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Final Thesis

**Why Memoirs Matter:
A Study of The Relationship Between
Readers, History, and Memoirs**

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Abstract

This paper examines the scope of memoirs through a multidimensional study of American life writing from the early 1700s through 2020 with the arrival of covid-19. By examining the relevant historical presence of memoirs in the United States, I clarify the aptness of the genre in its own right, which has often been contested, and argue for it as a lens through which to discern aspects of the intersection of culture and literature. The primary materials studied include, but are not limited to, the life writing of Benjamin Franklin, Frederick Douglass, Gore Vidal, and Barack Obama. These and more like them are analyzed on both a technical and theoretical level to identify key traits of memoirs that have persisted through history. I use two research methods: (1) a qualitative analysis of specific memoirs and their reception, and (2) a quantitative analysis of memoir sales during three critical moments in contemporary America. I obtained information from books, newspapers, interviews, archives, journals, and statistical databases. This paper challenges the impetus to take memoirs for granted on an academic level, and explores the applicability of the genre, especially as its frequently used: to motivate and unify its readers, as well as to provide an emotional journey. This paper considers the relationship between readers and the genre by studying the expectations placed on memoirs. While the literary landscape of the United States has shifted alongside major technological innovations and cultural progression through the centuries, the contemporary function of memoir can be traced to the early days of American colonialism. By understanding this lineage, one can more easily recognize the value and use of memoirs in times of cultural crises, such as 9/11 and the Covid-19 pandemic.

Introduction

Memoirs have been vastly overlooked in the rigorous study of literature. Indeed, academic inquiry has instead devoted a lot of thought to autofiction, memoir's generic cousin, which is commonly associated with high literary genres such as the Bildungsroman and the New Narrative. In contrast, the memoir is prevalently associated with lower forms of literature, and, beyond a handful of comprehensive studies to provide contextual definitions and histories, memoirs are mentioned mainly as referential material in academic surveys. Establishing a stable definition of the memoir does not seem to be a priority. Even in the contemporary landscape, where it is becoming increasingly impossible to ignore memoirs as they continue to appear with frequency, the study of autofiction has consumed serious scholarship dedicated to the intersections of culture, literature, and life writing.

Yet, memoirs continue to abound. In fact, a study of *The New York Times* nonfiction bestseller list reveals that the publicity surrounding the genre is coherent. The increasing presence of memoirs on professional bookseller lists and in public conversation suggests the need for a more meticulous investigation of the genre, in order to make sense of the nature of contemporary memoir, and attempt to clarify what about the genre compels its vast and dedicated readership. Thus, in this thesis, I seek to partially remedy the gap by studying memoirs as the main topic. I aim to demonstrate that the genre's malleability and truth-centered lens enable writers and sellers of memoirs to foster the readerly expectations that memoirs: motivate and unite in wartime, encourage political action, challenge a limited definition of whose lives we ought to recognize, adapt structurally to be more readable in increasingly digital formats, and lastly, adopt more emotionally stimulating lenses that enact social bonding when human interaction is unachievable, perhaps suggesting a readerly demand for stories at the intersection

of authenticity and vulnerability. I trace the “functional” quality of the memoir presented above from the earliest American manifestations of the genre to the present. In conducting my analysis, I try to establish a definition of memoirs that anchors the role of their utility. Furthermore, I hope to suggest grounds for further examination of the genre, since it is my conviction that memoirs illuminate a great deal at the intersection of culture, literature, and life writing.

Structure of the Thesis

In Chapter One I offer a broad overview of the memoir by presenting its main features. Then, I demonstrate the malleability (adaptability) and truth-centered lens of the genre by exemplifying the ways in which writers of memoirs have borrowed and branched from the novel and auto/biography proper. I then interweave the above overview with an exposé of two contemporary memoir examples that suggest that there is more to memoir than meets the eye. Namely, I demonstrate that readers prefer memoirs to be something *in addition to* truth-centered and that writers and sellers of memoirs are attuned to these expectations. At this point in the thesis, the expectations have not yet been identified.

Chapter Two commences with an exploration of the notion that the American memoir originated from a Protestant culture as well as a non-literary tradition of journals, diaries, letters, bookkeeping, inventories, and catalogs that were vital to the functioning of early American colonization. I then examine the effect that the non-literary, and indeed *functional* origins of the genre had on later canonical memoirs, such as those by Benjamin Franklin and Frederick Douglass. I also explore the intersections of memoirs and early American social and political issues such as slavery and women’s rights. In conducting this examination, I attempt to demonstrate that readerly expectations for American memoirs to be utilitarian stem from the utility of their earliest non-literary ancestors, and thus, the nature of the expectations of the genre

is such that memoirs *function* socially and culturally. Indeed, the Chapter concludes with the idea that memoirs are expected to motivate and unite in wartime, encourage political action, and challenge a limited definition of whose lives we ought to recognize.

In Chapter Three, I analyze the most popular memoirs that circulated during three culturally transformative moments of my choosing in the United States. Namely, this chapter explores the most popular memoirs that came out during 9/11, the release of the Amazon Kindle, and the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic. The memoirs were selected via a thorough study of *The New York Times* nonfiction bestseller list. Knowing that readership would be impacted by these three occasions, my analysis focused on the content of the most popular memoirs in order to determine if they reveal that, like their early American canonical predecessors, contemporary memoirs are expected to be functional, and how. I demonstrate that the memoirs that were the most popular on and around 9/11 indicate that, much like earlier American memoirs such as Benjamin Franklin's, contemporary memoirs are expected to motivate and unite readers in wartime. Secondly, I demonstrate that the memoirs that were the most popular after the release of the Amazon Kindle indicate that memoir authors adapt structurally to be more readable in increasingly digital formats. Finally, I demonstrate that the memoirs that were the most popular during the COVID-19 Pandemic indicate that contemporary memoirs adopt more emotionally stimulating lenses that enact social bonding when human interaction is unachievable, perhaps suggesting a readerly demand for stories at the intersection of authenticity and vulnerability. This last point concludes the chapter and leaves room for more analysis of the emotionally stimulating lens to be conducted in the next chapter.

In Chapter Four, I suggest that contemporary memoirs are increasingly expected to enact social bonding via emotional currency. Indeed, I demonstrate that contemporary memoirs are

expected to fulfill a more emotionally charged role than in their past, which is a contemporary manifestation of their malleability and functionality. Namely, I show that the malleability of the genre is evidenced, contemporarily, by its emotionally centered content and themes. I demonstrate that readers seem to prefer books that offer an emotional journey, which I define as a text whose content and theme are of an extremely emotional nature, and when readers encounter a genre that is truth-centered, such as other non-fiction like self-help and how-to texts, the preference for the combination of an emotionally centered and truth-centered lens becomes extremely evident. Lastly, I suggest that one way to read (understand) the preference for the emotional journey is through a postmodern little narrative lens. This chapter concludes the study by demonstrating that readerly expectations are founded on the combination of a truth-centered lens and a malleability of the genre which functions socially.

1.0 Chapter One Introduction: Memoir's Main Features

The term *memoir* has distinguishable, yet seemingly incompatible senses (Couser 17). Instead of attempting to define the genre in absolute terms, in this chapter, I will facilitate an understanding of the genre through its relationship with autobiography and fiction. In a comparative framework, it becomes clear that memoir, compared to fiction and autobiography, accomplishes different functions of literature writ large. Readers go to the memoir expecting one kind of experience, while they go to autobiography and to fiction for others. The following chapter will analyze memoir features that derive from or are shared with the novel and autobiography, and thus will define the memoir genre as a malleable mechanism that responds with and to history and readers, and indeed sets the foundation for the interpretation of the genre as culturally functional.

1.1 Memoir and Autobiography

Memoir and autobiography are nonfictional genres that are commonly applied interchangeably, and understandably so. In *Memoir: An Introduction* (2012) G. Thomas Couser says, “Sometimes it [memoir] is used to refer to *any* account of the author’s life as if it is synonymous and interchangeable with *autobiography*” (Couser 18). In reality, however, “...*autobiography* and *memoir* can also be used to refer to subtly different kinds of self-life writing’ (18). While the difference is subtle, it does exist. Thus, while memoir and autobiography share the impetus to narrate using first person pronouns, a more precise way to think of memoir is as “a *subgenre* of autobiography, a particular way of writing one’s life” (18).

The particularity of *memoir* perhaps is embedded in the very root of the word itself, which is more difficult to grasp than the word *autobiography*. In Greek, the *auto* prefix of *biography* stems from *autos* which denotes *self*. A linking word that is also common in the English language is *bio*. In its Greek origin, *bio* means *life*. *Graphy*, comes from the noun *graphia*, which is derived from the verb *graphein* that means “to write” or “to express by written characters” in Greek. (Etymology Dictionary). Put together, the *auto* records their *bio* in the form of writing, or, *graphy*. The etymology of the word *memoir*, although perhaps more straightforward, leaves much room for interpretation. The English word *memoir* derives from the French word for *memory* (Etymology Dictionary) (Couser 19). How does the French word for *memory* translate into a subgenre of writing about the self? Whereas *autobiography* tends to focus on the *facts* of one’s life, a *memoir* centers on one’s *memories*. Since memories are inherently fallible, biased, and subject to unconscious retrospective interpretation, memoirs create “the expectation that the narrative may be impressionistic and subjective rather than authoritatively fact-based” (Couser 19).

Contrasted with *memoirs*, *autobiographies* are usually written with as little interference from introspection as possible. An autobiography’s primary concern, then, becomes the structure of time and how this has shaped one’s life from the beginning to the present. Thus, an *autobiography* is a complete history of one’s life from birth until the point of writing. The aim of this type of historicizing is, likely, to record. It is precisely the autobiography's focus on chronological record keeping that defines its belonging to the genre of *biography*. Auto/biographies only differ in as much as there is the prefix *auto* on one word and not the other. While an autobiography is a story of one’s life by oneself, a biography is a story of a person’s life written by someone else. In all other ways, they are indistinguishable in form and scope.

Memoirs, however, differ widely from autobiographies in this sense, because they can appropriate the role of the biographer in so much as memoirs *can* be about other people.¹ One way in which memoir and autobiography are distinct, then, is the fact that “*Memoir* can also be used to refer to a narrative that is primarily about someone *other than* the author” (Couser 18). Combining the fact that memoirs can be about other people “known to, and remembered by, the author” and that memoirs are “based on memory rather than research” opens up a unique field of possibilities to write about the closest relationships one has (Couser 19). Oftentimes, memoirs of other people close to the author are filial. In this vein, there exists a plethora of opportunities available to writers of memoirs, as compared with auto/biography, which may explain one of the reasons for its resurgence as a popular form.

1.2 Memoir and Fiction

Fiction and memoir are not, as they may seem, competitors, but rather, branches of literature that function differently, and consistently share and borrow thematically from one another (Couser 21). In fact, in Western literature, the memoir and the novel matured together and “have enjoyed a symbiotic relationship” for at least 200 years (15). In addition to evolving together, the memoir and the novel also share some technical qualities. Especially contemporary memoirs, which increasingly dabble in the “invented or enhanced material” approach that defines the novel as fiction. The memoir is expected to “depict the lives of real, not imagined, individuals” (15), and while the novel is not expected to perform this function, it does often depict characters who are based on real individuals. In some ways, the memoir and the novel diverge. For instance, the memoir “can be a repository for witnesses’ accounts of historical events in a way that fiction, for

¹ For example, Augusten Burroughs’ *A Wolf at the Table: A Memoir of My Father* (2009), or Christopher Buckley’s *Losing Mum and Pup: A Memoir* (2009).

all of its range and power, cannot” (21). Additionally, the memoir is more democratic, in that it is available to everyone, by nature, who has lived a life and is willing to share stories from it.

The increasing prevalence of memoirs that dabble in the inventiveness approach which defines the novel as fiction has made scholars wonder “whether memoir belongs entirely to nonfiction, or whether fiction might have, to some extent, ‘contaminated’ it” (Di Summa-Knoop). These postulations abound in the form of scholarship concerning autofiction, an increasingly popular subgenre of life writing that will not be the focus of this thesis. However, the trending nature of autofiction as an academic object of inquiry perhaps eclipses the notion that, without morphing into a different genre, memoirs have also increasingly approached their “truth” claims with a new level of inventiveness. Contemporary memoirs have shown a preference for the combination of “summary” *and* “scene”, such as in fiction (Couser 71). To put this in perspective, life writing traditionally deals exclusively with summary, while the interplay between “showing” (scene) and “telling” (summary) is intrinsic to a work of fiction. “Showing” attempts to portray content as it is happening. It is the essence of the inventiveness of novels. “Showing” includes, among other techniques, “direct dialogue and highly detailed scenes” (52). Readers of fiction, in many ways, are required to suspend their disbelief in order to be absorbed by the story, or what is being shown. The novel deals with “scene” more than the memoir does. “Summary”, in a memoir, is used in an attempt to portray content through a thematic lens in order for the reader to extract meaning. Inventive techniques adopted by memoir to “show” the reader a scene calls into question the integrity of the genre, which is expected to be based on the truth. It is difficult to expect the reader of a memoir to suspend their disbelief since a founding principle of the memoir is that it is based on the truth. And yet, it is possible, in ways that will be explored in further chapters, for memoirs, especially contemporary ones, to adopt

novelistic techniques, such as the preference for scene over summary, while also, and most importantly, remaining loyal to their foundation of integrity.

However, memoirs must tread lightly when it comes to inventiveness. Indeed, one major difference between the novel and the memoir is that novels “are relatively free from legal and ethical constraints” (79). Couser says of memoirs that their “uneasy relation between their artfulness and their presumed factuality — sometimes gets their authors into trouble” (15). For memoirs rather than fiction, the scope of trouble seems larger in the contemporary literary landscape. Indeed, fiction created for itself an entire subgenre that mocked the upper echelons of nineteenth and twentieth-century America called the “Novel of Manners.”² Of course, the characters in such texts were overwhelmingly fictionalized, but it did not go unnoticed at the time of publication that certain personalities may have been based in reality. The extent of this kind of trouble usually met its end in court, for a libel suit to reach justice against supposed defamation. Memoirs, however, can see their troubles elevated on one of the country’s, if not the world’s, most-watched talk shows on television.³ The scale of trouble suggests the strength of and reliance on the genre characteristics that readers expect memoirs to adhere to. Breaking away from these expectations means intense public scrutiny and shame.⁴

James Frey had not yet reached celebrity status and was thus a “nobody” before publishing his first book. Presumably due to his fledgling nature in the field of literature

² In *The Novel of Manners in America* (1972) by James Tuttleton, the term is defined as a novel in which “the manners, social customs, folkways, conventions, traditions, and mores of a given social group play a dominant role in the lives of fictional characters, exert control over their thought and behavior, and constitute a determinant upon the actions in which they are engaged, and in which these manners and customs are detailed realistically” (Tuttleton 10).

³ Such was the case for James Frey and his memoir *A Million Little Pieces* (2003) after he was endorsed and subsequently dropped by Oprah on her television show after his text was examined with a more thorough lens and found out to be untruthful. In an effort to make his story “ebb and flow, to have dramatic arcs, to have the tension that all great stories require” Frey included details that were fictive (University of Texas).

⁴ “When Winfrey invited Frey back on her show, she harangued him for lying, saying that she felt ‘duped’ and that Frey had ‘betrayed millions of readers’” (University of Texas).

combined with the publishing industry's notice of the popularity of memoirs, Frey's manuscript was turned down in novel form right at first.⁵ His manuscript was only later accepted in nonfiction form as a memoir. While there are many aspects of Frey's case that could provide a thorough reflection on the relationship memoir has with its genre and expectations, for now, it is worth focusing on the fact that Frey's trouble arose, in part, because he was a newcomer to the world of published literature. This focus stresses a point that Couser makes which again defines memoir in opposition to its sibling genre, the novel. Namely, "unlike most literary or artistic genres, memoir is a particular, highly developed form of a very broad-based human activity: the narration of our real lives" (Couser 26) thus, the "memoir has unique democratic potential" since "it is more available to amateurs than other genres" (26).

