was so important because without its prominence in African

American life, there would have been no survival. The dependence on taking joy in one another, on the community revealed at the store porch, and on familial love and sexual relationships was key. Thus, the community figures in Hurston's work of fiction almost as another character, because it is so vividly presented.

Lucy's death means that Hurston has to recreate a new form of expression—develop her own linguistic scaffolding. Hurston must give birth to herself anew. Also, from her anthropologist's mind and like her mentor Franz Boas, who had met Freud, Jung, and Rank, Hurston inserts the “myth of the special child” who must find her own way into the story. Accordingly, Braxton points out that as a consequence of her loss, “Hurston will strive to re-create the perfect world of her childhood in autobiography, fiction and anthropological works where she serves as the fictional narrator” (Braxton 149-150) and also the heroine. What Braxton does not note is the role of anthropology and folklore in helping Hurston recover the value of her childhood experience through the intersection of her literal and cultural stories.

Despite the ways in which he disappointed Hurston, her father was a major factor in her story, understandably. His notion of suppressing Zora originated from her birth, because he didn't want any more daughters. Valerie Boyd says, “the way Zora always heard it, when John got the news that he was the papa of a new baby girl, he threatened to cut his own throat” (18). For her father, young women were meant to be quiet reflections of their family until it was time for marriage. She should “know her place.” Extra women in the family, as Zora was, were a nuisance. Zora's older sister Sarah was his pet and that was enough of girls for him (Boyd 27-28). This pattern of misunderstanding continues,

in Hurston's account, through his marriage to the purposefully anonymous wicked stepmother in *Dust Tracks* and on to the end of his life. The similarities between the stubborn John Hurston and the bullheaded John Pearson of her novel *Jonah's Gourd Vine* are no coincidence but her twists on them is indicative of her storytelling methods and motives.

Unquestionably, Hurston's father had a large impact on her but in *Dust Tracks*, John Hurston is drawn as an angry man who has no understanding at all of his youngest daughter. Hurston relates incident upon incident where the confrontations between her and her father are like war: "I'll riding horse you, Madam!" Papa shouted and jumped to his feet. But being down at the end of the table big enough for all ten members of the family together, I was near to the kitchen door, and I beat Papa to it by a safe margin. He chased me as far as the side gate and turned back" (Hurston 29). This heroic escape and the glee from Hurston in escaping her father's clutches can be seen as a physical but also a mental escape from John Hurston's narrow-minded influence, and symbolically, he, not she, stops at the gate.

When children are able to visualize alternatives in their world, the storytelling mind is nurtured and developed. Zora Neale Hurston goes through another kind of growing pain with her discovery of lying. Lying plays a healthy storytelling role in the black community through exaggeration, but her grandmother wants to break her of her lying habit. She is angry when Zora comes in and tells a story about the personification of a lake. The grandmother is quite insistent, and Hurston's conclusion is: "God knows, grandmother would break me or kill me if she had her way. Killing me looked like the

best one, anyway. All I was good for [according to the grandmother] was to lay up and [. . .] tell lies" (Hurstun 53). The grandmother wants Zora to be ready for a life of conformity because she understands that Negro women, as African Americans were called at the time, led hard lives and Zora should be ready for it, but the grandmother is portrayed by Hurston here as someone who misperceives the pleasures and uses of the imagination.

Her mother is portrayed as someone who does not see this lying as a problem. "Oh, she's just playing,' Mama said indulgently" (Hurstun 52), and she validates the notion of play as a drive in creative writing. Lucy Hurston's indulgence reflects her supportive attitude towards her daughter's creativity. This portrayal of Lucy as a nurturing influence is crucial for Zora as a developing writer and functions in the same way as Welty's parents and as Yeziarska's lover as we shall see later. This picture of the lies that Zora's mother allows her to tell, a fount of enrichment, prepares Zora for something much larger. This notion of 'play' with language and story gives Hurston a foundation for her work later on in life.

The importance and joy of lying is, in fact, confirmed in Hurston's depiction of her community. The 'lying sessions' on Joe Clarke's store porch helped provide a model for Hurston's writing as well as a source for marvelous scenes in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Zora "was a perfect mimic" and learned a range of storytelling techniques from "the masters of Joe Clarke's store porch" (Hemenway 22). In *Dust Tracks* Hurston honors this tradition by writing "I know that Joe Clarke's store was the heart and spring of the town. Men sat around the store on boxes and benches and passed

this world and the next one through their mouths. For me, the store porch was the most interesting place I could think of," and she claimed, "what I really loved to hear was the menfolks holding a 'lying' session. That is, straining against each other in telling folk tales" (46-7). The Bakhtinian notion of 'social dialect,' a group's own unique language, can be applied here—the young Zora was absorbing a language of various "shared values, perspectives, ideology and norms" defined by Bakhtin as 'heteroglossia' (Henderson 344). Eavesdropping on the store porch, she claims, began to give her this dialect.

Strangely, this reference in *Dust Tracks* to "lying" gives some critics trouble. Kathleen Hassall sees it as problematic because it may cause the "audience--her reader—[to] take her to be lying or take the lie for truth, and may never well realize there is a performance going on" (Hassall 164). Clearly Hassall misses part of the main point even though she understands that Hurston's work is a "performance." Hurston's posture in her self-authored life writing is purposeful and willful--reflective of an act of resistance on her part because she is determined to recreate her writer's life in her own way, not according to previous autobiographical conventions. Also, Hurston is applying an anthropologically-trained creative writer's perspective to construct her "one writer's beginnings," using the word "lying" to reflect the pleasures of invention and exaggeration—that is, performance--every fiction writers' tools. Hassell also misses that this kind of lying, aside from providing an important foundation for Hurston as a writer, is an important element in African American culture that Hurston validates. Playing the dozens--telling exaggerated lies about someone else's relatives in a comical game of

disrespect—is as important to African American story traditions as are jam sessions and cutting contests to the practitioners of jazz. The entire “game” of lying develops a sense of shaping scene, structure, and form to entertain but also to enlighten. Hurston foregrounds this cultural habit as one of her sources, just as Eudora Welty did when, as it will be discussed later, she validates hearing her mother and friends gossip in automobile joy rides, and thus portrays a culture as well as an influence.

Bakhtin discusses the notion of the development of consciousness as inner speech: “[The languages of heteroglossia] encounter one another and co-exist in the consciousness of real people—first and foremost, in the creative consciousness of people who write novels” (292). Writers must develop their own unique means of expression in order to find success on the page. Indeed, the various modes of expression in *Dust Tracks* are a strategic purpose to avoid one mode or style of storytelling. Striking some critics as schizophrenic, the pastiche of *Dust Tracks* is instead successful as her way of expressing herself, as Mechling explains, in a “book that is supposed to—according to the rules of the genre—be about ‘self’” (230).

Part of the young Zora’s consciousness and thus the inner speech that she will later use to write her stories is developed through Eatonville, but part comes through a force external to her hometown-- reading. Hurston’s love of reading is showcased in *Dust Tracks* as a precocious ability. At a recitation section before white visitors from the North, Zora’s class is called upon to recite a line of poetry in the class book. This assignment comes easy for Zora. “The story was not new to me because I had read my reader through from lid to lid, the first week that Papa had bought it for me” (Hurston

35). She did not wait to be told what to read and when to read. This precocious ability results in the gift of books to her from the white missionaries who were at the recital, as well as some clothing. She writes that she loved her other gifts from the missionaries, "but the books gave me more pleasure than the clothes" (Hurston 39), another choice in her self-authored life writing text that valorizes the writer of the books that she became. Later in *Dust Tracks*, when Hurston tells stories of her work as a maid in the homes of the rich, she emphasizes that she has a hard time cleaning the libraries because of her desire to stop and read the wonderful books. When she writes that she finds a discarded copy of *Paradise Lost* and reads it from cover to cover, she discovers a symbol for her own life—the loss of her mother, the dominance of her father, and her youthful exile from Eatonville, a town whose name does not sound unlike “Eden-ville.” When she later works for an actress in a touring company, their mutual status as avid readers grants Hurston more access to books, opens her mind, and furthers her education (Hurston 98-99). Hurston could have written about Eatonville and her domestic service differently, but she sees her development as that of the writer she became, and it is, in effect, the hero’s life, and in every hero’s life there be dragons, as Eudora Welty confirms in the closure of her masterpiece, *The Golden Apples*, where she evokes Perseus and the Medusa in the thoughts of Virgie Rainery, her “hero.”

A call to the writer’s vocation through a passion for books can be a disturbing experience for someone so young, with fearsome visions accompanying her developing sense of narrative and story. She explains what this life would cost her, just as Yeziarska did, which I will show later: "I was weighed down with a power I did not want. I had

knowledge before its time. I knew my fate. I knew that I would be an orphan and homeless. I knew that while I was still helpless, that the comforting circle of my family would be broken and that I would have to wander cold and friendless until I had served my time" (Hurston 420).⁶ She moves more clearly into the realm of myth-making, with herself as the focus. Her narrative resonates with the courage she needed in order to face the often unbearable contingencies of human existence that threatened her work. Albert Stone discusses the importance of visions in African-American autobiography: "Visions [. . .] are in this sense simply models for several sorts of experiences through which changes and continuities in identity are dramatically realized" (quoted in Braxton 145). The visions in *Dust Tracks* resonate as a metaphor revealing to potential writers the feelings of isolation and heroism that must come with the writing career they seek.⁷ After the visions she describes as coming to her as a little girl, Hurston tells us her imagination begins to develop along writerly lines. She discusses the development of her imagination: "When inanimate things ceased to commune with me like natural men, other dreams came to live with me. Animals took on lives and characteristics, which nobody knew anything about, except myself. Little things that people did or said grew into fantastic stories" (Hurston 57). To augment her growing imagination, she goes to the store porch and eavesdrops on the men, taking on their skill, authority, and narrative power. Hurston purposefully constructs, in this story of making a doll, a story of making herself or even creating Janie of *Their Eyes were Watching God* in the account:

In a few minutes, [a cast-off chunk of corn] had become Miss Corn-Shuck, and of course she needed some hair. So I went back and picked up some corn silk and

...tied it to the pointed end. We had a lovely time together for a day or two, and then Miss Corn-Shuck got lonesome for some company (50).

The imaginative little girl then gives Miss Corn-Shuck friends--a potential husband and an enemy--adding the elements of plot and conflict. Hurston, the anthropologist, surely knew something of the "corn goddess" Demeter and of other myths of "corn"—British for wheat rituals in works such as James G. Frazer's *The Golden Bough*, a staple of modernist anthropology. Also, as the doll is being made, as Hurston is making herself, she gives the doll long, glossy hair. Hurston's hair concerns are well documented across her writing career.

As her own hero, Hurston relates, she was intrigued about what is up the road, but she suppresses her questions about what lies beyond the horizon for a long time, because she needs to think about how she will get there. Then, one day she asks for a horse from her father, who abruptly refuses her request. When her wish isn't fulfilled, she relies upon her imagination and states, "Since Papa would not buy me a saddle horse, I made me one up" (Hurston 29), and ultimately she had to be retrieved from far down the road. Again, she resists convention and does what she wants to do. Again, the image is telling, evoking mythic associations with steeds such as Pegasus and the hero's quest. She simultaneously portrays the specific barriers a female hero must face. Given that she was away from influence that a library might have provided as in Welty's case, she instead developed her curiosity, which was free. Sitting on her father's store porch was forbidden, because she was young and female, but that did not deter her from taking part in listening: "I was not allowed to sit around there, naturally. But, I could and did drag my feet going in and out

(of the store) whenever I was sent there for something, to allow whatever was being said to hang in my ear"(Hurston 46). Having to "drag" her feet and dawdle is less heroic than soaring away on a magical horse of imagination, but a woman writer needs to dissemble and all good writing involves both dawdling and soaring. Her resistance is evident here as well.

One effect of her exposure, Hurston writes, is that she came to believe strongly in the legitimacy of folk culture and this, of course, becomes one of the most important aspects of all of her writing, fiction or non-fiction. Using a comparison between African-American folk culture and Shakespeare, Hemenway argues for the important connection between Hurston's academic studies and her appreciation of folk life. He writes that Hurston understood that

Shakespeare depended heavily on English tradition, [and] that midsummer-night observances were just as much a part of English folklore and folkways as hoodoo practices in *Brer Rabbit* are part of Afro-American folkways. She repudiated the psychologically captive blacks who thought that acquiring degrees and losing black dialect would be marks of intelligence. [. . .] [Zora said] 'Fawn as you will. Spend an eternity standing awe struck. Roll your eyes in ecstasy and ape his [the white man's] every move but until we have placed something upon his [the white man's] street corner that is our own, we are right back where we were when they filed our iron collar off.' (Hemenway 206)

Dust Tracks shows every sign of her understanding that family, culture, reading, and formal education play equal parts in her ascent to the status of successful writer in several genres. In fact, *Dust Tracks* documents this in both content and form. Hurston re-focused on the strength of the folk culture from which she derived through the lens of modernist anthropology, the revolutionary openness of her teacher, Franz Boas, and the models of modernist fiction that came into, and from, the Harlem Renaissance. Her self-authored life writing is her attempt to recreate a mythology for and of her own culturally rich Eatonville childhood.

As an outcome of her anthropological research, and as a way to earn money, Hurston frequently produced folk concerts, insisting that they were a way to help preserve the “real” songs of black culture. In *Dust Tracks* Hurston writes, “LET THE PEOPLE SING, was and is my motto” (Hurston 172). The capital letters showcase the strength of her belief. Singing these songs as if they were European art songs was to denigrate the folk culture in them, to steal their voices, and simultaneously to uplift a European aesthetic. For her, the spirituals were tales come to life in a different way. As Robert Hemenway writes, “Paraphrasing Ralph Ellison’s definition of the blues [the spirituals] were autobiographical chronicles of a group catastrophe transcending events through lyrical expression and biblical analogy” (Hemenway 54). Though doubtless it was her anthropological education in the 1930s that gave Hurston new ways to see the importance of folk material and her story material, *Dust Tracks* dramatizes her childhood as a time when the young hero emotionally discovered the power and purpose of her folklore. Russian formalist critic Mikhail Bakhtin was exploring—though not publishing in English—and writing about

similar topics at about the same time, valorizing folk culture and the rich humanity of the grotesque as derision and resistance directed against the rules of a closed and conforming rigid society. Hurston could well agree with the Bakhtinian notion of the folk man as: “a character [who] is great in his own right, not on some other account; he himself is tall and strong” (Bakhtin 150). Folk materials, Hurston perceived, emerge in many ways so that both the lyrical expression that figures prominently in her work and the folk-derived biblical analogy that has import in *Moses*, *Man of the Mountain* and in *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* are similarly universal.⁸

The second half of *Dust Tracks on a Road* takes a turn that allows Hurston to pay homage to the second phase of her life and to the importance and impact of the social sciences on her writing. In this little-critiqued section of the book, she turns to a new set of subjects that affect a writing life just as Lillian Smith does in the second half of *Killers of the Dream*. Some of Hurston’s chapters concern large general topics: "Love," "My People, My People," and "Seeing the World As It Is." The second half of the book, which includes these three chapters plus the expurgated portions that were restored to the text in 1995, resembles Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, a series of lectures the British writer gave in 1928 and published in 1929. If Woolf’s text is seen as exemplary, then the second half of *Dust Tracks* is exemplary too. Hurston writes political essays about 1940s America that express social conditions just as crucial to her life as a writer as were the economic and educational issues Woolf cites as affecting her.⁹

Hurston wanted to portray those life events as crucial in woman writers’ lives, and they were. She did not want to focus on the trivial, the romantic or the titillating.¹⁰ In the

"Love" chapter, Hurston interprets what her love life has meant for her: "I have been out of love with people for a long time, perhaps without finding it out. But when I fall in, I can feel the bump" (Hurston 203). Her affair with "P.W.P." is the most detailed relationship that she discusses in this chapter. However, the main point is that her career keeps on interfering with conventional marriage or domesticity. Hurston reveals that she has always left a relationship before love got too intense because of her devotion to her research and writing. Valerie Boyd believes that the real life inspiration for "P.W.P." is Percival Punter, who was younger than Hurston by nearly twenty years. Punter wanted his "Snookums" to stay home and take care of him. Hurston, however, had to collect more folklore. As much as she loved him, she left for both of their sakes (Boyd 294). A clear pattern of rebelling against society's expectation emerges here when she conveys the P.W.P. story. What he offered had strings attached and was not what she sought, though he may have inspired Teacake in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, whom Janie, to save herself, had to kill.

N.Y. Nathiri writes that "Zora's marriages were doomed to failure because she was already married--to her work and her wandering. It was part of the price exacted by 'the force from somewhere in Space which commands you to write in the first place'" (Nathiri 33). The author of *Dust Tracks* does not see marriage as a fulfillment of her womanhood. Her work fulfilled her.¹¹

Both sections of *Dust Tracks* prove Hurston's intention to tell her own story in her own way. The book's contents and design also remind us that *Dust Tracks* is a fully managed text about how a woman writer acquired and fulfilled an ambition. Having her

book censored or cut before publication was a blow to her sense of herself. In her notes appended to the Library of America text, the editor Cheryl Wall indicates that on the manuscript pages Hurston wrote in her own hand, “Parts of this manuscript were not used in the final composition of the book for publisher’s reasons” (Wall 982). Like a prisoner scrawling on prison walls, she may have hoped that someone would later see her struggle to create her own life story in her own way.¹² James Olney, who considered that he was writing only about men’s autobiography, made a statement that could have applied to Hurston’s original intentions: “They seem very different things, study of the self and study of the world, yet the two cannot be ultimately separated, as subject and object join and merge in consciousness” (14). How frustrating it must have been for her that the publisher didn’t understand that she was merely trying to make sense of *her* world, as she saw it.

From her publisher’s point of view, most likely, Hurston’s majority audience for *Dust Tracks* when she wrote it was undoubtedly white. However, Hurston speaks *to* her people--African Americans--in a controversial way in the chapter "My People, My People." Here she is well aware of the privileged position she has as a writer to comment on the Negro “situation,” though many critics of her day condemned her for failing to do just that. These critics neglect to notice that Hurston is borrowing an old autobiographical practice here; both Frederick Douglass and Booker T. Washington engaged in this sensibility of multiple audiences. Also, both parts of this censored chapter explain Hurston's refusal to speak *for* the masses of African-Americans. Part of her strategy of resistance, Sartwell explains, was that Hurston is not inclined to generalize

about anything (134). She feels that Negroes deserve the chance to be individuals.

"Light came to me when I realized that I did not have to consider any racial group as a whole. God made them duck by duck and that was the way I could see them" (Hurstun 171). Because this is a book about how one woman became a writer, like Welty's work, she sees that she is an expert only on her own experience, not her "people." As more African Americans of different backgrounds publish work that follows her lead in these postmodern days, the Zora Neale Hurston of 1942 begins to come across as a visionary.

With her self-confidence and intellectual toughness, Hurston writes fiction that has a more personal quality and a less propagandistic intent than that of some of her contemporaries and critics. She was not a protest novel writer, like Richard Wright, who wrote rather joyless prose, no matter how great his work is (Sartwell 149). Rather than give a bitter and sad portrayal of the lives of African Americans, her fiction reflects the warmth and pride of the Eatonville setting where she grew up, without minimizing its flaws, conventions, or peculiarities. Her determination to tell her own stories in her own way continued to showcase her resistance to abstract or restrictive cultural beliefs about how black authors should write. Her work has an involved quality because she is both a participant in her community and the social scientist observer returning to it: "White people have come running to me with a deep wrinkle between the eyes asking me things. They have heard talk going around about this passing, so they are trying to get some information so they can know. So since I have been asked, that gives me leave to talk right out of my mouth" (Hurstun 237). In the chapter titled "My People, My People" her pride in her race is evident, along with some self-deprecation that resists idealization or

stereotyping. She continues to reflect upon the controversy of passing, saying that it is not just black people trying to pass for white; she cites a particularly famous example of a white man who is trying to pass for black:

Take James Weldon Johnson for instance. There's a man white enough to suit Hitler and he's been passing for colored for years. [. . .] Look at James Weldon Johnson from head to foot, but don't let that skin color and that oskabolic hair fool you. Watch him! Does he parade when he walks? No, James Weldon Johnson proceeds. Did anybody ever, ever see him grin? No, he smiles. He couldn't give a grin if he tried. He can't even Uncle Tom. (Hurstun 238)

Her study of Johnson here brings to mind what Morrison calls the “[impact of] racial ideology [and what it] does to the mind, imagination and behavior of the masters” (12). For Hurston, there is something to be proud of in her race. The style of African Americans and the coping mechanisms that they used to survive racial hatred are hallmarks of strength for her. Nevertheless, the desires of the individual still take precedence and are of primary importance. Her singular attitude proves that Hurston is ever reluctant to be the representative for millions of individual people.

Cultural pressure has often insisted that the work of a black writer be inherently political, and Hurston understood that. Hurston had intended to discuss the importance of politics to the writer's life in the second half of *Dust Tracks*. Hurston's attempts, in an unexpected manner here, disturbed her longtime publishers, J.B. Lippincott, who censored the true intentions of her work. In 1942, the onset of America's deepening involvement in

World War II made change to her work inevitable –not only because of paper shortages mandating smaller books, but also because of cultural conservatism—may have affected her publisher’s decision. But Hemenway sees the censorship of Hurston as a question of her race: "It should not be forgotten, however, that since she was a black author in a white publishing world, she felt especially subject to the constraints and controls of her editors" (286). The most political chapter in *Dust Tracks*, "Seeing the World As It Is," was expunged from her work before publication. In this expurgated chapter, she discusses extensively the "Race Problem" and "Race Consciousness" concepts in America. She states, "[s]ince there is no fundamental conflict, since there is no solid reason why the blacks and the whites cannot live in one nation in perfect harmony, the only thing in the way of it is Race Pride and Race Consciousness on both sides" (Hurston 240). Her liberated attitude sprang from her proud childhood in Eatonville, which, in turn, permeates her fictitious work, and also from assurances by Franz Boas that “race” was a pernicious social construction, not a biological reality. There are no white people for her characters to blame for their misfortunes. Her characters are her own people, just as she is determined to be her own woman in her self-authored life writing.

Though the political content that remained in the first edition of *Dust Tracks* was deemed worthy of a \$1000 prize from the *Saturday Review* for Hurston’s contribution towards race relations, the censorship of her work cramped her wide-ranging vision. Lillie Howard writes: "her rather biting statements on race relations, democracy, and America in general should have been included in the published version. That way those readers who feel that Zora was not socially and racially conscious would have been

soundly rebuffed" (164). The political statements in *Dust Tracks* prove that she was capable of being more vocal about her displeasure with society than she was allowed. Not only did this censorship harm the way that Hurston was seen by critics at the time, but it also probably had an effect on the circulation of Hurston's work for decades to come, since *Dust Tracks* was rarely championed as innovative by the black intelligentsia in her own time or by the white liberal literary establishment.

The "Seeing the World As It Is" chapter was removed at a time when publishers were in no mood to publish work about how unjust and undemocratic Americans were to the Negroes at home. Published within the first year of World War II, some of these passages were probably seen by the Lippincott editors as nearly treasonous, for example the following: "President Roosevelt could extend his four freedoms to some people right here in America before he takes it all abroad, and no doubt, he would do it too, if it would bring in the same amount of glory. [. . .] I will fight for my country, but I will not lie for her." (Hurston 251). This is interesting commentary from Hurston who is spinning her own "lies" in her construction of her self-authored life writing. Besides, to speak ill of President Roosevelt at this time was extremely risky. Her subsequent relationship, or lack thereof, with Lippincott, brings to my mind how Toni Morrison explained her own position as a writer: "My work requires me to think about how free I can be as an African-American woman writer in my genderized, sexualized, wholly racialized world" (4). The concerns that Hurston faced in her censorship the 1940's still persist for writers today.

Hurston's refusal to adhere to autobiographical convention allowed her mostly generous biographer, Robert Hemenway, to call *Dust Tracks* "a discomfiting book [which] has probably harmed Hurston's reputation" (276). However, Hemenway is overlooking the ways in which Hurston subverted the conventional approaches that were usually made in autobiographical writing. Probably looking for patterns of continuity, Hemenway sees that the two halves of *Dust Tracks* prove Hurston's failure to reconcile her child world of Eatonville with her education at Barnard: "Did she become successful by rising above Eatonville, or by digging into its very soul? She found herself in the uncomfortable position of mediating between two spheres of experience, searching for an interpretive voice that would authenticate both Eatonville and Barnard" (Hemenway 279). Though an astute observer in most regards, Hemenway never once considers that African Americans, as indicated by the two-part name by which her race is now called, have had to become masters at duplicity. The fact that Hurston succeeded in this two-fold mastery is expressed in the two-fold structure of *Dust Tracks on a Road*.

Francoise Lionnet regards the style of *Dust Tracks* as "self-conscious" and argues that "*Dust Tracks* does not seek to legitimate itself through appeal to what William L. Andrews has called 'a powerful source of authorization,' such as religion or another organized system of belief. It is in that sense that *Dust Tracks* is a powerfully anarchic work, not anchored in any original and originating story of racial or sexual difference" (Lionnet 113). This seems completely wrong, given Hurston's focus on the chronotope of Eatonville and the authenticity of folk voices as a contrast to the new urban sophistication and intellectualism of the "New Negro." Hurston's brings both instinct

and modern anthropology to bear in her development of a new kind of biographical fiction. Indeed, she is creating her own mythology and way of telling stories. Lionnet's idea of *Dust Tracks* as an 'anarchic' work--meaning that the book does not fit in with any of the expectations of autobiography--only serves to heighten the fact that Hurston had done something unprecedented in African-American women's life writing. The fact that she had deviated from a linear type of narrative does not mean that her work should be disregarded.

Kathleen Hassall approaches *Dust Tracks* differently. She goes so far as to consider Zora as a trickster in her self-authored life writing text, and uses Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s book *The Signifying Monkey* as support. She states, "[Gates's] identification of the 'Signifying Monkey' of African-American culture with Esu, the Yoruba trickster figure and messenger of the gods, would have delighted her[. . .] the monkey trope she puzzled over[. . .] is in fact a *sign* of black persistence in the face of white-imposed displacement" (Hassall 165-66). Hassall uses Gates to try to give credence to what she believes is Hurston's performance in *Dust Tracks*.¹³

To some, the idea of 'Zora as trickster' comes close to perpetuating a stereotype of African Americans best suited for comedy and entertainment. Hurston does say in *Dust Tracks* that "[m]y People love a show. We love to act more than we love to see acting done. [. . .] We just love to dramatize" (Hurston 222). What Hurston means by dramatizing and what Hassall means by trickster, however, are two different concepts. Hurston is discussing how African-American used certain poses to endure their stressful lives. This posture is maintained in *Dust Tracks* because she is telling her white audience

exactly what she wants them to know. As a black woman in the first half of the twentieth century, Hurston is well used to having to posture repeatedly depending on who her audience happened to be. Her various guises as writer, anthropologist, and Barnard graduate are all poses. Hassall uses the 'trickster' analogy almost to imply a shuffling minstrel stereotype, but given her education and her wit, Hurston's expression of positive endurance, a joie de vivre, inventive gestures are compatible with the Bakhtinian carnivalesque. It is not the maintenance of the "happy darky" posture, nor even a parody of that. It is the expression of a free spirit in a restraining world who, through a willful pose, documents her life events, selectively, as she wishes to convey them.

The problem may be that Hassall is looking at Hurston through a masculine lens. To be fairer to Hurston, Hassall might have employed the ideas of an African-American female scholar. In *Black Women Writing Autobiography*, Joanne Braxton presents a different idea of Exu or Esu, the trickster figure, a feminine idea that completely fits in with Hurston's writing persona: "Sass is a word of West Africa derivation that is associated with the female aspect of the trickster," Braxton writes (31). Sass, in African American culture, is presented as a way of coping with the ups and down of life and is a celebrated hallmark of resistance: "Women resort to wit, cunning, and verbal warfare as forms of rebellion" (Braxton 30-31).¹⁴

With the restoration of the censored material, a full and complete picture of *Dust Tracks* is available to fortunate audiences today and readers can make up their own minds. Rather than reflecting on *Dust Tracks* as evasive, disoriented, or silent, it is time to see it from an African American woman writer's point of view. Henderson argues that

for too long “black women have been discounted or unaccounted for in the ‘traditions’ of black, women’s, and American literature as well as in the contemporary literary-critical dialogue. [. . .] [B]lack women writers have begun to receive token recognition as they are subsumed under the category of woman in the feminist critique and the category of black in the racial critique” (343). Cheryl Wall acknowledges this when discussing the utter difficulty in being a black woman writer in the early part of the twentieth century: “What makes Hurston’s life so emblematic is the capacity for self-invention [. . .] at a time when the terms ‘black,’ ‘woman,’ and ‘artist’ were never complementary” (Wall 201).

Dust Tracks gives us a rare look into the unique self-invention of and the inner craft life of a “Genius of the South,” as Alice Walker called Hurston. Both self-invention and a specific approach to craft are perhaps still required by black women writers to carry out “the dialogue between self and society and between self and psyche [. . .] ‘a unique form of collaboration’” (Henderson 345) that Hurston explores in her text and that literally represents a privileged space in the structure of *Dust Tracks on a Road*. Olney, once again, could add something to this concept of this privileged space in his assessment of “schizophrenic” artist-scientist Montaigne: “‘I study myself,’ he proclaims ‘That is my metaphysics, that is my physics’” (qtd. in Olney 9). For all these reasons, Kelly Anne Mechling correctly characterizes *Dust Tracks* as a “mother text” (293) because of its groundbreaking approach to self-authored life writing texts. *Dust Tracks* has certainly been that for my study, having “given birth” to the entire idea of this project.

Notes

1. Alice Walker, who rediscovered Hurston and looks upon her as a literary foremother, related to Hurston's troubles in finding a patron. Walker discussed the intimate knowledge that such patrons have of the writer's living needs—and the power that they wield in then providing far less than the requested amount. Heavy reliance on patronage helped several writers through the depression years, but often by providing only half or a third of the initially requested amount (Walker v)
2. The critics/scholars who read *Dust Tracks* as disappointing and complain of Hurston's reluctance to get to the --to use a phrase Hurston used with Langston Hughes --"juicy bits" of her life, overlook that this autobiography was written by an African American woman whose outlook on place is very different from white male autobiographers like Augustine, Rousseau, or Franklin whose lives did not have the same rootedness in their communities.
3. Hurston had to consider her audience since "she was subject to the constraints of her editors, who were subject to the constraints of a predominantly white reading audience who did not cherish being offended or reminded of the 'sins' of their fathers" (Howard 164-65). Lillian Smith ran into the same "sins of the fathers" issue when she published *Killers of the Dream*. Lillian Howard further reports that a Lippincott editor wrote across the bottom of one of Hurston's pages: "Suggest eliminating international opinions as irrelevant to autobiography" (Howard 165). This narrow-minded attitude meant that Hurston's full expression of her writerly self was kept silent for more than a half century.

