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*Illinois State University*, [ssguede@ilstu.edu](mailto:ssguede@ilstu.edu)

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# BELIEVING MARY KARR

Stephanie R. Guedet

224 Pages

*Believing Mary Karr* examines how belief, represented in the memoirs of Mary Karr, works in our contemporary moment. This examination is supported by the argument that our identities and the stories we tell about them are always constructions of belief, and that these beliefs are ultimately relational, enacted in the intersubjective relationship between writers and readers of autobiography. This dissertation provides the fields of both rhetoric and life writing studies not only an awareness of how ideas about belief—how *beliefs* about belief—have already shaped our scholarly imagination but also the possibilities a rhetoric of belief can offer to future conversations about what it means to read and write autobiography in America today. Engaging theorists such as Graham Ward, Paul Ricoeur, Jessica Benjamin, Michel Foucault, and Judith Butler, this dissertation examines various beliefs, both sacred and secular, represented in Karr's *The Liars' Club*, *Cherry*, *Lit*, and *The Art of Memoir*.

*Believing Mary Karr* suggests that stories of belief, epitomized by Mary Karr's memoirs, offer readers an embodied experience that operates through the expectant affects of desire and hope and that also forms, re-forms, and transforms their own structures of believing. Thus, such narratives reveal their power on at least two levels. Individually, they invite us to reconsider the role of belief in our own lives. Collectively, they hold the potential to reinscribe pervading cultural myths by acknowledging how beliefs help create shared worlds.

KEYWORDS: Rhetoric, Life writing, Mary Karr, Belief, Memoir

BELIEVING MARY KARR

STEPHANIE R. GUEDET

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

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Department of English

ILLINOIS STATE UNIVERSITY

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BELIEVING MARY KARR

STEPHANIE R. GUEDET

COMMITTEE MEMBERS:

Amy E. Robillard, Chair

Susan Kim

Brian Rejack

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*Out of great suffering come great truths—not just intellectual concepts, but ideas informed by feeling. The word passion comes from the Latin passio, which refers to Jesus's suffering on the cross. Anytime you take a stranger's agony into your body, you're changed by it, refined into a vessel better able to give and receive love, which is the sole purpose of being alive. The best memoirs I've ever read deliver such salvation.*

—Mary Karr

It is both an honor and a pleasure to acknowledge all of the people who have accompanied me on this journey, whose ideas, inspiration, support, and voices are evident on every single page. I cannot imagine a project more *personal* than a dissertation, and this one in particular is a direct reflection of a number of very special persons. First and foremost, thank you to my committee, without whom this dissertation couldn't have happened. Dr. Susan Kim, for her amazing linguistic prowess and insightful suggestions. To Dr. Brian Rejack, who joined the team enthusiastically and whose thoughtful connections have already given me lots of ideas for future projects. “Dr. Susan” and “Dr. Brian,” your interdisciplinary perspectives have enriched this dissertation in so many ways. Thank you from the bottom of my heart.

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And for my beloved grandmother, Dorothy Guedet, who first taught me to love words. Who would have loved this.

S. R. G.

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## CHAPTER I

### SINGULAR STORIES IN A COLLECTIVE WORLD: AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL

#### NARRATIVE AND THE RHETORICS OF BELIEF

*Understanding is the reward of faith. Therefore, seek not to understand that you may believe,  
but believe that you may understand.*  
—St. Augustine of Hippo

*To understand is to understand one's life in front of the text.*  
—Paul Ricoeur

*If philosophy is defined as inquiry into certain truth, then what I pursue here is not philosophy  
but rhetoric: the art of discovering warrantable beliefs and improving those beliefs in shared  
discourse.*  
—Wayne C. Booth

#### **What Makes Stories Believable?**

A few months ago, Bob the cat disappeared. After almost eighteen years of living a relatively posh lifestyle with my parents, Bob, on an increasingly rare trip outside, simply never returned home. It was only a couple of days before my parents gave up hope and put away his food bowl and litter box. Considering Bob's particular feline tendencies, absences—even up to three days or so—were not uncommon. However, with his impending old age, they had grown less and less frequent. He had learned to appreciate the comforts that came with aging, just like my parents—a cozy chair, the remote control, heat, pillows. Once a vicious street fighter who protected his realm with vigilance, Bob no longer cared as much when the occasional squirrel, bunny, or even neighborhood cat roamed his yard. These days he preferred naps on my dad's lap to a nocturnal rumble. It hadn't always been, and he had the battle scars to prove it. His tabby coat was perpetually covered in dirt; he was missing half an ear and his entire tail. When my

parents caught his tail in the garage door, an accident that required a complete amputation, we joked that he was living up to his name.

Bob held an unusual place in our family's history of pets, and an even more rare spot in my dad's heart, especially for a cat. Bob was my dad's cat, and Dad was Bob's human. Eighteen years ago, my dad returned from a day of painting at our rental property with a little yellow kitten who had climbed up the tall ladder after my dad, announcing his presence with an insistent meow that only got louder the older he got and the larger his demands. When Dad first brought Bob home, I was in a transition and briefly living with my parents. Dad informed Mom and me that *Bob was an outside cat* and was not to be let in. My dad seemed convinced that Bob was simply passing through on his way to bigger and better things (sort of like his oldest daughter?) and didn't want him to get too comfortable. Bob had other plans. Slowly and casually, so as not to raise any suspicions, Bob made brief appearances in the house. Mom put out food for him, and Dad gave him a name. Sometimes, when Dad would notice Bob walking through the living room, he would remind us that *Bob is an outside cat*, a rule that we seemed to be forgetting. But Bob had his own agenda, and his devotion to my father was undeniable. It seemed as if out of all the humans in the world, Bob had chosen my dad as his companion, and to the utter shock of all of us, my dad seemed to allow this grungy kitten to claim his heart. One day, while my dad was otherwise occupied, Mom snuck Bob to the vet for a check up and shots. And the rest is history. Bob was the last pet in my parents' lives. Like the baby of the family, he was indulged in ways that would make our previous kitties roll in their graves.

When Bob left, my parents were devastated. Immediately Mom assumed that he had gone somewhere to die, but that seemed unlikely since he was in fine health, certainly not the spry kitten he once was, but also not obviously ill. I assured them he would return; after all, he always

had. When a week passed, I could no longer offer any believable reasons to explain his absence. My mom told me they worried that Bob had met a worse fate—had been hit by a car or perhaps torn apart by another animal. But then they decided to believe a different story about Bob. Possibly, wanting to spare my parents the sadness of his death (possibly he had a terminal illness he didn't want to reveal?), he left to simply fall asleep peacefully under a bush somewhere. Or maybe, just maybe, some older couple—desperate for a cat of their own—found Bob prowling through their bushes and brought him into their home to feed and love him. Bob, probably renamed something like Mittens or Whiskers, would live out the remainder of his life as an indoor cat, pampered by these benevolent caretakers who fed him canned tuna and actually enjoyed ushering him in and out a thousand times a day.

Beginning a dissertation with the story of Bob the cat might seem a bit misguided or even silly; however, I was really struck by how this simple narrative captured my interest in belief and story and how they work together. There are so many possible stories behind Bob's mysterious disappearance. Whatever story each of us conjures up to explain Bob's disappearance is colored by a lifetime of other stories—other *beliefs*—about pets, relationships, death, the afterlife, nature, and thousands of other narratives we've both learned and written to help us understand our world. *What makes certain stories believable?* This is the question motivating this dissertation. It is a question that has driven my academic, personal, and even spiritual life since as early as I can remember when I was taught to believe a very specific story about the world and my place in it. I wouldn't have called it a "story" then, however, as that word conjures up make-believe tales of children living in boxcars or hiding in wardrobes. No, the story I learned—complete with talking snakes, floating arks, parted seas, resurrections, and virgin births—was *true*. And because of its truth, I was taught to believe in it. This belief didn't feel like a choice, like believing whether or

not Narnia existed or whether the Bears were a better football team than the Cowboys. As a young child, I didn't choose this story so much as it was chosen for me. Because of my parents, their stories, their church, my small-town community, and thousands of other factors I can't even begin to recognize, I was destined to believe. Socionarratologist Arthur W. Frank calls our personal collection of stories a "narrative habitus," or the "embodied sense of attraction, indifference, or repulsion people feel in response to stories; the intuitive, usually tacit sense that some story is for us or not for us; that it expresses possibilities of which we are or can be a part, or that it represents a world in which we have no stake" (53). In other words, we continue to choose and be chosen by stories and this process both reflects and determines our beliefs.

The stories we believe can alter lives and justify deaths. On June 12, 2016, Omar Mateen opened fire on a nightclub in Orlando, massacring 49 members of the LGBTQ community, in one of the worst shootings our country has ever experienced. While most people agree the attack was a horrific tragedy, they seem to have difficulty agreeing on some of the surrounding details, specifically the motivations prompting the shooting. Was this an ISIS-motivated terrorist attack? Was this a homophobic hate crime? Was this an inevitable outcome of lenient gun control laws? Whatever story we believe about that terrible night has incredible consequences—politically, socially, culturally, spiritually—and we continue to feel the reverberations in our communities, government, schools, churches, and other institutions. The stories we tell ourselves and others are based on what we believe to be true or what we want others to believe to be true. Frank explains, "Stories always pose that question: what kind of truth is being told?" And yet, "Stories never resolve that question; their work is to remind us that we have to live with complicated truths," as Orlando has taught us (5). The stories we tell about our lives—as autobiographical

narratives—function in the same way, inviting writers and readers to engage in questions about the meaning of truth and the consequences of belief.

One of the authors whose stories call for such consideration is Mary Karr. In her trilogy of memoirs, *The Liars' Club*, *Cherry*, and *Lit*, Karr portrays decades of experiences, revealing a multitude of beliefs about her self, her past, her work, her relationships, and her God. I chose Karr as the subject for my inquiry because of my own beliefs. I *believe* her. I believe her stories to be true, not necessarily in an “accurate,” fact-checking, verifiable way—although Karr is a vocal proponent of such examination—but in the way of fitting into my own narrative habitus, of effecting belief in my own life.<sup>1</sup> I am not alone. Karr’s notable popularity with readers and critics

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<sup>1</sup> For an extensive discussion of the role of truth in memoir, please see Karr’s interview in *The Paris Review* (2009) and her recent book *The Art of Memoir*. Of a memoirist’s deliberate choice to falsify experience, she writes, “Memoirists can make the mistake of treating readers as enemies and trying to dupe them. I feel like the reader has given up twenty-plus dollars, and I owe her a vivid experience without lying” (Fortini 81). However, she also acknowledges the fallibility of memory, and the temptation to fill in details where none can be remembered. She writes, “I don’t try to reconstruct empty spots. I’ve been vigorously encouraged by various editors to fictionalize” (82). She explains, “In fiction, you manufacture events to fit a concept or an idea. With memoir, you have the events and manufacture or hopefully deduce the concept. You don’t remember something? Write fiction...If you see the memoir as constructing a false self to sell to some chump audience, then you’ll never know the truth, because the truth is derived from what actually happened. Using novelistic devices, like reconstructed dialogue or telescoping time, isn’t the same as ginning up fake episodes” (82). Autobiography scholar Nancy Miller lends another perspective in describing her strategy for writing about an event in her past: “I could write down what I remembered; or I could craft a memoir. One might be the truth; the other, a good story...As a writer, the question of what ‘really’ happened is literary—or at least textual. I will know it when I write it. When I write it, the truth will lie in the writing. But the writing may not be the truth, it may only look like it. To me” (Eakin, *The Ethics* 251). While the issue of truth in memoir isn’t the focus of this dissertation, *belief* in memoir is. What does a memoir need to do or be in order for us to believe it? How and why do certain memoirists inspire belief? What happens when a memoirist isn’t believable? The answers to these questions are located in our own beliefs about language, story, fiction, facts, as well as thousands of others. However, the impact of autobiographical hoaxes continues to problematize those beliefs. What if a memoirist is purposely trying to deceive readers? Can an inauthentic memoir reflect or inspire “true” beliefs? The answers to these questions, while outside the work of my dissertation, are suggestive of further exploration.

alike suggests her stories resonate with others in similar ways. In this dissertation, I attempt to answer my original question, “What makes certain stories believable?” by analyzing belief in the work of Mary Karr.

I’ve chosen Mary Karr’s stories as the focus of this examination for a number of reasons. First, her books continue to resonate culturally; she is even currently partnering with *Showtime* on a new series adapted from her memoirs. Critics, too, appreciate her work. In the *New York Review of Books*, Francine Prose explains, “It’s easy to understand why so many people were drawn to Karr’s book. She is a gifted storyteller who can make horrific events seem grotesquely funny without minimizing the pain and fear they caused.” And, some of the most esteemed scholars in the field of life writing also recognize Karr’s contributions. In his recent book *Living Autobiographically: How We Create Identity in Narrative*, Paul John Eakin devotes an entire chapter to examining the identity of Pokey and her status as narrator in *The Liars’ Club* because Karr, he explains, is one of the autobiographers who interests him most (64). However, I found that although her work has been present in the public eye since 1995 with the publication of *The Liars’ Club*, few lengthy examinations of her memoirs exist. In fact, the majority of scholarship concerning Karr comes from religious sources, such as *National Catholic Reporter* and *Christian Century*. While these articles focus on the spiritual themes in her memoirs and poetry, and especially her Catholic conversion, none of them examines her beliefs from a broader and secular perspective. Because Karr’s writing appeals to both religious and nonreligious readers alike, and because a rhetoric of belief is not essentially bound to spirituality, her texts provide a dynamic space for inquiry.

The work on this dissertation started four years ago when I took Life Writing with Dr. Amy Robillard and wrote a paper on my dad’s conversion in his late 20s to the

evangelical/fundamentalist Christian faith that I was raised in. For that project I studied not only the autobiographical genre of conversion narrative, but the phenomenon itself, particularly as a rhetorical trope that shapes the lives of converts (and their daughters) in very particular ways. I interviewed my dad for the project, and the final paper was a hybrid of scholarship applied to his story juxtaposed with the story of my own conversion, or deconversion, that ultimately happened when my faith was put into dialogue with critical theory, when my beliefs changed as dramatically and permanently as his did. That study and the questions that it uncovered became the foundation of my work in my doctoral program.

I'm interested in belief because from the time I was old enough to understand, I understood myself as a "believer." This designation, applied to those in my parents' religion who embraced a specific and prescriptive set of beliefs, distinguished us from "nonbelievers." This distinction was clear and certain; you either were or you weren't. It wasn't enough to simply "believe" in God, either; the Catholics or Methodists or, God forbid, Mormons, that populated my neighborhood and classroom and softball team did not make the cut. *Unbelievers*. While other parts of my identity were obviously important—I was a young, white girl growing up in a conservative, small, Midwestern town—they were completely overshadowed by my religious self as it determined whether my future would be spent in a glorious Kingdom with streets of gold or a fiery pit of eternal pain. In other words, belief, for me, has always been a matter of life and death.

I attended a private, liberal Christian college for my undergraduate degree. At the center of the campus stands a tall, spiraling tower that shoots off twin lights that cross each other's paths high in the night sky. One light symbolizes faith, the other learning—their reflection was meant to remind us of the integration of faith and learning, a relationship that didn't mean much



to me then but is the heart of my scholarship now. St. Augustine wrote of this relationship: “Seek not to understand that you may believe, but believe that you may understand” (*Tractates*, tractate XXIX). I confess that my own idea of faith, my own faith, is itself problematic at best, mostly nonexistent when I need it most and always popping up when I certainly don’t. It’s not an easy subject for me to write about—belief—but it is an essential one. In that first Life Writing class, Dr. Robillard insisted that we write about something that we didn’t already know, something that was worth figuring out, even if it made us feel a bit sick inside. Unlike the writing I did for my other courses, my life writing revealed the connections between me and my scholarship, situating my most meaningful personal experiences within a larger, academic context. The choice to do this kind of work, the kind that not only admits but actually requires the exploration of the personal, does sometimes make me feel sick inside. It carries me far beyond the narrow belief system of my childhood while refusing to offer truths in its place. This dissertation, then, serves a purpose beyond the fulfillment of a degree; it is my attempt to figure out how belief works cognitively, affectively, and spiritually, but also personally.

The study of rhetoric, of the ways that language does things, is the only way I know how I do that. Because at the end of the day, when my beliefs are inapplicable, inconsistent, inaccessible, or invisible, language *isn’t*. It exists—it lives and breathes and creates the stories that bring sense to our lives. It gives us something to believe in, even if that something, like language itself, is elusive, contingent, and ephemeral. In her third memoir, *Lit*, Mary Karr quotes Ernst Cassirer: “The same function which the image of God performs, the same tendency to permanent existence, may be ascribed to the uttered sounds of language.” Karr explains, “He meant that words shaped our realities, our perceptions, giving them an authority God had for other generations...” and continues, “words would define me, govern me and determine me.

Words warranted my devotion...” (40). This is belief that I can understand, as I have found in language, in stories, a kind of truth that mostly escaped me in the faith of my past. Rhetoric has taught me of the possibilities of language to do things, to *change* things, including our beliefs. The study of life writing has shown me the particular power of language when it’s used to construct narratives—stories—that teach us interesting and new ways to think about what it means to be human. My dissertation is my attempt to bring all of these (at times) disparate interests, loves, experiences, and beliefs of my own into a conversation that I hope will be useful to others.

In this introductory chapter, I provide a theoretical context for asking this question and situate my inquiry in the fields of rhetoric and life writing. To do this, I highlight modern and contemporary definitions of belief, rhetoric, and autobiography to show how they have shaped and been shaped by our history and culture and to provide the framework for my argument that is essential to an examination of belief in life writing is a rhetorical approach—a consideration of what beliefs *do* in the stories we write. To position this approach in current rhetoric studies, I highlight Sharon Crowley’s definition of a contemporary theory of rhetoric, inspired by ancient rhetorical theorists, that recognizes the significance of belief to our desires and values. Essential to a consideration of *what beliefs do* is *how beliefs work*; here, I turn to discourse, specifically autobiographical narrative, as the means by which beliefs, as expressions of ideology, circulate socially, culturally, and individually. Next, in a brief review of pertinent scholarship, I acknowledge the roles that various rhetorics of belief have played in life writing studies, particularly in the contemporary theorization of autobiographical identity and truth. After establishing the motivation and context for my project, and in an attempt to interrogate what beliefs do and how they work in my own scholarly narrative, I acknowledge some of my own

beliefs—about story, truth, discourse, and identity—that underpin this dissertation. And, finally, I provide a short summary of each subsequent chapter as well as an explanation of how it connects with my larger argument.

### **A Rhetoric of Belief**

Sharon Crowley's 2006 text *Toward a Civil Discourse: Rhetoric and Fundamentalism*, in which she examines the incompatibility in current political discourse between fundamental Christianity and liberalism, is an important study of the possibilities of rhetoric as a means of bridging impasses. At the heart of the problem that Crowley identifies are the varying roles *belief* plays in both discourses. And while Crowley recognizes that her book leaves us with more questions than answers, she challenges her readers to find other openings—or paths of invention—that rhetorical inquiry might provide. This dissertation, a rhetorical examination of belief in the stories we tell about ourselves, is one such opening. Although my interest in the rhetorics of belief serves different purposes than Crowley's, I use her work as an example of the kind of potential rhetorical studies holds in this particular contemporary moment—a moment explicitly shaped and continually negotiated by our personal and cultural beliefs. Now over a decade after Crowley's text was published, our public discourse reveals a culture that is arguably even more polarized than it was then. At the same time, the popularity of autobiographical writing is not only thriving but “booming” over the past two decades. Never before have we been presented with so many life stories, and not only in the publication of autobiographies and memoirs. The Internet has advanced hundreds of new platforms for the telling of our stories, from personal blogs to Twitter, Facebook posts to podcasts. Julie Rak, in her book *Boom! Manufacturing Memoir for the Popular Market*, argues that the growth in production of nonfiction can help us understand how life writing has the “potential to change the imagined

relations...readers have with the lives of others” (4). This, Rak suggests, “is the source of [its] power and fascination at the present time” (4). This connection between writer and reader—between individual and community—is what implicates our singular stories in our collective worlds. Thus, autobiography has the potential both to enforce and to disrupt the cultural norms that circulate in our nation, prompting Megan Brown to observe, “Life writing has a considerable role to play in US culture” (“Learning” 373). As a rhetorician concentrating in life writing studies, I examine how these roles, including the potential our personal stories, and the beliefs they represent, affect our cultural and historical narratives.

My examination of how belief—represented in autobiography—works in our contemporary moment is rooted in the assumption that our identities and the stories we tell about them (whether we identify as religious or not) are always constructions of belief. Furthermore, these beliefs are ultimately relational, enacted in the relationship between writers and readers of autobiography. My dissertation provides the fields of both rhetoric and life writing studies an awareness of how our ideas about belief—how our *beliefs* about belief—have already shaped our scholarly imagination, and it also gestures toward the possibilities that a rhetoric of belief can offer to future conversations about what it means to read and write autobiography in America today. A rhetorical theorization of belief, indeed a reimagination of rhetoric *as* a method of belief, offers life writing studies an important critical perspective for engaging autobiographical narrative by bringing rhetoric into conversation with life writing, a conversation that is long overdue and rich in opportunities. Life writing scholars Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson argue that crucial to autobiographical acts is a “persuasion to belief” (*Reading* 34). It is this concern with belief, both constructed and represented in language, that is the business of rhetoric. The study of rhetoric is, in many ways, the study of belief; in order to do our work, we must have

faith in language to *change things*.<sup>2</sup> Smith and Watson, Brown, and Crowley are hailing us to account for the way our own beliefs are enacted and shaped by language, particularly in the stories of our lives, an inquiry with implications for both rhetoric and life writing studies.

My work engages life writing scholarship from an overtly rhetorical perspective. While there certainly have been significant rhetorical contributions to the field from such noted scholars as Megan Brown, Suzanne Diamond, and Laura Gray-Rosendale, a productive space exists for further inquiry. As Julie Rak notes in her review of Diamond's 2011 *Compelling Confessions*, much of the previous work on life writing in rhetorical studies focuses on the pedagogical implications of personal disclosure in academic writing. She recognizes the value of scholarship addressing autobiography from a multitude of disciplinary perspectives and hopes for a future emphasis in the field on rhetorical approaches, as life writing scholars who are interested in personal narrative forms and the ethics of public identity production would find this approach "compelling" and "useful." This scholarship, she concludes, would "go a long way towards telling the rest of us how important the study of rhetoric is to the development of criticism and theory about life writing" (826). This dissertation is a contribution toward the scholarship Rak is calling for.

One way my work contributes to this growing field is by acknowledging the ways we think about belief historically and culturally in order to emphasize how it is currently working in

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<sup>2</sup> Again, the phenomenon of the autobiographical hoax complicates the relationship between rhetoric and belief. If an author either consciously or unconsciously deceives us, manipulating rhetoric as a means of purposely hiding his "true" beliefs, can such a relationship exist? Is it possible to hide our beliefs in language or are they always already apparent? In other words, are our stories always reflective of our beliefs? While these questions have significant implications for my work, I am not attempting to address them in this dissertation. From a rhetorical perspective, I am less interested in whether a belief is "true" or not than if and how the belief *works*.

the ways we write and read contemporary autobiography.<sup>3</sup> To do this, I examine the work of Mary Karr, one of the most celebrated contemporary memoir writers often credited for starting the recent memoir boom with the publication of *The Liars' Club* (Fortini 56). Her confessional stories, detailing a childhood of deprivation and violence, an adolescence of rebellion and sexual awakening, and an adulthood of alcoholism and redemption, have been met with both popular and critical acclaim. And while the Catholic belief that motivated her ultimate conversion might be the most recognized by readers, her stories are rich with beliefs about art, language, relationships, and other provocative issues that I explore.

### **What Belief Is: A Historical/Cultural Perspective**

Defining belief is hardly a task for one dissertation; in fact, many of the most enlightened minds in history have dedicated entire lives to this project. Plato, Descartes, Freud, Kant, Hume, Žižek, Damasio—this limited sample of names reflect celebrated scholars who have struggled to understand why and how we believe and whose work has significantly impacted our contemporary belief systems. However, rather than focus extensively on any one philosophy or

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<sup>3</sup> The terms *autobiography* and *memoir* have various meanings, histories, and connotations within the field of life writing studies and popular culture. “Autobiography,” a term that emerged in the Enlightenment and continues to be definitive today, remains the most widely used and understood name for self-referential texts. This term has been challenged as a result of postmodern and postcolonial critiques of the Enlightenment, however, because of its historical association as a story that privileges an autonomous individual and universal life story in Western tradition (Smith and Watson 3). In contemporary popular and scholarly arenas, the term *memoir* has been enjoying popularity and is often used to distinguish “autobiographical works characterized by density of language and self-reflexivity about the writing process” (4). In *Bequest and Betrayal: Memoirs of a Parent's Death*, Nancy K. Miller uses the term “memoir” as it captures a dynamic, postmodernism in its movement between “the private and the public, subject and object” (2), leading Smith and Watson to conclude that it seems more “malleable” than autobiography, “foregrounding historical shifts and intersecting cultural formations” (4). This definition of memoir seems closer to the concerns of my project. Further, it is the term Karr uses.

theory, a more productive approach might be to examine how our historical and cultural discourses about belief have impacted our contemporary ideas of what belief is and does—in other words, to examine our *beliefs about belief*. In his text *Unbelievable: Why We Believe and Why We Don't*, Graham Ward explores the impact various developments in neuroscience have had on our understandings of mind and consciousness over the past thirty years. Addressing this “quantum shift” by exploring the biology of believing, Ward offers a dynamic definition of belief as, “a mode of liminal processing, related to embodiment and affectivity, which ‘thinks’ more quickly and reacts more instinctively than our conscious rational deliberation. Beneath and prior to interpretation and the conflicts of meaning lie sets of remembered associations and assumptions woven tightly into the process of how we *make* sense” (12). His emphasis on “make” is instructive; these associations and assumptions—and the “sense” of our beliefs—have been taught and learned. Resembling Pierre Bourdieu’s *habitus*, or encultured dispositions, socialized mindsets, and biases, beliefs are not “innate” or “genetic.” Sometimes, they aren’t even articulated. Ward establishes this definition to contrast with a traditional philosophical view of belief as decisions or attitudes and ideas that require judgment (12). This differentiation is significant. If beliefs happen *before* judgment, as “dispositions toward judgments,” Ward suggests that it’s possible to infer that beliefs inform perception, interpretation, and action prior to rationalization—thus, how we *make* sense. If actions can precede consciousness and interpretation, the process doesn’t follow a linear route from perception, belief, and thought to interpretation and action. Instead, Ward imagines “not a linear process but a complex set of feedback and feedforward loops in which believing is deeply implicated” (13). This architecture of belief, with its spatial and temporal irregularities, offers interesting intersections with *narrative* as a story of connected events.

If belief can happen before cognition, as Ward argues, then it is not simply cognitive and can inform why we explain things the way we do. And although our beliefs are intimately connected to our affective states, belief is not an emotion. Ward explains, "...it is a mental behavior: it is involved in certain neural and somatic processes, with effects on both cognitive and emotional life; both intellectual and corporeal activities" (*Unbelievable* 13). He defines belief, then, as a *disposition*, and argues that while belief can be conscious and rationally justified through reflective critique, it is not "solely conscious" (29). He uses the term "disposition" because belief is "disposed towards"; "it looks beyond the individual who believes towards some object or person or condition in the world" (30). While the depth and range of much of Ward's work is outside the scope of this dissertation, his views on the politics of belief—or what makes a belief believable—are essential to a consideration of the *rhethorics* of belief.

However, before I consider further what makes beliefs believable, a limited historical and cultural perspective of belief and the changing structures of belief in the West can provide important context for that analysis. Ward traces the two competing models of knowledge and understanding in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, "one based on empirical sensation, perception, thought and judgment, the other based upon intuition, feeling, and imagination," and argues that although we recognize Enlightenment objectivity as "myths masking various levels of human interest and cultural bias," we still prioritize the objectivity of a standpoint over the subjectivity of opinion (*Unbelievable* 121). The relationship between belief and knowledge or reason has been debated as early as the allegory of Plato's cave; however, the modern struggle between both concepts probably best exemplifies how various hierarchal positions can dramatically impact our cultural attitude toward belief. Crowley exposes this hierarchy with an examination of the etymology of



*doxa* as beliefs, typically translated as “opinion” by 19<sup>th</sup> century translators. This misinterpretation is problematic, as it can mislead contemporary readers who read within a modern epistemological tradition that privileges reason, “theoretically available to all” over opinion, which tends to take “the flavor of the particular” (47). *Doxa*, in the ancient Greek, is frequently compared to *episteme*, highlighting the distinction between opinion as “an inferior grade of cognition” and *episteme* as “true knowledge” (47). The relationship between the two, since at least the meditations of René Descartes, continues to challenge scholars who have focused their attention on consciousness and knowledge. Epistemology—as the investigation of what distinguishes justified belief from knowledge—came from this work in an attempt to explain human understanding and its relation to the senses of the material world. The philosophies of Locke, Berkeley, Hume, and Kant followed, paving the way for the debates between empiricism, idealism, and phenomenology (Ward 104). These debates shaped the modern understanding of belief—an understanding that resists a postmodern rejection of dualities and prevails today.

While a thorough exploration of these debates is outside the scope of my dissertation, a brief look at John Locke’s theory is essential in order to recognize its lingering influence on a contemporary conceptualization of belief as separate from knowledge. His goal, in his 1690 *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* is to “inquire into the origin, certainty, and extent of human knowledge, together with the grounds and degrees of belief, opinion, and assent” (I. 1. 2). Knowledge is defined as “the perception of the agreement or disagreement of two ideas”; ideas represent what can be perceived through the senses. Belief, on the other hand, involves “the admitting or receiving of any proposition, upon arguments or proofs that are found to persuade us to receive it as true, without certain knowledge that it is so” (XV. 15. 3). With this move, not

only does Locke clearly separate belief from knowledge, but he also yokes it to persuasion, placing it squarely within the realm of rhetoric. However, even more significant than Locke's characterization of belief is his definition of certain knowledge (Truth), a phenomenon that extends beyond persuasion, or the rhetorical process of *making* someone believe (Ward, *Unbelievable* 130). The cultural politics that followed from this theory are unmistakable: knowledge is certain and transparent and untainted by belief or opinion. Ward posits that Locke's differentiation, based on the dualism of world and subject, lingers with us today, and can be discovered

in a culture in which human beings are valued as being rational above being emotional or imaginative; conceived as free individuals with a will to choose between various options; recognized as moral agents to the degree that they discipline desire for the sake of duty; respected for their abilities to consider any number of arguments and arrive at a considered judgment of what is the case... (122)

This describes a culture where belief is viewed as a weaker form of knowledge, as mere opinion. And while postmodernity has exposed the myth of objectivity, the lingering effects of this hierarchy are all too apparent to scholars in the humanities and human sciences who struggle for resources and support compared to the financial leverage of the "hard" sciences (122). As a professor of divinity, theology, and literature, Ward's overarching project is to change the way we see believing—and for both those who are religious and not—to appreciate the role faith plays in our lives. However, as a student of rhetoric, my interest is not specifically *how* we believe but *what* and *why*. What makes a belief believable? We can begin to answer this question by turning to Crowley's argument for a postmodern theory of rhetoric, specifically as it functions as a method of inquiry into life writing.

## **What Belief Does: A Contemporary Rhetoric of Belief**

In her text, Crowley points to the inability of “liberal rhetorical theory”—a rhetoric that is based on appeals to reason and evidence—to address the increasingly polarized viewpoints dominating today’s political and cultural climates. Instead, she offers a rhetoric appropriate for a “postmodern setting” that she argues “will work better in the present climate than liberal argumentation because it offers a more comprehensive range of appeals, many of which are considered inappropriate in liberal thought” (4). This rhetoric calls back to an antiquity in which rhetorical theorists understood the consequence of desires and values to the maintenance of beliefs (4). Rather than ignore or reject belief as a valid element of argument, as modernism might, Crowley acknowledges “that deeply held beliefs are so tightly bound up with the very bodies of believers that liberals’ relatively bloodless and cerebral approach to argument is simply not persuasive to people who do not accept liberalism or whose commitment to liberalism is less important to them than are other sorts of convictions” (4). If modernism continues to haunt not only our perception of belief, but also the ways we believe, could it also still impact our beliefs about rhetoric? That concern seems to underpin Crowley’s work on the intimate relationship between rhetoric and belief. She explains, “Despite its longstanding centrality to Western culture...rhetorical theory suffered a series of insurmountable intellectual challenges with the triumph of modernity, so much so that during the late nineteenth century rhetoric virtually ceased to be studied in European and American schools and colleges” (34). The moment that rhetoric is fixed to either persuasion or belief—and belief is seen as “lesser than” knowledge—rhetoric, as a legitimate pursuit, generates suspicion as “the dangerous capacity for unduly influencing others” (Marback 1). We are all too familiar with the pejorative “mere rhetoric” that suggests a speaker’s intent to deceive as well as an audience’s tendency to be duped. “Mere rhetoric” is distasteful

and manipulative, reserved for politicians and preachers: “Mere rhetoric is the kind of rhetoric Plato disparaged as cookery, Augustine likened to cosmetics, and Bacon dismissed as trickery; it is the kind of rhetoric Kant reviled as unworthy of respect” (1). Richard Marback argues that the anxiety and distrust we feel toward “mere rhetoric” is a reaction to the vulnerability we feel when we allow ourselves to be persuaded. The deception possible through rhetoric—a deception that Plato, Augustine, and Kant argue is impossible for us to detect—can lead to shame and regret, thus making us vulnerable to others. Rhetoric in this conceptualization, as separate from and less than knowledge, operates like this: “the more we know for ourselves what persuades us the better, for the more we know, the less likely we are to be unduly persuaded by someone else” (2). If I’m persuaded, my beliefs might have to change, and this possibility makes me vulnerable to others. In this way, we *want* to believe in an objective reality, even as we believe in its impossibility. Crowley’s examination of the decreasing potential for “civil discourse” reveals a similar impasse; people do not enter into argument because they don’t want to risk having their minds changed (30).

Crowley’s study examines the impact of Locke as well as other noteworthy scholars—George Campbell, I. A. Richards, and Wayne Booth—on liberal rhetorical theory, arguing that such a view of rhetoric still hopes that “appeals to understanding can overcome beliefs stemming from passionate commitment or life circumstances” (43). Crowley argues that modern ideologies, particularly the formation of the modern subject, have constituted a dominant contemporary liberal rhetorical theory that views rhetoric as working in this way: “a free, knowing, and sovereign agent is moved by circumstances to survey the landscape; develop appropriate arguments concerning it; clothe them in persuasive language; and repeat them to an audience of equally free, knowing, and sovereign subjects who hear/read without impediment or

distortion” (36). Liberal rhetoricians take the individual mind as a starting point. Because liberal rhetorical theory hopes that reasoning can produce a consensus, Crowley argues the only way to achieve this is to discount or eliminate dissent: “that is, to quiet or exclude different points of view” (44). This approach to rhetoric both privileges understanding and considers it the primary goal; thus, it avoids the possibility that audiences may understand the rhetor’s message but resist it. Crowley also argues that liberal thought separates values from reason, locating them in human preferences and emotional responses. When reason is considered the primary method of public discussion and debate—because it allegedly works the same for everyone—then the distinction between “disembodied, public reason and private, passionate evaluation” becomes even more sharply defined (37). Crowley, like Wayne Booth before her, imagines a rhetoric that brings ideas, and therefore people, closer together rather than drives them further apart. Booth writes:

The belief that the primary mental act of man is to assent to truth rather than to detect error, “to take in” and even “to be taken in,” rather than “to resist being taken in,” is of course not original with me. Notions of “in-spiration” have been found in every historical period, and regardless of who or what provides the breath, they have always entailed the mysterious process of two becoming one. When I assent to your thought...the line between us grows dim; in the ideal case it in a sense disappears... (xvi)

Rhetoric, in this conceptualization, operates not separate from but because of belief. It requires an act of faith before a spirit of doubt. While Booth’s “mysterious process of two becoming one” could be interpreted by Crowley as an attempt to erase difference or “quiet” points of view, it could also be read as a belief in the possibility of understanding another. To “resist being taken in” doesn’t have to represent a passive acquiescence; it could reflect, as Booth suggests, an acceptance rather than rejection of the possibility of shared “truths.”

It is in this extension toward others that the most powerful intersections between rhetoric and belief can be seen. Rhetoric requires a reaching outward and beyond to an audience. As Ward explained, belief requires an object, something beyond or in addition to an individual. To look beyond or toward requires the cognitive functions of both *anticipation* and *projection*. To these he adds *recognition*, as a method of sharing meaning that is fundamental to belief. Ward examines the term *Anerkennung* as used by G. W. F. Hegel in his *Phenomenology of Spirit*. *Erkennung*, in German, means “knowledge,” but the prefix *an-* conveys incompleteness. According to Ward, it is “almost” knowledge or “on the way to” knowledge and signals a cognition that is outside the ego or the one perceiving. “It is as if from an external stimulus the self provokes a knowledge that is not quite knowledge within itself: a déjà vu” (*Unbelievable* 53). The other (or external) offers a possibility for self-awareness or a consciousness that was inaccessible or unknown before the encounter. In this way, recognition extends the idea of projection: “from a consciousness of myself I come to an understanding of the other, myself and the relation of meaning binding both other and self” (53). The process of communicating and sharing belief—the knowing of belief—“is both emotional and relational before it is rational” (55).

The quotation from Booth, and his imagination of a rhetoric that allows us to be “taken in” by others and their beliefs rather than resisting such possibilities, parallels Marback’s exploration of vulnerability and further troubles the modern myth of the individual. In a pejorative view of rhetoric as “mere” or “weak rhetoric,” we keep ourselves from the shame and regret of deception by increasing our mistrust of others and believing ourselves self-sufficient and beyond the “reach of appeals” from anyone who could trick or manipulate us (3). However, Marback argues that if each of us really were self-sufficient, then the threat of “mere rhetoric”

would be empty. Instead, we cannot help but make appeals to others or be made by others' appeals. He writes, "Recognizing our interdependence through our appeals to each other compels us to accept that rhetoric leads us beyond ourselves to experiences, feelings, ideas, sensations, and thoughts we can embrace as our own and that we could never have had alone" (3). A recognition of our interdependence and the possibility of others to change us—what Marback calls a "strong view of rhetoric"—does not make us less vulnerable or even lessen our anxiety about that vulnerability. Rooted in the tradition of Cicero, Isocrates, and Quintilian, Marback's definition of a "strong rhetoric" views persuasive appeals not as tools of manipulation but as a means of generating relationships of "meaning and purpose and value" (3). Based on the acknowledgement that "rhetoric is a given," that people cannot have relationships or communicate without appealing to, inspiring, or persuading each other, a strong view of rhetoric is nothing to fear. The rhetor, who has ideas, beliefs, and arguments to share, is equally influenced by an audience who possesses their own expectations, awareness, and preferences. Marback explains, "The nature and extent of the rhetor's influence does not blind an audience. Instead, both audience and rhetor are made aware of the contingencies of being and knowing through their participation together in rhetorical activity" (3).

In contrast to liberal rhetorical theory's emphasis on the individual mind, Crowley suggests a contemporary rhetorical theory influenced by postmodernism and focused on the significance of language to the construction of human subjectivity (44).<sup>4</sup> Crowley, in her larger project of bringing ancient rhetorical concepts into a contemporary rhetoric, explains that while

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<sup>4</sup> For a brief yet nuanced overview of modern and postmodern rhetoric, see Patricia Bizzell and Bruce Herzberg's "Introduction" in *The Rhetorical Tradition: Readings from Classical Times to the Present* (1183-1205).

modernity presented an interruption in the history of rhetoric, postmodernity signified not a “turn” but a “return” to the idea that “discourse is an appropriate point of entry for theorizing human inscription” (46). However, not only is this discourse temporal, local, and provisional, the subjectivities it constructs are as well, and our impressions of reality itself are “mobile, various, and contingent on circumstance” (48). Crowley warns us that even with these beliefs in operation, we tend to treat language—and writing in particular—as though it does reflect a stable reality, and, thus, the rhetoricity or performativity of discourse can easily be forgotten. This tendency, even in the face of postmodernism, to approach language and the subjectivities it constructs as “stable” offers significant complications to the study of identity in life writing texts. It also helps us understand the considerable concern for autobiographical “authenticity” that currently dominates both popular and academic discussions in life writing. If we are literally “post-”modern, if we recognize the impossibility of a capital-T “Truth,” if we understand belief and knowledge to be complementary rather than contrary, then why the obsession with veracity? Autobiographical theorists Smith and Watson identify fundamental questions to the discipline: “What is the truth status of autobiographical disclosure? How do we know whether and when a narrator is telling the truth or lying? And what difference would that difference make?” (*Reading* 15). While the first two have recently preoccupied both cultural and academic discussions of autobiography, the last question—*what difference does it make?*—is particularly productive for rhetorical inquiry. Thus, a contemporary rhetoric, informed by a postmodern approach to truth, subjectivity, and discourse, can provide life writing scholars with productive ways to think about both the possibility and impossibility of self in story.

Another result of postmodern thinking with direct implications for rhetoric and belief is the rejection of dualism or the turning of binaries into relationships rather than hierarchal



dichotomies. For example, where a modern thinker might consider reason to be opposed to emotion and probably superior, a postmodernist could conceive both as existing in a relationship that is mutually dependent and constructive rather than defined by opposition (Crowley 48). For a rhetorical study of belief this distinction is crucial. If we define belief as not only completely separate from knowledge but also inferior to it, academic inquiry into belief—or a serious consideration of how belief operates in our personal and cultural stories—would be irrelevant. Our theoretical heritage, or belief systems, complicates contemporary definitions and attitudes toward belief and rhetoric. As Ward's works reveal, the effects of modernity continue to shape both our beliefs and our beliefs about belief. Crowley argues that our liberal tradition, born from modernist thinking, limits the potential of rhetoric. An awareness of how both have been affected by modernism and postmodernism—and, how *we* have been affected—is essential to the work of this dissertation. As contemporary writers of autobiography continue to be written by these cultural and theoretical discourses, so, too, are readers.