Frey arrived at the door of widespread fame because his memoir purported to be the true story of his fight against addiction, including a narration of his stay in a mental hospital. Despite the highly vulnerable subject matter and engaging storytelling, Frey was not allowed on the scene due to merit or readability alone.⁶ If that was the case, he might have been able to push his manuscript forward as a novel due to having a trusting relationship with the industry and an interesting story to tell. Frey was, however, allowed to publish his manuscript as a memoir instead. The sumptuous advance he received implies the publishing company's certainty that the story of a newcomer with an enlightening tale of redemption based in reality would certainly

⁵ In a Vanity Fair article, Evgenia Peretz writes that the publishing industry took notice of the popularity of extraordinary memoirs that purport as fact, and has responded over the years by giving the public exactly that (Peretz par. 11). As for Frey's manuscript being turned down in novel form, Peretz writes that Frey's agent "sent the book out to 18 publishers, and no one wanted it" however, "when told it was a true story, the industry said, Well, let's talk" (Peretz par. 23). Indeed, "[f]rom Frank McCourt's *Angela's Ashes* to Mary Karr's *The Liars' Club*, [...]memoirs had become cash cows for publishing houses, while the sales of novels, especially first novels, had been languishing" (Peretz par. 23).

⁶ Frey's text is dubbed as "the 'War and Peace' of addiction" by author Pay Conroy (Kamp) (Cassery) (Timberg).

strike a nerve with the reader if, and only if, as a memoir.⁷ It is Frey's amateur nature combined with a vulnerable subject that garnered so much lethal attention and infamy for the book. Frey's *A Million Little Pieces* story would surely lack in readability if the plot was anything less than "rife with raw emotion" (Frey).⁸

Some highly read and circulated news sites such as *The New Yorker* and *The Boston Globe* use the following list of adjectives to describe Frey's text: "frenzied", "electrifying", "incredibly bold", "stark", "disturbing", "ripping, gripping" and "lacerating" (Miller par. 8) (Frey) (Barnes & Noble).⁹ The visceral nature of the adjectives invokes intensity. Such positive reviews denoting the intense bodily reaction that reviewers had towards the book are all on account of it being an emotionally intense read. The content representing truth in *A Million Little Pieces* is not lauded on the basis of it being the truth alone. Indeed, truth is a necessary but not sufficient condition of a memoir. If the truth was the only valued theme in the text then there would be quite a bit more praise for monotonous and trivial detail, because such boring things do happen in "real" life. Contemporary memoirs also prioritize an emotional currency with which the truth is dealt.

Memoirs purport as fact. Thus, the exposing, visceral details seem to take on a more gruesomely attractive and *real* quality. The more truth is presented in such detail, the more readers seem to expect and even crave it. The reaction towards memoirs of such a gruesome nature suggests that, contemporarily, there exists something in the relationship between truth and

⁷ "Nan Talese [...] was deeply impressed by the immediacy of the book and thought it would be invaluable to anyone with an intimate connection to addiction. She was ready to offer this first-time writer \$50,000 for the memoir" (Peretz par. 23).

⁸ This quote comes from the "praise for" section of *A Million Little Pieces* and is credited as a Chicago Sun-Times review that has seemingly been taken down from the web.

⁹ Many of the editorial reviews have since been taken down from the web after the *A Million Little Pieces* scandal was uncovered. The only one that seems to remain is from a *New Yorker* article. The rest are quoted either in Frey's "praise for" section or on many bookselling webpages, such as that of Barnes & Noble.

an emotional journey that matters.¹⁰ Fiction cannot upset the social order in quite the same way as a memoir because of its purportedly distant relationship with reality. We expect that fiction, however visceral and stark, is based on an invention. But on the whole, a memoir's piercing quality lies in its relationship with the truth. Perhaps so much so that what we come to expect of memoirs *is* visceral and exciting because of the content's foundation of truth. It can and will be argued moving forward that memoirs have a very particular place in contemporary literature, and their uniqueness rests on the principle of integrity that is integral to the genre, as well as on the increasing use of fictive techniques that highlight the emotional details and journey. What's more, the way a memoir author handles their emotional currency is indeed based, in part, on the public status of the author. Since the genre is democratic and available evermore increasingly to the average person, the genre has adapted ways in which to approach subject matter (borrowing from fiction and autobiography) to create a genre that is culturally functional. This will be expanded on in later chapters.

What should be evident in the Frey case thus far is one of the two elements regarding the democratic nature of memoirs: the relevance of former "nobodies" like James Frey who can write a memoir and become famous, combined with an intense and vivid plot, creates an allure for everyday readers. On the basis of the author gaining widespread notoriety through a memoir, the possibility that one could write their story and become famous does not now seem so far-fetched. Of course, the purported "nobody" nature of Frey only takes his text so far, since, at the end of the day, he was still capable of composing a very interesting story that is certainly not wholly relatable to the masses. This, then, speaks to the expectations of memoirs, on the one

¹⁰ Prof: "In the comment you quoted (in a comment above) Frey says that "I wanted the stories in the book to ebb and flow, to have dramatic arcs, to have the tension that all great stories require." This cannot be dubbed as "raw""

hand, to be true, but on the other hand, to remain as moving and entertaining as fiction. The fine line that memoirs are expected to walk is not required of fiction.

The second compelling aspect of the democratic nature of memoirs is that, for celebrities and notable people, since they eclipse the democratic nature of memoirs in writing one from a position of known privilege, they must instead tone down their content in order to appear relatable. The celebrity memoir apprehends what has been levied against it. Celebrity memoirs have adapted to make their stories more accessible by harnessing the humane elements and brushing over the facts of the author's life that separate them from the masses. One example of this can be found repeatedly in Gore Vidal's memoir, *Palimpsest* (1995). Vidal laments several times throughout the text that the only reason he undertook some of his less glamorous (as opposed to writing in an Italian villa) Hollywood movie industry jobs was to make ends meet financially. He only politely, and briefly, mentions (out of respect for the expectations of the genre?) that he had a monthly allowance of 1,000 dollars, which, in the 1950s, was a decently large sum of money for a young, single bachelor (Vidal 68, 244). Vidal clearly was not destitute, and some may even take offense to his financial complaint, or accuse him of cosplaying as poor. Of course, Vidal can argue that he remained true to the reality of his life, and thus the genre, if 1,000 a month was not sufficient for his style of living. And what's more, he can connect with his audience on the level of financial struggle that, in reality, separates him and his reader in every imaginable way. As a writer primarily, and a celebrity secondarily, Gore Vidal's memoir is maybe even too succinct. Even he understood the nature of the genre and made this evident in the memoir itself.¹¹ He not only knew the power of the genre, but he also harnessed it to further

¹¹ "Today an ambitious writer would be well advised to label any work of his imaginative nonfiction, or, perhaps, a memoir" (Vidal 239).

bind himself and his reader in ways that his other modes of visibility as a socialite did not afford him.

Yet another example of a famed person's book harnessing the democratic power of the memoir is former President Barack Obama's latest, *A Promised Land* (2020). In it, among other material spanning nearly 800 pages, former President Obama writes about his domestic familial relationship with his wife, Michele Obama, and daughters, Sasha and Malia. The ultimate power couple, whose book (re: memoir) deals had, at one point, a bidding total of roughly 60 million, made their lives accessible to the public, or their fans and voters, in part, on the basis of their domesticity (Stelter). By portraying what at least appears to be the truth of their relationship, they gave readers the ability to relate to one of the most influential couples in the history of the country, if not the world. Of course, at this point, one might point out that such material is included not to leverage the uniting power of the mundane but simply to reflect the truth because it is true that celebrities and high-profile individuals are still people. The only problem with this line of thinking is that it is all too evident the existence of material that, like Gore Vidal's monthly allowance, gets hurriedly mentioned or even brushed over altogether. The sometimes absent, sometimes quiet revelations that separate celebrities and known figures into "them" as opposed to "us", speak volumes about the aim of the memoir. If they wanted to, high-profile writers could fill volumes with unimaginable anecdotes and realities unthinkable to a commoner, but they rarely do this.¹² Instead, high-profile memoir writers execute their memoirs with an air of relatability about them, perhaps, as it will later be argued, with relatability being the vehicle that charts a more functional aim of the memoir.

¹² Examples of approachable celebrity memoirs: *The Extraordinary Life of an Ordinary Man: A Memoir* (2022) was published posthumously by Paul Newman using interviews familial sources, and, evidenced by the title alone, enacts approachability by highlighting the ordinariness of Paul Newman, thereby allowing everyday/layperson readers to project themselves into his "extraordinary life." *Making a Scene* (2022) by Constance Wu chronicles her modest upbringing in the suburbs of Virginia and how she waited tables in New York as she waited for her big break.

What's especially interesting in the case of former President Obama's *A Promised Land* example is how essentialized his domestic examples are. Sentences such as the ones describing his domestic duties are dramatic and vibrant, yet few and far between. He speaks about his youngest daughter's laugh as he tickles her, Michelle's slowing breath as she falls asleep on his shoulder, and the act of trying to get his oldest daughter into her ballet tights as a child (Adichie par. 2). The examples the former President presents the reader with reach the heart of the father-daughter relationship that he aims to represent. As Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie says in her review, the former President's "focus is more political than personal, but when he does write about his family it is with a beauty close to nostalgia" (par. 2) As Adichie rightly observes in regard to the former President's vulnerability in the memoir, "for all his ruthless self-assessment, there is very little of what the best memoirs bring: true self-revelation. So much is still at a polished remove" (par. 9). This assessment of the former President's memoir should have a familiar air to the reader. It is quite possible that the distance former President Obama affords between himself and his reader is only perceptible to the trained eye. Regardless, however, the essentializing of the domestic examples in the memoir seems to be an attempt to make economic use of their inclusion in the first place. It would have been possible to fill an entire volume without such minor and dream-like examples of his duties as a father and a husband. Whether prompted by an Editor or on his own accord, the difference in treatment regarding political and private matters sends the message that their presence in the memoir serves different functions. As has already been explained, the power of memoir as a functional genre is palpable, and one of the main functions of said utility is to unite its readers. Gore Vidal, in his own way, accomplished this by ingratiating himself with those who have struggled with their budget. Former President Obama, perhaps less obviously, treated the content available to him as "relatable" with such care

and precision as to make it stereotypical, that he almost blew his cover, so to speak, entirely. The careful consideration of his domestic material came across as too cautious. It had the effect, at least to one critic, of ironically distancing herself from the man behind the page, thereby not adhering to the expectations she and other readers have of the memoir genre (par. 9).

Readers of memoirs have to negotiate between the democratic nature of the genre and the presentation of truth. In the case of *A Million Little Pieces*, since James Frey is an amateur, then his content matter, his “truth”, needs to be riveting. This makes sense as an advertising and sales tactic, of course, because no one knows Frey’s name and will not know it unless there is some kind of allure. That allure exists because of the fact that Frey is an amateur and has an exciting tale. It allows audiences to conjecture that their own stories can be told in a similarly high-profile fashion. In the case of celebrity memoirs, the democratic nature is purely content based.

Celebrity names bring readers in immediately, on the title page. Therefore, the content, or, their “truth”, needs to be such that the layperson reading it feels, in some way, connected to the story.

Gore Vidal does this by alluding to financial struggle, something quite widespread and accessible. Former President Obama connects readers with tidbits of domestic duties that indeed quite a few readers can relate to. Other celebrity memoirs, as I will explain in further chapters, accomplish relatability and thus the functional nature of memoirs by telling tales of abuse, addiction, or other such human afflictions.

1.3 Conclusion of Chapter One

In this chapter, I conducted a brief comparative analysis to underscore the points of convergence and divergence between memoir and auto/biography and memoir and the novel. Namely, memoir and auto/biography are similar in that they both seek to reflect “truth” or “reality” as it is, the distinction is in the process each genre enacts to arrive at their version of reality. The difference

in approach is evident in the etymological origins of “memoir” and “autobiography”. An autobiography is a self-written history of one’s life that usually begins with the birth of the subject and follows the course of their existence, typically after the subject has lived a full life. In contrast, a memoir is the self’s version of reality from the lens of specific memories. Thus, the structure of a memoir is naturally built around a theme, that is, whatever the memories pertain to in the subject’s life. Therefore, a memoir does not need to be and often is not organized chronologically, since the theme can pertain to memories that the subject had, for instance, later in life, centered around a specific event or catalyst. Since memoir and auto/biography share many common techniques and are both based on truth-telling, yet, memoir and autobiography are not wholly synonymous because they still have some contrasting functions and capabilities, memoir is considered a subgenre of autobiography. Therefore, it is acceptable to think of memoir as having borrowed from the life writing genre that autobiography and memoir both belong to.

The memoir is related to the novel insofar as they developed together in Western literature and thus share some techniques. For instance, the memoir (increasingly in contemporary times) borrows some inventive techniques from the novel, while the novel has been known to orient itself, like a memoir, in reality: using real people as prototypes for characters. The memoir diverges from the novel in that, being based on truth, it cannot be fictive outright, and thus must adhere to ethical and moral principles. The novel is free to be as inventive as it pleases. Furthermore, the memoir is more democratic than the novel. The material required for the content of a memoir is simply *life*. Since everyone *can* write a memoir in theory, the genre is broadened. For example, there are many examples of “nobody” memoirs that become bestsellers alongside memoirs by known persons.

As evidenced by the comparisons described above, memoirs are expected to perform quite a few functions that may seem contradictory. For instance, the memoir borrows thematically from fiction in order to be more story-like, while also remaining close to auto/biography in its foundation of truth. Thus, it seems that memoirs, as operative functions of literature, are perhaps in need of further study. The genre's increasing presence on bestseller lists further suggests their relevancy, and thus their position as potential objects of investigation. The memoir is capable of adapting, in part, by borrowing thematically from other genres, which has the effect of making memoirs attune to the reading public's needs and expectations. This is especially true of American memoirs. As I will show in the next chapter, historically, American memoirs served great political and social functions that might have laid the foundation for contemporary memoirs to be functional in ways that European, and more specifically British memoirs, are not.

2.0 Chapter Two Introduction: Memoir's American Roots

The reader's expectation of a memoir was not always to "be impressionistic and subjective rather than authoritatively fact-based" (Couser 19). This may be because the term *autobiography* was not necessarily invented until around the 1800s (Couser 23). Until then, much of what we would now consider autobiography was known as memoir, thus, there was no distinction to be made between the two. This is significant inasmuch as it highlights the malleability of genre classifications over time. Still, more importantly, it helps readers navigate this chapter's use of the terms "memoir" and "autobiography" respectively. Nonetheless, early American autobiographical writings seem to set the foundation for some of the defining characteristics of contemporary memoir. Notably, the practice of constructing specific kinds of social identities, an intrinsic convention for many contemporary memoirs, arguably matured in early American autobiographies. The primary aim of this chapter is to examine three categories of early American autobiography that aided in the construction of individual and national identities at a crucial point in American history and culture. First, this chapter will provide the relevant historical context, and then present and argue that early American memoirs provided a foundation for the contemporary manifestation of the genre in two respects: the construction of a new identity and the visibility of marginal identities in the cultural conscience. Thus, this chapter suggests that the foundation built by early American memoirs makes way for contemporary memoirs to be introspective, individualistic, and yet inclusive.