4. Alice Walker reveals that in a letter one of Hurston's nieces reported that the only way the family ever knew something was wrong with Zora was when Hurston told them. Otherwise, the family would have no way of knowing where or how she was (Walker xvii).
5. A writer's sense of curiosity, or the need to question, can provide the motivation to create. Hurston was still quite young, but the fact that she had a strong need to find answers to questions could explain her interest in anthropology. Later on in her life, she was also looking for a scientific affirmation of the black experience, which Franz Boas predicted in general terms in his lectures and speeches.
6. The vision tales are included in *Dust Tracks* because the emotions that overwhelm her after having visions help to prepare her, and any potential reader-writer, for the loneliness of the writing life. As Gary Morson states: "selfhood 'derives from an internalization of the voices a person has heard, and each of these voices is saturated with social and ideological values'" (qtd. in Henderson 350). For Hurston the voices seem to forecast the lonely way in which she lived the latter part of her life.
7. Hurston's inclusion of the visions in her self-authored life writing project points to the understanding that she always would have a feeling of difference from other people. Hurston knows that in the African American culture people who see visions are singled out as blessed and gifted individuals. She is blessed in this same way as a writer. Writers are the ones who are the observers and often must maintain a distance to see their way clear to/through a story idea.

8. As Hemenway explains, “She enjoyed Keats but recognized the poetry in her father’s sermons” (54), for both were equivalent expressions of poetic sentiment, another reminder that the writer must find the universal in the local.
9. Readers who are displeased with Hurston's reticence in *Dust Tracks* must be looking for a conventional approach in autobiography or an explanation somewhere as to why her creative energy was not spent on marriage and/or children. When this explanation does not come forward in her self-authored life writing or indeed in any woman writers’ project, there is disappointment. It is well known that Zora Neale Hurston repeatedly elaborated or evaded 'the facts' about her life on everything from her marriages to her true age. Hurston's motivations for doing this are not malicious. She just did not think that these unimportant facts were anyone's business. She even says so. As Kathy Hickock, another critic, points out, "What difference does it make whether Herbert Sheen, Hurston's college sweetheart and first husband, is mentioned by name? First of all, we know his name, or can find it out if we really care; second, we never needed to know it at all" (Hickock 112).
10. Love lives would rarely be discussed in these self-authored life writing texts focused on careers except as an influence on the writer's *work*. *Dust Tracks* adheres to this standard. Whenever a love affair ends, Hurston does not exhibit a feeling of sadness or despair. It is more like relief--a startlingly modern attitude towards love and marriage in 1942.
11. Critics also point to “P.W.P.,” Percival Punter, as the inspiration for Teacake in *Their Eyes were Watching God*. “P.W.P.” may be that, but there the parallel to Zora’s life

ends. Hurston and her fictional character, Janie, take very different paths. Janie, as a character, is allowed to revel in the love affair and act out notions of “What if?” that Hurston herself may have had but did not pursue. When Hurston is offered an escape from her relationship by way of the Guggenheim award, she takes it. Hurston does call herself P.W.P.'s 'slave,' but she does not allow herself to remain that way for long. When an opportunity to write arises, she is off to fulfill her destiny. Hurston does not dwell on details about her love life, in part, because she was a woman of her era. But Hurston also does not see such events as anyone's business, as she points out in her “Love” chapter. For her, these love affairs had little to do with her writing life. Readers taken by the fictional Janie’s affair with Teacake may want a frank account of Hurston’s own romances, but her discreet silence on her love life is exactly in keeping with the expectations of an account that parallels the life of an independent, writing woman.

12. Lippincott must have kept Hurston’s comments in mind even after editors cut the political parts. Hurston had only one small publishing success after *Dust Tracks*, *Seraph on the Suwanee*, which was published by Scribner’s, after she left Lippincott, characterizing them as “timid soul(s)” for interfering with her political commentary in *Dust Tracks* (Kaplan 443). Regardless, the most important realization about the censored chapter is that its inclusion in Hurston’s original idea of *Dust Tracks* underscores the point that she saw the current political events of her world as having considerable bearing on her own writing life, and wanted to include her insights at

- considerable risk to her reputation, which may have been a starting salvo in killing her career.
13. If Hurston was so bent on performing, as Hassall argues, then why, upon finishing the book, would she have complained that it was too hard to reveal herself like that? Hurston herself says: “I did not want to write it at all, because it is too hard to reveal ones’s inner self” (qtd. in Boyd 356).
 14. Since sass is a way of dealing with the world, Hassall should try to understand that Hurston does not employ this 'sass' persona to avert or deceive, she is merely dealing with the facts of life as she knows how to--as an African-American female.

Chapter Three

One Writer's Beginnings: a manifesto of self-authored life writing

One Writer's Beginnings (1983) chronicles Eudora Welty's growing up years in the South. Much of the influence on the young Welty had to do with the heavy impact of Southern womanhood. Louise Westling characterizes Welty's upbringing in this way: "the Southern lady held a position of moral superiority [. . . and] behind the façade of the Southern patriarchy lay a domestic situation close to matriarchy[.] Perhaps another consequence of this situation was a tolerance for eccentricity in upper-class white women and a respected place for single women of definite character. Her mother and grandmother were. [. . .] Southern women of strong character" (Westling 9). Thus, Welty was born into a world that knew strong women; but was it this that allowed her to have a career as something more than the typical Southern belle? Appearances can be deceiving. Although always gracious and reticent looking, Welty was thoroughly capable of rendering what Sidonie Smith calls an "autobiographical manifesto." *One Writer's Beginnings*, undertaken as a commissioned series of Harvard lectures, reflects Welty's own understanding of how she became a writer and her determination of how self-authored life writing should be expressed. Her resistance in the work best expresses Carolyn Heilbrun's wistful characterization of Welty as wishing others to "keep hands off" of her life.

Lillian Smith, Welty's Southern contemporary, believed that Southern women had certain unique gifts in their writing: "Instinctively woman chooses life, wherever life is, and avoids death, and she has smelled death in the word *segregation*" (Smith 191).

But in a speech in 1962, Smith bemoans the fact that Southern women had yet to produce a great autobiography. Interestingly, Smith doesn't consider Hurston's efforts in *Dust Tracks on a Road*. Even more unfortunately, Smith didn't live to be able to see what Eudora Welty produced in 1984 in *One Writer's Beginnings*. She might have changed her mind.

Until the publication of the Suzanne Marrs biography in 2005 and prior to Welty's death in 2001, Welty's would-be biographers were frustrated by the writer's reluctance to participate in a revelatory "life," and several baseless statements made in the very beginning of Ann Waldron's unauthorized 1998 *Eudora Welty: A Writer's Life* show that Welty's reluctance about biographies was justified. Waldron's thesis seems to be that Welty became a writer because she was *not* a "belle." Waldron misses the possibility that Welty chose not to seek the path of a belle, but that of a writer, and her thesis seems to ignore the narrative Welty constructs in *One Writer's Beginnings*.

Carolyn G. Heilbrun categorized Welty's memoir as unbelievable: "I do not believe in the bittersweet quality of *One Writer's Beginnings*, nor do I suppose that the Eudora Welty there evoked could have written the stories and novels we have learned to celebrate. [. . .] She wishes to keep meddling hands off of her life." Like some critics of Hurston's *Dust Tracks*, Heilbrun upbraids Welty for failing to write what she thinks would be a "truthful autobiography" (Heilbrun 14-15) Heilbrun apparently means that *One Writer's Beginnings* does not promote a radical feminist agenda nor foreground a struggle against male hegemony. Heilbrun does not agree with Waldron's judgment that *One Writer's Beginnings* is full of information about Welty's childhood and the forces

that drove her to become a writer” (Waldron 330).² This is a key point. More than any of the five books this study considers, *One Writer’s Beginnings*, and Welty’s vision, is a model of the kind of self-authored life writing project that a writer would craft. Without saying so, *One Writer’s Beginnings* is chock full of advice for prospective women writers about the construction of a writing life. Sections titled "Listening," "Learning to See," and "Finding a Voice" speak specifically to the progression through which a writer must go. Welty’s book foregrounds the education of sensory perception and the discovery of a unique writing self, not gender identity politics. This is Welty’s manifesto and the key to understanding her resistance. Still, if *One Writer’s Beginnings* is compared to *Dust Tracks*, the two books are not so different.

Like the beginning of Hurston’s text, much of Welty’s first section, "Listening," is devoted to Welty’s influences when she is young. Sidonie Smith, in her article “The Autobiographical Manifesto,” outlines the various components of the manifesto and I suggest that *One Writer’s Beginnings* fits the paradigm. One way in which Welty “purposefully identifies herself as subject, situating herself against the object-status to which she has been confined,” (Smith 190) is how she discusses her birthplace, her hometown of Jackson, Mississippi. Her discussion of Jackson fits into the Bahkinian notion of the chronotope, the perfect merge of time and place:

In that vanished time in small-town Jackson, most of the ladies I was familiar with, the mothers of my friends in the neighborhood, were busiest when they were sociable. In the afternoons there was regular visiting up and down the little grid

of residential streets. Everybody had calling cards, even certain children; and newborn babies themselves were properly announced by sending out their tiny engraved calling cards attached with a pink or blue bow to those of their parents. Graduation presents to high-school pupils were often "card cases." On the hall table in every house the first thing you saw was a silver tray waiting to receive more calling cards on top of the stack already piled up like jackstraws; they were never thrown away. (Welty 12)

Social expectation and integration of manners are a large part of this long-ago Jackson, but like *Dust Tracks*, Welty's account speaks of community and culture that brought youngsters within earshot of adult tale-telling. This is home for her. Mechling characterizes the importance of this notion of home for Welty: "Most of her reminiscences revolve around her family and the goings-on in her house. This was Welty's first world; what she learned and experienced in her home would later find its way into her fiction" (101). By the time Welty is writing, feminist critics like Heilbrun view the entire notion of "home" with hostility. However, Mechling insists that Heilbrun and her kind as missing the point. Indeed, the construction of a self-authored life writing text is like building a home for the writer (Mechling 101). Furthermore, in Welty's insistence on these types of depictions in *One Writer's Beginnings*, Welty exhibits a resistance to critics and biographers who might want to shape her life story with their imposed theoretical ideas.

Welty paints a vivid picture of the privileged white South that forms the basis of much of her fictitious work, but within this realm came servants or dressmakers, shopkeepers and country people on the busy Jackson streets whose diversity would later be captured in Welty's photographs and her stories. Welty showcases leisure and social expectations in this old-fashioned South so that readers can begin to understand how Welty, like Hurston, could later go out into her full culture knowing how to conduct herself amongst all the denizens of Jackson. For some of Welty's Jackson contemporaries, like Richard Wright and Margaret Walker Alexander, restrictions existed that meant conformity to place, race, and class. For Welty, her superior status meant the opportunity to observe, judge, and eventually render in fiction everything about the very rigidly constructed society in which she lived. This same important love of, but distance from, place is also evident in Hurston's description of Eatonville in *Dust Tracks on a Road*.

Welty discusses the importance of her family on her growth as a writer in *One Writer's Beginnings*. Both her mother and her father are giants in her life, and the positive influence of her parents permeates this memoir as much as it does Hurston's. Robyn Fivush and Katherine Nelson's notion of parents providing linguistic scaffolding for young children looms large here—each of Welty's parents is described as playing a different role in weaving the spoken and the written word into her life. With different birthplace origins and experiences, Mr. and Mrs. Welty were the ones to give her the basic tools of writing, Welty disarms the reader by first speaking in generalities: "I live

in gratitude to my parents for initiating me--as early as I begged for it, without keeping me waiting--into the knowledge of the word, into reading and spelling, by way of the alphabet" (Welty 9-10). But the great influence of Chestina and Christian Welty is also traced in the first section with Welty's discussion of their familial origins. In Jackson, Welty's parents were to some degree outsiders, and their long visits back to Ohio and West Virginia homeplaces became a part of what provides Welty with distance upon her subject. Eudora Welty sees the impact of these origins as having singular importance. Welty's mother's training as a schoolteacher in West Virginia caused her to imbue her young daughter with the love of learning. Her mother continuously impressed the importance of reading upon her. A bookcase in the house was designated as "the library" and the names of additional furniture pieces such as encyclopedia tables and dictionary stands reinforced the importance of books in the home (Welty 6). Welty knew the contents of the all-important library by heart and remembered her books with unabashed fondness in her memoir. Her mother's love of books was also connected to a heroic story, since her mother had once risked herself in a fire to rescue her complete set of Dickens (Welty 8).

Her father's example as a reader was less marked than her mother's sphere of influence, at least as presented in *One Writer's Beginnings*, but Welty remembers one of her father's childhood books also as a story: "This book was lacking in its front cover, the back held on by strips of pasted paper, now turned golden, in several layers, and the pages stained, flecked, and tattered around the edges. [. . .] I had the feeling even in my

heedless childhood that this was the only book my father as a little boy had of his own” (Welty 8).³

Welty lets the readers know that book ownership meant passion and sacrifice, writing that, “though it must have been something of a strain on his salary, as the youngest officer in a young insurance company, my father was all the while carefully selecting and ordering away for what he and Mother thought we children should grow up with. They bought [books] first for the future” (Welty 6). She adds that “they must have sacrificed to give me on my sixth or seventh birthday—it was after I became a reader for myself—the ten-volume set of *Our Wonder World*” (Welty 9), a set of books, that, as their title hinted, became one of the foundations of her fiction. These warm and supportive relationships with her parents resemble the example of Hurston’s mother. Of course, there is a significant difference between what was considered affordable in Welty’s home and the home of Hurston or, as we shall see, Anzia Yeziarska, but Welty’s characterization of her parents as struggling to give these advantages to their young daughter prefigure the necessary judgment that heroic efforts and reasoned sacrifice are required to succeed in an artist’s life. The connection between sacrifice and a serious writer’s struggles to succeed are a hidden lesson in these anecdotes.

Welty is also revealing other requirements for the writer’s life. *Our Wonder World*, to her, seemed to contain the fount of all knowledge. “These were beautifully made, heavy books I would lie down with on the floor in front of the dining room hearth, and more often than the rest, volume 5, *Every Child’s Story Book*, was under my eyes” (Welty 9). This was the volume that included bits and pieces of all types of classical

children's tales and mythologies from all over the world. She affirmed her mother's example as a dedicated reader by writing that she would have saved *Our Wonder World* from fire and water as her mother did with the set of Dickens' novels. Will Brantley points out that the repeated use of various mythological themes throughout Welty's works—especially such important female images as sibyls and Medusa figures (122)—probably is traceable to Welty's early exposure to these books. Beneath Welty's account of this childhood reading, then, are facets of female vision and power as well as a valorization of the ownership of one's own imagination: "our" wonder world.⁴

As a family that had to sacrifice to own books, the Weltys were nonetheless more privileged than the Hurston family. In Jackson they had access to quality public education and public libraries. Welty has a number of school-teacher characters in her work who can be traced to a Jackson teacher named Miss Duling, who was strict, hard, and not beloved (Welty 26). The fearsome Kentucky-born teacher represents a supreme example of the demanding taskmaster. Miss Duling's strict practices and high expectations of her students formed Welty in deeper ways than she herself first knew: "I did nothing but fear her bearing-down authority and did not connect this (as we were meant to) with our own need or desire to learn, perhaps because I already had this wish, and did not need to be driven" (26). As Yeziarska proves, knowing when to cut off the influence of a teacher figure is a strategic technique of resistance used to showcase the path of writerly development.

Another fearsome woman was Mrs. Calloway, who was entrusted with the public library holdings in Jackson: "I never knew anyone who'd grown up in Jackson without

being afraid of Mrs. Calloway, our librarian. She ran the Library absolutely by herself, from the desk where she sat with her back to the books and facing the stairs, her dragon eye on the front door, who knew what kind of person might come in from the public?” (Welty 32) Her mother sets an example in her dealings with Mrs. Calloway. Chestina Welty, who knew what was necessary for the curious mind of her young daughter, became the intermediary with the librarian: “My mother was not afraid of Mrs. Calloway. She wished me to have my own library card to check out books for myself. She took me in to introduce me. ‘Eudora is nine years old and has my permission to read any book she wants from the shelves, children or adult, Mother said.’” (Welty 32). When her mother faces down the fearsome Mrs. Calloway, the future writer is permitted to read freely from the library’s holdings. Thus Welty is shown, by her mother, a regard for freedom of thought that could help to imbue her with confidence and high expectations of her own abilities, but like Hurston’s story of running out of the gate when her father did not, the story has some mythic overtones. With her mother’s help, Welty conquered what writer Carmen Deedy calls “the library dragon.”⁵

Because she loved books and wanted to have continuous access to them, the young Eudora had to respect Mrs. Calloway’s strict rules: “You could not take back a book to the Library on the same day you’d taken it out; it made no difference to her that you’d read every word in it and needed another to start. You could take out two books at a time and two only; this applied as long as you were a child and also for the rest of your life, to my mother as severely as to me” (Welty 33). Welty is obviously critiquing the ridiculous limitations of this policy. However, these limits meant that the harsh Mrs.

Calloway expected from her patrons a certain amount of digestion or comprehension of the texts they borrowed. Also, the “two-book” policy probably enhanced the respect that the library patrons would have for the books. However, for voracious readers like the Welty women, this policy was bound to be very limiting. No wonder nine-year old Eudora had to get her own card!

Still, Welty’s memories of the ability to borrow from the library clearly assert the importance of a love of reading for the aspiring writer. It wasn’t quite Woolf’s notion of “A Room of One’s Own,” but still Welty was fortunate enough to have had the resources of libraries in both the community and the home to satiate her reading needs. The images of Miss Duling and Mrs. Calloway as gatekeepers to Welty’s desire expresses a mythological sense of dragons that must be conquered for Welty to come to know her purpose, much as Hurston had to thwart the patriarchal figure who doubted and restricted her. These stories also portray the social restrictions often placed on imaginative and intellectually curious young women, which Welty, via her comments in the text, chafes against. The admonition about reading and independence in the scenes constitutes part two of Sidonie Smith’s autobiographical manifesto: “To bring to light, to make manifest (literally, struck with the hand) [. . .] [asserting] the legitimacy of a new or alternative ‘knowledge’ located in the experience of the margins” (190-191). Welty’s reading and learning experiences as a young woman as expressed here show that the acquisition of knowledge is a powerful shaping experience for the woman writer who must often struggle against cultural or gender restrictions.

When Welty comes to choose writing as her career, her mother supports her fully. Welty writes, "I think she was relieved when I chose to be a writer of stories, for she thought writing was safe" (Welty 43). This is the way that Welty ends the chapter and her irony is apparent, for has she not already discovered the guile, courage, and determination that is required to begin her quest? She knows, just as Marita Golden knew, of the rebellion that writing involved.

As in *Dust Tracks*, another important part of *One Writer's Beginnings* involves the concepts of eavesdropping and lying. Welty's discovery of the centrality of eavesdropping comes upon her gradually:

It was taken entirely for granted that there wasn't any lying in our family, and I was advanced in adolescence before I realized that in plenty of homes where I played with schoolmates and went to their parties, children lied to their parents and parents lied to their children and to each other. It took me a long time to realize that these very same everyday lies, [. . .] were in fact, the basis of the *scenes* I so well loved to hear about [. . .] I had to grow up and learn to listen for the unspoken as well as the spoken--and to know a truth, I had to recognize a lie." (Welty 15)

Eavesdropping is one way to find out more information in childhood. Welty includes some scenes where she hangs around the house and tries to obtain information that she knows she isn't privy too. Welty characterizes her eavesdropping in this way: "Long before I wrote stories, I listened for stories. Listening for them is something more

acute than listening to them. [. . .] Listening children know stories are there. When their elders sit and begin, children are just waiting and hoping for one to come out, like a mouse from its hole” (Welty 16). Welty’s apt description of the way children try to obtain secret information resonates with anyone who remembers the frustration of having information withheld from them because of youth. Welty gives a pointed example of this frustration when she cites the black sewing woman, Fannie, as a source of juicy gossip in Jackson. The insertion of Fannie into her story as “the source” for stories is emblematic of Morrison’s concept of the central importance African Americans have in American literature: “The fabrication of an Africanist persona is reflexive; an extraordinary meditation on the self; a powerful exploration of the fears and desires that reside in the writerly conscious. It is an astonishing revelation of longing, of terror, of perplexity, of shame, of magnanimity” (17). Because of Fannie, the longing is personified and it is easy to imagine the young Eudora “hanging around” for some gossipy tidbits while Fannie assists her mother. However, Chestina Welty protected her daughter--even from gossip--and is always aware of Eudora’s presence during these work sessions. When the seamstress would start a story, Mrs. Welty often would say, “‘Fannie, I’d rather Eudora didn’t hear that’ [and] ‘That’ would be just what I was longing to hear, whatever it was. [. . .] It was tantalizing never to be exposed long enough to hear the end” (Welty 16). As with Hurston, who lurked and dawdled in the store to get partial versions of the storytelling she would later collect, these tantalizing cliffhangers assisted in the stimulation of Welty’s imagination to finish stories, reflecting on them for herself, that her mother would not allow to be finished in these work sessions.

Ethnographer Shirley Brice Heath did extensive work in the 1980's researching how white Southerners stigmatized lying in the relating of life stories. Welty's society in Jackson followed this belief. However, even though Jackson might have an often-ignored stigma on lying, the carrying of "family secrets" was seen as an acceptable way of obscuring the truth, a strategy of resistance against the lying stigma that Welty employs here. The young Eudora comes upon a family secret when, in her child's way, she finds two shiny nickels in a box in her mother's bureau. It is then that she discovers that she had an older brother who died before she was born. "The future story writer in the child I was," she writes, "must have taken unconscious note and stored it away then: one secret is liable to be revealed in the place of another that is harder to tell, and the substitute secret when nakedly exposed is often the more appalling" (Welty 19). Welty's discovery of the specter of the lost firstborn child reveals to her a loss that her parents could not even discuss, another revelation about human nature that the serious writer must have the courage to expose. This anecdote is also a lesson in mortality for the child who discovers both a painful secret and a first-born who preceded her.

Eavesdropping, lies, and family secrets can form important bases for fictitious stories that feel real because shards of these stories are from real life, something that Welty discusses in a different section of *One Writer's Beginnings*. The idea of hiding the truth was frowned upon in Welty's community, but discovering a widely practiced double standard freed her imaginative mind to seize on these nuggets and form them into fiction.

The "Listening" section also involves the preeminence of words, written and spoken. Welty discusses the development of her writer-voice from the reader-voice that

she recalled from when she was first read to as a child: “As my eyes followed [a] sentence, a voice was saying it silently to me. [. . .] The cadence, [. . .] the feeling that resides in the printed word, reaches me through the reader-voice. It may be part of the desire to write. [. . .] My own words, when I am at work on a story, I hear too as they go, in the same voice that I hear when I read in books. [. . .] I have always trusted this voice” (Welty 12 -13).⁶ As Welty characterizes it here, the voice sounds as if it were something that she, as a writer, can hear by herself. However, the development of this consciousness is a matter of having the right influence, patience, hard work, and the ability to be silent to find this inner voice and the confidence to follow it.

Part of Welty’s developing fascination with speaking voices as the primary mediums for her stories, as in, for example “Petrified Man,” comes from Welty’s listening to Southern speech. She relays a story about having a neighbor accompany the Welty’s on the Sunday afternoon automobile ride. When the neighbor would get in the car, the young Eudora would command them all to ‘talk’. Welty also recalls that when her mother would speak to the neighbor or on the phone, her mother spoke in scenes, which helped her develop structural sensibilities as a writer: “What I loved about her stories was that everything happened in scenes. I might not catch on to what the root of the trouble was in all that happened, but my ear told me it was dramatic” (Welty 14). Welty’s longing to hear talk, her fascination with the cadences of speech, and her sense of “scenes” in women’s gossip, all contributed to her development as a writer who frequently constructed stories (“Petrified Man” or “Why I Live at the P.O”) and even novels (*The Ponder Heart*) with the speaking voice as her medium.⁷ As a revelation of a

woman writer's development, the insight is that one must listen to and interrogate women's voices-- the coded language, the motives for reticence, and the masked areas of fascination—to become a woman writer.

With many examples and explanations, the “Listening” section of *One Writer's Beginnings* explains much about how Welty developed writerly habits and perspectives when she was young. Estelle Jelinek characterizes the revelation of happy, mythological childhoods as a mostly male autobiographical tradition (15). Welty thwarts and changes this expectation as she also reveals more than some readers suppose about how a woman writer constructs her roles and nurtures her desire for success. Although Heilbrun, Waldon, and Westling question the accuracy of Welty's characterization of her childhood, what is important is what she chooses to reveal, how she organizes her project, and what kind of a book she wrote. What Welty has chosen to pass along in her work, Will Brantley argues, is “enough of her personal experience to illuminate her understanding of the art she has produced” (117). However, Brantley's judgment is not quite on the mark. *One Writer's Beginnings* is an account of the stratagems of resistance—the willful application of both accidents and intentions—that accompany a woman writer's development.

If “Listening” is about the impact of the family circle, the “Learning to See” section concerns travel, first in a family car trip and then later on a train. Welty portrays journeys as critical metaphors in the development of her writer's sensibility.⁸ She likens the process of the journey to the process of writing. The story of the road trip has the following characterization: “Riding behind my father I could see that the road had him

by the shoulders, by the hair under his driving cap. [. . .] I inherited his nervous energy in the way I can't stop writing on a story. [. . .] Writers and travelers are mesmerized alike by knowing of their destinations" (Welty 48). In Welty's view, while her inner voice developed at home, travel allowed her an approach toward finding meaning in the text. The path of travel also provides a metaphor for the process of writing itself. Part of the challenge of writing a story is the discovery of the path the story demands.

The characterization of her parents, as they traveled on the car trip, is likewise a critical image for Welty. Her mother characterizes her father as the optimist, and he characterizes her as the pessimist, when in fact Welty sees the truth as the other way around: "And yet I was well aware[,] [. . . that]he the optimist was the one who was prepared for the worst, and she the pessimist was the daredevil" (Welty 50). What she seems to derive from this is not only a dramatic observation about character, but, perhaps, an understanding that both qualities are required by the writer. Welty's most direct connection between travel and the writing process is simple: "The trips were wholes unto themselves. They were stories. Not only in form, but in their taking on direction, movement, development, change. They changed something in my life: each trip made its particular revelation, though I could not have found words for it" (Welty 75).

Very often during her youth, the trips that Welty took were jaunts to visit her relatives and learn stories about them--like her long-deceased maternal grandfather who also had believed in the preeminence of stories: "I tend to think it had been Ned Andrews who saw himself in West Virginia as some original pioneer; he was the lone romantic in this story. He might have delighted in imagining the figure he'd cut to them back in

Tidewater Virginia” (Welty 66). This was the same grandfather who offered Chestina Welty several temptations to cut off her long black hair because people believed then that long hair would sap a child’s vitality. Only when Ned Andrews offered young Chestina the complete set of Dickens did she agree to have her hair cut (Welty 51-52). Welty characterizes her “romantic” grandfather as a teller of tall tales: “He told tales to his wife, Eudora Carden. He told one to begin with, in order to marry her, saying he was of age to do so, when he was nineteen and four years younger than she. [. . .] He shocked her with a tale—Mother said there was nothing to prove it wasn’t a fact—that one of the Andrews ancestors had been hanged in Ireland.” Ned, who had formed a literary society in college, had storytelling in his blood, a trait that Eudora Welty chose to embrace as a meaningful heritage (Welty 53).

On these trips, the young Eudora Welty had the opportunity to understand part of her heritage and to come to understand the larger forces on her parents that shaped her. In this section of *One Writer’s Beginnings*, Welty shows how one may come to understand, as did Hurston, her heritage as a source of strength.⁹ The past can mean many things—the writer’s job is to draw from it, as did Hurston and Welty, those things that empower. Coming to know “how Ohio had [my father] around the heart, as West Virginia had my mother” (Welty 48), helped Welty develop the “sense of place” and its importance in good fiction. This experience of her transplanted parents also taught her something about the construction of fictional place. Welty records seeing a drawing of the Andrews family tree and remembers that the “most riveting feature was the thick branch stemming from near the base of the main trunk: it was broken off short to a

jagged end, branchless and leafless, and labeled ‘Joseph, Killed by lightning’” (Welty 54). Like the two coins in her mother’s dresser drawer, the exposure of another family secret and this image of loss taught her how family history is bound up not just with the living but also the dead. This is a purposeful change in viewpoint that allows Welty to resist the convention in how her family’s history is recorded and to create her own pathways for retelling a story.

Welty devotes a large part of this second section to other ways her parents made an impact on her love of literature. As a schoolteacher in a one-room schoolhouse, Welty’s mother found ways to save money so that she could continue her education at Marshall College in the summers. An educated woman, her mother loved the cadences and sound of poetry. On her horseback commutes to her schoolhouse with her brother, Welty’s mother would recite poems from McGuffey’s Readers out loud. Welty’s regard for her mother’s literary knowledge is clear: “She could still recite them in full when she was lying helpless and nearly blind, in her bed, an old lady. Reciting, her voice took on resonance and firmness, it rang with the old fervor, with ferocity even” (Welty 57). It is easy to imagine that if Welty’s mother could recite these poems in her dotage, Christina Welty must have from the start given her daughter a love for the language of poetry. There is a wistfulness in Welty’s narrative of how her mother’s hard life may have sapped energy she might have applied to doing something literary. “Her mind was filled with *Paradise Lost*, she told me later, showing me the notebook she still kept with its diagrams” (Welty 57), apparently a record of her studies that revealed an analytical bent.

Welty writes about having inherited fierce independence from her West Virginian mother and characterizes it as a mountain quality she picked up as a child visiting her mother's home. It is the origination of Welty's determination to tell her stories in her way: "It seems likely to me now that the very element in my character that took possession of me there on top of the mountain, the fierce independence that was suddenly mine, to remain inside me no matter how it scared me when I tumbled, was an inheritance. Indeed it was my chief inheritance from my mother, who was braver" (Welty 66). Brantley believes that Welty's characterizations of her mother and Miss Duling in *One Writer's Beginnings* showed that she while admired them, "such women [. . .] also impinge on her own sense of independence" (114). However, he fails to see the value—and the result in Welty's art—of such strong role models.

Welty's mother insisted that her children learn to play the piano, a "Steinway upright she had bought for me when I was nine, so far beyond her means, and had paid for herself out of the house-keeping money, which she had added to by buying a Jersey cow, milking her, and selling part of the milk to the neighbors on our street, in quart bottles which I delivered on my bicycle" (Welty 67). This anecdote, ostensibly an account of her mother's desire to make her children well-rounded, also teaches that choices and sacrifices go hand in hand with even small achievements. Cultivating musicality and rhythm probably had impact in Welty's writing, and specifically in some of her stories ("Music from Spain," "Powerhouse" and "June Recital").