The acknowledgement of how we are impacted today by previous cultural and historical beliefs is an example of how ideology works as the circulation of beliefs and moves us from a consideration of *what belief is* to a study of *what beliefs do*. Here, Crowley's work from a rhetorical perspective is particularly instructive. Crowley defines ideology as "any system within which beliefs, symbols, and images are articulated in such a way that they assemble a more or less coherent depiction of reality and/or establish a hierarchy of values" (65). She characterizes belief as "moments of ideology" and ideology as the medium within which beliefs are articulated. For Crowley, beliefs are conjectures or "views or attitudes about nature that serve the interests of the believer and/or some other person, group, or institution" (69). Beliefs must serve a purpose—they must be of use, and only need to be "true"—or at least appear consistent with

“reality”—within situations where those consistencies are useful to the believer. Crowley argues that the relationship of belief to empirical reality is undetermined (69). In other words, whether or not a belief is verifiably “true” in some measured way is less important than if the belief *works*. Crowley’s attention is to the social nature of belief; beliefs cannot be individual. Just as a private language is impossible, so are private beliefs “because beliefs participate in the *habitas*; *doxa* is always already in circulation” (74). Barbara Herrnstein Smith explains, “The reason our beliefs cannot be formed or transformed *independent* of cultural practices and products is that they are continuously formed and transformed *in response* to them” (47). While these beliefs are primarily constructed and shared through discourse, they are also learned through our bodies, through “adopting bodily positions, making gestures, and performing movements” (Crowley 69). In fact, belief cannot be separated from our bodies, as our bodies are part of the very environments that make up our culture.

Herrnstein Smith’s work in cultural theory is significant to a discussion of what makes beliefs believable, particularly in its attention to how our beliefs change. Working against a traditional view, wherein beliefs are defined as “sets of either discrete, true/false mental propositions about the world or discrete, correct/incorrect interior representations of it,” Herrnstein Smith suggests instead that “Beliefs may be reconceived...as configurations of linked perceptual/behavioral tendencies of various degrees of strength, continuously formed, transformed, and reconfigured through our ongoing interactions with our environments”(44). Instead of a modernist rhetoric of objectivism, or “the invocation of self-evident truth and objective fact, of intrinsic value and absolute right, of that which is universal, total, and transcendent,” she argues for a constructivist theory of belief. This theory of belief, which emulates the hermeneutic circle in literary studies, stresses the *participation* of prior belief in the

*perception* of present evidence. She contrasts this theory with a “traditional (rationalist/realist) epistemology” that insists on the possibility of a *correction* of prior belief by present evidence (38). Herrnstein Smith bases her theory on a model of human structure as a product of two histories: “the evolutionary history of that creature’s genetic makeup and its life-history in a particular environment” (47). Neither of these histories, or the potential of their development, is determined at birth. Instead, our interactions with our environments shape our identities, and we, in turn, shape our environments. This circular process is what we might refer to as “cognition,” “learning,” or “development.” However, the structural and behavioral modifications, when relatively fixed and available to both observation and verbalization, are what we refer to as “(acquired) knowledge or (changed) beliefs” (48). While these processes are in play culturally and socially, they also operate individually, “for ‘we’ are also different from ourselves over the course of our individual lifetimes, and each of us continues to play out and evaluate his or her beliefs under conditions other than those in or from which they first emerged” (43). The relationship, then, between our selves and our environments, reflected in our belief systems, is one of perpetual transformation.

### **How Beliefs Spread: Narrative and Autobiography**

Whether beliefs are shared prior to, because of, or in spite of language, through discourse—as an expression of various ideologies—they circulate culturally, socially, and individually. The believability of belief is inseparable from the discourses that persuade us to imagine an object in a certain way (Ward, *Unbelievable* 118). Wesley Kort argues that narrative discourse, like life itself, is grounded in and shaped by beliefs (50). He provides a number of reasons to support this assumption: first, characters in narratives are distillations or embodiments of our beliefs about other people, and our evaluations of other people are based less on evidence

than on belief. Next, our conception of how temporal processes affects our lives—naturally, personally, and socially—is based on our belief about whether such processes are positive or negative: can we make changes to certain courses of events or are we determined by these processes? The answers to these questions are rooted in our belief system. Finally, the language of the teller is also affected by beliefs, including the rhetorical tasks of selecting, depicting, and evaluating material. Our beliefs determine what is worthy of mention or what makes something either “admirable or deplorable” (51). Thus, Kort explains, “Narratives, then, are really webs of beliefs” (51). Who I am, the world in which I find myself, and the beliefs I hold are inevitably entangled, and while identity and beliefs are not the same, they are also inseparable. However, narratives as webs of belief are involved in shaping not only individual beliefs but cultural ones as well. Thus, narratives are culturally and often religiously important because they incorporate beliefs that challenge/confirm the beliefs of the culture and of readers. Autobiographical narratives, then, can simultaneously propagate and resist ideology, can—as Megan Brown argues—speak to and back to the cultural norms that are currently circulating in our nation.

Narratives situate autobiographical acts in *story*, locating identities and experiences in time and place. This situatedness is crucial according to Smith and Watson, “since life narratives are always symbolic interactions in the world. They are culturally and historically specific. They are rhetorical in the broadest sense of the word” (63). They are addressed to an audience, and they are involved in an argument about identity. At their most basic level, autobiographical stories ask readers to believe that something happened in a certain way. Autobiographical subjects know themselves—and their experiences—through language. Smith and Watson observe that our experiences are discursive and embedded “in the languages of everyday life and the knowledge produced at everyday sites” (32). Michel Foucault’s analysis of discursive

regimes reveals that the ways we know ourselves and our experiences have been negotiated through multiple domains of discourse, domains that establish what counts as experience and who counts as an experiencing subject. However, since discourses change over time and in response to broader historical and cultural transformations, what “counts” changes, too (Smith and Watson 32). These shifts in discursive subjectivity and experience are clearly reflected in the autobiographical stories we tell and read.

While discourse is essential to our understanding of our selves and lives, human experiences do occur outside of discursive frames, including embodiment, spirituality, and sensory memories (Smith and Watson 32). We are affected all the time by the material world—“Bodies bleed. They manifest illnesses. They hurt. They feel hunger, thirst, and desire” (32). In making sense of these events, we make the meaning or “experience” of them discursively, and not just in language but as *narrative*. We understand our experiences and express it to others through storytelling; those stories, in turn, are both motivated and shaped by discursive patterns that are available to us (32). Our stories and experiences, as well as the discourses available to share them, are populated by our beliefs.

### **Belief and Life Writing Studies**

A concise overview of primary texts, scholars, and theories in the field of life writing, focusing specifically on contemporary perspectives of truth and subjectivity in autobiography, reveals some the field’s most significant beliefs. First, however, a brief look at the history of the genre as it developed within a modern paradigm is essential to understanding how our stories act as webs of belief—connecting us to our culture and to each other. The history of Western autobiography, or memoir, typically traced back to either St. Augustine’s or Rousseau’s

*Confessions*, is rich with relevant experiences that have shaped the field.<sup>5</sup> While I will engage St. Augustine's contributions to the genre in Chapter Three, for my purposes here, Jean-Jacques Rousseau's autobiography, as a reflection of Enlightenment principles, is a productive point of origin. Though heavily influenced by Augustine's story, Rousseau's autobiography is a direct disputation of its predecessor. The *Confessions* quickly became a classic example of the genre and altered our understanding of the autobiographical act. According to Ben Yagoda, at least four key "beliefs" of contemporary memoir are embedded in Rousseau's text, and while we now consider them essential to the genre, they were revolutionary at the time of publication. They include: "a belief in total frankness and honesty; an emphasis on the inner life of the mind and emotions rather than on the external one of action; a significant attention to childhood and youth; and a recognition that mundane matters...could be...earthshaking" (62). The Enlightenment, with its focus on rationality, objectivity, and universal knowledge, shaped modern autobiographical subjects motivated by these cultural beliefs. Rousseau's claim to identity as an "exceptional subject" celebrates the individual self as contained and solitary, a "natural man, in solitary quest of lost innocence in a corrupted society" (Smith and Watson 115). Smith and Watson argue that Rousseau's project of memoir as "self-absorbed individualism" continues to be an influential and controversial model today (115).

The other text with perhaps the most influence on our contemporary understanding of life writing is Benjamin Franklin's autobiography, which he began to write in 1771, coincidentally the same year Rousseau finished his. However, *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*, referred to as a foundational text of American republicanism, deviates sharply from the French

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<sup>5</sup> For an excellent overview of the history of the memoir, see Ben Yagoda's *Memoir: A History*.

philosophy underpinning Rousseau's self-examination. Franklin's text portrays the Rousseauian individualist as "corrupt and unproductive" in the new republic. Franklin, instead, celebrates a "flexible, pragmatic subject, adaptive to the needs and possibilities of the new republic and critical of the old world privileges of inherited status and legacy" (Smith and Watson 116). Attributed to secularizing the Puritan religious narrative, Franklin's story emphasizes self-invention as an ethical rather than spiritual quest. His autobiography serves as "the prototypical narrative for America's myth of the self-made man and the entrepreneurial republican subject, specifically marked as male, white, propertied, and socially and politically enfranchised" (116). This narrative perpetuates a "boot-strap pedagogy" that rewards "self-made men" and celebrates the lessons learned by a public figure rather than the confessions of a private one (DeVinne 22-23).

The genre of autobiography, rooted in the self-shaping narratives of Rousseau and Franklin, is historically populated with similar, epic tales of individual perseverance and ingenuity and, thus, is widely and justly critiqued by contemporary scholars, such as Lauren Berlant, in her examination of the relationship between the mutual purposes of life narrative and public building (Jolly viii). According to Berlant, such "intimate publics...flourish as a porous, affective scene of identification among strangers that promises a certain experience of belonging and provides a complex of consolation, confirmation, discipline and discussion about how to live" (viii). While Berlant seems to suggest that one achievement of intimate publics is the promise to non-dominant and marginalized people to share and acknowledge the experience of belonging, she's skeptical of the possibility of the autobiography as capable of transcending the normalization that the genre threatens. To engage Berlant's conceptualization of "intimate publics" asks readers of life writing texts to reconsider the public/private binary and to consider

the political/personal implications of doing so. Berlant's concern with the "presumed self-evident value of bionarrative" is one concern that requires the field of "life writing to carefully interrogate how the story of having a 'life' itself relies on logics of normativity" (Prosser and Berlant 181). Berlant's work challenges both writers and scholars of autobiography to think about what and how stories get lived and written (and cited and recited) within a historical moment that is "as transnational as the circulation of capital, state liberalism, and the heterofamilial, upwardly mobile good-life fantasy have become" (Berlant, *Cruel* 11).

Megan Brown offers further critique of the genre; a recent article in *Biography* reframes contemporary addiction memoir as "biopolitical self-care guide." Drawing on Foucault's biopolitical technologies as methods for defining and classifying norms, Brown argues that "personal narrative is a central way to circulate discourse about 'private' life and to perpetuate and even police norms of subjectivity" (372). Autobiography continually threatens to participate in a neoliberal ideology interested in "optimizing individual conduct in a capitalist, competitive sphere" by perpetuating norms of individual conduct that focus on self-actualization and self-fulfillment (361). At the same time, autobiography has never been more popular. Yagoda argues that memoir has become "the central form of the culture: not only in the way stories are told, but the way arguments are put forth, products and properties marketed, ideas floated, acts justified, reputations constructed or salvaged" (28). Inherent in contemporary autobiography is this tension between the private and public—between the individual and the social—that continues to multiply in ways we cannot anticipate or control (Jolly x). In a 2011 special issue of *Biography* that addresses this tension, editor Margaretta Jolly advises us to be careful not to condemn or idealize the work that autobiography does (despite our "irrational attachments to life storytelling") (x). Brown agrees. In her reading of memoir as biopolitical technology, she argues



that such texts “cannot be categorized as either beneficial or harmful because their effects are multiple; the norms themselves (productivity, a well-managed life, and so forth) also resist easy categorization” (372). Autobiography, then, as a genre that continues to flourish within our culture, demands a rhetorical scholarship that recognizes how our stories not only reflect but also shape our individual experiences but also shape our collective realities.

Although the autobiographical tradition itself extends back to 397 C.E. with St. Augustine, and some argue even further, life writing studies as a discipline has a relatively short history. And yet, as Susanna Egan observes, since its beginning in the late 1950s with the work of Georges Gusdorf (1956) and continuing with the work of Roy Pascal (1960), Philippe Lejeune (1971), James Olney (1972), and Elizabeth Bruss (1976), the field has become a robust area of both production and scholarship (12). Egan attributes this accelerated growth to the developments in theory that “undermined and overruled the humanist self” (*Burdens* 12). Certainly, any shifts in the ways we think about the self—or identity—have an immediate impact on the ways we tell stories about those selves. Thus, the study of subjectivity in life writing is directly impacted by our belief systems. At the core of our beliefs is *who we are*—a conceptualization that is incredibly complex. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson in *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives* (2010) remind us that our identities or “selves,” are not “essential—born, inherited, or natural—though much in social organization leads us to regard identity as given and fixed” (39). Instead, they are located in language, constructed, and discursive, echoing M. M. Bakhtin’s claim that consciousness, as a category of identity, is dialogic. Thus, autobiographical narrators construct their textual identities in response to the discourses that surround them.

A significant text on identity in autobiography, Paul John Eakin's *Living Autobiographically: How We Create Identity in Narrative* (2008), explores the connections between identity and narrative, between selves and stories. Following the recent work in cognition from neurologists such as Oliver Sacks and Antonio Damasio, Eakin suggests that narrative is at identity's core, that autobiography not only structures our lives but actually constructs them (4). Stuart Hall describes identity as "a 'production,' which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation" (222). Beliefs operate in a similar and reciprocal way; they work to both reflect and construct selves and in response to the discourses within which they operate. Similarly, Dana Anderson offers a rhetorical conceptualization of autobiographical identity that is particularly relevant to this dissertation. Identity, according to Anderson, is "a persuasive strategy, as a means of moving audiences toward certain beliefs or actions" thus, "identity matters less as something that one 'is' and more as something that one *does* in language...or as something that one does to an audience through the expression of who or what one is" (4). An attempt to ascertain *identity* is challenging, Anderson acknowledges, as the "word smacks of a certain naïve modernism, or enlightened, unified, atomistic individuals," and threatens an "essentialist" conception of a person outside the forces of language, culture, and history (5). Instead, he suggests we think of identity not in *ontological* terms but in *experiential* ones, "as a word not for what a person or self 'really' is but rather for a person's ability to articulate a sense of self or self-understanding" (6). Identity, then, is our understanding of who we are—an understanding mediated by the beliefs that our culture holds as foundational and essentially related to selves, such as gender, race, ethnicity, and sexuality, and that dramatically shape our ongoing process of self-identification

(9). Subjectivity, as constructed in and by autobiography—as constructed by *belief*—continues to suggest provocative inquiries to the field of life writing.

Another rich subject of discussion in the field particularly relevant to a rhetorical study of belief is autobiographical “truth.” Recently, the field has been consumed by discussions of authenticity perhaps in a response to the dominant public discourse about autobiography, a discourse that has “boomed” along with the genre. Much of this discussion is centered on the autobiographical fraud demonstrated most vividly in the controversy surrounding James Frey’s *A Million Little Pieces*. Julie Rak, in “Memoir, Truthiness, and the Power of Oprah: The James Frey Controversy Reconsidered” (2014) traces the connections between memoir and the “development of American ideas about individualism and citizenship” (224). She argues that our responses to Frey’s revelation that many of the facts in his story were purposely falsified were directly connected to our cultural assumptions about the meaning of truth and were directly related to a larger, public debate concerning the “idea of weapons of mass destruction, the relationship between publishing and television...and the value of personal experience in the public realm” (224). Regarding this recent cultural obsession of fact-checking and truth-verifying, Sarah Smarsh ironically observes that it is the “most democratic of nonfiction genres, memoir—in which any citizen might be the ultimate authority on her own experience—is the one most scrutinized for veracity.” In 2014, Leigh Gilmore presented another important examination of truth-telling in autobiography in her article “Boom|lash: Fact-Checking, Suicide, and the Lifespan of a Genre.” In this piece, Gilmore identifies a new term “boom|lash” as a merging of the simultaneous popularity and backlash against the memoir genre. Through her analysis of John D’Agata’s *Lifespan of a Fact*, Gilmore interrogates “the relations among genre, evidence, and ethics” in the debates about what counts as autobiographical “truth” (211). A recent special

issue of *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies* (January 2016) was dedicated to “biofiction” with a focus on truth, subjectivity, and genre and includes articles from Joanna Scott, Jay Parini, and Barbara Mujica. These scholars join many others, including practitioners of autobiography, to theorize the infinitely complicated issue of truth in memoir (Miller, Shields, Murdock, Lejeune, Karr, Sacks, D’Agata, to name a few).

Although my work isn’t focused specifically on issues of autobiographical fraud, authorship, or “what counts” as truth in nonfiction, I am concerned with how our individual and cultural ideas of truth impact what and how we believe.<sup>6</sup> As a focal point of this examination, I am specifically interested in the relationship between the life writer and reader, a space Smith and Watson argue reveals “how complex questions of the authenticity of experience and the integrity of identity can become” (37). This complicated relationship, defined by Phillipe

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<sup>6</sup> Karr theorizes at length the memoirist’s fraught relationship with truth and has been instrumental in my own conception of how belief and truth work together. On one hand, she defends a definite, knowable truth, arguing “it’s the busted liars who talk most volubly about the fuzzy line between nonfiction and fiction.” And yet, she also acknowledges the slippery nature of memory, and explains how, when remembering, she “often barely believe(s) (her)self.” Karr uses the example of Greg Mortenson’s *Three Cups of Tea*, revealed as fraudulent in 2009, to explain, “The people that have lied—and lied the most—it’s not just that they’ve lied, it’s that they talk about failures of memory and intention to deceive as though they’re the same thing, and they’re really not. [Greg] Mortenson [author of *Three Cups of Tea*] didn’t think he had been kidnapped by the Taliban. He didn’t misremember and think that he had been in jail when he hadn’t. Rather: he set out to deceive people” (E. Wood). When asked why memoir provokes readers and critics alike to be obsessed with truth, Karr answers, “If I had found out that Helen Keller wasn’t blind or only nearsighted, or that Maya Angelou was light skinned and passing, their stories would “mean” differently. I know I can sound like that guy at the titty bar who thinks the women really like him—I do know these people are selling me a book, their story, that is, it’s an artificial relationship—but I get hope knowing they survived their travails and if it turns out they didn’t have any, I feel deceived” (E. Wood). In this quote Karr seems to recognize the relationship between truth, belief, and the rhetorical impact of how both work in a story. The word “hope” suggests an affective response to belief—because this response is affective, when a reader discovers their beliefs have been unwarranted, unfounded, or undeserved, the result is a feeling of deceit.

Lejeune as a “contract” between writer and reader that verifies the truth of the “signature” on the cover and title page, is predicated on belief. And yet this relationship, and the “autobiographical truth” it yields, is mutually constructive, or, as Egan defines “an intersubjective exchange between narrator and reader aimed at producing a shared understanding of the meaning of a life” (*Mirror* 16). It is in this examination of the reader/writer relationship, critical to life writing studies, that rhetorical analysis can be especially insightful with its attention to audience. Thus, one contribution my dissertation offers the field is an explicit rhetorical analysis of how our beliefs both instigate and negotiate the stories we tell about our lives. Additionally, through my analysis of the relationship between writers and readers of autobiography, I argue that our beliefs are rhetorically constructed through our stories.

As Crowley’s work contends, rhetoric can no longer afford to reject or ignore the role of belief in contemporary discourse. Increasingly described as “post-factual” or “post-truth,” our culture, perhaps now more than ever, demands our attention to the complex and contested definitions of truth, knowledge, reason, and fact—all of which are intimately related to our beliefs. If we are truly “post-truth,” wherein the “complexity of modern problems has led to the proliferation of radically different conceptions, such that people can now essentially find experts to deliver facts that confirm their preconceived notions—almost no matter what,” we cannot afford to discount the role of belief in this phenomenon. Psychologist Gregg Henriques echoes Crowley in his identification of a “wicked polarization” impacting our society, where the two political parties compete to define current issues and are increasingly defined in opposition to each other. While he, like Crowley, acknowledges there are no simple solutions, he does recognize the role of our belief systems both in determining the problem and proposing a solution. He explains:

We can all own the fact that we are justifiers, that our belief-value systems emerge and evolve as function of our interests, demographics, early and important experiences, friends, feelings and intuitions, and that such justification systems play a defining role (if not the defining role) in how we look at particular complex social issues and that once we become entrenched in particular views, we are extremely resistant to changing our view. From this starting point we can then work to be more explicit about owning our justification systems, be reflective about where our systems of justification come from and what drives them, be clear about our ultimate values and visions for the good life, and have the appropriate degree of humility regarding...problems.

While a rhetorical inquiry into belief in memoir might not spark the kind of revolution that can address such a wide-sweeping, cultural phenomenon, it can suggest a path. Crowley reminds us that while such paths may be “well worn and others choked with rabbit brush,” they are the concern of rhetoricians, whose professional affiliation commits us “to finding the available means of persuasion in any given case” (x). Crowley suggests that *story* might be the most effective place to begin an “in(ter)vention” as “story is, perhaps, the most efficient means of garnering attention” and of tying believers to their belief systems. “I think we overlook how often all of us use stories as means of persuasion,” Crowley remarks. I agree. A rhetorical examination of belief as demonstrated in this dissertation offers the field of life writing a productive and timely method of thinking about the significant cultural work our stories can do.

### **My Own Beliefs: A Brief Acknowledgment**

Before I turn to the work of Mary Karr and the rest of this dissertation, I want to acknowledge my own beliefs and the ways they have motivated and complicated this project. I

believe our scholarship is an explicit justification of our beliefs—to assume any kind of tidy objectivity would undermine my argument. This observation is obviously not mine alone. Wesley Kort argues that the question of belief, particularly its role and legitimacy in our scholarship, might currently be experiencing a heightened awareness based on our acceptance of the premise that our work is not as free from beliefs and values and previously imagined. He explains, “Scholars are often more forthright about their locations, how they have arrived at what they’re putting forward, and what view of it they hold. Belief, then, has become part of academic culture” (221). While I might not be as optimistic as Kort, I do see concepts such as “belief,” “faith,” and “doubt” revealing themselves in conversations throughout the academy. I see, too, an increased presence of “life writing” or personal narratives making appearances within scholarly discourse. The simultaneity of these happenings further establishes the connections among belief, identity, and narrative and provides exigency for my dissertation.

Let me return here to the story I alluded to in my introduction—not the story of Bob the cat but the story that would define my life. The story, the hundreds of stories, found in the Christian Bible. Long before I would become an English major and devote my academic career to writing, reading, and teaching stories, I was inspired by a text. While my relationship to this particular text is always complex and shifting, I have never stopped looking to language, and specifically stories, for meaning in my life. In other words, I believe in the primacy of texts. Our worlds are primarily textual, and when we are studying those worlds, we are doing so from ways that are conditioned by texts (Kort 225). Because of this position, which might seem obvious for a student of rhetoric, I have been consistently drawn to and inspired by the work of Paul Ricoeur, a French philosopher who believed “being human is also to be immersed in language” (Ward, *Believable* 7) and whose work is responsible for a “hermeneutical turn” in academic discourse.

According to Ricoeur, “life is the bearer of meaning;” understanding, as a mode of being, allows us to relate to the world, make sense of the world and our exchanges with it, and give shape to that world. Ricoeur believed that whatever is intelligible is accessible to us in and through language and all uses of language call for interpretation. This is where a hermeneutical approach becomes essential, but, as I argue, one with an explicit rhetorical awareness. Ricoeur argues, “There is no self-understanding that is not mediated by signs, symbols, and texts; in the final analysis self-understanding coincides with the interpretation given to these mediating terms” (“On Interpretation” 151). Arthur Frank explains, “Hermeneutics begins with the premise that any understanding of a text, which I...restrict to stories, is enabled and also limited by understandings that have already been set in place by knowing previous stories” (94). Self-understanding, revealed and created in stories we tell about ourselves, is impossible without interpretation. The stories of our lives call for interpretation even if they resist it. This kind of interpretation, according to Frank, following both a hermeneutical and dialogical tradition, is “less a matter of decoding stories than of seeing all the variations and possibilities inherent in the story... Interpretation seeks not to stand over the story, speaking about it. Interpretation aspires to be an ongoing dialogue with the story” (104). Life writing—as interpretation of a *life*—allows readers and writers such an opportunity.

This process of textual interpretation and self-understanding is fundamental to a practice of reading and writing autobiographical narrative. It is also the primary concern of the growing field of narrative psychology, influenced by scholars such as Jerome Bruner, that views human experience as a form of text construction and relies on the assumption that humans create their lives through autobiographical processes. Because meanings of past events change over lifespans as the beginnings of the story are reconstructed to lead to endings that are “mutable and in



process,” people create life stories in an “interpretative and constructive way” (Josselson 2). Thus, scholarship in this field relies on hermeneutics as a method of moving from text to meaning.

However, even as I acknowledge the primacy of text in my own world, even as I constantly look to texts for inspiration, clarification, self-understanding, and meaning, I am also aware of the impossibility of language to convey both experience and identity. Rhetorician Kenneth Burke explains, “Language, to be used properly, must be ‘discounted.’ We must remind ourselves that whatever correspondence there is between a word and the thing it names, the word is not the thing” (18). For autobiographical scholars, an awareness of the impossibility of language to refer, or to reproduce history as “evidence,” is crucial. This awareness pushes against our cultural prioritization of testimony as “truth”: after all, what could be truer than a subject’s own story of what she lived through? This perspective threatens to imagine subjects as “fixed and autonomous, and who are considered reliable sources of a knowledge that comes from access to the real by means of their experience” (Scott 28). Joan W. Scott clarifies:

Subjects are constituted discursively, experience is a linguistic event (it doesn’t happen outside established meanings), but neither is confined to a fixed order of meaning. Since discourse is by definition shared, experience is collective as well as individual. Experience is a subject’s history. Language is the site of history’s enactment. (34)

Scott asks us to vigilantly resist the commonplace belief in an unmediated relationship between words and things and to instead “embrace an approach that assumes all categories of analysis as contextual, contested, and contingent” (36). For life writing scholars, whose work is inevitably bound to matters of identity, truth, and experience, this distinction is critical. Identity,

experience—these are always already interpretations and simultaneously in need of interpretation (37).

While interpretation is typically situated clearly in the field of hermeneutics, it also is the business of rhetoric. Hayden White argues that since interpretation accommodates various ways of explaining or describing an object or experience, the method of articulation is more tropological than logical. He explains, “And this is why rhetoric, considered less as a theory of persuasive speech than as the theory of the tropological bases of speech, discourse and textuality provides one promising way of comprehending what goes on in interpretative discourse in general” (254). White’s observation confirms what I already believe; the interpretation of lives—as the purview of autobiographical writers and readers—is ultimately a rhetorical pursuit. Even as rhetoric functions to reveal the inherent instability of text, it also reminds me of what language can do. As a rhetorician, I am compelled to believe that language is capable of *doing things*.

And, lastly, I must recognize that this dissertation is perhaps most impacted not by any specific belief as much as my inescapable propensity *to believe*. As a result, my scholarship is heavily influenced by the life and work of St. Augustine, whose own autobiography reveals the intractable, inevitable, and yet dynamic tension between faith and learning. To address this tension, Augustine brought a distinctly hermeneutical approach to his rhetorical practice—specifically a reconceptualization of rhetoric and hermeneutics as a mutual and co-constructive approach. Without hermeneutics, Augustine couldn’t understand his God, his world, or his place in it. Without rhetoric, he couldn’t share his understanding with that world.

I hold a personal stake in Augustine’s work—and, at the same time, recognize what sometimes feels to be a strange connection between a medieval rhetorician born in 354 in a Roman colony in Africa, and a community college professor born in 1969 in Peoria, Illinois.

However unlikely, I identify with the existential struggle he felt when attempting to negotiate what must have felt like two completely different versions of his life—scholar, then bishop—motivated by completely different beliefs, different truths. This struggle was mine, too, as I found myself unable to navigate the fundamental Christianity I had been raised to believe and the literary and rhetorical theory I met in college. Both Augustine and I could not, it seemed initially, accommodate rhetoric and “hermeneutics” at once, particularly a worldview based on literal and singular interpretations of text. The Christianity I was raised with used a “hermeneutical” approach to reading Scripture not only as a means for sussing out “Truth,” but a means of excluding others. It was used as a powerful tool of oppression, and, gradually, with very little effort, I found myself reorganized into the category of “other” and I experienced, firsthand, what a very different relationship to a text feels like. I didn’t like it. The truth no longer felt true. I turned from my faith to a scholarship that showed me what happens when a text opens up rather than closes down possibilities. This is why Augustine’s methodology—a “rhetorical hermeneutic”—engages me in such profound ways, the result of which can be seen throughout this dissertation. While St. Augustine’s work is certainly problematic on many important levels, it attempts to bring his knowledge and his beliefs into a dialogue that directly informs and reflects his relationship to language—what it means and what it does. And it extends that relationship, through the concept of *caritas*, as a hand to others.

While my research has taught me that this tendency toward belief is not mine alone but actually a result of evolutionary biology, less about specific choices I’ve made and more about the experience of being human, I understand that my fundamentalist upbringing conditioned me toward belief in ways I can only begin to know. Although I rejected the fundamental Christianity of my childhood years ago, I can still feel its effects lingering in my personal and academic lives,

drawing me simultaneously toward belief and doubt. Christian fundamentalism, as a religious worldview, is in many ways structured by *desire* as an affective consequence of belief. This desire is characterized by the deferral of the temporal world by the promise of an infinite future. In this way, to live as a fundamental Christian is to live in expectation, continually looking ahead in anticipation of something more. This life, thus, is defined by lack, by a desire to be fulfilled by something outside and ahead of us. While I could write another dissertation on the destructive impact of this belief, I am also aware of how it has oriented me toward possibility. Kort describes this experience as “the desire or anticipation of something new or more ahead or above me that calls of a releasing of my hold on what is or its hold on me, in order to be open to something new” (231). For Kort, this sense of expectancy and desire of something “new or more” reflects what some people could equate with a belief in God. This is why Ward’s conceptualization of belief as a “disposition,” as “disposed towards” and looking “beyond the individual who believes towards some object or person or condition in the world,” resonates so deeply with me (30). When applied to the study of discourse, this approach becomes a “hermeneutics of ‘as if’” or “a hermeneutics of looking toward and hoping for something more, something new” (234). This hermeneutics directs our attention “to something more that looks ahead and above” or, in my practice, toward possibility or “openings.” However, as Kort reminds us, a critical task of the hermeneutics of “as if” is to “counter or dismantle the assumption, one that...I also retain and am attached to, that there are people, texts, and occurrences in my world that cannot be, or do not deserve to be, read in that expectant way” (234). This belief is the closest I can get, most days, to the divine.

## Chapter Overview

Thus far in this chapter, I've explored the various exigencies for my research by situating my topic historically, culturally, and within the field of life writing studies. In my second chapter, I examine the role that both reading and writing played in Mary Karr's life, primarily as a structure for her early beliefs and as a foundation for her later religious conversion. To do this, I look closely at Amy Hungerford's definition of "postmodern belief" that she explores in her recent text *Postmodern Belief: American Literature and Religion since 1960*. Religion and literary studies have shared an intimate past in our American historical tradition as two disciplines fundamentally concerned with text. In her book, Hungerford traces the similarities between a postmodern secular "belief" in both religion and literature, and ultimately argues that to live such belief—especially through the practice of reading and writing—is "undoubtedly to live religiously" (xv). Hungerford argues that writing, for those invested in particular beliefs, is both an articulation of belief and a form of religious practice (108). Building on Hungerford's work, I argue that Karr's autobiographical writing, and her positioning of literature as sacred, is itself a form of religious practice as essential to her belief system as her Catholicism.

The third chapter of my dissertation, "(Re)turning to Her Same Self: Mary Karr's Conversion and Foucault's *Askesis*" explores the phenomenon of conversion as it impacts belief. Since St. Augustine's famous moment in the garden in his *Confessions*, autobiography has been shaped by conversion both as a trope for identities and as a structure for narratives. Conversion, then, has been used to mark moments of change in narratives when writers have experienced some kind of epiphanic awareness that has led to new beliefs. After a brief examination of conversion from a number of disciplinary perspectives, I use the work of Michel Foucault to compare two dichotomous models of conversion—a traditional Christian model and Hellenistic-

Roman model—that have historically been diametrically opposed. In his analysis, Foucault problematizes both models with a discussion of “truth” and its relationship to subjectivity, conversations that are essential to a contemporary study of autobiography. Using Mary Karr’s conversion as represented in *Lit*, I analyze how both models offer distinct approaches when thinking about autobiography, particularly how Foucault’s definition of conversion—as a method of self-care—expands our traditional conceptualization of conversion beyond religious practice.

Chapter Four, “Memoir as *Poiesis*: Belief, Desire, and Relationship in the Work of Mary Karr,” analyzes the relationship between the writer and reader of Karr’s memoirs as a site of *poiesis* or creation of something new. *Poiesis* is the name Aristotle gave to the verb “making” or “creating” and is historically associated with creative action. For Aristotle, *poiesis* was intimately connected to affective responses, especially desire, a response that is closely related to belief and structures our reading of autobiographical accounts. Affect theory, particularly Teresa Brennan’s conceptualization of affective transfer, is a crucial component of this chapter, as well as Judith Butler’s work on the Other in self-accounts. In this chapter, I argue that reading memoir is itself a *poiesis*, a transformative and creative act that both actualizes and demands belief (Ward, *Believable* 147).

Finally, in Chapter Five, I examine Karr’s newest text, *The Art of Memoir*—a “how-to” book for people interested in writing memoir—for further answers to my primary question: *What makes Mary Karr believable?* Through my examination, I argue that our pedagogies are inextricably bound to our beliefs, and, as such, deeply and affectively connected to who we are, not only as writers but also as teachers of memoir. I contend that what Karr teaches us about writing memoir is ultimately about how to be believed. Memoir, as Karr imagines it and teaches

us to us—as a practice of belief—becomes a pedagogical tool for possibility and change, both individually and socially.

## CHAPTER II

### WORDS CAN SAVE YOU: LANGUAGE, STORY, AND BELIEF IN *THE LIARS' CLUB*

*You hope to find the writer who can dramatize belief the way it feels in your experience, at once a fact on the ground and a sponsor of the uncanny, an account of our predicament that still and all has the old power to persuade. You look for a story or a novel where the writer puts it all together. That would be enough. That would be something. That would be unbelievable.*  
—Paul Elie

*The American religion—so far as there is one anymore—seems to be doubt. Whoever believes the least wins, because he'll never be found wrong.*  
—Mary Karr

Like many children, especially those who grow up to be English teachers, I vividly remember the stories that made me fall in love with reading. From my earliest Golden Book (*The Three Little Pigs!*) to Ramona Quimby, *The Boxcar Children*, and eventually Lucy and her beloved lion, the places and people I met in my books occupied long summer afternoons and ushered in my nightly bedtime. The older I got and the more complicated life became, so, too, did the stories I read. S. E. Hinton's tales of troubled adolescence, Judy Blume's coming-of-age novels—these books, as all good books do—reassured me that the loneliness, longing, frustration, confusion, terror, beauty, and exhilaration that consumed me were *normal*. Of course, this history is not unusual for someone who “grows up” to teach literature and composition and who devotes years of her life to studying the effects of both on herself and her students. Certainly, some version of the same story is echoed in the collective experiences of many of us, children who found in the pages of their books something different—something *bigger*—than the worlds we inhabited. Stories carry with them at the very least distraction from the “real” lives we're living.



Mary Karr goes so far as to say that stories do something much more than distract us. In an article aptly titled “A Life Saved by Stories,” Karr explains, “Poetry saved my life. I was mesmerized by the sheer beauty of the language, and the fact that this work of art is made out of the same materials [words] that everybody uses to get the butter passed or get on the bus” (W. Smith 52). Salvation means “to deliver from some danger; rescue from peril, bring to safety,” and even “to prevent the death of;” it also has an obvious theological meaning: “to deliver from sin or its consequences; admit to eternal life; gain salvation.” The root *save* comes from Old French *sauver* “keep (safe), protect, redeem,” and from Late Latin *salvare* “make safe, secure” (“Save”). Protection, redemption, safety—these are words not often associated with stories. Thus, when Mary Karr says her life was saved by stories, she ascribes to them a power that is beyond what most of us imagine.

In this chapter, I examine this particular belief of Karr’s, of the possibility of stories to save us, and argue that it is this belief that precedes or perhaps even prefigures her eventual belief in God. Before I turn to Karr’s specific beliefs, however, I continue my discussion of contemporary belief as both (and neither) sacred and secular and argue that our modern conceptualization has been determined by a Western, and specifically Christian, framework. Next, I briefly highlight the rich tradition shared by the studies of literature and religion, noting how the two have collided, intersected, eclipsed, and informed each other as the result of both modernism and structuralism, particularly focusing on the assumptions both make about textuality, language, and meaning. This context helps me establish Karr’s theoretical and cultural influences, in her role as both a reader and writer, and identify the similarities between her literary and religious beliefs, particularly in the power of both to save her. Using a framework of Kenneth Burke’s rhetorical theory on *Logos* and Amy Hungerford’s post-secular theory on belief

and meaninglessness, I suggest that one provocative way to read Karr's beliefs about both literature and religion is to consider them not as inspired by specific, dogmatic beliefs but instead as defined by the practice of believing itself. To illustrate the possibilities of this approach, I identify and analyze key moments in *The Liars' Club* when Karr's beliefs—about God, about literature, and about salvation—are interrogated. Finally, I offer another reading of Karr's memoir, based on a typological hermeneutic, that positions her identity and experiences in *The Liars' Club* within a larger narrative, bringing her beliefs about religion and literature into additional conversation.

First, however, let me return for a moment to that younger version of myself from the opening of this chapter. While reading served an incomparable role in my leisure time, easily topping my list of favorite things to do, stories played a more essential role in our house. I was introduced to the stories in the Bible right along with Dr. Seuss, the iconic tales of David and Goliath, Jonah and the whale, or Noah's ark permanently etched in my narrative consciousness. The Christian Bible, beginning with the story of an idyllic garden and ending with a fiery pit, contains hundreds of smaller tales, the most important featuring a God/man born of a virgin, who lives an extraordinary life performing miracles and discipling skeptics, and dies as a martyr on a cross to save humankind. This story is the one that dictates all others—the Most Important Story—and it would come to structure the belief system that determined the first twenty-five years of my life and continues to resonate personally and culturally in ways I can only begin to imagine, ways I'm attempting to understand in this dissertation.

Like the novels that lined my bedroom bookshelves, the story behind the Christian faith, behind most faiths, lives between the pages of a book. In other words, it is *textual*. When I was learning to read, I was simultaneously learning to *believe*; in other words, I read what to believe

and believed what I read. And while I understood that a world of difference existed between the story of Margaret getting her period and the story of sinners seeking eternal life, I couldn't help but see the obvious parallels between the ways that text drives religious and literary or rhetorical inquiry. The text is where I began to believe.

Before I made it my actual job to understand how and why narrative shapes our lives and our cultures so significantly, I was already a "cradle believer" in the power of text to not only enrich but to ultimately *determine* our lives. While my personal beliefs—about text, about God—have progressed through multiple revisions as a result of education and experience, and in many ways barely resemble the simple and uncomplicated assumptions of my youth, they are ultimately and fundamentally grounded in language. And as a student trained in postmodern and post-structural theory, I understand the complications—even impossibilities—of such beliefs. The possibilities of language, as a system of words and signs without essential connections to the world or our experiences, can challenge even the most ardent believer.

Although language cannot ultimately represent the world or experience, it can illuminate it as scholar Robert Lundin notes, "for it can lift the veil and expose those habits of mind and relationships of power that have arbitrarily tethered words to the realities we claim they signify" (49). Discourse is always about something, according to Paul Ricoeur, and only a "few sophisticated texts" meet the ideal of a "text without reference" in which the "play of the signifier" breaks entirely free from any reality of the signified. Thus, written works always speak in one way or another about the world ("The Model" 96). "For me," explains Ricoeur, "the referent of all literature is the world (*Welt*) that language creates out of the environment (*Umwelt*) of human experience" (96). According to Ricoeur, the texts "we have read, understood, and loved" manage to "light up our own situation" by taking our experiences in the world and

casting them in a narrative framework. Therefore, the references of literature “*open up* the world” for us by pointing not only to what we are, but to what and whom we might become. “In this sense,” Ricoeur writes, “Heidegger rightly says...that what we understand first in a discourse is not another person, but a project, that is, the outline of a new being-in-the-world.” Writing reveals “the destination of discourse as projecting a world” (97). It is this sense of anticipation that characterizes religion and literature as *possibility*, as an expectation of something new. I recognize this similarity in my own experiences as a child raised to believe in the power of a text to save me from my sins and Mary Karr’s life as a child raised to believe in the power of literature to save her from her life. Interestingly, my own beliefs led me away from religion and to the study of language, while Karr’s moved in the opposite direction; her belief in literature in many ways anticipated her eventual belief in God. This chapter focuses on the ways those beliefs both inform and complicate each other, and emphasizes how the formal practice of belief itself—as separate from or in spite of content—remains both personally and culturally significant.