According to Couser, "the memoir as we know it in the West" has existed for a mere 200 years, beginning "from the time of the American and French Revolutions" with production surging in the age of Romanticism (Couser 109). Before that, the memoir's history is not widely agreed upon, though much has been speculated. The creation of glass certainly stimulated

introspective thought, and cultures that “attribute importance to the individual self” through religion seemed to “have provided the most powerful impetus to self-life writing generally” (Couser 108). One of the earliest classical autobiographies is *The Confessions of Saint Augustine* around 400 CE. Much later, the Protestant Reformation spurred a spiritual autobiography boom in England. Even in the secular realm, what some call “Renaissance humanism” encouraged, for instance, the *Life of Benvenuto Cellini* in the sixteenth century, an example of life writing without religious overtones and a fixation on conversion narratives (Couser 109). Indeed, from its early stages, the memoir form, in all of its manifestations, was what Karl Weintraub proclaimed as “the literary form in which an individual could best account for itself (847)” (Weintraub qtd in Hazlett 78). However, the literary form’s availability to fringe citizens, such as women, prisoners, and the formerly enslaved, happened gradually.¹³

To reiterate an idea presented in Chapter one, “the novel and the memoir were ushered into the world of British literature as virtually identical twins” (Couser 110). This may be true concerning the history of British memoirs, but the specific history of American memoirs is relatively unique. In her *New York Times* article, “These Literary Memoirs Take a Different Tack”, Megan O’Grady reflects on the evolution of the genre on the American scene from the initial phases of the country into contemporary times. She maintains that, while “Histories of memoir tend to begin with St. Augustine’s ‘Confessions’ around 397 A.D....there’s no doubt that the form enjoys a particular centrality in our individualistic country” (O’Grady par. 8). And yet it may not seem to be the case on the surface. Early European settlers in American colonies were too busy building a civilization to dedicate resources to the literary arts. Therefore, much of their writing was of a pragmatic nature. Journals, diaries, letters, bookkeeping, inventories, and

¹³ “early on, life writing genres favored those prominent in public life: men over women, whites over people of color...the democratic potential of memoir has taken time to be realized” (Couser 109).

catalogs are not considered premium literary or creative output. Most of what is now integral to American history and American literary history more specifically was not meant for public consumption (Couser 111). Early American literary output “was of necessity more utilitarian and instrumental; belles lettres was a luxury. In America, then, the antecedents of the modern memoir lie not in literary genres, but in non— or sub-literary ones: various humble modes of life writing that were integral to the exploration and colonization of the continent” (Couser 110).

2.2 Memoir’s Protestant Influence

It could be argued that Protestantism is an ancestor of the modern American memoir.

Protestantism is a powerful institution influencing many of the memoirs that are presented in this chapter. Protestantism actively imbibed many parts of American cultures, such as life-writing (Couser 115). Unlike Catholicism, Protestantism aimed “to minimize institutional mediation between the individual Christian and God” and thereby “favored introspective or devotional life-writing genres, such as the diary and the meditation – rather than confession, which involves a clerical intercessor” (Couser 116). In Protestantism, a legacy that lives into modernity is the notion that the strength of one’s devotion is measured by “a compelling narrative of the experience of conversion”, or testimonial (Couser 116). In fact, in Puritan times, anyone who wanted to be part of the church was judged by members of the institution after orating their conversion story for estimation of veracity (Couser 116). This practice is intrinsically Protestant and therefore intrinsically American. As a core element in the foundation of the nation, this practice has indeed persisted into modernity. At Irving Bible Church in north Texas, for instance, in order for one’s baptism to be formally recognized, one must present their testimonial to the church’s board for evaluation (Irving Bible Church). This is a common practice, especially among the more traditionally evangelical and Protestant communities’ churches. And on a

broader scale, the act of baptism in one's teens (or even adulthood) is an intrinsically Protestant practice. Conversely, catholicism prioritizes the baptism of newborn infants, which signals an entirely different belief in the function of baptism. Protestantism places high value on the narrative of one's conversion to Christianity and ingrains the presentation of this narrative to the acceptance of one's faith and devotion. The success of one's narrative of conversion, and thus admittance into the congregation, necessitated that the narrative is compelling. The prominence of this practice "fostered a consensus that conversion involved a particular sequence of distinct stages. Thus, over time, the genre became rigidly conventional; individual narratives became formulaic" (Couser 116). In this way, Protestant conversion narratives, or testimonials, became important subgenres of American memoir writ large. Furthermore, testimonial-like plots exist in many seemingly nonreligious American memoirs. What is especially important to consider while attending to Protestant conversion narratives, is that they reached nearly every nook of early American life. It is easy then to see why, for instance, later on, Frederick Douglass integrates a testimonial formula into his former-slave narrative. By doing so he is priming his readership, and easing them into a story by way of something more palatable and familiar to his predominantly white, predominantly Protestant audience. The specifically Protestant value of conversion narratives, or testimonials, is an important foundational element in American life writing. It is inextricable from American memoirs and part of the fabric of what made many American memoirs wide-reaching. Without the Protestant link, therefore, many seemingly radical themes and ideas would not have been palatable. And as in the case of former-slave memoirs and even some key political speeches, it is used as a bridge on which revolutionary members of society introduce new, often radical themes in a covert way.¹⁴

¹⁴ Douglass used religious vocabulary and motifs to ease his predominately white audience into his July 5th 1852 speech "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?" about the meaning of the word "freedom" for enslaved black Americans (Douglass).

2.3 Memoir and the Generational Elite

“Perhaps because civilization on this continent was so much a work in progress, American writing, unlike its British counterpart, often attempts not so much to record history as to shape it” (Couser 112). Indeed, then, memoirs are the “perfect genre for Americans” O’Grady claims, and have been perfected by us, “a nation of oppositions narrating themselves into existence”, as well (O’Grady par. 8). Framing the early American writing tradition as an intentional and calculated act helps to dispel the notion that “because there was little imaginative writing being produced in the colonies, such works [as those utilitarian in nature] have come to be canonical ‘American literature’ by default” (Couser 112). Indeed, Couser agrees that this “would miss the point: *a real, and distinct literary tradition was being formed under conditions conducive to a very different kind of writing—nonfictional, utilitarian, instrumental*” (112). An American literary tradition, intrinsically bound with life-writing, was deliberately controlled with the foundation of utility already set.¹⁵

Such deliberation oftentimes materialized in the form of encouraging momentum for colonial pursuits. A case in point: “Bradford’s account of the first decades of the Plimoth colony was meant to impress later generations with the sacrifices of the first generation. The narrative sought not merely to document, but to perpetuate, the colony’s original mission” (Couser 112). As well as the already mentioned utilitarian aspect of American writing, (journals, inventory, bookkeeping) there was also a cultural utilitarianism at play, evident in Bradford’s attempt at impressing and motivating future generations. In addition to Bradford’s account, “of the founding memoirists, Benjamin Franklin most astutely realized the genre’s democratic potential”

¹⁵ An American literary tradition that includes such canonical authors such as Ralph Waldo Emerson and his book, *The American Scholar* (1837).

and, at the age of 71, began writing a memoir formed as a letter to William, his son.¹⁶ Eventually, for personal and technical reasons, Franklin abandoned the relational letter technique because he felt that his narrative was meant to be read by a wider audience, therefore, instead of only addressing his son, Franklin centered his text on the future of the forming nation.¹⁷ This lens significantly widened his audience. It is important that the original framework was of such a personal nature, because it encourages a closeness between the author and the reader that might not have otherwise been there, and this relationship engenders a collective, shared destiny of the ‘rising nation’ in question. Another way in which Franklin honed in on the collective future identity of the nation is by composing a letter to himself between the first and second parts of his text. In this letter, he encourages himself to keep writing his autobiography because, if the nation succeeds in the Revolution, then it will be important to know who the “author” of the war was.

The immense revolution of the present period, will necessarily turn our attention towards the author of it; and when virtuous principles have been pretended in it it will be highly important to show that such have really influenced; and, as your own character will be the principal one to receive a scrutiny, it is proper (even for its effects upon your vast and rising country, as well as upon England and upon Europe) that it should stand respectable and eternal (Franklin 46)

Notice that in this encouraging letter to himself, Franklin uses collective personal pronouns such as “our” when speaking of an innermost function, that of giving attention. He refers to the collective “attention” of the nation being formed. He then highlights “your own character” as being that which will receive scrutiny. Since this is a letter to himself, the personality in question

¹⁶ The first words of the first chapter of his memoir reads “Dear Son,” so the reader is immediately queued in (Franklin 3).

¹⁷ “instead of casting his story as a family chronicle, he explicitly linked it to the destiny of the ‘rising nation’” (Couser 118).

is Franklin's. However, the effect is that the reader may insert his or her own character to replace the personal pronoun "your". Knowing that Franklin is the author of this encouraging letter towards himself serves further to mesh the subject and the reader in this letter. The letter not only encourages Franklin, but it encourages the reader and also further entangles the identities of the author and the reader by using collective personal pronouns. In parentheses, Franklin writes more candidly in regard to the future of the country. Again, Franklin emphasizes the collective by using "your" in regard to ownership of the ample and developing country. This portion of his text is critical in its use of pronouns and also because it stands out starkly against the rest of the text in that it is a one-time occurrence. It informs the remainder of the text and certainly influences the portion that came before it. Franklin's self-motivational letter is poised as a break from the rest of the text and is crucially contextualized within the framework of the Revolution. Alongside the important work the personal pronouns are doing, the contextualization of war also plays a major role to collectivize this motivational speech. In "Generational Theory and Collective Autobiography" John D. Hazlett integrates two different schools of thought on Generational Theory: he quotes Robert Wohl who considers the prerequisites of creating a generational consciousness.

the formation of a generational consciousness is some common frame of reference that provides a sense of rupture with the past and that will later distinguish the members of a generation from those who follow them in time. This frame of reference is always derived from great historical events like wars, plagues, famines, and economic crises (210) (Wohl qtd in Hazlett 79)

Franklin's use of war can be interpreted as a rationalization to self-motivation which is an essential element to the formation of a collective identity. After making use of personal pronouns

to emphasize a collective, the Revolution stands in for what Wohl calls “a great historical event” and “provides a sense of rupture with the past” in content and in form, being that the motivational speech breaks from the bodies of part one and two of the text. Wohl’s theory can be applied to the formation of identity that is active in Franklin’s autobiography. In fact, Hazlett claims that a consequence of “such ruptures” is that “the younger generation’s sense that the model of identity offered to them by their elders is unsuitable or oppressive” and thus the “generational self-consciousness is accompanied, therefore, by the development of a new collective identity” (Hazlett 79). Wohl and Hazlett’s thinking is applied to generational categories defined by age and historical context. Moreover, the concept of “elders” is characterized by both Wohl and Hazlett as an unfair top-down power structure, and can thus comprise the notion of “England”, thereby considering the relationship between the colonies and England. Franklin spearheaded the writing of the Declaration of Independence, which encompasses, as the title suggests, the thirteen colonies’ proclamation of freedom from English rule. The “generational self-consciousness” of the colonies is the material with which the nation emerges: non-literary life-writing (journals, logs, inventories, bookkeeping) that is tangibly creating the substance of the new nation in tandem with life-writing that is actively developing the notion of said nation’s “new collective identity” (79).

While early American founders are not necessarily studied as a generation per se, the novelty of their emerging nation attracted and engendered a youthful spirit. Hazlett believed that “the consciousness of each generation is determined by the particular portion of history that it possesses in its youth” (81). Through the lens of Generational Theory, then, Franklin’s literary output can be interpreted as speaking to the creation of a collective national identity by using personal pronouns and adopting a unifying tone, by formatting the motivational speech with the

contextualization of the war, and finally, by adopting an “us-versus-them” attitude, such as he did in the Declaration of Independence. Bradford and Franklin’s texts concern the creation of national and individual identities. Specifically, Bradford’s account seeks to encourage the “rupture” and is thus implicitly reacting to Wohl’s notion of “a great historical event” (Hazlett 79). Franklin’s account, also motivational, is active in the building of a new collective. Both solidify the theoretical presence of cultural identity in formation: one that stresses collective innovation and a break from the overarching power structure that is.

Franklin’s memoir is, furthermore, significant as it highlights a relevant distinction between at least two types of memoirs that this project is concerned with. Although not spoken of in such a manner, Franklin’s memoir, compared with captivity and ex-slave writings, for instance, is considered elite. He is a well-known historical figure whose name is synonymous with the creation of the nation. Thus, Hazlett, Bourne, and Ortega’s idea regarding the “generational elite” as it relates to generational autobiography may be applied. The claim is that the autobiographer has an “implicit conviction that his or her own story is the story of the generation” because they believe themselves to be interpreters of “the spirit of the times” who identify “the generational identity” and guide “the generational mass” (88). We know this to be true of Franklin considering the fact that, originally conceptualized as a letter to his son, he intentionally reconfigured the text to dedicate it to a wider audience. By speaking to the audience in a tone that could also have been used in the context of a father-to-son relationship, Franklin elevates himself to a position higher than that of his reader, that is, a figure capable of interpreting the moment, culture, and time. In order to “qualify their efforts”, such autobiographers at times may waver “between the construction of a collective identity and nagging doubts about their right to represent that identity” (88). But, says Hazlett, “such

disclaimers are at least partially disingenuous, for all generational autobiographies finally represent audacious bids for the representative status of their authors and their friends” (88). Franklin’s break from the text in the form of a motivational aside may be considered the effect of a “nagging doubt” as to his fitness to represent the generation’s emerging identity. On the one hand, Franklin writes to motivate himself to further his mission, and on the other, in motivating himself he also, consciously or not, writes in such a way that conflates the reader and himself. In this way, he is performing another key element of the creation of a collective identity that Hazlett mentions. In fact “the collective self is as often announced as it is narrated” (Hazlett 86). Thus, while Franklin practically writes to distinguish himself and his fellow countrymen from the powers that be before them, he also narrates technically, as is demonstrated above, in a manner that invites the creation of a collective identity.

2.4 Women and Memoir

According to Susannah B. Mintz in her review of Ben Yagoda’s *Memoir an Introduction*, memoir “serves the important function of contesting a narrow definition of whose lives we ought to acknowledge” (Mintz 354). Indeed, considering that memory *is* identity, “for those historically cast to the margins of our national stories...seizing control of one’s narrative has a particular power” (O’Grady par. 3). This is another lens through which we can recognize the important work of early American autobiographical writing in creating the expectation of inclusivity in the genre’s canon. Besides life-writing undertaken by already noteworthy names such as Benjamin Franklin, captivity narratives also played a key role in the construction of the genre’s significant characteristics.¹⁸ And while the captivity narrative is a particularly native genre to America, it

¹⁸ In fact, “a key literary development in New England in the late seventeenth century was the emergence of the narrative of Indian captivity” (Couser 112).

actually stems from a more global phenomenon (Couser 113). The captivity narrative at the time of its use in the early colonies was a modernized version of the biblical narrative of the ancient Israelites. This narrative resonated with American Puritans, who, surrounded by native Americans of a different race, culture, and belief system, conflated their plight with that of the Israelites and considered themselves precious warriors in God's battle (113). And while it would be at least a century before "works by writers who identify themselves on the basis of gender, class, race, or ethnicity have been numerous" (Hazlett 77), it is true that American captivity narratives in memoir form did authorize and, oftentimes, require the narration of a woman (Couser 113). The technical reason for this requirement was that tribes preferred female captives. Instrumentally, however, the centering of a woman's voice "heightens the pathos of the captivity" and thus made it more appealing to the readership who expected certain emotional journeys while reading memoir. Certainly, the genre fell short due to its being "a product of a patriarchal culture" yet it nonetheless opened a path for women to write their own lives, or "at least, short traumatic episodes of them" (113).

Regarding the notion that American memoirs are critical antecedents to contemporary memoirs globally, it is important to note how the captivity narrative memoir is situated in the history of constructing identities. Encouraging women to author captivity narratives over a more typical formula of the genre meant that they were disproportionately representing a vulnerable and traumatic period of their lives. Associating women, vulnerability, trauma, and truth as it is expected of the genre form, meant that memoirs actively perpetuated a patriarchal conception of women as the fragile, needy, and weak gender in comparison to men. Consider Hazlett's presentation of Susan Friedman's argument which regarded the shortcomings of traditional Generation Theory. Namely, "the emphasis on individualism does not take into account the

importance of a culturally imposed identity for women and minorities” (Hazlett 78). This lens can also be applied to the memoir genre form’s availability to women in the nation’s early stages. As Couser highlights, captivity memoirs were produced in a patriarchal society. Considering that women were encouraged to author their captivity stories instead of men on account of a technicality and also instrumentally, to heighten pathos, one can assume that, considering the autonomy of women (or lack thereof), it was likely the advantageousness and profitability of women-authored captivity memoirs that encouraged their creation, and not anything to do with the advancement of women’s rights or increased representation. And, indeed, to consider the creation of identity inherent in memoir writing but not the imposed identities “for women and minorities” would be remiss (78). Thus, it is crucial to note that, while the early American memoir form saw the solidification of many of its contemporary characteristics insofar as the creation of identities goes, it also actively perpetuated stereotypes and maintained gendered misconceptions.