Welty writes much about her mother's family and their impact on her life, but, by contrast, little information is recorded of her father's family.¹⁰ What is there, however,

Welty connects to her sense of independence and the freedom that she needed to grow. Just as she talks about her independence as a mountain quality, from her mother's side, she characterizes loneliness as something in her father's life that is a gaping hole to her:

Now I look back, or listen back, in that same desire to imagine, and it seems possible that the sound of that sparse music [from her paternal grandfather's music box], so faint and unearthly to my childhood ears, was the sound he'd had speak to him in all that country silence among so many elders where he was the only child. To me it was a sound of unspeakable loneliness that I did not know how to run away from. I was there in its company, watching the moonflower open. (Welty 73-74)

Hurston also tells a story about lunar influences in her childhood in the early part of *Dust Tracks on a Road*. Welty's portrayal of her desire to imagine her father's lonely childhood leads her to fill in the gaps and this imagined loneliness allows her to understand the importance of silence in listening to her own inner reader-writer voice.

Though Welty records several episodes that come from her father's family, there were few stories and those few evoking sadness, she makes an interesting conclusion about her father's family's Germanic Swiss heritage—that her family origins “seem to hark back to German fairy-tale traditions,” (Welty 70) and later Welty relates an extremely sensate passage about playing fairy tales in her paternal grandfather's barn. This heritage surfaces, perhaps willfully, in her “Fairy Tale of the Natchez Trace,” *The Robber Bridegroom*, as if Welty wants to grant her father's family's a literary influence on her life. Both these portrayals of family influence are interesting, especially since her

mother encouraged her writing as a “safe” endeavor--while her forward looking father insisted she take a business degree so she could support herself. In restructuring her beginnings, she demonstrates her determination and her need to exceed beyond parental expectations.

The last chapter of *One Writer's Beginnings* is full of writing advice, too. Here we learn that a powerful gift from Welty's father is the chance he gave her to travel. In *One Writer's Beginnings*, journeys are recorded, but, she writes, “my father put it all into the frame of regularity, predictability, that was his fatherly gift in the course of our journey [. . .] For now, and for a long while to come, I was proceeding in fantasy” (Welty 81). The reconstruction Welty makes of her past again leads to the reflection of what would be required for a woman writer's life: “My temperament and my instinct had told me alike that the author, who writes at his own emergency, remains and needs to remain at his private remove. I wished to be, not effaced, but invisible—actually a powerful position. Perspective, the line of vision, the frame of vision—these set a distance” (Welty 95). In the contrasts between her chapters Welty discovers both a sense of place and the necessity of distance, just as she discovers how one must learn from, but go beyond one's parents.

One of the pleasures of reading and writing fiction has to do with the details. Fiction writers have their own way of arranging and presenting the details of their fictional world; this is what makes the resultant writing singular. In her final section where Welty imparts several bits of writing advice interspersed with the story of her life, she states: “What discoveries I've made in the course of writing stories all begin with the

particular, never the general [. . .] Each writer must find out for himself, I imagine, on what strange basis he lives with his own stories” (107).¹¹ She goes on to observe,

From story to story, connections between the characters’ lives, through their motives or actions, sometimes their dreams, already existed: there to be found. [. . .] The stories were connected most provocatively of all to me, perhaps, through the entry into my story-telling mind of another sort of tie—a shadowing of Greek mythological figures. (Welty 108)

Long before Welty might have discovered psychologist Carl Jung’s use of archetypes as a mode for expanding the force of narrative, those afternoons spent with volumes in the *Our Wonder World* collection served to assist Welty in discovering patterns for her own material. The details of these ancient myths grew within Welty and came forward as stories told in her own unique mode of expression.

Part of the uniqueness of expression is the realization that other influences play a role in the development of characters. This is not to say that all fiction writing is inherently autobiographical. This easily-made assumption undervalues the hard work that goes into creating fictional characters.¹² Considering the influences on the writing process --memory, experience, and other artistic forms, even Fannie—Welty confesses,

it was not until I began to write, as I seriously did only when I reached my twenties, that I found the world out there revealing, because [. . .] memory had become attached to seeing, love had added itself to discovery, and because I recognized in my own continuing longing to keep going, the need I carried inside

myself to know—the apprehension, first then the passion, to connect myself to it.

(Welty 83)

Photography, as an art form, offered an alternative way of seeing that helped her with her writing:

Photography taught me that to be able to capture transience, by being ready to click the shutter at the crucial moment, was the greatest need I had. Making pictures of people in all sorts of situations, I learned that every feeling waits upon its gesture; and I had to be prepared to recognize this moment when I saw it.

These were things a story writer needed to know. (Welty 92)

In other words, all the preparation in the world will not help until the would-be writer struggles repeatedly and hard with the process. She also recommends some immersion in the other arts as an aid to perception and performance. What is telling is that Welty does not shirk from telling her readers about difficult moments of realization. This is no feel-good self-help book, and she once again highlights her propensity to use a strategy of resistance in relating her work. Photography taught Welty a lesson that she could learn only by practice, and reveals her need to “parting a curtain” between herself and the humans she wished to portray.

Conversely, “Writing fiction,” Welty says, “has developed in me an abiding respect for the unknown in a human lifetime and a sense of where to look for the threads, how to follow, how to connect, find in the thick of the tangle what clear line persists. The strands are all there: to the memory nothing is ever really lost” (Welty 98). Again, her imagery is from myth, a hint of the brave but abandoned Ariadne who leads Theseus

into—and shows him how to escape—the labyrinth at the center of which is the devouring monster.

Using her own work, Welty talks about the emergence of the thread of narrative in her story “A Still Moment,” and describes the creation of this story as a remarkable event: “I never wrote another such story as that, but other sorts of vision, dream, illusion, hallucination, obsession, and that most wonderful interior vision which is memory, have all gone to make up my stories, to form and project them, to impel them” (Welty 97-98). Like Ariadne one must have courage and memory to plot the way.

Welty’s great friend the British writer Elizabeth Bowen said that in making fiction physical detail could not be created—it could only be chosen and the only place that this detail can be chosen from is from real life (Welty 109). Welty affirms this belief in her discussion of the evolution of Miss Eckhardt, a character from *The Golden Apples* with whom she discovered a surprising affinity. Though Welty believes that Miss Eckhardt came from within her, the physical detail that makes up Miss Eckhardt came from her piano teacher, “‘eligible’ to the extent that she swatted my hands at the keyboard with a fly-swatter if I made a mistake [as Miss Eckhart does to her pupils]; and when she wrote ‘Practice’ on my page of sheet music she made her ‘P’ as Miss Eckhardt did—a cat’s face with a long tail. She did indeed hold a recital of her pupils every June that was a fair model for Miss Eckhart’s [recital]” (110). The writer’s choice of such small details latent with personal feeling are the ones that allow fiction to bloom and come to life, Welty teaches, though they allow room for other influences to mingle to create an entirely new and different character from those one has seen or known.

Sidonie Smith's last three ideas about the autobiographical manifesto apply to the final portion of Welty's text. First, Smith urges, a manifesto must "speak to the future" (194). Welty does that in the text of *One Writer's Beginnings*, which imparts a great deal of writing advice in just over 100 pages and also addresses common concerns about writers and the origin of their material. For instance, Welty has often been criticized for not writing more about the predicament of blacks in Jackson. Welty addresses the critics who believe that she should be more political in her writing in a way that supports the writer's autonomy and freedom to reflect the truths of her culture in her own way. She states: "Of all my strong emotions, anger is the one least responsible for any of my work. I don't write out of anger. For one thing, simply as a fiction writer, I am minus an adversary—except, of course, that of time—and for another thing, the act of writing in itself brings me happiness" (Welty 42-43). Indeed, Toni Morrison lauded this approach later when she cited Welty as an example of how a writer of a different race should write about black people. Appropriately, Welty uses this point in her self-authored life writing to defend her choice of writing material and what works for her in terms of telling a story, an admonition that Hurston's critics perhaps needed to hear. Welty's attempts at a story about civil rights leader Medgar Evers's assassination did not succeed for her, she observes, because of her emotion about the event: "I'm not sure this story was brought off; and I don't believe that my anger showed me anything about human character that my sympathy and rapport never had" (Welty 43). The uncertainty of Welty's feeling about this story must not have been a fond memory, but I believe she chose this

observation to illustrate to young writers of the future that the organic approach to writing is the best and that different subject material works better for different writers.

Carolyn Heilbrun's belief that Welty's nostalgia masked anger and that her account of her upbringing was not truly candid misses Welty's gift to her women readers. On the platform at Harvard, Eudora Welty was not only better off than Virginia Woolf at Oxford, she had more to offer other women writers. Brantley points out that the writer of the famous essay "Must the Novelist Crusade?" did take risks in her work in other subversive ways that undermine the arguments of critics like Heilbrun who felt that Welty's nostalgia was potentially damaging (122). A critic like Heilbrun would probably be very surprised to see *One Writer's Beginnings* described as a manifesto, given that the word is also loaded with political association.

To complete my assessment of Welty and the autobiographical manifesto, I will discuss how *One Writer's Beginnings* falls in line with Smith's last two ideas about the self-authored life writing text, that the work is public and also a performance: "To announce publicly [and] To perform publicly" (191-192). Like Hurston, Welty was urged into her self-authored life-writing project, and financial necessity may have played a role. Welty's performance was first a series of lectures to the public that were later revised and edited for the printed page. A CD recording of the lectures, somewhat different from the printed text, is now available. There, the quality of the language that Welty uses sensate tones that are easy to appreciate. Ultimately, Welty indicated that she enjoyed recrafting her lectures into a self-authored life writing text, probably ultimately enjoyed reflecting about her life as Olney states: "[I]f all selves are constantly evolving,

transforming, and becoming different from themselves, then how is it at all possible to comprehend or define the self or to give anyone else any sense of it? [. . .] To make the attempt is an act of faith” (29).

Welty ends *One Writer's Beginnings* with a comment that first appears coy, but really is a straightforward remark: “As you have seen, I am a writer who came of a sheltered life. A sheltered life can be a daring life as well. For all serious daring starts from within” (Welty 114). Ann Waldron characterizes this statement as “puzzling” (Waldron 88), having missed Welty’s conception of the heroic interior life where memory and myth mingle but also ignoring the searing fatalities and illnesses with which her parents and she herself had to deal, much less the witness that Welty bore to the Great Depression, the epidemic of lynching and murder in Mississippi, the years she did not voluntarily write, and so on. Welty recommends that writers use the inner tensions of their lives as a source of story rather than reciting what they “live through.” For Welty, daring writers are the ones who choose to write their own truth through the imaginative re-creation and embellishment of what they have closely observed with eyes trained by patterns of story derived from fairytale, myth, poetry, fiction, family, and friends. As the titles of her chapters inform us, the successful writer must listen, learn to see, and find a personal voice within the fund of remembered stories heard and read inside the sphere of family and cultural life.

Notes

1. Part of the criticism of Welty's work, both fictional and in this memoir, has often had to do with some highly speculative comments about Welty's supposed frustration at not fitting into the "Southern belle" stereotype. Claudia Pierpont dismisses close her "friend's" assessment of Welty's physical appearance: "It is appalling that just about everyone willing to speak of Welty in her youth refers to her physical unattractiveness [. . .] [their statements] make clear what kind of segregation must have been the ruling evil of Welty's early life" (Pierpont 161).
2. The controversy over revelation of information in *One Writer's Beginnings* is similar to that regarding Zora Neale Hurston and *Dust Tracks on a Road*. One difference between Welty and Hurston is that the more than forty years between the publication of the two books makes it less necessary for Welty to explain about anything that is left out, like love lives.
3. Welty's characterization of herself as a 'heedless' child provides a tip-off to how she views herself, but also apparent in her physical and content description of the book is her respect for her father's reading experiences. Her assessment shows, in her reflection, some resistance to how she had reacted in the situation.
4. She wasn't the only one affected by these texts. Someone as different from her as Malcolm X also cited the wonders of *Our Wonder World* in *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* as transformative in his educational experiences in prison.

5. The title and story of *The Library Dragon*, a children's book by Carmen Deedy, sums up the feelings any bibliophile has had about the possessiveness that librarians tend to exude whenever a patron attempts to borrow a book.
6. Bakhtin would agree. He theorized about the development of consciousness as the inner voice of the novelist: "Analysis would show that the units of which inner speech is constituted are certain whole entities [. . . resembling] the alternating lines of dialogue. There was good reason why thinkers in ancient times should have conceived of inner speech as inner dialogue" (qtd. in Henderson 344).
7. Welty also believes in the influence of the King James Bible on her writer's voice. She states, "How many of us, the South's writers-to-be of my generations, were blessed in one way or another, if not blessed alike, in not having gone deprived of the King James Version of the Bible. Its cadence entered into our ears and our memories for good. The evidence, or the ghost of it, lingers in all our books" (Welty 37). As this particular version of the Bible is one of the most beautifully written books in the English language, it is not hard to imagine the deep impact of these words on Welty. Also, as we shall see with Lilliam Smith, this ghost imagery plays an important role in assessing Southern culture.
8. Welty uses travel to start her first novel, *Delta Wedding*. Welty discusses the importance of travel to her: "Nor is it surprising to me that when I made my first attempt at a novel, I entered its world—that of the mysterious Yazoo-Mississippi Delta—as a child riding there on a train" (Welty 75).

9. This is another portion of Sidonie Smith's idea of the autobiographical manifesto: "to speak as one of a group, to speak for a group" (193). Although the title of her book might belie this particular part of Smith's idea, Welty's representation as a Mississippian and a Southern writer is very strong throughout. The roots of her parents are also part of what comprises her viewpoints and this also impacts her work.
10. Welty's father appears to have had no family stories to pass on to her, and this omission is something that Welty had to come to her own conclusions about: "My father is not the one who told me this: he never happened to tell us a single family story; could it have been because he'd heard so many of the Andrews stories? I think it was rather because, as he said, he had no interest in ancient history – only the future, he said, should count" (Welty 70). The omission of her father's history, along with the small facts that she did know, allowed her active imagination to fill in the details.

One place where Welty reflects on her paternal family history has to do with her own middle name. Welty states: "Alice was my middle name. Her [Welty's paternal grandmother] name had been Allie. Too late, after I was already christened, it came out that Allie stood for not Alice but Almira. Her name had been remembered wrong. I imagined what that would have done to her. It seemed to me to have made her an orphan. That was worse to me than if I had been able to imagine dying" (Welty 71). For Welty, 'disremembering' is worse than dying, for to remember incorrectly is to discard the dead one completely. Everything about this

‘disremembered’ grandmother contributes to the sense of loneliness she imagines in her father’s family. A small book, a few trips to her grandfather’s farm, and the incorrectly remembered middle name are all that is left for the Weltys.

11. To paraphrase Alfred, Lord Tennyson: Writers are a part of all they have met, including themselves. Regarding a character in *The Golden Apples*, Welty writes: “As I looked longer and longer for the origins of this passionate and strange character, at last I realized that Miss Eckhart came from me. [. . .] She derived from what I already knew for myself, even felt I had always known” (Welty 110). A better analogy is that actors may mine some of their previous experiences for expression to use for a character they are chosen to play, but the character is not the actor. The difference with writers is that they get to “play” all of the roles at the same time in a narrative. This simultaneous playing of roles comes out of re-memory. Re-memory or remembering allows fiction to grow organically. Welty points out:

It is our inward journey that leads us through time—forward or back, seldom in a straight line, most often spiraling. Each of us is moving, changing, with respect to others. As we discover, we remember; remembering, we discover; and most intensely do we experience this when our separate journeys converge. Our living experience at those meeting points is one of the charged dramatic fields of fiction.” (Welty 112)

Upon her realization here, Welty begins to develop her most concrete explanations of the fiction writing process. This is a remarkable enough accomplishment, and Welty also imparts some important story lessons in this final section as well.

12. The use of her own experience in a story appears to be a revelation that she is eager to share in this section, which is full of helpful advice for writers. Welty reflects upon the start of the story in a comment told to her by a neighbor who happened to be a traveling man. A mere sentence, “He’s gone to borrow some fire,” started a fire within Welty to write (Welty 94). Small snippets of life experiences inspired her to create story.

Chapter Four

Killers of the Dream: a reflection of the Southern self

In October of 1965, Eudora Welty published a landmark essay called “Must the Novelist Crusade?” in the *Atlantic Monthly*. Given the timing of the essay, Welty found it necessary to make comment during a political time about the responsibilities of the novelist. Her essay, written in a somewhat sarcastic tone that might have been appreciated by a critic like Carolyn Heilbrun, thoroughly denounces the idea that “political fiction” can succeed. Indeed, fiction written as propaganda is often doomed to failure. She also later touched upon this topic almost twenty years later in *One Writer’s Beginnings*. She believed that the moment she tried to write an angry and polemical story about the murder of Mississippi Civil Rights leader Medgar Evers, her fiction became a wooden thing (Welty 43). In “Must the Novelist Crusade?,” Welty lays the groundwork for this particular point of view by stating her belief that the novelist and the crusader cannot be on the same side of “proper use of words for the proper ends” (804). Throughout her essay, she takes great care to use the title “crusader-novelist” to indicate this opposition that cannot happen in the same piece of work.

However, distance, both in time and space may help in telling an effective political story. Other writers, like Toni Morrison, and including Welty, argue that every fiction writer is political in some sense because she is trying to paint an accurate picture or her vision of human nature and the world. There are certain occasions, however, when the synthesis of character and propaganda can work: Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle*, John Steinbeck’s *Grapes of Wrath*, Barbara Kingsolver’s modern day epic of Africa, *The*

Poisonwood Bible, are good examples of political fiction from twentieth century American literature. These writers achieve the ability to tell a deeper truth in their own stories than could have ever been told in the most skillfully written piece of journalism or creative non-fiction. These writers reached into the hearts of their readers and revealed a political situation through the lives of their characters.

Welty also believed that the mentality of the crowd didn't assist the novelist in maintaining the individualistic point of view that fiction requires and that there was implicit risk in writing propagandistic novels (809). In writing this essay, was Welty commenting on the career of her fellow southerner, Lillian Smith? Almost proving Welty's point, Lillian Smith wrote about the political in her fiction and was nearly forgotten. Her most notable work of fiction, *Strange Fruit*, was about an interracial love affair in a small Georgia town whose population could not accept this radical love. Smith's intention in *Strange Fruit* was to tell a story of how the races should be able to get along together and also to show, in fiction, how love between the races is possible. *Strange Fruit* became a bestseller and was even adapted into a play—but for all the wrong reasons.

Mostly, Smith achieved widespread notoriety and shocked reactions for her depiction of the love story between the white Tracy and the lightskinned Nannie. Some were offended, like Zora Neale Hurston, who indicated to one of her editors: "Take for instance *Strange Fruit*. Negro girls no longer have children by white men. I challenge her to find an instance, even in her own Georgia. It is simply not being done" (qtd. in Kaplan 537-538). Others were titillated, but not converted to an understanding of how

love could exist between people without regard to race. Published in 1944, *Strange Fruit* was a failure for the determined Southerner Smith, who felt compelled to portray what she had come to understand about racial relationships. Not having reached the audience or put across the point of view that she had wished to, Smith essentially closed out her career by writing an unusual reflective self-authored life-writing project titled *Killers of the Dream*. In *Killers*, Smith not only told the story of her writing life and self, but also used her text to construct a “Southern self,” explaining Southern morality in light of Southern behavior. Her own vision in the text, both in structure and in content, was politically charged because of her vision of this Southern self. Smith used Welty’s idea about the crowd mentality as a foundation for her own crusader’s voice and told the South’s story as her own story. She stepped away from an account detailing her personal life and instead focused on using resistance to delineate the South’s story. For her daring, she ultimately paid the price. Her work proved Welty’s points that the nonfiction writer’s search for personal and cultural truth is rarely what the cultural public wants in its fiction—or its nonfiction.

Killers of the Dream was a book ahead of its time, and too many people in 1948 in the United States of America were not ready for its message of the damage racism did to both white and black people. Instead of furthering the values that she felt it important to reveal, Smith found that the reception of *Killers of the Dream* ensured that she was downgraded to minor writer status. Since it was several decades before the development of the notion put forward by Joan Leslie, among others, of the “personal as political,” a number of reviewers saw to the destruction of Smith’s career in their reviews. *Time*

magazine was brutal about Smith, saying that *Killers* was “badly organized, excessively repetitious and too persistently eloquent” and that Smith’s ideas of ending segregation were “extreme and impractical” (Loveland 103). The reviewer in the *Atlanta Constitution*, the liberal Ralph McGill, went even further with a more personal attack on Smith: “Miss Smith is a prisoner in the monastery of her own mind [. . .] but rarely does she come out of its gates and then, apparently, seeing only wicked things to send her back to her hair shirt and the pouring of ashes on her head and salt in her own psychiatric wounds” (Loveland 104). In this review McGill took a decided departure from his own point of view of a Southerners’ fate as “[being] involved with his region, [and to] always feel himself held by it” (Jenkins 3). The characterization of Smith as a psychiatric patient did little to convince people that she had written an important book. With *Killers*, Smith’s career went on the wane until the Civil Rights Movement began in earnest in the late 1950’s and people took a second look at her work.

Smith knew what was going to happen to her work ahead of time. Her biographer, Anne Loveland, who sympathizes with Smith’s cause of racial understanding, confirms that “Lillian said later that ‘it was quietly smothered to death in numerous places, including a few libraries and many bookstores.’ [. . .] Although she was unhappy with the [initial] reception of the book, neither was she particularly surprised by it” (Loveland 105). What was so awful about this book that made readers ignore it away in 1948 and not care to pick it up again until the early 1960’s?

Killers of the Dream takes the self-authored life writing text in a different direction. Rather than simply recounting her personal life story, Smith examines her own

life in the context of her source material, the South. Smith tells why she feels compelled to write and, in that, tells how she came to understand why she had to speak out against racial prejudice: “I wrote it because I had to find out what life in a segregated culture had done to me, one person, I had to put down on paper these experiences so that I could see their meaning for me. I was in dialogue with myself as I wrote, as well as with my hometown, and my childhood and history and the future and the past” (“Foreward: A letter to my publisher” 13). *Killers* does not prove that novelists can crusade effectively, because its reception was so poor, but it does show that a crusading Southern female novelist can write with feeling and good style. This point of view also confirms Mechling’s point of view of the way women piece together their life stories as part of a matrilineal heritage (132). Smith’s project tapped into an attempt to save her Southern heritage. For her time and gender, Smith’s project was unprecedented. In many ways, hers is the purest of the works examined in this study in that her entire structure is resistant to the conventions of autobiography and her narrative is the most frank about its subject, the people of the South.

Smith had her doubts about her own work, expressed in a series of speeches she gave in the early 1960’s after *Killers of the Dream* had its resurgence. In a 1962 speech, she wonders why no women had written any great autobiographies, a question that echoes Virginia Woolf’s lamentations in *A Room of One’s Own*. In making her statement, “we must face the fact that no woman has yet written a great autobiography” (Smith 189), she excludes herself, having written *Killers* more than ten years before. Granted, there was no sexist language debate then, but even so, it is striking that Smith’s

speeches, from a twenty-first century perspective and the current understanding of language, consistently lament the lack of great women autobiographers with the strict use of male nouns and pronouns. The intelligent, imaginative Smith couldn't even imagine a way out of the language for women; she could more easily believe that "women ha[d] no gestalt" or structure to write the great autobiographical project. Still, in 1963, she excluded *Killers* from the genre of autobiography by saying: "I hope, some day, to write my autobiography" (Smith 196). She then negates this statement by applying the appellation "autobiography" when she explains why she wrote *Killers of the Dream*. In response to an inquiry about the book's origins, "'Did you write this book as an act of penance?'" she replies, "I think, perhaps, I did in a way—as every autobiography is an act of penance" (Smith 197). If she had been able to continue the dialogue with herself into the realm of language about pronouns or in critiquing the term "autobiography," she might have found the resources to critique other areas of language as well. Smith's use of resistance is embedded in the structure and content of *Killers* and not in the language.

Written years before the surge in popularity of self-authored life writing projects, *Killers of the Dream* was ahead of its time. Smith opens her work with a Foreword that explains some of the resources she used to write her book. Her extensive list, resistant just in the length and breadth of it, includes such classic studies of American and Southern society as Gunnar Myrdal's *American Dilemma*; Arthur Raper and Ira De A. Reid's *Sharecroppers All*; H.C. Nixon's *Forty Acres and Steel Mules*; Rupert Vance's *Human Geography of the South*; Charles Johnson's *Patterns of Negro Segregation*; Howard Odum's *Southern Regions*; Paul Buck's *Road to Reunion*; Carey McWilliams'

Brothers under the Skin; Liston Pope's *Millhands and Preachers*; W. J. Cash's *Mind of the South*, and M. N. Work's *The Negro Year Book*, along with material from the *Atlanta Constitution* and *Atlanta Journal* newspapers and the U.S. Office of Education (Smith 10). I give only part of Smith's listing here, but the thoroughness of the list shows that Smith feels it is ridiculous to have to appeal to these other male writers for acceptance of her as a writer. Also, Smith knew that she would need to have heavy intellectual hitters to back up her conclusions about the roots of human behavior regarding race. The time spent in justification of her point of view in *Killers* is reminiscent of the practice in nineteenth-century slave narratives where the word of a prominent abolitionist was necessary to preface the slave narrative to attest to the authenticity of the author and the truthfulness of the text. Smith is doing much the same in her foreword to *Killers*. Even though she is providing the sources herself here, the authorities she has read attest to the validity of Smith's own perceptions and serve to validate her own life story. If a white male wrote *Killers*, I wonder if so much justification would have been deemed necessary.

The structure of *Killers of the Dream* is roughly similar to *Dust Tracks on A Road* in that the first half is personal and the second half is political. However, overall, *Killers of the Dream* is divided into four parts and Smith uses a traditional approach to the self-authored life-writing project only in the first part. The subsequent three parts explore her developed theory of Southern behavior. In the first part, "The Dreamers," she uses the first person point of view to show her own experience and to explain what she believes is "killing the dream" and crippling the South, the "haunted childhood [that] belongs to

every southerner. Many of *us* run away from it but *we* come back like a hurt animal to its wound, or a murderer to the scene of his sin” [Italics and bolding are mine.] (Smith 15).¹

Though a liberated woman herself with a liberal point of view, Smith never drops the first person plural in her rhetoric. She might have said “whites” or “Southerners” or a myriad of other terms, but she always includes herself amongst the ones who embrace the harsh prejudiced lessons that were part of her upbringing. This is a deliberate strategy in crafting her work. Her potential detractors, then, would know that she sees herself as a part of the problem—that she does not put herself above the society she criticizes.

Smith continues to appropriate Southern tradition as the shaping force of her life by using first person anecdotes to include analogies between sex and race to show the foolishness of the way she had been taught to deal with “Negroes,” which is Smith’s term of the time. She is also unafraid, as Hurston and Welty are, to talk about sex in frank terms:

I do not remember how or when, but by the time I had learned that God is love, that Jesus is His son and came to give us more abundant life, that all men are brothers with a common Father, I also knew that I was better than a Negro, that all black folks have their place and must be kept in it, that sex has its place and must be kept in it, that a terrifying disaster would befall the South if I ever treated a Negro as my social equal. (Smith 18)

Her relationship with her old nurse is emblematic of white Southern hypocrisy: “I learned to use a soft voice to oil my words of superiority. I learned to cheapen with tears

and sentimental talk of ‘my old mammy’ one of the profound relationships of my life. I learned the bitterest thing a child can learn: that human relations that I valued most were held cheap by the world I lived in” (Smith 19). It is almost as if Smith and other Southern children learn very early to speak in polyphonic Bahktinian voices. This is Smith’s first attempt to reveal the “dirty laundry” of the white Christian South with her rebellious intention to put the mammy relationships on an equal footing with other relationships. Smith feels that white Southern children are raised to practice duplicity in their relationships with black people and that this duplicity eats away at their very souls. She further develops this idea later on in *Killers*.

The other writers in the self-authored life writing projects in this study discuss one or the other of their parents as a positive or negative shaping force in their writing lives. For Zora Neale Hurston, her mother is the positive force and her father also shapes her writing life even with his negative attitude. Eudora Welty’s parents formed a secure foundation for her to pursue her writing dreams. And, as we shall see, Anzia Yeziarska’s scholarly father shapes her negatively in that everything she does is a challenge to his old-fashioned ideas about women, while Mary Austin’s father encouraged her, and she spurred herself to greater success despite her hostile mother. However, none of these other writers rejected their upbringing and created themselves anew quite so much as Lillian Smith records in this first part of *Killers of the Dream*. Even as she dedicates the book to her parents, she “kills them off” in the very beginning, through harsh critique of their value systems, a move that is in direct opposition to the central Bible commandment, “Honor thy mother and father.”

Language plays a role in Smith's resistance against her white Christian upbringing. Smith recites a litany of the expectations and beliefs that her parents raised their children with: "We lived the same segregated life as did other southerners but our parents talked in excessively Christian and democratic terms. We were told ten thousand times that status and money are unimportant (though we were well supplied with both); we were told that 'all men are brothers'" (Smith 23). Smith's rejection of her parents' ideas represents a dismantling of the 'linguistic scaffolding' put forth by them (Nelson and Fivush 35). Her use of parentheses here acts as an aside and highlights the hypocrisy of her parents' speech. Smith's intention is to show that the language of her parents was damaging, and that their actions did not match their words. She does not honor her parents here as much as she destroys their world. Thus, in Luddite fashion, she destroys those prior uses of rhetoric. She intends to craft her own language, and to build her own linguistic scaffolding to describe the world anew.

Another incident that reveals the hypocrisy and also allows Smith to employ the stratagem of resistance against the value system of the South and of her parents involved a little girl named Janie in the neighborhood. The little girl, who was staying at the home of some black people, was very light in color. The community assumed that she was a kidnapped white child, and so she was brought to the Smith home to be cared for until a place was found for her. Young Lillian gave Janie a doll to play with and the little girls got along well. Soon it was discovered that Janie was a really a light-skinned black girl and she was immediately taken out of the Smith home to go back where she came from. For Smith, Janie's literal color did not mean much in terms of classification. In terms of

placement in the text, Janie's story is the point when Smith begins to separate herself from her parents and feel different about life. However, this separation was an earth-shattering moment for her, as it would be for any child: "But I felt compelled to believe they were right. It was the only way my world would be held together" (Smith 29). The relation of this story is similar to the "My People, My People" chapter in *Dust Tracks* where Hurston harshly criticizes the separation of races in terms of skin color. Smith also intends to show the economic power of the whites in the community when they take Janie from a home where she may have been perfectly happy, into another strange place—all because of skin color. This continuous questioning of her parents' value system, although painful, is what later allows Smith to take a different approach with the girls at her summer camp in the North Georgia mountains.

Smith was in the empathetic position of understanding how her young women felt despair as they questioned their parents' value systems. If this were a conventional autobiography, she might have written an essay expressing her point of view. However, she instead structures a Socratic dialogue with an older camper to show how Smith herself reasoned her way through and away from these parental value systems. Showcasing her skills as a fiction writer, Smith doubtless cobbled together a composite of conversations to exemplify how young people struggle in rejecting their parents' value systems and begin to adapt their own. In this way, Smith's audience could also question their received values, retain a positive sense of their own intelligence, and begin to build a new and more judicious value system for themselves. At the same time, by putting

these words into the mouth of a young person, Smith is building an audience for her future works—an audience she presumes will be more inclined to racial understanding.