### **Logology and Divine *Logos***

I start with the work of rhetorician Kenneth Burke, whose *The Rhetoric of Religion* marries theology and literary criticism while remaining utterly secular, to frame my argument in this chapter. In his text, Burke argues that “words about God” are essentially “words about words” and coins the term “logology” to refer to the study of language from this perspective. Burke seeks to understand how words about God, in texts such as St. Augustine’s *Confessions*, allow us to learn something about language itself when they return to the secular world with new, religious meanings. Burke explains, “For regardless of whether the entity named ‘God’ exists outside his nature sheerly as a key term in a system of terms, words ‘about him’ must

reveal their nature as words” (2). Although logology seeks to replace a sacred understanding of the divine *Logos* with a secular understanding of transcendent language, it still endows literature with “supernatural” qualities typically attributed to religion (Hungerford 9). Although *logos* is commonly associated with the Aristotelian modes of persuasion meaning “logic” or argument, the divine *Logos*, or doctrine of Logos, is a Christian reference to the Word of God as incarnated in Jesus Christ as described in the first few verses of the book of John:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God...All things came into being through him, and without him, not one thing came into being...And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth. (John 1:1, 3, 14)

However, before John imbued *Logos* with a divine purpose, the word *logos*, simply translated as “word,” held important meaning in the Greek world. The philosopher Heraclitus is associated with the first usage of the word as a reference to a divine rational intelligence, a universal rule that animates the universe and is associated with fire. The ancient Greeks were interested in answering the ultimate questions of reality and in seeking truth; *logos* described this reality, as the force that gave life and meaning to the universe. In Greek philosophy, this phenomenon was understood to be an impersonal force, not a personal being. When the apostle John imagines a divine Logos, he imbues the word with aspects unimagined by Greek philosophers. Rather than an impersonal force, *logos* becomes a personal being who can be rejected or received by individual people. Thus, the Christian church extended the Stoic idea of the universal community by claiming the universal nature of salvation and the potential for all

humans to participate in it (Lebreton). In this new definition, where “words become flesh” and live among us, Christianity endows language with the power to save.

From Burke’s secular perspective, however, he argues that our “logological” concern should be with the analogy between “words” (lower case) and The Word. While “words” have “wholly naturalistic, empirical reference, they might also be used analogically, “to designate a further dimension, the ‘supernatural’” (7). Indeed, whether or not the “supernatural” exists, words for it do. Burke notes the linguistic paradox here; “For whereas the words for the ‘supernatural’ realm are necessarily borrowed from the realm of our everyday experiences, out of which our familiarity with language arises, once a terminology has been developed for special theological purposes the order can be reversed” (7). In other words, we can “borrow back” the terms from the borrower, “again secularizing to varying degrees the originally secular terms that had been given ‘supernatural’ connotations” (7).

Burke uses examples of words such as “grace” and “spirit,” which, in their original Latin forms, had purely secular meanings; however, once borrowed into theological language—“translated from the realm of social relationships into the supernaturally tinged realm of relationships between ‘God’ and man”—the etymological conditions were set for a reverse process where the theological term becomes “aestheticized” (8). This movement, from the secular to the sacred and back again, gives us a sense that language is not just “natural,” but is actually capable of adding a “new dimension” to the things of nature; in other words, words have the capability to “transcend” non-verbal nature (8). This capability is “to be treated not literally, but as a sheerly technical kind of ‘transcendence,’” where the secular, empirical terms are “infused by the spirit” of the “transcendent” terms (10, 37). Burke continues that words themselves are material with a “dimension of sheer physicality by which a word is uttered,

transmitted, heard, read, etc.”; however, “the word’s ‘meaning’ is not identical with its sheer materiality. There is a qualitative difference between the symbol and the symbolized” (16).

Burke reminds us that “Language, to be used properly, must be ‘discounted.’ We must remind ourselves that, whatever *correspondence* there is between a *word* and the *thing* it names, the word is *not* the thing” (18).

Burke argues that the relationship between theology and logology cannot be simply interpreted as moving in one direction; in fact, a “logological” approach complicates not only the movement of words, but of historical development, from the “sacred” to the “profane” or from the “spiritual” to the “secular” (35). In this chapter, I suggest that a similar “logological” model of belief offers interesting ways of looking at Karr’s autobiographical narration of her childhood beliefs, precisely because it considers the capacity for the multidirectional movement of belief, momentarily occupying both secular and sacred and the spaces in between. My inquiry focuses specifically on her beliefs about literature and about God, how those beliefs develop mutually and simultaneously, and how they complicate and complement each other.

### **Belief and Religion**

Although Burke’s work is motivated by and invested in secularity, logology is a concept that resists a similar categorization. Instead, Burke contends, “Logology systematically admonishes us against so simple a dialectic” as spiritual/secular (35). For a rhetorical consideration of belief, as demonstrated in this dissertation, a similar resistance is crucial. Scholars such as Graham Ward and Mark C. Taylor insist that rather than belief being absent from the secular movement, it is at its very heart. Ward explains that the “unbelief” frequently associated with secularity is itself a belief because religious faith is only one of the many forms

believing takes (125).<sup>7</sup> Belief is not solely the province of religion, and religion isn't the only purveyor of beliefs. Thus, central to the work of this dissertation, particularly to this chapter, is the acknowledgement of the complex and historically-varied relationship between belief and religion. And while I have oriented my own beliefs as first a result of and later a reaction against a very particular religious system, I argue that a contemporary rhetoric of belief must understand belief as an experience that attends to but also extends beyond the sacred. Generally, the definition of belief as "belonging to" religion, or as synonymous with religious belief, is based on the commonly unchallenged assumption that the "adherents of a given religion...understand that adherence in terms of belief" (Lopez 21). Donald S. Lopez, Jr. explains that belief has been the axis around which Christians have told their own history; further, scholars of religion and anthropologists have defined religion in terms of belief or practice as deeds motivated by belief (21). Robert Orsi argues that belief is "the wrong question"—the question asked by the naïve, the old-fashioned, the child, the student, the Fundamentalist. The scholarly question of belief threatens to be an "unwitting masquerade for the evangelical Protestant question—Do you

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<sup>7</sup> Secularism—what it means and when/whether we've achieved it—was a primary concern in many of the texts that influenced this chapter. While these concerns are outside of the scope of my work, I found Mark Taylor's perspective to be particularly instructive for my understanding of belief. In *After God* (2007), Taylor argues that religion and secularity are not opposites, but rather Western secularity is a religious phenomenon. He observes, "Religionists and secularists are mirror images of each other who share more than they are willing to admit; each reverses but does not displace the other. Although it is not immediately obvious, both perspectives rest on the same error. Bound by the exclusive logic of either/or, each side in this conflict sees religion and secularity as irreconcilable opposites. While choosing opposing sides, they are fighting the same battle" (132). According to this perspective, religion and secularity are both "co-emergent and codependent" (132). In my attempt to distinguish belief from religion, I use Taylor's work to suggest the same possibility for belief and secularity. In other words, just as religion doesn't "mean" belief, neither does secularity "mean" nonbelief. In *Religious Experience and the Modernist Novel*, Pericles Lewis asserts, "Regardless of whether we call the changes in religious life 'secularization,' they do not necessarily imply a rejection of all religion, but rather a transfer of authority in religious belief from public to private hands" (30).



believe in Jesus?” (Hungerford 109). Thus, a focus on belief sneaks into any discussion of religion an implicitly Christian assumption about what religion is and what its relationship to belief must be.

Orsi claims that to say that one “‘believes in’ a religion means that one has deliberated over and then assented to its propositional truths, has chosen this religion over other available options, as a personal choice unfettered by authority, tradition, or society,” and argues that “this account of religion carries real normative force” (18). And Lopez explains that the connection of belief to Christianity specifically, as allied with political power, has “made it possible to transport its belief to all corners of the globe (if not the universe), making belief the measure of what religion is understood to be” (33). When belief is inextricably yoked to religion it threatens to take on a particular flavor and become the province of some and not others. Further, the conflation of religion with belief suggests that they are a “package deal,” so to speak. In other words, if I am religious, then I am a believer; if I’m not religious, then belief has no purpose for me. A contemporary rhetoric of belief, while certainly able to accommodate a religious orientation, cannot be reliant upon it. Another essential component to my argument is the recognition that Mary Karr’s autobiographical narratives, as provocative sites to examine contemporary rhetorics of belief, are meaningful for both secular and spiritual readers. Indeed, critical to Karr’s ability to not only believe herself but to inspire belief in her readers, is her ability to freely negotiate the boundary between the sacred and profane, while still believing in *something*. This ability underscores Taylor’s critique of contemporary culture, that although “we may no longer believe in God, we still believe in belief” (34).

## Belief in Belief

In her compelling text, *Postmodern Belief: American Literature and Religion since 1960*, Amy Hungerford questions whether the fundamentally Protestant way of understanding religious belief, as limited to specific, particularly Christian doctrine, is still relevant to the study of contemporary religion and literature. A post-secular critic, Hungerford argues that belief without meaning—or specific religious content—“becomes both a way to maintain religious belief rather than critique its institutions and a way to buttress the authority of the literature that imagines such belief” (xiii). And, finally, that to live a belief in meaninglessness—to live it specifically through the practice of writing and reading—is “undoubtedly to live religiously” (xv). Meaninglessness, as situated within literary and religious discourse, Hungerford defines as “belief for its own sake, or belief without content, or belief where content is the least important aspect of religious thought and practice” (xiv). With her thesis, Hungerford directly challenges the narrative of secularization by demonstrating the enduring energy of religious experience in contemporary literature and life. Positioning those who believe in God and those who believe in literature as natural allies, Hungerford demonstrates how our ways of speaking about both literature and religion have “become elliptical—have come continually to orbit the dual foci of belief and meaninglessness” (xxi). This “line of orbit” is what she calls “belief in literature” (xxi). Hungerford’s focus on the practice of believing, as distinct from specific content, seems particularly suited to an examination of belief in *The Liars’ Club* as Karr’s youth is marked by a distinct *disbelief* in religion juxtaposed with the near worship of literature. Karr remembers, “In my godless household, poems were the only prayers that got said—the closest thing to sacred speech at all” (“Facing Altars” 126). In this quote and in numerous others, she reassures us that

while her family members might have lacked a particular set of traditional religious beliefs, they were not without *belief itself*.

### **Belief and Modern Literature**

In the first chapter of this dissertation, I argued that our contemporary definitions of belief have been significantly impacted by modernity, particularly in the positioning of knowledge as separate from and superior to belief. These paradigmatic shifts in cultural beliefs about belief itself dramatically transformed the fields of religion and literary studies as disciplines ultimately concerned with meaning, interpretation, and language. The modern period, according to scholar Pericles Lewis, inherited a “call, and an anxiety,” perpetuated by Arnold’s prediction that “Most of what now passes with us for religion and philosophy will be replaced by poetry” (“The Study”). Although consistently associated with the secularization of the movement, modernist authors, particularly novelists, were “strikingly engaged with the spiritual aspects of life” (Lewis 5) and heavily influenced by the social scientific study of religion. Lewis explains, “The modernists’ spiritual concerns include borderline states of consciousness, forms of the divided self, the process of conversion, the function of ritual, the magical potential inherent in words, moments of sublime experience, and the relationship between social life and sacred power” (5). While their texts might have been missing specific religious content, they were never lacking spirituality.

Thus, preceding Hungerford’s postmodern “belief in meaninglessness” or belief without specific doctrinal content, Lewis identifies a generation of social thinkers—such as William James, Sigmund Freud, and Max Weber—who were more concerned with the structure of faith than with its truth content (20). These social scientists in turn influenced the work of secular novelists who “sought to make the structure of the novel more capable of transcendent

experiences” (20). Lewis argues that for the modernists, “transcendence” was used to designate experiences that originated in the natural world, rather than the supernatural, but that revealed a kind of insight beyond the scope of the ordinary. To convey these experiences, modernists often used religious language, such as the term “epiphany” (20). While consciously rejecting doctrine or institutionalized theology, the modernists discovered methods to describe in literature what William James called “religious experience” or the basic consciousness at the root of all religions and yet unassociated with any specific church. In his text, *Religious Experience and the Modernist Novel*, Lewis challenges the “secularization thesis,” characterized by the “emergence of modernity as the result of increasingly rational modes of thought and a rejection of belief in the supernatural” (23). This thesis assumes that earlier, religious narrative forms (primarily the epic, but also spiritual autobiography), in which events unfold as a result of supernatural forces, gave way to naturalistic techniques of description and subject matter from the “empirically observable world” (23). Lewis traces this transformation through the work of Walter Benjamin, Erich Auerbach, Mikhail Bakhtin, and Ian Watt, with a special emphasis on Georg Lukács’s description of the novel as “the epic of a world that has been abandoned by God” (23).

However, Lewis problematizes the secularization thesis, arguing that “a sense of the sacred persists even in the apparently godless modernist novel,” and that the modernists are not the devout secularists that most critics portray; “rather, they sought, through formal experiment, to offer new accounts of the sacred for an age of continued religious crisis” (24). According to Lewis, while modernist novelists weren’t interested in seeking solutions for spiritual problems in the occult or traditional Christianity, they did regard the challenges of modernity as essentially spiritual. Lewis offers the term “secular sacred” as a modernist literary approach that sees words like “sacred,” “reverence,” “sanctity,” “magic,” and “soul,” as not exactly orthodox but “more

than merely metaphorical” (30). Instead, “this was the language available to them for speaking about ultimate truths, human truths for which supernatural explanations might no longer seem adequate, but for which a sheer materialism or reductivism also seemed suspect” (30). Directly challenging Clifford Geertz’s distinction between “religious perspective” and “aesthetic attitude,” Lewis echoes Taylor’s perspective that rather than a rejection of all religion, “secularization” implies a transfer of authority in religious belief from the public to the private realm (30).

It is at the beginning of the sixties, squarely in the middle of the childhood Karr remembers in *The Liars’ Club*, that Hungerford locates the burgeoning tension between “faith in faith” and specific religious conviction. While many saw the retreat of religion from the public sphere and into the private realm as evidence that strong and specific doctrinal faith was losing out first to faith in faith itself and finally to secularism, others recognized the beginning of dramatic growth in conservative Christianity, particularly fundamentalism. According to Hungerford, writers, critics, and religious Americans during this time cultivated ways of thinking that allowed for both faith in faith and specific conviction to be held simultaneously, the effects of which can be felt in both the criticism and literature of the later twentieth century (8). Lionel Trilling, in his essay “On the Teaching of Modern Literature,” contends that modern literature (for him, contemporary) “asks us...if we are saved or damned—more than anything else, our literature is concerned with salvation. No literature has ever been so intensely spiritual as ours” (8-9). Trilling’s observation complicates some of the commonly held assumptions about the relationship between secularity and modernization.

James Wood is another literary critic, like Lewis, who studies modern writers who traverse boundaries between literary and religious belief. For Wood, it is during the modern

period when the distinctions between “literary” and “religious” become blurred, and, he argues, we have lived in the “shadow of their blurring ever since” (xv). This moment is when “the old estate broke;” he uses the symbol of the “old estate” to represent the collapse of the belief that religion represents a set of “divine truth-claims and that the Gospel narratives were supernatural reports.” While fiction may be supernatural, it is always *fictional*—“it was not in the same order of truth as the Gospel narratives” (xv). Wood argues that during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, these two positions begin to “soften and merge,” and at the climax of the novel’s popularity, “the Gospels began to be read, by writers and theologians, as a set of fictional tales—as a kind of novel” (xv). At the same time, reading literature became “an almost religious activity (though not, of course, with religion’s former truth-value for this was no longer believed in)” (xv).

Our beliefs—about literature and about religion—have obviously evolved significantly since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, although Karr herself argues that we are still living under the “flapping shadow” of the “flag of Modernism” (“How to Read”). However, the contemporary relationship between religion and literature has made some critics, such as Paul Elie, ask if fiction has lost its faith. In a 2012 editorial for the *New York Times* Sunday Book Review, Elie argues that “if any patch of our culture can be said to be post-Christian, it is literature.” In a country whose Christian faith has “something like 170 million adherents, a faith that for centuries seeped into every nook and cranny of our society,” Elie contends that the “novel of belief” has gone where belief itself has gone—out of our cultural imaginary. While some contemporary authors (such as Raymond Carver, Jeffrey Eugenides, and Denis Johnson) suggest ways that moments of belief can impact individual lives, Elie argues our stories are no longer “about” belief. He describes an America where Christianity is “highly visible in public life” but of little consequence in the lives of individuals. Thus, for the “first time in our history it is possible to speak of Christianity

matter-of-factly as one religion among many” and possible, even, to leave it out of our dialogue altogether. The United States might be a “vast Home Depot of ‘do-it-yourself’ religion,” but, as Elie argues, “you wouldn’t know it from the stories we tell.”

Elie quotes Flannery O’Connor, who located the struggle to “make belief believable” with the struggle to gain the attention of the “indifferent reader.” The religious aspect of a work of fiction, according to O’Connor, is “a dimension added” not one taken away. Elie continues with his discussion of the role belief plays in contemporary literature: “[The] refusal to grant belief any explanatory power shows purity and toughness on the writer’s part, but it also calls to mind what my Catholic ancestors called scrupulosity, an avoidance that comes at the cost of fullness of life.” Perhaps Karr gets our attention as readers “indifferent” to belief (or religion, or the sacred, the supernatural, the divine, etc.) by making belief believable. I suggest that one way she does this—makes us believe in the *believability of belief*—is by asking readers to follow her as she moves between literature and religion, infusing each with the power to transcend, and ultimately, to save. In the next section of this chapter, I identify specific passages and scenes from the text that most clearly reveal a number of Karr’s beliefs about literature and religion. I position her literary beliefs first, and then her religious beliefs, to highlight a narrative “order,” a pattern of believing where one set of beliefs follows another. However, while my organization (like narrative) might suggest a distinct “before” and “after,” her beliefs are multidirectional, developing simultaneously and in conversation with each other. Because Karr situates these beliefs within her memoirs, the movement between genres is also significant. In other words, Karr’s beliefs about the genre of literature are also filtered through the generic demands of autobiography, a move that further complicates them. Autobiography asks us for a different type of belief as it promises a special kind of truth.

## Of Poetry and Prayer

*In language I found a way out of myself—to my mother, then to a wider community (the poets I imagined for years), then to a poetry audience for which I wrote, then to the Lord...*

—Mary Karr

The argument that Mary Karr found a spiritual significance in literature far earlier than, but ultimately similar to, religion isn't a particularly fresh line of scholarly inquiry. She develops this connection herself in the article "Facing Altars: Poetry and Prayer," appearing in *Poetry* in 2005 and reprinted in her 2006 poetry collection *Sinners Welcome*. In this essay, which she describes as a confession to her "unlikely Catholicism" for a "journal founded in part on and for the godless, twentieth-century disillusionaries of J. Alfred Prufrock and his pals," Karr elucidates the path through poetry that led her to conversion through prayer. Throughout the piece, Karr moves between characterizations of "poetry" and "prayer" as simultaneously and essentially opposite and the same—sort of a "poetry does this" while "prayer does that" approach. In this positioning, she substitutes features of one for qualities of another, shoring up one's effects with the other's. For example, she writes, "Like poetry, prayer often begins in torment, until the intensity of language forges a shape worthy of both labels: 'true' and 'beautiful'...But, if you're in a frame of mind dark enough to refuse prayer, nothing can ease the ache like a dark poem" (127). Additionally, she frequently places poetry first in a chronological account of her experience—first was poetry, then was religion. In this essay, she identifies her most profound childhood experiences as a reaction or in relation to poetry or literature. She explains, "From a very early age, when I read a poem, it was as if the poet's burning taper touched some charred filament in my rib cage to set me alight...poetry never failed me, even if the poet reaching me was some poor wretch even more abject than myself" (126). And, of her earlier association



between the two, Karr reflects, “Poetry never left me stranded, and as an atheist most of my life, I presumed its mojo was a highbrow, intellectual version of what religion did for those more gullible believers in my midst” (126).

Karr’s tumultuous childhood, the subject of her first memoir *The Liars’ Club*, recounts her youth spent in a small, coastal Texan town (“Leechfield” is the pseudonym she uses) once voted by *Business Week* as “one of the ten ugliest towns on the planet” (*The Liars’* 34). Of Leechfield, Karr writes, “the world smelled not unlike a wicked fart in a close room...In the fields of gator grass, you could see the ghostly outline of oil rigs bucking in slow motion...giant towers rose from each refinery, with flames that turned every night’s sky an odd, acid-green color” (34). Later, Karr learned that during her childhood Leechfield had been a manufacturing site for Agent Orange. Perhaps more oppressive than the physical environment, however, was the community itself. Karr frequently describes her family as outsiders, and although she enjoyed the benefits of her father’s reputation as a no-nonsense, steady union member and refinery worker, she experienced the less than ideal effects of her mother’s reputation as an overeducated, atheistic, Yankee who suffered from being Nervous. Because of her parent’s turbulent relationship illustrated with violent domestic scenes where Karr and her older sister Lecia would “hear a crash or the sound of a body hitting the linoleum, and then we’d go streaking in there in our pajamas to see who’d thrown what or who’d passed out” (39), the family was generally ostracized by their churchgoing neighbors. Karr remembers, “I noticed that when somebody’s mom went knocking on doors for company, she never knocked on ours. The more devout families wouldn’t even let their kids come into our yard” (39). Karr’s describes poetry (alternatively, reading and literature) as the thread that linked her to the world: “Poetry...was most crucially the first source of awe for me, because it eased a nagging isolation: it was a line

thrown to my dreary-minded self from seemingly glorious Others” (“Facing Altars” 126).

Although Karr felt no viable connection between herself and her immediate surroundings, she felt in poetry a link to world beyond Leechfield.

Not only was Karr isolated within her community but also within her own home. While her father worked long shifts at the refinery, her mother, Charlie, pursued her own interests—studying Russian philosophy and art history, painting in her studio, and reading, always reading. Described by Karr as “seductive and mercurial and given to deep doldrums and mysterious vanishings,” Charlie would spend days in bed, drunk on vodka, and depressed while Mary and Lecia opened up cans of tamales for breakfast and lounged in the midday heat in nothing but their underwear (*The Liars*’ 126). The sense of loneliness Karr felt, in the world, in her town, and in her home, in many ways founded her earliest beliefs about the power of language—first poetry, then prayer—to transcend or “snatch” her “from the fire” (O’Reilly). To be “snatched from the fire” is a reference to Jude 1:22-23 in which readers are persuaded to show mercy to those who doubt and to save others by “pulling them out of the fire.” Language, first of literary classics and eventually of prayer and sacrament, pulled Karr from the fire to safety, from doubt to belief.

### **Belief in Literature**

Mary Karr is not only a poet and memoirist, but also an accomplished literary scholar and critic. At Syracuse, she wants her students to learn what she refers to as “The English line: Keats, Wordsworth, Byron, Coleridge,” and notes she’s a big fan of Milton and Dickinson. Additionally, she teaches the criticism of modern writers such as Eliot, Stevens, and Plath and has taught a class called “Dead White Guys” focusing on the poetry of Pound, Eliot, Stevens, and Yeats (B. O’Donnell). She penned the introduction to “The Waste Land” for *The Modern*

Library, an essay titled “How to Read ‘The Waste Land’ so It Alters Your Soul,” and in her controversial essay “Against Decoration,” Karr argues that the primary function of poetry is to “move the reader” (3). These critiques join others to create a rich collection of relevant and contemporary literary scholarship and also locate some of Karr’s academic interests in the writing of the modern period. While this scholarship is certainly pertinent to my study and has informed the work of this chapter, the focus of my inquiry is on Karr’s earliest interactions with literature as recounted in *The Liars’ Club*—those that shaped her beliefs, and surely paved the way for her future as a writer, professor, and practicing Catholic.

In a 2016 interview with Krista Tippett for the podcast *On Being*, Karr says, “the place I had contact with both my mother and my father is around language, in a way — my father’s stories and my mother’s love of literature.” *The Liars’ Club* tells the story of Karr’s childhood as shaped by these earliest relationships between her, her parents, and language and is told in the best example of this language, in its rich diction and vibrant storytelling, which is attributed with heralding our contemporary memoir explosion. This voice in *The Liars’ Club* Karr describes as drawn “from a lifetime of reading, which my mother had fostered. An artist and history maven, she kept a wobbly tower of books by her bed” (*The Art* 140). From her earliest memories, Karr associates her mother with books; not only was her mother immersed in her own literary pursuits, but her rare attentions to Mary were often motivated by texts. Karr remembers, “mother bringing me Eliot’s poems from the library, and she not only swooned over them, she swooned over my swooning over them, which felt as close as she came to swooning over me” (“Facing” 126). A reader by the age of three, Karr recounts a memory of her mother taking her to the principal’s office, a “handsome ex-football coach named Frank Doleman” the girls referred to as Uncle Frank, to “dutifully read the front page of the day’s paper out loud to him, so he could be

sure it wasn't...memorized" (*The Liars* ' 62). Karr's interest in literature and her identity as a reader bonded her to her mother in an intimate and singular way.

Likewise, language connected her with her daddy, and this relationship would also prove to have permanent and inimitable consequences. Unlike her mother who "was smart and witty—the master of the one-liner—but not much of a storyteller" (*The Art* 140), Pete Karr was a seasoned raconteur, whose cohort of pals, christened the Liars' Club by "somebody's pissed-off wife" (*The Liars* ' 14), provided the title for Karr's memoir. Karr notes that the Liars' Club—a group of local men who met at the American Legion or "in the back room of Fisher's Bait Shop at times when their wives thought they were paying bills or down at the union hall"—was an apt name since "Certainly not much of the truth in any technical sense got told there" (14). The stories that were told here highlighted her father's colloquial voice, rich with Texas diction, that would ultimately "unlock" *The Liars' Club* for Karr. She explains, "Daddy, the in-house exile in our household of book-reading females, would solve my biggest literary problem...his manner of talk was so singular...The stories hummed through my fibers" (*The Art* 141). Central to Pete's stories were the sharp "carnal" details that Karr suggests lead readers to believe in the veracity of the experience, a critical function of autobiographical narrative. She argues, "A great detail feels particular in a way that argues for its truth. A reader can take it in" (72). Karr locates her own signature language, rich with idiomatic slang and attentive to sensual details, in her father's linguistic tradition.

However, perhaps even more essential to Karr's work is the early relationship between truth and language that she perceives while visiting the Liars' Club. After her dad tells a particularly fictitious story of his father's death to his gullible friends, Karr writes, "I've plumb forgot where I am for an instant, which is how a good lie should take you. At the same time, I'm

more where I was inside myself than before Daddy started talking, which is how lies can tell you the truth” (*The Liars*’ 124). A vocal proponent for the centrality of truth in any autobiographical enterprise, Karr argues that the quality she’s admired most consistently in the life writers she’s read and taught is that “Truth is not their enemy. It’s the bannister they grab for when feeling around on the dark cellar stairs. It’s the solution” (*The Art* xviii). As her reaction to her father’s stories suggests, the truth she’s after—the truth possible in autobiography—isn’t an “authoritative, third-person, I-am-camera view” masquerading as fact, but instead a transcription of the mind “so its edges show,” a writing constantly reminding the reader that he’s not “watching crisp external events played from a digital archive” (16). This truth, Karr argues, is the speaker’s truth alone, and in this way, the genre is constantly disavowing the “rigors of objective truth” (16). This is the truth Karr realizes from her father’s stories, obviously crafted around outrageous lies, a truth that reveals something about her.

Karr locates her interest in truth, and its complicated relationship to language particularly in the stories we tell ourselves, in her earliest exposure to *lies*. In her *On Being* interview, she clarifies, “We’re all lied to, either intentionally or not intentionally...in an alcoholic family... you start with that big lie —‘I’m not drunk.’ I mean, you’re just told that so many times. Or, ‘Everything’s OK’” (Tippett). Motivating the writing of *The Liars’ Club* was Karr’s need to find the “truth” about her family’s dysfunctional history. She explains, “... In an age when even to use the word ‘truth’ or even to say the word ‘truth,’ it always comes now with finger squiggles around it, comes with quotes around it, as though, ‘How dare one presume to know the truth?’” Karr believed she could. She says that she *had* to believe “there was such a thing as truth and that it could possibly in any way be knowable by a person through self-reflection, and therapy, and talking to people, and fasting, and prayer, and eventually talking to Jesus.” Karr clarifies, “I

believed that that the truth would set me free. I believe that..." (Tippett). Her earliest beliefs, richly complicated by a difficult upbringing as the child of alcoholic parents, embrace the possibility of language to reflect truth, to "set her free," to *save* her.

Not only did literature and storytelling connect her with her depressed, distracted mother and often absent father, they serve as a control to the chaos in her childhood. For example, after Lecia nearly dies from a man-of-war attack, young Mary "broke out the Encyclopedia Britannica and read aloud to her about squids the length of battleships and massive shark attacks on shipwrecked sailors during World War II" (*The Liars'* 118). After her mother moves Karr and her sister to Colorado, separates from her daddy, and starts "keeping company with a cowboy from the stable, a fellow named Ray who had the small and peg-like teeth of a rabbit," Mary holes up in the local Christian Science Reading Room to read e. e. cummings and write poetry (196). And after one of the most terrifying scenes in *The Liars' Club*, when her mother draws a pistol on her then-husband Hector while the girls are alternately begging for his life and running to get assistance from their neighbors, Karr remembers Hector sitting in the parlor chair with Lecia wedged in next to him, "a Nancy Drew mystery on her lap" (256). In some of the most dramatic memories of her memoir, Karr focuses her memories and the readers' attention to them on a text. Literature is always present in ways her parents can never be.

Literature becomes Karr's way to transcend experience. In the same way that her mother subscribed to the *New Yorker* to be "exposed to the literary Ivy League, even in [her] little armpit of the universe," Karr believes literature is a means to save her from her current life by connecting her to the world (Fortini 69). She explains, "There was nothing else to do in that suckhole of a town...But reading is socially accepted disassociation. You flip a switch and you're not there anymore. It's better than heroin. More effective and cheaper and legal" (60). Her

personality as a reader, crafted from grade school when she memorized Frost and cummings and dressed up in a sheet to recite Shakespeare, to the age of twelve when she memorized Eliot's "Prufrock," positions her outside and beyond her small, conservative town (61). Her beliefs in literature provide comfort, stability, community, and identity, the same qualities that she would ultimately associate with her beliefs in religion.

A specialist in reading theory, J. A. Appleyard, draws connections between the developmental trajectory in young adult readers, as moving from simple and familiar forms to novel and challenging texts, and the changes that young adults go through in their religious lives (31). He argues that reading engages with the same phenomena that are the territory of spiritual growth: identity, relationships with others, what it means to love, the nature and limits of truth and knowing, manners and morals, mortality, evil, death, what we hope for beyond our lives" (31). Based on an interactional or transactional view of reading from theorists such as Wolfgang Iser, Louise Rosenblatt, and Norman Holland, centered on the historically-situated encounter between a reader and a text, Appleyard argues that the text is a "system of response-inviting structures that the author has organized by reference to a repertory of social and literary codes shared by author and reader" (33).

While the relationship between the author and reader will be further explored in Chapter Four, I mention Appleyard's work here as a bridge between Karr's literary and religious beliefs, particularly as connected to her identity as a reader. In the transactional model of reading, the reader brings to bear on the text expectations derived from past literary and life experience; the text then "feeds back" these expectations or challenges them. The reader, then, filters this feedback through "characteristic defenses, imbues these data with fantasies, tests them against his or her canons of value and belief, and transforms the event into a coherent experience." Thus,

the process of reading is a dialectic of reader/text/world, with the reader's developing self at the center of the process (33). This process explains how and why reading became so essential to Karr, as a child working out her beliefs about the world around her. In a constant loop of "feeding back," Karr's experiences are both filtered through and developed by not only the texts she reads but the process of reading itself. Reading and believing are mutually productive, identity-shaping activities that define how we understand selves, texts, and worlds.

### **Belief in Religion**

While Mary Karr locates her conversion to Catholicism in 1996, she had started the prayer practice that defined her recovery process a few years before, during the same period *The Liars' Club* was published. *The Liars' Club* offers a vivid portrayal of Karr's earliest beliefs about religion and God, beliefs that ultimately change and are the subject of the next chapter of this dissertation. In this chapter, however, I focus on what her childhood beliefs about religion suggest about belief itself. Like her first beliefs about language, Karr's relationship to religion is a reflection of her parents'. She describes her religious training as consisting of "sporadic visits to Christian Science Sunday School alternating with the exercises from a book Mother had on yoga postures" (*The Liars'* 43). When Karr suggests in the wake of Hurricane Carla that the family pray "just in case," she remembers her mother "lifted her middle finger to the ceiling and said *Oh, fuck that God*" (85). Jesus, according to her mother is a "mewling dipshit" (105) and according to her father, "a trick on poor people" (Fortini 81).

The poor people of Leechfield indeed seem to be "tricked," as Karr directly associates religion with the Leechfield Baptists, the same neighbors who instruct their children to avoid the Karr's house and whose doctrine is usually filtered through the character of Carol Sharp. Carol has fundamentalist beliefs like: "God thought Leechfield Baptists somehow better Christians



than folk over in Louisiana” (*The Liars*’ 105); “There are some mysteries in life the Lord doesn’t want us to understand” (106); and “...how the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse would coming riding down out of the clouds with their black caps behind them and how the burning pit would open up in the earth for sinners” (85). Karr openly resists the dogmatic religion of her classmates and their families, and, instead, associates their beliefs with a life very unlike her own. She writes, “When Baptist girls standing next to me on the choir risers got all misty-eyed singing about the purple mountains’ majesty, I would often elbow or jostle them out of spite” (106), and also “I hated them...hated their broad heavy bottoms slung low in those stripy garden chairs. I hated their church suppers, their lumpy tuna casseroles, their Jell-O molds with perfect cubes of pear and peach hanging suspended” (267). Their world, closely prescribed by their religion, is not only unappealing—but perhaps even more telling—*unavailable* to Karr.

We first meet Karr’s God on page eight of *The Liars*’ *Club* on the night the sheriff comes to her house and “mother was adjudged more or less permanently Nervous” (7). Karr, age seven, is anticipating where she’ll be sent overnight; as her habit at the time is to “bargain with God,” she imagines she “started some haggling prayer about who might take us home” (8). She writes, “I proposed to whatever God I worshiped”—a God she perceives as distant, controlling—or, “large and invisible” (63). This God seems removed from the daily reality of Karr’s life, although in times of trauma, such as the hurricane or the death of her grandmother, her thoughts drift toward the divine, perhaps as much as anything to “hedge her bets.” Mostly, however, Karr defines her beliefs in opposition to others. To Carol Sharp’s theological propositions, she replies, “I was spiteful enough to tell her that I didn’t want to sign up with any god who sent tidal waves crashing down on trailer parks” (85). In Karr’s memory, the other kids “still saw the world as some playground smiled over by God” (105), a belief impossible for her to understand based on

the world she actually occupied. When Carol tells her that God had made them from dirt, Karr replies, “I wasn’t dirt, and I wasn’t God’s Barbie doll either. And why would God set Death loose among us like some wind-up robot destroyer if he loved us so much” (106). Prompted by the gruesome and prolonged death of her grandmother, whom she both despised and feared, Karr “keenly felt the loss of...trust in the world’s order” (106). The world, whether governed by a judgmental deity or her neglectful parents, is anything but ordered.

In a traumatic scene that further illustrates Karr’s view of God, her sister is stung by a man-of-war while their parents are drinking at a local hotel bar. Karr runs to get her parents, who perform a number of small ministrations to Lecia’s injury before rushing her to the closest hospital. Desperate for her sister to live, Karr turns to prayer, and it is at this moment that we see her beliefs about God clearly. She writes of Lecia, “I had wished her dead a thousand times, even prayed for it, no less fiercely than I had prayed for grandma to die. Now God, who had done me the kindness of killing Grandma, was taking payment for that kindness by killing Lecia too” (*The Liars*’ 117). Although Karr is certainly suspicious about God’s presence in our lives or even existence in the world, she is still driven to pray. In this scene, she suggests that while God might be capable of taking and sparing lives, He is a fierce and exacting negotiator, unwilling to give mercy without getting something in return. She continues, “I was a child—three feet tall, flat broke, unemployed, barely literate, yet already accountable for two deaths” (117). Thus, not only is God culpable for the tragedy of human death, so is the seven year-old Karr. While the Karr of *The Liars’ Club* retains her disbelief in God, she frequently turns to prayer as a means of reaching outside her troubled world to something potentially bigger and more powerful, even if she simultaneously doubts the possibility of such an existence. Prayer, as an act of *language*, is

her path to the divine. Even at the age of seven, Karr believes that language—of poetry and prayer—holds the power to transcend.

A final scene that perhaps best illustrates the ways in which her beliefs in both literature and God operate in tandem occurs in 1963 when Karr is eight. At this point in the narrative, her family has moved to Colorado, her parents have divorced, and her mother has married Hector, the bartender at the local cowboy “joint.” Charlie and Hector alternate between drunken benders and extended road trips, leaving the sisters unattended or under the supervision of strangers. On one such afternoon, Karr, home with a fever from school, is left in the care of a “grown man” who is “allegedly” tasked with babysitting her (*The Liars*’ 239). In an excruciating nine-page passage, Karr details the sexual assault she suffers under his care. In this scene, we see a clear juxtaposition of her beliefs about literature and about God and their respective places in her life. The scene opens with Karr “sitting in a shaft of sunlight on the Oriental rug in [her] room reading *Charlotte’s Web* for the hundredth time” (240). Moving between the sad part of the story, when Charlotte dies, and the end, when her three baby spiders decide to stay with Wilbur, Karr remembers, “I cry a little, then cheer myself up” (241). Stirred by E. B. White’s famous tale of the cycle of life, Karr realizes, “...people talking about the cycles of nature get to feeling better; the way Baptists talking about the Lord’s Mysterious Plan feel better” (240). Used to discussing literature with her mother (who had previously explained to Mary that Charlotte’s actions made her “Noble, according to Mr. Camus”), Karr calls her sitter up to her room to share her enthusiasm (240).

Karr writes, “When he stands next to me in that circle of sun, I tell him about it with my whole heart. About Charlotte and the babies and Wilbur. My sitter nods all slow and serious. At the end, he says how being special friends with somebody keeps you ever from being lonesome.

And do I want to be his special friend” (*The Liars*’ 241). Karr, in her eight-year-old naiveté, assumes this means her new “friend” wants to be part of her vampire club and begins to explain the required initiations to join. Instead, she’s greeted by “the zipper of his chinos” and “inside that zipper his pecker is making that bulge, the bad words for which zoom through my head—Hard-on, Boner, Stiffie” (241). Slowly and with painstaking detail, Karr describes forced oral sex to us. She recalls, “He reaches his big hand out to place it on my head, cupping my skull. It’s like the gesture Jesus makes in my Bible picture, when they’ve written *Suffer the little children*...in the caption” (244). The comparison between this man and Jesus ends there, however; “But I won’t raise my eyes to see if this man is Jesus, because all the while he’s patting my head, that pecker of his is staring right at me with its slitted eye” (240). Karr considers running, but acknowledges the certain futility of such an attempt as, like all kids, she is “smaller than, less than, weaker than” (240). Instead, in this moment of acute trauma, she turns her thoughts to God and the (im)possibility of escape. This quote seems to encapsulate Karr’s earliest beliefs about God and His ability to intervene in our lives:

I wonder why somebody doesn’t appear in the doorway to lift me out of range of that big, one-eyed dick staring me down. If God made the world...then why doesn’t He send some Christian soldier rushing in with a sword unclanging from its scabbard to stab this man, or lop this pecker off at the root? And I know Carol Sharp would say this right here is God’s plan for me. Or it’s punishment for some badness I did.... (245)

Of course, God doesn’t send anyone to rescue Karr, not a Christian soldier, not her inattentive mother. Instead, Karr suffers the sexual abuse that will perhaps eventually contribute to her depression and alcoholism and qualify her religious beliefs for years to come. This scene

opens with the most detailed description of literature in the memoir; we see Karr engaging *Charlotte's Web* as a reader who believes that stories—and her beliefs about stories—*matter*. However, Karr's enthusiasm is met not with her mother's rare attention, but with the sexual advances of her caretaker. This narrative moment directly challenges and then actually perverts her beliefs about the social interaction literature affords. No longer does literature have the singular power to garner her mother's approval; it also holds the potential to hurt her. When Karr reaches out to convert a new believer, she is betrayed. Her realizations about literature—as something that people talk about to feel better (like the Baptists talking about God's "plan")—immediately merge into her beliefs about God.

Although it will be thirty-five years before the Karr of *The Liars' Club* will convert to Catholicism, her belief in literature and language anticipates her belief in religion. In many ways, the content of her beliefs is less important than her belief itself, her belief in the power of language—of poetry, of prayer—to carry her beyond her current circumstances. Like Burke's theory of logology or Lewis's "secular sacred," words about God can be read as words about words; in this move, Karr's beliefs resist the dialectic of secular/sacred and thus expands our concept of belief beyond a practice limited to spiritual concerns. One example of her troubling the secular/sacred dichotomy is in her analogy of poetry as "Eucharistic," a term traditionally associated with the sacrament of communion in the Catholic Church.<sup>8</sup> She explains, "In

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<sup>8</sup> In her essay "How to Read 'The Waste Land' So It Alters Your Soul" published as the introduction to the newest Modern Library edition, Karr ends with this paragraph that beautifully illustrates this analogy. She writes, "In this way, ['The Waste Land'] can work like the miracle of communion—you take the Eucharist of the writer's words into the rough meat of your body in order to be transformed by someone else's mysterious passion. It brings you into a community of like sufferers... There's healing in that... Reading the poem gives me the conviction to live my life, not with the despair and angst rendered, but with the alertness the poem demands. People spend hundreds of thousands of dollars in therapy for the same sense of presence in one's life,

memorizing the poems I loved, I ‘ate’ them in a way. I breathed as the poet breathed to recite the words: someone else’s suffering enters your body to transform you...” (“Facing” 133); and continues in an interview for *Image* journal: “That’s what I mean by eucharistic: somebody else’s passion, suffering, comes into your body and changes you” (B. O’Donnell). Although she distinguishes poetry from religious liturgy or prayer, “What was different from liturgy was that it wasn’t sacred. It wasn’t sanctified by the Holy Spirit. It wasn’t Jesus” (B. O’Donnell), the language of each is capable of the same effects. While it isn’t until many years later, after her conversion, that Karr will position her beliefs about literature and God in direct dialogue with each other, in her earliest autobiographical writing the relationship between the two beliefs are revelatory. I argue that, resembling the modern authors she studies and teaches, these beliefs are neither sacred or secular, spiritual or natural, religious or literary, but capable of existing in the spaces in between.