2.5 Slavery and Memoir

The modern memoir is “a phenomenon, as far as African-Americans [are concerned], anyway, that dates as far back as the journals sent down by former slaves” (Martin). Beyond influencing modern memoirs, such as Edward P. Jones’s *The Known World*, and William Styron’s *Confessions of Nat Turner*, early African-American life writing was also significant in its distinctly American roots.¹⁹ Former slave life-writing is culturally important and historically unique. In an interview discussing memoirs during Black History Month, the president of the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and former chair of Yale’s African American Studies department, Elizabeth Alexander, discussed the conscious use of memoirs to further the abolitionist mission. Alexander

¹⁹“Like captivity narrative, slave narrative is a form of life writing generated by distinctive American historical conditions” (Couser 121)

reminded the audience of Frederick Douglass' oratory skills and dedication to the abolitionist cause. She then imparted that "Eventually, what his audiences and his sponsors realized is that, if the book were written, if it were published, if it could be distributed, then it would reach far more people and thus serve the abolitionist cause even better" (Martin). Indeed, O'Grady also asserts that Douglass' and even Harriet Jacobs' narratives were "written in part to convince a white public that slavery as an institution was immoral" (O'Grady par. 10). Therefore, the memoir was deliberately employed at a culturally and historically momentous moment for America because of the expectation that it would reach a wider audience and mobilize people, emotionally speaking, to act in favor of the abolitionist cause.

The deliberate use of Douglas' memoir is significant. It enriches the notion of readers' expectations and therefore enlivens the discussion regarding genre. In her review, Mintz reminds readers that the "distinctive power" of the memoir comes from "its capacity to memorialize, rehabilitate, or assert the rights of individuals, as well as to effect change in how readers understand broad social phenomena like slavery, mental illness, even the conception of identity itself" (Mintz 354). If readers expected the memoir to be able to yield certain results, it means that the genre exists in the cultural imagination as an entity in itself. This raises a plethora of questions regarding how and when the genre acquired certain characteristics. Secondly, the deliberate use of Douglass' memoir is significant in that it inherently implies the crystallization of the idea of what it meant to be a former slave in the public imagination. This is not to say that Douglas' memoir was the only one to be written. One can be sure that a multitude of former slave life writing exists. One widely read example is "Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl" by Harriet Jacobs. However, for the wider reading public, Douglass' and Jacobs' accounts were utilized in memoir form, specifically, to appeal to the pathos of white abolitionists. The

utilitarian factor of Douglass' memoir meant chiefly that his identity on the margins reached a wider cultural conscience. In terms of the language of identity formation, these former slave memoirs accounted for the atrocities and hardships faced by the authors in a way that unveiled, for many Americans, the details of mistreatment due to slavery. The first-person narrative offered by a memoir was the chosen medium to powerfully garner the attention of abolitionists and therefore move them to action. Of course, "the anti-slavery agenda pushed the genre toward testimony and away from autobiography proper - or autoethnography. That is, the genre favored documentation of oppression over attention to individual self-development or to the formation of a distinctive African-American culture. As self-life writing, then, slave narrative is relatively, but understandably, impersonal" (Couser 121). Former-slave life writing does have elements of testimony, a category of religious memoirs. However, it is critical to note that, actually, this may have strengthened the readability and reach of said memoirs. Douglass initiated his white audience by combining testimonial, a familiar genre form, with the slave narrative, a combination which was ultimately successful in reaching a wide audience.²⁰ Douglass made his narrative readable by representing himself "as an isolated figure" whose "climactic scene in his narrative is not his physical escape, as would be expected, but rather a moment of psychological self-liberation" (Couser 123). In this way, the audience can relate to the narrative on a level at which they might not have been able to, had the narrative been purely within the realm of documenting slavery. By adopting a familiar formula, Douglass reconfigured the genre in order to serve the goals of the abolitionist cause.

In much the same way that the testimonial aspect of former-slave memoirs may seem to veer the genre into something else entirely, the impersonality of former slave narratives is a

²⁰ "part of his [Douglass'] achievement involved capitalizing on the similarities between the conversion narrative and the slave narrative" (Couser 123)

paradox. One can acknowledge this in O'Grady's essay, when she asserts that former-slave narratives serving the abolitionist movement were to, all at once, "be read not only as personal, historical accounts but as representative experiences of their race, a kind of proof of humanity" (O'Grady par. 10). Former-slave memoirs were tasked with the seemingly impossible. To create a new space for their authors and other formerly enslaved in the cultural consciousness and thereby freeing themselves legally, all the while working within the limited confines of the country's preconceived notions as to what black people amounted to, which was less than human. Former-slave memoirs had to be empathetic and relatable, in order to assert their humanity and argue for their freedom, as well as be, contradictorily, impersonal. These memoirs had to be impersonal for two reasons. Firstly, to collectivize all black people and not take away from the larger issue of slavery by singling in on one person or incident, and secondly, to not offend the delicate social strata that placed them at the very bottom by being too aggressively candid about the evil that was done at the hands of people who white abolitionists likely had more in common with than the formerly-enslaved authors themselves. To this point, Toni Morrison concurs in her essay "The Site of Memory" (1995) that authors would avoid conveying atrocities out of fear that the white audience, even compassionate ones, would not want to continue reading (Morrison).

The impetus to document mistreatment as a means to further the abolitionist cause may at first seem, as Couser suggested, to veer into the autoethnography realm or genre. However, considering the first-person narration and the vulnerability inherent in displaying the brutality both Douglass and Jacobs faced, it could also be argued that the impersonality in the form of documentation was actually an extension of the kind of life writing intrinsic to early American literature as well as the foundation for what happens in many contemporary memoirs now. It is

exactly the combination of the genre form's expectation of truth and vulnerability paired with the unique beginnings of American life-writing rooted in seemingly mundane documentation that produces the kind of memoirs that helped to end slavery, and, furthermore, created a base for contemporary memoirs to act as a testimonial in order to unveil the everyday existence of some racial groups considered to be on the outside of mainstream society. While Elizabeth Bruss acknowledges, that a "defining feature of the [memoir] genre" is "individual identity" and, as Paul John Eakin writes that "the value of the individual...is the premise, ipso facto, of autobiography as we know it today", depersonalization through the employment of documentation style can be considered subversive in its material manifestations of creating space, politically and culturally, for individual identities (Eakin 198). A narrative that attempts to encapsulate an entire group's misery at the hands of an uneven power structure is then capable of uniting the collective as well. By collectivizing the individual experience, the narrative can speak broadly against mistreatment, whereas, if a narrative spoke predominantly of the individual, said narrative would be limited in scope and utility. In such a case, it could be argued that the personal narrative that speaks narrowly of a singular incident actually terminates a debate on the issue's larger impact. Therefore, in many ways, the impersonal approach in former-slave memoirs broadens the readership by making the experience encountered by the author available to readers who might otherwise exclude a vulnerable narration from a former-slave. For sympathetic readers, however forward-thinking they might have been, the impersonality inherent in these narratives may have perpetuated a singular vision stereotype of black Americans. Of course, this consequence, even if from a well-meaning initiative, has societal manifestations that have lasted into modernity. Nonetheless, the impersonal style eliminates the aspect of personality, the inclusion of which may have been counteractive to the cause. The values of

pre-abolition America were not aligned in such a way that created equal space for black and white written narratives. In much the same manner that there was not equal space for female and male narratives. This, then, allows for an analysis of the creation of former-slave narratives. The grounds on which they differ from other memoirs enable an understanding of the form itself, and how it was reconfigured to serve necessary societal functions. Furthermore, an analysis of the creation and impact of former-slave memoirs, along with captivity narrations by women, engenders an understanding of the thematic structure available to fringe, or minority, societal groups. This, then, helps to make clear the impact of early American memoirs in creating a collective national and individual identity.

The fringe memoir invites another parallel between early American autobiography and contemporary memoir. Fringe memoirs helped spread a more humane and personal point of view on ostracized and often demonized members of a community. For instance, the first-person account of a prison inmate on death row helped rationalize his/her crime and point of view in order that he/she may be absolved. On the other hand, the memoir of an ex-enslaved person typically attempted to endear the reader emotionally in order to further the abolitionist cause and promote equal rights. What is also significant is the distinction between the memoirs of those with elite status and those on the fringes of society. For instance, Franklin's and Douglass' memoirs both "aim to direct the social and political future of their culture" (Hazlett 94) yet, out of necessity within the social structure, they must attempt this feat from differing positions. On the one hand, Franklin is able to take for granted that he may be speaking for an entire generation and is able to make rhetorical choices corroborating his position as the leader of such an initiative via the use of personal pronouns and a structure that unites the reader with himself. While on the other, Douglass must make calculated moves in order to remove himself personally

from the narrative, and thus speak for the collective by allowing for one to exist in the narrative *without* his presence, not *through* his presence, as Franklin does. This distinction is significant in that there are trace elements of these approaches, distinct within their racial and social categories, in contemporary memoirs. In fact, one of the pointed defects of memoirs of black and brown people is that they may be written in a way that speaks for a collective that does not actually exist. This would not be lobbied against black and brown stories if it did not happen prolifically. By studying early American memoirs, one can get a sense of where this phenomenon may have started, and how, to begin with, the collectivization actually had a positive outcome.

2.6 Conclusion of Chapter Two

It is important to distinguish the relevant aspects of American memoir history, beginning with the idea that it stems from a non-literary tradition. Knowing the pertinent history of American life-writing enables us to read contemporary memoirs as an extension of a unique tradition, especially as it concerns memoirs written by authors who purportedly speak for their generation, and fringe memoirs, oftentimes written by women and people of color. This chapter considered three categories of early American autobiography that aided in the construction of individual and national identities at a crucial point in American history and culture. Namely, Protestantism, elite memoirs, and fringe memoirs. On a broader scale, utilitarian output, such as journals and bookkeeping, influenced the culturally functional elements of American literary output, elite and fringe memoirs included. Over time, Protestantism influenced early American memoirs by creating the expectation and prioritization of the redemption story arc considering the fact that successful narration of one's testimonial was (and still is, in some cases) required by senior members of the church to participate in the congregation. Protestantism also influenced the palatability of certain ideas that were presented in memoir form. Namely, the horrors of slavery

presented in Douglass' memoir. A mix of testimonials and an impersonal narrative technique allowed for the readability of the former-slave memoir. So-called "elite" memoirs, such as Franklin's, invited readers to ascribe to a collective identity that he was actively part of creating. As for utilitarianism, Franklin and Bradford ascribed the useability of their memoirs to further the objectives of the collective, the nation, seemingly more than they ascribed to the personal uses of the memoir. Other memoirs, like Douglass', were tasked with altering cultural and political thought, and even the laws themselves by way of emotionally reaching the voting population to overturn the constitution's ruling on slavery. Protestantism, utilitarianism, speaking for the generation in an effort to create a concise cultural identity, and speaking on behalf of a mistreated population in order to alter public perception: these factors converged to create a literary genre concerned with the function and prosperity of the identity of the nation and the identities of the individuals that made up said nation.

The memoirs presented in this chapter were part of a culture of memoirs that came with a set of expectations that seem to inform their successors, including contemporary memoirs. In fact, O'Grady claims that "the expectation of palatability to a white, middle-class audience persisted well into the 20th century" (O'Grady par. 11). In present times, fringe memoirists are oftentimes coopted to write first-person accounts chronicling what it is like to exist outside of the mythical norm.²¹ Although there is certainly more work to be done, and therefore literature should not exhaust itself with the stories of lives on the margins, this "publisher-driven" expectation can be "especially compromising for those whom literature and society haven't always heard or valued" (O'Grady par. 11). However, what all American memoirs seem to have in common is "the impulse to 'celebrate myself and sing myself, and what I assume you shall

²¹ In *Sister Outsider*, a collection of essays on racial inequality and blackness in the US, Audre Lorde uses the term "mythical norm" to encapsulate the following qualities "white, thin, male, young, heterosexual, Christian and financially secure" that come with degrees of privilege in American society (Lorde 116).

assume,' as Walt Whitman wrote in 1892", which, "somehow feels endemic to our nation of competing origin stories, and the battle to own a national narrative continues today" (O'Grady).

O'Grady, Couser, Yagoda and others are correct to point out a certain pulse that exists in the contemporary landscape of literature. The next chapter will consider the relevant presence of memoirs in the present, building on the historic tropes examined in this chapter, as well as using the vocabulary and thematic landscape of the first chapter, to attempt to decipher the pulse that exists in the contemporary landscape as it relates to memoirs. To do so, the third chapter will examine memoir sales on a minuscule scale, in relation to other nonfiction sales according to a popular American best-seller list. Looking at what memoirs sold well in three specific time periods may continue to encourage the discussion on the expectations placed on the genre, as well as the expectations placed on the identities of the authors who write within the genre.

3.0 Chapter Three Introduction: Contemporary Bestselling Memoirs

A key factor of contemporary memoir, which was noted at the end of Chapter One, is its malleability. More specifically, memoirs seem to be functional as a genre by adapting to the expectations of readers. It was demonstrated in Chapter Two that in the United States, life writing's utility was expected and also crucial to phases of American history. Building from the foundation of utility and malleability in the American sense, it is worth exploring more contemporary matters, to demonstrate whether or not memoirs exhibit a similar malleability and are therefore expected to be *functional* as in the past.

To explore this thread, I chose to highlight three key moments in American and literary history in this section. Firstly, 9/11, a tragic and sobering moment in American cultural and political history. The event is consistently analyzed and written about by some of the world's most revered authors. Secondly, the release of the Amazon Kindle in 2007. This device forever changed our way of reading and possibly ushered in a new wave of online book buying. After this point, and alongside advances in Amazon shipping technology, it was no longer necessary to physically go to the store. This newfound privacy may have had a huge impact on the types of books people bought and the way in which said books were written. Thirdly, the Covid-19 pandemic, a global virus that forced a standstill and huge transition for all of humanity, including more reliance on technological devices and virtual replacement of typically face-to-face interactions and errands. Alongside a tragic death toll and economic fluster, the reliance on the virtual spawned by the pandemic can be said to have increased levels of depression and loneliness in the United States. 9/11, the release of the Amazon Kindle, and the Covid-19 pandemic are all moments ripe with opportunity to ponder the memoir, and how it may have been a useful literary coping and unifying tool. While on the surface only one of these moments

seems related to memoirs, indeed to literary history in general, considering the genre's ability to adapt to public needs and expectations, evident in its American roots, it is paramount that I examine these moments in American history through a literary lens. Of course, this endeavor is an entire project in its own right, so the scale at which it is undertaken is quite minuscule. To analyze these three crucial American moments with a literary lens, I studied *The New York Times* Nonfiction Bestseller List for each moment's corresponding year.²² Further study was also done in the surrounding years in order to grasp any possible trajectories in reading habits overall. Of course, *The New York Times* list that provided the information is not an all-encompassing resource, however, it is considered to be the best.

3.1 *The New York Times* Bestseller Lists

In *Book History*, Di Ezra Greenspan and Jonathan Rose hold that *The New York Times* lists are “the best known and most widely consulted” today (Greenspan and Rose 290). The list's prestige is longstanding. Since *The New York Times*'s hushed release of its first bestseller list in 1931, the paper has been steadily building its reputation as America's, if not the world's, most widely referenced list. In August of 1942, the newspaper printed a list most similarly resembling the one in production today (Jordan). Arguably, what distinguished *The New York Times* lists in comparison with the lists' influences, including an American magazine called *The Bookman*, which was imitating a London magazine by the same name, is the fact that *The New York Times* decided to abandon the bestseller-by-city standard. Namely, *The New York Times* originally gathered its sources from *The Bookman* along with wholesale booksellers and major department stores in several U.S. cities in order to determine the bestsellers per city (Greenspan and Rose 290). The 1942 list was split between the most popular books nationwide on one side, and a

²² (The New York Times 1995-2023).

by-city ranking on the other.²³ Eventually, *The New York Times* decided to abandon the by-city ranking to make their bestseller list a national metric. This seemed to achieve two things. Firstly, it helped to solidify *The New York Times* as a national, not just a New York-based newspaper. By issuing a bestseller list without the context of geography, the paper was claiming an authority regardless of whether or not it was earned.²⁴ Secondly, it arguably embedded, or at the very least maintained the idea that was already circulating mid-century, that the U.S. was now a vital component of literary exhibitions worldwide. That is to say, as *The New York Times* gained worldwide esteem, the bestsellers were potentially regarded more highly, or at the very least with more curiosity. It could even be said that the books represented were read by readers who let their guard down in trust of the lists' moniker as world renowned. The bestsellers were unified on a national front, surely, and possibly on the world's stage as well. No longer were the bestsellers analyzed against themselves as they were in the by-city lists, which conveyed where the book was most *and* least popular. The by-city presentation certainly had the potential to raise questions regarding the qualifications of a book's popularity. For instance, what aspect of *King's Row* by Henry Bellamann compelled it to the very top of Detroit's bestsellers, yet number five on the Atlanta and Dallas lists? (Jordan). In essence, the by-city metric seemed disjointed. It certainly ran the risk of dividing readership based on geography, and, inevitably, politics. The U.S.'s electoral system, which assigns representatives per state to elect the president and vice

²³ See Fig. 1. (The New York Times). The chart looked like the following: the bestsellers in a column of no particular order on the left, while on the top right there was a list of major US cities, and in rows corresponding to each city and each book, there were numbers indicating the space each book claimed on the bestseller list per city. For instance, *And Now Tomorrow* by Rachel Field had the following numbers: 2,1,2. The first corresponded to its placement on the bestseller list in New York, the second, Boston, and the third, Philadelphia (Jordan).