The camper is angry with Smith for introducing the campers to an ideal system that she feels is impossible to live up to: The camper says, “ ‘We loved you for giving us ideals that we could be proud of. We wanted to live them. They seemed so fine.’ She laughed a bitter little laugh [. . .] ‘But I almost hate you tonight for letting us fall in love with beliefs that I see now we can’t possibly live’” (Smith 44). The reader is then led through the girl’s reasoning process as she explains her parents are good people: “I couldn’t believe it—he’s so good—I’ve never seen Daddy do an unkind thing in all my life. [. . .] Then *why* [Smith’s italics] does he want to keep Negroes segregated—what pleasure does it get out of it? Does it make him richer to keep them that way?” (Smith 45) The girl continues to struggle through the contradictory nature of her parents’ beliefs, recalling an incident on the train when a black man who was the president of a black college had to sit behind curtains to eat.

After her anger is vented at Smith, the camper shows fear for the future and Smith uses the camper’s thinking process to illustrate how easy it is for subsequent generations to slip into the comfort of their parents’ value systems. The camper reaches for answers, continuously frustrated: “I’ll teach my children not to *think* [Smith’s italics] about things like this [. . .] I lay there tonight trying to tell myself that segregation is right. [. . .] I said ‘Daddy knows more than we know here at camp. There’s no sense in worrying about it’” (Smith 47-48). Smith then responds to the girl, talking about her own father as proof, showing how these contradictory beliefs manifest themselves in the minds of white

people. One of her father's friends punished a black man. Smith relays how the punishment from the hands of this friend sharply contrasts with the sweet goodies that the same hand would extend to children: "[Y]ou knew that some of your father's friends did use the sweat box or stocks or whipping as punishment for the convicts leased out to them and these same friends gave you and your little sister candy and dimes and sometimes brought you presents from Savannah. Strange, how you remember a little bag of candy and a sweat box together." (64)

Smith moves from this evocative language to the use of quotations from different books and articles in the Atlanta newspapers to show the counter arguments of people who insist on maintaining segregation which range from the mild to the ugly. William Alexander Percy insists on maintaining the status quo until the "Negroes," as he calls them, learn to act like whites. Selections Smith quotes from editorials and letters in the Atlanta newspapers forward ideologies of Negro inferiority: "Only a fool would say the Southern pattern of separation of the races can, or should be overthrown." And, "The brown people and the blacks are mentally unfit for directors in our form of government." The worst sentiments come interviews with hard core segregationists in her friend W.J. Cash's work *The Mind of the South*, interviewed: "The way to control the nigger is to whip him when he does not obey without it, and another is never pay him more wages than is actually necessary to buy food and clothing," And , "Whenever the Constitution comes between me and the virtue of the white women of the South, I say to hell with the Constitution!" (qtd. in Smith 78 – 79).

These ugly words of hate allow her to question why an entire region would maintain a segregationist policy and to show that in an economic sense these policies make no sense: “How can an idea like segregation become so hypnotic a thing that it binds a whole people together [. . .] making them one as only a common worship or a deeply shared fear can do? [. . .] What makes it so important to us that men will keep themselves poor to sustain it, out of jobs to defend it?” (Smith 79). Smith’s use of the non-specific “it” of segregation lets her point out that the South could profit economically and morally if the evil of the institution was destroyed. This transition allows her to address the ‘ghosts of the past’ in part two.

Throughout part one, however, she uses her childhood and the expectations of the children in the camp to show the forces that formed her as a writer and a critical thinker and to trace the path of her resistance to explain how she freed herself from the bonds of Southern Tradition. Smith believes that it is up to the youth and that the campers that follow will make change in the South. She ends the section with a single paragraph: “You cannot forget words like this if you have ever heard a young voice say them” (Smith 74). Smith hoped that her words in *Killers of the Dream* would be enough to stir the young people in the South to make change. In the 1961 forward to *Killers*, Smith writes that she believes herself to be vindicated when she praises the four young people who sat at that lunch counter in Greensboro, North Carolina, in February, 1960: “it is their acting that has stirred the world: their quiet sitting there while burning cigarettes are pushed into their backs by white hoodlums, while they are insulted or slapped or kicked; their relaxed, amused reaction to going to jail” (“Foreward: A letter to my publisher”

19). The protestors' courage, Smith believes, is enough to incite resistance to the status quo.

She also shows the impact of the segregationist way of thinking on white children. In Smith's point of view, if white people think that maintaining these traditions harms only the black people in the South, they are wrong. This systemic shutting off of the mind is harmful for all, especially for ones who might wish to write. At another point where she is in dialogue with herself, she writes,

I knew, though I would not for years confess it aloud, that in trying to shut the Negro race away from us, we have shut ourselves away from so many good, creative, honest, deeply human things in life. I began to understand so slowly at first but more and more clearly as the years passed, that the warped, distorted frame we have put around every Negro child from birth is around every white child also. Each is on a different side of the frame but each is pinioned there (Smith 30-31).

The use of the frame as a device to describe this isolation from black people brings to mind the rigidity of the white Southern approach. Smith's first person struggle sees the institution of segregation as a tragic loss of opportunity for crucial human interaction. As a writer who must expose herself to different points of view to reach an understanding, Smith must open herself to different experiences in order to expand her mind and understand the full impact of this loss of interaction. Smith articulates as early as the dedication of *Killers* her admiration of her parents who "tried valiantly to keep their nine children in touch with wholeness even though reared in a segregated culture" (7). This

reach toward openness or wholeness is an act of resistance on her part, because the rigidity of her upbringing had wired her to be closed to anything other than her family's version of white Southern Christianity.

The first part of *Killers*, then, is Smith's attempt to trace her thought process as she considers the forces of history and how her parents have shaped her as a writer who is now shaping (and reshaping) this text in the present. Through her reading and education, Smith is aware how standard Southern customs have twisted the Southern psyche. This is only place where she most closely obeys the conventions of the traditional kind of autobiography. However, she still makes strong use of resistance in the first part of *Killers*, because of her liberation from the Southern Tradition that she grew up with and her rejection of her parents' ideas and racist language.² This "rebirth" ultimately allows her to become an activist writer, and her message seems to urge, (and her stories about the girls' camp in effect challenge) Southern women to employ resistance in their own lives. If she can do it, any Southerner can.

While less traditional in approach and structure to traditional autobiography, the remaining sections of the book function like an autobiographical manifesto, and revisits Sidonie Smith's terminology if not her approach. Here, Lillian Smith highlights the duplicity of the "'Southern self,'" and shows her continuous resistance to societal convention. All of these endeavors serve to reveal, by implication, more of her own true self and her intentions for her work.

Part two, "The White Man's Burden is his Own Childhood," deals with the upbringing of white Christian Southerners who have learned duplicity and superiority

from a very early age. Smith starts off the section with a lesson taught at the knees of white Southern mothers about their superiority. Even though she tries to reduce the responsibility of these mothers (and thus of her own mother) by softening the impact, she is still inciting her audience to reject their upbringing. The mothers try to explain to their daughters, just as Welty had learned from her mother and Hurston from her grandmother, how to be safe: “We southerners learned our first three lessons too well. I do not think our mothers were often aware that they were teaching us lessons. It was as if they were revolving mirrors reflecting life outside the home, inside their memory, and we were spectators entranced by the bright and terrible images we saw there” (Smith 77). Smith’s critics, like Ralph McGill, point to repeated ideas and phrases in *Killers* as a weakness. However, a good portion of this repetition serves to emphasize Smith’s point about the deep-seated belief in the privilege of white skin. She uses phraseology like “We learned and We were taught” to drive home her points about the Southern self, which is her own self: “We were taught in this way to love God, to love our white skin, and to believe in the sanctity of both” (Smith 77). Employing this kind of challenge to her audience is most certainly not the safe behavior her mother taught her. It is the kind of language that calls attention to the author instead.

Connected to these repeated lessons of racial superiority and the sanctity of white religion was the lesson of the body as an object of shame. These lessons, she argues, were twisted together into the race-sex-sin spiral. Smith’s discussion and use of sexual analogies were not conventional for a work in the late 1940’s:

By the time we were five years old we had learned, without hearing the words, that masturbation was wrong and segregation is right, and each [word] had become a dread taboo that must never be broken for we believed God, whom we feared and tried desperately to love, had made the rules [. . .] concerning our bodies and Negroes (Smith 78).

People became upset when Jocelyn Elders discussed masturbation in public in the 1990's, and Smith certainly took a chance making analogies with this topic in the Cold War era. However, the analogy works to highlight Smith's point about the nature of children's curiosity. Smith concludes, however, that these rules were impossible to follow because of children's innate curiosity about their bodies. Similarly, she adds, children have an innate curiosity about others and do not hate someone of a different skin color unless they are taught to do so. Writers must also have a sense of curiosity and must breach restrictions on it and not pay attention to the conventions of society. Smith does this continuously in employing her resistant techniques in *Killers*. It is obvious that she believes that ignoring society's conventions allows for the best writing and is the best way to attain the most success. Following these imposed rules guaranteed the fragmentation of the white southern psyche. Smith called it a split:

They were taboos which we dared not to break. Yet we did break them, for it was impossible to observe them. We broke the rules and told ourselves we had kept them. [. . .] Our minds had split: hardly more than a crack at first, but we began in those

early years a two-leveled existence which we have since managed quite smoothly” (78).

As part of her writing strategy, Smith ties body segregation together with racial segregation. Smith uses a monologue that imitates a running patter and takes on the pose of a silent voice whispering into the ears of white children as they are growing up: “Now, parts of your body are segregated areas which you must stay away from and keep others away from. These areas you touch only when necessary. In other words, you cannot associate freely with them any more than you can associate freely with colored children” (Smith 81-82). As McKay Jenkins points out, Smith uses the word “segregated” pointedly here to parallel these forbidden body parts with the sectors of the world that were forbidden to blacks (111). This equation of genitalia with black children serves Smith well in relating sexual repression to racial oppression in the Puritanical Southern self and highlights her fearlessness in showing how sex played a role in developing that Southern self, and her own self.

She continues to be resistant to societal expectations in *Killers* in an allegorical fashion when couching her own homosexuality as the “Unpardonable Sin.” Smith never spells out the definition of this “Unpardonable Sin,” and it remains purposefully unclear. Smith states, “but life seemed a lost battle to many of us only after we learned the lesson of the Unpardonable Sin. [. . .] God forgave, if we prayed hard and piteously enough, all sins but one. This one sin against the Holy Ghost He would never forgive. Committing it, one lived forever among the damned. What this sin was, what the “Holy Ghost” was,

no one seemed to know” (Smith 80). Despair is the Unpardonable Sin—the loss of hope in the face of the ever-available “mercy” of God—but Smith, like Hawthorne, keeps the definition of it vague to illustrate how Southern religion bred fear, shame, and secrecy. The entire notion of secrecy, emphasized by the usage of capital letters, dramatizes how the unspoken and unexplained ruled Southern life in her childhood. However, since the Unpardonable Sin does not cow Smith, could this be a potential place in the text where Smith inserts a mention of her homosexuality?

It has been well established by several scholars, her biographer and McKay Jenkins among them, that Smith was a lesbian. Jenkins thus offers an explanation of this enigmatic paragraph: “Smith was well aware of the manner in which white Southern discourse propped up its mythical notions of sexual innocence by demonizing those who did not play by the same rules. For not only was she a racial liberal in the conservative South, she was a lesbian in a culture obsessed with maintaining traditional images of sexual conduct” (Jenkins 111). Her long-term relationship with Paula Snelling and her inclusions of lesbian relationships in her novels considered, it is plausible that this was one place in her self-authored life writing where Smith could challenge social notions of the sinful nature of homosexuality.

Smith was not naïve, however, even as she knew the racial content of *Killers* to be divisive, she still wanted someone to purchase her text. Any overt mention about lesbians would have been too alienating at the time. Joan Leslie points out the continuous pull between silence and honesty that lesbians have had to endure. When signing up for a peace march, Leslie explains, “I did not put the word Lesbian on my

card. I put Jewish and feminist” (61). Like Leslie marching in 1963, Smith knew that the battle, at this point in 1949, was for racial integration. However, knowing the battle ahead, she couldn’t resist keeping some small reference to her sexuality in the text.

In contrast to the Unpardonable Sin, which Southern children were led to interpret with sexual guilt or spiritual doubt, racist behavior was not stigmatized by religion or social custom: “Anyway, [. . .] pushing [black kids] off the sidewalk is not one of the Sins you have to worry about. You somehow know this [. . .] You know you will not go to hell if you push little colored kids into sand spurs (or later out of jobs) though you may go there if you steal a nickel or do ‘bad’ things or even think about them” (Smith 86).

These revelatory examples also work when Smith shows how the Southerner’s psychic split is further illustrated by the parents’ behavior. Joan Leslie posits that the very nature of lesbianism is to stand in direct opposition to the system of patriarchy, which might explain Smith’s approach (106). However, it is difficult for Smith to censure her parents entirely—they are still her parents, and she absolves them somewhat in terms of thinking about how they, in an earlier generation, might have done the right thing in terms of treating black people, though they too were taught prejudice: “Our mothers and fathers would have weakened, I think, had not religion and southern tradition kept them hard at the teaching. Even so, their hearts and their sense of humor gave us a holiday” (Smith 87). Smith posits that the parents were so guilty about maintaining the mental split that they overindulged their children, even using language, to make up for teaching them how to be cruel to others:

Honey, sugar, sweetie [Smith's italics] were milk names that still cling to our middle-aged vocabulary. Kisses and big hugs, and soothing laps to nuzzle up in, and tea cakes and bread 'n' butter 'n' sugar, and cane syrup poured on hot buttered biscuit, and homemade ice cream and praise, gave a velvety texture to childhood which did not keep out the sharp stabs from the lessons but soften them now in our memory until we deny that we felt them at all. (Smith 88-89)³

Smith's rich description reflects her petted upbringing as one of nine children in a relatively well-to-do household. The description is also notable because it serves as a explanation for how honeyed Southern words, accompanied by affection, also reflect the great split and are also duplicitous regarding how black people are treated in this sweet society.

In *Dust Tracks*, Hurston celebrates biblical mythology by relating biblical passages and stories about God, and Smith likewise must give consequence to the role that religion plays in the Southern life in order to portray it accurately. However, unlike Hurston, she showcases resistance by laying the blame for the religious part of the split on the preeminence of the church in Southern life. For her, the old ways of operating religion must be rejected to lead to the open mind needed for a developing writer. For instance, she recounts, once a year, revivalists would come into town and something new and exciting would happen for the young Lillian. Smith does not see these revivalist preachers as Flannery O'Connor does in "A Good Man is Hard to Find." Smith questions these uniquely Southern viewpoints: "How can such men be called hypocrites, as they are grossly represented by most novels and plays written about them?" (Smith

98) She admits that she may have been exposed to a particular mindset about revivals as she grew up, but the revivalists that she knew were exciting and new – quite apart from the ordinary churchgoing experience that had preached duality in the treatment of human beings: “They were twisted men, and often fanatics, but they were delightful companions [. . .]. These men were remarkable storytellers, with a warm, near-riotous sense of humor; brilliantly adept with words, soft and gentle with the children of their host, and courteous and considerate of their hostess. We liked them” (Smith 100). These revivalist storytellers had a particular influence upon young Lillian Smith that helped her to formulate her stories.

The revivalists also prodded Smith to think about the potential conflict implicit in her treatment of other human beings. Smith tells of their strong capability in this field: “By means of threats, hypnotic suggestion, and a recall of the earliest fears of childhood, they plunged deep into our unconscious and brought up sins we had long ago forgotten [. . .] Though they knew no word of psychoanalysis, they directed their attention to buried memories much as the Freudians” (Smith 101). Smith shows that these revivalists, with their unrefined methods of bringing the past to the fore, gave her a Freudian way to reason about the Southern mental split.⁴

The “Three Ghost Stories” chapter is a focal point of *Killers of the Dream*, where, in very clear terms, Smith delineates three white-black relationships and their ultimate destructive impact on the Southern self. Her strategy of resistance is employed here through the continuous use of ghost and death metaphors showing that the old way of life

in the South is dead. In the 1961 Forward, Smith reemphasizes this by saying, “So many of us are sleepwalkers wandering around in search of a past that never existed; more afraid of ghosts than atomic war” (“Forward: a letter to my publisher” 18). Indeed, Darlene O’Dell observes that in a sense, “*Killers of the Dream* is a ghost story, set in graveyards alive to displaced ghosts [. . .] Smith draws from the cultural work of the Ku Klux Klan, particularly the Klan’s use of ghosts, cemeteries, and other gothic images to represent itself” (O’Dell 80-81), dramatizing the ways in which white Southerners lived in the past. These explanations point back to Smith’s childhood watching the execution of these relationships and how Smith was able to reason toward a better understanding between the races that allowed her to become a politically oriented fiction writer.

Smith portrayed as “ghostly” three different relationships in the lives of Southern whites. They are: white man – black woman, white child – black mammy, and white man – black children. Southern Tradition dictated that the whites act as if these relationships existed on the fringes of white people’s lives but in the reality that Smith documents, they were central to the way many Southerners lived.⁵ For example, Smith spends a fair amount of time discussing the attractiveness of black people. Her discussions of their attractiveness is in direct rebellion against Barbara Christian’s notion of “The Cult of True Womanhood,” which idolized white women and was perpetuated in the South far past the end of the nineteenth century. White people, who have traded any potential spark or color in their own lives for constant control, cannot help being pulled into the orbits of the blacks around them. In the back yards of the houses, white men especially fell under the spell of the blacks who worked in the house: “It was natural that

the white man was drawn to them. Laughter, song, rhythm, spontaneity, were like a campfire in a dark tangled forest full of sins and boredom and fears. So bright, so near” (Smith 112). Again, she is always unafraid to confront sex as part of the Southern self, and her self. Smith uses vivid imagery to show how white males were drawn to their slave women:

[T]hey could not resist the vigor and kindness and gaiety of these slaves. And succumbing to desire, they mated with these dark women whom they had dehumanized in their minds [. . .], The race-sex-sin spiral had begun. The more trails the white man made to back-yard cabins, the higher he raised his white wife on her pedestal when he returned to the big house. (Smith 116)

Clearly those back-yard trails were crucial in determining the nature of other white-black relationships in the South: the white man used blacks to raise his own children, and also used black women to bear and raise his half-black and half-white children who were considered slaves and thus increased his economic wealth. This cycle of rape and abuse, for Smith, are an anathema upon the Southern psyche.

In this same section Smith discusses the tremendous child-rearing abilities of black women. These ways of childrearing, for Smith, are more freeing and lead to the open mind needed for becoming a writer. Her assessments are somewhat idealized, but they are important to her theory to show contrast with the whites and to show how her assessments predated the revolutionary Dr. Benjamin Spock’s views on childrearing by a few years:

Little black children did all the naughty things little white children were punished for, did them and prospered in body and mind. [. . .] I think these old black matriarchs knew secrets of child rearing and secrets of sanity that our psychiatrists have been learning the hard way for the past sixty years through research and that white mothers still know too little about. (Smith 113)

Smith uses these ideas to discuss the prominence of her own mammy and of similar caregivers in the lives of other Southerners. Smith's experience includes the craftiness of Aunt Chloe who ended up saving her life when Lillian became unreasonably stubborn about eating:

The story is that Aunt Chloe tried food after food all of which I rejected, then studying the pale young face before her for a little while, she suddenly took a little food, chewed it first in her mouth, put in mine and I swallowed it promptly. Soon I was prospering on this fine psychological diet, gaining weight and security as the weeks went by. (Smith 126)

At the time Smith writes, whites and blacks in the South couldn't even use the same water fountains, and so Smith's inclusion of this anecdote is quite interesting. Despite the fact that she ate the masticated food taken from a black woman's mouth, Smith obviously lived and didn't suffer any bad aftereffects of Aunt Chloe's ingenious feeding method, more proof of the foolishness of racism. The inclusion of these anecdotes also revisit Toni Morrison's discussions about the centrality of the Africanist perspective in United States culture and literature as she raises these issues in *Playing in the Dark*:

“Much more important was to contemplate how Africanist personae, narrative, and idiom moved and enriched the text in self-conscious ways, to consider what the engagement meant for the work of the writer’s imagination” (16). It doesn’t take much imagination to see the parallel that Smith is drawing: the very nourishment that builds up her body or that of any other Southerner comes from black mouths.

However, in the Southern self, there is no gratitude for this, only more use and abuse of the black body and psyche. Smith also talks about how deeply ingrained the Mammy persona is in the minds of many prominent Southerners who have been taken care of by a black nurse. She uses the Mammy persona as her explanation for the reason white men wished to later return to black women in a sexual capacity. Smith writes:

In the old days, a white child who had loved his colored nurse, his ‘mammy’ with that passionate devotion which only small children feel, who had grown used to dark velvety skin, warm deep breast, rich soothing voice and the ease of a personality whose religion was centered in heaven not hell, who had felt when mind is tender the touch of a spirit almost free of sex anxiety, found it natural to seek in adolescence and adulthood a return of this profoundly pleasing experience. (Smith 123)

McKay Jenkins believes Smith’s use of sensual language here is indicative of a displaced homoeroticism that reflects Smith’s lesbianism (Jenkins 125), but her description is in line with the rich and sensate descriptions in other places in the book. Smith’s language creates a picture of the comfort that the black mammy gave to her charges, so that the

reader can more fully understand the impact that the role of the black mammy had on white children. The references to care-giving, comfort, and sexuality also counter the harshness of the race-sex-sin spiral she has already written about. Joan Leslie writes of these concerns as part of the lesbian woman's "passing"—sort of like a garment, taking on the concerns of the heterosexual female population in order to fashion an argument. As Leslie defines it, this "passing garment" is an indicator of the survival mechanisms lesbians used in the pre-Stonewall era (107). This is another place where Smith enhances the importance of *Killers*, and her project can be viewed as part of a matrilineal heritage. Another autobiography critic, Trinh Mihh-ha states, "Every woman partakes in the chair of guardianship and of transmission [of story]—in other words of creation" (qtd. in Mechling 132). This is what Smith is doing as she relates the importance of these Mammy figures to the South, willfully giving a place of prominence to the very women Zora Neale Hurston once proclaimed as the "mules of the world."

The relationship with the black mammy figure and the white mother continues the cultivation of the split in the young white child's mind. Smith's description here is somewhat chilling and also illustrates the beginning of the split mind: "It is as if he were fastened to two umbilical cords which wrap themselves together in a terrifying tangle, and then suddenly, inexplicably, but with awful sureness, begin steadily to move, each in a different direction" (Smith 128). With this image, it is easy to feel how frightening this developing duality might be to the young white Southern mind. Yet the duality happens and the individual has to change the way of thinking so that he/she is made ready for

society. With this change and gradual pulling toward the white mother, the child then begins to learn how to demean the black nurse: “From now on, his gifts to his old nurse will be little presents, not of esteem and love, but a linen handkerchief [. . .] he has almost completed the cheapening of this tender profound relationship that his culture insists upon” (Smith 130). Despite her timely use of the singular male pronouns of the day, these sentiments also apply for little girls, because from the tone of these sentiments, Smith obviously regrets the way she treated her Aunt Chloe as she was growing up. Only the realization of their ingratitude towards black people will free Southerners as they have freed Smith to be a better observer and writer. Smith uses this regret as a form of energy to further elucidate her defense of her point of view and to resist any others.⁶

In the last chapter of part two, Smith challenges the True Womanhood concept again by challenging the views about how the Southern white woman copes and how Southern white women have been impacted by the ghost relationships discussed in the previous chapter. In Smith’s point of view, the lies that Southern women repeatedly tell themselves are a large part of the problem. Smith illustrates just how much pain the Southern white woman has had to deal with--first of the rejection of her sexuality by her husband, and then the rejection of her maternity by her children: “She valiantly made jokes about it, telling her friends that her child preferred Mammy to her and that was fine, wasn’t it, for it gave her so much more time to attend to all she had to do! [She would] laugh a light tinkling laugh which sounded like little glass bells about to break into splinters” (Smith 134). These women would lie, because their tragedy was that without

anything else to do or any other interests in their lives, they were already lost. In *The Restricted Country*, Joan Leslie posits that feminism came along specifically because of these “lost” feelings that these heterosexual women experienced (115). Rather than act as a positive force and an elaboration of the storytelling capabilities as used in Hurston’s and Welty’s self-authored life writings, Smith posits that these lies are destructive to the capability of Southern women to write a great autobiography. Only upon telling the truth of these Southern relationships can greatness in the writing occur.

As she showed in her fiction with the white Southern Christian Tracy women in *Strange Fruit*, Smith explains in *Killers of the Dream* how these white women went on and made lives for themselves and their families. Again using the first person plural, Smith criticizes the false ways in which Southern women fill their lives: “Whatever the hurt in our lives, there are these memories of food and flowers, and of southern gardens, filled with our mothers’ fantasies that had no other way to creep into life” (Smith 138). It became crucial that these women find some outlet to deal with their pain of rejection. The women redirected their energies into pseudo-political organizations that sprang from churches. The church ladies also channeled their power to their various clubs and used these organizations to make small changes in Southern society. Smith tells their story benignly at first, giving some credit to those who stepped beyond their comfort zone:

They followed a sound feminine intuition, working as ‘church women’, leaning on the strength of Christ’s teachings for support when they needed it [. . .] they aroused the conscience of the South and the whole country about lynching; they

tore a big piece of this evil out of southern tradition, leaving a hole which no sane man in Dixie now dares stuff up with public defenses. (Smith 143-144)

Here Smith is writing about courageous women who formed anti-lynching organizations to try to protect the sons, brothers, and husbands of the women who worked with or for them, giving them proper credit for at least reaching toward change.

However heroically these women comported themselves in the early twentieth century, Smith still believes that they did not go far enough. They didn't go far enough because they still raised their children according to the old ways, instead of raising their children in a way that would have made change. Smith attributes this to a bitter enmity that white Southern woman must have harbored against their husbands and their children for turning to the black woman for comfort: "Their own dreams destroyed, they destroyed in cruelty their children's dreams and their men's aspirations. Most of them felt they were doing 'right.' They would have been more deeply shocked had they been accused of hate" (Smith 146-147). Smith's characterizations are again intended to demolish "The Cult of True Womanhood," seeing this worship of white women as harmful to true and purposeful racial relationships.

Smith believes that in trying to cultivate the friendship of black women, these women resisting against the status quo, but concerns of the South's sexual past hold them back from going further: white and black churchwomen's groups sometimes sought to band together by eating together, but it was difficult because the old training, the mental split, and other jealousies and hatred still existed: "One of these church women told me of

her experience when she first ate with colored friends. Though her conscience was serene, her enjoyment of this association with colored women was real, yet she was seized by an acute nausea which disappeared only when the meal finished” (Smith 144). Smith knows that the hatred existed on the black side too: “One of the most charming, sensitive, intelligent Negro women I know, tells me that even now when she is long with white people she grows physically ill and has immense difficulty coming to terms with the resentments of her childhood” (Smith 145). The destructiveness of white-black relations is never long buried and never far from reach. Still, Smith holds out hope for a united front between black and white women: “Colored and white women stirring up a lemon-cheese cake for the hungry males in the household looked deep into each other’s eyes and understood their common past. A mistress, reading the Bible to her colored maid polishing silver, would lay aside Holy Writ and talk of things less holy but of immense importance to them. Insurrection was on” (Smith 141). It may appear that Smith here is cheering for a coup and resistance; however, it is troublesome to note that the place where Smith hopes for healing is primarily in a kitchen with an employer-employee relationship where the black women were far from free to speak. This is a gap in Smith’s logic, where she fails to see beyond the confinements of Southern societal expectations, and that is startling.

This isn’t the only troubling spot. Smith tried to encourage interracial friendships in a more natural setting like her camp. McKay Jenkins believes that the camp remained a touchstone for her thinking and writing; but her efforts to integrate her camp with initial

interracial “gatherings” met with angry reactions from both the parents of her white students and the people near Clayton who viewed her with great suspicion (Jenkins 118). In 1955, two young men who were reacting to these attempts at “gatherings” at the camp burned down her house. Either because of Smith’s age or her problems with angry segregationists, the camp shut down shortly afterwards (Loveland 195). This limited Smith’s influence to have further impact upon youth, and thus the future. But at least the seeds were planted.⁷

The initial reception of *Killers*, as stated before, contributed to the slow death of Smith’s literary career. She wrote only one more book after 1949, a novel. She kept writing other works of non-fiction and offering criticism via speeches, but then fell into obscurity. In the early 1960’s she realized that people were responding to *Killers* as a text of inspiration for the Civil Rights movement. Anne Loveland describes it in her continuing project to redeem Smith’s work:

With the thaw in the South came a lifting of the conspiracy of silence under which Lillian had chafed for almost a decade. The first of it appeared in Atlanta. At a Democratic election party in the fall of 1960, the first big party she had been invited to in the city since 1949 [the publication year of *Killers*], she found everybody discussing *Killers of the Dream*. (Loveland 232)

The meaning of this for Smith was twofold. The Atlanta establishment had long shut her out as a writer of any worth or importance. Now she was welcome. The other meaningful part of this acceptance is that she was recognized in a positive way and was not degraded

or censored. Her approaches were vindicated and she discusses this in the 1961 Forward: “It pleases me, therefore, to find validity and poignancy as I read it now. Its inner drama seems exciting and firmly motivated. The facts, twelve years after they were written down, are still accurate. Obscure areas of the human experience are illuminated more surely than I had thought” (“Forward: A letter to my publisher” 14 -15).

This resurgence in acceptance for *Killers* was so exciting to her that she decided to rewrite part four. The first version of the last part of *Killers* spoke in vague terms about her hopes for the future and how she had hoped that the South would see that continuing the evil of segregation was costing the South life and productivity. She had always been dissatisfied with the last part and thought that it had been hastily written (Loveland 221). Now she had the opportunity to revise this work because by 1960, change was beginning to happen. Smith was freer to challenge people who had attempted to shut out her message.

She was free, also, to lash out at those who consider themselves writers in the fullest sense of the word. Her attack here delineates more fully for her audience the role of a real writer in the modern world. In the first chapter of the revised part four, Smith takes on the Fugitives/Agrarians of the famous school of writing of the 1920s and 1930s who had evolved into the academic New Critics of the 1950s and 1960s. Smith is harsh in her assessment. The growing acceptance of *Killers* must have given her confidence: “No writers in literary history have failed their region as completely as these did. They called themselves Fugitives; some preferred the name, Agrarians. They were not so opposed to change, if I read them accurately, as opposed to what we were changing into”

(Smith 223). Not only does she see these writers as talents who are embracing a dead way of life, but she also disagreed with them on the function of the artist in society. Smith corrects their point of view: “These same Fugitives will argue that the role of the artist does not embrace concern and action. They are wrong: a glance at the history of the European artists shows that the mainstream of art has always involved itself with the profound experiences of its age and man’s commitment to them” (Smith 225-226). For Smith, artists are an important part of the larger world that they write in—especially after World War II.⁸

As Smith has proven in her self-authored life-writing tract about the South, brave people have to step out to see that change is made so that America can progress into the future. Smith’s deep investment in these issues through her exposition of the creation of the Southern self and her use of strategies of resistance in both her fiction and other works is admirable, although writers such as Hurston and especially Welty believed that a less polemical art could be equally brave and help to effect social change. Although they felt very differently about the role of the artist in society, Welty and Smith ultimately agreed about the power of writers and what writers do: “We write because of an urgent necessity to create out of our ten billion acts and thoughts and feelings a story of our life that is essentially true and meaningful. It is a great and daring creative act” (Smith 198). Interestingly enough, Smith’s words echo Welty’s closing thoughts in *One Writer’s Beginnings*. Given the prominence of theory in the academy, there should be a greater appreciation for the daring of Smith’s project as an early contribution to the growing variety of self-authored life writing projects. Jelinek states, “creative people [. . .] have

produced some of the best autobiographies in literature without conforming to the confessional ideal” (10). This characterization is certainly true of *Killers of the Dream*. Although her approach to her self-authored life writing is different even from other creative writers in this study, Smith’s work does much to forward the use of sociological material as part of her autobiographical theory and allows a woman writer to discuss the political events of the time as an integral part of her own individual life story.