While *The Liars’ Club* documents Karr’s childhood decades before her conversion, the memoir is rich with religious words and images that, when viewed logologically, infuse the narrative with a spirituality quite different from the conservative and fundamental beliefs of the other Leechfield residents. When opening the door to her mother’s studio, the young Karr felt like a “thief in church” (*The Liars’* 59); after her family nearly escapes the hurricane, can remembers, “I felt no grace” (93); she describes her grandfather as “seemingly older than Jesus” (93); and, after a particularly irreverent story told by her father to his friends, Karr notices “they take this death as gospel” (95). These examples join many others to signify that religious language, wielded by a “nonbeliever,” still carries with it “supernatural” meaning—despite the

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the same fusion of inner self and outer experience. The mere exercise of attention—eyes wide, ears pricked, heart open—is not a bad way to move through the world.”

belief system of Karr or her reader. Burke's logology is used as a method of studying how "words about God" essentially are "words about words"—as such, words imbued with religious meaning and significance can still dwell in the "supernatural" whether or not we believe "the entity named 'God' exists" (2). For Karr, and for her reader, words such as "church," "grace," and "gospel" that are borrowed from a religious tradition, resonate with spiritual meaning even though she (or, perhaps her reader) doesn't yet "believe" in God. When situated within a secular context and analogically connected to objects that aren't immediately religious, such as a "thief," a "grandfather," or "death," the spiritual words are "aestheticized" (secularized) while still retaining their sacred associations.

I'm interested not only in the logological nature of *words* about the religious and the literary but in our *beliefs* about them. In Mary Karr's first memoir, her beliefs about both are simultaneously developing and overlapping. Sometimes nebulous and often contradictory, these beliefs—about literature and about God—are shaped in reaction to her childhood experiences and will ultimately lead to a conversion that surprised her as much as her friends and readers. Perhaps because Karr is so adept at moving her beliefs between secular and sacred spaces and back again, her stories speak to readers who are religious and to those who are not. Indeed, one of the most compelling elements of Karr's stories is the way she values belief in her life—in our lives—whether we believe in poetry, prayer, or a "Creator/Rain God/Fertility Queen" ("Facing Altars" 128).

### **The Old and the New**

Here, I'd like to return to James Wood's thesis of the blurring between the "religious" and "literary" as the result of ways we began to think about the role of truth in narrative, particularly the relationship between fiction and the "Gospel." While Wood's emphasis is on

modern fiction, I argue his work can be productive to a consideration of all narrative, including autobiography.

Wood reflects on the connection between narrative and “reality,” asking if it was “not just science but perhaps the novel itself which helped to kill Jesus’s divinity, when it gave us a new sense of the real, a new sense of how the real disposes itself in a narrative—and then in turn a new skepticism toward the real as we encounter it in narrative” (xvi). The movement between life and narrative, like Burke’s logology, carries meaning back and forth, infusing both with both belief and doubt. Wood explains:

There is something about narrative that puts the world in doubt. Narrative corrugates belief, puts bends and twists in it. I don’t mean that it relativizes belief, only that it makes belief more difficult. A story is a formal filibuster; it slows down belief until belief falls asleep and begins to dream its opposite, its negative.  
(xvi)

Karr’s childhood, as represented in *The Liars’ Club*, offers readers a compelling consideration and complication of belief and/in narrative.

Wood’s observations of the changed relationship between truth, narrative, and fiction as the result of the modern reinterpretation of the Bible parallels the work of theologian Hans Frei who devoted his life to the study of 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century methods of interpreting narrative in Scripture and who gradually grew convinced of the improbability and inaccuracy of the entire modern Christian theology. For centuries before the modern era, Christian theologians read the Bible as a realistic narrative, as containing an overarching story of the world beginning with creation and ending with the Last Judgment. This type of reading facilitated a “figural” or typological approach where events in the stories and in the world “prefigured” or reflected the



larger narrative. This interpretation encouraged Christians to locate their own personal experiences within the Biblical story. However, around the 18<sup>th</sup> century, readers began to reverse this process; as their daily experiences began to define for them what was “real,” they attempted to understand the meaning of the Bible by locating it within their world (Placher). Frei argues that both approaches fundamentally distort the meaning of the text as they lose sight of the function of Biblical stories as realistic narratives. Instead, a theology that respects the meaning of Biblical narrative must start by simply retelling the stories, without an attempt at apologetics and without any attempt to begin with generalizations based on our own experiences. William C. Placher explains:

The stories portray a person—a God who acts in the history of Israel and engages in self-revelation in Jesus of Nazareth. They help us learn about that person in the way that a great novelist describes a character or that a telling anecdote captures someone's personality. They provide insights that we lose if we try to summarize the narrative in a nonnarrative form. No abstract account of God's faithfulness adequately summarizes Exodus. The Gospels surpass any abstract account of God's love.

Frei suggests that the meaning of Biblical text comes from an “internal literary world pictured in its stories not from the external historical world referred to by these stories” (Wallace 91).

Frei recognizes, however, that the Bible isn't simply a realistic novel, offering particular challenges to interpreters attending to its unique characteristics. Instead, he echoes the perspective of Erich Auerbach, a literary critic he greatly admires, in a description of Biblical narrative as “Far from seeking...merely to make us forget our own reality for a few hours, it seeks to overcome our reality: we are to fit our own life into its world, feel ourselves to be

elements in its structure of universal history” (*Mimesis* 14-15). Whether readers locate narrative before or as a result of their experiences, theorists such as Frei and Auerbach agree that Biblical narrative has structured the way we read not only the Bible, but stories in general. This perspective views narrative as offering something greater than the “socially acceptable disassociation” that reading provides Karr. A model of reading based on Biblical narrative, rather than disassociating us from reality, seeks to actually overcome it by revising and repositioning our experiences to fit within a larger, universal story.

While a thorough comparison of various interpretative approaches to the Bible and narrative are far outside of the scope of this dissertation, I think a brief reconsideration of typological hermeneutics is relevant to my argument that belief—as separate from specific content—is capable of moving between the sacred and secular, between the religious and the literary. I say “re”-consideration because typology as a method of interpreting Scripture is less applicable to contemporary liberal and postmodern theologies that don’t assume a causal connection between the Old and New Testaments and, instead, consider Scripture as the account of disparate religious experiences rather than a unified historical record or “grand narrative” (“Biblical Typology”). Typology, then, is a method of Biblical interpretation in which an element (person, story, symbol, or event) found in the Old Testament is understood to “prefigure” one found in the New Testament. The initial element is called the “type” and the subsequent one the “antitype”; often the type is messianic and frequently associated with salvation. A typological hermeneutic is contingent on a fundamental theological unity between the testaments, the Old “shadows” the New, where what is interpreted in the Old is not foreign, obscure, or hidden but arises “naturally” out of the text due to the relationship between the two

("Biblical Typology"). The most recognizable typological relationship is revealed in the type of Adam in the Old Testament as prefiguring Christ (antitype) in the New Testament.

According to Lynne Walhout Hingosa, such a hermeneutic has "epistemological, ontological, and ethical ramifications for the reading self: the text simultaneously identifies, reforms, and instructs the self who is reading" (642). As Frei noted, a typological Bible reading encourages readers to see their selves and stories as participating in a larger historical narrative; thus, typology is not only a way of relating Hebrew (Old Testament) to Christian (New Testament) history, but it is also a way of reading one's own life as following a narrative pattern revealed in the Bible—moving from Old Testament "type" to New Testament "antitype"—and in this new self, constantly moving toward the afterlife (646). Therefore, as we read the Biblical narrative, we can recognize a pattern in which types point to our "future perfected by spiritual fulfillment in Jesus who literally enters history and transforms it" (645). The act of reading is obviously central to typological hermeneutics. Hingosa explains, "Both the text and the reader's life contain prefigurative literal and spiritual meaning, and these connections are elucidated through the experience of reading" (646). Applying a typological hermeneutic to autobiographical narrative can yield a fascinating dimension to what and how we believe about literature and about religion and about the selves of both.

Hingosa uses the example of Augustine's *Confessions* to illustrate how autobiographers can apply types to "read the self" or place the self within a narrative. One of the earliest practitioners of typology, Augustine explains, "Wherefore, in the Old Testament there is a veiling of the New, and in the New Testament there is a revealing of the Old" (Salmond 4.8) and uses this hermeneutic to read his own life. According to Hingosa, Augustine narrates and interprets his life according to Biblical types, and while a more thorough discussion of

Augustine's contribution to the field of autobiography and rhetorical studies will occur in the next chapter, a brief mention of his *Confessions* is useful here. In the *Confessions*, Augustine details his sinful youth, characterized by a seemingly unyielding resistance to God and religion that ultimately results in one of history's most notable conversion stories. One of the infamous tales he recounts in Book Two describes a scene where he needlessly steals pears from a neighbor's tree and then mercilessly chides himself for his crime, ultimately connecting his behavior to a dark and malevolent sinful nature originating from Adam. This episode (anti-type), read typologically, reminds the reader of the Biblical account of Adam and Eve's fall (as type). In this move, Augustine not only classifies himself as a type within the *Confessions*, but also prefigures the subsequent narrative in which his conversion to Christ will occur (Hinjosa 646).

Typological readings, such as Augustine's, employ a mode of interpretation that is simultaneously literal and spiritual, relying on the assumption that "real" historical events hold spiritual significance as they prefigure future historical events that fulfill more completely spiritual realities (Hinjosa 647). In typology, both interpretations—literal (historical) and allegorical—are real; and spiritual reality does not detract from literal reality. According to Hinjosa, the word "spiritual" is used here instead of "allegorical" in order to highlight the difference between the terms. Typology "retains with equal emphasis both the reality of the literal-historical and the reality of the spiritual truths that the literal-historical prefigures" (648). Allegory tends to emphasize the abstract concepts to which a fictional or "not real" symbolic narrative points. Frei, in his study of the Reformers (Luther, Calvin, and the English Puritans), discovered that while a broad disparity exists in their various theologies, they mostly agreed that the Bible should be interpreted typologically. Thus, the Biblical narrative is not only historically true—literally—but also spiritually prefigurative, with the Old Testament prefiguring the New,

revealing Christ as the center of the narrative. Hingosa explains, “God creates history, participates in history, uses real things to signify other real things in time, and provides spiritual instruction at the literal level of the text. To leave behind the literal level would be to deny this universal historical narrative and to deny one’s own position as a reader within that narrative” (650).

Applied to Augustine’s *Confessions*, then, the individual self and its particular story are constantly sacrificed not only to God but also to the larger (Biblical) narrative. “The individual life is never the final end or reason for interpreting scripture, and indeed, reading scripture should teach one that the self’s identity exists beyond one’s own story” (654). From a typological perspective, it is the future that exists beyond our stories, and in this future, we can be saved. Hingosa argues that the purpose of reading for Augustine, then, is not to gain certain knowledge of his spiritual status, but rather to become one with the text, both literally and spiritually. In the *Confessions*, Augustine shows how the literal—the life one lives/the story one reads—is always situated within universal, spiritual meanings that give it ultimate meaning (656). For Augustine, conversion is the experience that carries us out of our individual stories; once we are converted, we are no longer merely readers of narrative but real people *within* that narrative. We have literally become the “living Word” or divine Logos.

While I certainly recognize, like Frei, the theological limitations of a typological hermeneutic, particularly the assumptions such interpretation holds about the correlation between truth, narrative, and experience, I offer it here as a provocative approach to understanding how our beliefs about religion and literature have developed historically, culturally, personally, and ultimately *mutually*. In this chapter, I have focused on how these beliefs—about religion, about literature, about *language*—shaped many of Mary Karr’s childhood experiences. I would like to

conclude with some suggestions of how such a reading might enhance our understanding of Karr's beliefs, particularly as they are both bound and circulated by narrative.

The textual theory of Paul Ricoeur is relevant to a typological understanding of Karr's autobiographical narrative. As Ricoeur notes, the texts that we have not just read, but understood and loved, have taken our experiences in the world and placed them within a narrative framework. In this way, literature "opens up the world" for us by not only solidifying who we are but imagining who we might become. Thus, what we "understand first in a discourse is not another person," but a *new* person, "the outline of a new being-in-the-world" ("The Model" 202). Typological readings, such as Augustine's, are meant to foster self-knowledge as the reader places herself into the narrative while reading. However, just as the Biblical narrative moves from Old Testament to New, typology reveals a new "true self" constantly moving toward the afterlife. Thus, typological reader not only acquires self-knowledge, she also receives a new life, transformed from "false" to "true" (Hinjosa 646). David Jeffrey explains: "it is less the explication of texts that matters than the Text itself; the authentic reader is one in whom that text has entered to become a living Presence" (51).

Of course, a typological hermeneutic is completely reliant on narrative or texts bound by time and space. Typology begins with the "Old" and moves to the "New," a chronological forward looking movement that continually directs our focus to the future while simultaneously looking backward for signs (people, events, places, things) that illuminate that future. However, both movements, forward and backward, are linear and temporal, grounded in narrative structure. As Augustine models, typology can yield stimulating readings of autobiographical narrative, as texts specifically concerned with understanding a self in the world, and as texts that require

writers to look to the past in order to make sense of the future. Consequently, when reading *The Liars' Club* typologically, some interesting observations come to light.

Karr published *The Liars' Club* in 1995, at age 40. Her memoir focuses on her childhood, the bulk of which details her life between the ages of seven and nine. (Part Three, the last two chapters of the book, takes place in 1980, "seventeen years later.") Autobiography, of course, requires its authors to rely on the past, primarily through memory as the source of narrative, and in a sense looking to the "Old" for hints to where they belong in the "New." Karr has commented extensively on the challenges of recreating her distant past and has been frequently recognized for her success in doing so. She writes, "...a single image can split open the hard seed of the past, and soon memory pours forth from every direction, sprouting its vines and flowers up around you till the old garden's taken shape in all its fragrant glory. Almost unbelievable how much can rush forward to fill an absolute blankness" (*The Art* 2). One of Karr's notable qualities as an autobiographer is her ability to recreate her experiences in detail and language that feels believable to the reader. Another, is her ability to make sense of these experiences in the context of the rest of her life, to situate the "old" or past self within the narrative of the "new." Scholar Paul John Eakin explains of autobiography's identity work: "the memory work involved when we look back on our pasts is driven not only by our present circumstances but also by our plans for the future" (*Living* 151).<sup>9</sup> The "self" of *The Liars' Club*, is both bound to her historical past while simultaneously conceived by the Karr of the future.

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<sup>9</sup> Eakin explains that seeing memories as neurological events helps to answer the question of why we believe in "autobiography's retrospective illusion, the 'you-are-there' narratives...that mask the autobiographical act unfolding in the present" (*Living* 157). First, it is because we are "steadily moving away from the past into the future, and we want to bridge that gap." Also, he argues, "...the present it not a story yet. We can know it only indirectly, and we are conditioned socially...and neurologically...to absorb our journey across time in narrative terms" (157).

While the publication of *The Liars' Club* predates Karr's "official" conversion by a year, she is engaged in the recovery process, and the daily prayer it requires, during the writing of the memoir. While her "new" (converted) self is not yet revealed, perhaps the construction of her childhood persona ("old") is cast in the shadow of what is to come. In *The Liars' Club*, Karr uses present (or future, to her childhood self) literary references to recast previous experiences through a new lens. In this move, the shadow of the "new" is cast over the "old," revealing a reinterpretation of her past self. In one scene when Charlie gives Mary one of the many spankings encouraged by her dying grandmother, Karr remembers, "In school when I stumbled on the famous Yeats poem about things falling apart, it was the spin of those spankings I thought back to" (*The Liars'* 72). After her grandmother's death, Karr imagines her mother driving the body across the Texas desert. Karr's writes, "I guess it wasn't till I read William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*, where the kids are dragging their dead mother across Mississippi...that I began to figure that some ambulance has probably carted the body back" (102). And, in another memorable scene when Charlie burns all of the family's possessions in the front yard, Karr writes, "Epicetus has a great line about the division between body and soul—'Thou are a little spirit bearing up a corpse.' When I read that line years later, I automatically pictured those dresses emptied of their occupants and sailing into the fire in graceful arcs" (152). These scenes mark rare moments in the text when the present Karr explicitly uses her "future" self to understand her "old" self. Tellingly, literature is the vehicle by which she both accesses and understands her childhood identity.

Another observation revealed in reading Karr's memoirs typologically involves the connections between them, specifically between her first book *The Liars' Club* as "Old" and her third *Lit* as "New," in the same way that Biblical narrative is read as the Old Testament



prefiguring the New Testament. Read this way, the Karr of *The Liars' Club*, and all of her formative experiences, including her emerging beliefs about literature and about God, serve as the original “type” and prefigure her new self, post-conversion, that *Lit* portrays as “anti-type.” As I’ve previously mentioned, her position as pre- or post-converted is relevant here: while writing *The Liars' Club*, she was beginning her recovery process, which included a daily prayer regimen. And while *Lit* details her resistance to this practice, as I will note in the following chapter, she is more “open” to spiritual concerns than at previous points in her life. When Karr writes *Lit*, over a period of years beginning around 2005, she is already ten years into her “new” life as a converted Catholic. Thus, the writer of both memoirs stands in different relationships to her spirituality. Typology involves reading the Old Testament as prefigurative to the New; Adam, then, is a type that prefigures the antitype Christ. The latter becomes the “perfect” fulfillment of what was previously imperfect. Just as we can read the Biblical narrative to determine a pattern in which types point to their future perfect selves, spiritually fulfilled, so can we read the autobiographical narratives of Mary Karr. The childhood Karr, like Augustine, is a pre-figuration of her future self, and, as such, is in need of the salvation a “new self” offers. Reading Karr’s experience typologically, as following a narrative pattern revealed in the Bible, provides another understanding of how her earlier experiences and beliefs predict her eventual transformation—her “true” self that is constantly moving forward and toward the afterlife.

Reading *The Liars' Club* in isolation, and not as the first in a trilogy of memoirs as Karr always imagined she’d write (W. Smith 53), offers plenty of rich context in which to consider her early religious and literary beliefs. However, to read the memoir as a beginning, as the “Old,” wherein her identity, experiences, and beliefs represent a “type” and then to follow her life’s trajectory through *Lit*, as the “New” and antitype, reveals “new” possibilities. As such, Karr’s

earliest beliefs in literature and in its potential to lift her out of her environment prefigures her later beliefs in religion—hinted at in *The Liars' Club* but fully explored in *Lit*—as able to realize “from the Almighty” an “experience of joy...come in middle age on the rent and tattered wings of disbelief” (“Facing Altars” 135). Karr explains, “Having devoted the first half of my life to the dark, I feel obliged to revere any pinpoint of light now...” (136). According to the logic of typology, the “new” Karr, like Augustine, is no longer simply a reader of her narrative, but a “real” person within the Biblical narrative, one who has become the “living Word”—a move that extends beyond the individual life and reading for self-identification into a wider, literal interpretation of the self as part of the “living Word” which seeks to imitate Christ, indeed, to *be* Christ, as the divine Logos.

As I’ve noted, the act of reading is essential to self-identification, self-transformation, and ultimately salvation. Indeed, in the moments leading up to Augustine’s final conversion, while “weeping in the bitter agony” of his heart, he heard a child’s voice from a nearby house saying *Tolle lege, tolle lege*—“Take up and read. Take up and read” (*Confessions*, Book IIX, XII: 29). Augustine interprets this mysterious command as a spiritual sign; he opens his Scripture randomly and reads the passage before him from Matthew 19:21. Augustine notes that this passage “converted” St. Antony. Thus, he’s moved to “return to the place where Alypius was sitting” where he had put down the “Apostle’s book.” He “snatched it up, opened it and in silence read the passage upon which (his) eyes first fell,” Romans 13:13-14. After reading the texts that he directly associates with his own experience, he writes, “I had no wish to read further, and no need. For in that instant, with the very ending of the sentence, it was as though a light of utter confidence shone in all my heart, and all the darkness of uncertainty vanished away” (*Confessions*, Book IIX, XII: 29). After eight long chapters of struggling against this

moment, he finally “takes up and reads”—and the result, his conversion, is a significant moment in both literary and religious history. In similar ways, the act of reading, in many ways separate from the content of specific literary texts, paves or “prefigures” Karr’s path to religion. The reverence she reserves for the literature so prevalent in her mother’s world can only be described as sacred. When she reads, she is not the child of neglect, stranded in a dead-end town and surrounded by a community that neither supports nor understands her. Instead, through her poems and stories, she is able to transcend the misery of her early years and the isolation that characterized her home life into communion with readers and writers outside and beyond her experience.

Certainly, a typological hermeneutic can threaten, as Frei noted, to isolate experiences from the Biblical narrative and from our lives, and thus imbue both with spiritual meaning beyond their functions within a story. When this happens, we are encouraged as Auerbach observes, to “fit” our lives within the Biblical narrative, to “feel ourselves to be elements in its structure of universal history.” This interpretation of lives, as individual selves operating within a grand, divine narrative, can be particularly devastating when read from various political and social perspectives. That is not what I’m advocating in this application of typology to Karr’s work. I offer it instead to argue that secular typological readings, as separate from any particular doctrinal orientation, indeed distinct from religion at all, can be a provocative approach to thinking about autobiographical narrative as texts rooted in the reading of lives and the transformation of selves—from Old to New. Like Burke’s logology, typology can be a secular hermeneutic, one that also considers the relationship between words and The Word or between narrative and the Biblical narrative. When we read typologically, we “fit” our story, or *move* it, to a new position within a larger whole. Whether that bigger narrative is secular or sacred—

*whether or not we are*—we can see new meanings when our stories travel to distant places and when they return. The spiritual significance given our narratives when situated within the Biblical model, just like the supernatural meaning attached to words when they are pulled from their secular past into a sacred context, offers the “dimension added” that Flannery O’Connor describes.

Karr notes, “Writing spiritual stuff for a secular audience is like doing card tricks on the radio” (Fortini 76). However, she is clearly able to do so as she notes the positive reaction to her third memoir, *Lit*, which details her burgeoning spiritual beliefs: “I think what surprised me the most were friends of mine who were atheists who really liked how I wrote about my faith, or could understand. My friend Richard Ford—who, when I first got baptized, sent me a postcard saying, ‘Not you on the pope’s team! Say it ain’t so!’—wrote me a fan letter about it, and it was very gratifying to me (Jansen 92). Although *The Liars’ Club* is generally not considered a “spiritual autobiography,” it certainly reveals a narrative that is rich with beliefs that speak to readers in powerful ways because these beliefs are invested in language and in the practices of reading and writing. Poetry, according to Karr, is meant to *move* us. While one meaning of the verb “move” is “to affect with emotion,” as Karr is certainly referring to in this case, its Anglo-French and Latin etymological history includes “to introduce,” “to set in motion,” or “to prompt or impel toward some action” (“Move”). Thus, when language *moves* us, we are set in motion toward *something*. As humans bound by time, that something is generally before us, as a point in our narrative future, as something beyond who and where we are now. Religion moves Karr, too—but that movement she generally describes as upward rather than forward; she prays to be “lifted” from her life, and she explains she was “snatched out” of the fire. However, regardless of the trajectory of her experience, literature and religion are capable of taking Karr somewhere she

hasn't been before—in her words, “That’s why I pray and poetize: to be able to see my brothers and sisters despite my own (often petty) agonies, to partake of the majesty that’s every Judas’s birthright” (“Facing Altars” 136).

### CHAPTER III

#### (RE)TURNING TO HER SAME SELF: MARY KARR'S CONVERSION

##### AND FOUCAULT'S ASKESIS

*It was in my inmost heart, where I had grown angry with myself, where I had been stung with remorse, where I had slain my old self and offered it in sacrifice.*

—St. Augustine of Hippo

*I believe in God. But even if you don't, you can believe in a self, the person who is innately who you are. Once you fully become that person then everything you do will be blessed.*

—Mary Karr

*Checking into the hospital, I surrendered to a sobbing that I'd always held back, thinking if I started in on it it would never, ever, ever stop. Then it stops after a week or two, as if a lifetime's portion of grief has boiled out of me. The ferocious internal motion I've been praying would end finally—almost in a nanosecond—stops. It's a pivot point around which my entire future will ultimately swivel. That first night, kneeling before the toilet, I let go, as they say. Or call it the moment my innately serotonin-challenged brain reached level X.*

—Mary Karr

After a lifetime of struggling with neglect, abuse, and addiction, this poignant and long-coming moment marks Mary Karr's conversion to Catholicism as narrated in her third memoir, *Lit*. While reflecting only a few brief minutes in a recovery process that ultimately spanned years, this particular moment forever defines Karr's life and situates her text within the historically rich genre of conversion narrative, or "spiritual autobiography." Since St. Augustine's famous moment in the garden—when, after years of resisting the God and religion of his mother and various mentors, he experiences a profound and life-altering transformation—autobiography has been shaped by conversion both as a trope for identities and as a structure for narratives. Susan Jacoby defines conversion as "any shift of belief that significantly alters the course of a life" (xxii). Conversion, then, isn't limited to religious experiences. Instead, conversion as a trope has been used to mark moments of change in narratives when writers have

experienced some kind of epiphanic awareness that has led to new beliefs whether sacred or secular.

While the genre of conversion narrative has been theorized extensively from a number of disciplines including literary studies, religious studies, sociology, and cognitive psychology, the phenomenon continues to raise provocative questions for the field of life writing, whose very origins are often traced to one of the most famous conversion narratives in history—Augustine’s *Confessions*. Written between 397 – 400 C.E, the *Confessions* of St. Augustine of Hippo, the autobiographical story of a sinful youth ultimately converted to Christianity, is a seminal text occupying a privileged historical position as the origin of Western self-representation (Riley 24). One of the first narratives of the self through time, the *Confessions* continues to challenge and inspire religious and secular readers alike. Of recurring interest to scholars of life writing is Augustine’s representation of the converted identity, a “bipartite notion of the self or, rather, the back-to-back representation of two distinct, conflicting selves that are cleaved into separate entities by the conversional moment” (25). Occurring in Book 8, the conversion splits the narrative into the autobiographical focus of the first part of the text and the metaphysical consideration of memory, temporality, language, and biblical exegesis found in the remaining chapters. The moment that serves to “cleave” the narrative is Augustine’s conversion. Thus, according to the logic of the *Confessions*, Augustine’s conversion requires more than a characteristic Christian negation of self; it also requires an abandonment of narrative. A rich paradox occurs here; at the moment Augustine recognizes, for the first time, the “truth of the self,” he must deny his autonomy by demonstrating, through the transformation of conversion that this self can be realized only in God (25). Patrick Riley observes, “Conversion enacts a dynamic in which an autobiographical narrative is generated only to be silenced, but that

superseded narrative remains to remind us that autobiography is something Augustine will finally devalue; it is a discourse through which he has to pass in order to arrive at God” (25). Augustinian scholar James O’Donnell suggests it is this binding of conversion to self-narrative that inspires many to consider the *Confessions* an autobiographical urtext (83). Yet, O’Donnell’s biography of Augustine, published in 2006, challenges our reading of *Confessions* as autobiography *only*. In his newest study, O’Donnell argues that the *Confessions* is less a story about Augustine and more a story about his God. Thus, reading the text autobiographically without reading it theologically is to understand the book only partially (63). According to O’Donnell, “the fault line that separates the *Confessions*-about-god and the *Confessions*-about-Augustine runs right through the most vividly remembered scene of the book, the one in the garden in Milan...” (64)—or, Augustine’s conversion. Although the conversion is at the heart of the text, serving as the climax to Augustine’s life story, O’Donnell suggests that to his story, the *autobiographical* is secondary to the *rhetorical*. The *Confessions*, then, is “a work of brilliant artifice and power, a virtuoso act of self-invention and self-justification” (Fredriksen 90). Regardless of the lens through which we choose to read the stories of our lives, our earliest examples of autobiography demonstrate, and St. Augustine’s *Confessions* exemplifies, that self-narratives evolve from and revolve around moments of fundamental change.

Many scholars argue the impossibility of thinking about autobiography without a consideration of conversion as an almost unavoidable construct in life writing. In an essay titled “Conversion and the Language of Autobiography,” Geoffrey Galt Harpham suggests that conversion serves as a device for defining autobiography itself. According to Harpham, “One is converted when one discovers that life can be made to conform to certain culturally validated narrative forms; spiritual conversion might simply be a strong form of reading” (5). This



approach suggests that what motivates a conversion is the discovery that there is a discourse through which to tell a story. For Harpham, conversion isn't as much the language that an autobiographer uses to write a life story as the "inevitable moment that occurs when one sees one's life as a text" (5). Not only is conversion a psychological phenomenon, Harpham argues that it is equally (or perhaps more so) a linguistic or rhetorical one. So, in effect, we are converted when we are able to think about our lives as stories.

Another theorist interested in how conversion shapes our life stories is Peter Dorsey, who describes the purpose of conversion narratives as capturing the relationship between self and larger social and ideological systems. This theory is one that dominates the field today as most of the more recent work on conversion is interested in where the "self" is situated in this process of becoming. According to Dorsey, one of the most distinguishing characteristics of the genre is the communal and sociological aspect of it (39). In fact, many times the act of conversion is actually triggered by hearing other stories within the community, an occurrence that motivates the communal telling of these narratives or "testimonies." And while a conversion signifies a movement of the individual into a larger collective of "believers"—or other converts—at the same time it could mark a removal from mainstream cultures, an estrangement of sorts. This impulse is motivated by believers to not be "of this world"—a space that is viewed as not able to accommodate the ostensibly contradictory priorities of those who do and don't believe. Tensions such as this, the seeming incompatibilities between the effects of our beliefs and the interests of our selves, are the topic of this chapter. While an interdisciplinary examination of prominent conversion theories could certainly yield a broad context for my project, such work is outside the scope of my dissertation. Instead, after a brief historical look at the development of conversion narratives in the Western autobiographical tradition, I narrow my focus to Michel Foucault's

technologies of the self in order to compare two dichotomous models of conversion—a traditional Christian model with a Hellenistic-Roman model—that have historically been diametrically opposed. In his analysis, Foucault problematizes both models with a discussion of “truth” and its relationship to subjectivity, conversations that are essential to a contemporary study of autobiography. Using Mary Karr’s conversion as represented in *Lit*, I analyze how these models offer differing approaches to thinking about autobiography and argue that Foucault’s definition of conversion—as a method of self-care—expands our traditional conceptualization of conversion beyond religious practice.

### **The Converted Self of Autobiography**

Conversion, as a literary construct, provides the text a point on which to change directions, specifically as it operates in the story of a life. Patrick Riley explains, “The logic of conversion, as it creates a reference point for the literary construction of identity, is one of the most compelling rhetorical and psychological structures available to the autobiographer trying to understand and communicate the shape of his or her life” (2). Riley suggests we imagine conversion as a fulcrum which suggests not only a prop or anchor, but also a center of motion, “a pivot on which...the momentum of a life shifts, a turning point, a knife-edge bisecting an identity and its story” (6). In the opening paragraph describing her own conversion, Karr identifies this moment as “a pivot point around which my entire future will ultimately swivel” (*Lit* 281). This moment joins other notable turning points in *Lit* to serve as a “knife-edge,” bisecting her identity into “selves” and her story into “befores” and “afters.”

However, before we move to Karr’s story, a brief historical consideration of the relationship of conversion narratives to identity construction is important. While St. Augustine (397 CE), and St. Paul hundreds of years before him, are often credited with authoring the first

conversion narratives, the Western version of the genre we recognize today developed as a method of constituting self, experience, and community for early American evangelicals. Following the classical Protestant theology of Martin Luther, John Calvin, and the Reformers, evangelicalism emphasized a personal and affective experience over sacramental activity as the key to Christian life (Payne 7). At the heart of this theology was the requirement that individuals obtain a personal experience of divine forgiveness and salvation, an experience that evangelicals recognized was an “act of language” or a way of saying something meaningful about themselves. According to Rodger Payne, conversion thus emerged as a “discursive object,” functioning as a discourse that eventually shaped the modern consciousness (2). Using Foucault’s understanding of discourse as not only as a way of speaking (or writing) meaningfully, but as offering an explanatory model of perceived reality, Payne argues that conversion discourse became a basis for analyzing and explaining the human condition, and thus establishing itself as “truth” (5). This discourse developed into an essential means of confronting the particular cultural challenges facing Protestants in the eighteenth century and beyond. Payne explains:

Between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries, changes in the theoretical and practical structures of economic, scientific, technological, and political life transformed Western culture, creating a correlative sense of confusion and disorder. Faced with these numerous transformations that delineated the rise of “modernity,” many Protestants in Europe and America reconceived traditional religious and ecclesiastical forms as a means of interpreting and making sense of the new cultural phenomena they were forced to confront. For many of these Protestants, conversion became the principal metaphor through which they could incorporate these changes into their worldviews. (7)

Certainly one of most troublesome challenges of modernity to traditional forms of Christianity was in the development of the concept of “self” as an independent and autonomous site of sensation, intellect, and consciousness. According to evangelical theology, conversion required a denial or even negation of self, a demand that was in almost complete opposition with modern conceptualizations of identity. Traditional Christian theology regarded human identity as essentially a combination of corporeal body and incorporeal soul, a position directly challenged since the seventeenth century, beginning with Descartes and continuing through the modern era.

This reconceptualization of self had crucial implications for autobiography, a genre whose motivation, according to Stephen Shapiro, is “identity formation,” or the process of integrating the present self with earlier versions of the self (445). Spiritual autobiography was particularly implicated, as despite authorial intentions otherwise, the central character in any conversion narrative was always the convert, not God. Payne describes this tension: “The issue of the self, particularly the creation of self and the structuring of personal identity, formed the very center of this genre of religious literature, but at the heart of the evangelical conversion experience was a profound ambivalence of the self” (33). The more the convert attempted to speak of self-negation, the more self-focused and self-defining the narrative became. In this way, the discourse of conversion—the language available to identify transformative experiences—both limited and shaped the self of autobiographical narrative.

This tension can be identified in autobiography from its very conception in the *Confessions* of St. Augustine who describes the self as the source of pride, egotism, and conceit, ultimately in opposition to the surrender required by the call of God: “Let the proud of heart deride me now and all who have never been brought low and broken by Thee unto salvation...” (IV.I.3). Augustine’s struggle haunted the conversion stories of the Puritans, forcing the

autobiographer into a “Self Civil War” wherein he was “driven by self-loathing to Christ and forced back to himself by the recognition that his labors are an assertion of what he loathes” (Bercovitch qtd. in Payne 41). However, the premodern self of the Augustinian model eventually shifted into the modern self of secular conversion, a result of post-Enlightenment subjectivity. According to Riley, this view of selfhood, a direct result of Cartesian philosophy, was appropriated by the autobiographical genre and reimagined conversion as “secular inwardness” (73). Whether we locate conversion as a religious experience of self-denial or a secular experience of self-awareness, the experience is irrevocably concerned with self-identification. The conversion narrative, as a genre that both facilitates and complicates identity, has significant implications for the ways we understand not only character in autobiography, but the very act of autobiography itself (Riley 3).

Identity continues to be critical to conversion narratives, whether the transformation involves religion, gender, politics, or any other belief system, secular or sacred. As Lewis Rambo explains, conversions play a “significant role in the construction of identity, pointing a life in a particular direction, giving it aim...provid[ing] a coherent center from which to conduct one’s life” (31-36). The change perpetuated by conversion, as it functions to transform a person’s actual identity, is both distinct and comprehensive—to use St. Paul’s words, the convert is one who is changed so completely, she is actually a “new creature” (2 Corinthians 5:17). John E. Smith describes a convert who “is in some sense changed, but the change seems not to be a difference *in* this or that feature of the person’s life, but a change of person as if a new being now dwelt where another had lived before...The change is so radical and so completely alters the being of the person that we are inclined to speak of a ‘new’ person being involved” (55). In a narrative, conversion divides the text and thus the convert into discrete parts, different *selves*.

Such a phenomenon suggests provocative possibilities to think about the concept of identity in life writing, which will be the focus of the second part of this chapter as I look closely at the different “selves” of Mary Karr before, during, and after her conversion.

### **Foucault on Conversion: Self Care vs. Self Denial**

First, however, I want to turn my attention to Michel Foucault’s theories on conversion, confession, and subjectivity as a place to situate my inquiry. I choose Foucault not only because of his obvious impact on the way we think about power relations in discourses such as confession, but also because of his less theorized engagement with conversion and autobiography. Throughout his career, Foucault focused much of his scholarship on the genealogy of the subject and the construction of subjectivities (Nielsen 188). While Foucault’s earlier work on the self is more often related to its relationship to social constructions and domination as illustrated in *Discipline and Punish*, his later work reflects an “aesthetic turn” that reimagines subjectivity as a result of a turn “inward” to practices of self care (Yates 79). Characterized by some as a “spiritual turn” or conversion, Foucault’s attention to the self in his later writing reconstructs subjectivity on a three-fold axis with truth and the world (83). Paired with his lifelong inquiry into the practice of confession, Foucault’s theories are particularly relevant to life writing scholarship. In order to fully understand Foucault’s idea of conversion, it’s important to recognize his belief that the subject is a process, not a substance (Dankel 52). According to scholar Edward McGushin, Foucault believes a subject does not pre- (or post-) exist. Instead, “...for Foucault subjectivity is not something we are, it is an activity that we do. Subjectivity is relational, dynamic, and restless, potentially unruly and unpredictable” (134-135). In her dissertation on subjectivity in the work of Foucault, Tara Dankel suggests that his work on conversion was not only academic; rather, “conversion to the self is what he is seeking in his

own life” (52). In an interview in 1980, Foucault explains that like the classic philosophers he admires who incorporate the truth of their projects into their own lives, “my books are for me experiences...an experience is something in which one seeks to transform oneself...I only write because I do not know exactly what to think about this thing I would very much like to think about”(Dits et écrits 860). Thus, conversion is the goal of both his scholarship and his everyday life as he believes “one cannot be ethical, cannot see the truth, without undergoing a transformation in her subjectivity” (Dankel 53). This transformation is characterized by a subjectivity that is anything but passive; in Foucault’s words, “[t]aking care of oneself will be to take care of the self so far as it is the subject of a certain number of things: the subject of instrumental action, subject of relationships with others, subject of behaviors and attitudes in general, and the subject also of relationships to oneself” (*History* 57).

The transformation Foucault imagines is possible only through a new understanding of the relationship between knowledge and selfhood, where the self is “the subject *of* true knowledge, not yet a subject *for* acquiring knowledge of truth” (Yates 83). Truth, in this paradigm, is both a goal and an experience rooted in self-exercises, not a problem to be confronted with intellectual inquiry. McGushin explains that the truth Foucault is after is “not the truth in the sense of the quality of correctness of a judgment; it is not a particular truth about some object to be known” but rather a conception of truth as “a fullness of being which offers itself only to those individuals who have performed the proper work on themselves” (*Foucault’s* 39). This work is achieved through Foucault’s techniques of the self: “techniques which permit individuals to affect, by their own means, a certain number of operations on their own bodies, soul, thoughts—to transform themselves, to attain a certain state of perfection, purity, power, happiness” (“About” 203). Foucault argues that the path to truth must be uncovered and

recovered from the historical practices that overtook it; his objective is to unveil the methods by which the relationship between “subject” and “truth” have been shaped in the West (Yates 82). However, to see the relationship in other ways is complicated and perhaps even impossible as we are deeply invested in a modern conceptualization of the self, one that is completely disassociated from the ancient Hellenistic-Roman view embraced in the first two centuries C.E. In *Hermeneutics of the Subject*, Foucault examines the two principles of *gnothi seauton* (know yourself) and *epimeleia heauton* (the care of the self). He attempts to understand why “know yourself” continues to consume contemporary philosophical thought, while the idea of caring for the self has been lost. Foucault situates this loss as a consequence of Cartesian thought, which, he argues, divided philosophy (knowing) from spirituality (caring), ultimately eliminating the need for spirituality by arguing that an individual “is capable of recognizing the truth and having access to it in himself and merely through his acts of knowing, without anything else being demanded of him and without him having to change or alter his being as a subject” (19). The Cartesian subject is exactly what Foucault is working against; instead, for Foucault, truth is only possible through a transformation in the being of the subject:

...in the truth and in access to the truth, there is something that fulfills the subject himself, which fulfills or transfigures his very being. In short, I think we can say that in and of itself an act of knowledge could never give access to the truth unless it was prepared, accompanied, doubled, and completed by a certain transformation of the subject...in his being as subject. (16)

Transformation, as work of the self on the self, reflects the ancient practice of *askesis* or “the practice of a certain way of living and speaking, a certain way of being with oneself and others” (McGushin xiv). *Askesis*, however, appears within the larger experience of conversion,



particularly in the Cynic, Epicurean, and Stoic traditions between the first century B.C.E. and first century C.E., framed by an exercise of salvation focused on a “conversion to oneself” (Yates 84). This model of self-conversion Foucault clearly differentiates from the historical narrative of Christian conversion, a phenomenon that he consistently portrays as self-renunciation rather than “self-return.”<sup>10</sup> Foucault explains, “A fundamental element of Christian conversion is renunciation of oneself, dying to oneself, and being reborn in a different self and a new form which, as it were, no longer has anything to do with the earlier self in its being, its mode of being, in its habits or its ethos” (*The Hermeneutics* 248). Thus, by juxtaposing the Hellenistic-Roman with the early and medieval Christian—the conversion *to* self with the sacrifice *of* self—Foucault reestablishes the historical practice of self-care into a “spiritualized relationship between subjectivity and truth and unties itself not only from the fabric of modern epistemology and hermeneutics, but, perhaps more importantly, from an alternative spirituality that grants truth to the self by way of eliminating the self” (Yates 85).