²⁴ *Book History* points out that as soon as the NYT list abandoned the by-city metric, their sources became harder to pinpoint. The paper stopped making it public knowledge who or what their sources were. Presently, the already nebulous system is computerized. The NYT automatically sends a survey out to their sources, likely wholesale and booksellers, which asks them which books are doing the best. The automation of this practice seemingly helps avoid error, but also further isolates the human connection and raises questions as to how much one can trust their sources and process (Greenspan and Rose 290).

president, was put in place to ensure that highly populated cities, usually coastal, did not determine the outcome of a national election by popular vote or Congress. The by-city metric, then, seems all too equipped to highlight occasionally fraught differences in culture, identity, and politics.

Not only are *The New York Times* bestseller lists an imperative research tool, but they also seem to be one of the key factors in paving the way for contemporary memoirs. By creating a unified front that is not split by differing city tastes, thus avoiding a magnification of cultural and political differences, *The New York Times* is able to claim, in totality, that the books on their lists are widespread bestsellers. It is no longer relevant where precisely the books are bestsellers, only that they *are*. The readers of said lists may take for granted the notion of “bestseller” and indeed, many must, considering that this was their only recourse once the by-city metric was abandoned. Be it as it may, the Times’ lists have gained exceptional prestige in the world of popular literature. If a book has been on a New York Times bestseller list, it likely says it in the advertisement for said book. Readers of New York Times bestseller lists presumably value the system inasmuch as it continues to flourish. These are the reasons why I chose to examine *The New York Times* nonfiction bestseller list. As a metric of book popularity, it presents itself as the most widespread and unifying system, which is paramount in the world of memoirs. As I demonstrated in Chapter two, early American memoirs seemed to be written in a way that prioritized the unity of its readers. The audiences of said memoirs, such as those by Benjamin Franklin and Frederick Douglass, were typically on a large national scale. The uniting power of *The New York Times* bestseller lists parallels the uniting power of early American memoirs. Indeed, *The New York Times* bestseller lists’ history and system speak to the quality that is vital to American literary culture, the leveraging power of unity.

In order to create an operative measuring system, this project charts the number of memoirs on the nonfiction bestseller lists from 1995-2020. Each year that was analyzed saw varying numbers of books, so the percentage of memoirs per year is based individually on a scale of 0-100%.²⁵ There are several notable metrics to consider. Namely, how many weeks a book spent on the bestseller list, how many times a book reappeared on the bestseller list and *when*, and what percentage of “former nobody” memoirs are on the bestseller list versus the percentage of memoirs by already celebrated individuals. Combining these three metrics proved fruitful. The data available is full of potential for analysis. Indeed, what started as a question to be definitively answered with data, ended with more questions that needed a broader cultural context to be interpreted. For instance, one initial assumption was that percentage of weeks a memoir spent on the bestseller list would coincide closely with the percentage of memoirs out of all nonfiction books for that year. However, this was not so. While there is no clear trajectory, the percentages vary, sometimes vastly. A representative case of this would be the list for the year 2000. That year, memoirs accounted for 76% of the nonfiction books on the list, yet spent just 67% of the total time in weeks. As the data continued to be collected for each year into the 21st century, it became apparent that the number of weeks a book spends on the list is just as important as the overall percentage of memoirs on the list. This is because some books may spend only one week as the bestseller, while others spend fourteen. Thus, the book that spends fourteen weeks on the list takes up a larger percentage of the overall tally for time, but less than that in the percentage accounting for the number of books. Something I observed in the lists as the years progressed was more books on the list overall, but each for less time on average than in the late 1990s and

²⁵ Including repeats in both calculations, *The New York Times* 1999 nonfiction bestseller list charted a mere eleven books, while in 2020, however, the number of books was 28. The percentage of memoirs on the 1999 bestseller list is 45% (including repeats) and the percentage of memoirs on the 2020 list is 57% (including repeats), however, despite a less than 10% difference, the number of memoirs on the bestseller list in 2020 outnumbers the amount on the 1999 list by eleven. The 1999 list contained 5 memoirs, including repeats, while the 2020 list contained 16 memoirs, also including repeats.

early 2000s. In 2000 again, memoirs were bestsellers from January to mid-June, until *Flags of Our Fathers* by James Bradley and Ron Powers took over at the top of the list for five weeks, uncoincidentally, just in time for the celebration of America's independence. Five days after Independence Day, or the Fourth of July, Mitch Albom's *Tuesdays with Morrie* was reinstated, this time making its third appearance as the number-one seller for the year. Moments like this one, in which the memoir boom takes a pause for the observance of Independence Day, imbue the study with more meaning than it may at first appear to hold. *The New York Times* bestseller list precisely reflects the notion that literature is a reflection of culture, and thus can tell us quite a lot.

3.2 Bestselling Memoirs On and After 9/11

In the introduction to *9/11 and the Literature of Terror*, a collection published for the tenth anniversary of the attacks, Martin Randall echoes the widely held notion that the terrorist attacks of September 11th, 2001 mark the beginning of 21st century America (Randall 1). Certainly, the attacks occasioned a new sensation among Americans and the West, one that highlighted "individual and collective vulnerability" (McKinney 111). This exposed/ing feeling registered as a threat to the average American citizen. In the sociocultural and political treatment of vulnerability in the US after the attacks of 9/11, a sense that such a notion was a foreign legion, and not part of the natural makeup of humanity, persisted. The cultural distrust of this specific strain of vulnerability corresponded to an "effort to reassert the integrity of the body politic – to clearly demarcate self and other, friend and foe" (111). Don DeLillo, in December of 2001, produced an essay calling for a reevaluation of the dominant response to the attacks.²⁶ The essay focused on a "counter-narrative" that hampered the delusioned lucidity of the partitions between

²⁶ "In the Ruins of the Future: Reflections on terror and loss in the shadow of September" (2001) by Don DeLillo

us and *them* (DeLillo). Some years later, DeLillo's essay inspired his 2007 novel *Falling Man*, which thematically provides the counter-narrative he proposed in December of 2001. A plethora of literary responses to the attacks was predicated on the vulnerability felt by the nation. In the genre of memoir alone, at least three different kinds come to the fore: a 2008 graphic memoir titled *American Widow* by 9/11 widower Alissa Torres, a 2011 memoir by 9/11 survivor Lauren Manning titled *Unmeasured Strength*, and a 2011 memoir by former Vice President Dick Cheney that includes his version of the attacks, titled *In My Time: A Personal and Political Memoir*. What these have in common is an investigation of the traumatic personal effect that the attacks of 9/11 had and how they restructured everyday life and interactions.

The magnitude of the attacks makes the event difficult to characterize. The repercussions permeated nearly every sector of society. Certainly what can be said of the attacks is that the aftermath was, and still is, reflected upon by scholars, theorists, and authors of fiction and memoir alike. Evidence of this ongoing discussion includes Randall's text that is made up entirely of essays and discussions by prominent authors analyzing the event and its consequences.²⁷ The range of renowned writers showcased in the text demonstrates the richness of the discussion in multiple creative fields. From post-modern authors to theorists, poets, filmmakers, journalists, and historians, the topic of 9/11 and its national and global impact is at the epicenter of cultural examination. Precisely due to the event's magnitude and the consequent nebulousness in its retrospective characterization, I chose to analyze *The New York Times* Bestseller list for the year 2001 as well as the surrounding years' lists, in order to investigate the significance of memoir in times of intense cultural vulnerability in American society. Memoirs, and life writing in general, proved to be a valuable literary output in the early days of the

²⁷ *9/11 and the Literature of Terror* include discussions on 9/11 related writing by: Ian McEwan, Don DeLillo, Simon Armitage, James Marsh, and more (Randall).

colonies as well as the foundational years of the country. Combining a memoir's historic reality with the perceived expectations placed on the genre suggests that this study may provide a deeper understanding of the cultural dynamics at play.

In the year 2001, thirteen books were recognized as bestsellers. Three of those books, *The O'Reilly Factor* and *The No Spin Zone* by Bill O'Reilly, and Jimmy Carter's *An Hour Before Daylight* made at least two appearances on the list, making the total number of slots come out to seventeen books. Out of the seventeen slots, six memoirs were reported. This means that 35% of the documented nonfiction books were memoirs. Only one of the memoirs on the 2001 bestseller list is by a "former nobody", also known as, a person made famous by the memoir in question. Jerri Nielson, a doctor and former nobody, as well as his writer, Maryanne Vollers, collaborated on *Ice Bound*, a book that stayed on *The New York Times* Bestseller list for two weeks, and accounts for a mere five percent of the texts on the list. Memoirs were documented as the highest-selling books for fourteen out of the 52-week year. This means that memoirs, compared to other nonfiction on the bestseller list, were the most-read genre for 27% of the year 2001.

Former president Jimmy Carter's memoir, *An Hour Before Daylight*, accounts for five weeks at the beginning of the year. Sandwiched between its two and three-week stints on the list is where one can find *Ice Bound*. Towards the end of March, *Longaberger*, a memoir/how-to book by famous business persona, Dave Longaberger, topped the charts for one week. The last piece of life-writing on the list before the September attacks is *Foley Is Good* by Mick Foley, a memoir with an "inside scoop" perspective that spent two weeks on the list from the end of May to the beginning of June. The month of the attacks saw Stephen Ambrose's *The Wild Blue* top the charts until the week of the 23rd of September when the bestseller title was handed to *Jack: Straight from the Gut* (2003) by Jack Welch and John A. Byrne. Welch's book spent four weeks

in the top position on the list, until relenting to *Germes: Biological Weapons and America's Secret War*, a nonfiction tell-all by New York Times journalists Judith Miller, Stephen Engelberg, and William Broad. The remaining weeks of the year were filled with Bill O'Reilly and an illustrated remembrance, by Life Magazine, in memory of the year's tragedy.

There are various observations that can be made on this data. Noting only 2001, and not the years surrounding it, one can observe the fact that memoirs account for more space on the list at the beginning of the year and markedly less space towards the end of the year. One can also take note of the fact that the last memoir to appear on the list came directly after the attacks, and compared with the other memoirs of 2001, stayed on the list for the longest amount of time. If one looks at the list without memoirs strictly in mind, it can be noted that the two texts that stay on the list for the longest amount of time overall are biographies, with the tone of a memoir, about significant historical figures. Namely, *John Adams* by David McCullough is a biography in the sense that it is a text about John Adam's life written by someone else, and it is more than a biography, in fact verging on a biography memoir, in the sense that McCullough writes in such a way as to invite the reader on a more intimate level. He writes the biography, at times, as if he were seeing through the eyes of John Adams himself, and therefore the text may be considered as somewhat tasting as a memoir, too.²⁸ The book spent thirteen weeks on the bestseller list, from mid-June until September third. *Seabiscuit*, by Laura Hillenbrand, stayed on the list for six weeks from early April to mid-May and is written in such a way as to, at times, be in the first person of those close to the racing horse, Seabiscuit.

²⁸ Indeed, throughout the text McCullough uses "scene" more often than "summary", which is evident in the first two paragraphs, where a setting is being described, and the reader does not actually encounter John Adams until the third paragraph when McCullough officially introduces him. Before this introduction, readers are invited into the scene McCullough is setting in order that the reader feels in the presence of John Adams. McCullough writes, at times, as if he were seeing through the eyes of John Adams (McCullough 1).

The years surrounding 2001 add some necessary perspective to the observations presented above. Compared to the year prior, 2001 recorded 41% fewer memoirs on the bestseller list. Coincidentally, the years 2001 and 2000 recorded the same number of bestsellers on the nonfiction list, seventeen. The year 2000 claimed thirteen bestselling memoirs compared to 2001's six. Interestingly, though, the year 2000 actually only saw five different memoirs that were in constant rotation for the bestseller position that year, tallying to thirteen different appearances on the list by the same five texts. *Tuesdays with Morrie* by Mitch Albom stands out as the bestselling of the bestsellers noted that year, and indeed, is one of the key texts mentioned in relation to the memoir boom of the turn of the century (Stončikaitė 2). The year after the attacks, 2002, recorded even fewer memoirs than in 2001. That year, 30%, or six of the twenty registered books, were memoirs. On the anniversary of the attacks, a memoir titled *Let's Roll* was published by Lisa Beamer, a famous 9/11 hero's wife, and her writer, Ken Abraham. It stayed on the bestseller list for six weeks, from the beginning of September to the middle of October 2002.

On the one hand, it does not appear that the year 2001 was an extraordinary one as far as the sale of memoirs is concerned, indeed the year 2000 is markedly more full of memoirs, and certainly, the years leading up to the turn of the century indicate a rising trajectory in the reading and popularity of memoirs. However, the year 2001 is significant in other ways, specifically, the year 2001 illustrates how pervasive and influential the memoir is in books that are not readily considered in the memoir tally. For example, the case of the two biography memoirs, which were not included in the overall percentage of memoirs present on 2001's list, speak to the power of life-writing perhaps even more so than the memoir form itself. Namely, the authors McCullough and Hillenbrand resurrected the stories of two historically significant figures, John Adams and the famous racing horse, Seabiscuit, and wrote about them in a way that transcends the limits of

biography. The question of “why” becomes paramount. Why was not biography enough? The answer lies in the expectations of memoirs, and the idea that they can achieve so much more on an emotional level than other genres, even other life-writing genres, such as biography. To choose to write a biography in a nontraditional sense is a marked decision to move away from the confines of biography and towards something else. Here I echo Benjamin Franklin’s calculated move to write a memoir for the public, yet in a personal style addressed to his son. These purposive choices speak to the utility of memoir, and the fact that so many, consciously or not, have an impulse to write in the memoir style in order to achieve their objectives. For *Seabiscuit* and *John Adams* to have spent the most time overall on the 2001 bestseller list speaks, in part, to the influence of memoir. In McCullough’s case, a Pulitzer Prize was granted, in some measure due to the quality of his prose, certainly, and also partly due to the way the text’s memoir-esque characteristics hooked and enlarged the audience in a way that biography proper is unable to do.²⁹ In the case of *Seabiscuit*, Hillenbrand, being perhaps unable to write in the first person perspective of a horse and still label her book nonfiction, imbued her text with the moralizing element so frequently recorded in contemporary memoirs. Readers noted having come away from the text with a lesson in mind, despite the book’s setting remaining in the 1930s.³⁰ Hillenbrand certainly moves away from traditional biography in that sense. Indeed, biographies are meant to focus on the chronological order of life. In Hillenbrand’s and

²⁹ The aspects of the text that are written about the most on the *Goodreads* reviews are of a more memoir meets fiction nature. The reviews do not highlight or fixate on the characteristics of the text that are of a proper/traditional biography nature. The story-telling, “scene” over “summary”, and thereby the invitation to the reader to feel themselves in the presence of John Adams that McCullough extends, lead me to believe that it is the text’s memoir-esque characteristics that are responsible for hooking and enlarging the audience. For example, *Goodreads* #33 top reviewer, Stephen, wrote playfully on the 7th of June, 2011 in a “message” format to other biographers to “sharpen your storytelling” in the face of the “best biography” he has ever read (@Stephen). Additionally, *Goodreads* user Elyse Walters, the #3 top reviewer on the site, noted on the 31st of May, 2017 how moved she was by the book, writing, emphatically with bold lettering, that something inside of her had “SHIFTED” (@ElyseWalters).