Notes

1. Smith identifies herself as a part of the problem with the South and uses pronouns to reflect that. She also uses rhetoric like 'wounds,' 'murderer,' and 'sin' to show the seriousness of the problem.
2. Smith takes a strategy used by a hate group to show that the South, for its own sake, had to move on beyond segregationist policies.
3. My own black grandmother, born and raised in Alabama, even embraced this Southern sweetness as part of her upbringing. She never said goodbye upon leaving--it was always, "You be sweet now." Everyone is part of maintaining this layer of sweet treatment in the South, and Smith shows, with the use of these terms of affection, how white Southerners continue to assuage their guilt to apologize and absolve themselves for their poor treatment of their fellow human beings.
4. Smith relays an anecdote about the time that her father was leading family prayers when someone came to their home and told them that one of his mills was on fire. Since he was in the middle of prayer, her father did not disturb his prayer to see after his factory. Only when he was through did he calmly rise from his chair to investigate the matter (Smith 25). Smith includes the incident to show that that this man, who was so deeply religious, was the same man who taught her that Negroes were inferior.

5. For Smith, just as people attribute unexplained phenomena to potential ghosts, Southern white people reasoned away the importance of these three “ghostly” relationships in the harsh daylight of their minds.
6. Given the shortness of the passage, Smith spends the smallest amount of time talking about the third ghost relationship, that of the white man and his mulatto child. Smith calls the children that are the product of the white man – black woman union “the South’s rejected children.” Smith comes across as more comfortable when dealing with the sexual union that produces these children than with the children themselves. “The stark ugly fact is,” she writes, “that millions of children have been rejected by their white fathers and white kin and left to battle alone the giants that stalk our culture. Little ghosts playing and laughing and weeping on the edge of the southern memory can be a haunting thing” (Smith 120). Her main protest of their treatment is against the fathers who placed legal barriers in front of the mulatto children that barred them from gaining any ground in the world.
7. Parts three and four of *Killers of the Dream* resemble the second half of Hurston’s *Dust Tracks on a Road*. These remaining sections of the book have a political thrust and on their surface have less to do with Smith’s personal life or her way of addressing the issue of how one chooses or develops a writing career. They do, however, explain Smith’s source material, the formation of the Southern self, and her writing mind.

8. World War II and the events that followed are crucial for Smith in explaining why people have finally begun to see the Southern Tradition as outdated: The fear of the world after Hiroshima was huge: “Color, race, religion, nationality no longer had relevance. We were just people, two and a half billion frightened people clinging to one small earth which could give us no protection against the hate in men’s heart and this dread power in their hand” (Smith 229). America could also no longer maintain the charade of superiority after World War II. Smith believes that if America intends to fight for democracy in foreign lands, they have to show the same consideration at home or it is a sham: “though we declare to the world our unshakeable belief in freedom, our defense of it at home has been faltering and our failure, even now, to give the Negro group its full rights has shaken the world’s faith in our words” (Smith 234). In 1961, she sees, as Hurston did in 1942, that America cannot hold on to its past and move forward into the future as a world power—a point of view that still holds true in today’s post 9/11 world. Smith believes in America’s power to be generous, and she encourages it: “We have grown more prosperous, we have more things and we produce more things; we have better communication with the rest of our country and with each other [. . .] events are loosening our grip on the past [. . .] even though the people still struggle wildly and bitterly” (Smith 241).

Chapter Five

An Immigrant's Künstlerinroman: Red Ribbon on a White Horse

I first came across Anzia Yeziarska in my “Book a Day” calendar where her most famous novel, *The Bread Givers*, was cited as an exciting “rediscovered” work of fiction from that landmark year in American literature--1925. This calendar is usually a source for popular fiction, so an “obscure” author like Yeziarska, who was never a best-selling author, made for a surprising inclusion. I quickly read through her entire oeuvre and discovered that *Red Ribbon on a White Horse* (1950) acts as almost a sequel to this famous novel but is an example of a life writing that tells the story of how Yeziarska made singular and determined sacrifices in order to have a writing career. A period of twenty-five years separates *The Bread Givers* and *Red Ribbon on a White Horse*. This period is marked by the deep decline of her career, making it not unlike *Dust Tracks, One Writer's Beginnings* and *Killers of the Dream*.

Louise Levitas Henriksen, who died in 1997, is Yeziarska's only biographer to date. She was also her daughter and only child. Henriksen maintains that *Red Ribbon* was given the categorization of autobiography by the editor prior to its publication. Obviously this is a familiar practice that has been recently revisited in popular culture with the recent controversy over the Oprah Book Club selection, *A Million Little Pieces* by James Frey, which was dubbed an autobiography by an editor, Nan A. Talese. However, unlike Frey's work, which changed and fabricated few incidents, Yeziarska's work is a purposeful *mélange* of fiction and fact. Henriksen states: “Although it is subtitled ‘My Story,’ *Red Ribbon* should not be simply called an autobiography. For it

contains as much fiction as fact. Rather, it is Anzia's conception or interpretation of her life, much refined by art" (Henriksen 222). From the beginning, given her use of her mother's first name, it is Henriksen's intention to formulate an understanding of her mother's motives. So, Yeziarska's conceptions bear closer examination. *Red Ribbon on a White Horse*, Yeziarska's self-authored life writing, is structured as a *Künstlerinroman* and it also purposefully critiques, via strategies of resistance, what it is to be an American and develops herself as her own Cinderella. Her longing to belong is the "glass slipper." Alice Walker expresses it in another context: "What the black Southern writer inherits as a natural right is a sense of *community*. Something simple but surprisingly hard, especially these days, to come by" (17). A community, then, represents the consummate fairy tale for this immigrant Jewish writer who is not looking for a handsome prince, although she does find one along the way.

Given Jill Ker Conway's assertion that people who write their life stories are leaving behind certain trails for others to follow, and Sidonie Smith's assertion that manifestos are also created, Yeziarska's underlying main message, in her compelling blend of self-invention and creation, is that the choice for a writer's life is a difficult path that requires a great deal of sacrifice along the way. Flying in the face of Philippe LeJeune's ideas of the "the autobiographical pact" made between reader and writer who uses first person in telling the true life story, she writes from the persona of a narrator bearing her name. As will be seen later, this highlights Yeziarska's pride in her Jewish heritage and also focuses on the importance in keeping her own native name rather than exchanging or "selling out" for a more American moniker. As part of her reinvention of

the self-authored life writing text, Yeziarska presents events and characters from both her imagination and her life. This, in her daughter's words, makes for a "truth-revealing" work (48). Thus, *Red Ribbon* is just as "true" as Welty's interpretation of her life in *One Writer's Beginnings* and Hurston's recreation of herself in *Dust Tracks on a Road*.

The title for Yeziarska's life story came from a Yiddish proverb: "Poverty becomes a wise man like a red ribbon on a white horse." This title was probably chosen because concerns related to finances shape Yeziarska's life as she presents it, just as Zora Neale Hurston discusses in *Dust Tracks on A Road*. The choices that she makes in her constructed life matter as much as the viewpoints of race and social hypocrisy acted to shape the careers of Lillian Smith and Zora Neale Hurston.

William Boelhower, one of the few scholars who have analyzed immigrant autobiography, posits that part of the American ideal in immigrant self-authored life writing has to do with the fiscal ideal that is American; he noticed that many projects use gold as a metaphor signifying money as a part of the structure of an American ideal (27). Sau-ling Wong, who analyzed Boelhower in another article, points to a problem with his argument, at least in a Chinese immigrant context: "A lost Golden Age or lost Eden to be recovered, a new Adam to be reborn, the Old World renewed, the New Jerusalem, the City on a Hill—these are European-origin fictions" (304-305). What Wong points out as a problem for Chinese immigrant self-authored life writings is certainly true for Yeziarska, even though she is a Russian Jewish American émigré. She does not believe in these mythic structures and, instead, sets about the more complex work of questioning

American ideals. She purposefully structures an anti-Edenic version of America in her work, in contrast to the lost Edens of Hurston, Welty, and Smith.

Boelhower outlines four potential objectives of the immigrant autobiography as he prepares to analyze four different Italian self-authored life-writing projects written by males. Each project exemplifies one principle: “1) *confirmation* of codes in the dominant structure; 2) a *variation* of the codes, in which case the dominant culture is respected but some of its untested possibilities are tried; 3) a *negation* of the dominant codes; 4) a *substitution* of the dominant culture with a counter-cultural alternative” (20). Refusing to be categorized, Yeziarska’s work is so rich and full that she bucks this trend and in *Red Ribbon* manages to incorporate all *four* objectives in her self-authored life-writing project. At the beginning, though, her main thrust is uplifting her own heritage and point of view.

Even though she endured several Anglicizing name changes in her real life--the most ‘American’ of them as Hattie Myers--she makes it clear from the beginning of *Red Ribbon* that she is not going to change her name. She insists on maintaining the sounds of her own heritage and not overthrowing that heritage for “American” sounds. Ruth Wardlaw, in her analysis of Mary Antin’s *The Promised Land*, discusses the name change in that self-authored life writing: “[Antin] shows how quickly she became ‘Mary’ rather than ‘Mashke,’ giving up orthodox Jewish customs for more liberal American views, advancing her beyond immigrant status on the ladder of education’s upward mobility. [. . . She] stresses her heroine’s unquestioning allegiance to a superior Anglo-

Saxon culture” (80). Antin’s work was published in 1912, years before *Red Ribbon*, and Yeziarska was surely inspired by this work. However, Yeziarska adopts a different purpose from the first page and negates the way people craft the conventional self-authored life-writing project.

Red Ribbon opens on a note of excitement around the receipt of a telegram that tells Yeziarska she has achieved the ultimate success—a call to Hollywood to write for the movies. Clearly, for Yeziarska, her birth as an American and as a writer takes place in 1920 with the receipt of that telegram, not in the shtetl of Poland where she was physically born around 1880. Even on the first page of her life work, Yeziarska’s concerns are with money and finances. It is her neighbors who receive the telegram in her absence and shout out her name just as she arrives home. The calling out by the community is perceived immediately as bad news of a potential eviction: “The angel of death, I thought, my landlady had come to put me out! And Hester Street had gathered to watch another eviction. I opened the door with fear” (Yeziarska 25).

Ironically, Yeziarska needs money to respond to the telegram by phone and in person. Having just spent her last nickel on tea to fool her empty stomach into believing she has eaten, Yeziarska realizes that she doesn’t have even the fifteen cents for carfare and a phone call. She has to pawn the shawl that was a wedding present to her mother back in Poland. The pawnbroker gives her only a quarter for it, enough to get to her agent’s office where she is offered \$10,000 for the film rights to *Hungry Hearts*, her first book.¹ After borrowing some money to get a decent meal, she then goes back to the pawnbroker to purchase her mother’s shawl. She offers him up to twenty dollars to

redeem the shawl, and the pawnbroker finally admits that he sold it the same day she left it with him (Yeziarska 45). She has permanently lost a connection to her family. Was her success worth it? In her recreation of this “life event,” structured as a story, she is clearly showing that there are some prices that are too high to be paid and that difficult choices are ahead.

As an immigrant, she is supposed to sell out the old in favor of the new but instead, her shaping of these events shows her readers that there is worth in her heritage, a valuation that resists assimilation into American culture and that her writing life has been a costly endeavor—a slight twist on the structure of the *Künstlerinroman*.² Also, the wealth is deceptive. With the money, she first wants to eat, attempting to permanently separate herself from her tea-drinking days. Yeziarska writes mouthwatering descriptions of food: “I saw myself biting into thick, juicy steaks, dipping fresh rolls into mounds of butter, swallowing whole platters of French fried potatoes in one gulp” (Yeziarska 28). Pointedly, when she tries to eat the rich American food, she is not fulfilled or happy. As she eats the dinner that she describes, Yeziarska realizes with sadness that her parents are no longer around to share in her riches. Her mother is dead and her father has abandoned her. The subtext in this moment makes her come to this very realization. Yeziarska, as emblematic of the immigrant who “gets out,” feels responsible for the poor left behind.

If that realization is not enough, she hammers the point home when, even at a moment of financial independence, the shawl is gone after a week at the pawnbrokers. Carol Shoen summarizes the loss of the shawl: “The shawl represents her last heritage from her European past, the last remnant of her identification with her family and its

traditions[. . .], this shawl is the item she sold, as Esau had sold his inheritance, for little more than a mess of pottage” (Shoen 104). The shawl is the one possession of value given to her by her mother, and she has sold it. Selling the shawl also represents a variation on the codes of the dominant culture—she is supposed to be happy to be rid of it, but is not. The fear of “selling out” the immigrant population, the “hungry hearts,” that she “exploits” to make her fortune, overwhelms her. The motif of the shawl dramatizes all that her self-named narrator has lost in seeking success.

Yeziarska goes to visit her father to find out if he is pleased with her success in selling her book and to see if she can help him in his impoverished life as a Talmud scholar. She offers him a hundred dollars: “‘I earned that money with my writing.’ For all his scorn of my godlessness, I thought he would take a father’s pride in my success” (Yeziarska 33). Her hope is in vain because her father rejects her money. He then condemns her, believing she has sold her soul for the money. Her ten thousand dollars will not purchase the approval that she so desperately craves from her father. Zora Neale Hurston, given her portrayal of John Hurston in *Dust Track on A Road*, could have told her that. He knows, as she will ultimately reveal what she will learn only later—that her talents and self-pride should not cost so little. Her point to her audience here is that approval as a writer will be fleeting and not to look for it.

That first chapter of *Red Ribbon* is called “Hester Street,” the center of the Jewish slums in New York of that time, but Yeziarska might as well retitile the chapter, “Beware all Ye who Enter here.” Writers pay a high price. This chapter is an auspicious beginning for a story that requires the audience to trace her path of success and discover

the potential for loss when something new is gained. Yeziarska's self-authored life writing project questions the wholesale acceptance of the "American way" and asks the audience to think carefully upon the other riches in their lives and whether the writing life is worth multiple penalties.

Part of the Bildungsroman, and thus the Künstlerinroman, is the discovery of love and sometimes marriage. Yeziarska subverts that expectation by thwarting it. What is the fairy tale ending? Happiness with a man? Happy in a career? Or happy with herself and her heritage? Yeziarska cannot hope for the happiness that love might bring to her. She must forego the love of the Anglo-Saxon lawyer John Morrow who encouraged her to write in the first place--to focus on her writing work. Her careful recasting of the John Morrow character is a thinly veiled characterization of the eminent education theorist and social philosopher John Dewey, with whom Yeziarska had an "affair" of the mind three years prior to the beginning of *Red Ribbon*. The affair ended when he threatened to interfere with her work: "But now, with the prospect of Hollywood, I began to hate those letters. Why hang on to words when the love that had inspired them was dead? [. . .] There would be other men" (Yeziarska 30). Hollywood would represent a fresh start in the conduct of her life and her writing. Her initial depiction of Hollywood falls into Boelhower's ideas of America as Edenic and seems to represent a confirmation of the codes in the dominant culture, but Yeziarska plays with those expectations too.

The remaining section of part one deals with Yeziarska in Hollywood as she confronts the movie industry and is asked to sell some part of her writing soul for the possibilities of money, position, fame, and power. For Yeziarska, there is always a trial.

Upon her arrival, Yeziarska is given a secretary who exists to make everything smooth for her so that Yeziarska can write another blockbuster picture for Hollywood. She is given a multitude of paper and carbon and wonders at it: "Abundance now, and once I had counted every sheet bought in the five-and-ten cent store. I had used grocery bags, scraps of wrapping paper, and the backs of envelopes. Now I could be a glutton with paper" (Yeziarska 42). The assistance and the abundance still leave her feeling empty, another point in her rags to riches story where she questions the relevance of such "help" to the creative process of the American artist. This also inverts the whole "room of her own" concept. For Yeziarska, it is all about the struggle.

She sees her secretary, Miss Young, as an impediment to her creative process, too. Meeting her for the first time, the narrator sends Miss Young home, paid for the whole day. She later tries to obtain a raise for Miss Young because the idea of someone working for her makes her uncomfortable. Yet while she muses about what to do for the secretary, Yeziarska is envious of her as a young woman who is rising in the world even as she herself has already arrived at success. The character of Miss Young questions what a woman wants. Her use of the character allows her to employ resistance to conventional expectations and to strike out on her own path. However, the tone at the end of Chapter Six is tinted with regret as she contemplates what this young woman who works for her will do: "Marriage was waiting for her. She would have all the things that should come naturally to a woman. [. . .] I wanted the impossible of life, of love. And so I stood empty, homeless, outside of life. Not a woman –not a writer" (Yeziarska 74). Her expression of these seeming dualities is interesting. The easy choice to make, as she

presents it here, would be the typical “woman’s” life. She must make the difficult choice, even though the Hollywood types try to make the writer’s life easy. That’s not possible for Yeziarska, who characterizes herself as “not a writer” because the big Hollywood office, the people, the chauffeur, and the secretary all draw on her writing energies so much that she has nothing left to give to the page. These amenities also demean the struggle so crucial for the writing life, according to Yeziarska’s theory and must be rejected.

During her tenure in Hollywood, Yeziarska feels as if someone will realize that she is a phony and remove her promptly. With these constant fears, Yeziarska questions whether the writing life is worth the concern and trouble. These issues are brought to the fore even more when Yeziarska meets the “real” writers who are in Hollywood to work.² She is always questioning herself: “You’ve made a fool of yourself again! I wept inwardly, sick with self-disgust. I felt like the woman who went to a doctor for diagnosis. He treated her pregnancy for tumor, and the child was born an idiot” (Yeziarska 73). These constant blows to her self-esteem also drain her creative energy and contribute to her inability to write. She is drained.

Chapter seven provides Yeziarska an opportunity to incorporate another expectation of the Bildungsroman and Künstlerinroman--education. She flashes back to a time when, unable to attend school, she paid the janitor’s daughter to borrow her schoolbooks so that she could study them herself at night, on the weekends, and on holidays. Critics question the genuineness of this material, and rightfully so. It is Yeziarska’s intention to create stories that will highlight her drive to obtain literacy. This

is evidence of another “higher truth,” a metaphor of desire that happens to resemble the stories about hunger for books by Welty and Hurston. The anecdote also suggests how persistence led her to success in her writing career.

After Yeziarska is literate in English, she pours all her energy into becoming a writer. Chapter seven shows the hard work that it took to eliminate the accent and homespun Jewish sayings from her spoken English, a dismantling of the linguistic scaffolding that was part of her immigrant past. She reconstructs a conversation with a teacher in the tenement school who tells her some of the basics of how to construct a good story: “A story must have a plot, otherwise it’s no story, [. . .] So you think that you’re clever enough to discard the rules and create your own form?” (Yeziarska 78) The teacher’s advice about plot serves as a fundamental rule that Yeziarska passes on as instruction in her text, but the elimination of the “Jewishness” from her writing represents a loss of her “voice,” which she has to regain, a crucial part of becoming a writer that Welty and Hurston also refer to.

Another lesson Yeziarska learns and inserts into her story is for a writer to know when to cut free of the teacher’s advice and to send out the work, an act of resistance that eventually leads to the acceptance of a story for twenty-five dollars. These incidents shed more light on the process of struggle. Even after her success in Hollywood, Yeziarska warns that there is no greener side of the fence: “here I was-- in the mecca of writers—struck dumb. Like King Midas, whose touch turned everything to gold, I was dying of starvation” (Yeziarska 79). Her success as a writer gets her to Hollywood, but without

ideas and motivation, her life seems no better than the one she left in the Lower East Side of New York City. Without the struggle, she is unhappy.

The \$10,000 paid to her was to lure her to Hollywood. Once she gets there, she is offered a contract worth ten times more. The prospect of money, via a contract worth \$100,000 over three years, only pressures her. Yeziarska feels terrible. She confronts the Hollywood lawyer with the realization: “The problem with a contract is that it’s a contract” (Yeziarska 86). She realizes her bind. The presentation of this “room of one’s own” is more like a prison. She will not be free to write what she wants as she wants. Yet, she ponders the decision carefully:

How could I earn all that money working in my slow underground way? I’d have to speed up, cover up with bluff and craftsmanship what I could not create. To sign or not to sign. To sign and become rich; not to sign and plunge back into poverty [. . .] Ten thousand dollars hadn’t given me happiness or peace of mind, clarity or knowledge of how to write. (Yeziarska 86)

She has found the proverbial “gold” that all immigrants are supposedly looking for in the United States. Once again, in her decision, Yeziarska purposefully subverts what she, as an immigrant, is supposed to want. Yeziarska comes to the conclusion that her freedom to write is not for sale. There is something more important than money, in that a writer is not meant for a life of ease. She returns the unsigned contract to the lawyer, in person saying, “Writing is everything I am [. . .] It’s my search for a meaning. I can’t sign it away” (Yeziarska 87). She recognizes that she must go back to her roots in New York to

find her writing voice again. It is also necessary for her to return to her Jewishness and her original voice. As Boelhower observes, her rejection of the American dream of success is another place where she chooses her heritage over the dominant expectations of “fitting in,” clearly a strategy formed by resistance.

Part one ends with her receipt of a letter from a poor rabbi who has written to the successful author to obtain money to go back to the old country before his death. It is this letter that propels her back to New York to give him the money only to find out from his landlady that he is dead—he died debt-ridden and stuck in America. Henriksen considers this story another one of the made up parts of *Red Ribbon*'s narrative, the “poor rabbi,” an obvious stand-in for her father who had abandoned and condemned her (Henriksen 223). Symbolically, the death of someone who represents tradition, faith and the old country, represents the loss of what makes her unique and why it should not be bartered away.

Much of part one shows the sacrifices that produce a successful career as well as the sacrifices that threaten to destroy the authentic voice. And like the stories of the writer's apprenticeship told by Hurston and Welty, much of it is definitely managed and possibly even made up. For example, though the narrator envies the aptly named, and perhaps fictitious, Miss Young her opportunities to marry, the truth is that by this time, the real Yeziarska had been married twice. The first marriage was quickly annulled but the second marriage produced a daughter – Hendriksen—who ultimately went to live with her father at the age of four so that the driven Yeziarska could make her way in her writing career. The decision to end her second marriage and to place her child with the

father, if she had included it, might have proved instructive to future writers to show how far Yeziarska was willing to go to devote herself to her writing career, as well as how childrearing—as Tillie Olsen and others reveal—is often a losing battle for someone struggling with a writing career. Carol Schoen observes of Yeziarska that “[a]n unpublished short story possibly written at this time offers a clue to her mental state. [. . .] Whatever personal problems she may have encountered with her husband, she must have found the position of a married woman stultifying” (Schoen 9).

The omission of this and other material from *Red Ribbon* may express Yeziarska’s concern that harsh judgment would have awaited her in the conservative atmosphere of the early 1950’s when the work was published. Schoen believes that Yeziarska gave up her daughter to Arnold Levitas for financial concerns (Schoen 9). Also, the omission of a child or children falls in line with the idea that few autobiographical writings include children (Jelinek 11). The price paid to become a writer was more complicated than shown in the text of *Red Ribbon on a White Horse*, and revelation of this harsh truth might have discouraged a few more potential writers who read her text—much as Flannery O’Connor hoped would happen in *Mysteries and Manners*.

Part two of *Red Ribbon* is short but important because much of it deals with Yeziarska’s emotions regarding her year-long affair of the mind with John Morrow—as noted, a thinly veiled portrait of philosopher John Dewey. Yeziarska uses this part of the story to illustrate what happens when “prince charming” comes along. Development will

occur, but how will that development happen—as a writer or as a woman? In the introduction of her male character, she subverts the expectations and weaves together both love and career here, unlike Welty and Hurston for whom these concerns are completely separate. The affair, in a sense, represents the pull between Yeziarska's desire to be an American and her need to retain her Jewish self. The pull is reminiscent of Hurston's tug of war between the Anglo American and African American aesthetics.

Dewey's influence on her writing career was of singular importance. When writers have to deal with the issue of lovers in their personal lives, the lover might prove a deterrent or a help in developing that career. Unlike Hurston, Welty, or even Smith, Yeziarska's affair spurs her to new writing heights, so that the Anglo-Saxon educator might be "proud" of her. In these chapters, as Yeziarska rethinks her encounters with Morrow/Dewey, she still shows the singular drive that would later contribute to her Hollywood success. After having tired of working in sweatshops, the fictional Yeziarska decides that she wants an "uptown" job and sees an ad for a legal stenographer. She has studied stenography in school, but has no business experience. A series of rejections causes her to respond sharply to Morrow's inquiries about her employment: "Where shall I get experience if no one gives me a chance to get it? [. . .] The last place I applied said they wouldn't even try me out when I said I was a Jew. Experience! My God! I'm burning up with experience, but not in offices" (Yeziarska 106). Her outburst might seem inappropriate here, but the character is reacting to the way in which someone of her heritage would have been received in an office at that time. Boelhower outlines the atmosphere of constant xenophobia that immigrants like Yeziarska must have had to

endure as a result of the influx of immigration between 1890 and 1914 (12). As a writer, she intends to express these frustrations outside the stereotype of the “silent immigrant,” thus utilizing resistance in a way that will be real for her audience.

Welty speaks of the importance of the development of her inner voice and in Morrow/Dewey Yeziarska finds this voice and is drawn to it immediately: “As he dictated I became aware of his voice. It was a kind of voice I had never heard before. The charm of courtesy and kindness was in it and the assurance of education. It was like listening to music that quieted fear”(Yeziarska 106). He is Prince Charming because he gives her this voice and it becomes her inner ear. This “real American” man’s acceptance of her is transforming and, in part, provides her with an initiation into mainstream American culture. She quickly learns a “cultural grammar” to understand how American society is organized (Boelhower 44). Understanding that she is good enough to enter the world of uptown New York gives Yeziarska a new confidence and a new perspective:

He patted my hand. It was a gesture of simple kindness, but it stirred currents in me that had never before been touched. The mountain of hurts I carried on my back from czarist Russia, and the hurts piled up looking for a job in America, dissolved. I had been accepted, recognized as a person. [. . .] I had tasted the bread and wine of equality. (Yeziarska 107)

Morrow/Dewey’s kind acceptance of her improves her self-esteem and sets the stage for Yeziarska to become emotionally involved with her employer and to have more confidence in herself as a writer. The Morrow/Dewey affair, then, strengthens her

resolve to write, and their relationship is so comfortable that Yeziarska shows him her writing. This is another important element of the fairy tale that Yeziarska is crafting. She has to find an audience, and he becomes that for her. She has previously shown her writing to strangers, but she wants him to approve of her. His reaction is just what Yeziarska wants: “This is rough now, but alive” (108). With this praise, Yeziarska is affirmed, “I had found some one who saw me, knew me, reassured me that I existed” (108). His encouragement is transforming. Morrow/Dewey also accepts her culture, and Yeziarska takes him to Yiddish restaurants and plays. Like Hurston in Boas’s classes and doubtless Welty in Wisconsin, she begins to see her culture through new and appreciative eyes, a recurring theme in immigrant literature. The acceptance of minority culture comes only after a representative of the dominant culture sees the beauty and, as Morrow/Dewey says, the “passion” of the immigrant culture (Yeziarska 109).

A Prince Charming as wondrous as Morrow/Dewey could not be unmarried. Since he is an older married man, it is inevitable that there would be an encounter with his wife. Yeziarska forms the counterpoint--that is, Mrs. Morrow as the cultivated American housewife in contrast to her unkempt career woman. She describes her: “Mrs. Morrow, a gracious woman in her fifties with an intelligent, attractive face, smiled at me as she entered. It was the first time I had ever seen her, and I felt instantly that she was everything I was not” (Yeziarska 110). Here, Yeziarska is comparing herself to the “Cult of True Womanhood” archetype. Yeziarska feels inadequate next to against a “real American” woman who does not have to work as hard as she works. In her biography of her mother, Henriksen describes the harried Yeziarska and her attraction to

Morrow/Dewey: “Her intensity, the aggressive and impassioned speech, even her blouse pulled partly free of her skirt, her red hair slipping out of its pompadour in wisps around her flushed face—all these unconventional traits, which had so offended school principals and deans, were persuasive to Dewey” (Henriksen 88). However, in her text, Yezienska resists the appeal of his beautiful wife and speaks of her own qualities when she says: “[W]hat I had thought coarse and commonplace was to him exotic. My Old World was so fresh and new to him it became fresh and new to me” (109). These characteristics of being freer and more expressive are important to her growth as a writer and essential in her acceptance of her Jewish heritage. She wouldn’t want to trade places with the wife—she is fine the way she is. Like Lillian Smith, Yezienska thinks the “Cult of True Womanhood” is a prison in American culture that she would rather not occupy.

As the writer, Yezienska uses the Cult of True Womanhood archetype in her description of the character of Mrs. Morrow. As she is portrayed in *Red Ribbon*, Mrs. Morrow/Dewey is the kind of woman who is perfect in every way: “The delicate perfume, the slender elegance of her shoes, the softly tailored gray suit, the perfection of her shining gray hair were details of a rich life I had only read about. She had a natural poise and elegance. She was kind with the kindness of one whose position in the world was secure” (Yezienska 110). Yezienska is intimidated, but as a young 23-year-old, she dismisses the wife’s contribution to Morrow’s life and sees herself as the primary woman in his life:

I consoled myself. I knew him as neither his wife nor children could know him. They had his name, his money, his reputation, but I had something that fed his

spirit. He could never share with his family the thoughts he shared with me. Our need for each other burned away the differences between Gentile and Jew, native and immigrant—the barriers of race, class, and education. In my dreams I felt myself more married to him than his wife, closer to him than his children. I was twenty-three (Yeziarska 110).³

This is a key point where Yeziarska realizes her worth as a person and articulates a crucial point that resonates in *Red Ribbon*—that the American way is not always the best way. During the Cold War, when Yeziarska is writing, this was certainly a risky strategy.