With this work, Foucault promotes a discourse of *resistance*. Conversion that focuses on self-renunciation (what he identifies as Christian salvation) contains beliefs that must be resisted: first, that this kind of salvation is constituted according to a binary system that “pits life against death, morality against immorality, world against other” (Yates 85). Because of this positioning, salvation amounts to a “crossing over” from one self to another and is located historically in a system of chronological and causal events (transgression/sin/Fall) that necessitates the corrective act of redemption. Finally, Foucault argues, conversion is a “complex operation” that requires

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<sup>10</sup> According to Christopher Yates, the Christianity Foucault is describing is specifically Thomistic in nature. Thomistic theology, specifically as it applies to the Catholic faith, follows the philosophy of Thomas Aquinas, who believed that both faith and reason discover truth, a conflict between them being impossible since they both originate in God (Magee).

not only the efforts of the devoted subject but also an external other, another characteristic that reinforces a Christian model of self-renunciation. In contrast to a salvation embedded in self-renunciation, salvation in the ancient Hellenistic-Roman tradition allowed “an access to the self that is inseparable from the work one carries out on oneself within the time of one’s life and in life itself” (*The Hermeneutics* 184-185). When juxtaposed, then, these contrasting views of salvation delineate two distinct concepts of conversion: a Christian conversion *from* the self and a pagan conversion *to* the self. Foucault’s recovery of the ancient Hellenistic-Roman conversion then focuses on the tension between self-return and self-renunciation, between self-subjection and self-objectivation.

The spirituality of self-return is characterized by the image of “turning,” like the verb “to convert” from the Old French *convertir*, meaning “to turn” (“Convert”). Foucault explains, “We must turn away from everything that turns us away from our self, so as to turn ourselves toward our self” (*The Hermeneutics* 206). This turn is actualized in the direction and movement of the “gaze,” a practice of subjectivation described by McGushin: “one is not only that which appears before one’s gaze when one looks, but also the activity of looking into oneself” (36). However, Foucault argues that this gaze is not simply reduced to isolated self-knowledge. Instead, the conversion to self, like the Christian model, requires an “other.” This other, unlike the Christian version, is not a text or dogmatic revelation of a Truth. It is, rather, found in the natural order, or the world. The gaze in the ancient practice of conversion moves through the self and into the world; additionally, it provides the self with a program of exercise—or *askesis* (Yates 91). The concept of *askesis* differs greatly between the Hellenistic-Roman and Christian practices as Foucault explores in his study of confession as a technique of the self.

At the center of the Christian *askesis* is confession: an exercise of truth-telling in which the subject objectifies herself in “true discourse” (*The Hermeneutics* 333). At first glance, similarities exist between the Christian confession and ancient *askesis*; primarily, both practices support the subjective desire to “say the truth about oneself” (362). Both models understand truth as an exercise in community, as “one must respond to the words of truth that teach me the truth and consequently help me in my salvation” with a “discourse of truth by which I open the truth of my own soul to the other, to others” (391). The crucial difference was that in the Hellenistic-Roman practice the goal was to become the subject *of* truth, not subject *to* truth. In the Hellenistic-Roman tradition, confession was an individual task wherein the subject divides itself into two roles—the confessant and confessor. However, unlike in the Christian practice, the confessor-self took on the persona of an administrator rather than a judge. In the process of Hellenistic-Roman “confession,” the confessant is invested in looking for mistakes, not sins. Truth, as the object of confession, is not something that is hidden behind or under the consciousness in the deepest recesses of the soul; “it is something which is before the individual as a point of attraction, a kind of magnetic force which attracts him toward a goal” (209). And, perhaps most significantly, confession in the ancient tradition is not oriented toward the individualization of the self through an identification of personal characteristics but toward a constitution of self. The self is not something to be discovered but something to be constructed.

Christian confession, however, is motivated by a completely different view of truth and its relationship to self. In Christian technologies of the self, the problem is to discover a truth that already exists and is hidden, thus the development of a “hermeneutics of the self” where the self is a text that we have to decipher and interpret rather than something that has to be constructed. Foucault argues that Christianity is itself a confession, as “Christianity belongs to a very special

type of religion, the religions which impose on those who practice them an obligation of truth” (“About” 211). These truths include the obligation to believe a set of propositions or dogma, to hold certain texts as a permanent source of truth, and to accept decisions of certain authorities in matters of truth. However, the most important truth obligation for the Christian is the duty to know who he is and what is happening in him. And, not only must he know who he is: he is obligated to confess this truth to someone else, and, thus, “bear witness against himself” (211). This process is necessary—this making of truth within oneself—in order for the soul to be purified and salvation possible.

Foucault identifies the incompatibility between a Christian conceptualization of the self and a hermeneutic of the self, based in Hellenistic-Roman philosophy as one of “the great problems of Western culture” (“About” 222). This problem, defined by a conceptualization of a sinful self that must be sacrificed before it can be absolved, continues to challenge autobiographers today as it did early American life writers who share a literary tradition shaped by Christianity. Whether we see conversion as *the* defining experience in all autobiography, as theorists such as Harpham suggest, or as a powerful narrative trope available to life writers, the genre continues to compel and shape Western autobiographical accounts. Foucault’s recovery of an ancient model of conversion, and a resulting spirituality focused on self-mastery rather than self-denial, offers us alternative ways of reading stories of personal transformation in addition to (or in spite of) the Christian, and specifically evangelical Protestant rhetoric, that has shaped the genre. It allows us to think differently about what happens to the self of the story before, during, and after conversion. Rather than a self that has been rejected or replaced, the self becomes a site of return. Like Herrnstein Smith’s constructivist theory of belief as outlined in Chapter One, the ancient model of conversion parallels a hermeneutical circle, emphasizing the *participation*—rather than a *correction*—of a prior self in the formation of

present identity. Further illuminating conversion as a recursive and continual process is Herrnstein Smith's general dynamic of belief as the ongoing process of "stabilization, destabilization, restabilization, and transformation" (xiii). The transformation possible through conversion is part of active and recurring processes of identification and negotiation of our selves and our beliefs.

### **The Conversion of Mary Karr**

*Every now and then we enter into the presence of the numinous and deduce for an instant how we're formed, in what detail the force that infuses every petal might specifically run through us, wishing only to lure us into our full potential. Usually the closest we get is when we love, or when some beloved beams back, which can galvanize you like steel and make resilient what had heretofore only been soft flesh. It can start you singing as the lion pads over to you, its jaws hanging open, its hot breath on you. Even unto death.*

—Mary Karr

In 1996, Mary Karr converted to what she calls an "unlikely Catholicism" after a "lifetime of undiluted agnosticism" in a move that shocked her friends and readers alike. Readers of her first two memoirs *The Liars' Club* and *Cherry*, would have been unable to predict this specific turn in Karr's life as in those memoirs she writes that her father taught her that "Jesus was a trick on poor people" and she often refers to Marx's description of religion as the opiate of the masses. Raised in a "godless household" where "poems were the only prayers that got said," Karr details a conversion from a life marked by a troubled marriage, depression, and alcohol abuse to something quite different. Self-identified as a "black-belt sinner," Karr describes her transformation as one from "black cynicism into awe" (Fortini 80). Of the unlikeliness of her "whispering my sins in the confessional or on my knees saying the rosary," Karr herself admits that a more likely pastime might have been a "Pole dancer. International spy. Drug mule. Assassin" (*Lit* 330) It seems that Karr's conversion surprised her as much as the rest of us.

## Reading *Lit* as Christian Conversion: Salvation of a ‘Sinner’

In the second part of this chapter, I examine how Karr’s conversion changed her beliefs, particularly the way she constructs the beliefs about her identity—her *selves*—in relation and reaction to this change. Initially, I use a traditional Christian perspective through which to read her conversion as an example of the ways such a framework continues to structure contemporary memoir. Then, following Foucault’s dichotomy of conversion, I analyze her conversion as care of the self, as a practice of self-mastery rather than the self-renunciation associated with the Christian experience. While both readings can yield fruitful discoveries, a reconceptualization of conversion more closely resembling the Greco-Roman practice *askesis* illuminates the rhetorical nature of autobiographical identity. Additionally, untethering conversion from a specific religious tradition, as such recovering it from its previous “sinful” association and reimagining it as a provocative focus in life writing scholarship, can provide rich possibilities for future exploration.

In an interview for *The Paris Review* in 2001, Karr explains the necessity of self-transformation in a memoir: “The memoir’s antagonist has to be some part of the self, and the self has to be different at the end of the book than at the beginning” (Fortini 88). Interestingly, she doesn’t limit this observation to conversion narratives or spiritual autobiographies; instead, she proposes a theory of the subject in memoir as a self in process. While Karr’s first two memoirs could certainly offer rich opportunities for an analysis of identity, my focus will be on her religious conversion in *Lit*, her third memoir that begins with her at “age seventeen, stringy-haired and halter-topped, weighing in the high double digits and unhindered by a high school diploma” (*Lit* 13) and ends with her current post as a professor at Syracuse University. Before a consideration of *Lit*, however, a look at the last page of *Cherry*, Karr’s second memoir detailing her troubled adolescence

and sexual awakening, reveals the beginning of her sense of self—*what* it is and *who* she is—at least as she's able to define it on the page:

For years you've felt only half-done inside, cobbled together by paper clips, held intact by gum wads and school paste. But something solid is starting to assemble inside you. You say, I am my Same Self. That's not nothing, is it? ...Like I'm chocolate through to the center. Same self. That oddball catchphrase will serve as a touchstone in years to come, an instant you'll return to after traveling the far roads. ...As for the actual validity of the notion, an immoveable self ever firm, you're there only by half at best. But half's good measure more than some people ever get. You'll spend decades trying to will Same Self into being. But you'll keep shape-shifting. Probably everyone must, so long as a body's treading sod or drawing breath. (276)

After *Cherry* closes on Mary's Same Self, the reader follows this emerging identity to the subsequent memoir *Lit*, written nine years later, where this self will be the subject of a conversion no less tumultuous and surprising than St. Augustine's. In fact, in many ways, Karr's conversion story parallels Augustine's—the writer whose *Confessions* she credits as the real start to the memoir boom and her favorite autobiographer (Garner). Like Augustine's, her conversion consists of many false starts and partial commitments; her inner struggle with God might best be summed up in one of her favorite of St. Augustine's quotes: "Give me chastity, Lord, but not yet!" Of course, these similarities are not surprising since Karr locates her own theory of autobiography directly in this historical Christian tradition. If Augustine's text serves as the "sui generis" of the conversion narrative as James O'Donnell argues, then Mary Karr's *Lit* can be read as a model of the genre. In his text *Character and Conversion in Autobiography: Augustine, Montaigne, Descartes, Rousseau,*

and *Sartre*, Patrick Riley traces the evolution of the Christian conversion narrative typified in Augustine's *Confessions* through the tradition of philosophical autobiography, where conversion becomes a secular trope featuring the central drama of the writer's experience in relation not to God but to writing and intellectual life (9). Riley's work is focused specifically on the formation of the subject in autobiography. He explains:

Conversion is the moment that motivates autobiographical production and provides a structure for a narrative of the self. Yet it also implies the self's dissolution into alterity. If conversion legitimates narrative retrospection by offering a unitary, even teleological, framework in which to cast the subject's history, it also threatens to expel the self from its textual edifice. It creates the conditions under which I may tell my story, but since it has made me "other," there is no guarantee that "I" am the subject of representation in any other than a nominal way. (9)

The structure of a conversion story, often following a linear temporality of "before" and "after," offers an autobiographer the possibility to view the self in relationship to a defining moment or—in the case of both Augustine and Karr—a series of such moments. However, Riley argues that this "totalizing structure" can immediately be deconstructed since it fashions a self that is entirely different from what it had been (15). In the case of Augustine's *Confessions*, the subject that emerges is a split version of a self, a consecutive representation of two distinct and conflicting selves that are divided into two separate "beings" by the conversion experience. To read Karr's *Lit* as a Christian conversion narrative offers a similar perspective of dual (or multiple) identities separated by individual moments or epiphanies that illuminate their irreconcilable differences.



Because the Christian model of conversion is most fundamentally one of salvation, the autobiographer must identify a self that requires redemption—self as *sinner*. This characterization, according to Foucault, allows the convert to “cross over” from one self to another—in Augustine’s case, from Manichean, thief, womanizer, and public intellectual to Christian, theologian, dutiful son, and eventually bishop. Augustine creates an earlier self that is fragmented, inauthentic, and unstable, ultimately defined by a separation from God. What characterizes this version of self is his active and willful disposition to sin. As the father of not only autobiography but also our predominant cultural definitions of original sin, Augustine portrays sin as the foundation of subjectivity, selves characterized by a “greedy love of doing wrong” (*Confessions* 4:2). Augustine’s definitive inner conflict with his sinful self has provided *the* template for the authentic Western spiritual search and continues to inform contemporary autobiography.

Karr’s conversion narrative clearly reflects this history as the story of a sinner struggling to find a “god [she] can’t believe in” (*Lit* 215). Like Augustine’s, Karr’s conversion reflects a crossing-over from one self to another; the promise of resurrection requires a Christ-like death. She writes of this transition: “If you live in the dark a long time and the sun comes out, you do not cross into it whistling. There’s an initial uprush of relief at first, then...a profound dislocation. My old assumptions about how the world works are buried, yet my new ones aren’t operational. There’s been a death of sorts, but without a few days in hell, no resurrection is possible” (260). Throughout the memoir, she consistently describes separate selves—selves characterized by a temporal before and after—particularly as she attempts to remember the details of her relationship with her husband, Warren. The self that is writing the memoir, the “after” self of conversion, reflects on the “before” self, “So while I trust the stories I recall in

broad outline, their interpretation through my old self is suspect... When I read to grasp a solid truth from that time, smoke pours through my fingers” (88). Certainly, the limits of memory, particularly traumatic memory, complicate Karr’s task of portraying her earlier self. However, in its portrayal of a self separated from God (a preconversional or “before” self), the conversion narrative allows the autobiographer, who at the moment of conversion is authorized and legitimized by a turning to God, to examine the past, “sinful” self as a field of inquiry.

While Karr does specifically refer to her “sinfulness” in the memoir, she primarily associates her earlier self with “bad” mothering, class-related self-doubt, and, especially, addiction to alcohol, a struggle that consumes the first half of the memoir, leading to the break up of her marriage, a suicide attempt, and a resulting hospitalization before she finally becomes sober. In many ways distinct from her turning *to* God is her turning *from* addiction; while the recovery process certainly parallels the structure of religious conversion, drawing heavily on spiritual themes and premises, her journey to sobriety can also be read through a secular framework. From this perspective, Karr’s “before” self is defined completely by her relationship to alcohol, and her “after” self can only be realized when she is finally sober. While Karr focuses the first part of *Lit* on her relationships with her husband and son, her relationship to alcohol is as—or perhaps more—intimate and pleasurable. Describing her first drink of whiskey shared with her alcoholic father, she writes in her characteristic poetic style, “The warm silk flowered in my mouth and down my gullet, after which a little blue flame of pleasure roared back up my spine. A poof of sequins went sparkling through my middle” (43). As her addiction worsens, she describes, “That’s the secret to getting up: the glass talks and my neck cranes toward the drink like flower to sunbeam... A drink once brought ease, a bronze warmth spreading through all my muddy regions. Now it only brings a brief respite from the bone ache of craving it, no more

delicious numbness” (159). And, finally: “I keep getting drunk. There’s no more interesting way to say it” (171). Her descriptions are replete with compelling imagery and sensory details—“warm silk,” “flame of pleasure,” “flower to sunbeam”—and convey her consuming passion for alcohol and the effects it provides. These passages help us understand the *presence* of alcohol in her life—its impact is predictable and fulfilling in ways her personal relationships have never been.

When Karr finally attends her first AA meeting, she immediately rejects the spiritual element of recovery: “...*Higher power, my rosy red ass*, I can hear my daddy saying...” (191). However, she does recognize in “a snippet of a revelation” that “I have a disease whose defining symptom is believing you don’t have a disease...but I’m not ready to stop listening to the screwed-up inner voice that’s been ordering me around for a lifetime” (196). This voice—or self—she begins to identify as a “half”: one half sober, the other drunk and never occupying the same head space simultaneously. As she progresses through recovery, and begins to consider the value of a higher power in the process, she recognizes the possibility in her mentor Joan’s observation: “...drinking is like the butcher knife. You have to put it down before you can let God in. It’s like you have to break up with the guy who’s beating the crap out of you before you can scan the room and find the nice guy who’s got a crush on you” (217). In effect, she must “break up” with her old self before she can be healed. Karr’s identity, characterized by “selves” primarily defined by their relationship to alcohol, reflects the power of conversion in structuring autobiographical narrative. Karr easily could have chosen other significant moments as turning points, such as the birth of Dev or her divorce from Warren, which would have drawn attention to other parts of her identity or other selves. Instead, she locates her conversion in the moment(s) when she simultaneously became sober and turned to God. Like the subject of all Christian

conversion narratives, then, Karr must first be a sinner (in her case an alcoholic) in order to be saved.

In a review of *Lit*, Francine Prose observes, “Believers and nonbelievers have long been drawn to confessions, like Saint Augustine’s, that read like dispatches from the knock-down, drag-out encounter between God and the stubborn sinner. ‘Lit’...is one of those.” Just as readers of Augustine’s conversion may find themselves wondering when he is finally going to convert already, so would readers of Karr, who describes herself as “blunted, muted, starved, yet stubbornly refusing the one suggestion everyone sober for very long makes: prayer. I recoil from any talk of spiritual crap...” (*Lit* 207). After many false starts and failed attempts at quitting drinking, she finally, grudgingly, agrees to the suggestion to pray every day for ninety days; her first prayer clearly reveals her resistance: “‘Higher power,’ I say snidely. ‘Where the fuck have you been?’” (219). Her struggle to give up the alcohol that has become an integral part of her daily survival is evenly matched by her struggle to give up control to a higher power, one of the key requirements in the recovery process. In an interview for *Christian Century*, Karr reflects on what must be lost in order to move forward: “You give up control...When you turn to God, you give up that house of cards that you call a belief system. In that house of cards, you understand how the world works. It is comprehensible to you and you have some sense of agency in it” (Frykholm 35). For Karr, giving up her house of cards—her previous belief system—almost costs her life. It isn’t until she attempts suicide and checks herself into a mental hospital that she realizes she is unable to heal without taking this last, integral step. As she finally submits to the program, Karr feels “something stir in me, a small wisp of something in my chest, frail as smoke...The boundaries of my skin grown thin as I kneel there squinting my eyes shut. For a nanosecond, I am lucent. Inside it: an idea, the thread of a different perspective than any I’ve ever had” (276). The idea—what she identifies as divinely inspired—is that the trials she’d

encountered raising her sick baby in the midst of a failing marriage actually kept her from drinking to the point of death years before. Dev's frequent illnesses, coupled with an absent husband, required her to cling to some small periods of sobriety. This realization is characterized not only by a turn *to* God but a turn *away* from her previous self.

As she describes the experience of her conversion, she clearly identifies the change in terms of her identity as distinct selves. "The change happens before my eyes, the muted colors of the room brightening from gray to a cool azure. Now when I begin obsessively to gnaw on my fears, I try to wrestle them loose from myself (who are these two halves?) the way you'd take a slipper from a Doberman" (281). When the transformation of conversion finally occurs, the result is a newer, truer version of self. She remembers, "...I lift my just-scrubbed face from the towel to meet my own gaze in the metal mirror, and I almost see a bold outline around myself, as if inked with magic marker. Alive, I am, a living, breathing Mary of myself" (284). This last observation echoes the "Same Self" Karr describes at the end of *Cherry*, as if the years between had been lived by a different self completely.

While Karr mainly locates her before and after selves in the process of recovery from alcohol addiction—her "before" self is a drinker who doesn't believe in God while her "after" self is a nondrinker who does—she also characterizes these selves by their intellectual capacity. In other words, throughout her memoir, Karr frequently separates belief from intellect—belief is reserved for the weak-minded. This separation, an obvious reflection of a modern paradigm wherein knowledge and reason are celebrated as distinct from and superior to belief and emotion, has been ingrained in Karr since childhood. This distinction is critical as it represents the biggest hurdle she must overcome in her own conversion from a person who believes that God is "a trick for the dim-witted" to one who believes that faith and intelligence can not only coexist but also complement each other.

Her initial participation in recovery clearly portrays her skepticism. She writes, “Pray about it, those religious morons suggest, for they fancy some bearded giant staring down from a cloud is gonna zap me into shape” (*Lit* 126), and “...when everybody grabs hands to pray, it’s like some dreary ring-around-the-rosy, and I refuse to mouth the words, instead gaping around at who’s dopey enough to go along” (195). Morons, dopes, “sheep”—these are the words she uses to describe believers, contrasting sharply with the intellectualism that defined her childhood identity. For Karr, religious belief required a surrender or submission that represented not only a lack of will but also a lack of intelligence. Conversion, in this perspective and following Foucault’s argument, reinforces the traditional Christian practice of self-renunciation, characterized by a sinner-self that requires salvation as a corrective act of redemption.

This form of conversion, Foucault argues, is deeply rooted in modernism, specifically as a consequence of the Cartesian subject that not only separated philosophy (knowing) from spirituality (caring), but actually positioned it as superior. This move virtually eliminated the need for spirituality by suggesting that an individual is capable of recognizing the truth and having access to it in the self simply through acts of “knowing...without...having to change or alter his being as a subject” (“About” 19). In this model, truth is assumed to be separate from and in a position of authority over the subject; one “knows” the truth as it is given through sacred texts or revelation, and the purpose of this self-knowledge is to conform to this version of the truth (Yates 89). This relationship to the truth, then, is determined by an antagonism to the self; one’s salvation is dependent on truth as already established by revealed knowledge. Therefore, this knowledge—a normative truth of the self told from the “outside”—has power over the subject. When we limit our understanding of Karr’s conversion to the traditional Christian model, we are tempted to see her both her recovery process and spiritual awakening less as an individual, subjective transformation into a

truer self than as a submission to normative definitions of experience, already established as “truths.”

Karr’s spiritual struggle in many ways parallels the Cartesian worldview that Foucault works against, particularly in the separation between knowledge and spirituality. Throughout her life, Karr consistently associated religious belief with stupidity—believers are “idiots” or “coolies.” In one telling scene when Karr is describing her middling prayer regimen, her mentor Joan observes, “It’s like there’s some hook in your head. You’re still fueling your fears by intellectualizing them, thinking this way and that” (*Lit* 258). When Karr approaches her recovery as a purely cerebral pursuit—divorced from faith—she fails time and again. Further, the “letting go” rhetoric of both the recovery process and religious conversion repels her when it represents the submission or self-renunciation traditionally associated with both. Her response makes perfect sense, especially when we return to her Same Self of *Cherry*, which she worked so hard to create. Instead, when conversion becomes a process of self-return as Foucault suggests, the self is a site of transformation rather than rejection. Karr writes, “Before, I’d feared surrender would sand me down to nothing. Now, I’ve started believing it can bloom me more solidly into myself” (299). This realization reflects the transformation in Karr’s conceptualization of the possibilities of conversion. While Karr’s conversion is definitely from agnosticism to a Christian faith (Catholicism), in many ways it more closely resembles the ancient Hellenistic-Roman conversion of self-return, of a deeper knowledge of a truth of self that is characterized not by self-denial but self-mastery.

Karr’s articulation of the relationship of her body to her belief both engages and resists a traditional conversion model. In her essay “Facing Altars,” Karr explains, “The very idea of prostrating myself brought up the old Marxist saw about religion being the opiate for the masses and congregations as dumb as cows” (129). Prostration, or kneeling in prayer, seems to embody the

surrender of self that Karr so adamantly resists; she writes, "...I do try to stretch out my standard two-sentence prayer habit a little longer...but not on my knees—no way am I gonna grovel like a reptile" (*Lit* 224). Tellingly, the actual moment of her conversion in the bathroom of the mental hospital is marked by kneeling: "I tiptoe to the bathroom and bend onto the cold tiles... I feel small, kneeling there. Small and needy and inadequate. Pathetic, even. Like somebody who can't handle things" (275). In the practice of kneeling to pray, Karr's submission is not only spiritual but corporeal. It's as if she needs to complete a physical act in order to access the spiritual.

Karr frequently recognizes the carnality innate to Catholicism as one of the essential reasons she was drawn to it. She explains, "...the Church's carnality, which seemed crude at the outset—people lighting candles and talking to dolls—worked its voodoo on me. The very word *incarnation* derives from Latin *in carne*: in meat. There's a body on the cross in my church" ("Facing" 132). However, it's not only Christ's body that's important to Karr's spiritual practice, but also her own joined with others: "Through the simple physical motions I followed during Mass, our bodies standing and sitting and kneeling in concert, I often felt my mind grow quiet, and my surface differences from others began to be obliterated" (133). In Karr's spirituality, the actions of the body are no less meaningful than those of the mind. In fact, frequently the embodied practice of worship, including the kneeling and prostration she initially resisted, are prerequisites for her belief. This aspect of her conversion challenges the Cartesian mind/body dualism that informs the traditional Christian model wherein self-renunciation is the condition for salvation; and, self-renunciation is only possible through "knowing oneself," an act of the mind, separate from and superior to the body.



## Karr's Conversion as *Askesis*

A closer look at the role of *askesis* in Foucault's theory of conversion reveals possibilities in reading Karr's transformation as a means of resistance against a traditional, Christian model. In Greek philosophical practice, *askesis* represents a remembering: "the memory of what you've done and what you've had to do" (Foucault, *Technologies* 34). This practice is interested in the discovery of mistakes rather than faults or sins. The truth, then, is something not buried deep in the soul, but *before* the self, as a goal to be actualized. *Askesis*, in the philosophical tradition, is used to create truth—particularly, truths about selves—rather than to discover an identity that already exists. *Askesis*, the Greek origin of our word *ascetic*, means "training or exercise." Although contemporary usage associates asceticism with self-denial, the original word referred to the physical training required for athletic performance. Later, the word was used to describe rigorous practices associated with all major religions as means of attaining redemption or a higher spirituality. *Askesis*, for Foucault, is synonymous with self-discipline and essential to conversion. Foucault regards conversion as the moment when an individual recognizes her mode of being as problematic and decides to begin the process of transformation (Dankel 82). This change is possible only through techniques of the self, realized through *askesis* or daily operations by the self on the self. According to Foucault, the goal of *askesis* specifically and of conversion broadly is to move the individual from an "emerging self" to an "aspiring self," or at least to shore up the distance between the two. Foucault's concept of *subjectivation*—or the process of becoming a subject—consists of a co-constitution of body and mind, possible through *askesis* as a dual training of both. Tara Dankel argues that Foucault's conflation of the mind and body in this practice demonstrates first, that one can only reach subjective truth through daily practice; second, that the mind is fundamentally embodied; and, finally, that the care of the self is defined by pleasure found in discipline and hard

work (83). The goal of subjectivation, possible only through *askesis*, is an emerging self that more closely resembles the “flexible but consistent conduct of the aspirational self,” as determined by true discourses (83). It is the fulfillment of the aspirational self that Foucault recognizes as *salvation* (110). Dankel is careful to clarify, however, that Foucault’s aspirational self is not *determined by* conversion; she still has the opportunity to change based on new life created by further practice (84).

In order to understand Foucault’s subjectivation, we must understand its relationship to “true discourse.” True discourse emerges from any philosophical tradition that has demonstrated, over time, the ability to affect change in peoples’ lives. Therefore, true discourse must be transformative—it must have the power to “change the perspective of the individual and call her from the values and norms of her surrounding society to a different mode of being” (Dankel 85). Foucault argues that *all* subjects are created through discourses and practices external to themselves either through subjectivation or subjection. These discourses, while “contingent and arbitrary,” can provide the conditions of possibility for an individual’s conduct (11). Judith Butler, in her extensive work on subjectivity, argues, like Foucault, that to claim a subject is *constituted* is not the same as claiming it is *determined* (“Contingent” 46). This distinction is crucial to understanding conversion from Foucault’s perspective and the possibilities available to the subject who practices self care.

Mary Karr’s conversion, profoundly influenced by the recovery process, can be interpreted as an example of Foucault’s subjectivation or the becoming of a self through the practice of *askesis*. Returning to the recurring images of embodied worship in Karr’s spiritual practice, we see the essential relationship between the body and the mind that is essential to Foucault’s theory. One of the primary premises of Foucault’s work, particularly in *Discipline and Punish*, is that societal norms and disciplines are inscribed on our bodies. Foucault argues that the subjectivation of truth occurs through the repeated practice of both the mind and body; further, subjection of the body can

only occur through bodily practice. Not only did Karr's experience involve bodily participation, it *required* it—both her addiction and her recovery from it. Because her pleasure of alcohol is experienced through her body, her recovery from it must be too. Joan advises her, “Put your mind where your body is. ‘One day at a time’ forces you to reckon with the instant you actually occupy...” (*Lit* 208). To accomplish this, Karr rarely attempts prayer without involving her body: kneeling on a cushion, lying facedown on the carpet, bent on the linoleum. Foucault argues that because our bodies have been habituated to certain kinds of movements and practices, one can only subjectivate a different truth through a different form of practice (Dankel 104). When Karr begins her ninety-day prayer regime, she begins with her body: “...I take a small cushion down and get on my knees for the first time in my life—prayer number one” (219). This movement interrupts Karr's typical routine and redirects her body. As *askesis*, this daily practice refocuses her attention and energy, creating different possibilities in her life.

Another way that Karr's prayer regimen epitomizes *askesis* is in its consistent repetition. In *A History of Sexuality*, Foucault explains “that the truth can not be obtained without a certain practice, or a certain set of fully specified practices, which transform the subject's mode of being, that modify, transfigure, qualify it...” (46). Within the context of the philosophical schools, these regimens were ritualized because they were validated by tradition and gave shape to communities of practice. These practices were loosely defined and tailored to the individual needs of the practitioner; thus, their development required deliberate and reflective thought (Dankel 82). Karr's daily prayer routine, while proposed by a young doctor who was herself a recovering alcoholic, certainly reflects a practice that both defines Karr individually and connects her to a larger community of religious believers steeped in spiritual tradition. After Karr's first prayer, “a peevish start, tight-lipped, mean of spirit, but a prayer nonetheless,” she vows to “make it regular, this half-baked prayer” (220). The

regularity of the act—"I will silently say every morning, 'Keep me sober.' At night, it's 'Thanks,'"—is as necessary as the prayer itself (*Lit* 220). In an interview for *The Paris Review*, Karr further describes her daily rituals, practices that engage her mind and her body:

I try to pray formally morning and night starting with breathing exercises or centering prayer. Then the Lord's Prayer or the Prayer of St. Francis... Sometimes I listen to the daily liturgy on my iPod from Pray-As-You-Go.com, or I go online at Sacred Space... At night I do what Jesuits call an examen of conscience, plus I keep a list of people to pray for. In times of pressure or anxiety—I'll do a daily rosary for everybody... The real prayer happens when I'm really desperate. (Fortini 74)

These activities, like *askesis*, are daily and consistent techniques of the self that begin to move Karr from an emerging self to the aspirational self she imagines. They locate her conversion not in the act of turning from a previous self to a new and different version, but in the daily effort of looking inward and performing "operations on [the] body, [the] soul, [the] thoughts, [the] behaviors" that can ultimately lead to "a certain state of perfection, of happiness, of purity, of supernatural power" (Foucault, "About" 203). The self of this conversion is transformed rather than replaced.

Another crucial aspect of Karr's burgeoning spirituality as *askesis* is her participation in the exercises of St. Ignatius. In the Stoics' practice of *askesis*, truth was found in the teaching of the masters, or in what Foucault designates as "true discourses." In the classical period, true discourses were acquired through the philosophical tradition in the form of *logos*. St. Ignatius, a 16<sup>th</sup> century Spanish priest, theologian, and founder of the Society of Jesus (Jesuits), is recognized as a "master" in the art of spiritual direction, and his *Spiritual Exercises*, a collection of Christian meditations, prayers, and mental exercises written between 1522-1524, remains one of the most influential books

on spiritual life ever written (“St. Ignatius Loyola”). Composed in four sections and designed to be carried out over 28-30 days, the exercises encourage practitioners to discover Jesus in their lives, and eventually lead them to follow Christ’s teachings. Although St. Ignatius isn’t considered a classical philosopher, his exercises clearly serve the function of “true discourse” in Karr’s subjectivation. Karr learns of the exercises through her friend John, who “as a young man...had been torn between a career as an athlete and the Jesuit seminary, but he’d drunk his way out of both businesses” (*Lit* 365). When Karr runs into John, he has been sober longer than her, runs his own swim club where he coaches Olympic-caliber competitors, and is reconsidering the call to become a Jesuit. In order to figure out what he should pursue, he “undertakes a lay version of the Exercises, emerging nine months later like a creature dipped in fine metal, heart-break cured” (365). After this experience, his coaching career blooms, and he attributes his success to the spiritual practice. Karr explains, “...following Ignatius jacked up both his mood and his productivity, and—being the competitive bitch that I am—this spiked my interest” (365).

Like the Stoics of ancient Greece, Karr seeks out a “master” to guide her through the spiritual exercises. She finds a mentor in “a bulky Franciscan nun named Sister Margaret, patiently going blind behind fish-tank glasses that magnify her eyes like goggles” (*Lit* 368). Spiritual direction in Ignatian practice is defined as “help given by one Christian to another which enables that person to pay attention to God’s personal communication to him or her, to respond to this personally communicating God, to grow in intimacy with this God, and to live out the consequences of the relationship” (“Spiritual Direction”). According to Joann Crowley, this process is defined by mutual discovery and disclosure, and the goal is deeper self-knowledge, compassion, and “one-ness” with the Spirit of God. Through her relationship with Sister Margaret and her daily exercises and prayers, Karr is able to finally make peace with her mother and the horrors suffered because of her addiction,

to make peace with the neglect of her already deceased father, and with her failed marriage. Most significantly, however, she makes peace with herself. She writes, “I start to arrive in the instant as never before, standing up in it as it pushed from behind like a wave, for it feels as if I was made—from all the possible shapes a human might take—not to prove myself worthy but to refine the worth I’m formed from, acknowledge it, own it, spend it on others” (*Lit* 384).

Karr’s relationships to Sister Margaret, Joan the Bone, Tobias Wolff, and many others are critical to her conversion and imitate the ancient Hellenistic-Roman confessional model. Foucault situates confession at the center of *askesis* as one of the primary methods of self care. However, he clearly differentiates between the Christian and Stoic practice, particularly in their relationship to truth. At the center of Christian *askesis*, confession is an exercise of truth-telling, “in which the devoted objectifies himself in a ‘true discourse’” (Yates 94). This truth is pre-determined and is offered up to a priest, pastor, counselor, or someone in a position of power. Truth-telling within this model seeks not to liberate the subject herself but to prepare her for a “final liberation from the bondage of the self”; all “truths” of the self are identified and evaluated based on divine “Truth” (95). Instead, the truth of the self in Hellenistic-Roman confession is constructed within a different relationship: “The truth, passing from one to the other in *parrhesia*, seals, ensures, and guarantees the other’s autonomy” (Foucault, *The Hermeneutics* 379). According to Foucault, *parrhesia* means “frank speech” and is essential for the intense, affective relationships necessary for self care. He defines it as the “virtue, duty, and technique [that] must characterize, among other things and above all, the man who is responsible for directing others, and particularly for directing them in their effort, their attempt to constitute an appropriate relationship to themselves” (*Government* 43). In the ancient philosophical model, the speech that moves a subject toward the enunciation of the truth of self originates with the master or counselor, or one demonstrates the “coincidence between belief and

truth...in a verbal activity” (Foucault, *Fearless* 14). *Parrhesia* requires a relationship; it cannot be undertaken alone. Foucault describes it as an ethics of speech in which both participants open their hearts, one to allow true discourse to flow out, and the other to allow it to flow in (*The Hermeneutics* 132). This relationship is defined by intimacy and vulnerability, thus placing both participants at risk.<sup>11</sup> Karr’s recovery from addiction and conversion to Catholicism would not have been possible without *parrhesiasts*, interlocutors acting as “masters” or experts, not as judges or priests. Clearly, the sponsor role in addiction recovery, portrayed in *Lit* by Joan, Deb, and Patti, embraces *parrhesia*. In her spiritual life, Karr’s relationships not only with Sister Margaret, but also Toby, John, and Father Kane, embody the *parrhesiastic* relationship where, as Foucault describes, “...the master is an operator in the reform of the individual and in the formation of the individual as a subject. He is the mediator in the relationship of the individual to his constitution as subject” (125). The following exchange between Karr and Sister Margaret reflects *parrhesia* as Foucault imagined, as “a certain action one will have carried out on the individual, the individual to whom one will have offered a hand, and whom one will pull out of the state, the status, the mode of life, the mode of being which he is in...” (129-130). In their first meeting, Sister Margaret says, “I see you—she peers through those lenses—‘what I can see of you, as my sister, God’s beloved child. The hairs on your head are

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<sup>11</sup> Foucault’s recognition of the risk in this relationship is echoed by Judith Butler in *Giving an Account for Oneself*. The work of Butler is essential when we think about the relationship between writers and readers of autobiographical texts. In *Giving an Account of Oneself*, Butler analyzes how personal accounts are scripted with instructions of how readers are to respond. For Butler, self-accounts are always, inevitably Other-shaping narratives: “It is not simply a question of imparting information to an Other who is over there, beyond me, waiting to know. On the contrary, the telling is the performing of an action that presupposes an Other, posits and elaborates the Other, is given to the Other, or by virtue of the Other, prior to the giving of any information” (“Giving” 37). Informed by Freud’s model of the therapeutic dyad and the role of psychological transference, Butler’s self-accounting proposes that the Other, no less than the self, is *proposed* and not *discovered*, through this interaction (Diamond 46).

numbered, and we've been brought together, you and me, to shine on each other a while.' So, you don't judge me? I want to know. 'For what?' she said. 'I don't even know you'" (*Lit* 368).

In Foucault's imagination of the recovery of the Hellenistic-Roman model of conversion, *parrhesia* ideally occurs in face-to-face encounters, particularly in his insistence of the embodiment of *askesis*. However, he focuses his attention on reading and writing, particularly in the form of letters, as an essential aspect of self care that engages both the mind and body and that can occur without physical presence. In his recovery of the ancient practice of letter writing as *parrhesia* he explains, "the letter renders the person 'present' to the person whom he addresses. And present not simply by way of the information that he provides to him about his life, his activities, his successes and failures, his fortunes and misfortunes; present in a way that is immediate and quasi-physical." This is because "[t]he letter that...works to subjectivate true discourse...also constitutes at the same time an objectivation of the soul" ("Self Writing"). Letter writing, then, brings people "face to face" or "soul to soul" and is distinct from the Christian confessional model of "bearing one's soul." Instead, letters reflect a daily accounting or inventory of actions. The reader, in the role of a guide, examines this account for patterns of action, noticing those that form the self of the writer. He can then assess and assist the other's progress of self to self (Dankel 156). Examining Karr's memoir through this repositioning of the roles of the confessional writer, reader, and text—not as a tell-all tale of past sins traditionally associated with the genre, and instead as a story of movement, facilitated by others, from an emerging to aspirational self—will be the project of the next chapter.

In his essay "Self-Writing," Foucault focuses on another form of writing as self care that he himself practiced, *hypomnemata*, or the construction of notebooks in which one gathers pieces of wisdom about living. Foucault is quick to distinguish *hypomnemata* from both confessional or academic writing, insisting that the goal is not to provide an account of oneself, but instead to collect



the “already-said” toward the larger project of constituting self. The structure of *Lit* in many ways acts as *hypomnemata*. The memoir begins with an open letter to Karr’s son, and proceeds in 45 chapters, each introduced by an epigraph typically from a famous author or philosopher. Including the quotes that open each of the organizing four sections, and the line from the *Odyssey* that begins the entire text, there are 52 times Karr includes someone else’s words in her memoir, not including quotations within the narrative itself. A distinct departure from her previous two memoirs, *Lit* features brief, individually titled chapters that extend the themes or ideas of the introductory passages. For example, Karr begins “The Nervous Hospital,” the chapter detailing her experiences in the mental institution with Dorothy Parker’s question, “What fresh hell is this?” (*Lit* 278) The previous chapter describing her intake process starts with Czeslaw Milosz’s words, “The history of my stupidity would fill many volumes.” She builds on this quote in the chapter title, “A Short History of My Stupidity” (267). Karr’s careful curation of meaningful words from “masters”—artists, writers, performers, and philosophers serve the same function as Foucault’s *hypomnemata*, as an essential method of constructing the truth about self by a careful assemblage of others’ words. Her epigraphs not only introduce and contextualize her own story, but also pay tribute to the work of others that she has spent her life admiring. The title “Lit,” when read as an abbreviation for “literature,” suggests the importance of stories to her life; in interviews, she’s frequently claimed, “Poetry saved my life” (W. Smith 52). The echoes of others we hear throughout the text, join with Karr’s voice in creating what Foucault describes as a “chorus”: “Through the interplay of selected readings and assimilative writing, one should be able to form an identity through which a whole spiritual genealogy can be read. In a chorus there are tenor, bass, and baritone voices, men's and women's tones: ‘The voices of the individual singers are hidden; what we hear is the voices of all together...’” (Foucault, “Self Writing”).

Conversion narratives, like Mary Karr's *Lit*, offer rich possibilities for a rhetorical approach to identity, as an attempt to persuade others—to change their *beliefs*—through an expression of *who we are*. In this perspective, identity matters less as something one “is” than something one “does” in language. To the field of life writing, whose texts are both motivated and shaped by conversion, the ancient practice of *askesis* serves an essential rhetorical function in the creation of the selves of autobiography. Foucault's theory enables the extension of approaches to conversion beyond those of a traditional Christian model. While conversion can be read within this framework, as it has been since St. Augustine, this approach threatens to limit the ways we theorize such essential topics as identity and truth in life writing. Further, it tends to bind the experience of conversion to spirituality, rather than understand it as a process of transformation inherent to all autobiography. When conversion is viewed as self-objectivation—as a denial or death of self rather than a return—it is easy for contemporary scholars to dismiss, particularly scholars of *life* writing who are perhaps more invested in the ways identity is constructed rather than destructed. At best, Christian models of conversion are viewed as no longer culturally or academically viable, and at worst, an acknowledgement of a restrictive and oppressive world view. If, as I argue in this dissertation, belief is very much the concern of rhetoric and life writing scholars, and if conversion is inseparable from belief, then we need a different approach to thinking about transformation in our stories. Conversion in many ways is less a trope in autobiographical acts than autobiography itself. Jean Starobinski explains:

...one would hardly have sufficient motive to write an autobiography had not some radical change occurred in his life—conversion, entry into a new life, the operation of Grace...It is the internal transformation of the individual—and the exemplary

character of this transformation—that furnishes a subject for narrative discourse in which “I” is both subject and object. (78)

Thus, a “conversion” in our own thinking about conversion is necessary as autobiographical scholars interested in the ways we consider the selves of life narratives, selves that are ultimately an amalgamation of beliefs. The phenomenon of conversion reminds us that beliefs *can* and *do* change, even if these changes aren’t the radical rejection of the old for a different and better new as a traditional conversion narrative suggests. While the work of scholars such as Foucault, Bourdieu, Ward, and Herrnstein Smith remind us that we can never really separate ourselves from the belief systems in which we have been enculturated, perhaps we can imagine the ways changing our beliefs *can* and *does* alter the trajectories of our personal and communal stories.