³⁰ One *Goodreads* reviewer notes “This story is not just about Seabiscuit. It's also about humanity, [...] You will be astonished at what you learn from this book (@Swaps55).

McCullough's texts, the focus belongs elsewhere, albeit in different ways, and thus flirts with memoir.³¹ Furthermore, while these two examples are paradoxical in that they are examples of biographies that have borrowed from the memoir form, they nonetheless emphasize the power of the genre's tenets. Where employed, memoir-esque characteristics will work to widen the audience of a book by way of making it more emotionally and culturally relevant.

As it was noted in Chapter one, the memoir "can be a repository for witnesses' accounts of historical events in a way that fiction, for all of its range and power, cannot" (Couser 21). Furthermore, I argue that memoir can function even more succinctly in this way compared to biography in the traditional sense, as emphasized by the two semi-memoir biographies above. Instead of remaining within their genre of biography proper, the authors felt that it was more beneficial to mimic elements of memoir for their suited purposes. A memoir, without the imposition of a chronological standard, is free to organize its content thematically, thus allowing for a more relevant and immediate response to a historical event. Conversely, biographies, indeed, structured by a chronology of the person in question, can only respond thematically to historical events in select portions of the content, in the pages of the year in which the historical event took place. It is much more difficult for biography, considering the expectations to be chronological, from the beginning to the end (or nearing end) of a life, to interact wholly with a historical event, whereas a memoir can have said historical event as its entire premise. Historical memoirs such as *The Diary of Anne Frank*, *Night* by Elie Wiesel, *Personal Memoirs* by Ulysses S. Grant, as well as contemporary examples such as *Just Kids* by Patti Smith, *Orange is the New Black* by Piper Kerman, and *The Year of Magical Thinking* by Joan Didion, all structure themselves thematically around a historical premise relevant to the author and readers, and thus

³¹ *Seabiscuit*, like *John Adams*, is also lauded for its non-traditional biography characteristics, indeed, one *Goodreads* reviewer and fellow author writes "Laura writes non-fiction like the best fiction, and I appreciate the way she makes it real" (@RebeccaRosenberg).

create space for the history of their time to be recorded and analyzed simultaneously, to a greater extent than biography proper. One reason to carry out this study of the bestsellers list was precisely the notion that memoirs carry out the function as a historical repository so well, by implimenting characteristics from fiction and biography, and thus offer deeper analyses of the psyche of the nation through literary means. Thus, it is important to take note of the memoirs published around the time of intense cultural shifts in American society. Memoirs have increased in production and consumption in the 21st century. What I am trying to do is demonstrate that expectations are placed on the genre to fulfill a distinct potential, need, or gap in the cultural imagination. One way in which to note the reliance on memoirs during times of cultural struggle, then, is by taking note of the kinds of memoirs that make the bestselling lists in particular moments of American history. Perhaps by more closely examining the contents and themes of the memoirs that circulated most in American society, one can grasp the relevance and utility of the contemporary memoir.

The year before the 9/11 attacks were quite unvaried in terms of bestselling memoir content. The year 2000, although extraordinary with a high percentage of memoirs as bestsellers, was not diverse insofar as content is concerned. In fact, to begin with, the year 2000 did not record any “former nobody” memoirs. As we have seen,, the memoirs that dominated the bestseller list were by already famous persons. Furthermore, the memoirs on the 2000 list can be reduced to famous writers, actors, musicians, and athletes sharing anecdotes and life lessons from their time in the spotlight. While certainly necessary to include in the overall metric, many of these kinds of texts seem to suggest a voyeuristic impulse, however, on a more cynical note, they are sure-selling books that promise a different side of an already famous person. On the charts compiled for this project, I typically labeled these kinds of memoirs as “tell-all” or

“inside-scoop” memoirs. They typically revolve around one or a combination of the following scenarios: 1) a famous person telling their side of an infamous event or moment in their career or life, 2) a famous person giving readers a behind-the-scenes look at a multi-million dollar industry, such as American sports, or Hollywood, and 3) a famous person asserting their humanity by revealing a tragedy or secret that they dealt with, such as alcoholism or abuse.³² Certainly, these metrics do not cover the breadth of celebrity memoirs; however, a cursory look at the descriptions, titles, and reviews concerning the majority of these kinds of memoirs shows that prose is not their alluring asset, but rather, their content which promises to add depth to, or contrasts the author’s public image. As pointed out in Chapter one, the public versus private nature of celebrity memoirs is notable: it could actually be the main incentive for the public, namely, to comprehend what is behind the scenes, or, what is private. The longing for what is private to be made public suggests a voyeuristic longing to know what is presented as hidden or unknown. As far as the expectations of memoirs are concerned, it is obvious that memoir is a genre ripe for the unveiling and revelation of private matters. It is a genre that prides itself on sincerity and truth, no matter how revealing or uninhibited. In fact, as it has been noted, the genre is often lauded the more it reveals, and the more uncensored the content. This has become more and more true in a culture that prioritizes embellished storytelling, which constitutes the stronghold that social media such as Instagram has on younger generations, and the cult of immediacy which has affected the agency of celebrities in the wake of a booming paparazzi industry. Indeed, memoirs are advertised to unveil, as is evident in the synopses that characterize content as vulnerable and visceral. All of these factors grant the memoir genre with potential for

³² In *This Will Only Hurt a Little* (2018) comedic actress Busy Philipps “opens up about chafing against a sexist system rife with on-set bullying and body shaming” (Simon & Schuster par. 3). Tennis star Andre Agassi’s *Open* (2009), one of the most notable sports memoirs, is advertised to reveal that “off the court he was often unhappy and confused, unfulfilled by his great achievements in a sport he had come to resent” (Knopf). *Friends, Lovers, and the Big Terrible Thing: A Memoir* (2022) by “The beloved star of *Friends*” Matthew Perry, “takes us behind-the-scenes of the hit sitcom and his struggles with addiction in this candid, funny and revelatory memoir” (Flatiron Books).

celebrities to set their own records at their own pace. It allows agency over one's story, and also, certainly, creates monetary profit at the same time.³³

Perhaps the only notable deviations from the celebrity-written memoirs of the 2000s are Mitch Albom's *Tuesdays with Morrie* and Christopher Andersen's *The Day John Died*. Andersen's 1998 bestseller, *The Day Diana Died*, about Princess Diana, is the formulaic precursor to the 2000's bestseller about John F Kennedy Jr. Although some reviews scorned the text's gossipy nature, it nonetheless spent a week on the bestseller list on the anniversary of the Junior Kennedy's tragic death. In contrast to the majority of memoirs on the bestseller list for that year, it was a biography-memoir, which focuses primarily on the life of JFK Jr., but also, as the title suggests, chronicles the author's whereabouts and feelings upon learning of the tragedy. Indeed, on a popular reading social-media website, *Goodreads*, the text seems to elicit highly personal storytelling in the reviews section (which is typically meant to be less anecdotal and reminiscent) certainly due to the highly personal nature of the text itself, which seems to ask of its reader: where were you when tragedy struck? The text-to-talk interaction, in this case, an interaction implied in the title, *The Day John Died*, is not an uncommon occurrence. According to Irene Kacandes in *Talk Fiction: Literature and the Talk Explosion*, an analysis of literature that is interdisciplinary and takes into account the influence of modern media may yield a new understanding of what she calls "talk fiction", or texts that "contain features that promote in readers a sense of the interaction we associate with face-to-face conversation (Kacandes x).

³³ Notably, Stanford economics professor Alan Sorensen conducted a study of *The New York Times* Fiction bestseller list, and concluded that for new and up-and-coming authors, presence on the list increased sales by 57% (Krakovsky par. 6). For repeat and popular authors, such as John Grisham, presence on the list was negligible to number of sales. The conclusion is that presence on the list increases sales considerably for new authors, but does not have much of an effect on the sales of popular authors, being that they are already popular. Considering that the statistics come from fiction, it could stand that the metrics do not apply to nonfiction bestsellers, considering the fact that celebrity memoirs combine the very things most suitable to the bestseller list: newness, in the sense that a memoir is different from the norm that made the celebrity famous, yet familiar in the sense that the celebrity is already a known name, so their fans, personally, and their fans of whichever industry they are famous in are sure buyers of the memoir.

While the focus of Kacandes' argument is fiction, she nonetheless proposes that "to fully appreciate the communicative hybridity of our age, we need to register the presence of oral elements in literature" (Kacandes x). The popularity of *The Day John Died*, confirmed by its presence on the bestseller list, as well as the impetus for readers on *Goodreads* to share their own whereabouts on the day John died, suggests that Kacandes' argument can be extended also to nonfiction. Indeed, the impetus to interact with a text is part of what seems to enliven the comment and review sections of literature-focused social media. Furthermore, many reviewers admit feeling misled by the title. In fact, more than one reviewer writes that they regretted the presence of a biography of JFK Jr at all, and hoped instead for the focal point to be on the actual day of the tragedy.³⁴ When one stops to consider what a book like that would entail, excruciatingly detailed descriptions come to mind. Indeed, how else is one to fill up the pages of a book with the content of one single day? However, when one considers the memoir aspect of it, perhaps it can be suggested that readers hoped for exactly what they ruminated on in the review section of Andersen's book on *Goodreads*. Namely, a text-to-talk interaction, or personal anecdotes of everyday people and what they were doing when they heard the news. The sentimental aspect of memoirs is essential to making sense of their popularity in times of tragedy and change, and certainly, as a tool for uniting their collective readership. The year before the attacks of 9/11 saw the massive circulation of a smaller-scale celebrity tragedy on the anniversary of his death, which is not regarded as a national holiday and thus goes mostly unobserved by the average person. However, its popularity seems to suggest that even on a smaller scale, the reading of memoirs and memoir-imbued biographies is tantamount in times of change and crisis. Their existence invites reminiscence and nostalgia, emotive vehicles that are

³⁴ "I'm subtracting half a star simply because despite the title, the book really doesn't cover much of the day John died" (@Erin) and "*The Day John Died* is a misleading title" (@Ice).

typically inaccessible through traditional biography. Andersen's memoir-esque qualities in *The Day John Died* prompted hundreds of readers to expose themselves on the review section of a public social-media site, certainly evincing the memoir's impetus to unite.

The first memoir on the bestseller list that came two weeks after the attacks and stayed on the list for four was, as previously mentioned, *Jack: Straight from the Gut* by Jack Welch and John A. Byrne. Jack Welch, who wrote his memoir upon retiring, was an engineer and business executive and is most widely recognized for his position as CEO of General Electric from 1981-2001 (Cowe). There are two pieces of information that seem relevant to consider regarding Welch's text on the list at such a culturally sensitive time. Firstly, it was originally published earlier in the year, and thus was, in essence, resurrected from the shelves in a massive sale after the attacks. Secondly, the contents of the book, judging by the cover, seem to evoke an instruction manual more than an emotive, unifying memoir. Its resurrection and seemingly dry content prompted a more thorough investigation. Evidently, the content was not as dry, or unemotive, as it first appeared to be. Indeed, the text's exposed nature is quite evident in the title itself, with the invocation of the body, the "gut", in its most evocative vulnerability: *Jack: Straight from the Gut*.

Upon further inspection, the first chapter commences with a story about Jack's mother in his early childhood. It reminisces on her maternal qualities and praises her for instilling Jack with the characteristics of a leader. There is a constant back and forth between specific memories of childhood and later on, business deals and relationships in which Jack suggests a solid throughline to what his mother taught him as a child. The memoir balances nostalgia and motivation, toeing the line between sentimentally reminiscing the past and assertively projecting confidence into contemporary stories, where Jack demonstrates a keen business intuition and

authoritative energy. Jack Welch and John A. Byrne are able to stitch the callous with the humane, seamlessly jolting the reader with grisly and sometimes embarrassing stories of poor business decisions Welch made in the past, and soothing the reader with familiar anecdotes that are shared across humanity, those of childhood and adolescence, growing up, and learning lessons.

The fact that the memoir was not an instant bestseller upon its release suggests that it was relevant for the very moment in which it became a bestseller, namely, two weeks after the September attacks. Certainly *Jack: Straight from the Gut*'s popularity in such a critical moment in American history evokes a parallel to the popularity of Benjamin Franklin's memoir during the American Revolution. It, too, stitched grisly war commentary with sentimental bonding phrases addressed at the nation through personal language seemingly for the private reading of his son. While the techniques differ, the effect is much the same. Namely, both texts use the memoir form to motivate and unite the reader by way of familiar and comforting language mixed with stimulating encouragement for the future. Both memoirs also seem to work as motivation for war. Indeed, both memoirs operate on the predominate cultural narrative of us versus them, the kind for which Don DeLillo proposed an antidotal counter-narrative. It was in retrospect that the logic and ethics of starting a war with Iraq were scrutinized more intensely by the majority of the United States. In fact, less than a week after the Iraq war began in March of 2003, a Gallup poll indicated that 72% of Americans support the war, and roughly the same amount supported President Bush's administration (Newport). Of course, in later years it became clear that the public was misled in interpreting the situation. However, in the moment, there was a seemingly unified front.³⁵ Indeed, President Bush was subsequently reelected in 2004, having won the

³⁵ One such corroboration came directly from President Bush's administration in the form of a biography memoir by Scott McClellan titled *What Happened: Inside the Bush White House and Washington's Culture of Deception* (2008), which was a bestseller the week of June 15th, 2008, before President Bush was due to leave office. In it, McClellan

popular vote. Furthermore, in the presidential library of George Bush Jr., the decisions room simulates the pressure under which the president and his cabinet had to determine the best plan of action after the attacks. Its presence in the library can be colloquially understood as a scenario simulator to offset the disdain expressed towards Bush Jr., in large part for engaging in war, by demonstrating the duress under which the decision had to be made. At the moment, the resolve to declare war on Iraq was certainly protested, however small the numbers were, and on the Gallup poll that number scarcely reached 25%, therefore the majority's wish was to declare war. This being so, it stands to reason that the cultural sentiment would reflect a need for a combination of motivation for future action as well as the ability to mourn the tragedy of 9/11. One way to conceptualize the popularity of Welch's memoir, then, is to see it as the pacifying yet energizing tool it appears to be in terms of content, tone, and relevant time on the bestseller list. Another similarity between Franklin's and Welch's memoirs is the fact that both can be considered products of the generational elite, a concept introduced in Chapter two. While Franklin's status as a generational elite can be taken for granted, certainly, due to his notoriety as a founding father, drafter of the constitution, and one of the instrumental leaders of the American Revolution, perhaps Welch's status is not as concrete. Of course, it is without question that Franklin's power was supported, in part, by his business and financial competence. Having arrived in Philadelphia without much to his name, his life culminated in a long and monetarily subsidized retirement. However, the arrival of financial success seems to give way to Franklin's other accomplishments. This is very much unlike Welch's success story. Considering the different cultural context, Welch's power, which grants him access as a generational elite, came primarily from his managerial and financial literacy, in an industry not necessarily known to

chronicles his insider perspective of how the administration bungled major national and domestic policies in times of crisis such as during hurricane Katrina and the Iraq War (McClellan).

possess the ability to unify a nation, such as Franklin's position. While business and financial success may not immediately conjure the collective to unite, *Jack: Straight from the Gut* does seem to invoke a "rags to riches" or "self-made" trope that is at the mythical heart of the United States and was one of the mainstays of the economic boom of the 1980s, thereby giving Welch an authority as a generational elite in the culture's own definition. Indeed, part of the synopsis for Welch's memoir reads: "[s]o begins the story of a self-made man...who thrived in one of the most volatile and economically robust eras in US history, while managing to maintain a unique leadership style" (Hachette Book Group). The focus on his financial success in an economically explosive time in the United States solidifies the notion that the priorities of the cultures in which the two men lived are different, and thus the impetus to motivate and unite essentially takes a different form. While Welch's memoir might not directly address the notion of an upcoming (or in Franklin's case, concluding) war, the text's presence on the bestseller list in a historically significant moment does suggest that memoirs may morph for purposes fit for the cultural topography in which they exist.