While it is true that Dewey was in his fifties and older than Yeziarska, the truth is that at this point Yeziarska was 35, a mother, and a woman who had been married twice, not a twenty-three year old novice.⁴ As an experienced writer structuring a *Künstlerinroman* and adhering to expectations of that form and showing a willful purpose in adhering to the “truth,” Yeziarska knew that making herself a young and inexperienced girl, as a protagonist, would allow her to seem less calculating and more transformed. Leaving out the marriages and the child also meant that the fictional narrator of the book was free to “carry on” with Morrow as she wished. Given that *Red Ribbon* was published in 1950, this was the wisest choice that Yeziarska could have made, ensuring the best reception of her message of the writer’s life as a costly proposition, marked by some youthful folly.

Whatever the relationship, Dewey and Yeziarska inspired each other and Dewey’s confidence in her abilities spurred her to become a better writer while he, the staid Puritanistic philosopher, wrote poems that went undiscovered until ten years after the

affair and were not published until much later (Rosen 175). The mere fact that they came to be muses for each other shows the singular importance of the right kind of influence in a writer's career, though this is something Welty and Hurston chose to omit.

Since this affair consumes Yeziarska's energies, there must be a natural end so that Yeziarska can go on to find her community. As portrayed in *Red Ribbon*, Morrow is the one who ends the affair, just as Dewey did in real life. The difference, as recounted in *Red Ribbon*, was that Morrow made a move to become intimate with her and she refused him. Yeziarska explains it as her reluctance to betray her upbringing: "For a long moment we stood silent. Then I was in his arms and he was kissing me. His hand touched my breast. The natural delight of his touch was checked by an alarm that stiffened me with fear. I had the same fear of drowning in his arms as I had of drowning in the river. [. . .] Sensing my unyielding body, he released me" (Yeziarska 113). Yeziarska's reluctance to take the affair to another level is a purposeful strategy that she inserts to contradict xenophobic perceptions of immigrant women as morally loose (Boelhower 29). As for his part, after this uncomfortable rejection, Morrow becomes cold to the narrator and ignores her until she comes to understand that their interactions are over.

Yeziarska's fictionalizing the story so that the narrator's youth affects her thinking plays well in terms of explaining the end of the affair. Her youth, and assumed inexperience with men, means that her rejection of a physical relationship makes better sense.⁵ In the sexual relationship, her lover comes off as a petulant child, but is also shown as considerate of their difference in age, "Someday when you're older, you'll see I

have nothing more to give you. I've given you everything I had. I'm an old man and you're only twenty-three. The years ahead of me are short, leading to the end. And yours are long, leading to the beginning of life" (Yeziarska 116). This closure makes dramatic sense within the *Künstlerinroman* context of *Red Ribbon*, empowering the developing writer, almost as if a wizard is sending her on her way to greater feats.

Yeziarska must know, though, that the reality is hard to believe. Not many 35-year-old women who had been married twice would turn down the chance to be intimate with their soul mates. The real reason for the breakup was that Dewey knew as a married man he could not give her the love that she deserved, and she wanted to be with him: "He asked her to try to understand what he was about to say: that he was not free. He wanted to preserve their rare understanding and friendship, not destroy it. He was trying to return to a safer distance, but Anzia, shocked, would not allow him to" (Henriksen 101). His travels took him further and further away from her so that Yeziarska would have time to come to grips with the end of their relationship. It is surprising that Henriksen is not resentful in her presentation of this material, but she knew, in delineating the writing life of her mother, that the real Yeziarska would have had a hard time relinquishing such wondrous nourishment for her writing career.

For the rest of part two, the narrator of *Red Ribbon* returns to the present day in Hollywood where she realizes that her writing strength was left behind in New York: "But now—after many years and much labor—I had acquired this beautiful simplicity and I was struck dumb. I could buy everything I wanted except the driving force I once had to inspire my work. Bitterly I told myself that I had never found anyone among the

literati as real as Zalmon, the fish peddler, or Sopkin the butcher” (Yeziarska 63).

Yeziarska knows that her loss is heavy when she has to be away from her source material. For Yeziarska, perfect nexus of time and place is organic and is what all writers should seek. Like Welty and Hurston, she has found that writers gain and must draw strength from their own unique experiences and environment to create stories that are real and organic, the same discovery Zora Neale Hurston seemed to have made.

Yeziarska’s encounters with Hollywood types who are only concerned with the “business” of books overwhelm her and suffocate her own truth. These people, for her, represent the constant fear of “selling out.” She represents them as people who are interested only in a false ideal. When they want her to make appearances and speeches, Yeziarska is hesitant: “I was silent. [. . .] In my lust for recognition I had cheated, denied and duped myself for so long, I no longer had the integrity to say what I believed. Back in my apartment, I reread the page still in my typewriter. It was as false as the talk at the luncheon I had just come from. Every labored word lacked the ring of truth” (Yeziarska 67). Every writer knows that this is a death knell. The living words on the page were the reason that Hollywood came to her in the first place. Without that energy and that drive, Yeziarska believes that she is through as a writer.

The realization of her depleted writing energy is confirmed for her when she appears before the young sorority girls who come to hear her speak and see her as an exalted “Woman of Letters.” This chapter is doubtless a condensed version of the many times Yeziarska was asked to speak to groups. She sees the young girls in the audience and wonders why they have come to hear someone like her and her words purposefully

resonate with resentment against these “perfect” young women: “Everything the world could give was theirs – and yet they wanted something from me! [. . .] Suddenly I hated them. They, who had everything now wanted to wrest from me they knew not what” (Yeziarska 130). Again, she sees these young girls as the embodiment of that “Cult of True Womanhood” archetype that continues to plague her. So in an impulsive move, she tears up her speech and instead tells them a threatening story employing resistance that tells of how her deep hunger was to become a writer. While she was writing *Hungry Hearts*, her first book, she tells them, she decided to give up her job and to live for her writing. When she runs out of money, she is hungry and goes to visit her sister who has nine children and is far worse off. Yeziarska states: “they never had enough to eat, but occasionally they let me have a bite from the little they had. [. . .] A pot of oatmeal was boiling on the stove. I seized the pot, rushed with it to the sink, added a little cold water to cool it and began wolfing it. That whole pot of oatmeal only whetted my hunger” (Yeziarska 133). She explains herself in a telling statement: “A mother has a right to steal to feed a hungry child. I have a right to steal to finish my story [. . .] every step of my writing career was a brutal fight, like the stealing of that oatmeal from hungry children” (Yeziarska 133). With such stories, Yeziarska hoped to frighten the audience of polite, well-dressed young women. Instead, Yeziarska was surprised to find acceptance and admiration, her message about sacrifice and drive apparently ringing true even to these well-to-do girls. Even as she was brought in to “educate” the young women, Yeziarska was surprised to find American acceptance and that her own “education” is far from complete. Thus, by using resistance against the archetype of the

Cult of True Womanhood, she ably demonstrates that a writer must always be prepared to grow and accept new ways of learning.

Though part two is brief, the *Künstlerinroman* structure of struggle dramatically portrays the writing life as an often unpleasant, brutal, and scrappy endeavor. It also reaffirms Yeziarska's notions that this is what makes the writing life one that she wants to continue to live.

In part three Yeziarska recreates a writer's community, her depiction of the Federal Writer's Project of the Depression-era WPA (Works Progress Administration), renamed in the book by Yeziarska from the same initials: the Writers' Progress Administration. Yeziarska is exposed to viewpoints of other writers of all ethnicities and origins. Many writers and artists were involved in the real-life Works Progress Administration, among them Ralph Ellison, Saul Bellow, Eudora Welty, Orson Welles, and Richard Wright. However, Yeziarska confines her characterizations in *Red Ribbon* to two characters in the WPA, Richard Wright and Jeremiah Kintzler, who represent the past and the future respectively. Carol Shoen discusses the importance of these characters to Yeziarska's self-authored life writing: "The two people in the Writers Project whom Yeziarska chooses to focus on represent two ends of the spectrum, not only of writers on relief but of writers in general, and at the same time she shows both the stupidity of the bureaucratic approach and its ineffectuality" (Shoen 108). The tale of the WPA years also illustrates Yeziarska's determination to reveal an artists' work pattern via composite and created characters and a chance to contrast her method with theirs.⁶

When attempting to find a job during the Depression, Yeziarska discovers that her writing experience means nothing. This must have been the same unspoken fear that Christian Welty had for Eudora, when he suggested that she go to Columbia Business School to learn something dependable. When Yeziarska downgrades her living standard several times, like Zora Neale Hurston, she is forced to find a job as a nursemaid. The children get along with her and love her, but her lack of real experience leads the mother to declare, "I need a nursemaid, not a writer," and then fires her (Yeziarska 144). The message seems to be that a writer must keep an oar in the everyday world in order to survive and even to write the best kinds of stories.

As in other Bildungsroman stories, the protagonist suffers great highs and lows while being educated. Her chapter "The Silent Years" shows how someone who had been lifted to a 'high' position in Hollywood can be brought down by the change of fortune. It is also evident in this chapter that Yeziarska feels no shame in her ability to do a hard day's work: "Oh for plain, honest work, simple tasks, the peace of obscurity!" (142). There are certain skills that writers should always have in their grasp, and the ability to do a hard day's work, according to Yeziarska, is one of these important life skills (143). For her, the necessity of doing "honest work" can remind everyone that there is worth in all endeavors and that any work can contribute to the writer's experience. Yeziarska is not ashamed of her "lean times."

This interlude illustrates Yeziarska's belief that the issue of "selling out" is not just a fearsome problem for immigrants; it is a problem for writers as well. How well should a writer live? What can the writer do to feed the wellspring of creativity, but not

kill it? The WPA appears to be an answer. Yeziarska hears from other writer and artist friends about the WPA as a job opportunity. After some machinations, she is accepted to work on a project. The objective is to write a new travel guide for New York State. However, the objective of the project for the writers is to hurriedly complete the boring travel writing so they can use the rest of their time to complete their own projects. Yeziarska is determined to show the corruption of the WPA and how it reflects that corruption back to the writers who work for the bureaucracy. The attempts to assist backfire because of the cheating that occurs on both sides. People have to tell lies, draw up fake papers, and verbally kill off their relatives to get the relief. Yeziarska is shocked: “I was so horrified that they stopped their laughter. ‘What’s the good of a job if you have to sell your soul for it?’” and they respond, “ ‘To hell with pride. The relief mill has to put the stamp of a legalized pauper on your forehead. Shut your eyes and go through with it’”(153). Having been through this type of soul-selling experience, Yeziarska has prepared her audience to understand that little good can come of the WPA assistance. This is an attitude, again, that flies in the face of the American puritanical work ethic-- that any job is a good one.

When a new, more militant director is appointed at the WPA, the writers are called before him to give an accounting of the work that has been done. Yeziarska states, “I trembled as I walked in with my manuscript.” She is afraid because she knows that her text as she presents it to this new Acting Director will not be enough. He tells her straightforwardly: “The great urgency is to complete the *Guide*. [. . .] You are free to write your novels after hours. No one is stopping you. But all of us on government pay

must work for the government. [. . .] You haven't produced anything in years. [. . .] We can only use writers who can turn in copy" (Yeziarska 174). By this point in the story, Yeziarska has already shown that at a "high" writing point in her life, she refused money to produce work that had no investment of her heart and soul. Here, asked to direct her writing energies in a different direction, Yeziarska is still required to "sell herself" in a way that will drain energy away her life's work. In the crafting of the *Red Ribbon* text, Yeziarska uses the narrator to show what happens upon the selling of oneself, and then uses Richard Wright and Jeremiah Kintzler to represent the old world and the new world of writing as well as to show the impact of government work on the writing craft.

The character named Richard Wright in *Red Ribbon* is a thinly veiled representation of the renowned author of *Native Son* (1940) and *Black Boy* (1945), his own fictive autobiography. The inclusion of the emerging Richard Wright into the text shows how Yeziarska might have made different choices as a young writer in the world. At this point, Wright is struggling to make his name known. As Yeziarska depicts him, Wright has an attitude that is non-defeatist and he is relentlessly optimistic, a definite contrast to the way Wright himself described those times. When asked what kind of writing he produces, he makes a joke and says, "Unpublished writing." A depressed, downtrodden Wright would not have served her purpose in this section of the book. In her exposition, Yeziarska follows up this statement with a characterization: "His laughter was a window flung open in the smoke-filled room. 'This is the biggest break I ever had. For the first time the government is giving us bread and meat'" (157). Clearly, Yeziarska admires this young black man's attitude towards the government work.

Wright appears to feel that his writing and the government work are not at odds with one another. He even acts as the sage here, even though he is the youngest one of them, stating wisely: “Don’t glorify a tent for a night—a soup kitchen in time of famine” (Yeziarska 157). As shown in this characterization by Yeziarska, Wright is flexible and adaptable. His youthful energy and drive mean that he can do what the government requires and compartmentalize his work so that he can eat and also feed his own important creative writing, an important lesson to learn.

Red Ribbon was published during Richard Wright’s heyday as an important African American novelist and critic. Using another strategy of resistance, Yeziarska may have included him in her fictionalized remembrances here to say, “I knew him when.” However, more importantly, his inclusion here in her *Künstlerinroman* is also necessary for Yeziarska to show the continuous interplay and need for support within the community of writers. The fact that he is African American helps Yeziarska to show that he is accepted in the creative community even at that time. She is publishing in 1950, during the rumbling beginnings of the Civil Rights movement in America, when showing this communal embrace was a risky move; her inclusion of him further proves that Yeziarska was not just name dropping.

Wright’s easy acceptance of the confines of the project is a direct contrast to Yeziarska’s questionings. Wright and Yeziarska’s attitudes also contrast with another character’s views on the project. Jeremiah Kintzler’s rigid point of view about the project is that it is all busy work. In another way, Yeziarska reshapes the text to suit her own needs. Kintzler is a composite character who represents many writers whose very

rigidity contributed to their downfall; the lesson of the *Künstlerroman* is that this old world rigidity is of no help to the emerging creative writer. Kintzler continuously reflects backwards: “With gentle fingers, he touched his picture at the head of a Jewish news column, tattered and yellowed with age, but carefully reinforced with glue strips” (Yeziarska 157). Kintzler carries his manuscripts with him all of the time, worried about fire breaking out in his room. He is obsessed with his work, and cannot adjust when he brings his own work before the new Acting Director, but “[Kintzler’s] *Life of Spinoza*, his reason for living, was rejected without even a reading. ‘I am the greatest living authority on Spinoza. [. . .] I, Jeremiah Kintzler, I am ordered to look up trivia for a guide to Babel! It is a desecration of everything holy’ (Yeziarska 176)! This very inflexibility will contribute to Kintzler’s downfall. Yeziarska characterizes him: “In the library were his beloved books on Spinoza, yet he was ordered to read historic junk for the *Guide*. He had dragged himself as far as the library, only to slump down at the entrance steps. He’d die rather than read stuff that didn’t interest him” (Yeziarska 179). With this obstinacy in the face of joblessness, Yeziarska admires him: “He walked away, mumbling to himself, ‘I’ll show them yet—here’s one man who’ll not sell his soul for a mess of politics’” (Yeziarska 181). Yet his stance costs him dismissal from the project and, ultimately, his life. There is a point, even for Yeziarska, when as a writer she had to obey particular conventions in order to eat. Kintzler’s reluctance to obey these conventions act as a warning tale for her readers.

Kintzler’s defiance leads to a collapse, which in turn, leads to his dramatic death just as the writers are receiving their first pay, again another of Yeziarska’s warnings to

not sell out. The juxtaposition is striking. Kintzler is the one who refused to sell his writing soul, yet he dies because of his inflexibility. Yeziarska takes up his briefcase as they carry his body away, and sees that there is nothing but incoherent trash contained inside. “I hunted, and only papers of all sizes, clippings, scribbled envelopes, and bunches of notes, fell out. At the bottom was a mess of stuff, as if the trash from the wastebasket had been dumped there [. . .]the more I read, the more disheartened I became with the stilted language” (Yeziarska 191). These scraps are pitiful and serve to show Yeziarska’s points that these little scraps don’t represent the real effort that it takes to be a professional writer. In the end, Jeremiah’s life and scholarly promise come to a heap of rubbish. This sad end to Jeremiah’s life leads Yeziarska to term his obsession with Spinoza as Jeremiah’s “dybbuk” or devil. This is a striking use of the term since in an earlier part of *Red Ribbon*, and also in her novel, *The Bread Givers*, others dub the narrator’s obsession with writing as a “dybbuk.” Using this term suggests that Yeziarska also sees herself in the created character of Jeremiah Kintzler and uses Jeremiah Kintzler as a warning to her not to become too obsessed and to embrace the variety and opportunities in life.

Still seeking acceptance for her Jewish self and a minimum standard of living for her writing, Yeziarska’s search for her fairy tale concludes with the section of the book describing when she goes to live among the WASPs in Connecticut. Here she sees a different type of community in action, and initially, she embraces it, echoing Boelhower’s confirmation of codes in the dominant structure. Upon arriving at her

rented house, she sees the generosity of the community manifested in the appearance of the house:

[Marion Foster] opened the icebox and showed me milk, eggs and butter. In the breadbox there was a loaf of fresh homemade bread. Like a child on Christmas morning, I followed her into the living room. It was furnished, even with curtains and a rag rug. [. . .] Home in America. And here at last I had found it. This was it. This gift of home. (Yeziarska 202)

This assessment echoes Woolf's call for women writers to obtain a room of their own to work on their projects. Interestingly, Yeziarska is not afraid to embrace these gifts and feels that to accept them is less "selling out" than a move toward wholesale American acceptance. This is supposed to be what she wants. In shock at the neighbors' generosity, she also has the opportunity to strike up a friendship with this Marion Foster, the created character who, in reality, was the writer Dorothy Canfield Fisher-- a literary arbiter of the 1920's and 1930's.

Yeziarska's need for friendship and her emotionalism, however, distance the neighbors. Her overtures are coolly received, even after Marion tries to warn her that the people of the town are initially friendly to outsiders: "A personal relationship takes time [. . .] It can't be pushed through as you push a button or turn a screw" (Yeziarska 203). Another villager, Mrs. Cobb tells her "Our village is slow to take in a stranger. Perhaps you don't realize that you put up a wall around you that shuts people out" (Yeziarska 209). The wall Mrs. Cobb refers to is her origin and heritage. The Yankees of the village are not used to dealing with a Jewish woman. Yeziarska wears her ethnicity as a badge

of pride, a sign of resistance against the conformity of that neighborhood and another rebellion against the American ideal, and this pride distances those who are not used to ethnicity.

Yeziarska finally realizes that her ethnicity is what makes her unique and different. She will always be the observer looking in from the outside—and as a writer this isn't a bad thing. She is the “true American.” She comes to this realization at a dinner when she states, “‘I’m a Jew!’ [. . .] There was a sudden click of silence. A look of embarrassment closed their faces. After an interminable pause, Mr. McCormick turned to me. ‘I’m an Irishman, but I don’t think it’s important to announce it’” (Yeziarska 211-212). This difference in point of view about her own ethnic background in Fair Oaks is the final breaking point that separates her from the villagers. The narrator’s realization of who she is and what makes her unique as a writer ends her self-authored life writing fairy story. From Yeziarska’s point of view, this successful search for self is the ultimate success story—not the Hollywood version.

There is an eighteen-year gap between the end of *Red Ribbon* and the publication of the book itself. These were quiet and silent years. There were no publications and no reviews from Yeziarska—nothing. In her literary biography of her mother, Henriksen recalls these years in a chapter titled “Silence.” I believe that Henriksen means for the title to be ironic. This quiet time probably allowed Yeziarska’s mind to focus on her next work--*Red Ribbon on a White Horse*. However, during this time, her living was earned in a hand to mouth fashion. Later she obtained a Writer in Residence position at the University of Wisconsin through the influence of writer friend Zona Gale.

This position lasted only a year, and much of the rest of the silent eighteen years meant reliance on others to support her. Renee Stubbs, in her introduction to *The Arrogant Beggar*, another Yeziarska novel, sheds some light on Yeziarska's mindset during these silent years. Stubbs outlines the concept of *tsdokeh* from Eastern European Jewish communities. *Tsdokeh* meant giving, and this giving was expected from all members of the community. The richest members of the communities were expected to give the most and help the most with others who were less fortunate. The best kind of *tsdokeh* was that given with kindness—not mentioned or secretive. These were gifts that came without strings or obligation (Stubbs xxix). This concept of *tsdokeh* was the type of giving that Yeziarska's scholar father believed in, a rather Old World concept for Yeziarska to embrace, but it isn't included in *Red Ribbon*, doubtless a purposeful omission, since this wouldn't fit in with her theme of "selling out." His wife, his daughters, and by extension the community were expected to support him so that he could continue his scholarly study of the Talmud without interruption.

Much of *The Bread Givers* and the memoir *Red Ribbon on a White Horse* deal, in their respective ways, with Yeziarska's denunciation of her father's expectations of support, but the family continuously gives to the father figure—even though they find his expectations burdensome. As she grows older, the real Yeziarska slides into the same mode as her father and has the same expectation that her relatives and others should support her so that she might continue to write. With successful nieces and nephews (among them a successful songwriter and a respected movie critic) and Louise

Henricksen as potential resources, Yeziarska must have felt there were plenty of ways to have the concept of *tsdokeh* shown to her (Henricksen 254).

In the “Silence” chapter, Henriksen outlines Yeziarska’s repeated requests for money, along with her mother’s pleas for support to work on the book that became *Red Ribbon on a White Horse*. Henriksen indicates that the process was slow and long. The periods of writing would alternate with periods of depression for her mother: “I’ve been going through the most awful feeling of lostness [. . .] like one dead among the living. [. . .] I can no longer delude myself with attempts at writing.’ But a day later Anzia might be in a buoyant state” (Henricksen 265). The amazing point, though, is that Yeziarska never gave up.

During her quiet years, Yeziarska made friends at Columbia University through her writing. One of them, Reinhold Niebuhr, was a religion and philosophy professor who introduced her to the esteemed poet W.H. Auden. Auden promised to write the introduction for *Red Ribbon on a White Horse*. When she saw the introduction, Yeziarska was not impressed by it. Henriksen states: “She could not bear the rather stately introduction that Auden wrote for her book! [. . .] Because his long, formal introduction didn’t instantly translate into emotions, Anzia felt cheated.” She wanted the introduction of her hard-fought book to ‘ring true’ with emotion—not stuffy academic prose. Yeziarska didn’t care who Auden was. She prevailed upon him to cut some of the introduction and he did. Others, like Henriksen, tried to get her to see reason and what the text represented, the ultimate acceptance: “She [Henricksen] tried to explain what Auden’s introduction meant; it was in fact an understanding analysis of Anzia’s story.

He touched on the Faustian problem of all artists tempted by money and success, and he saw her book as reflecting the modern disease of alienation” (Henriksen 270-71).

However, for Yeziarska, these assessments were a lot of double speak. She needed the introduction to fall in line with her vision of her life as an emotional, fairy tale story and she pressed for change from the esteemed poet until he complied.

Auden’s name was expected to help sell a lot of copies of *Red Ribbon*. However, it did not. Henriksen chalked up the sales failure to the timing of the book. In the post World War II years, Jewish literature had turned from the immigrant experience and was populated by a new generation of writers like Philip Roth. These new Jewish writers portrayed a different dream of American assimilation. Also, Yeziarska’s critique of America and her press for better acceptance for ethnicity wasn’t a popular view during the Cold War years. However, since then, *Red Ribbon* has received more appreciation and a better reception. A growing number of dissertations and conference papers about her work have continued to appear.

There is much to take from Yeziarska’s self-authored life writing that is structured like a *Künstlerroman*. There is even more to be said about the postmodern structure of *Red Ribbon*. As in Hurston’s *Dust Tracks on a Road*, Yeziarska does not tell the story of her writing career in a chronological manner, but she uses, and perhaps invents, the important parts to tell young writers. Most importantly, *Red Ribbon on a White Horse* reflects the conflict of how one writer comes to embrace her rebellion against the dominant codes of society. Yeziarska says it best herself toward the end of the text: “With a sudden sense of clarity I realized that the battle I thought I was waging against

myself, against the Jew in me. [. . .] It was like cutting off part of myself. That was why there was not wholeness, no honesty in anything I did” (212). Once she discovered what was “true” in her story, Yezierska was able to complete her account of struggle, harsh reality, and perseverance—all valuable lessons for a writer.

Notes

The Careerist: *Red Ribbon on a White Horse*

1. Despite having reached the ultimate dream of many writers, that of publishing her first book, she still lived in poverty for several years because this collection of short stories, *Hungry Hearts*, was considered by critics to be “literature” and it didn’t sell many copies.
2. First established in Western Europe in the late 1700’s as a sub genre to the Bildungsroman, a Künstlerroman is a special kind of novel that tells the life of a writer or an artist. A Künstlerinroman is a sub-species of the Künstlerroman and is devoted solely to the special depiction of the climb of the female writer or artist. Both forms depict the struggles culminating in the writer’s success (Eystruoy 144). *Red Ribbon* falls into the Künstlerinroman category. One salient point that many female critics have made in the past ten years is that the original definition of the genres of Bildungsroman, Künstlerroman, and Künstlerinroman all are in relationship to the novels or fictive works of white males. Many critics now understand, though, that these story forms can apply to many other works by people of other ethnic origins and genders. With the following analysis of *Red Ribbon on a White Horse*, I also propose that the self-authored life-writing project is capable of structuring the works in these other genres as well. Given the already asserted nature of the self-authored life writing project as a created entity and a narrative invention, the Künstlerinroman can and should be applied as a structuring device as well as a novel.

3. Henriksen also makes it clear that the impact of Dewey's wife and children was much less at this period of time in his life: "He was ready just then for another protégé or friend – to fill the space left by his children, who were now all adults, and by his wife, who since the tragic death of their youngest child, Gordon, at the age of eight, had grown increasingly detached and critical" (Henriksen 89).
4. In Henriksen's book, the affair of the heart with Dewey is detailed in a chapter called "Real Love," while her mother's relationship with Arnold Levitas, her own father, is discussed in a chapter called "Love." The affair with Dewey adds charm and richer dimension to her mother's life story, thus showcasing even more how Yeziarska meant to structure her own life story. Levitas was nowhere the influence on her that Dewey was—even though he was the father of her child.
5. This explanation of her affair with an older man is an old conceit; here, as she is crafting her text, Yeziarska leans upon the conceit and uses it to show her relative youth and naïve beliefs when she is dealing with Morrow/Dewey, who is in his 50's.
6. Schoen calls the WPA project episode of *Red Ribbon* "the most important section of the book" (107). This section does portray an important aspect of the Depression years when the government supported America's writers. Writers in this particular enclave also contributed to a new subgenre of American literature, the protest novel. This subgenre derived entirely from the fact that these writers witnessed and endured tough times and even tougher frustrations with government bureaucracy.

Chapter Six

Veiled Insight: the duality of Mary Austin in *Earth Horizon*

Melanie Graulich, a critic who has written often about Mary Austin, correctly characterizes her subject's landmark self-authored life writing text as an extremely important work for women's culture: "in *Earth Horizon* she put forth a feminist analysis and agenda for social change. [. . .] Many of the issues she explored have become major concerns of the feminist movement today, and she deserves attention as a major feminist foremother. [. . .] *Earth Horizon* displays why Austin was one of the foremost feminists of her time" (389). This approach puts Austin's strategies of resistance in the appropriate spotlight. The conflicts in a woman's life are manifold today in the twenty-first century, but the pressures were even greater in Austin's time.

Determination and guts can often help a writer achieve success; these aspects can be more important to a writer's career than early talent. Mary Austin (1881-1934) was a determined and gutsy writer. Through many obstacles in her writing life, Mary Austin continued to insist on pursuing her writing career in her way. Her self-authored life-writing project, *Earth Horizon* (1932), characterizes her struggle to have a writing career. Mary Austin started her writing career in the Victorian era and then developed a new writing style to fit into the new century. Her self-authored life writing, in its structure and presentation, is, a transgression against Derrida's "Law of Genre." His law states, "Thus, as soon as genre announces itself, one must respect a norm, one must not cross a line of demarcation, one must not risk impurity, anomaly or monstrosity" (qtd. in Mechling 258). The women of this study have been held accountable to the conventional

standards of the autobiography that have existed for so long. However, on the other hand, Jelinek put forth her idea that women's autobiographies are regularly fragmented and multi-layered. She states:

The multidimensionality of women's socially conditioned roles seems to have established a pattern of diffusion and diversity when they write their autobiographies as well, and so by established critical standards, their life studies are excluded from genre and cast into the "non-artistic" categories of memoir, reminiscence, and other disjunctive forms." (Jelinek 17)

These transgressions of genre offend critics like Derrida but for other critics, like Mechling, it is a woman writer's job to transgress those expectations of genre. Austin's life writing does not disappoint. *Earth Horizon* chronicles the story of her career, but at the same time it is reflective of her determination to fashion intellectually a self that showcases the multiple parts of her persona and repeatedly critiques the roles of women in society, thus resisting a linear approach of the conventional autobiography.

Much as Hurston does in *Dust Tracks on A Road* and Welty does in *One Writer's Beginnings*, Austin is compelled to explicate her origins thoroughly at the beginning by writing a section that she names "The Saga of Polly McAdams." The use of a maternal ancestor's name at the very beginning of the text shows Austin's intent to recreate her self from scratch—tracing through the female line of familial relationships. These origins show how she is put together as an American individual:

There is something in Mary which comes out of the land; something in its rhythms, its living compulsions, which dominates over her French, Scotch, Irish,

Dutch, English, and even the far-off roving mind's eye that includes for her, in its implications, the whole American continent, and at the same time, in its rejection of the male ritual of rationalization in favor of a more direct institutional attack, providing the key to her approach. (Austin 15)

Polly McAdams, as the pioneering ancestor, provides Austin with the trope to explicate how a woman like her was born at the end of one century and was able to grow and develop into another kind of woman into another century. The character of her ancestor will foreground the pioneering spirit Austin will need to make her way towards a successful writing career. As she relates what kind of strong woman Polly McAdams was, Austin is foregrounding the kind of woman she herself would become. Feminist theory did not develop until some forty plus years later—so Austin is using her ancestor to outline a pattern of survival with dignity to begin to explain the kind of woman she is. In “In Search of My Mother’s Gardens,” Alice Walker theorizes about where and how her ancestor’s creative energy was spent: “She made all the clothes we wore, even my brother’s overalls. She made all the towels and sheets we used. She spent the summers canning vegetables and fruits. She spent winter evenings making quilts enough to cover our beds” (238). Some forty years earlier, Austin makes the same justification for where Polly McAdams spent her creative and intellectual abilities: “Polly invented a way to preserve the fruit [spiced apples] in the wide-mouthed crocks which were the precursors of the screw-topped glass jars, which gave place to the world-encompassing canned food business” (17). Austin is obviously proud to have sprung from such an intelligent

woman as Polly McAdams. For Shelley Armitage, this convergence of cooking and artistic capabilities is no accident; it is part of Austin's literary theory: "Austin linked the domestic or homemaking quality—'givingness to others,' she called it—with the intellectual, prophetic, and intuitive qualities in women that make their acts or arts contributory" (4). Part of Austin's purposeful plan is in giving McAdams a focus to skills thought worthless by contemporary standards. This shows how she intends to rebel against contemporary standards of intellectualism.