## CHAPTER IV

### MEMOIR AS MAKING BELIEF: DESIRE, RELATIONSHIP, AND *POIESIS* IN MARY

#### KARR'S *CHERRY*

*The object we call a book is not the real book, but its potential, like a musical score or seed. It exists fully only in the act of being read; and its real home is in the head of the reader, where the symphony resounds, the seed germinates. A book is a heart that only beats in the chest of another.*

—Rebecca Solnit

*Desire desires the desire of another.*

—Elizabeth Grosz

Before I attended my little Christian liberal arts college in small-town rural Indiana, I was raised in another small town, one state over in Illinois, and attended a little Christian church with a strong fundamentalist streak. I was excruciatingly familiar with the way this fundamentalism played out in my life: essentially anything cool or fun was forbidden. *Verboten*. Out of the question. The binary worldview embraced by fundamentalism reduces complex issues to a simple “yes” or “no,” a resounding “good” or “bad.” Duran Duran? Bad. Heavy petting? Bad. The latest John Hughes movie? Bad. Bible quiz team? Good! This dichotomizing philosophy extended to much more serious issues, like abortion (bad, *obviously*) and capital punishment (mostly good), but I couldn’t care less about anything bigger than my own small self struggling to come of age in a world in which I was always, first, a sinner in need of salvation. A fundamentalist is defined by this need. By *need*. By desire for something beyond self, in a future only imagined.

Margaret Miles, in her memoir *Augustine and the Fundamentalist’s Daughter*, describes the fundamentalist worldview as an “acute alertness to wrongdoing, and a particular construction of ‘self.’” The fundamentalist self, according to Miles’s own childhood experience, begins with

“an especially poignant sense of *lack*, the quite valid suspicion that *I am not real*” (6). Miles, a “recovering” fundamentalist, reflects that it is the idea that sin defines her, her self, that has been nearly impossible to eradicate in adulthood. St. Augustine in his *Confessions* describes sin not as evil but as the absence or lack, “privation,” of good. Either definition—self as sinner or, perhaps worse, self as *nothing*—has significant impacts on the fundamentalist believer. It certainly did in my case. Where I was lacking, the Church, their God, and my parents as ambassadors of both, *completed* me. Every single spare space was stuffed full with prayer requests, Sunday school stories, praise songs, memorized bits of the Old and New Testaments, and pat answers to all the questions I could think to ask. And yet, I never felt *full*. Perhaps this is the greatest tragedy of fundamentalism for its believers: the inability—no matter how ardent the attempts—to be satiated. In this way, the fundamentalist self is completely ordered by desire, a desire defined by what is presently missing. This characteristic is most evident in the apocalypticism woven into the fundamentalist worldview, a phenomenon originally associated with prophetic revelation that mostly refers to the belief that the world will come to an end, probably within a believer’s lifetime. Apocalyptic believers tend to live with one foot in the world and the other in the promise of a future paradise where sinners are punished and believers are rewarded by eternity in heaven. To live with this belief is to live in a perpetual state of lack, desiring not what *is* but what *could be*.

Reading was an attempt to fill that lack—to *make present* what was absent. Stories—far beyond the ones I learned in the Bible—offered me something I could never presently have, and, in this way, shaped not only *what* I believed but, more importantly, *how* I believed. For example, the first time I remember actually losing myself in/through a book was C.S. Lewis’s *The Chronicles of Narnia*. While my earliest and fondest memories involve stories and books, it

wasn't until I followed Lucy through the magic wardrobe to Narnia that I really understood what reading could not only mean but *do*. Narnia, with its talking animals, snowy landscapes, evil witches, and ancient prophecies captured my imagination in new ways. Narnia, and getting to Narnia, consumed my waking thoughts—I dreamed of ways that I, like Lewis's characters, could stumble through a wardrobe or leap into a picture frame and be miraculously transported to a different world. I was always on the lookout for possible portals to Narnia, and not because my eight-year-old self was unhappy or angstful—I wasn't looking for something *different*—I was looking for something *more*.<sup>12</sup>

Narnia, of course, has no external existence, no actual location on any “real” map. The *making present* of Narnia requires a creative act, as the word “making” suggests; we are neither simply passively observing nor actually discovering another world. Graham Ward argues that the role of literature in *making present* requires *making us believe* and therefore helps us understand how beliefs are made believable. To explain this process, Ward draws on William Wordsworth's and Samuel Taylor Coleridge's “poetic faith” from their *Lyrical Ballads*, a concept that I use to frame this chapter. Literature caters to desire by presenting to us a world/experience/reality that is both given (by the text) and responded to (by the reader) (Ward 134). There is not “another” world, but the one we *create* that we imagine and emotionally interact with as we read (*Unbelievable* 134).

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<sup>12</sup> In *The Faraway Nearby*, Rebecca Solnit writes of same power *The Chronicles of Narnia* held over her as a young reader, particularly in Lewis's use of *doors*. Narnia can only be discovered at the end of a portal—most famously a wardrobe, in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, but also through picture frames, landscapes that come to life, and secluded forest pools. As a metaphor for the act of reading itself, Lewis's characters must travel through doors to enter other worlds, just as his readers must do. Solnit explains, “Every book is a door that opens onto another world, which might be the magic that all those children's books were alluding to” a description that captures the experience of reading for me (62-63).

Coleridge, in his 1817 *Biographia Literaria*, famously writes of the “semblance of truth” with which all literary endeavors are involved, and of the “procuring” of the “shadows of imagination,” that “willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith” (Chapter XIV). “Procuring” suggests lack, the desire to obtain something. The imagination *desires*—and this association with belief, a reminder of the word’s Old High German root “*galaub*,” meaning “to desire, care, love” (*Unbelievable* 135). Stories pander to our desire, and what we desire is the suspension of disbelief, which Ward argues is not the antithesis of belief that Coleridge suggests, but a reaction to the cultural rationalism still prominent. Instead, Ward argues that there is no such thing as “disbelief,” only a displaced object of another belief (135). In other words, to believe in nothing is still to believe.

The rational mind, a direct result of John Locke’s epistemology, is not open to the possibilities of miracle or to what Coleridge portrays as “the wonders of the world before us;” it cannot transcend the natural or respond to the transcendent. To suspend our disbelief suggests a “giving in,” and although Coleridge describes this as “willing,” Ward identifies this process less as an act of the deliberate will and more as “a giving-in to the erotic solicitations of the poetic” (*Unbelievable* 136). He explains, “A shadow crosses the relationship between the affective (desiring), imagining, believing, and knowing. It is the shadow of seduction, the eclipse of reason by the libidinous passions, and the overwhelming of the will” (136). In *Biographia Literaria*, Coleridge distinguishes his own poetic attempts from Wordsworth’s when completing the *Lyrical Ballads*; while Coleridge believes “endeavors should be directed to persons and characters supernatural,” Wordsworth strove “to give the charm of novelty to things of every day, and to excite a feeling analogous to the supernatural” (Chapter XIV). The excitation of feeling is associated with “awaking the mind’s attention”—the emotional is inseparable from the

intellectual and rooted in the imagination. According to Coleridge, the result is not only therapeutic, but also *salvific*. Poetic faith, thus, invokes a transcendence that is both theological and ethical; we will be moved from our “selfish solicitude” as “we have eyes, yet see not, ears that hear not, and hearts that neither feel nor understand.” The very ways we believe are affected by literature, by stories, as we are moved from our locations and perceptions of the individual self (Ward, *Unbelievable* 136). Thus, belief is not only given expression when we read—but also *created*. As Ward explains, “...we can go even further with reading: to be ‘engrossed’ is to be absorbed into the world presented; its world co-evolves with our participation” (139). Ward notes, and I explore further in this chapter, that our capacity for poetic belief—like all belief—is not just a cognitive event but an embodied and affective experience. He categorizes this process with the acts of receiving and responding: “We enter an interaction that resituates us, not topographically but in terms of what we are receiving and responding to in our substituted locality. That receiving and responding acts upon and within our structures of believing. We could not read at all if we did not have the capacity to believe; to *make believe*” (140). Accordingly, “suspension of disbelief” makes possible alternative states of believing, and, thus, the suspension of belief is impossible (140).

My interest, particularly in the experience of reading memoir, is in this process of receiving and responding between people—both “real” and imagined—as identified through the relationships forged through and within autobiography. Drawing upon Ward’s work on poetic belief, as well as affect theory, I imagine these relationships as structured by both desire and belief in the ways we imagine the other. Thus, in this chapter, I examine relationships—between belief and desire, between autobiographical narrators and characters, between writers and readers, between readers and texts, as affective and embodied responses rooted in and motivated



by an anticipation of something or someone beyond the individual self. Engaging contemporary understandings of desire resulting specifically from the field of affect theory, I focus on how desire moves between people and structures relationships through the writing and reading of memoir. To do this, I engage Ward's work on poetic faith, particularly in the act of reading as a productive relationship that is mediated by desire. Using Aristotle's concept of *poiesis*, I argue, like Ward, that reading itself is *poietic*, a transformative and creative act that both actualizes and demands belief (*Unbelievable* 147). However, while Ward's argument focuses on reading fiction, I extend *poiesis* to the act of writing and reading autobiography, uniquely motivated by the mutual desire to know, recognize, and *make believe*, as creative acts offered by the relationship between life writers and readers. Through an examination of the memoir *Cherry*, particularly as it both illuminates and fosters our desire for relationships, I posit that Mary Karr is able to skillfully negotiate the tricky spaces between our identities and our beliefs. And, ultimately, it is this ability, realized through the relationship with her readers, that makes her beliefs believable—that *makes us believe*.

As I noted in chapter one, “belief is both emotional and relational before it is rational” (Ward 55). Thus, the relationship between reader and writer of autobiography provides a fascinating space for inquiry, extending beyond an autobiographical “pact,” predicated on the basic belief in the veracity of the narrator's identity, to a relationship, or, as Egan describes, “an intersubjective exchange between narrator and reader aimed at producing a shared understanding of the meaning of a life” (Smith and Watson 16). I *believe* Mary Karr, not just in a fact-checking, verifiable kind of way, although, as I've previously noted, her attention to historical accuracy is widely known in the field. What I mean when I say I believe Mary Karr is much more complicated, motivated by a different kind of truth-seeking, caught up in the narrative interaction

between writer and reader, rooted in a myriad of desires, and enacted in the embodied processes of writing and reading. And yet, this belief isn't mine alone as Karr's enduring popularity attests, spanning readers from various professions, ages, faiths, and interests. In the wake of the memoir boom—when memoirs continue to capture our public attention and private imagination—why does Karr's work resonate with both popular and critical audiences? With secular readers and the most ardent believers? I argue that her stories transcend such distinctions by deftly navigating the spaces between them, and by extending to readers a "truthful" story, regardless of how we choose to define that elusive word. In a culture that simultaneously champions and subjugates belief, Karr's memoirs unapologetically reveal hers and require ours. And yet, *what* we believe might mean less than the *ability* to believe. Of Karr's rare skill to speak to such diverse readers/believers, Francine Prose remarks, "We believe she means every word, fiercely dredging up memories, however wrenching to revisit. At the same time she's keeping a cool eye on what makes a story work." Karr's stories invite us to not just suspend our disbelief, but to actually *make belief*. Readers believe in the "truth" of Mary Karr, perhaps because she allows us to hold our own beliefs while still believing her.

### **Desire and the Transmission of Affect**

To understand how Karr achieves this effect on her audience—to make us believe, to *make belief*—affect theory is particularly suggestive. If belief is, as Ward argues, a mode of cognition associated with imagination, motivation, desire, intuition, and feeling" (*Unbelievable* 77), then affect theory can illuminate how desire and belief work in tandem. Ward's use of motivation is instructive here; he explains, "by motivation I mean the energies that swirl within embodiment itself, fed by air and water and various foods, orientated by appetite..." (77). Ward compares this function of belief to *appetite*, resembling Baruch Spinoza's *conatus* or self-

protective drive to live, and *desire*, as stronger and deeper than appetite because it “longs for what it cannot name” (77). “Motivation,” from the Latin *to move* or *to motor*, yokes belief with movement forward—with anticipation and projection of something beyond (“Motivation”). Our beliefs are not only revealed in our desires but are also shaped by them.

A limited examination of prominent cultural theories of desire, particularly as a result of the “affective turn,” is useful in understanding the relationship between self and other. Very broadly speaking, our cultural conceptualizations of desire have shifted as a result of postmodern intervention and as a result of affective theory based on the work of scholars such as Lauren Berlant, Baruch Spinoza, and Brian Massumi. Berlant describes desire as a “state of attachment to something or someone, and the cloud of possibility that is generated by the gap between an object’s specificity and the needs and promises projected onto it” (“Intimacy” 6). This gap is a large and tricky space, full of intricate signals that we confuse with other things like love. According to Berlant, desire visits us as an impact from the outside, but when it engages us emotionally, it makes us feel as though it comes from within. So when we desire *something*, like a piece of dark chocolate, or *someone*, we feel alive from the inside out. The inside-out metaphor is especially illuminating when considering the relationship between reader and writer. When we engage another, anticipation and projection excites the imagination; there is a desire to understand, a desire for the immediacy of relation, a desire for transparency. In autobiography, these desires often translate into a desire for “truth,” an occurrence that surely muddies the already contested issue of autobiographical authenticity.

Desire, like belief, is not only a disposition but also a forward-looking drive, an example of what German critical theorist Ernst Bloch labeled “positive expectant emotions”:

Expectant emotions (like anxiety, fear, hope, and belief) are those whose drive-intention is long-term, whose drive-object does not lie ready, not just in respective individual attainability, but also in the already available world...thus the expectant emotions are distinguished from filled emotions by the incomparably greater anticipatory character in their intention, their substance and their object.

(74-75)

According to Bloch, all emotions are bound by the “horizon of time,” but the expectant emotions “open out entirely onto this horizon” (74). Temporality, as an organizing structure, orients these emotions forward, always moving toward the future and something or someone else that is not yet ours.

One of the most useful definitions of desire, Kristyn Gorton argues, can be found in Jean-Paul Sartre’s 1956 *Being and Nothingness* wherein he describes desire as *trouble*, drawing on the analogy between troubled water and the desiring consciousness (387). According to Sartre, desire stirs up things from below, disturbing the surface, and clouding our judgment (Gorton 18). Sigmund Freud famously theorizes desire as movement, emphasizing the connection between desire and drive; he also defines desire as *lack*, a concept that is further developed by Jacques Lacan. Lacan conceives desire through the question of the Other, and thus establishes the role of the analyst to find meaning and establish a cure (18). In their groundbreaking work on desire, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari move away from the idea of lack and toward desire as *production*, playing a central role in capitalism. Gorton argues that this shift reflects a contrast “between a negative conceptualization of desire and a positive or productive one and also a contrast between a (modern) search for meaning and a (postmodern) recognition of multiple interpretations” (18). This shift, toward a conflation of desire with production, has complicated

how we theorize desire, not only what it is but what it does. A view of desire as production has, rather than freeing up our relationship to desire, commodified and alienated it; as a result, desire has become less accessible. Berlant addresses this failure in her work on intimacy, suggesting that “Virtually no one knows how to do intimacy...People talk about the desire for it and the fear of it...in its instantiation as desire, it destabilizes the very things that institutions of intimacy are created to stabilize” (“Intimacy” 2).

Theorist Elizabeth Grosz reimagines Deleuze and Guattari’s work on desire as production by placing it in conversation with feminist theory, attempting to move beyond a psychoanalytical ‘ontology of lack’ towards the ‘productive potential in becoming.’ In this repositioning, Grosz argues, “Desire does not take for itself a particular object whose attainment it requires; rather it aims at nothing above its own proliferation or self-expansions...it moves, it does” (165). Elspeth Probyn engages Grosz’s work to consider how desire moves and what it does, how “desire...propels...touches off and sets into motion different possibilities” (13). In her reconfiguration of lesbian desire, Probyn is interested in a queer use of the concept; rather than conceive of desire as pointing toward one object (person, place, or thing) and therefore slipping into the “negative polemics of lack,” she considers the movement inherent to desire. Like Guattari and Deleuze, Probyn argues that “desire is productive; it is what oils the lines of the social” (13), and, therefore, “desire...and writing are about the modes of affecting movement, movement aimed at creating a momentum of change in social relationships” (14). What Probyn’s work reveals, most relevant to my work in this chapter, is the “positivity of desire as it produces new relations and relationships among individuals, things, groups, etc.” (14) Desire, like belief, moves us *toward* objects and others as it looks *forward* in expectation.

Like belief, desire *does things*—to texts, to lives, and to stories about those lives. Gorton explains, “Desire creates recognition (through identification and the gaze); it marks the narrative; it highlights the moment when lovers’ eyes meet; it affects the lives of characters; it marks their bodies, forcing them to move, act or react differently; and it transforms people—radically alters their being-in-the world” (19). If desire works as Gorton suggests, an examination of its effects on writers and readers of autobiography yields provocative discoveries as both are engaged in relationships to individual stories and to collective others, relationships motivated and mediated by desire. Understanding desire as movement, as embodied in autobiographical relationships (between characters, readers, writers, texts), and expressed in various ways, necessarily draws upon recent work in affect theory, specifically on the transmission of affect, to illuminate its intensity and potential to motivate change.

To understand how desire is transmitted or *moves*, Sara Ahmed’s work on the cultural politics of emotion is particularly informative. Ahmed defines emotion as “the feeling of bodily change” and notes that emotions “shape the very surfaces of bodies which take shape through the repetition of actions over time, as well as through orientations towards and away from others” (4). This movement towards and away is highlighted in the Latin root of emotion *emovere*, meaning “to move, to move out” (11) and serving as the origin of the words *motive* and *motivation*. With her work, Ahmed critiques both “inside out” and “outside in” models of emotion that have dominated our cultural assumptions of how emotions move. In the inside out or “psychological model,” emotions are discovered by looking inwards, asking myself “How do I feel?” and then expressing my feelings, allowing others to respond to them. If the other sympathizes, then we might have a “fellow-feeling,” and if not, then we might feel alienated from each other. The logic behind this model is that “I have feelings, which then move outwards

towards objects and others, and which might then return to me” (9). The “outside in” model reverses direction, where the individual is no longer the source of the feeling. Instead, the feeling comes from without. Ahmed argues that both of these models rely on the distinction between “inside and outside, the individual and the social, and the ‘me’ and the ‘we’” (9). Rather, emotions are *relational*, involving reactions and relations of “towardness” or “awayness” in relation to objects. Therefore, emotions are not ‘in’ either the individual or the social but produce the very surfaces and boundaries that “allow the individual and the social to be delineated as if they are objects” (10).

Teresa Brennan’s work on the transmission of affect further troubles the illusion of boundaries between objects, as “there is no secure distinction between the ‘individual’ and the ‘environment’” (6). Brennan uses the term “transmission of affect” to name a process that is social in origin but biological and physical in effect; “the origin of transmitted affects is social in that these affects do not only arise within a particular person but also come from without” (3). Affects, while coming from interactions with other people and the environment, have a physiological impact. Simply, by “transmission of affect,” Brennan means, “the emotions or affects of one person, and the enhancing or depressing energies these affects entail, can enter into another” (3). Affect, then, is not a personal feeling, but the means through which bodies interact in context with each other. Ahmed, too, argues that emotions are not just a result of movement but also about attachments between bodies. She explains, “What moves us, what makes us feel, is also that which holds us in place, or gives us a dwelling place....movement...connects bodies to other bodies: attachments take place through movement, through being moved by the proximity of others” (11). Because this chapter is specifically about desire, about how it works affectively to structure relationships in autobiographical projects, Ahmed’s and Brennan’s work

on the boundaries between objects—between self and others—is particularly cogent. My argument, thus, builds on this theory of affective movement or of the potentialities of attachments between bodies. These attachments, produced by the constructed relationships between autobiographical readers, writers, and texts, form a complicated “web of affect” by which desires and beliefs are shared. Our desires move us just as we are moved by other’s desires.

Perhaps it is no surprise that I chose Karr’s second memoir *Cherry* as a text through which to examine desire as the memoir traces her coming-of-age, “detailing...the usual rites of passage for a talented, spirited girl between the ages of 11 and 16 in a small town: her first pimple, her first crush, her first ‘sex club,’ her friendships, teenage romances, experiments with drugs...and so on” (Law-Yone). Desire seems to go hand-in-hand with our cultural characterizations of adolescence, yet the burgeoning sexuality commonly associated with early teenage years isn’t the only focus of the memoir. While she definitely desires the attentions of her crush John Cleary, Karr more explicitly desires the intimacy of a close friend, the affection of her parents, the recognition of her peers, the escape of drugs and alcohol, and the promise of poetry. Thus, desire, as a “positive expectant emotion” organizes the memoir and moves the narrative forward in expectation—both Karr’s and her reader’s. Will Mary get what she wants? This question motivates the story, and our reading of it as we recognize in Karr’s struggles our own. In her review of the book, Sara Mosle explains, “*Cherry* succeeds because of its universality.” Perhaps it is the familiarity of Karr’s childhood, what Alix Kates Shulman calls “an ordinary plot: American girl traverses the tricky terrain of adolescence,” that initially hails readers and with the promise of mutual recognition and offers the invitation to believe. This



invitation defines the act of autobiography itself, as a shared experience between writer and reader, defined by the desires of both.

*Cherry* provides us with a number of relationships to consider both within the memoir and in our lives. However, before I examine these relationships, a brief exploration of autobiographical subjectivity is crucial with a particular emphasis on the complicated position of the “I” and “you” in memoir. The distinction between these subjectivities has been theorized extensively in the field and continues to inspire compelling scholarship. Perhaps most notably in *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*, scholars Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson explain the complicated role of the speaker/narrator using five distinctions: the autobiographical “I” (the producer of the story), the “real” or historical “I” (the flesh-and-blood person located in a particular time and place), the narrating “I” (the “I” who tells the story), the narrated “I” (the version of the self that the narrating “I” chooses to constitute through recollection for the reader), and the ideological “I” (the concept of personhood culturally available to the narrator when telling the story) (72-76). Readers of autobiography can easily be seduced into confusing the autobiographical narrator with the historical person who is writing the text (or narrating the story or being narrated by the story), especially if the author is still alive, like Mary Karr. Smith and Watson remind us, however, that the “real” or historical “I” is “unknown and unknowable by readers and is not the ‘I’ we gain access to in an autobiographical narrative” (72).<sup>13</sup> Because an autobiographer can inhabit multiple positions simultaneously, the

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<sup>13</sup> Karr’s narrated “I” is further complicated by her narration of childhood experience from her adult perspective. Smith and Watson explain, “That child...is an objectified and remembered ‘I,’ the memory of a younger version of a self. The child is not doing the remembering or the narrating of the story” (73). Cherry’s narrator, then, occupies multiple subject positions, challenging any attempt to establish any dichotomy between the narrating “I” and narrated “I.”

reader inevitably finds herself cast in various roles, each offering a different relationship to the text and each exciting different desires. In the remainder of this chapter, I identify some of these key relationships and, using various theoretical contributions, suggest how they work broadly to “make belief” or make us believe in the stories of Mary Karr. When appropriate, I refer to the narrated “I” as “Mary,” or the version of self that Karr is narrating based on her memory, and “Karr” generally to refer to the autobiographical “I” or narrating “I.” However, because of the complicated concept of autobiographical subjectivity, my attempt to neatly categorize such relationships feels tentative at best. I offer the following “sections,” organized by relationships and the desires each reveals, with the caveat that such distinctions can only be suggested. The boundaries remain temporary and contingent, mirroring the borders between selves and others, as revealed in any autobiographic project.

### **The Relationship between the Narrated “I” and Autobiographical Characters**

To understand how desire structures relationships in *Cherry*, I first want to look at Karr’s position as the narrated “I.” What does Mary desire? This perspective allows us to observe Karr’s most crucial relationships as an exploration of adolescent longing and then experience them as a model for our own desires. What Mary longs for in others—to be desired, yes, but more importantly *to be recognized*—mirrors our own desire as readers. While I am not limiting my analysis of desire in *Cherry* to Karr’s sexual awakening—or conflating desire with sexual desire—it certainly cannot be underestimated. Indeed, it is the desire between characters, specifically Karr and a number of her early boyfriends, that has garnered the most attention in the memoir. However, expanding our view to consider the multiple subjectivities Karr inhabits, and the resulting effects on readers, broadens our understanding of how desire works in the relationships fostered by autobiography.

Certainly, at first glance, *Cherry* is a story about awakening desire, realized in the relationships between the adolescent characters. Karr's frank and lyrical exploration of some of her earliest longings establishes desire at the center of the memoir. Writing female desire in autobiography is notoriously and historically difficult as memoirist Claire Dederer argues in her article, "Why Is It So Hard for Women to Write about Sex?"<sup>14</sup> She answers her own question, "Because it's easier to titillate, shock, and lie than to get at the messy truth about female desire," requiring "even the boldest of writers to stare down the specter of modesty" (102). She explains, "Female desire and arousal have for so long been represented as a form of incitement to men that it's hard for a woman to describe lust" (102). Arguing that female desire lies perhaps as much in the mind as in the body—"Female lust is a powerful force, but it surges in the form of an interrogation, rather than a statement. Not *I want this* but *Do I want this? What exactly do I want? How about now? And now?*"—Dederer identifies the difficulty of "narrative truth-telling" when attempting to capture just how "equivocal yet irrepressible female sexuality is" (104). Dederer recognizes Karr's *Cherry* as an autobiographical attempt to complicate female desire and suggests that the challenge facing contemporary memoir writing is "to get at what feels true, which is that the endless internal oscillation that happens during sex needn't sabotage our sexual experience, much less our autonomy. If questioning can't be part of expressing female desire, that is a diminishment" (104). Dederer's observations feel particularly cogent to *Cherry*'s portrayal of desire—what makes Karr's scenes so memorable, so *sexy*, is not necessarily sex itself, but her response to it. Robin Bradford notes, "Sex is what really stands out in *Cherry*—not

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<sup>14</sup> Both Miller and Eakin are interested in the impact of gender on reading autobiography. For a further exploration of this topic, please see Nancy K. Miller's "Facts, Pacts, Acts" and Paul John Eakin's "Relational Selves, Relational Lives: The Story of the Story."

the hard-core act that the title suggests but the chaste sexual longing of girls.” Sexual longing is the effect of desire, clearly differentiated from the act itself—to long for is to yearn for something that has not happened yet, for something beyond the present self.

Karr admits her struggle to get the sex right: “Our culture doesn’t recognize what is libidinal for a young girl. There’s not a language for girls to have sexual feelings. Though the world is saturated with the language of male stimulation, there’s nothing comparable for girls” (Bradford). Of the autobiographer’s challenge in writing desire, Karr says, “Women don’t write about it—except aberrant sex. Maya Angelou’s rape scene in *I Know Why a Caged Bird Sings* comes to mind and Katherine Harrison’s *The Kiss*. But most women memoirists just skip over the years 12 to 16” (Bradford). And then there’s the added challenge present in all childhood autobiography of authentically capturing experiences that happened deep in the past. Dederer describes this as “the difficulty of knowing exactly how you feel at any given time, and then the added difficulty of traveling back in time to find the words to say what it was really like” (108). Karr explains that she mostly “mined her memory” for what her sexual fantasies were “back then,” surprising herself by how simple her desire was (Bradford). It is perhaps this simplicity that lends some of her most innocent and intimate moments a fierce sexuality. The object of her first crush and earliest desire is John Cleary, whom she first declares her love for at six years old “with little subtlety; I walked the road before his house with I LOVE JOHN CLEARY in black magic marker on the back of my shirt” (*Cherry* 42). Later, as she gets older, she notes “the instant a tensile line stretched between us. Some silk actually seemed to spin in the summer air from him to me” (44).

What the young narrator imagines is less about her sexual identity than her identity in general as shaped by this early desire. In the following passage, she pays attention to the impact our first loves have on our selves and our relationship to others:

First loves take us like that. But because they rarely have any consequence,  
people slight them...our own features in youth have not yet been sharply carved.  
So in some way, we don't exist yet. Thus we mock ourselves for loving so easily  
and in the process choke the breath from our first darlings. Which denies their  
truth, I think, for my inner life took full shape around such a love. I learned to  
imagine around his face. Before such enchantment takes us, there are only the  
faces of parents, other kin. These are doled out to us; they are us in some portion.  
These first beloveds are other. And we invent ourselves by choosing them.

(*Cherry* 44)

Echoed throughout this passage is the questioning or “internal oscillation” that Dederer argues complicates female desire. In autobiography, it is the “truth” of present awareness recast on past experience that authenticates the narrative.

Like Dederer, who suggests, “If the point is to find truths about desire—not in what the author did but in what she felt and thought while she did it—outré territory in the realm of sex memoir gets redefined: the memoirist needn't have sex at all” (104), Karr's sexiest scenes exist in her imagination rather than her body. Describing a neighbor's cousin visiting for the summer, who was “slim and brown and expressionless in a way that let [her] manufacture complex thoughts for him,” Karr writes: “...his thoughtless beauty dragged from me the faint tug of something like desire... This wasn't desire as it would become. Not yet. The cool fire circled more in my abdomen than between my legs, and it was vague and smoke gray. I pictured no boy

yet—not even John Cleary—gathering me into his arms” (*Cherry* 45). Her desire is focused not exactly on being touched but instead, on being seen—*recognized*. Karr remembers:

I’ve never met a girl as young as I was then who craved a bona fide boning. But flowing nonspecifically from my solar plexus was this forceful light. I wanted John Cleary...or some other boy to see that light, to admire it, not to feed off it for his own hungers. When I closed my eyes at night, I did not manufacture naked bodies entwined...I pictured John Cleary...taking my hand for the couples’ skate at the rink...with his gaze inventing me in the stare of those we passed. (46)

The image of desire having the power to “invent” is echoed later in the memoir when Karr describes “a va-va voom moment, and you’re drunk on being both source and recipient of that desire. After the vast years of solitude, his aqua eyes carry you into the air. Incarnate you. Your fleshly image of yourself is deriving from what he sees” (168). The reimagination of adolescent female desire as an authentic reflection of the “contrasting Sturm und Drang in [the] heart and brain that accompan(ies) it” (Dederer 102) distinguishes Karr’s *Cherry*.

Karr suggests that the lack of memoirs about girls’ adolescent experiences might be due to a lack of language for such experience. In an interview for *The Paris Review*, she explains, “When I started *Cherry*, I realized there were no words to describe an awakening female libido. Boys have these childlike words like chubby and woody, but the parlance for female genitalia and female desires is too porno.” The longing of teenage girls, Karr argues, is as powerful as sexual longing, but “not so genital.” Instead, “It’s somewhat about being seen—what feminist critics might call a longing for the male gaze. Being looked at in this culture invents you as a woman long before you’re getting laid. It was about love more than sex—about beauty, desire”

(Fortini 71). Karr connects desire here with *being seen* and the recognition inherent to intersubjectivity where the self is developed in and in relation to someone else.

While Karr certainly traces her burgeoning identity to John Cleary, Phil, and other male characters in her adolescence, perhaps the most powerful recognition she experiences is with her friend, Meredith Bright, who moves to Leechfield from Mississippi when Karr is in high school. On a constant search “for like-minded souls,” Karr first notices Meredith reading Dostoevsky on the bus, “a rarity since books by Russians can make teachers question you vigorously about Communism” (*Cherry* 143). Encouraged by Meredith’s boldness, Karr approaches her and says, “I hear you’re a genius” (143). Meredith returns with “This is true,” and the most momentous friendship of Karr’s life is born. When Karr recites an obscure poem from memory that Meredith finishes, they recognize in each other something completely new. Karr remembers of this moment, “Meredith continues to nod slowly at you, and you at her. You’re lost in some capsule of wonder that will sustain you both in years to come beyond anything you could hope for. When a smile breaks out across her moon face, something worthwhile has been granted” (146). Meredith, a genius who can discourse not only on Dostoevsky and Pynchon, but also on most contemporary poetry and philosophy, becomes Karr’s “heart companion.” The desire motivating Karr’s intellectual awakening is as profound as her sexuality.

Not only does Meredith mirror Karr’s academic and literary interests, but she also seems to understand the neglect and isolation that have shaped Mary’s past, a connection that is particularly evident in the characters’ dialogue. Jessica Benjamin’s theory of intersubjectivity, a theory that “maintains that the individual grows in and through the relationship to other subjects” (Egan, *Mirror Talk* 19-20), highlights the role of dialogue in realizing identity in autobiography. Dialogue can position the self as both respectful of and distinct from others. Life writing scholar

Nancy K. Miller explains: “Autobiographers who, within one text, are both subject and object of speech and regard, becoming in turn self and other for each other, play out the politics of lived experiences as a realistic trope for exploring, defining, and expressing just who they are” (“Facts” 8). Intersubjectivity requires mutual recognition, “the necessity of recognizing as well as being recognized by the other...” (Benjamin, *The Bonds* 23). This idea implies that we actually have a need to recognize the other as a separate person who is like us yet distinct. The dialogue between Karr and Meredith vividly represents this need in both girls. After a passage where the two discuss Victorian fainting couches and the merits of Thomas Pynchon’s *V* (Meredith’s recommendation), Karr writes, “This kind of banter is part of an unspoken contract whereby Meredith will pat you on the head a few times before she actually undertakes explaining whatever book has stumped you. The charade somehow dilutes the fact that the most meritorious opinions invariably stem from Meredith. Without this oblique shoring up, the friendship would consist of her lecturing while you take notes” (*Cherry* 149).

Karr explains, “Kids in distressed families are great repositories of silence and carry in their bodies whole arctic wastelands of words not to be uttered, stories not to be told” (*Cherry* 156). The secrecy inherent in dysfunctional family systems causes, “a bristling agony” which can only be relieved by talk—“hours and hours of unmuzzled talk, the recounting of stories. Who listens is almost beside the point...” (156). Without a space for such conversation, kids tend to assume personal fault for the failures of their families. Karr recognizes the “gravity of such silence” in Meredith, and Meredith in her. Meredith observes, “I can see that you’ve suffered,” to which Karr replies, “I can see that about you too” (157). This mutual recognition binds the girls further together, permitting both the opportunity to “air family dramas abstractly...without betraying the tribal silence you’ve both forsworn” (157).



Throughout *Cherry*, Karr portrays Meredith as both a kindred spirit and distinctly separate. As the calm to Mary's storms, Meredith is unfailingly kind and singularly brilliant. When Karr plummets into the drug and alcohol abuse that will follow her into adulthood, Meredith opts instead for the stability of a relationship, eventually leaving Leechfield and Karr behind. However, at the end of the book, Karr reconnects with Meredith who is home for Easter to share the epiphany of self-discovery that concludes the memoir. As "Meredith listens through the screen with head bowed like a confessor," Karr delivers her discovered truth: "There's no place like home" (*Cherry* 273). Predictably, Meredith problematizes the originality of Karr's "ultimate sentence" ("You do remember it's from *Wizard of Oz*? she asks"), but offers her friend something much more poignant in return: "You're your Same Self" (276). Karr recognizes the truth in her friend's observation, "Like I'm chocolate through to the center...Same Self" (276). She concludes, "That oddball catchphrase will serve as a touchstone in years to come, an instant you'll return to after traveling the far roads. Like everything else, Meredith thought it up. You were there solely for embellishment and witness. You were there to watch" (276). In this compelling scene, Meredith and Karr literally call Mary's identity into being, as a collaborative creation of self—a self that is simultaneously the same and different than her best friend. Karr's desire for recognition is met in Meredith, and their relationship exemplifies intersubjectivity as it works to shape individuals in response to others. The "you" in this passage could be read in another way, again an example of intersubjectivity, as a relationship between the narrating "I" and narrated "I"—between Karr and Mary—as a version of self available only through the act of autobiography. Both selves, as versions of "you," reveal the rich complexities of subjectivity in life writing. Simultaneously revealing both self and other, the identities that we create on the page reflect a collaborative production of co-creation.

## The Relationship between Narrators, Characters, and Readers

If female desire works the way both Dederer and Karr seem to suggest—less a result of complicated sexual acts than a nuanced exploration of the complicated thoughts surrounding them—then perhaps that is why the desire portrayed in *Cherry* feels real or “true.” Not only does it move readers to believe in its authenticity, it moves readers to *feel* the same desire. We recognize in Karr’s experiences our own; thus, our relationships to the characters in *Cherry*, including our relationship to Mary as the narrated “I,” are born of and fueled by our own desires.

A return to Ward’s concept of poetic belief as it extends to the relationship between reader, narrator, and characters is fruitful here. Ward argues that our projection toward others, inherent in the process of reading, is a manifestation of both desire and belief as we create the other person (*Unbelievable* 141). Although Ward’s focus is on the act of reading fiction and on our relationship to fictional “characters,” I find it especially productive when considering autobiographical subjects, specifically, how—as rhetorical constructions—they challenge and resist traditional categorizations. Ward notes three places where the encounters between a “real” person and fictional character diverge, arguing that such divergences reveal belief, desire, and the imagination (144). I argue that Ward’s distinctions can be applied, also, to the narrating “I” and narrated “I” as “characters” we meet on the page. First, when we encounter an unknown person, unlike a narrator or character, the relation established is reciprocal. The person I meet can make judgments about me based on my reception and response, as I her. A narrator/character cannot reciprocate, regardless of my participation. Further, in a reciprocal relationship with another person there is the possibility of deception and manipulation.

Secondly, Ward argues that projection and anticipation work differently in these relationships; “for what is anticipated with a character is a narrative—a future development

related to the direction taken by the plot” (*Unbelievable* 145). While our imagination can create various alternative narratives for people we meet, narrators/characters are already “in the narrative” and bound as such: “...the curiosity to know that informs our reception and response cannot be divorced from an expectation that something is certain to follow” (145). A final difference is felt in our reception and response to narrators/characters. Ward explains that what we are seeking in characters is a means to fill a “fundamental absence, a more profound and affective invisibility...that calls for a deeper commitment to an engagement in the process of believing” (145). With the stranger in front of us we are not asking whether or not she exists. On the other hand, a relationship with a narrated “I” or autobiographical character requires something different from us: we are “co-creating, we are making them present within us, not before us; and whilst believing in them, we know they are not there at all” (145). Poetic faith, then, engages our ability to *make present*—our interest is a testament to the intensity of our “willing suspension of disbelief” (145).

How much more complicated poetic faith and belief become when considering the “characters” in autobiography, people who *really do exist*. For example, I have met Mary Karr twice. A quick Internet search can reveal pictures of her sister Lecia, her son Dev, her ex-husband Warren, and her ex-lover, David Foster Wallace. These people have lived and live in the “real world” as well as in readers’ imaginations, shifting the way we think about our relationships to narrators/characters in autobiography and thus our relationship to the “truth” in these narratives. In this way, our desire for recognition threatens to be satisfied when we imagine that the person who historically exists or exists on Facebook is the same as the narrator as a “character” when we conflate the autobiographical “I” with the historical “I.”

Life writing scholar Leah Anderst explores the affective possibilities afforded in the relationships between readers of autobiography and the characters they encounter. Anderst's focus is on empathy, and she argues that while most scholarship considers the empathetic effects of reading fiction, the possibilities of "feeling with" autobiographical characters might be even more profound (272). Because autobiography is rooted in the "real world," readers read it differently from other kinds of texts, and this difference, Eakin argues, "is what makes autobiography matter to autobiographers and their readers" (*Touching* 30). In recognizing the power of Mary's desire, we "feel with" her along with the other adolescent characters in the memoir. What does Mary want? Or Meredith? Doonie? John Cleary? As we discover the answers to these questions, our own desires are (re)awakened, as our memories incite affective responses. "Interactive remembering," Miller explains, "where the screen prompts the construction of memory itself," is one of the richest possibilities autobiography can offer (*But Enough* 7). She explains, "When you read a memoir that has already given a life something like yours a shape...it gets harder to hold onto your sense of self-possession; the boundaries of your past self may start to blur around the edges" (7). Rather than a loss, however, this prospect is a gain: "you can seize what it is that escapes the grid" (7). Perhaps what we desire when we read memoir is to simply *remember* what time constantly threatens to erase.

The power of Karr's narrative to produce desire in her readers isn't based solely on her ability to accurately capture female desire. Her poetic language, too, imbues her experiences with lush possibilities. Shulman describes Karr as "a poet, high on language" and goes so far to suggest that the true "hero" of *Cherry* is "Karr's slangy, muscular, free-wheeling prose: the English language goes wild with arousal and submits to her will as Karr takes any liberties she

likes...never before has a kiss been described so fully,” as is evidenced by this scene describing her first kisses with Phil (19):

You often go meandering inside his breath until you feel yourself vanish into the plush warmth of his tongue, each movement of which is a word or piece of punctuation in a conversation so intricate, all your diligence is required to keep up. He runs his tongue along your lower lip like a question, and you return the inquiry. Then in unison your tongues meet all soft on that same territory and glide together the small distance. Touch and withdraw, taste and test. All the light of your being seems to pour into him at such moments, and his into you. His tongue barely spirits along a closed eyelid leaving a light stripe of cool damp. For the whirled cartilage of your ear, it’s cyclonic. Or he can hypnotize you by lightly tracing a finger along your jawline as if he were drawing you into being...”