3.3 Bestselling Memoirs After the Release of the Amazon Kindle

The Amazon Kindle was released to the public on November 19th, 2007. The cumbersome 10.3 ounce device, which was equipped with 90,000 pre-saved titles and sold for \$399, was presented in New York City by Jeff Bezos, founder, and CEO of Amazon. The first-generation Kindle sold out within five and a half hours (Kelly par. 9). At the time of the launch, Amazon also announced its self-publishing platform, called Kindle Direct. The company furthermore stated that all e-books on their platform would cost ten USD, "well below what new printed books sold for", therefore, while the device itself was expensive, the books available on it cost less than a physical copy that one might find at a store (Hall, par. 16). A couple of years later, the company

launched the Kindle app for smartphones, making the device's vast e-book library available to many readers across the globe. November 2022 marked the fifteen-year anniversary of the release of the Kindle, a device that revolutionized readership.³⁶ While there have been many business-level controversies regarding the Kindle, including alarm regarding Amazon's control of the e-book market and the subsequent frustration, sometimes expressed legally, of major publishing houses, this section will focus primarily on the literary correlation between the release of the first Amazon Kindle and the bestsellers on *The New York Times* Nonfiction list for the year 2007 as well as the surrounding years.³⁷ In doing so, it will interrogate the texts present on the list in order to discuss the effect that e-books, and specifically e-book popularity, had on readership.

Memoirs accounted for thirteen of the twenty-four texts on the 2007 New York Times Bestseller list. For twenty-nine weeks that year, a memoir was a bestseller. For five weeks of those twenty-nine, the bestselling memoir was by a former-nobody. In total, memoirs accounted for 54% of books on the 2007 list. The year began with ten weeks of *The Audacity of Hope* by Barack Obama, who had not yet become president, followed by four weeks of *In an Instant* by famous news anchor Bob Woodruff and his wife, Lee, and lastly came Ishmael Beah's *A Long Way Gone*, a former-nobody's war memoir that stayed on the bestseller list for two weeks. The remaining 2007 bestselling memoirs include a political/insider look at 9/11 titled *At the Center of the Storm* by former CIA agent, George Tenet, *Lone Survivor* by notable veteran and former-nobody Marcus Luttrell, and his writer, Patrick Robinson. There were also several more

³⁶ See "E-books and Reading Experience" (2014), by Vessela Howell, "How Do E-Books Change the Reading Experience?" (2013) by Moshin Hamid and Anna Holmes, "Ebooks are changing the way we read, and the way novelists write" (2015) by Paul Mason, "E-books are changing the way we read" (2013) by Janet McFadden, "How E-Books Will Change Reading And Writing" (2009) by Lynn Neary, and "A History of eBooks" (2016) by James Hardy.

³⁷ For more on the alarm regarding Amazon's control of the e-book market, see "A Case for Openness – Book Publishing and the Role of Amazon" a 2022 article by Antje Kreutzmann-Gallasch and Simone Schroff.

memoirs by celebrities and politicians that made the 2007 list. When the Kindle came out on the 19th of November, Stephen Colbert's *I Am American (And So Can You!)* was already on the list and remained there until the ninth of December. The year after the release of the Kindle was statistically comparable. The 2008 Bestseller list recorded 13 memoir bestsellers out of the 24 books on the list, and the weeks memoirs were bestsellers accounted for 52% of the year.

What is most notable about this information aside from the memoirs themselves, is the nature of the bestseller lists on which they appear. From the years 1995-2006, the average recorded number of books on the list is eighteen. From 2007-2018, that number reaches just over 23. Although only marginally higher, the rise is significant in that it signals what many theorize as the effect of digitalization and the growing dependence on technology to replace common activities, including e-books in place of physical copies of texts for the purpose of reading. Namely, the slimming and already finite resource, one's attention, and the fact that devices with internet connection make it increasingly more difficult to concentrate on a text, unlike the way a physical book commands one's attention with multiple sensory points, is implicated in the rising number of books on the bestseller lists. The more books on the bestseller list, the less time each book spends as a bestseller. In the last decade, a text's presence on the list for more than five weeks is increasingly becoming an anomaly. Indeed, in 2009, roughly two years after the Kindle was released and the same year the Kindle app became available on smartphones, American author Steven Johnson published an article in the Wall Street Journal titled "How the E-Book Will Change the Way We Read and Write." In it, he covers the breadth of reasons why the E-Book will create waves in the field (Johnson). Johnson's reasons substantiate the rise in bestsellers since the release of the Kindle. Namely, with internet access on one's reading device, or, in the case of the Kindle app, with the ability to read on one's internet device, it is difficult to

give one's full attention to a text, there is more of an impulse to buy a text that has been recommended or referenced, therefore possibly abandoning the text one is currently reading, and there is an infinite amount of commentary available immediately through reading websites and literary social media that link directly to the e-book via highlighting passages (Johnson par. 20). Furthermore, the suggested changes to the way authors will write come from the culture of sampling, whereby e-books allow access to introductory chapters of a text in addition to the synopsis in order to entice potential readers and compete with the infinite amount of books now available at the click of a button (Johnson). Such changes to the style of writing are not uncommonly prompted by changes in the ways of readership. In fact, according to Johnson, "the serial publishing schedule of Dickens's day led to the obligatory cliffhanger ending at the end of each installment" (Johnson par. 23). With the new culture of sampling, authors are prompted to write in increasingly more accessible and captivating portions in order to attract and retain their audience. Indeed, in 2005 the results of a study done by San Jose State University concluded that our brains process information in a non-linear manner when reading on a screen as opposed to paper (Liu).³⁸ Our eyes search for keywords and main points, therefore the in-depth reading that one must heed while attending to *War and Peace* (1867) is replaced instead with the kind of reading more apt for short articles, concise chapters, and social media posts. This style lends itself well to the memoir and it certainly must, since the highest-selling and read E-books, according to the Amazon Charts, are memoirs (Amazon). Therefore, it can be suggested that e-books, memoirs, and other easily digestible nonfiction are natural allies. Indeed, linguist Naomi Baron published her 2015 book titled *Words Onscreen: The Fate of Reading in a Digital World*, and in it, echoes the idea that with the combination of a shorter attention span and change

³⁸ Another study, conducted by the Reading Center of the University of Stavanger, reached a similar conclusion (Mangen).

in authorial practice, shorter books that require less close reading and reflection will be increasingly popular (Baron). To that end, it is worth examining a sample of memoirs that were published in the wake of the release of the Kindle E-Book.

The first memoir to top the charts after the release of the Amazon Kindle was Valerie Bertinelli's *Losing It*. Headlining and in bold on the Simon and Schuster official publisher page, under the "About the Book" section is the information "The *New York Times* #1 bestseller (3 weeks running)" (Simon and Schuster 2008). Additional descriptors of the memoir include "Surprising, uplifting, and empowering" as well as "frank" (Simon and Schuster 2008). The adjectives advertising Bertinelli's memoir already suggest that this memoir's selling point is the "behind the scenes" look at the visceral qualities of Bertinelli's life not previously shown on screen during her acting career. Between the title page and the prologue of *Losing It* there is a page outlined with a rectangular card, reminiscent of a notecard, that is titled "Me" and gives readers basic and concise information such as Bertinelli's name, age, height, weight, occupation, and then such things as "strengths, faults, happy or sad" and also, a section titled "you will never see me" in which she writes "without my clothes on" (Bertinelli). The opening page which reads like a study card is unique specifically due to the layout, the information provided, and its positioning at the beginning of the text.³⁹ It signals the readers to the text's keywords and clues them into the principal takeaways. The study card serves, as any study card, to remind the reader what is important as they continue on in the text. The page is easily visible due to its double-lined outline and easily accessible due to its positioning at the beginning of the book before the pages begin to fill with text. Indeed, the format of a book in and of itself is worth considering, according to Gerard Genette in *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, "the most all-embracing aspect of the production of a book – and thus of the materialization of a text for

³⁹ See Fig. 2

public use – is doubtless the choice of format” (Genette 17). And while Bertinelli’s concise outline takes up only one of nearly 300 pages of text, one can contend that it is part of *Losing It’s* paratext, or what Genette characterizes as “a fringe of the printed text which in reality controls one’s whole reading of the text” (Genette 2). Perhaps the most suggestive element of this page is the subheading under “Me”, which reads “The Quicky Version”, which supports the theory that the advent of the E-Book creates the impetus for authors to construct their texts to be more concise and focused on keywords and main ideas rather than requiring readers to perform close readings and analysis (Bertinelli). Indeed, the 288-page memoir’s contents pages lists 29 chapters, which means that each chapter is about ten pages in length. Bertinelli’s memoir reflects the E-Book theories regarding shortened attention span, smaller portioned chapters, and the focus on keywords and main points as opposed to chapters requiring labored analysis.

3.4 Bestselling Memoirs During the COVID-19 Pandemic

On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a global pandemic. One month later, the country with the most confirmed deaths and recorded cases was the United States (Horigian 1). Many health experts were already concerned and closely tracking the rise in loneliness and depression, especially among young people in the United States, before the pandemic. They doubtless feared that the problem would only worsen with normal activities at a standstill and day-to-day life moved online (Horigian 1). One of many studies of its kind, “Loneliness, Mental Health, and Substance Use among US Young Adults during COVID-19” concluded that there was a notable rise in loneliness and depression in young adults during the pandemic.⁴⁰ The same can be suggested for those considered middle-aged, although the research

⁴⁰ “Participants reported significant increases across mental health and substance use symptoms since COVID-19” (Horigian 1).

tends to focus on the two extremes, namely young and old adults.⁴¹ Nonetheless, people everywhere speculated on the short and long-term effects of digitalizing everyday activities such as grocery shopping, school, and work. While some people were prepared to make the shift, the transition to life in quarantine came as quite a shock for most. But the country adapted and made the best of the situation. In fact, in the literary world, the year 2020 saw the largest yearly increase in book sales since the year 2010 (Milliot par. 2). Print books alone rose 8.2% from the recorded sales of 2019, with adult nonfiction accounting for 4.8% (Milliot par. 7). The bestsellers that contributed to the record amount of sales in 2020 include Barack Obama's *A Promised Land*, *Too Much and Never Enough* by Mary Trump, and Glennon Doyle's *Untamed*.⁴² Indeed, according to *The New York Times* Nonfiction Bestseller list for the year 2020, the first memoir to top the charts after the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a global pandemic was Glennon Doyle's *Untamed*. It subsequently returned to the bestselling position two more times in the year 2020, shuffling between other top-selling memoirs such as Barack Obama's *A Promised Land*, *Too Much and Never Enough* by Mary Trump, Matthew McConaughey's *Greenlights*, and more. Of the 28 books that made the bestseller list of the year 2020, sixteen, or 57%, were memoirs. Memoirs spent 65% of the year on the bestseller list, and former nobody memoirs accounted for 14% of all memoirs accounted for.

The two most notable memoirs in 2020 were virtual opposites. One, *A Promised Land*, was by former president Barack Obama, a household name. The other, *Untamed*, was by a former nobody, Glennon Doyle, who is recognized for her first memoir published in 2013.⁴³

⁴¹ Indeed, one study published in the *Journal of Aging & Mental Health* concluded that, since older adults are in a high risk category for COVID-19 fatalities, and thus more restrictions have been imposed on them by the government, "most research so far points towards an increase in loneliness during the pandemic" (Dahlberg).

⁴² According to Jim Milliot for Publishers Weekly, *A Promised Land* sold over 2.5 million print copies, while *Too Much and Never Enough* and *Untamed* sold about one million (Milliot par. 8).

⁴³ Doyle's rise to fame began with the publication of her first memoir *Carry On, Warrior*. The text was composed of the musings similar to those found on her blog. Both attempt to record her life navigating motherhood, a Christian faith, and the hardships that come with life. The 2013 memoir is characterized as "inspiring", "personal" as well as

Circling back to Chapter one in which the democratic nature of memoirs was analyzed, it is telling that the two most renowned texts of the year speak to opposing ends of the democratic spectrum. Obama's *A Promised Land* essentializes the domestic moments he shares with his family. Doyle's memoir, by contrast, delves into domestic matters and is lauded for being victoriously uninhibited.⁴⁴ In the first Chapter I analyzed James Frey's *A Million Little Pieces* and the subsequent controversy. The controversy excluded, Doyle and Frey's texts both speak to the use of the democratic nature of memoir by former nobodies. Indeed, one aspect of the democratic potential of memoirs is that it is more accessible to newcomers than other, more gatekept genres (Couser 26). Yet, Obama's memoir speaks to the democratic nature of memoirs insofar as his domesticity apart from stardom, or his private affairs, are made public.

In light of the rise in loneliness, depression, and the imposed social restrictions as a result of the pandemic, both Obama's and Doyle's memoirs' popularity in the year 2020 suggests a societal impetus to bond. From a world-renowned former president to a previously unknown former nobody, the bestsellers of 2020 span the breadth of authorship. With Doyle's memoir, the notion that anyone can write a memoir and become famous for it resurfaces, and with Obama's memoir, the idea that the former president carries out similar domestic duties, such as putting on his child's ballet flats, creates complicity with an otherwise faraway figure. These are important starting points that can be supplemented by Rita Felski's *Hooked*, which expounds on the notion that "stories help make things bearable" (Felski 84). In fact, Felski's text, *Hooked*, goes a long way in elucidating the notion that humans create different kinds of attachment to art. She furthermore hypothesizes that an attachment personal in nature is not necessarily

"moving" and "refreshing" on the official publisher's page (Simon and Schuster). Indeed, the text is lauded as one that "invites us to believe in ourselves, to be brave and kind, to let go of the idea of perfection, and to stop making motherhood, marriage, and friendship harder by pretending they're not hard" (Simon and Schuster).

⁴⁴ Look no further than the title itself, "*Untamed*", a synonym for wild, savage, feral, and undomesticated.

counter-intellectual, as it is sometimes thought. In chapter four of *Hooked*, Felski expands on the kinds of identification to art that are possible. Within this context she delves into the identification one may feel with characters in a text. Here she echoes philosopher Berys Gaut who posits that identification with a character does not mean, as Felski writes, “obliterating or overriding differences” (Felski 82). Instead, to identify with a character means to relate to specific aspects of said character. “One can identify with a character’s perceptions, emotions, motivations, beliefs, self-understanding, physical characteristics, experiences, or situation” (Felski 82). This suggests that the popularity of *A Promised Land* and *Untamed* go far beyond the known or unknown presence of the texts’ authors. Indeed, the fame of former President Obama does not obstruct the momentum to identify oneself in his domestic duties. It is quite possibly the process of identification with similar “experiences,” situation[‘s]”, and “self-understanding” (Felski 82) that help to create complicity between the reader and the author, and thus the reading of Obama’s memoir generates a bond.

In Doyle’s case, the author's text is one of the readers’ first interactions with Doyle as a human. Unlike the former president, the reader has likely not been introduced or accustomed to aspects of Doyle’s persona through media or conversation with others. With one caveat, the identification process follows a similar logic to that of *A Promised Land*, whereby readers are able to see themselves in Doyle, by clinging to certain aspects of Doyle’s personhood. The main difference that can be suggested between identifying with former president Obama’s memoir and Doyle’s memoir is that perhaps there is an element of “shock in recognition” available more to readers of Doyle’s memoir, whereby the author takes up less capital in the public imagination, and can thus fade into the background of the text more easily (Felski 83). Indeed, both memoirs allow a extensive degree of identification, but perhaps Doyle’s former nobody memoir goes

further towards causing “us to revise our sense of who we are” (Felski 83). Taking it one step further, it can be suggested that this form of identification, one that reaches the core of the reader’s personhood, enough to encourage or enact change, could be the result of the kind of content typically associated with former nobody memoirs and even some celebrity tell-all memoirs with a focus on addiction, a problem, or a tragedy. One parallel example is evident in queer studies, where frequent work is being done to study the reader's response to gay attachment in media and literature (Felski 82). One common reader takeaway is to be “empathetic” with the characters who experience pain or abjection, as well as feel vindictive on behalf of those victimized (Felski 83). Therefore, identifying “does not simply entrench a prior self but may enrich, expand, or amend it” (Felski 83) in gay literature as well as in memoirs that expand on trauma or alternative ways of being that are not normalized or perhaps accepted within the cultural consciousness.