This artistry, resonance, and resourcefulness are passed onto Polly McAdams's descendant. Mary Austin's artistic capabilities are earliest expressed in cooking and she discusses the process as a way other artistic endeavors can be a crucial part of a woman artists' development. She states, "[Cooking] remained, for the period in which her literary gift was incubating, the sole art which she could happily practice [. . .] This was all that kept the artist's feeling for craft, for the perfection of technique, going in Mary until she happened on Indians who could teach her something of the inner meaning of art" (Austin 68-69). Austin challenges contemporary perceptions of cooking as a merely technical skill and places a high value on her domestic skill as a means of artistic expression.

Part of the discovery of self that Austin is uncovering has to do with her finding and testing a voice in which she can speak. Austin selects the anecdote where she tells her reading teacher, at a very young age, that she can read. The teacher accuses her of lying and punishes her, but the principal happens to come in. He tests her on some material that she could not possibly have memorized and promptly promotes her to the

next grade. Austin's point of inclusion of the material is her repeated incantation to the adults of "I can," twice in the anecdote (60). When Austin allows young Mary the voice to say, "I can," she is resisting their classification of her and is also showing how these capabilities developed in her at a very young age. The entire question of lying is also raised here and this becomes important in the development of a fiction writer, as it later does in Hurston and Welty's self-authored life writing texts.

These tropes relating to speech continue to be revealed as part of Austin's project further on in the work at two other places. She pointedly says: "When I first began on this story of Mary's life, seeking for a criterion of choice among the multitudinous incidents that come crowding on recollection, [. . .] such trifling occurrences take their place in the slow progression of woman's mastery over her own talent" (Austin 135 - 136). Here she is admitting that there are going to be certain stories that will function more strongly in the story than others. Thus, like the other works I have considered, this is a managed composition.

When she was a "bored housewife," Austin made friends with the Paiute Indians that lived in her area. These interactions were valuable opportunities because Austin learned from the Paiutes how to put together stories and relate that process of discovery as a moment of epiphany. By watching the way the herders communicate amongst themselves, she learns, and this plays a role in her growth as a writer: "[The t]ransmission of experience between man and dog is probably the most important contribution to the story-teller's art that Mary will ever make, I have found no storyteller in America in the least interested. [. . .] It led on, for Mary, a renewed curiosity about

Indian sign languages and their experience-carrying possibilities” (Austin 266). These cultural exchanges formed crucial opportunities for her to express herself. She came to an understanding of how to put together nonverbal communications so well that she was a noted relater of Native American sign language stories. Even Austin’s project in giving credence to the relevance of this minority literature is an important move on her part.

The Chisera figure from the Paiute culture, which Austin wrote about in her 1911 play *The Arrow-Maker*, is a perfect symbol to reflect the split of a gifted woman who must struggle between creativity and femininity. Anna Carew-Miller analyzes this conundrum in light of Austin’s seminal work of fiction, *Woman of Genius*. She states, “[In *Woman of Genius*,] Austin brings to her readers’ attention the difficult situation of women artists: while their lives as artists place them outside the safety of social convention, they continue to be judged by the standards for women of convention” (Carew-Miller 111-112). In writing the play and making it reflective of a particular Native American culture, Austin was able to find expressions of concerns important to both her writing and personal lives. The Chisera wants love, but she is not allowed love because it will compromise her holy status. The Chisera wants community, but she must be exiled in order to commune with the spirits. She is in an exalted position, but she wants to be like any other woman. For Austin as a writer in two very different eras, almost equally as a Victorian woman and as an emerging suffragette of the twentieth century who was also a wife, a mother, and a worker, she found complete understanding in the pull in the life of the Chisera.

As a woman whose career bridged two different periods, Austin characterizes this split in a fascinating way in *Earth Horizon*. Graulich discusses this split in the afterword to the 1991 edition of *Earth Horizon*. She states: “Austin describes herself as having two selves, I-Mary, ‘always associated with the pages of books,’ and Mary-by-herself, ‘forlorn’ and abandoned” (Graulich 379). Austin uses these two selves to tell her life story, and for an autobiography published in 1932, this is a surprisingly post-modern choice for Austin to have made. Her choice in telling her story echoes that of W.E.B. Dubois’s *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), where he analyzes the conundrum of the Negro in America as:

gifted with second-sight in this American world, --a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness, [. . .] two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder (3).

As someone who had once spoken at a dinner in DuBois’s honor, Austin could certainly relate to the split feeling that DuBois articulates in the start of his seminal work (Austin 347). Much of the text of *Earth Horizon* is devoted to Austin’s expression of the difficulty in balancing the various roles in her life.

Austin's development of polyphonic voices in *Earth Horizon* falls in line with the Bahktinian notion of voice as an expression of power or powerlessness in society (Bahktin 294). First, I-Mary is the expression of Austin's personality where she is strong and confident, the book lover and the feminist who believes that she has a voice worthy of expression. The I-Mary characterization manifests itself many times throughout her self-authored life writing—indeed it may be said that the preeminent voice of *Earth Horizon* is I-Mary since I-Mary is the voice of the literary Mary Austin—the direct expression when she has power.

The development of the power persona of I-Mary happened by accident when Mary Austin was young. Her brother was helping her with her letters while her mother was making bread. Upon review of the letter “I,” Austin came to an understanding of her true self and purpose. This assertion of herself at such a young age is one place where she employs resistance to her families' classification of her, a recurring theme in her work. Austin states in the third person, “Always [until she was quite grown up,] I-Mary was associated with the pages of books. The mere sight of the printed page would often summon her, and since her coming was comfortably felt—this was a reason for that which comes next—it was sought in the contemplation of print” (46). Here at the tender age of three, Austin embraced the realm of books, very much like Eudora Welty, who also “heard” all her writing life the voice that had first read books to her.

As with Hurston and Welty, reading became power for Austin. In her unfinished biography on Mary Austin, *Wind's Trail: the Early Life of Mary Austin*, Peggy Pond Church attempts a style not unlike Austin's genre-bending technique in *Earth Horizon*.

In the biography, Church mimics the unique style of her subject as she characterizes the moment reading touched Austin's life: "as soon as ever [anyone] found out what the words meant, she was there. Was it knowing how to read that made her? After a while she could do it by herself, point her finger at a word and call its name. All at once something behind the word would open like a door" (65). This discovery of the mystery of reading would transform itself, for Austin, into the wondrous discovery that actual people created stories and were paid for writing them.

Church continues to explore Austin's life via Austin's "fictionalizing technique," using a polyphonic approach as she outlines the self development in Mary's pre-reading days with the development of a fictional character in Austin's play world. Snockery was a little made-up demon who lived in the hollow apple tree in the Graham family orchard. In *Earth Horizon*, the fictional sprite becomes "the tree fetich down by the pond" (qtd. in Church 77). This pretend character further stretched Austin's imagination just as the saga of Miss Corn-Shuck & friends did for Zora Neale Hurston in her make-believe world.

At the same time, words drew Austin's attention like a magnet. Church chronicles her fascination: "What mattered to Mary was the picture behind the words. She could be fascinated with the way one word called up another, the way images shimmered and shifted but always made some kind of pattern, patterns that formed of themselves like frost on the windowpane. [. . .] As early as Mary could remember, she was enchanted by the sound of words" (89). Long associated with femininity, the moon plays a role here as well as in *Dust Tracks* where Hurston, along with her friend Carrie, followed the path of the moonbeam. Welty recalls a similar fascination with language

around the word “moon” in her self-authored life-writing story. In *Earth Horizon*, Austin recalls eavesdropping on her mother as she read to her father late at night. Austin’s listening sessions, reminiscent of Welty’s eavesdropping on her mother, led to spankings from her unsympathetic mother, but they also helped to form Austin’s skills with language (Austin 54-55). This resistance to her mother’s rules showcases Austin’s defiance and may have also helped to strengthen her I-Mary resolve.

Austin learned to read so early that she was called upon to prove her skills in front of the principal in school when she was only six years old. Her reading ability caused Austin to be moved forward two grades, something of an embarrassment. As she tells it later:

Mary’s more than ordinary verbal memory was the source of more than a little educational misadventure. She was always being promoted beyond her years, on the basis of her reading achievement, so that her penmanship was a subject for ridicule, and arithmetic a hopeless muddle for years, thus confirming the popular opinion that people who are particularly ‘smart’ in one direction are subject to a compensating stupidity in others (Austin 61).

However, her highly developed reading abilities meant that she had the opportunity to absorb language into her marrow. I-Mary’s growth and Austin’s depiction of it is showcased later when Austin recalls reciting Tennyson’s “Lady of Shalott” for her teacher. The teacher is insistent that the young Austin, only seven years old at this time, should be able to reiterate the meaning of the poem if she is to recite it. Austin’s focus,

however, is on the language of the piece: “There she had you. You hadn’t supposed up to that time that poetry had been expected to mean anything in particular. ‘The Lady of Shalott’ you had chosen for its glittering figures, its smoothly swinging movement of rhyme and meter” (Austin 63-64). Austin’s interest is rewarded when the principal, who overhears the teacher scold her, lets them both know that Tennyson is his favorite author. This new turn of events opens the door to young Mary’s developing mind: “[Mary] was busily conning the saving phrase that it might not be forgotten. My favorite author! It was her first time of hearing it, but she knew what it meant. She knew precisely on what compensating occasions she would be able to use it” (Austin 64). Thus Austin illustrates how small occasions of resistance encouraged her development and helped her to learn how to be a writer:

Austin opens chapter nine of *Earth Horizon* with an intriguing reflection:

When people began to ask how early Mary first had a notion that she might write, Mother said carelessly ‘Oh, as soon as she could talk,’ which goes to show how unreliable family anecdotes are. The first public announcement of her intention which Mary recalls, as her father used to relate, came much later than that, probably the summer she was seven. (70)

This anecdote also marks the point where she introduces her father as a powerful positive influence in terms of shaping Austin’s linguistic scaffolding, preferring her father’s recollection over that of her mother.¹

Zora Neale Hurston and Eudora Welty relied heavily upon the examples of their mothers to guide them toward their writing careers. Mary Austin, however, is her father's daughter. She gathers pleasure from books at her father's knee:

Mary liked sitting on Pa's desk when he worked—he often wrote papers there to read at the Grange or the Horticultural Society—which she had leave to do so long as she didn't interrupt. She sat perfectly and quietly happy, looking at books; even when she couldn't read them, it gave her an interested feeling just to look at books—shelves of them going up higher than she could reach. (Austin 70)

Books boost her belief in I-Mary and give her a feeling of strength and confidence that soon expresses itself in a desire to become a writer. Her rejection of her mother as the shaping parent also represents Austin's resistance to the roles that have been predefined for her.

The personification of I-Mary is particularly strong here. Austin, in crafting and including these passages, is not only reflecting upon the pleasing nature of the language and the feel of these books, but also is remembering with some specialized insight how someone becomes a person who writes books for a living. Her belief in her writing as career is an act of daring for a young girl, and it is the reaction and support of her father that allow her to articulate her dream. Young Mary asks her father to leave her his book collection when he dies. Mystified by her request, he asks her why she wants them.

Austin recalls:

“I will sell them and live on the money until I write a book my own self.” You can see this couldn’t have been the first time she had thought about it. “Well, of course, for anything so important as that”—Father began to twinkle the way he had—“What kind of books do you mean to write?” “All kinds,” said Mary with large impartiality, and she never understood why, when Pa related this conversation, which he did on several occasions in her presence, people always laughed. Mary had not yet heard the popular superstition that you can only do one kind of thing, and that to suppose yourself capable of doing more is to get yourself suspected of conceit. (71)

Austin is well aware of the strange nature of her proclamations; yet, as she is recalling these moments at the end of her life, she does not characterize her father’s twinkling as patronizing. Indeed, Austin couches it as her father’s favoritism toward her as I-Mary grows strong and confident. With her father’s support imbuing her with strength and confidence, Austin is not afraid to be thought of as conceited. At age seven and a half she is already showing great determination about her future. Early on, she is determined to resist the structure of various writing genres.

Mary’s father also played a role in shaping her reading choices. He felt that Sir Walter Scott was too old for Mary at nine, but worthy for her to read when she was older. The precocious Mary had to admit to him that she had already read and committed to memory her father’s copy of Scott’s *Lady of the Lake*. To further encourage his daughter, George Hunter borrowed *Ivanhoe* and read it with Mary. Austin recalls this

shared experience of *Ivanhoe* as a pleasant memory. Like Hurston with her Pluto and Persephone story, she showed her precocious reading capability by reading her text from “lid to lid.”: “How the child ever got through it, I can’t imagine. [. . .] She also read the notes and appendix. What Mary knew after reading ‘Ivanhoe,’ completely and absolutely knew, was that she wanted to write books ‘with-footnotes-and-appendix.’ She wanted to write books that you could walk around in” (73). Fittingly enough, *Earth Horizon* is the only self-authored life writing that I have seen, including the other works in this study, that has an index at the back. What young Mary is meant to understand, even at that tender age, was that indexed books were the ones that were taken seriously. Besides a rebellion against the conventions of autobiography as another break in Derrida’s “Law of Genre,” the inclusion and recreation of this story in her self-authored life writing is reflective of Austin making a bid for her work to be taken seriously and appreciated.

Storytelling is remembered with some prominence in *Earth Horizon*: “Mary’s literary effort,” Austin writes, “was begun in the half-remembered, half-invented tales with which she entertained other children. These were flagrantly popular in tone, shaped to the demand of her audience for adventures in which they could recognizably participate, well punctuated with shivers and satisfaction suited to their years” (72). Thus, as Austin reveals here, her writing style began to develop from selecting details that were pleasing to an audience and the I-Mary voice grew in strength.

As Welty, Hurston, and Yeziarska have already demonstrated, fiction writers are called upon to develop their own styles and this is reflected in Austin’s text. They must recreate language in their own way. Austin was doing it before she was ten:

“It happened to her,” she writes, “at that age when there is a necessity upon childhood to invent languages to the significance of which their elders are not privy [. . .] that she found herself in possession of a language which the elders actually did not understand. [. . .] Years after, they discovered that the secret speech [. . .] was recognizably German in structure. (75)

Austin here is too modest when she assumes the creation of secret language by children is insignificant, but she goes on to explain that the I-Mary voice begins writing her own work when she is ten. Austin recalls that: “Mary began upon a piece of writing, the initial impulse to which has been so completely lost, the plot so blurred, so little related to current reality, that I suspect it of being not so much a creation as a partial recovery of something heard and forgotten, floated up to the surface of a mind beginning faintly to be stirred by pre-adolescent activity” (75) The piece was titled “A Play to be Sung,” and its origin was linked to sadness and loss.² Mary’s encouraging father, George Hunter, succumbed to illness when Mary was ten, in 1878. Only six weeks later, her younger sister Jennie, the person with whom Mary shared her writing hopes and dreams, died of diphtheria. Within that same year, Mary started on “A Play to be Sung.” Austin describes her work: “Mary worked on this composition at intervals for two or three years before discarding it. Some fragments of it which turned up years later between the pages of an old arithmetic, which was the device adopted by her for keeping her work finally from family inspection, are still preserved” (75). The loss of two important people did not quench her writing desire, but rather fueled I-Mary to further expression.³

Although her father encouraged her with reading and books and Jennie was the person with whom she shared her confidences and secrets in *Earth Horizon*, Austin does not connect the feeling of loss of these two deaths with the beginning of her writing career. Church shows Austin's concerns in structuring this part of her life story. Her biographer explains this omission in a curious way: "At the time she wrote her autobiography, Mary Austin was very much concerned with what posterity would think of her, and she works hard to give the impression of a child who has been overwhelmed by her own grief" (Church 104). Jennie's death, which occurs second, hits Austin the hardest: "The loss of her is never cold in me, tears start freshly at the mere mention of her name. And I would not have it otherwise. She was the only one who ever unselfishly loved me. She is the only one who stays" (Austin 87). Still, the coincidence of losing two family figures who represented encouragement and interest regarding her writing seems very significant, just as loss was significant in the lives of Hurston and Welty or even Smith as she lost her family's value system.

Young Mary might have found a refuge with her mother, but Susie Hunter was too wrapped up in her own grief. Austin's guilt over the fact that her own illness with diphtheria preceded her sister's death impels her to recall something that she believes her mother said to an aunt after Jennie's death, "Why couldn't it have been Mary?" Church does not believe that Susanna Hunter actually said this, but instead posits that Mary's guilt over her sister's death coupled with her rocky relationship with her mother may have allowed her to have a re-memory that wasn't factually true (85). In any case, after Jennie's death, Susanna Hunter fixated on her remaining sons and allowed her only

remaining daughter to flounder in search of herself. This recreation of her mother as uncaring and unsupportive, against the notions of motherhood of her contemporaries, allows her, much like Lillian Smith and even Yeziarska in her omission of her mother, to “be born again.” Without her mother’s support, Mary Austin turned more fully to books and reading as her maternal sources of strength and comfort.

Repeated acts of rejection by her mother might also have led Mary to her deep-seated feminism—and to more source material. Austin’s own family unknowingly contributed to her interest in the rights of women when, once her father died, Susie considered Jim Hunter, Mary’s older brother, as head of the house. Susie let all of the household activity revolve around Jim’s likes and dislikes. Chief among these concessions was the seemingly trivial matter of the way that the eggs were cooked in the morning: Jim wanted a four-minute egg and Mary wanted hers cooked one minute longer. Mary requested that her egg be put into the pan first so that it could cook longer, but this request apparently, in the eyes of her mother, upset the balance of order in the household. Austin states it baldly in an acerbic tone: “To remember Mary’s egg became a constantly annoying snag in the perfect family gesture of subservience to the Head, which all her [mother’s] life had gone to create. And perhaps there was latent in Susie’s mind [. . .] that a different sort of boiled egg was more than a female had a right to claim on her own behalf” (128-129). Later, rather than make a fuss about it, Mary stopped eating eggs for breakfast. Sartwell considers *Dust Tracks* a monument to resistance, but this moment in *Earth Horizon* is Austin’s moment of epiphany and her reaction to it is pure resistance. It is mind-boggling now to consider that a woman’s life would be ruled

by such picayune concerns, but the inclusion of this incident in her self-authored life writing project is a purposeful part of her creation and is a turning point in I-Mary's development.

In *Earth Horizon*, the I-Mary narrative voice insists on her way of telling her own life story and is seemingly frustrated with the conventions of autobiography, explaining how she intends to transform them in the writing of the book when she states, "All this Mary business is a nuisance; having to stop and tell why she did things and what she thought about them" (Austin 204). Yet, Austin is still invested in the confident I-Mary voice to know that there would be great interest in her life story, and she expresses some discontent with the self-authored life writing standards of the day: "I don't see why it should be so much the literary mode just now to pretend that ideas are not intrinsically exciting and that one's own life isn't interesting to one's self" (Austin 216). No one is going to tell Austin how to write her story or what to include in it. She states, "I must write these things the way they happened to Mary, swiftly flashing, in a flame spurt. Nothing Mary does has so irritated the critics against her as her habit of writing of these things in all the shining sharpness of her first perception of them" (Austin 217).⁴ Austin learned how to write with shining sharpness as she wrote about nature and this is another part of Austin's willful intention to "bend genres." Her insistence on the inclusion of approaches from her nature writing in her self-authored life writing project is a risky strategy because the whole notion of "woman as reflective of nature" is one that has been consistently disrespected by the "keepers of genre" like Derrida, from the origins of

literature. The entire idea of genre is one where there are certain rational rules that must be obeyed. Austin does not intend to obey in *Earth Horizon* and her inclusion of this natural approach, the “shining sharpness” method, is proof of rebellion. Shelly Armitage believes that this approach comes directly from Austin’s biggest commercial success, *The Land of Little Rain*, and is all about a different way of seeing: “She attends to the adaptive facts of flora and fauna, people, places that speak of the ancient definition of beauty based on harmony. [. . .] Linking natural rhythms and human rhythms, she speaks of the relation of people and place—the significant connection between the individual [. . .] and the communal” (19). This is not easy to do and this is expressive of Austin’s sense of frustration with the conventional approaches of autobiographical writing as well as the difficulty inherent in her need flout these rules of genre in her descriptions of her own life. It is a frustration that Welty expresses as well in *One Writer’s Beginnings*.

As with her fellow writers’ similar stories of development, certain information is not for public inspection. At one point in *Earth Horizon*, she addresses the notion that women should discuss their sex life, writing:

To satisfy the modern expectation in that direction, Mary would have to tell a great deal more than matters, since to the things Mary cared most about, sex never mattered much [. . .]in her youth, women were much too busy fulfilling their sex life [. . .] Opportunities for Freudian shock were singularly lacking to older sisters growing up in families where there is a baby arriving practically every two years (Austin 114-115).

This reluctance to talk about the body is an expression of Austin's Victorian mindset and resembles Hurston's reticence in discussing her love life in *Dust Tracks on a Road*.

Though reticent about sex, I-Mary was unafraid to take on the publishing establishment. Austin details the struggles that she had to endure as a writer of Western concerns at a time when Western writing wasn't the 'in vogue' thing to do. Austin continuously insisted that the New York publishers pay attention to her work, not only as a Western writer but as a feminist too. She also wrote of feminist concerns and railed against the stupidity of small minds in deciding the course of her writing career. For example, Austin observes that in her novel, *A Woman of Genius*, she had her heroine "behave like one," but upon "setting out on what promised to be a successful career, I found that after four months that the publishers had dropped the book and sold the remainders. I was told later that the wife of one of the publishers had decided that the conduct of the woman [in the novel] was immoral" (Austin 320).⁵ Clearly, the small mindedness of the woman, in Austin's view, is a betrayal to the feminist themes in her work. Some might perceive her purposeful inclusion of that anecdote as "gossip" here is intended to show Austin's rejection of this kind of small mindedness.

As a Western writer, Austin had to continuously fight ignorant Eastern perceptions of the West. Austin published *Land of Little Rain* at a time when the Western had barely started to grow in popularity as a fiction genre in American popular culture (Austin 320). The fighting spirit of I-Mary is clear here after so many attempts to renovate her work. However, this non-fiction landmark work did something different that popular cowboy novels could not do for the West: "There was, of course," she

writes, “the difficulty that my books were always of the West, which was little known; and always a little in advance of the current notion of it. [. . .] I recall that people used to fret at me because I would not do another ‘*Land of Little Rain*.’ I couldn’t, of course, I had used up all I had in the first one” (Austin 320). Austin’s frustration is palpable. She was ready to move on—why shouldn’t her audience? Her impatience here is another expression of resistance—part of the I-Mary persona.

The persistence that she showed was also another manifestation of I-Mary. Mary Austin was always persistent in making her writing career happen, determined to see that nothing stood in the way. On her wedding day, May 19, 1891, Wallace Austin gave his wife an unusual gift. One of the first biographers of Mary Austin, Helen MacKay Doyle, who had been one of Ruth Austin’s doctors, recalls the incident in her book, *Mary Austin: A Woman of Genius*: “Wallace Austin’s gift to his bride was a gold pearl-handled pen in a velvet case. Mary went about showing it to the guests. ‘I would rather have this than a pearl necklace,’ she said, ‘because it means that I am to go on with my writing’” (Doyle 132). An ordinary woman might have preferred the pearl in some form of wearable jewelry, but not Mary, whose primary concern was her work.⁶

I-Mary is in control most of the time. In other accounts, Austin’s attention to her work is so single-minded that it negatively impacts the ongoing concerns of her household. Doyle’s biography, written in 1939, used interviews with people who actually knew Austin and is intent on revealing parts of Austin’s life where she was not a success as a woman following appropriate convention. Friends of the Austin family, the Pyles, told Doyle anecdotes about conflicts between Austin’s writing and her domestic

situation. One anecdote came from the daughter of the Pyle family: “Mary was [always] endeavoring to write. [. . .] The dishes accumulated and often Dera Pyle came to the rescue. She wiped while Mary washed, meanwhile looking out of the window, dreaming or telling some story that was taking form in her mind” (Doyle 133). Much to Dr. Doyle’s chagrin, I-Mary was not concerned with her housework.⁷

Austin’s consuming concentration on her work also applied to her daughter. Not all of the anecdotes relayed by Dr. Doyle were flattering to Austin and the omission of this material shows how managed *Earth Horizon* is. So absorbed was she in her writing that while taking care of her mentally handicapped daughter Ruth, Austin inadvertently neglected her while musing upon some narrative problem—I-Mary had taken over: “Neighbors told how they would hear the child crying until they could endure it no longer and would go to the house to find out what was the trouble. There they would find the child strapped in a chair screaming, and Mary, pacing the floor, her hair down her back, trying to capture some idea that eluded her for the writing she was always working at” (Doyle 206-207). However, Doyle does make it clear in *Mary Austin* that the Owens River Valley community, where Austin lived, disliked her and felt that she improperly portrayed the community in *Land of Little Rain*. Austin was apparently aware of the community’s feeling toward her, but did not find it important enough to include their disdain in her self-authored life writing text, more evidence of her creation of self. I-Mary would not be deterred. Augusta Fink starts her biography of Mary Austin, *I-Mary*, with an important truth about *Earth Horizon*: “In her formal autobiography, *Earth Horizon*, she presented only those aspects of her life about which she wanted the world to

know” (Fink ix). As she consistently articulated, Mary Austin wanted control of the self she portrayed in her self-authored life-writing project.

Even in her spirituality, Austin expresses a confidence about the entire business that does not show vulnerability for having adapted an alternate means of worship that resists the structures of Christianity that ruled her day: “In the meantime the experience called the Practice of the Presence of God had come back to me, and a profound movement of spiritual growth away from the orthodox Protestant expression of it” (268). She uses particular phraseology to convey how strongly she felt about her beliefs. When discussing the effect that Professor William James had on her spiritual growth she says in two places: “I am firm in my conviction” and “I am firm in my contention.” She is also firm about what she believes: “What I got out of William James and the Medicine-Man was a continuing experience of wholeness, a power to expand the least premonitory shiver along the edge of primitive apprehension to the full diapason of spiritual sophistication, which I have never lost; a power of the record of which, haltingly set down as it happened, makes the full significance of these pages” (Austin 283). As stated here, she is very open about how Native American practices of religion have contributed to her spiritual growth. Beyond that: “[Mary] entered into their lives, the life of the campody, the strange secret life of the tribe, the struggle of Whiteness with Darkness, the struggle of the individual soul with the Friend-of-the-Soul-of-Man. She learned what it meant; how to prevail; how to measure her strength against it. Learning that, she learned to write” (Austin 289). This spiritual strength of Native American culture carried on into her political beliefs where she began to participate in activities that strengthened her

resolve to be protective. The language that she uses is combative: “I got out of the actual activities involved precisely what my contemporaries in cities got, a knowledge of the persisting strain of bruteness, of emotional savagery, of greed and hypocrisy which taints the best of our Western civilization” (Austin 266-267). She is even willing, at a time when it is unpopular, to claim kinship with Native Americans, emblematic of another political stance: “a single isolated gene of that far-off and slightly mystical Indian ancestor of whose reality I am more convinced by what happened to me among Indians than by any objective evidence” (Austin 267).

It is this voice of the confident, focused, and sometimes arrogant I-Mary that resonates throughout *Earth Horizon* and pushed Mary Austin to become a writer and promoter of political causes for Native Americans and women. Austin not only draws strength from these Native American cultures, but also from other women. She talks at various places in the book about how Frances Willard was a role model, but she also names others who have inspired her: Susan B. Anthony, Dr. Anna Howard Shaw, Charlotte Perkins Stetson (Gilman), Jane Addams, and Mother Jones. In listing these women, almost invoking them, the project of I-Mary gathers strength and fortitude. The creation of I-Mary on the page means that Austin finds a way to speak because of the speeches and writings of these women who have inspired her. The sensitive part of her personality characterized by the “Mary-by-herself” personality in *Earth Horizon* plays a role too, demonstrating the multiple responsibilities the woman writer almost inevitably must find a way to balance.

In her article about Mary Austin called “Between Worlds, Crossing Borders,” Anna Carew-Miller defines the Mary-by-herself part of Austin’s narrative strategy as “a persona that can be read as the aspects of femaleness that Austin wanted to reject, the version of femininity institutionalized in Victorian culture. [. . .] While Austin names Mary-by-herself, she does not grant her much narrative space” (121). I agree with Carew-Miller’s definition, but I would have to qualify her statement regarding the amount of narrative space given to Mary-by-herself. Austin does not intend to give this ultra feminine aspect of her personality much room, but she allows Mary-by-herself more voice in *Earth Horizon* than Carew-Miller claims. Even though Austin might like to claim to escape and as prescient as she is, she cannot completely escape the conventions of her era. Mary-by-herself personifies the pull of social expectations for women and at some points articulates the difficulty of suffering under these expectations.

Carolyn Heilbrun claims that the female life must pass through the veil of predetermined ideas about the patterns of men’s lives, and take on, in a woman’s own autobiographical terms, the masks the female adopts in response to conventional expectation or for the purpose of telling a truth in safety (qtd. in Armitage xxi). W.E.B. DuBois’s notion of the veil also expresses Austin’s viewpoint of the veil that separates male and female life when he states, “I had thereafter no desire to tear down that veil, to creep through; I held all beyond it in common contempt, and lived above it in a region of blue sky and great wandering shadows” (2).⁸ The existence of Mary-by-herself is a nod to the notion of living the female life through a male lens. Part of the appeal of *Earth Horizon* is how Austin presents herself as a straightforward and driven feminist writer,

but the antagonistic pull of the feminine duty-bound side of her life still exists and creates a conflict within her presentation that is intriguing.

One way in which the pull of everyday life is shown in *Earth Horizon* is Mary Austin's repeated nervous breakdowns or spells. Various feminist scholars have discussed the idea that the inclusion of illness in a narrative is a direct expression of anger, and is also a signifier of the only way women of Austin's time might foment a rebellion. If women internalized their anger that then manifested itself as some form of illness, then it can be seen that women were trying to conduct their lives from their power base, rather than a position of weakness, the idea manifested by Freud, when he forwarded his notions of female hysteria as proof of the fallibility of women.⁹ Austin appeared to have these nervous spells during periods of great change, which created the stress, which then contributed to the spells. Austin suffers these spells at three breaking points in her life, when she certainly could have been angry: during college, on the move to California, and during her marriage. The stigma against nervous breakdowns or any kind of mental illness was greater in 1934 than it is today. So, in *Earth Horizon*, Austin's coverage of these dark times in her life comes across as veiled and does not express her anger at these life events directly. The nervous breakdown, significantly, is a chief symptomatic revelation of Mary-by-herself, but can also be viewed as her resistance at these changes Austin focuses a great deal of energy on the origin of the breakdown: "The breakdown was supposed to have been caused by overwork. There was that item, of course; the curriculum was crowded, the drive cruel and incessant [. . .] At the normal school she was simply redriven over the curricula of public school grades with immense

and boring particularity” (151-152). In her view, I-Mary was not being mentally challenged and so then the vulnerable Mary-by-herself was exposed and this led to a breakdown.