(*Cherry* 167)

The comparison of the kiss to a conversation, highlighted by the punctuation of touch, embodies the highly metaphoric prose characterizing all of Karr’s writing. This passage also marks the moment when desire joins together the body and language, locating the origin of both in the mouth. Mary is “drawn into being” not only by Phil’s kiss, but the discourse that the touch embodies.<sup>15</sup>

Because desire, like belief, is an expectant rather than filled emotion, Bloch reminds us its “drive-intention is long-term” motivated by the anticipation and projection of something beyond. To further underscore her own early desire, and to evoke it in her readers, Karr employs

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<sup>15</sup> Thank you to Dr. Brian Rejack, Illinois State University, for this connection.

a deliberately slow pace to some of her most erotic passages. In the passage quoted at length above, she literally stops time in order to let the reader linger in the moment and savor the details. The narrator, herself, feels no consequence of time, no urgency to move into the future and the increased sexual involvement it will inevitably demand. Karr explains, “Time will never again stretch to the silky lengths it reaches that spring when you and Phil first sit entangled in his car...Because the nights don’t have sex as an end...the kisses are themselves an end. And in that, they become endless” (*Cherry* 167). This, perhaps, is the power of Karr’s passages themselves—like the 15- year-old narrator, they are in no hurry to progress; they invite the reader to imagine, like the writer, future possibilities. Karr remembers:

It’s either spectacularly sad or spectacularly innocent that while your solar plexus churns and all your body rushes with desire, you don’t long to unzip Phil’s pants or otherwise dismantle his clothing, nor do you even get so far in fantasy to actually envision sex, the brute carnality and mechanics of which would ruin all the verdant, soft-focus power of his kisses...(168)

While Karr recognizes that Phil’s “dream of sexual paradiso seems to differ quite strongly at eighteen from [hers] at fifteen,” she neither fulfills his expectations quickly or her reader’s, at least until her older sister Lecia tells her to “Get your skinny ass up and double-dog fuck him...” (169). When Karr finally decides to take her physical relationship to the next level, she only allocates six lines to the actual act, remembering now that his “kisses seem to come from some boy you never knew. He’s trying to be slow...but this urgency emanates from him. In your eagerness to please, you stand aside for his passion, let it dwarf your small wants till you feel somewhat beside the point” (182). And after: “The myth of absolute like-mindedness, cathexis, soul-deep entwinement that you cooked up inside those infinite kisses has been banished. You

could have wallowed forever in the silky infinity of those nights, whereas for him, those wordless conversations were doubtless arrows aimed at this night, precursors to it, erotic cheese and crackers” (183). Like Dederer suggests in her own complication of female desire, what is desired in Karr’s sexual experience is less about fulfillment than the anticipation of it.

### **Sharing Desire between Writer and Readers**

Finally, I turn my examination to autobiographical writers and readers and the complicated relationship between the autobiographical “I” and “you.” What do autobiographers desire? What does Mary Karr, the writer, want? And what do readers want when they open the pages of any memoir? How does the relationship between writer and reader fulfill our own desires? Karr’s *Cherry*, like most autobiographical projects, reveals a multitude of answers to these questions. Judith Butler’s work on self-narrative provides a useful starting point as she reimagines the boundaries between the individual and the social. While a brief mention of Butler’s conceptualization of self-accounts as Other-shaping narratives appeared in the previous chapter, I expand her ideas a bit further here to explain her argument of the impossibility of a distinct “I” and “you” in autobiography. Building on the work of feminist philosopher Adriana Cavarero, Butler argues, “I am not...an interior subject, closed upon myself, solipsistic, posing questions of myself alone. I exist in an important sense for you, and by virtue of you” (*Giving* 32). Butler explains, “...one can tell autobiography only to an other, and one can reference an ‘I’ only in relation to a ‘you’: without the ‘you,’ my own story becomes impossible” (32). According to Butler, Cavarero’s argument offers two salient points: first, we are fundamentally social, dependent on the other, and “cannot exist without addressing the other and without being addressed by the other” (33). The second point, however, limits the first. “No matter how much we each desire recognition and require it, we are not therefore the same as the other” (33). The

tension between these points—the limits and possibilities of intersubjectivity—certainly impacts the relationships forged by the stories we tell about ourselves. Our desire to know and be known, to recognize and be recognized, seduces both readers and writers of autobiography, even as we are aware of the impossibility of either.

In *Cherry*, Karr employs a number of rhetorical and stylistic choices that muddy the boundaries between the writer and reader, a move that, like Butler argues, complicates the “I” and “you” of autobiography. I previously analyzed Karr’s use of dialogue as a tool to not only develop but also to differentiate characters, specifically the adolescent Mary from her friend Meredith. The dialogue in *Cherry* can also be seen as an attempt to dissolve the borders between the characters, specifically considering Karr’s formatting choices. Unlike in *The Liars’ Club*, much of the dialogue in *Cherry* appears without quotation marks, even visually suggesting a blurring between characters and their words. For example, when Karr first meets her drug buddy, Doonie, at his sister’s sleepover, the interaction looks like this:

...You sit upright to watch Doonie in his pajama bottoms using his elbows  
to drag his skinny body forward to your side of the bed.

...He says in a whisper almost wholly starved of air, Wanna see  
something?

Like what? You say curious.

At which point, Elizabeth bolts up like some marionette jerked from full  
slumber into straight-backed fury...She says, Get out of here you little  
pervert. (191)

Freeing the dialogue from quotation marks not only softens the borders between the speaker and words but also shifts the way we think about the historical accuracy of the conversation, further



complicating the “truth” of the experience. Although quotation marks aren’t universally indicative of an assumed correlation between accuracy and language, Karr pushes against generic expectations she when removes them. In this move, Karr distinguishes the structure of *Cherry* from *The Liars’ Club*; she explains, “...by not using quotation marks in later books, I seek to keep the reader more ‘inside’ my experience—the subjective nature eschews the standards of history, I think” (*The Art* 24).

Karr uses this strategy in the Prologue and Parts Three and Four of *Cherry*, sections that are additionally separated by the use of the second person pronoun “you” as the previous passage shows. This move has been examined by a number of readers who find the switch a bit confusing, particularly in the consideration of the three memoirs as a “whole.” While one critic, Wendy Law-Yone, describes the device as “largely unobtrusive” in Karr’s hands, others such as Shulman find it “awkward,” “disconcerting,” and “annoying” (20). Bradford remarks that “*Cherry* must be the only memoir in the history of the universe that is written about 50% in second person” as “the notion of using ‘you’ when you are clearly writing about ‘I’ is a strange one.” However, Karr explains, “I needed to create a sense of detachment; at the time I didn’t have a self to be inside. Second person gave me a sense of remoteness which is how I felt...” (Bradford). Thus, Bradford argues, the reader, in taking in Karr’s thoughts and experiences through the second person, actually helped the young Karr create herself. Smith and Watson explain that the use of second person complicates the roles of the narrator, by “rerout(ing) the expected address between narrator and reader to an unexpected intimacy of exchange between the narrating “I” and narrated “I” (74). Whether the effect is directed toward the narrator, reader, or both, certainly the use of “you” requires a different level of rhetorical engagement in the text, asking participants to inhabit different positions or roles in the text. In *Cherry*, the use of “you”

calls specifically to the reader, requiring not just recognition of the writer's experience but almost a substitution, as if Karr is placing the reader directly into the narrative, further blurring the boundaries of subjectivity. However, a different reading could suggest that rather than speaking to the reader, Karr, as the narrating "I," is speaking to her teenage self (the narrated "I") as other and *not* the reader at all. This perspective possibly alienates the reader, moving her to the sidelines to simply observe the action in the scene. Perhaps these multiple interpretations contribute to the ambivalent response readers have had to the narrative style of *Cherry*; Karr's second memoir requires them to negotiate different positions, different relationships to the characters, the narrator, and the text.

This narrative technique is particularly significant in the passages where Karr revisits her own adolescent desires inviting the reader, for instance, to relive the innocent kisses of adolescence from a slightly different perspective than most autobiographical narrative rendered in first person. The "I" reading the text becomes the "you" in the story. In this shift from writer to reader, affect—specifically desire—gets transmitted, as Teresa Brennan's theory suggests. Thus, desire (in the writer) *creates* desire (in the reader). This way, as Jennifer Cooke argues in her article on the risks of intimacy in autobiographical writing, texts do not just describe intimacy; they are capable of creating it (6). This process is mutual, Grosz argues, as "desire participates in elements of both need and demand: it re-establishes the specificity and concreteness of the satisfaction of need, while it participates in and demands orientation to the other" (64). The writer not only creates but also desires desire in the reader. Thus, desire is *made present* through the imaginative act of reading, shared in the relationship between writer and reader.

Additionally, Karr's narrative shifts from the first person singular "I" to the plural "we/us" and calls the reader to the text and into an intimate position to experience the moment alongside of Karr, to share in her most personal memories. The passage previously noted on first loves illustrates this strategy: "First loves take us like that. But because they rarely have any consequence, people slight them...Our own features in youth have not yet been sharply carved. So in some way, we don't exist yet" (*Cherry* 44). The move from the personal "I" to the universal "we" assumes readers "feel with" Karr in a similar way. We must *trust* Karr in order to feel a part of her "us." Not only are intimacies complicated between writers and readers of autobiography, so too is the trust that is at the foundation of the relationship. Smith and Watson argue that because persuasion to belief is crucial to the intersubjective exchange between narrator and reader, issues of trust figure prominently into autobiographical narrating (33). Cooke remarks, "There is a choice for the reader: to believe or not believe in the authenticity of the author, the narrator..." (13). Since the relationship depends on the narrator gaining and keeping the reader's trust in the plausibility of the narrated experience and the credibility of the author, the bond between author and reader is complex (Smith and Watson 33-34).

Readers must trust Karr to not only understand their individual experiences but also portray them *authentically*. With these moves, Karr reveals her own desire to be believed by her readers. This belief is possible only because Karr can offer us something that *feels* true. Nancy K. Miller suggests that the very desire that motivates readers and writers to engage in autobiography is the desire to read and be read according to the expectations of autobiography as a "true story" ("Facts" 12). Thus, the desire to be read "truthfully...states a meeting with the symmetrical desire in the other constituted by readers" (12). Miller offers an example from Jean-Jacques Rousseau who when writing his *Confessions* explained, "The reader doesn't need to

know this, but I need to tell him” (12). As readers, we respond to that need either sympathetically or unsympathetically—with belief or without—and in that event, the pact between writer and reader becomes affective (12). In Miller’s part-theoretical/part-autobiographical text *But Enough about Me: Why We Read Other People’s Lives*, she considers how postmodernism has shaped our relationship to truth in memoir, and thus complicated the ways we theorize the “pact” between writer and reader. In explaining the contemporary memoir phenomenon, Miller attributes the genre’s popularity as a reaction to postmodernism: as a “desire for story killed by postmodern fiction; it’s the only literary form that gives access to the truth; ...it’s a desire to assert agency and subjectivity after several decades of insisting loudly on the fragmentation of identity and the death of the author...” (12). Unlike fiction, autobiography promises readers a “truthful” story—an experience we desire even as we recognize its impossibility. Karr is a memoirist, who, unlike many of her contemporaries, embraces rather than resists the complications that inevitably present themselves when constructing a remembered life based on the elusive nature of memory.

According to Miller, the relationship binding self to other has shaped most autobiographical narrative experience beginning with St. Augustine and his mother Monica, whose death ultimately motivates the *Confessions*. And while feminist theory has persuasively linked relational identity to life writing, it has been postmodernism that has suggested that the autobiographical subject almost always requires a reader or “a partner in crime” (*But Enough* 2). Miller argues that the “bonds and desires that attract readers to the contemporary memoir” have everything to do with attachment—a bond created through “identifications” and “disidentifications” (3). The desire for identification is not only what drives readers to the memoir section, but also “the other side of this desire is the author’s wish to be encountered in

this way, found on that particular shelf” (3). Recalling her own memoir reading experiences as a fulfillment of similar desires, Miller illuminates, “Another’s text can give you back your life” (7). Miller’s work reveals what might be the most compelling reason we read autobiography today: *we want to be seen*.

The desire for recognition is one of the primary motivations compelling the reading and writing of autobiography. Drawing upon both Hegelian and Lacanian theories of desire, Butler explains, “the desire for recognition...will be under an obligation to keep itself alive as desire and not to resolve itself. ‘Oh, now I know who you are’: at this moment, I cease to address you or be addressed by you” (*Giving* 43). In Butler’s attempt to revise recognition as an ethical project, she argues that we need to see it “as, in principle, unsatisfiable” (43). Butler asks if our desire to *be*—“to persist in one’s own being”—is fulfilled through the desire to be recognized. Further, if recognition works to capture or arrest desire, then what happens with our desire to persist in our own being? Any ethical theory of recognition, then, requires us to account for these desires, “remembering that desire sets the limits and conditions for the operation of recognition itself” (44). When we read memoir, such as Karr’s *Cherry*, and we recognize ourselves in and through the author’s narrative, we are both *seeing* and *being seen*. When I read the passages that detail Mary’s adolescent longings, I see a younger version of myself, feeling, loving, and desiring in similar ways. I also *see myself being seen*. Karr’s ability to imbue personal intimacies with universal significance allows me to not only remember my own experiences—my own intense crushes, first kisses, heartbreaking betrayals—but also to imagine them as *beyond self*, as part of a larger, collective narrative of adolescence. These moments of recognition, affective attachments of us to others, feel rare and precious in a culture that seems to be ever moving away from such experiences.

And yet, recognition, and the intimacy it promises as imagined in autobiographical relationships, has been problematized within the field, particularly as it operates in confessional accounts. Elizabeth Bruenig warns that autobiographical relationships

...create a particular confidence, a kind of intimacy between speaker and listener that, for all its closeness, is actually a capacious cultural space...The intimacy in confession can be equally disorienting and disaffecting. As in most relationships, the closer one comes, the more danger she is in. We desire to be intimate with one another, but can scarcely ever estimate the price.

Cooke explains, “intimacy is about knowledge: knowledge of an other or others gained through shared experiences...yet to think, write, or represent intimacy involves an encounter with the limits of knowledge too, whether of the self or the other. There are those times when we presume we know someone when in fact we cannot or do not” (3). Our desire to recognize ourselves in the “other” of autobiography, and to experience the intimate relationship such recognition suggests, is impossible to ever completely satisfy. And yet, we cannot resist the possibility. This desire, like other affective responses, moves within autobiographical acts, to create what Cooke terms, “a dangerous and brave form of intimacy between author and reader” (13). The intimacy such a relationship offers, is, like autobiographical acts themselves, infinitely complicated by the contemporary relationship between public and private lives.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Autobiographical narrative offers the illusion that we can imagine “autobiographical” lives as belonging to individuals and individual lives as representative of a community of lives. Life writing, thus, functions personally and publicly in similar and disparate ways. A private individual gains legitimacy through the representation of a life worth living as one worth publishing, reading, and circulating. And yet the very act of this legitimization continues to reinforce the national mythologies that contribute to our ideas of identity and subjectivity (Smith and Watson 5).

Whether the narrative effectively creates a relational space of intimacy, belief, or trust, Butler maintains that the relationships between the “I” and “you” in self-accounts are yoked in their mutual efforts to create something new. Butler explains, “The other represents the prospect that the story might be given back in new form, that fragments might be linked in some way, that some part of opacity might be brought to light” (*Giving* 80). Autobiography scholar James Olney similarly notes the creative potential between the reader and writer, as “the encounter of two lives...produces the biography that is in its nature a work of art or of literature” (“(Auto)biography” 429). Thus, autobiographical writing becomes not only an intimate involvement of self-recognition between writer and reader, but also “co-respondence” in which two or more voices encounter each other, interact (Egan 3). Susanna Egan uses the term “mirror talk” to describe this “encounter between reader and writer of life and of ‘life,’ repeated both outside and inside the text” (*Mirror Talk* 3), as a site of creation. The intersubjectivity inherent in these encounters is crucial to Egan’s theory. Drawing on Benjamin’s definition of intersubjectivity, Egan emphasizes the need for *mutual* recognition—the necessity of recognizing, as well as being recognized, by the other—as “what many theories of the self have missed” (8). Egan’s work, like the work of life writing scholars such as Paul John Eakin and Nancy K. Miller, is motivated by a view of identity as relational, co-created in response to others and implicated by cultural moments (9).

Clearly, Karr holds a similar view of identity, as evidenced throughout *Cherry*. Frequent references to her “self” pepper the narrative: “We tend to overlay grown-up wisdoms across the blanker selves that the young actually proffer” (24); “This mental skitter for the mastery of my public self rose up from nowhere” (41); “I felt another trapdoor in my quivery sense of self fling open” (42); “A few times you try to explain to certain people—that your Old Self had been

falsified, a mere mask tacked over this Real Self..." (135). However, these selves are always only imagined with and through the eyes of another—Phil, Lecia, Meredith, her mother, and Karr as narrating "I." The Mary she remembers and the Mary Karr she becomes are possible only through the intersubjective exchange or "mirror talk" between author and reader. Smith and Watson explain that this process has the potential to disrupt contemporary notions of subjectivity as, "The routing of a self known through its relational others undermines the understanding of life narrative as a bounded story of the unique, individuated narrating subject" (88). No "I" speaks except "as and through an other" (88).

French literary critic Ross Chambers, writing on the power of literature to transform desire, discusses the relationship between reader and writer and concludes, "As an activity of mediation, reading—as the production of a text-reader relation in which each component functions as the other's other—demonstrates that the production of identity is relational and systemic and that, as a consequence of this systematicity, its outcome is change" (249). Change here is "forward-looking," pointing or moving toward a desired end and bound by the temporal limits of narrative. Chambers explains, "such textual production represents life precisely only because narrative protention, personal transformation, or political change, rather than conclusion (as in fiction), is the desired, even necessary end" (10). Before forging relationships, then, the act of autobiography offers the possibility of producing (of *making present*) our very identities.

The *making present* of something new, possible in reading—new identities, new relationships, new ways of being in the world—"bears ontological weight," according to Ward, and cannot be dismissed as "fiction" or a "mode of non-existence." That which is made present "...changes us; impacts upon the cultures in which we live; it transforms values and ideas; it informs behavior" (*Unbelievable* 145). Ward uses Aristotle's understanding of *poiesis* to explain



the rhetorical work involved in the creation of making present. *Poiesis*, related to the verb *poieo* meaning “to produce, perform, execute...generally, be active,” is historically associated with *praxis*, from the Greek *prasso*, meaning to act, manage, do, or accomplish (146). Ward argues that for Aristotle, a distinction is drawn between a specific form of making (*poiesis*) and a more general notion of doing (*praxis*), where *praxis* is associated with ethics, politics, and the formation of character. However, in Ward’s conceptualization of the term, he doesn’t isolate aesthetic production from ethical activity. Neither, Ward argues, can *poiesis* be reduced to *techne*, as it doesn’t simply reproduce, “but draws into visibility that which is invisible and in this way creates anew” (146). Perhaps the most relevant usage of the word of interest to the study of autobiography comes from the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben who relates the creative act of *poiesis* with *aletheia* or “truth-making”—“the truth that emerges only in and through the act of creation” (146).

In “On the Soul,” Aristotle argues that *poiesis* is deeply connected to modes of affectivity and that neither desire, thought, nor imagination can be separated from either sensation or “the soul.” Aristotle uses the word *orexis* as a general word for longing involving three forms of desires: “passion (*thumia*), wishing (*boulesis*), and wanting (*epithumia*).” For Aristotle, desire is not a source but a condition, as Ward explains: “If the condition of the soul is both the origin of motion and always in motion, this motion is related to the soul’s desiring. What is desired is actuality, the complete realization of their form in the body” (*Christ* 312). According to Ward, what is actualized is *poiesis*, as what “desire desires, what believing believes and imagination imagines” (*Unbelievable* 147). The selves that are created when we read and write autobiography are *poietic*, possible only through the making present of something new, which Agamben argues is the only truth. Truth, in this conceptualization, is possible only through belief; Ward explains,

“With a character we are co-creating, we are making them present within us, not before us; and whilst believing in them, we know they are not there at all” (145). When that “character” extends beyond the page, when we extend *poiesis* to creating new selves, the concept of autobiographical “truth” takes on new significance and meaning. It is the formation of Karr’s “Same Self—her *true* self—that closes *Cherry*, representing her greatest epiphany and the awareness that will carry her into adulthood and her next memoir. This truth of self reveals itself only through *poiesis*, the result of a co-created, intersubjective practice between narrator, character, and reader.

Wayne Booth’s work on the ethics involved in truth telling between writer and reader gives us yet another perspective of the creative potential (and limitations) of this bond. Booth portrays this relationship as a “friendship,” and stories as gifts or friendship “offerings,” arguing that “all narratives offer with their titles and opening sentences a cry of invitation, ‘Join me...’” (*The Company* 174).<sup>17</sup> However, no matter how many “gifts” the narrator offers with a story,

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<sup>17</sup> Marilee Misfud in “On Rhetoric and Gift/Giving” offers a compelling look at the rhetorical possibilities and risks associated with the cultural practice of gift-giving, ultimately imagining rhetoric itself as gift/giving. Misfud argues that a return to the archaic Homeric gift economy, drawing broadly on the anthropological theory of Georges Bataille and Marcel Mauss, might provide resistance to the classical polis economy of gift-giving that separates and commodifies both giver and object. Of particular interest to the idea of autobiographical stories as gifts are the inextricable relations between the public and private/person and things in the Homeric gift economy (93). In archaic gift cultures, no absolute boundaries exist between public/private or between persons/things. “Things are an extension of persons...because the thing itself possesses a soul. To make a gift of something to someone is to make a present of some part of oneself” (93). This model contrasts with the polis economy (reflected in modern capitalism) where exchange meets the needs of the nation-state, “where things and people...are related through distant, abstract mechanisms of power, rather than personal relations...” (98). Engaging the work of Jacques Derrida and Hélène Cixous, Misfud suggests us that while “The archaic Homeric gift economy is not our *savoir*,” that exploring it in contrast to the classical polis economy, not only creates an experience of alterity, but also recognizes the “radical otherness that the polis is to the gift” (101). Thank you to Dr. Susan Kim, Illinois State University, for this connection.

unless the listener engages in the story *as* story, “and that means engaging with the author in a patterning of desire for this kind of gift,” the offer will not be recognized (201). In this way, the didacticism present in the friendship is evident; stories will only work as stories, “as something that leads-from-here-to-there” if they make the reader want more of the friendship, to “move forward...from here to there, from beginning to ending, and then, sometimes, back again” (201). Booth explains that the most powerful effect, then, on the reader’s ethos is the attentiveness to desire, fear, and expectation, leading her toward something further, toward possible future fulfillment. Thus, as a reader, I am made to want more of what I don’t have enough of; “so long as I continue to read, my whole being is concentrated on ‘how it will all turn out,’ or on ‘what it will turn out to be’” (201). The relationship between writer and reader is disciplined by the affective consequences of desire as a positive expectant emotion. It is pointed toward the future, the possibilities of which could be the greatest of friendship offerings. According to Booth, stories are *active rhetoric*—engaged in “the total patterning of the reader’s desires and satisfactions” (206).

Readers of Karr’s memoirs have been offered many “story gifts,” and with them, the invitation into a relationship with the author that is imaginative, provocative, complicated, rewarding—but, above all, *constructed*. This relationship, like most between the writers and readers of autobiography, is motivated and structured by a myriad of individual and shared desires. In *Cherry*, Karr portrays not only a candid and erotic description of her awakening sexuality, but also the development of her very self as a result of her own powerful desires. The teenaged Mary simultaneously yearns to belong and to escape—to love and be loved—and through her story, these desires resonate with her readers, inviting them to a shared affective experience. Just as Karr needs John Cleary, Phil, Doonie, Lecia, Meredith, and the entire cast of

family and friends that appear in the narrative to lead her to the self-realization evident at the end of the text, she needs her readers to call this self into being. It is this possibility that she offers her readers—a role that extends beyond casual observer to co-participant—that makes her story feel true. Blurring the boundaries between “flesh and blood” author and narrator, and between writer and reader, Karr’s writing provokes readers’ desire by calling on their imagination—on their *beliefs*—to facilitate her own self-discovery. In turn, the recognition (and misrecognition) inherent in this relationship can produce discoveries in the reader, by *making present* what has previously been invisible. Through this creative act of *poiesis* as “truth-making,” we can realize what Agamben described as the truth that emerges only in and through the act of creation” (*Unbelievable* 146).

*Poiesis*, defined as such, presents us with fresh ways to think about autobiographical truth, as a co-created product of the writer/reader relationship. In *The Art of Memoir*, Karr describes the job of the memoirist as discovering “The Story” and a voice “exactly suited to telling that tale in the truest, most beautiful way” (xxii). By “true,” she means without trying to pass off fabricated events to the reader, and by “beautiful” she means “for the reader” (xxii). The reward for writing that is both true and beautiful—“a memoir (that) feels so intimate—believable, real” is a story to which readers are “lured back time and again” (xxiii). However, Karr recognizes no matter how many intellectual pleasures a memoir offers readers, it is ultimately the emotional connection to the narrator that resonates the strongest. She writes, “A good writer can conjure a landscape and its people to live inside you, and the best writers make you feel they’ve disclosed their soft underbellies. Seeing someone naked thrills us a little” (xxiii). Perhaps it is the thrill of such revelation, such *nakedness*, that calls us from our own lives and into the stories of others. Regardless of our own desires, what creative potential is realized

through the act of autobiography relies, to an extent, on the relationship between its writers and readers. Sarah Smarsh's article "Believe It" powerfully captures the role of both: "In matters of truth, much has been said of the memoirist's responsibility in wielding accuracy; much less has been said of the reader's responsibility in wielding belief." Like Booth, Smarsh characterizes stories as "offerings," an exchange between writer and reader that says as much about the receiver as the giver. Belief, for Smarsh, is a "form of reverence; disbelief, a form of rejection...whether we stick out our tongues to deny or savor another person's claims, the revelation is about ourselves." What lies beyond our critical ability to judge a story, then, is something *transcendent*, bound to our own ability to receive it.

Of the shared experience of remembering—of identification and disidentification—Miller writes, "You follow the threads that take you back, even if then there was no story, just the loose threads you see now woven into a readable fabric, material for another story: your own" (*But Enough* 10). My own story has been forever altered by Mary Karr's. Most obviously, this dissertation reflects the ways in which her stories have transformed my own thinking, have set me down specific paths of inquiry, have shaped the past two years of my life. As such, this project is a revelation of my own desires, realized through the processes of reading and writing. While my primary academic concern centers on the rhetorics of belief, I find that study impossible, or at the very least hollow, without a consideration of *stories*, specifically those that attempt to illuminate the "truths" of our lives. Of all the autobiographies available, I chose Karr's memoirs specifically because of the ways they resonate in my own life—both academically and personally—the ways in which her stories simultaneously provoke and fulfill my own desires. Why do I believe Mary Karr? What makes her stories "true"? The answers to these questions reveal as much about me as Mary Karr, and in this way, resist the kinds of conclusions this

dissertation attempts to achieve. Karr's critical and commercial success as a memoirist suggests that her work speaks to her readers in profound ways, serving as testament to the unique relationship between writer and reader that her stories foster.

## CHAPTER V

### READING, WRITING, TEACHING MEMOIR:

#### TOWARD A RADICAL PEDAGOGY OF PASSION

*Grief, hatred, bitterness, anger, rage, terror, and apathy as well as emotions of self-assessment such as pride, guilt, and shame—these form the core of the hidden curriculum for the vast majority of people living and learning in a highly stratified capitalist society. This curriculum holds most of us so deeply and intimately and yet differently within its logic that our affective lives are largely immune to the legislative efforts of social critique and to the legislative gains of progressive social movements.*

—Lynn Worsham

*You can't really change the heart without telling a story.*

—Martha Nussbaum

In 2015, after thirty years of teaching and theorizing the craft, Mary Karr published her own text on writing autobiography. *The Art of Memoir*, described as “chaotic,” “lively,” and “thought-provoking” (Maslin; Baker), details Karr’s advice for would-be memoirists, drawing heavily on examples from her favorite autobiographies and vignettes from her own experiences. According to Karr, the book began with the syllabus from her course at Syracuse University and ultimately reflects her belief that memoir is “an art, a made thing,” a democratic telling available to anyone who has lived (Kephart). In this pedagogical move, Karr shifts between the roles of writer to that of reader/critic/teacher, requiring her (and us) to think about autobiography from many positions.

In this final chapter, I examine Karr’s newest text, *The Art of Memoir*—a “how-to” book for people interested in writing memoir—for further answers to my primary question: *What makes Mary Karr believable?* To accomplish this goal, I argue that our pedagogies are inextricably bound to our beliefs, and, as such, deeply and affectively connected to who we are, not only as writers but also as teachers of memoir. I contend that what Karr teaches us about

writing memoir is ultimately about how to be believed; by “believed,” I mean extending to readers a narrative that is *truthful*, even as it resists or revises contemporary “truths” that are currently celebrated in our culture. Additionally, I look to Lynn Worsham’s work on the pedagogy of emotion to understand how we have been schooled to *feel* in very specific ways, ways that preserve rather than resist the dominant culture. Finally, I turn to memoir, as Karr imagines it and teaches it to us as a pedagogical tool for possibility and change, both individually and socially.

### **Pedagogy and Belief**

A brief survey of trends in education scholarship, particularly in the past fifteen years, reveals a growing interest in the connection between belief, particularly “teacher beliefs,” and pedagogy. Scholars from many different perspectives within the field, from teaching preparation to educational psychology, have concentrated on the complicated connections between beliefs—not only about education but also about selves, others, and worlds—and classroom practices.<sup>18</sup> However, just as the concept of belief escapes the boundaries of a simple definition, so, it seems, do its effects on our pedagogy. According to Vicki Snider and Rebecca Roehl, the complex relationship between beliefs, which influences the way knowledge is viewed, and knowledge, which influences beliefs, “makes the study of teacher beliefs messy” (873). While education scholars may disagree on what exactly belief is or how it works, most agree, “Teacher beliefs

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<sup>18</sup> Lortie, Borg, Calderhead, Pajares, Snider, Roehl, Khader are some theorists that have informed this chapter, although their work focuses on primary and secondary teachers. While less scholarship exists on teacher beliefs in higher education, Maria Northcote’s article, “Educational Beliefs of Higher Education Teachers and Students: Implications for Teacher Education” provides a useful overview and review of literature (although focused on the implications of belief for teacher preparation programs).



influence classroom practice, expectations for success, and even public policy” (873). For this reason, belief is a topic that continues to be relevant to contemporary pedagogical theories. Of particular significance to classroom practices is the assumption that beliefs dispose or guide people’s thinking and action as well as the correlation between belief and our value commitments (Borg 186). This correlation recognizes an evaluative aspect to the concept and is not surprising as the word itself originates from the Germanic *galaub* meaning “to love” (186). In other words, we believe what we love (and love what we believe). In this perspective, our pedagogies—as belief practices—reflect what we value or love.

The recent attention to belief and its role in pedagogy grows increasingly critical as researchers have discovered a staggering lack of disciplinary consensus about best practices based on objective evidence. Instead, D.C. Lortie argues, teachers rely on intuition and practical knowledge acquired from experience rather than empirically based principles and practices learned through education and training to shape their pedagogical beliefs. Further, contextual factors, such as the heterogeneity of students, teachers, schools, and families, create complexities that make it challenging to establish empirically based principles of teaching and learning that can accommodate dynamic and idiosyncratic classroom scenarios (Snider and Roehl 873). This lack of consensus, then, elevates the importance of teacher beliefs in education, particularly as pressure continues from the current political climate and reform initiatives requiring teachers to use “scientifically based” methods (873).

In one of the most telling examples from Snider and Roehl’s recent study of teachers’ beliefs about pedagogy, the researchers examined the effects of the accountability movement in education, particularly in the wake of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 and the Responsiveness to Intervention (RTI) initiatives. The assumption driving both of these initiatives

is the “presumption that increasing academic achievement is the primary function of schools, and the expectation that all children can achieve basic academic skills” (Snider and Roehl 876). However, a recent study revealed that only 53% of teachers were “somewhat confident” that “most of [their] students will learn the skills and knowledge they were supposed to by the end of the year” and 42% said that “the effort students make in the classroom is mainly determined by the motivation students bring” rather than by the actions of the teachers (Farkas, Johnson, and Duffett). This discrepancy—between “evidence” and practice, between policymakers’ and practitioners’ expectations—reveals a sharp disconnect between what teachers “know” and what they believe to be true. If teachers are making pedagogical choices based on what they believe versus what empirical evidence suggests, then teacher beliefs are of crucial significance to any pedagogical theory.

Of course, our individual pedagogies are smaller, “local,” and contextual versions—*microcosms*—of much larger systems, which reflect broader cultural ideologies that are “educating” us far beyond our classrooms. Lynn Worsham, in her article “Going Postal: Pedagogic Violence and the Schooling of Emotion,” distinguishes between these “two senses of pedagogy”—as practiced in our classrooms and practiced in the world—and argues that the two cannot be isolated despite our greatest intentions. What Worsham refers to as “dominant pedagogy” draws primarily on Louis Althusser’s conception of ideological state apparatuses and Michel Foucault’s notion of discipline and consists of “the ruling ideas of the ruling class or group” (221). Pedagogy, in this sense, refers to the power held by dominant discourses to “impose meanings that maintain and reinforce the reigning social, economic, and political arrangements as legitimate when in fact they are entirely arbitrary” (221). Worsham focuses much of her argument on the violence inherent in such systems, and while her observations are

compelling to any discussion of pedagogy, I'm interested specifically in her consideration of the relationship between dominant pedagogy and our individual pedagogical beliefs as well as her concentration on the role of both in "schooling" our emotions.

According to Worsham, dominant pedagogy depends on a social assumption (or "misrecognition") of the "objective truth of pedagogic work"; to ensure its broader success, dominant pedagogy cultivates systems of smaller, "subordinate educational ideologies" that work to hide its real agenda (221). These educational ideologies underpinning the pedagogies that we enact in our classroom—pedagogies that are deliberately and even stubbornly anti-oppressive, oppositional, post-oppositional, feminist, decentered, and often informed in direct opposition to dominant pedagogical imperatives—are, ultimately, conceived within and by these larger systems. Following the theories of Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron, Worsham suggests that these pedagogies "do not (and cannot) recognize the extent to which their authority is based in dominant pedagogy and contributes to its legitimacy" (222). We can never get fully outside or beyond the systems that have written us.

However, the primary imperative of dominant pedagogy, according to Worsham, extends beyond the imposition of a specific framework of meanings, such as the domination of capitalism and its tenets as a cultural and economic logic. Instead, the primary work of this pedagogy is to "organize an emotional world, to inculcate patterns of feeling that support the legitimacy of dominant interests, patterns that are especially appropriate to gender, race, and class locations" (223). To this end, pedagogy not only locates individuals within hierarchies of power relations, but also disciplines or "organizes their affective relations to that location, to their own condition of subordination, and to others in that hierarchical structure" (223). As individuals are bound to the social through "complex and often contradictory affective lives," the

work of this pedagogy remains invisible and misrecognized. Worsham argues that it is this misrecognition that is dominant pedagogy's most violent act; "Primary pedagogic work mystifies emotion as a personal and private matter and conceals the fact that emotions are prevailing forms of social life, that personal life always takes shape in social and cultural terms" (223).

In middle-class American society, Worsham argues, the dominant pedagogy holds emotion in opposition to reason, and has "masked the fact that emotion is...fundamental to the way we organize understanding and experience" (224). Reminiscent of modernist debates, this pedagogy delegitimizes emotion and associates it with the "irrational, the physical, the particular, the private, the feminine, and the nonwhite others" (224). In this move, emotion is bound to negatively valued categories, thus securing the ideological subordination of women and minorities (224). Catherine Lutz suggests this pedagogy teaches us to define and value emotion in contradictory ways: negatively, as in opposition to reason and rationality, and positively, in terms of its "opposition to estrangement and disengagement from the world" (55-59).

Worsham traces the relationship between emotion and contemporary "radical" pedagogies, primarily postmodern and critical pedagogies, ultimately suggesting that while both seek to change the emotional structure of the postmodern subject or to "produce...a democratic citizen who participates fully in public life," emotion "remains undertheorized and mystified in many important respects" (233). Ultimately, both pedagogies still operate within the confines and logic of the dominant. The precise danger of such radical pedagogies, Worsham argues, is in their reimagination of the role of affect in education, one that "...finds the political imperative to reconceive itself as a form of radical politics with goals that are formulated with a sense of utmost urgency" (217). Key to Worsham's critique is the dynamic role of the subject, which she suggests responds and corresponds to changes in the world as a "consequence of the penetration

of capital into ...uncommodified areas—specifically, nature and the unconscious” (229). As a result, this latest development of capitalism “creates an utterly alien and alienated object world in which the subject cannot recognize the results of its own activity in the world and, as a consequence, is unable to recognize the subjectivity of the other” (229). Thus, both critical and postmodern pedagogies, in their attempts to “reclaim education as a terrain of struggle crucial to the reconstruction of a public political culture,” perpetuate a dangerous—and ultimately *violent*—version of selfhood as “revolutionary subject[s] capable of transforming the world” (217).

Worsham offers Jessica Benjamin’s theory of intersubjectivity as a possible alternative or perhaps an essential supplement to radical pedagogy, as a “fundamental revision in our conception of subjectivity and of our affective relationship to the world” (240). Anything less, Worsham argues, would fail the potential of pedagogy in constituting our emotional lives (240). According to Benjamin, the inability to recognize the subjectivity of another is an outcome of our inability to recognize our own (*Like Subjects*). Thus, subjectivity and agency are “denied to the other at the same time they are denied to self” (Worsham 229). Worsham’s critique of dominant pedagogy is deeply informed by Benjamin’s theory, fostering a revised concept of individual identity based on the idea of intersubjectivity and the process of mutual recognition. Finally, Worsham suggests that an intersubjective model offers recent pedagogical discourse an alternative to recent “postmodern” or dominant pedagogies, particularly in their definition of concepts such as agency and subjectivity. Worsham’s criticism is focused on various “radical” pedagogies, a term that has various meanings according to different academic contexts. Following the work of theorists such as Paolo Freire and Henry Giroux, radical pedagogies are invested in the deeply politicized aspects of educational institutions and argue that education can

and should be used as an agent toward social change. Some practitioners use the term “radical pedagogy” to refer to cutting-edge developments in education, the latest theories, methods and practices that promise to fundamentally reinvent the processes of teaching and learning. While Worsham’s analysis of popular radical pedagogies, including postmodern, critical, feminist, and oppositional, is essential in understanding the limitations and vulnerabilities of such approaches, cultural theorist AnaLouise Keating offers an alternative vision of a pedagogy that is *radical*, based on a different understanding of what that word can mean.

Keating, and her work on post-oppositional pedagogy, can further illuminate the potentialities of a radical model based on interconnectivity as a framework for “identity formation, theorizing, social change, and the possibility of planetary citizenship” (back cover). Keating’s recent text *Transformation Now! Toward a Post-Oppositional Politics of Change* explores her belief that radical progressive change—“on individual, collective, and planetary levels”—is desperately needed, and even possible, although not necessarily easy to achieve. Keating suggests alternatives to conventional oppositional thinking and scholarship in the form of “threshold theories,” a title meant to underscore the “nonbinary, liminal, and potentially transformative” nature of such alternatives (10). In Keating’s usage, the term “thresholds” represents “complex interconnections among a variety of sometimes contradictory worlds—points crossed by multiple intersecting possibilities, opportunities, and challenges” (10). As such, threshold theories inspire practitioners to “be bold, to dream big, to affirm the possibility of transformation, to envision radical change” (10). Grounded in interconnectivity, threshold theories are relational, starting with the presumption “that we are intimately, inextricably linked with all human and nonhuman existence” (11). Keating argues for a radical pedagogy, informed by various threshold theories, as a catalyst for transformation.

Both Keating's and Worsham's visions rely on a definition of pedagogy that is intersubjective and interconnected, a perspective that I argue is indeed *radical*, if we consider that word separate from its connection to the postmodern and critical pedagogies that Worsham critiques. *Radical* is an adjective that can mean "very different from the usual or traditional" or "advocating extreme measures for a change" ("Radical"). A pedagogy described as "radical" could also be associated with the informal or slang use of the word that means "excellent or cool." However, the primary definition of *radical* that is lesser known and provides another way of thinking about pedagogy is "of, relating to, or proceeding from a root" ("Radical"). This definition of *radical* refers to something growing from the root of a plant (like a radical tuber) or "from the base of a stem, from a rootlike stem, or from a stem that does not rise above the ground" ("Radical"). In this usage, radical means "basic" or relating to or affecting the basic nature or most important features of something. A pedagogy that is radical, then, is something from which things grow—it is *essential*. This is the kind of pedagogy that relies on the powerful work of not only our emotions but also our beliefs in reimagining our selves and our relationships to others. Like Worsham imagines, this pedagogy demands that emotion play a very different role in our lives; like Keating suggests, this pedagogy navigates the thresholds of this contemporary moment, particularly between self and other, public and private.

The memoir, as theorized and practiced by Mary Karr, imagines a radical alternative to dominant pedagogical discourse. As an expression of beliefs—both individual and cultural—Karr's memoirs distinguish themselves against the "grief, hatred, bitterness, anger, rage, terror, and apathy as well as...pride, guilt, and shame...[that] form the core of the hidden curriculum for the vast majority of people living and learning in a highly stratified capitalist society" (Worsham 216). Thus, what Karr's *The Art of Memoir* offers is not only a how-to manual for

writing compelling stories but also a radical pedagogy of the possibilities of those stories to transform our lives and our world. Karr's beliefs, explored in *The Liars' Club*, *Cherry*, *Lit*, and finally *The Art of Memoir*, subvert dominant pedagogy, particularly in its reinscription of the distinction between reason and emotion (knowledge and belief) and the attachment of affect to specific groups of people. The intersubjectivity her memoirs support and even cultivate—as an affective exchange of belief between reader and writer—resists cultural definitions of “self” and “other.” Her unapologetic devotion to truth challenges our contemporary understanding of the concept. In short, Karr does not subjugate her beliefs. Instead, through her stories, she simultaneously interrogates and celebrates the ways they have defined her life. As she shifts her focus from writing memoir to teaching it, she continues to demonstrate to her readers how our beliefs are inextricably bound to the stories we tell.