Austin uses this first breakdown to show the folly of the thinking of old-fashioned males, and a small flicker of resistance against her treatment appears in her wry commentary:

Mary was sent home in a condition which old Dr. Hankins looked grave over, and suspected that it might have something to do with the natural incapacity of the female mind for intellectual achievement. It had something to do, no doubt, with the fact that the central heating was not yet reduced to a science, and that the winter diet of the Middlewest in those days was stuffily uninteresting (152).

Her strategy was two-fold. The supposed male expert, Dr. Hankins, is so out of touch with his conclusions about what was wrong with her, she wants this anecdote to show him as foolish. At the same time, the flaws of the Midwest of her youth are made more apparent and this sets the stage for her later move to California. As part of her work to recover the maverick aspects of Austin’s personality, Augusta Fink points out Mary’s outrage at the doctor’s assessment, but concludes that Austin sensibly began to enact her own cure by not listening to her doctor and activated her artistic gifts. Austin painted, wrote poetry and began to exercise her mind towards writing by reading everything she could and by keeping fictitious diaries, playing with voice and style (30–31). Austin

obviously knew, several decades before it would become part of psychological practice, that exercising her mind in a creative fashion would help her to rehabilitate.

Despite the gloomy inadequacy of the Middle West, Mary Austin did not choose to move to California. Her mother and brother decided that as soon as she finished Blackburn College, she would move West following Jim, thus taking advantage of her delicate condition at this time, showcasing how little choice women sometimes have in their movements:

“I don’t know now just when the plan developed of her joining Jim in California as soon as Mary was through college,” she writes, “but there it was. Mary had not been consulted. Not that she greatly cared; she did not see how being in one State or another would affect her own plan to earn a living teaching until such a time as [when] her writing would support her. (Austin 176-177)

Fink revealed the difficulty of the trip West for Austin, probably because of how her mind was unoccupied: “Against her [Austin’s] advice the house was dismantled, tenants found to occupy it, and furnishings sold or shipped. Mary herself was more disturbed than she was willing to acknowledge. On the trip west she almost suffered another nervous collapse” (35). Austin was not one to reveal how the rigors of the move affected her mind, but Susie Hunter, in letters to friends, explained the difficulty in a typically veiled Victorian fashion. “The doctor says he thinks that there is not much the matter but nervous prostration which rest and change will benefit. She came very near going to school too long” (Fink 39). Fink correctly surmises that the exclusion of Mary’s point of

view from the decision coupled with her move to a strange new place all contributed to her anger and thus the onset of this new occasion of nervous illness. A stop in Denver helped to restore Austin. Austin does not detail this part of her life in *Earth Horizon* since she is in Illinois one chapter and then she is in California in the next chapter. However, she may have later thought that the breakdown was unimportant, but at least she had the opportunity to articulate her displeasure in some way. Ultimately, looking back at her life as she recreated her self, she would see that her move to the West gave her source material, and thus, it was impossible to look back at this move with too much regret. However, her near collapse plays a role in her strategy of resistance in her task of forwarding the capabilities of women, making her all too conscious of the horrific nature of what happens when a woman is not involved in determining the trajectory of her own life.

Austin's third bout with nervous problems happened during her marriage, a clear opportunity to express her anger at Wallace's ineptitude. Austin's marriage was a difficult trial, and the continuously mounting responsibilities of husband and a special needs child took their toll. Augusta Fink writes that: "Finally the inevitable happened. Mary, who had been driving herself too hard, became ill from nervous tension and had to go to Los Angeles for treatment" (91). Austin glosses over this incident with a series of reflections upon her husband's shortcomings and then explains it all from the point of view of passing years and the wisdom of age: "The third year of Mary's marriage was largely devoted to the discovery that between being born with intelligence and behaving intelligently there is a gulf fixed" (241). The strains of trying to write, earning a living,

supporting a husband and a child with special needs was a great deal to take on and she was spread too thin. This spending of her energies led to the reemergence of Mary-by-herself and her nervous vulnerability. Though fiction-writing teachers sometimes suggest that aspirants should “live a life” in order to gain experience for writing, Austin, still in her twenties, was nearly overwhelmed by her husband and her daughter as she was living her life (Zinn 40).

Austin had married and borne a child because she wanted to and also because it was expected of her. However, in *Earth Horizon*, Austin’s love life and period of maternity are presented in a manner that would almost appear to gloss over the importance of these events in contrast to those that marked her belief in mysticism, her education, her move to the West and her writing. Church makes a keen observation about Austin’s life choices: “I had chosen the safe framework of marriage and maternity, a conventional woman’s life, at least outwardly—she had chosen commitment to her career for the sake of which [Austin] put away ‘childish things’” (29). Inasmuch as Austin has the traditional life, the cost levied on her for having a husband and a child is so high, it is a wonder that she was able to become successful in her writing, which reminds me of her fellow correspondent Yeziarska’s difficulty in finding marital or maternal happiness. However, her work formed a refuge from a traditional life and also helped to shape her.

Stafford Wallace Austin looked good on paper. A writer should marry someone with means—Virginia Woolf advocated it. He was the educated son of a sugar cane plantation owner in Hawaii and was quite moneyed until the family lost their fortune in

1885. Given his plantation background, Wallace thought that he would be able to become a fruit farmer in California (Fink 55). But, unbeknownst to Mary, Wallace was a ne'er do well who "talked a good game" but had problems executing his dreams. At the time he met Mary, Wallace had just embarked on a fruit farm venture, which must have sounded good to Mary, who had her own land but was attempting to find out what to do with it. Fink proposes that Mary had to make a decision soon, though she was a young woman only twenty years old. "She had been rebuffed by the public school system as well as by her family. Now the comfortable living arrangement she had enjoyed was about to be disrupted. Late that summer she accepted Wallace's proposal of marriage" (Fink 57). What else was a young woman in this time period supposed to do? Mary couldn't find out about other life adventures like marriage, sex, and children without experiencing those realities firsthand. She may have thought that plunging into marriage with this decent fellow would be the way to get experience. The Hawaii Austins had lost their fortune a few years earlier, but Mary may have thought it possible for them to generate income again. To her Midwest sensibility, the Austin family probably looked downright genteel, and marriage to Wallace represented the opportunity to have a nice, comfortable life. Besides that, Mary's philosophy had always been that her writing would help her to live life. She had made it clear to him from the start that her writing was to continue (Austin 220).

Could Mary Austin have married Wallace Austin for a meal ticket and a room of her own as Virginia Woolf sought? She had nowhere else to go. Her family did not want her and her public school teaching career looked as if it weren't going to work out. Fink

calls this chapter “A Marriage of Convenience,” but who was it convenient for? Austin puts it succinctly in this way herself:

She [Mary] had engaged herself to a young man of similar social background to her own, and with a university education. She had been entirely frank as to her intention toward a writing career. She had not concealed the fact of her lack of physical robustness, which she hoped to compensate for by teaching, if necessary, until the writing began to pay. She had said all that a high-minded young woman could say, and more than most of them dared to say on the subject of children and what she had herself to contribute in the way of inheritance. (220)

The rhetoric here sounds defensive, resistant and somewhat “keep hands off,” also straightforward and cold—the height of late Victorian reserve. The style of the passage justifies why she married Wallace Austin in the first place. One explanation for her Victorian reserve in her emotions toward her husband came from Mary’s family friends, the Pyles, who introduced the couple on their ranch in 1890. The family noted the lack of affection between Mary and Wallace: “The Pyle family teased Mary about her beau but privately wondered why there was never any demonstration of affection between the two. In the end they concluded that Mary was in love with Wallace ‘in her own modest way,’ and that ‘Mr. Austin was persistent and as ardent as an absent-minded professor could be’” (Fink 55-56). There were warning signs about Mary’s cool love here but she was in need of security.

Clearly, however, Mary thought Wallace Austin was the man to take care of her needs, however ill-defined or unspoken they were, and so she married him in a conservative little ceremony in her mother's parlor. Dr. Doyle first gave the particulars of the wedding ceremony and Augusta Fink reiterated them, observing the practicality of it all: "The wedding took place at the Hunter residence on May 19, 1891, at eight o'clock in the evening. The service was performed by a Methodist minister. Mary wore a plain, brown dress designed for durability. Twelve year old Dena Pyle was her only attendant; Jim acted as best man. No one gave the bride away" (Fink 59). Austin herself, in *Earth Horizon*, does not relate the particulars of the ceremony. She ends the third section of her book with a sparse account: "That was how things stood May 19, 1891, when Mary was married at her mother's house to Stafford Wallace Austin" (Austin 223). This lone paragraph ends the chapter and the section—saying more in the silence around these statements about the marriage than any direct comments she might have made.

It isn't an unusual occurrence in the life of a woman to marry for comfort, or even for a woman writer to marry someone who would further the writer's literary aspirations. To offer a different interpretation of Virginia Woolf's conclusions, marriage, at least in the first part of the twentieth century, was seen as a way for a female writer to obtain that "room of her own." Unfortunately for Austin, marriage did not work in this way because Wallace was a poor provider, and in only a short time Mary herself, and then her family, realized that Wallace was also a spendthrift. Upon finding out, Susie and Jim were horrified and advised that she end the marriage. As before, Austin didn't see her family's intervention as positive: "If at this time Mary had chosen to put herself entirely in their

hands, her family would have taken her back, and against all their moral prejudices would have agreed to a divorce. [. . . However,] she had to face, as the family was still unable to realize, their incomprehensible want of sympathy with her way of life and the total surrender of her right to it” (Austin 239). Mary wasn’t about to barter her writing career in order to live with her disapproving family, so the upshot of Austin’s financial difficulty was that both she and her husband would have to work. Mary’s work, teaching, would take more time away from her writing. She was living the experience she had wanted and was gathering source material for her writing, but increasingly, she would be unable to find time to write down her impressions in stories and essays.

Even worse, Wallace was not exactly forthcoming about the depth of their financial difficulty. Mary found out about an eviction the hard way: “One day her husband disappeared soon after breakfast, and Mary, coming back from her daily walk, found her trunk out on the sidewalk and her room closed. [. . .] She sat on the trunk for hours, all her energies consumed on not breaking down” (Austin 235). Fortunately, like her fellow writer and correspondent, Yeziarska, Mary was unafraid of honest work and she was able to find a place for them in a farmhouse that same day, but had to make pies and sew to earn their board. Like Hurston, she made a way out of no way. She was able to find something worthwhile in this humiliating experience, for the landlady’s husband was quite a character and helped to add to Mary’s source material: “Dodge was an old timer whose every word was interlarded with the quaintest blasphemies, between priceless idioms of the camp. By this time, Mary had come to realize that blasphemies were a sort of poetizing” (Austin 237). Even as she supported the household by taking

care of a bunch of miners in a boarding house as Mary-by-herself, I-Mary found a glimmer of writing potential by taking note of her surroundings.

Much of the beginning part of chapter three in the fourth section in *Earth Horizon* is devoted to the different ways in which Mary and Wallace saw their financial situation. Mary's Midwestern upbringing meant that by hard work and thrift, the Austins could resolve their own difficulty. Wallace was raised differently on the sugar cane plantation. When financial disaster struck, Wallace's idea of resolution was the gentleman's way out--bankruptcy. Mary, instead, arranged payment with creditors. She goes expressly against her husband's wishes and does what she feels is the right thing, again, using resistance to forward a feminist agenda and understanding of marriage. When Mary asked Wallace why he didn't tell her about the pending eviction from the hotel, her husband's response was to question what good it would have done for her to know (Austin 243). As a gentleman, Wallace did not want to deal in the unpleasantness of finance. Mary explains him in this way, using dry wit to show by contrast who had the better way of viewing the situation: "He had never heard of such things as budgeting the family income, of competence achieved by cumulative small sacrifices and savings. Now that he did hear of it, he thought it all rather cheap and piffling" (Austin 241). Her characterization of her husband here intends to expose his weaknesses, an adaptation of a willful stance in its honesty about Stanford Austin. The incident also expresses how, as seen in the life stories of Hurston, Yeziarska, Welty, and even Smith, money is almost always a concern in the lives of writers. Austin was not an exception in this respect, and it wasn't until later in her life that she was more capable of supporting herself as a writer.

Meanwhile, Mary fell further into the vulnerable Mary-by-herself mode when she became pregnant after the Austins were married less than two years.

Despite her ambitions to be a writer, Mary Austin always wanted children. Her desire to have children is a direct expression of Mary-by-herself and in *Earth Horizon*, Austin writes: “Mary cheerfully gave her promise about not marrying until she had ‘made something of her education,’ though privately she had made up her mind that about five children would be a nice number” (163). As straightforward as this statement is, Austin’s narrative voice becomes strangely quiet when her pregnancy appears in her self-authored life writing story: “That Mary should have recalled so little of what she had come to the Golden Gate expressly to find was due perhaps to its being pushed out of immediate consideration by the strange, perilous and yet welcome expectation of a child” (232). Austin’s charge against her domestic self of forgetfulness is an interesting narrative slip on her part and highlights the vulnerability of Mary-by-herself here. Even though it is more than forty years after these events when Austin is writing in 1932 and 1933, forgetting her purpose about being in San Francisco is not plausible. More plausible is the fact that her time with motherhood was by turns difficult and tragic, and represented a drain on her ambition to write.

Before the publication of *Earth Horizon*, Austin recalls the discovery of her pregnancy in a different way, again allowing for the possibility of her use of a particular narrative strategy to leave out certain aspects of her life. “I never expected to have a child.[. . .] I doubled my working hours. I hardly ate nor I hardly slept,” she said (qtd. in Fink 61). As already noted, Fink stated in her biography that Mary was not thought well

of in her neighborhood. Her lack of housekeeping skills reflected poorly on her and it was well known that most of the community's sympathies were with Wallace, and not Mary. Fink believes that her immersion in her work may have meant that she saw the coming baby as a threat and this, coupled with her disintegrating marriage to Wallace, meant that she had only her work left. Perhaps she sensed that this time before her baby's arrival would be the last concentrated time she had for writing. Two of her stories written during this time, "The Mother of Felipe" and "The Conversion of Ah Lew Sing" were later accepted for publication (Fink 63). Thus, the time during the spring and summer of 1892, when she was not yet a mother, was creatively important to Austin. Austin was also keenly aware of how this text, as she managed it, will be left for posterity and probably didn't want to be seen as a reluctant mother—like Susie had been for her.

Still seeking the approval of her mother, even as she was to become one—Austin revealed to Susie that among the "things that stood" in this section is the fact that Mary had slapped a man in the community who was known to abuse his wife. A year later she told her mother about the incident. Austin's reaction is all that the reader needs to know about the vulnerability of Mary-by-herself: "[Susie Hunter] came round after a while to saying, 'You did right, daughter; it was a risk and I wouldn't want you to do it again; but I want you should know that I think you did just right.' For a moment you could believe that she had discovered a genuine respect for Mary" (223). Despite this one-time approval, Susie Hunter never gave her blessing to any other endeavor that Mary undertook, especially her writing: "I had already written a few things [. . .] about which I could never get my mother to admit the smallest interest. She never pasted them in the

family scrapbook, as had been her habit” (Austin 256). I-Mary talks a “good game” about rebellion against her mother, but Mary-by-herself is always seeking Susie’s approval.

The birth of Austin’s daughter was a difficult time. Austin reflects upon this in a wistful fashion:

I know now, of course, that Mary was not physically constituted for child-bearing, and that the medical care accessible was not even the best for the time. [. . .] The doctor was called away in the midst of it for four hours. [. . .] On the ninth day, said her mother, any woman with any pride in herself must get up. Mary did as she was told; the next day the doctor had to be sent for, and months of shattering, debilitating consequences ensued (Austin 239).

In this passage Austin shows penitence for having the baby in difficult circumstances and for listening to her mother, who never, in this renegade portrayal, appears to have Mary’s best interests at heart. Susie makes the final break when on a later visit from her granddaughter, Susie assesses Ruth to Mary, writing: “I don’t know what you’ve done, daughter, to have such a judgment upon you” (Austin 257). They never spoke again and Mary never revealed Ruth’s difficulties to her mother, for Ruth, her long-awaited child, was mentally handicapped.

The writing had to be put to the side. T. M. Pierce acerbically plays upon Mary’s divisions of self in *Earth Horizon* when he states, “[W]ith the birth of her daughter Ruth on October 30, 1892, Mary-of-the-warming-bottle and Mary-of-the-kitchen-stove superseded Mary-of-the-writing-desk” (Pierce 32). The special needs of her child came

first and she had to consider those needs in the midst of great financial difficulty. The demands of her child, foolish husband, and house led to the third breakdown, but Mary was determined to carry on. Ironically, the need to obtain fresh air for Ruth led directly to Mary's acquisition of source material for part of her book of landmark essays, *The Land of Little Rain*. Austin would take her baby for walks to the nearby encampment of Paiute Indians. The Paiute women would fuss over pretty Ruth and then Mary would listen for hours to the tales that she used for *The Land of Little Rain*, for another short story collection, and eventually for *The Arrow-Maker* (Fink 73). Even though she was unable to write, Austin's mind was always absorbed in gathering material that would lead to creative work.

The growing realization of Ruth's inability to speak was stressful to Austin and Mary-by-herself came to the fore: "There was also the distress growing out of my increasing knowledge of what had happened to my child. I had had several talks with Dr. Woodin, in which he had repeatedly assured me that whatever had happened had happened before she was born, and that I could not be the least to blame for it" (Austin 256). Austin had to keep taking care of her daughter, and this duty was taxing business. Austin alludes to this in *Earth Horizon*, "[Mary] tried things; putting Ruth in the care of other people to see if haply they could do any better about her; employing one doctor and another" (Austin 268). However, after this, Ruth disappears from the pages of *Earth Horizon*. She had to be institutionalized. As for Wallace, he apparently was largely unable to respond to or worry about Ruth. Wallace's indifference about his daughter's welfare, coupled with Susie Hunter's rejection of Ruth, made Mary finally leave her

marriage in 1895. Clearly, it was I-Mary who left the marriage; Mary-by-herself wouldn't have left on her own. Giving up her marriage and then her daughter were the actions that freed Mary Austin the writer to become the writer that she always wanted to be. In a 1927 essay, Austin wrote, "In a way this tragic end to my most feminine adventure brought the fulfillment of my creative desire, which had begun to be an added torment by repression. Caring for a hopelessly invalid child is an expensive business. I had to write to make money" ("*Woman looks at her World*" 117). Her honesty in baldly stating her purpose in writing is not Victorian at all, and in resisting those conventions, her career has taken on a higher importance. I-Mary had taken over and made the difficult decision to go and live on her own. From this point, I-Mary narrates the rest of *Earth Horizon* and Mary-by-herself retreats from the pages of Austin's life story.

Susie Hunter's death is the sole break with Austin's structure and I-Mary is rendered temporarily vulnerable by the shock of having no living parents. In relating the incident she shows how she was emotionally affected: "I've been putting off the overwhelmingly personal event which actually happened in the summer of '96" (Austin 272). Besides the emotion revealed, Austin admits here to purposefully shaping her text. In Hurston-like fashion, Mary has a dream in which she sees her mother as a young woman and Susie reassures her and tells her not to worry. She wakes up crying and Wallace tries to comfort her, but the telegram comes the next morning that informed them of Susie Hunter's death. Susie's last words, as Austin reports, involved her: "'Take care of Mary' she said, and then no more" (273). Austin concludes her chapter by revealing the depth of her grief:

There is an element of incalculable ravaging in the loss of your mother; deep under the shock of the broken habit and the ache of present grief, there is the psychic wound, the severed root of being; such loss as makes itself felt as the companion of immortality. For how should the branch suffer, torn from the dead tree? It is only when the tree is green that the cut bough bleeds. (273)

Whatever their differences, the expression and the analogy of the passage here is even more striking than when Jennie and George Hunter died. Austin had very deep feelings for her mother that left her emotionally exposed.

Graulich sees this division of the self in *Earth Horizon* as a failure: “Perhaps the split between I-Mary and Mary-by-herself reveals Austin’s inability to reconcile her ambition and anger with her pain and loneliness. [. . .] Her defiant voice sometimes seems self-protective and it is sometimes hard to tell whether she is purposefully revealing her insecurities” (Graulich 382). I contend that the split is not a schizophrenic mode of expression, but an ingenious way of showcasing the way that women must conduct their lives in order to find peace and harmony. With constant financial problems, Austin’s life as a writer was a hard one, not unlike Hurston, who also had to divide herself or Yeziarska. Austin died almost two years after *Earth Horizon* was published and she didn’t have long to enjoy the reception of her genre-bending self-authored life writing work. However, there must have been some benefit in writing *Earth Horizon* and having the chance to express her frustrations with the autobiographical genre, both of which provided a place for Austin to “vent.” Mary Austin, of all of the women in my

study, best embodies the near insurmountable task of the worker-mother-wife characterized by Tillie Olsen in *Silences* as a feminine divided self.

One might call it the triumph of the will to write, but there is no mistaking the force of ego that Austin's decisions required. Writing well is a demanding business, Austin makes clear, and costly. There are other examples of Austin's tenacity in *Earth Horizon* that are remarkable, but one story stands out as a testimony of resistance against the turn of events in her life. Austin tells the story of how she went walking with baby Ruth and laid her under sagebrush while she retrieved a trout from a lake. These were lean, desperate times, and Mary's family needed the food for dinner. An eagle swooped down to fight Mary for the trout. The eagle tried to attack the baby to get to the trout that Mary had, but that eagle didn't know who it was tangling with. With a scratch on her arm to show for it, Mary was able to retrieve both the trout and the baby safely (Austin 247). This anecdote is a metaphor for Austin's strength in fighting whatever came her way in life. Poverty, a failing marriage, a disapproving family, and a special needs child were all scratches on her arm, but these factors did not stop her from having a writing career. There is a great deal to learn from Austin's determination to have her career in her own way and in the deliberate choices she made to portray herself in her own way in her self-authored life writing project.

Notes

Veiled Insight: the duality of Mary Austin in Earth Horizon

1. In this statement there is something more than just the desire of a pre-pubescent girl to maintain her privacy. There is a hint of real displeasure with her family's less-than-enthusiastic responses to her "scribblings".
2. Austin dismisses 'A Play to be Sung' as something that she might have read in a magazine and forgot so that she had presented its strangely titled versification as her own. It is true, though, that many young writers—some even older than Austin at this point—find a way to their own voice by aping the writing style of other admired writers. Through mimicry of others' work, bits and pieces of the new, fresh voice of the aspiring writer can come shining through. Austin's recall of her juvenilia has a wry tone, but what is also crucial is her recall of her family's reactions to these early imaginings.
3. Very often in writer's lives, some event that causes upheaval or loss will motivate the writer toward expression. In his writing memoir, *On Writing*, Stephen King reveals that he started to write after several debilitating childhood ear infections (King 14).
4. Mary Austin appears to advocate truth telling in her work, through her style of commenting on the writing task before her as she is writing, using the third person and first person alternatively to happen upon her truth.
5. That the wife of the publisher should have such an instrumental decision in the outcome of a book is ludicrous to Austin but she still persists in conducting her

- writing career. She doesn't let this or any other little incident slow her down, overwhelm her or stop her.
6. This anecdote is more proof of Austin's project of self-creation in her self-authored life writing. Maybe also keeping concerns of posterity in mind, Austin does not include this anecdote in her work. Perhaps this perception of relentless single mindedness about her writing would have been more revealing about her determination than she cared to show.
 7. As time can be fleeting for a writer, Austin's fix was to persist in her writing so that sometimes domestic concerns had to take second, third, or last place when working out a scene or some narrative problem. Coincidentally, Austin was not known as the greatest of housekeepers.
 8. In her Introduction to *The Souls of Black Folk*, Farah Jasmine Griffin points out the difficulty of the problem of the veil for DuBois, --a man utilizing this metaphor --a piece of clothing that has been solely the province of women: "While he [Du Bois] elsewhere claims to have lived behind the Veil throughout his life, here he positions himself as someone who dwells both within and just outside its cover—and, most important, as the investigator, the communicator, the native informant who can render the mysteries behind the Veil known" (xvii). This is why the use of the veil metaphor for Austin's purposes is very necessary—this investigation, communication and information of her very self are her work in her self-authored life writing project.
 9. In the 1980's, three books of feminist theory examined these ideas. Elaine Showalter most directly takes up these concerns in her insightful *The Female Malady*. The

long-standing characterizations and misunderstandings of women as mentally unstable continue to perpetuate into our society today. Mary Poovey takes time to view female health concerns in her *Uneven Developments*, and develops these considerations as a crucial matter of public health. Carroll Smith-Rosenberg discusses conventional and unconventional behaviors of Victorian women and how these behaviors perpetuated in circumstances of public health in Victorian England in *Disorderly Conduct*. Generally, the health of women was greatly misunderstood and as a reaction to these mistreatments, women often exercised power in the only way they could.

Conclusion

The price of self-creation

In a society that would not allow women to express themselves in unacceptable ways, each of these remarkable writers found expression in their self-authored life writing projects to create themselves as they saw fit. They used strategies of resistance to combat society's definition of them as women. But for the most part, these women saw themselves as professional writers and sought to posit themselves as such in their texts. As discussed in this study, critics look for more in these writing projects, like the factual truth, but they overlook the fact that fiction writers seek to tell universal truths in their work by telling lies. Tim O'Brien posits these theories in his genre-bending short story cycle *The Things They Carried* by defying the readers' attempts to categorize or classify his work. If acceptance for O'Brien's text came only reluctantly after his work's publication in 1989, then it should not be a surprise to anyone that these women, primarily writing in the first half of the twentieth century, faced harsh censure and pressure for attempting to do the same in works that were labeled "autobiographies."

For so long, critics have looked at these works in the wrong way. These have far more importance for academia than they are currently being given credit for. If all theory is autobiographical and theory is the engine that currently runs the study of literature, then it only makes sense to go back to these self-authored life writing works and see what they have in store for the future of Literary Studies. Toni Morrison, as a fiction writer herself, has been able to see how a different viewpoint on a work can possibly be transforming: "It is as if I had been looking at a fishbowl [. . .] and suddenly I saw the

bowl, the structure that transparently (and invisibly) permits the ordered life as it exists in the larger world” (17). Crispin Sartwell sees the importance of self-authored life writing too, even if he continues use of the old term of “autobiography.” He sees no distinction between autobiography and theory in that all autobiography is theory and that all theory is autobiographical. He believes that African American autobiographers, citing Zora Neale Hurston as chief among them, have led the way in this development (7). If this concept is true, then these re-creations, shaping, and management of text and patterns of resistance take on new importance in this current atmosphere in academia of the unshakable centrality of theory.

Zora Neale Hurston, for instance, is emblematic of the situation as put forth by Morrison and can apply to her situation as well as to Welty’s use of the Africanist persona of Fannie in her self-authored life writing:

As a writer reading, I came to realize the obvious: the subject of the dream is the dreamer. The fabrication of an Africanist persona is reflexive; an extraordinary meditation on the self; a powerful exploration of the fears and desires that reside in the writerly consciousness. It is an astonishing revelation of longing, of terror, of perplexity, of shame, of magnanimity. It requires hard work not to see this. (17)

Yet, many have worked hard in Hurston’s case, looking at the fish in the bowl, rather than the container itself. Her creations of her self, her discussions of her writerly development, and her points of view of the political situations and how they impact her life are practically revolutionary. Over the years since her recovery by Alice Walker,

many have looked to her essay writings and, most recently, her letters, for the revelation of Hurston's theoretical stances. These people should take another look at *Dust Tracks on a Road*.

In a the same lecture series as Toni Morrison but years earlier, Eudora Welty dared to put forth her understanding of her life as a Southerner and was lambasted by critics who wanted to know why she didn't have more boyfriends or how often she fought with Chestina. Who cares? *One Writer's Beginnings* is such a languid, beautiful tale of Welty's own mythological view of herself that her entire text stands as tribute to her insistence in redefining the conventional expectations of the self-authored writing text. The rise of these texts in the popular imagination is due in no small part to writers like Welty who showed daring in the way she played with structure and language in her life story.

It was good that, at least toward the end of her life, Lillian Smith got to see some acceptance for her ideas. Reading some of her ideas, though, in *Killers of the Dream* can be downright eerie. Smith had a keen understanding of human nature, the same keen understanding that allowed her to write novels. She predicted in her Forward to the 1961 version of her self-authored life writing that Cuba would be a point of contention for the United States. It happened the very next year. Some of her characterizations of the American character have found fulfillment in the aftermath of 9/11, as some Americans have grown more stubborn and inflexible as time goes on. Her writings and the submersion of her life story in the story of all Southerners gives weight to Toni Morrison's words: "Excising the political from the life of the mind is a sacrifice that has

proven costly” (12). Smith’s disappearance from the canon of American literature is due for an overhaul.

Anzia Yezierska, for me, is emblematic of a writer who has been ignored because of the “sentimentality” and “melodrama” written into her stories and novels. These oft-repeated terms are dismissive of women’s writing and should be unpacked and applied correctly to the appropriate work. It was Yezierska’s intention to convey how these emotions played a large role in the lives of immigrants and she does so successfully. She does so successfully in her self-authored life writing where she is the proverbial “fairy princess,” a status not readily granted to people of an ethnic culture in this county. She gives it to herself! There must be a place for these approaches, where women create themselves as they see fit, instead of suffering the derision of mostly male critics.

Finally, the tenacity of Mary Austin against all odds is an incredible testament to the endurance of women. Whatever a woman’s ethnicity, there is inspiration in the wide approaches and variety in the way that she insisted on living her life. As she documented her life, fragmented and constant commentary and all, she was unafraid to thwart conventional expectations of autobiography as linear texts with idyllic representations of childhood and revelatory expressions of personal lives lived. She changed the rules of self-authored life writing texts and, by her example, taught and still teaches lessons to aspiring writers and to those women who are aiming for any kind of career.

I titled this conclusion in economic terms because at the beginning of this project, the common element that I saw in all of these women’s careers was that they paid a terrible price for their determination to live their lives in their own way and to determine their own

destinies in their career choice. I've implied throughout, especially with Yeziarska's work, that it was the intention of such women to showcase the harsh depiction of their lives, portraying it so that others would reflect carefully on their life choices before holding anyone up as a "role model." It is almost as if a writer of Yeziarska's intelligence had anticipated what Jill Ker Conway believed about the importance of self-authored life writings--that it is the responsibility of women in high positions to inscribe their lives for those who may follow.

Whether Yeziarska or any other woman represented in the writing of this project would agree, these women are role models for any aspiring writer. In these times of shifting priorities in the publishing world and shrinking readership, anyone who really wants to persist in this difficult career can find sources of strength in the life stories of these women. Besides this, these women sought to define themselves apart from anyone's expectations, something that should also be celebrated. Although this right is often taken for granted these days, women are still bound by expectation of marriage, family, and caretaking responsibilities and have to fight mightily to break free from them in order to do whatever they might wish to do. Hurston, Welty, Smith, Yeziarska, and Austin have forged a pathway to self-creation using stances of resistance that have not changed in importance or shifted in meaning over the remainder of the twentieth century. Their works, as theory, have a lot to say to contemporary audiences and the work that they started still remains unfinished. Women of today would do well to heed the testimony that their lives have served and to use their life lessons as guidelines for ways to cope with today's multiple roles and contrasting expectations.

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