### **The Art of Being Believed**

In *The Art of Memoir*, Mary Karr teaches readers what to do in order to be believed. Before I examine her explicit instructions to would-be memoirists, I want to return one more time to Karr's own beliefs. This dissertation has been an exploration of many of Karr's beliefs—about God, language, and identity—that are revealed in her stories. In this final section, I turn to the beliefs that Karr holds about memoir itself, perhaps best captured in this passage:

Out of great suffering come great truths—not just intellectual concepts, but ideas informed by feeling. The word passion comes from the Latin *passio*, which refers to Jesus's suffering on the cross. Anytime you take a stranger's agony into your body, you're changed by it, refined into a vessel better able to give and receive love, which is the sole purpose of being alive. The best memoirs I've ever read deliver such salvation.



In this excerpt, from an article in *O: The Oprah Magazine* in 2015, Karr's description of memoir can be considered radical by any number of readers. Although appearing in a secular context, the article's use of words such as "truths," "Jesus," "cross," "agony," "love," and "salvation," clearly distinguish it from other content. In this telling quotation, Karr firmly binds memoir to emotion, particularly in her use of the words "passion," "suffering," and "love" to describe what is shared in the giving and receiving of our stories. Comparing the reading of memoir to Jesus's death on the cross, Karr suggests that the suffering involved in taking a "stranger's agony into your body" changes us, refines us, and prepares us to "give and receive love"—the "sole purpose of being alive." This image powerfully encapsulates the spirit of Benjamin's theory of intersubjectivity and reflects Worsham's vision of a radical pedagogy that could reimagine the role of emotion in our lives. Whether the reader is moved by the image of Jesus's suffering or by the suggestion of a stranger's agony, the result is the same—we *are changed by it*. In *The Art of Memoir*, Karr builds on these initial ideas as she further develops her beliefs about memoir. While many of these examples certainly reflect her religious beliefs (about God/about language), like the image of Jesus's suffering/stranger's agony, they can be read separate from any specific belief system. In other words, just like in her memoirs, Karr's beliefs resonate with believers and nonbelievers alike. In the second part of this chapter, I examine Karr's beliefs about truth, carnality, and voice in memoir, as an extension of her own beliefs, and as the foundation of a radical pedagogy rooted in embodiment, affect, and intersubjectivity, capable of transforming our lives and the stories we write about them.

Perhaps the belief that resonates loudest throughout her book is related to the crucial, albeit problematic, relationship between truth and memoir. Karr believes that memoirists should attempt to tell the truth, even as she admits the complications involved in such a task. As I've

noted, Karr is an outspoken advocate on the topic and has offered a number of critiques to practitioners who play “fast and loose” with the truth in their stories. Most notably, she calls out James Frey’s infamous imposture in *A Million Little Pieces* and fake Holocaust survivor Benjamin Wilkomirski’s *Fragments*; in fact, *The Art of Memoir* includes a chapter titled “Hucksters, the Deluded, and Big Fat Liars” where she details such intentional scams. However, she seems humbled by the “stiff pronouncements...demanding truth in memoir” she’s made throughout her career and worries that she might sound like “a pious twit” (9). Balancing her mutual concern for writers’ artistic freedom and the readers’ expectations for the genre, Karr seems less interested in “busting” hoaxes and more in explaining how telling the truth helps a reader’s experience. Karr briefly traces the development of our cultural definitions of truth and attributes the recent surge in memoirs’ popularity as a response to those shifts. She explains, “As we’ve lost faith in old authorities, our confidence in objective truth has likewise eroded...while formerly sacred sources of truth like history and statistics have lost ground, the subjective tale has garnered new territory” (16). The truth of memoir, then, isn’t an objective, capital-T truth but the “speaker’s truth alone” (16). As such, the genre is constantly resisting the possibility of a single, objective truth. And yet, Karr argues that while “Truth may have become a foggy, fuzzy nether area...untruth is simple: making up events with the intent to deceive” (11).

For Karr, the truth of a memoir is intimately connected to the writer’s identity—her own relationship to truth. To illustrate this point, Karr returns to the events in her own childhood, defined by the lies that defined it: “‘I am not drunk’ (most always a lie) and ‘Oh, don’t worry; everything’s fine,’ which was true just often enough to mess with my head” (*The Art* 21). Discovering the “truth” became Karr’s obsession and certainly motivated the process of writing *The Liars’ Club*. Karr acknowledges that memory reveals a different kind of truth, the “truth of

memory...not of unbiased history” (11). And yet, memoir writers must access actual lived experience lest “the more profound meanings will remain forever shrouded” (12). Without such an attempt, we are never able to “unearth the more complex truths” (12). The inauthentic memoirist cheats not only her readers but, perhaps more tragically, herself. These writers miss the personal liberation, and the resulting transformation, that can come from the examined life—one of the significant rewards of life writing.

The truth of a memoir responds to a reader’s expectations as well, making a “true” memoir a shared production, or intersubjective experience, between writers and readers. Karr reminds us, “We’re swept up in a tale we want to believe. Millions of perfectly bright readers get drawn in and duped by bullshit stories” (*The Art* 84). This possibility exemplifies the risk of reading memoir. And yet to deny this possibility robs the genre of its “true” potential. While “truth is less set in stone now, more mutable,” Karr warns against denying “even the possibility of truth” (85). She gives an example of a recent sexual harassment investigation on the Syracuse campus where a department chair said, “There’s her version and his version—there is no truth” (85). Karr disagrees. “Someone either assaulted the woman in question, or not. It [is] binary” (85). Our ambivalence or “strange cynicism” about the possibility of truth has led us to accept “all manner of bullshit on the page” (85). In her exploration of the complications of truth in life writing, Karr offers a compelling commentary on how the recent increase in our attention to autobiographical fraud reflects a larger, cultural response to contemporary attitudes about truth.

In order to tell a story in the “truest, most beautiful way,” Karr believes the writer must “craft a voice exactly suited to telling [the] tale” (*The Art* xxii). This belief reflects one of the main goals of *The Art of Memoir*, to help a “wannabe memoirist” discover The Story, “the only one she can tell” (xxii). This belief is so essential to the truth of the story that Karr writes, “Each

great memoir lives or dies based 100 percent on voice”(35). Of the relationship of voice to truth, Karr explains, “...the more memorable the voice, the truer a book sounds, because you never lose sight of the narrator cobbling together his truth—not everybody’s agreed on version” (41). Regardless of whether an authentic voice is either the cause or effect of our definition of a “true” memoir, Karr suggests the two are inextricable. A reflection of the writer’s identity, voice highlights an individual view of the world and thus distinguishes the narrator. In fact, Karr reminds us, “We kind of think the voice *is* the narrator” (36), a phenomenon that troubles the concept of subjectivity in memoir. An authentic voice grows from “a writer’s finding a tractor beam of inner truth...to shine the way,” and while voice is rhetorically constructed, the writer chooses its features because they are a “natural expression of character” (36). To illustrate how the writer’s voice is a tool to “forge a self” or “the gift of self-awareness,” Karr traces notable practitioners, such as Tobias Wolff, Hilary Mantel, and Richard Wright.

To further demonstrate her point, Karr uses the image of a stranger seated next to her on an airplane, candidly telling a story spoken from a “profoundly felt experience...[including] some parcels of radical suffering and joy” (*The Art* 43). She contrasts this narrator with a “chatty, perfectly nice but duller-than-a-rubber-knife human being” whose conversation we avoid by faking sleep. The difference in these two experiences is a result of voice. Karr explains, “speaking from passionately felt events is risky. Emotional stakes make drama, which is a conflict with feeling and danger mysteriously contained in a human body’s small space” (43). Our connection to one another relies on this drama, as, Karr, argues, we are “hardwired in moments of empathy to see ourselves in another” (45). In fact, hearing each other’s stories actually increases our levels of oxytocin, according to Karr, and joins us with each other in community (45). Translating these stories to the page requires a “special verbal device to unpack

all that's hidden in the writer's heart so we can freshly relive it: a voice" (45). Voice is the vehicle from self to other, allowing the writer the chance to "lodge" her own memories inside someone else's head. In some ways, Karr explains, "the narrator comes to exist as a stand-in for the reader" (51). Not only can voice invite the reader into an intersubjective experience with the writer, but it is also capable of negotiating the tricky issue of truth in memoir; "A believable voice notes how the self may or may not be inventing reality, morphing one's separate 'truths'" (49).

Another way that Karr teaches memoir writers how to be believable is through *carnality*, a word she uses to illustrate the "show, don't tell" concept that is central to narrative storytelling. Carnality, according to Karr, is directly linked to sensory details, as "Every memoir should brim over with the physical experiences that once streamed in—the smell of garlicky gumbo, your hand in an animal's fur, the ocean's phosphor lighting up bodies underwater all acid green" (*The Art* 71). Of all the strategies her book highlights, Karr insists that carnality is the most primary and necessary, and also the easiest to master (71). As I briefly mentioned in Chapter Three, carnality is essential to Karr's Catholic beliefs, specifically the relationship between belief and our bodies. In fact, the epigraph for the Karr's chapter titled "Sacred Carnality" is from Anton Chekhov—"My holy of holies is the human body" (71). Carnality means "to make into flesh," and refers to the Christian doctrine of Incarnation, or the belief that Jesus is both fully human and divine—flesh and spirit. Karr uses carnality, or specific details that engage all of our senses, to root belief deep in our bodies. She attributes this belief to her father Pete Karr, who introduced her in early childhood to "the raconteur's need for physical evidence" (71). According to her father, the more specific details the storytelling could wield, the more convincing her tale.

Like her discussion of voice, Karr suggests the real power of carnal writing lies in its

potential to impact the audience. She writes, “Getting sophisticated about carnal writing means selecting sensual data—items, odors, sounds—to recount details based on their psychological effect on a reader” (*The Art* 72). Details, like voice, work to fill in the space between self and other. In this way, they also make writing believable, as “A great detail feels particular in a way that argues for the truth. A reader can take it in” (72). However, while readers tend to “believe” carnal details, Karr admits, “physical details, however convincing, actually prove zip in terms of truth” (75). For example, in a scene where Karr remembers a junior high kissing game, she recounts the smell of her long-time crush’s Juicy Fruit gum, his red T-shirt with a tiny sea horse embroidered on front, the feel of herself inside his curved arms. These details carry us back in time to the experience, asking us to smell, see, taste, and feel the kiss with Mary. Whether or not the boy was chewing Juicy Fruit or Bazooka Joe or Dubble Bubble is irrelevant. Our memories are flawed, but Karr suggests that readers will forgive such mistakes because the feelings carnal writing evokes are truer than the details themselves. When choosing which scenes to feature in a memoir, then, Karr suggests highlighting those that are remembered with sensory detail, as these details offer an “intimate ‘truth’ that helps the reader enter the scene” (80).

Like voice and truth in memoir, Karr teaches us that carnality is ultimately a tool to invite a reader into our individual experience, to revise or actually erase the boundaries between self and other. She writes, “excellent carnal writing fashions...what feels like a breathing, tasting avatar the reader can climb inside, thus wearing the writer’s hands and standing inside her shoes. The reader gets zipped into your skin” (*The Art* 78). This image pushes beyond the typical suggestion to “see through someone else’s eyes” or “walk in someone else’s shoes.” Getting zipped into someone else’s skin requires a different level of intersubjectivity, one that Karr argues is the very potential of memoir. This exchange demands participation from our bodies and

promises to change and refine us (Karr, “People”).

Mary Karr believes that memoir can motivate such transformation—and not only change us but actually *save* us. Thus, the final and most significant belief that I examine involves Karr’s use of the word *passion* to denote the affective possibilities of reading and writing memoir. Like the word “carnal,” passion carries important religious connotations that provide a rich context for Karr’s beliefs. And although there is no chapter in *The Art of Memoir* dedicated to “passion,” nor does Karr ever directly discuss its significance to the craft, I suggest that it is the defining feature of her pedagogy of memoir. In her article “People on Paper,” Karr reminds us of the Latin origin of the word *passion*—“*passio*, which refers to Jesus’s suffering on the cross.” Indeed, before the word came to mean “strong emotion, desire,” passion denoted suffering, originally associated with the suffering of Christ on the cross and later extended to the general suffering of martyrs. In Christianity, the “Passion” refers to the short time between when Jesus made his final entrance into Jerusalem until his crucifixion on Mount Calvary, and thus defines the central event of the Christian doctrine of salvation. Salvation, in Christianity, is possible only because of “atonement,” which refers to the forgiving of sin, particularly original sin, through the death and resurrection of Jesus, thus enabling the reconciliation between God and his creation. While different theories of atonement explain this phenomenon in various ways, the concept itself relies on the intercession of Christ in the salvation process. In other words, Jesus’s suffering makes our salvation possible. The suffering that Jesus endured, according to Christian believers, was not only the physical pain of crucifixion, but also the spiritual pain of embodying the sins of the world. Thus, it is only through this process—of another taking on our suffering—that we are offered salvation. Passion, according to this definition and according to Karr’s usage, reimagines the concept of intersubjectivity and reinscribes the roles of “writer” and “reader.” Comparing

the reader of a memoir to Jesus on the cross is a bold move; the image asks us, as individuals, to take on the agony and suffering of a stranger, to allow it to enter us, to dwell in it, to *feel* it. The result, Karr promises, is transformative, changing us into people who are better able to love and be loved. If the memoir is capable of such potential, it becomes a pedagogical tool with implications far beyond individual experience, far beyond the walls of our classrooms.

Carnality, truth, voice—these are all tools that help our stories reach others. They are strategies that memoir writers, like Mary Karr, use in order to convince others to believe. Belief relies on others, as Graham Ward acknowledges: “belief... is both emotional and relational before it is rational” (*Unbelievable* 55). The reading and writing of memoir, as theorized and practiced by Karr, provokes an interdependent negotiation of subjectivity, a possibility of experience beyond the limits of the individual. Passion, as imagined by Karr, is a shared emotion, possible only through the experience of *feeling* another person’s suffering. Passion, in Karr’s definition, seems to mirror *empathy*, an emotion that, while limited and often misunderstood, holds incredible transformative potential. How can empathy, then, as a defining practice of intersubjectivity, inform pedagogy? If the primary work of pedagogy in our lives is to organize our affective responses, and if the goal of dominant pedagogy is, at the same time, to “mystify” emotion as private, individual, and subjective experience, then emotions like passion and empathy that rely on our ability to recognize another are radical indeed. To understand the possibilities and limits of empathy, a brief look at the concept of empathy is useful, including an examination of its common uses and frequent misuses in contemporary academic discourses.

### **Narrative and Empathy**

When we refer to “empathy,” we are usually expressing a commonality of social feeling or the ability to share the emotional experiences of others, to feel “at one” with their affective



responses (Swanson 127). For some, the concept of empathy extends from an individual relationship between humans and is extended to a compassionate relationship to the larger global community—to an “animate world”—and is based on the continuity between human existence and the fate of the biosphere. This kind of empathy is a driving force behind a number of ethical and political causes including animal rights and environmental activism (127). Whether we are conceptualizing empathy as an individual or global affective response, we are generally reflecting on the ability to not only imagine and reconsider, but to *feel for* what exists beyond the personal and the known. It is beyond the known that the realm of the “trans-individual” exists, where we experience the feeling of being in touch with *something* beyond ourselves. According to Gillian Swanson, empathy is a concept traditionally conceived as “a passage between minds, the mental processes that allow us to imagine the states of others as the basis of a feeling which is neither properly ours, nor empirically theirs, but borne from that connectivity” (128). However, empathy, closely bound to the concept of sympathy, is one that is often misused and misunderstood.

When we confuse or misuse the concept of “empathy” as simply another or more intense version of “sympathy,” we are overlooking an essential difference and potentially cheating ourselves out of the kind of powerful work that the reading and writing of memoir can do in lives. Sympathizing with a character, a writer, or a colleague—*feeling for* or *with* them—is not the same emotional experience as empathizing, or *feeling into* them. Sympathy essentially implies a feeling of recognition of another's suffering while empathy is actually sharing another's suffering, if only briefly. Sometimes, we're left with little choice but to feel sympathetic because we really can't understand the plight or predicament of someone else. It takes imagination, work,

or maybe even a similar experience to reach empathy. The idea of empathy suggests a more active process. It is also less common, especially in academic settings.

Because the concept has a historically ambiguous past, the term is frequently used to mean different phenomena. Diverse and competing interpretations have brought to our attention the varied roles of affect, imagery, and embodiment on the emotion. Thus, the word has been used to define multiple concepts reflecting psychological, ethical, aesthetic, and epistemological interests (Rosan 117). For my purposes here, I am suggesting that the concept, emotion, or phenomenon of empathy presupposes an intersubjective experience that forms the subject's connection to the other and the co-presence of worlds of meaning between self and other. The "intersubjective experience" that Karr models in her book and teaches in *The Art of Memoir* is an experience that can potentially lead us to a more empathetic "way of being" as readers and writers. Perhaps even as *people*.

Here—in the conflation of the roles of "readers," "writers," and "people"—might be where the differences between sympathy and empathy become most important. When we sympathize with others, we are not substituting ourselves for them. We remain in the tidy roles of "reader," "writer," "narrator," and "character," and our emotional response is one of *feeling for* another. When we step outside of these individual roles and into the more collective and shared role of "people," the lines between us become a lot less distinct or even important. Karr's use of the word "passion" to describe the affective experience of memoir highlights the differences between sympathy and empathy. Like Christ's sacrifice on the cross, the suffering required by *feeling into* a "stranger's agony" offers salvation only through substitution. Likewise, the image of "zipping" someone into our skin, asks writers and readers to engage in an active, embodied, emotional experience of wearing someone else's hands and body—a much more

intimate and carnal interpretation of “walking in someone else’s shoes.”

Karr suggests—and I argue *proves*—that memoir is capable of giving us such an experience, even as theorists such as Judith Butler, remind us of the limits of completely “knowing” or recognizing another. Maybe belief works differently. Maybe the empathy generated in and from our stories, the experience of “walking in someone’s shoes” or “zipping someone into our skin,” *does* make it possible to believe in the truth of the other. Belief, as it operates both similarly to and differently from knowledge, gives us a different (not lesser) path into the lives of others. This certainly is what happened to me. From the first time I read Karr’s first memoir, I believed her. Her writing—her idiosyncratic voice, distinguished by her eastern Texas slang and self-deprecating humor, her attention to sensory, carnal details, her probing inquiries into her own identity and experiences—provokes empathetic reactions from her readers. The experience of dwelling in Karr’s stories, of walking in Mary’s shoes, asks us to believe not only in the “truth” of her individual stories, but also, more importantly, in the possibility of those stories to change us.

We have not traditionally been taught how to participate in the kind of intersubjective experience that Karr is describing. Historically, the cultivation of empathy has been generally absent in our educational systems (as microcosms of dominant systems and pedagogies) and specifically absent in the way we have been trained (disciplined) as readers and writers. Almost immediately after the concept of “empathy” had been defined and centrally situated within Western aesthetic theory, it met up against high modernist theory, particularly New Criticism, which taught students to avoid the “affective fallacy” of empathetic experience when reading literature. This approach had a devastating impact on not only the interest but also the ability of students to engage in the kinds of literary interpretation that considers the relationship, mediated

by the text, between readers and writers. The movement, although never completely formalized as such, was a reaction against the idea of “literary appreciation” as being too subjective and emotional. Instead, New Critics considered the text as a self-contained, self-referential, and aesthetic object, separate from—and unaffected by—the interpretation of the reader or intention of the author. New Criticism dominated the literary landscape in our educational system until challenged by theories such as feminism and structuralism in the 1970s. While the formal practice of New Criticism has been mostly absent from the curriculum for decades, its influences linger, unintentional and possibly even unrecognizable, in the pedagogies dominant in our classrooms and in our world. It is in this “forgotten,” formalistic theory, with its prioritization of more “objective” texts in contemporary reading and writing classrooms—that the Common Core standards seem to be finding inspiration and importance. For instance, one of the core standards for writing is to: “establish and maintain a formal style and objective tone while attending to the norms and conventions of the discipline in which they are writing” (“English”). As students are taught not to *value* the “affective” in their approach to reading and writing texts, they are consequently taught not to *practice* it. For pedagogies shaped by affect and enacted through intersubjectivity, this historical baggage—ours and students’—is worth consideration. Because of our collective lack of experience encountering empathy as a pedagogical possibility, we may be unprepared for its transformative effects.

The work of psychologist Peter Rosan can help further illustrate how empathy works in intersubjective exchanges. According to Rosan, people come to understand one another “through their use of a common language and on the basis of their engagements in particular situation and shared traditions” (117). Both language and story are essential for this kind of empathetic awareness. The other’s expressive life begins to resonate with the subject and causes a “turning-

toward” where the subject joins with the other’s expressions toward the discovery of the other’s world (121). According to Rosan, turning-towards may be accomplished perceptually, imaginatively, and/or *narratologically*. For example, if the situation that is causing the other’s suffering is in the subject’s potential field of perception, she can turn directly with the other to the particular experience. Or, if the subject is unable to directly relate to or perceive the experience, she may imagine how the world appears to the other. Rosan argues that an understanding of the other is bound to, or has its origins in, a communicative experience and is dialogic in nature, arising from an interplay of multiple worlds of meaning:

The subject’s private reveries are intertwined with the spectacle of the other’s changing expressions and/or disclosures. In turn, these reveries reciprocally illuminate...the meaning of the other’s expressions, albeit from the subject’s own unique perspective...In this sense, empathy as a form of being with the other leads to an illumination of the other. (131)

Thus, to conceptualize empathy in the context of reading and writing memoir requires us to think about how discourse—language, words, *stories*—works to facilitate the experience.

Narrative theorist Suzanne Keen seems to suggest that the recent interest in the cognitive study of empathy—including the redefinition of the emotion as one that clearly involves both thinking and feeling—might be at least partially responsible for a reimagining of how empathy works in the study of narrative. In the relatively new field known as Cognitive Approaches to Literary Studies, based heavily on the work of Joseph LeDoux and Antonio Damasio, matters of affect are generally considered to “fall under the umbrella” of the term “cognitive” (213). Keen argues that empathy, as a process, involves both cognition and affect; when texts invite readers to feel, they also stimulate readers’ thinking (213). However, these responses—both affective

and cognitive—do not inevitably lead to empathizing, but “fiction does disarm readers of some of the protective layers of cautious reasoning that may inhibit empathy in the real world” (213). Of course this assertion would suggest that a clear distinction exists between a textual world and the “real world” where, as readers and writers, our ideas and experiences can be isolated between the real and the imagined. Rather than relegating experience into the distinct realms of “fiction” or “reality,” Keen might be suggesting that fiction could provide a bridge between the two.

Although Keen’s work on narrative empathy is focused on the study of fiction, it can be productively applied to the reading of nonfiction, particularly memoir. For instance, narrative theorists have identified a number of techniques that perpetuate empathetic experiences, such as the use of first-person narration and the interior representation of characters’ consciousness and emotional states, that life writing shares with fiction. Life narratives are personal reflections but also aesthetic *constructions*. In other words, life stories are ultimately *stories*—not the people they represent. This belief, central to life writing studies, separates lives from texts in a way that makes empathy not only a psychological experience (between subject and other) but also an aesthetic one (between subject and object). If we believe that the constructed text is merely one reflection of a *represented* self and not a representation of an *actual* self, then an empathetic experience becomes much more complex.

In her work on narrative empathy in autobiography, Leah Anderst considers the different affective responses involved in reading fiction and nonfiction. Although some theorists, like Keen, suggest that nonfiction demands “suspicious reading,” requiring readers to engage in continual “reality checks” and ultimately disrupting textual engagement, Anderst believes that nonfiction narratives have as much potential for creating empathetic responses and arousing strong emotions in readers (273). She attributes these possibilities to strategies such as self-

reflexivity, distinct voice, and multiple points of view and offers the memoirs of Doris Lessing (*Under My Skin*) and Alison Bechdel (*Fun Home*) as examples of narratives capable of generating intersubjective experiences, based on empathetic exchanges, between writers and readers. Karr's memoirs resemble those of Lessing's and Bechdel's, which "in their call to intimacy and in their multiple and powerful instances of internal, embodied narrative empathy school their readers" (287). Anderst continues, "They...lead readers down multiple paths toward affective responses, toward empathy, paths already forseen and cleared by the writer's own narrative empathy with herself in the past and with her character-family members" (287). Karr, in her characterization of her childhood (*The Liars' Club*), her adolescence (*Cherry*), and finally adulthood (*Lit*), offers her readers the chance to eavesdrop on a very personal conversation between her present and past selves and, thus, calls them into an intimate and exclusive relationship of shared growth and transformation. Of the difference between the empathetic possibilities in fiction and nonfiction, Karr remarks:

As I turn a novel's pages, a first-person narrator may seduce me, but the fact that it's all made up and not actually lived oddly keeps me from drawing courage outside the book's dream. The deep, mysterious sense of identification with a memoirist who's confessed her past just doesn't translate to a novelist I love, no matter how deliciously written the work. (*The Art* xvii)

However, "identifying" with an autobiographical someone, Karr admits, is naïve, as the writer is ultimately "a peddler of pages who profits from my buying her act" (xvii). Like "the guy at a strip club who thinks the dancers really fancy him," readers must remember the limits of identification, echoing Butler's argument that "no matter how much we...desire recognition and require it, we are not therefore the same as the other" (*Giving* 33).

In “Entitlement and Empathy in Personal Narrative,” Amy Shuman further problematizes the relationship between empathy and narrative with her argument that “empathy appropriates the personal with the goal of greater understanding across experiential differences” (149). Her work focuses on the limits of storytelling, especially when a particular narrative is used beyond the context of the event it represents and when personal stories are used to represent collective experience. She argues that making meaning out of other people’s stories can produce sentimentality rather than empathy, in which an emotional response becomes a substitute for understanding others. Shuman warns us that

...claiming a narrative as a way of understanding events is a political choice that enjoins particular obligations upon tellers and listeners. Empathy is one kind of obligation, sometimes creating a possibility for understanding across differences...sometimes romanticizing tragedy as inspiration, but in any case deeply compromising the relationship between tellers and listeners. (152)

Shuman draws on the work of Adam Zachary Newton who understands empathy as a part of a continuum mediating between “identification or empathy on the one hand, and objective respect at a distance on the other” (55). Finally, she leaves us with the sobering thought that although storytelling offers us the possibility of empathy, and empathy offers the possibility of understanding across space and time, it rarely changes the circumstances of those who suffer (152). Shuman suggests that the biggest challenge to the study of personal experience narrative continues to be to “avoid the conflation of experience and the personal with the authentic and the real and at the same time to understand why this conflation is so compelling” (153). This is a challenge that continues to face readers and writers of memoir.



There are limits to knowing another person; there are boundaries that define the “other.” Empathy without this acknowledgment is impossible. Rosan describes this as “the tentativeness of knowing another person” while being empathetic. In other words, the subject is well aware that any realizations or comprehension of the “other” will never exhaust the full meaning of the other’s experience or selfhood. He calls this a “knowing naïveté,” or an awareness of limits can potentially lead to a discovery of possibilities for the subject (127). Rosan argues that once subjects recognize the limits of empathy, they are freed for an “existential epiphany” or an awareness of the personal significance of the other’s experience for themselves. An existential epiphany, according to Rosan, is signified by movement of the subject toward a possible future with newly discovered meaning. When a subject is deeply moved by and for the other, when she reflexively returns to self, she discovers that she has become *other* through the other, that she has been changed by the other’s differences (127). My reading of Mary Karr, as this dissertation demonstrates, has prompted existential epiphanies in my own life. In many ways, personally and academically, she has zipped me up in her skin. This experience has demanded that I engage with her work not only cognitively, as a compelling object of study, but also affectively. I’m moved by Karr’s memoirs and changed because I’ve read them. From the horror of sexual abuse, to the thrill of a first kiss, the wonder of motherhood, and the agony of addiction—all of Karr’s experiences have extended to me the possibility of *feeling with* another.

### **The Schooling of Empathy**

Empathy is messy, unbound, wild, and complicated just as pedagogies that rely on its effects can be. Empathy, like any emotion, is organic, authentic, and in many ways, utterly out of the control of even the most experienced or well-meaning practitioner. And yet, Karr’s work seems to suggest the reading and writing of memoir at the heart of a pedagogy of

intersubjectivity—possible only through the affective work of empathy—might be worth such risks. In this role, pedagogy becomes a method of not only negotiating the world, but also of reimagining it. What hope can such pedagogy have within educational and social systems that seem, according to Nadine Dolby, to be moving us away from a culture that values, nurtures, and practices empathy?

According to a recent study in *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, empathy is on the decline (Stratman 25), and certain research suggests that while our students continue to isolate themselves with technology—distancing themselves from others through social networking and violent video gaming—their desire and even ability to connect with others continues to decrease. While I am hesitant to engage broad and predictable claims about generational behaviors as a valid reflection of the specific needs facing contemporary classrooms, I offer these findings instead as a commentary on broader cultural shifts and their effects on our individual lives. A 2011 meta-analysis of 72 studies conducted on college-age students from 1972 – 2009 indicates a decline in empathy of 40 percent during that time period (Dolby 62). In her winning entry for the *New York Times Magazine* college essay contest, Amy Baugher highlights the decline of social action among her generational peers by suggesting that the students' fear of deviating from a lockstep path that will (perhaps) lead to a financially secure future, keeps students from engaging in activities that foster empathy (62). Her reflections imply that the declining economic security of the middle class has created a generation that is focused inward on self, rather than outward, toward connections with others.

The researchers of the 2011 study were most concerned not with the general decline of empathy, a phenomenon they contend doesn't necessarily suggest that we have lost the "golden age" of empathy, as American college students have always struggled to see life from other

perspectives, but with the link between empathy and social skills. Critics of this generation of college students argue that our students “compose one of the most self-concerned, competitive, confident and individualistic cohorts in recent history” (Stratman 26). In the profiles for her 2011 book, *Alone Together*, Sherry Turkle discovered that students want to put distance between themselves and others; they prefer texting to talking on the phone. They crave the sterility and disconnection of the screen compared to the “messiness” that comes from interacting with another human being. These are the students, Turkle argues, that are sitting in our classrooms, obsessing over their Facebook profiles and “friends” “while slipping ever further into a solipsistic and hermetically sealed world” (Dolby 64).

Despite the decline in measurable empathy, research on the biology of empathy is thriving. Research from such various fields as neuroscience, primatology, social psychology, and cognitive ethology (the study of animals under natural conditions) is demonstrating that while competition is innate to animals, so is cooperation and empathy. What seems to matter to humans is the culture that surrounds them; if that culture promotes competition, then our brains become wired to anticipate and privilege competition. The same goes with cooperation and empathy. According to this theory, humans are capable of creating a more humane, more empathetic world than the one we currently have (Dolby 62).

This is a world where school and public shootings happen so regularly we can’t even keep track of them. Where wars based on human differences rage across the globe. Where, Gillian Swanson argues, “The perceived failures of social feeling identified in commentary on street crime and riot at one end of the social scale, and financial corruption...at the other are no longer painted into an epic canvas of evil and pathology but one scaled down to petty human failures: greed, arrogance, selfishness” (126). According to Swanson, to fail to act in the

“common interest” is a failure of ordinary emotion; it is a lack of the emotional connectivity through which an individual subjugates personal motivation and self-interest in favor of the public good. “Sociality,” then, is tied to an emotional behavior and occurs not only through a recognition of a “common cause,” or mutually shared purposes or interests, but of being bound to a “commonality of predicament, experience, and affective response” (127). This commonality of feeling is typically referred to as the concept of empathy.

If, as the research suggests, this emotion can be nurtured in a culture, then one very obvious place to start that process is school where students are first learning how to successfully participate in a community of others. In many countries, such as the United States, Canada, Australia, and Britain, students are taught empathy as part of emotional literacy in schools. In 2013, the Roots of Empathy program, established in Canada in 1996, was introduced in England and Wales. Empathy training is also embedded in the common curriculum as part of a form of relationship education and it at the center of nationwide anti-bullying campaigns. These educational initiatives ask students not just to imagine and consider the other, but to *feel* for them. Empathy is being offered as a cure—or maybe an antidote—for violence.

These initiatives seem to be working, or at least to be offering a glimmer of hope to an educational system that is struggling to understand how to meet the needs of the contemporary student. And, schools are trying to address the problems before students arrive at their doors by teaching parents to start incorporating explicit empathy awareness in their parenting practices. It seems our culture is desperately attempting to understand and address our social issues through a pedagogical lens of empathy. However, Worsham argues that in order to understand the relationship between pedagogy and emotion, we have to look much more broadly at how our society, not just our children, have been “schooled” to feel in certain ways. Before we

presume that empathy can be neatly packaged into a curriculum or fostered in a classroom practice, Worsham suggests that we first look at how pedagogy and *violence* have worked together to shape the cultural narrative that we are attempting to disrupt.

Faced with an awareness of an increase in violence in our society, especially the kind of violent acts like school shootings that feel so *random* and even unmotivated, Worsham argues that “our most urgent political and pedagogical task remains the fundamental reeducation of emotion” (216). The kind of education that Worsham is calling for involves “restructur[ing] a mood that characterizes an age” (216). Worsham, drawing on a cognitivist view, argues that emotion can be “educated, reeducated, and mis-educated” according to what the dominant pedagogy has established or determined as desirable. This pedagogy, “in which the subject cannot recognize the results of its own activity in the world and, as a consequence, is unable to recognize the subjectivity of the other” (229), has created a world unable to *empathize*. A pedagogy that relies on intersubjectivity and is firmly rooted in the cognitive process of emotion—both the *thinking* and the *feeling*—is one way to begin to reimagine and redefine the dominant ways we have been schooled to feel. When we read and write our life stories, as Karr does and teaches us to do in *The Art of Memoir*, we *are* resisting, one page at a time.

The memoirs of Mary Karr, as well as her theory of autobiography, exemplify Wesley Kort’s observation that narratives are “webs of belief” (51). Her beliefs about topics such as religion, literature, language, childhood, memory, truth, love, and identity are woven throughout her stories and her advice on how to write them. Each belief is a thread that connects, crosses, dissects, and overlaps others, creating a pattern of intersections and interconnections for readers to discover. Like the root system of a plant, a web can only grow through these rhizomatic connections. A radical, root-like pedagogy relies on the same logic. For anything—an idea, an

emotion, a pedagogy—to be radical, it must return to its fundamental nature to dig down, to dwell at the root-level, at the origin. The very beginning. A pedagogy that is radical has the potential to work at the deepest possible level, before and beneath the current, economic, and *individual* interests and priorities celebrated in the dominant culture. Like the 1920s version of the word “radical,” it is “unconventional.” It is also, like the surfers of the 1970s noticed, “at the limits of control.” As readers, writers, and teachers of life writing, as purveyors of stories, we are in an extraordinary position to interrupt the larger narratives that threaten to isolate us, to keep us from the often messy and self-implicating practice of learning to listen to each other. Of learning how to *feel* as well as how to know. Of becoming “better able to give and receive love,” which Mary Karr reminds us, “is the sole purpose of being alive” (“People”).

## CHAPTER VI

### CONCLUSION

*...It's much more radical, much more daring, and much more dangerous to hope.*  
—Mary Karr

In 2005, Stanley Fish, in his article “One University Under God?”, examines the evolving role of religion in contemporary culture and argues that in a post-9-11 world, it is increasingly impossible to separate faith from public policy or of “keeping the old boundaries in place and of quarantining the religious impulse in the safe houses of the church, the synagogue, and the mosque.” In his compelling argument, Fish addresses the academy with a warning that the usefulness of distinctions long assumed—between reason and faith, evidence and revelation, obedience and inquiry, and truth and belief—has expired. Instead, “the geopolitical events of the past decade and of the past three years especially have re-alerted us to the fact...that hundreds of millions of people in the world do not observe the distinction between the private and the public or between belief and knowledge, and that it is no longer possible for us to regard such persons as quaintly pre-modern or as the needy recipients of our saving...wisdom.” The “persons” Fish is describing are those who are both teaching and learning in higher education, a claim that challenges many of our previously held expectations of religion’s current place in the university, specifically in its tidy designation as an object of historical study. In other words, we have courses that might examine the American Puritans as a fascinating study of an impulse that we’ve moved beyond or study the Bible through various literary and critical lenses. This approach fails to recognize the increasing cultural shifts that are producing students who come to our classrooms “not only...seeking knowledge; they will be seeking guidance and inspiration, and many of them will believe that religion—one religion, many religions, religion in general—

will provide them.” Interestingly, one of the catalysts for Fish’s observations comes from the 2004 presidential election, during which candidates John Kerry and George W. Bush were repeatedly compelled to profess, or “prove,” the validity of their faith.

How much more critical this issue proves, twelve years later, in the wake of the 2016 election! Texts are always rooted in a particular moment in time and space, and this dissertation is no different. Written between 2016-2017, a period that I believe will mark a very pivotal historical moment in our country and will continue to challenge and redefine the role of belief in our lives, this project brings to my attention questions that feel more urgent now than when I began. In Chapter One, I argued that in a culture increasingly described as “post-factual” or “post-truth,” the contested definitions of truth, knowledge, reason, and fact—all of which are intimately related to our beliefs—demand our attention now more than ever. These issues are so prominent in the national imaginary that Oxford Dictionaries named “post-truth” its 2016 Word of the Year, a designation awarded to the single word that captures the “ethos, mood, or preoccupations” of that particular year. Post-truth, an adjective, is defined as: “Relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief” (“Post-truth”). It is no coincidence, then, that 2016, when the use of “post-truth” increased by 2000% from its usage in 2015, simultaneously saw the birth of the term “fake news.” If, as President Barack Obama suggests, we are living in a time when “everything is true and nothing is true,” a rhetorical understanding of belief has never been more vital (Remnick).

In *Unbelievable: Why We Believe and Why We Don’t*, Graham Ward concludes, “We are...living at a time when believing is reasserting its fundamental nature—and analysis of both the believability of a belief and the *making* of a belief is crucial” (186). What makes a belief



believable? To answer this question requires a rhetorical understanding of belief—a rhetoric of belief—that demands a reconsideration not only of the meaning of the concepts “rhetoric” and “belief,” but also a reimagination of their relationship to each other. Rhetoric, like belief, reaches out and beyond, to an audience, to another; belief, too, as it requires an object, extends beyond the boundaries of the individual and toward something or someone else. Both compel a moving forward, in anticipation, and are driven by positive expectant emotions, such as desire and *hope*. Of all the expectant emotions, the most important, “the most authentic emotion of longing and thus of self, always remains in all of this—hope” (Bloch 75). And hope, according to Ward, is “inseparable from belief and longing or desire” (152). Hope, in its projection toward something beyond, “exceeds outside the finitudes of individual intending” and creates possibility. Narrative is a practice that requires hope; as we read and write stories, we move through them with the expectation of something that lies in the future, requiring us to simultaneously anticipate and create—to *believe*. Ward calls this phenomenon “narrative hope,” characterized by an engagement with both text and other that “not only embodies and operates through structures of desire, expectation, and hope, but it also forms, re-forms and transforms our own structures of believing” (155).

This experience extends beyond the individual reader, as Paul Ricoeur recognizes in his examination of how imagination and belief are implicated in social praxis. In his landmark essay “The Imagination in Discourse and Action,” Ricoeur argues that the imagination occupies a central role in both the critique and transformation of the social. Action, according to Ricoeur, is rooted in imaginative possibility, empowering us to “act for and engender alternative belief-possibilities, variations on the conditional mood of ‘I can’” (Ward 151). A thorough understanding of Ricoeur’s theory of imagination is impossible in a few concluding paragraphs;

however, I mention it here as one possibility for future exploration of how to move from “a theory constructed within the sphere of language...to the sphere of practice”—from *text* to *action* (“Imagination” 168). Ricoeur explains, “Without imagination, there is no action...on the level of projects, on the level of motivations, and on the level of the very power to act” (177). The project, defined by Ricoeur, is the “thing to be done by me” or the action (177). It is through the anticipatory imagination of acting that we “try out” different possible courses of action or “play” with possibilities (177). Ricoeur locates this moment where pragmatic “play” intersects narrative “play”—or when the text meets action. He explains, “The function of the project, turned toward the future, and that of the narrative, turned toward the past, here exchange their schemata and their grids, as the project borrows the narrative’s structuring power and the narrative receives the project’s capacity for anticipating” (177). This interaction—between past and future, imagination and practice, narrative and project, text and action—seems to hold, for me, the essence of my argument in the previous chapters. I believe, as I’ve endeavored to illuminate in this dissertation, that text, specifically the stories we tell about our lives, can motivate and inspire real changes in the real world. This possibility lies within the affective power of our beliefs, both secular and sacred, public and private, personal and communal, to move us to new spaces, new considerations of what it means to live in this historical moment.

As I reflect on my analysis of Mary Karr’s memoirs, I cannot help but conclude that a rhetoric of belief is unapologetically *hopeful*, in spite of, or perhaps because of a social and political reality that threatens the opposite. When the value—or, perhaps, even the possibility—of discourse is threatened, when our perception of language itself is rapidly and daily shifting to accommodate every new headline, we need a rhetoric that not only acknowledges belief but leverages it. As I explored in my first chapter, Sharon Crowley locates stories as possibly the

only, or at least the most efficient, means of gaining attention in the contemporary civic landscape (197). The stories Crowley imagines are born of ancient rhetorical tradition; they are narratives rooted in pathos that serve as exemplary tales, both historical and fictional (198). Stories of belief, epitomized by Mary Karr's memoirs, proffer us an experience that not only embodies and operates through our desires and hopes but also "forms, re-forms, and transforms our own structures of believing" (Ward, *Unbelievable* 155). Such narratives reveal their power on at least two levels. Individually, they invite us to reconsider the role of belief in our own lives. Collectively, they hold the potential to reinscribe pervading cultural myths by acknowledging how beliefs help create shared worlds. The last sentence of Karr's *The Art of Memoir* reads: "None of us can ever know the value of our lives or how our separate and silent scribbling may add to the amenity of the world if only by how radically it changes us one and by one" (218). This is the hope—the *possibility*—that stories offer us.

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