Former President Obama’s memoir, and others like it, do not seem to possess the aim of eliciting a response that indicates a change or future change in character to the same extent as Doyle’s and other memoirs. As is suggested by one review of *A Promised Land*, perhaps former President Obama indeed goes too far in the other direction, by essentializing his domestic duties to the point that they become dry or impersonal (Adichie). This is expected, in a sense, if one follows Couser’s thinking in regard to the kinds of memoirs typically written by politicians. (Couser 9, 103). While it is difficult to argue the intentions of a text, it does appear that some, more than others, focus on content that is relatable to the reader and possibly speaks to them, invoking Kacandes, while others, like *A Promised Land*, have relatable material as an aside, or in the background, and whose content suggests the aim is more likely aligned with setting a record straight.

Nonetheless, the identification made possible in *A Promised Land* and *Untamed* allows the reader to catch a glimpse of oneself “in a character”, thus allowing oneself to be transported, just as in fiction “into alternate worlds” (Felski 83-4). Felski concludes this line of thinking with the idea that “personal stories speak to others when they become paradigms or parables” (Felski 84). Indeed, memoirs that function as parables, therefore “providing an instructive example or lesson” or “illustrating a moral attitude” are abundant (Merriam-Webster). To make the leap from the cultural impetus to read memoirs in times of intense loneliness to the cultural demand for social bonding becomes less arduous with Felski’s premises. While, again, she addresses the realm of fiction, it can be argued that her theories extend to all written stories. Felski uses evolutionary psychology to argue that humans “have an intrinsic bias toward sociability: we are primed to be curious about the thoughts, feelings, and actions of other persons...and are drawn to stories that stimulate deep features of our social brains” (Felski 85). Readers prioritizing memoirs in times of decreased social interactions suggest that memoirs are perhaps sought after or expected to fill a gap normally reserved for human interaction. Felski’s hypotheses also go a long way in asserting the power of the written word to fill this gap. This power, combined with the scientific research conducted on human social attachment and emotional arousal through media (Dunbar) shed light on the importance of memoir, as well as the ability of memoir to adapt to public needs and expectations.

3.5 Conclusion of Chapter Three

Memoirs are a unique and multifaceted genre. This chapter analyzed a selection of memoirs that accompanied three critical moments in contemporary American history to develop a more thorough understanding of the malleability of memoirs throughout time and space. Firstly, in order to demonstrate the pertinence of *The New York Times* Nonfiction Bestseller resource, an

analysis was conducted into the history and contemporary presence of the list in the cultural conscience. Next, an illustration of this project's methods was presented in order for the reader to understand the metrics that were considered valuable to this specific study. What follows are three studies that investigate the bestsellers and their reception during critical moments of American contemporary history, namely, 9/11, the release of the Amazon Kindle, and the onslaught of the Covid-19 pandemic.

The bestsellers in the year of the attacks of 9/11, as well as surrounding years, demonstrate a kinship to prevalent memoirs of America's past, namely, the popularity of memoirs that emanate a motivational quality tailored to the culture within which the memoir was written. The bestsellers of the years surrounding 2001 also highlight the relevance of Irene Kacandes' text-talk theory, which, summarized, expands on the notion that certain texts elicit a direct response from their readers (Kacandes). The impetus to respond lends itself well to the progression of literature-focused social media, and is invoked by contemporary memoirs that more frequently blend content with implied questions to the reader. The bestsellers after the release of the Amazon Kindle indicate the ability of memoirs, and memoir authors, to adapt to the ways of readership. This section of the chapter considers the effect that the Amazon Kindle, and E-books writ large had on readership, and then moves to discuss the proposed effects this change has on memoir style and content. It also suggests that there is a cause-and-effect reaction, whereby the Amazon Kindle alters readership ways, and thus memoirs can fill a newly created gap. It was concluded that memoirs lend themselves well, in content and form, to digital readership. The last study was of the bestsellers in the year 2020, the first and most serious of the Covid-19 pandemic. This study attempted to discern the reasons why two seemingly opposing authors' memoirs were both successful. By using, among other sources, Rita Felski's theories

first proposed in *Hooked: Art and Attachment*, this chapter concludes that one way to understand the breadth of top-selling memoirs in the year 2020 is by positioning memoirs as literature that enacts social bonding and thus fills a gap, such as that created by the lack of social interaction in 2020. This section analyzes two specific memoirs and in doing so is able to present theories applicable to all memoirs in this study. Indeed, memoirs must fill a gap, or at least are sold on the expectation of such, or else they would not continue to circulate, and even thrive, throughout history and in socially traumatic or meaningful times. By analyzing memoirs at multiple points in history and culture, one is able to grasp their relevance and reliability, and, therefore, gain a more thorough understanding of the importance of memoirs.

4.0 Chapter Four Introduction: Contextualizing The Emotional Journey

In Chapter One, I explored the general principles of the memoir genre and how it has borrowed structurally and thematically from the novel and auto/biography proper. In Chapter Two, I discussed the historical American expectation for life-writing to be politically and culturally functional. In Chapter Three, I argued that certain contemporary memoirs enact social bonding and thus are contemporarily utilized to fill a gap. In this Chapter, I set out to integrate the previous three chapters to firmly contextualize the utility of contemporary memoirs, and retroactively map the trajectory of the memoir impulse and influence from a part of the 20th century onwards. I hope to contextualize some of the catalysts that propelled the prioritization of the emotional journey in contemporary popular literature, indeed, by engaging tenets of contemporary memoir with those of postmodernism. Next, I will transition into a discussion of the literature of experience, which is prioritized in the United States, in order to take the reader to the present-day literary landscape to highlight the preference for the emotional journey in popular literature.

My aim in this final Chapter is to demonstrate that while continuing to borrow thematically and structurally from fiction and other genres, and although expected to fulfill a more emotionally charged role than in their past, contemporary American memoirs adhere to their foundational principles of utility and authenticity, while also, in their preference to deal in emotional currency, can be read as following the logic of postmodern literary output. In other words, this Chapter will explore the ways in which memoir has adapted to the particular conditions of our cultural context while also remaining true to the genre, thus further illustrating their remarkable ability to adjust to the expectations of the time in which they are written.

An emotional journey seems to be preferred by readers of contemporary literature. This concept was discussed in Chapter Three, where I conducted an analysis of bestselling memoirs to highlight the connection between memoirs and culturally transformative times. The trending preference for an emotional journey will be further explored in later sections of this Chapter. For now, it is worth noting that the current *New York Times* fiction bestseller for the year 2023 is Colleen Hoover's *It Ends with Us* (2016) which, at one point, "set a company record for first day fiction sales" for Atria Books, an offshoot of Simon and Schuster (Veltman par. 2). The book, while certainly not a failure before, reached a new level of popularity and sales due to a surge of readers who encountered the book as well as other works by the author on BookTok, a literary community on TikTok dedicated to sharing books on the basis of how they make readers feel. Hoover's text rose to the number one spot on *The New York Times* bestseller list in January of 2022 and has since returned five times, along with several other Hoover titles such as *Veracity* (2018) and *It Starts with Us* (2022) for a total of well over 150 weeks. The responsibility for such a sudden rise in popularity is exclusively BookTok's (Veltman) (Alter). On the same app, a video published in October of 2022 captioned "I'll never recover from these books: books that crushed my heart and had me sobbing for days" reached two million likes and almost one million saves (@adriadiaries). The video furnishes viewers with five book titles that supposedly induced sobbing for the creator of the video. All five books are contemporary fiction and were spread widely through the video, presumably based on the expectation of an emotional journey. The relevance and popularity of BookTok will be analyzed later on in this chapter.

The expectation of and consequent preference for the emotional journey seems to extend to memoirs. Memoirs, especially contemporary ones, operate on emotional currency. Memoirs seem to circulate less (still, some) through the emotional advertisement of BookTok, likely due

to the fact that the genre speaks for itself in regards to the emotive. Indeed, the foundation of a memoir is authenticity, and the revelations of said authenticity have the power to materially alter reality: public perception of a celebrity's image, a major event such as a political scandal, etc. Memoirs, at least celebrity ones such as, for instance, Prince Harry's *Spare* (2023) and Michelle Obama's *The Light We Carry* (2022), a follow-up to her number-one bestselling memoir *Becoming* (2018), offer readers more revealing and authentic content than is shared about the author's public image on a day to day basis. Revelations of any sort deal in emotional currency. They might alter or shatter a previously held public truth about the author, set a record straight, or reinforce a publically held notion about the author. In short, they shatter, create, or augment publicly regarded truths, and thus have the power to create, shatter, or augment emotions. And, indeed, for celebrity memoirs, the revelations which possess that power are what drive curiosity and, eventually, sales: the two top-selling nonfiction books, according to *The New York Times* 2023 list, are Prince Harry's *Spare* and Michelle Obama's *The Light We Carry*. Both books are memoirs by celebrities. Both memoirs deal in contemporary emotional currency.⁴⁵

4.1 Contemporary Memoir and the Postmodern

The previous Chapter analyzed the presence of emotionally functional memoirs that were essential to culturally transformative times such as the aftermath of 9/11, the release of the Amazon Kindle, and the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. This section will attempt to map the postmodern onto the contemporary impulse to focus on the emotional in literary output such

⁴⁵ For example, referencing, among others, Prince Harry's mother's tragic death, the publisher page concludes *Spare*'s official synopsis with: "Prince Harry tells his own story, chronicling his journey with raw, unflinching honesty... full of insight, revelation, self-examination, and hard-won wisdom about the eternal power of love over grief" (Penguin Random House par. 5). Such adjectives as "raw" and "unflinching" highlight the emotional currency which this memoir deals in, and, surely, create the expectation in its readers that the memoir will fulfill on its promise to portray Prince Harry's vulnerability.

as memoirs. In many ways, the contemporary examples of memoirs presented above and in Chapter Three indicate the flourishing of memoirs in the postmodern era. Studying the postmodern, then, can help contextualize the contemporary memoir impulse to deal in the emotional. There are four characteristics of postmodernism that can be mapped onto the contemporary memoir insofar as content and structure is concerned. Contemporary memoirs embody the Baudrillardian theory of simulacrum and maps. Contemporary memoirs are ironic in the postmodern sense. Contemporary memoirs embody Lyotard's theory of little narratives > metanarratives, and, finally, contemporary memoirs are non-linear and enact an imitation of the past, a pastiche, through the highly subjective and emotional exorcism of past events. The following section will map the postmodern onto contemporary memoir in the above four ways. In doing so, I hope to illuminate current literary trends, specifically, the preference for highly emotional and subjective content in memoirs.

To put it bluntly, "postmodernism is a notoriously slippery and indefinable term" (Nicol 1). Its contested nature stems from a fundamental questioning of its purpose. Many scholars do not agree on whether or not postmodernism "reject[s] modernist attitudes and techniques or adapt[s] or extend[s] them" (1). Evident even in the disagreement, however, is the extent to which postmodernism enacts dialogue with its predecessor. Modernist literature, exemplified by Ezra Pound's motto "make it new" (18), can be understood as an experiment with form and expression that pushed back on the assumptions of realism in an effort to "convey how the conscious mind experiences reality not just as something that can be measured by universal norms, but as something deeply personal and particular" (19).⁴⁶ Indeed, postmodernism often lobbies against realist notions, too, one difference between postmodernism and modernism, then,

⁴⁶ "[M]odernist novelists such as James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, and Joseph Conrad believed that subjectivity (the experience of being a human being, or social 'subject') ought to be rendered more accurately than it was in the nineteenth-century novel" (Nicol 19).

becomes a question of approach, for example, “[w]here modernism is sincere or earnest, postmodernism is playful and ironic” (2).

One catalyst that contextualizes the difference in approach from the modern to the postmodern stems from “[t]he consequence of living in a postindustrial, information-driven, media/culture-saturated world” (4). The consequence in question “according to theorists of postmodernity, is that we have become alienated from those aspects of life we might consider authentic or *real*” (4). In this regard, a postmodernist approach articulated by philosopher Jean Baudrillard rests on the notion that in the current “postindustrial, information-driven, media/culture-saturated world”, we increasingly experience reality as a simulation (4-5). Stark evidence of this is the way in which real historical events, such as war, have been consumed virtually: through depictions of the real in media form.⁴⁷ Before the current postindustrial world, depictions of war in media form surely existed, however, in the aftermath of a post-industrial world, the depictions are progressively realistic and capable of alienating viewers from the original that is being represented.⁴⁸ The increasing frequency, quality, and reliance on media depictions contribute to Baudrillard’s theory of alienation in the current post-industrial world. Thus, our experience of, for example, the Vietnam war through television is indecipherable from the real thing. The simulation of war actualizes the event itself (5). Baudrillard, therefore, highlights that in postmodern times, the simulacrum precedes the real; the map precedes the territory.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ In his text *Simulacra and Simulation* (1994), Baudrillard uses, for example, *Apocalypse Now* (1979) as a map, or simulacrum, of the Vietnam War (Baudrillard 59-60).

⁴⁸ Baudrillard is contending that “it is simulation that is effective, never the real” (Baudrillard 57). Indeed, he argues that, at least for *The China Syndrome* (1979), the “mental strategy” was to simulate catastrophe, for only then “the only means of mitigating this scenario would be to make the catastrophe arrive, to produce or to reproduce a real catastrophe” (Baudrillard 58). The text goes a long way in explaining how, in our current post-industrial society, the simulacrum we produce are capable, and indeed excel in, going beyond the real.

⁴⁹ To accomplish this, Baudrillard appropriates the theories of linguist Ferdinand de Saussure who postulates that “language, unlike speaking, is something that we can study separately” meaning that the world and language can be

We can likewise position the memoir as a media form that mediates reality, most importantly, through language. Contemporary memoirs can be read on two levels using Baudrillard's theory of simulacrum. First, memoirs create "real" events filtered through multiple layers of memory and input stimuli, so that, by the time the "real" event written about in the memoir reaches readers, it has been filtered through multiple linguistic "maps", or lenses, and is, in itself, something else. Of course, this has always been the case with memoirs, and indeed, the same lenses arguably operate in fiction through, for example, characterization. What has presumably changed, however, is the contemporary impulse to deal more fervently in emotions. The emotional journey and memoir combination seems to suggest a longing for the real/authentic, but at the same time, this combination seems to take the reader further away from the real/authentic, evidenced by the emotional thematic lenses that separate the reader from what is "real" and the genre that, while based on "truth", increasingly borrows from fiction and engages in storytelling and narrative techniques, rather than dealing exclusively with the truth, such as, perhaps, a traditional auto/biography. Memoirs have ironically contributed to the oversaturation and separation from the "real" that produces postmodern anxiety. Baudrillard's postmodern anxiety is perhaps evidence of a cultural attempt to cling to authenticity and thus escape oversaturation. Contemporary memoirs are demonstrably more concerned with the emotional. The genre itself has also become more popular and widely read than ever before. Perhaps the contemporary memoir can be better understood as a representation *and* symptom of Baudrillard's postmodern anxiety concerning simulacrum.

Indeed, it is possible that the postmodern anxiety regarding our alienation from authenticity and reality compels the popularity of a genre that purports to be based on reality.

sundered (Saussure 15). Saussure explains language as a system of signs, whereby the sign is made up of two elements, the signifiers and the signified (Saussure 66-7).

Perhaps postmodern anxiety drives the obsession for memoirs, which promise to fulfill our need for authenticity, and increases their sales. Memoirs are ironic: at once addressing postmodern anxiety while simultaneously existing as evidence of that same anxiety. In this way, contemporary memoirs embody the ironic reaction that helps distinguish postmodernist from modernist works. Contemporary memoirs enact, also, a structural irony in line with the kind of irony that postmodernism proposes.⁵⁰ A postmodern ironic literary production acknowledges and interacts with the fact of itself ideologically constructing reality. Memoirs acknowledge and interact with the fact of themselves on a structural level, namely, using (mostly) the first person. While the first person is not exclusively the domain of memoirs, the first person in combination with the preference for the emotional journey is what distinguishes contemporary memoirs as highly ironic in the postmodern sense. The kind of irony that postmodernism refers to is demonstrated by Italian author and theorist Umberto Eco in an oft-quoted ‘I love you madly’ assertion. The idea behind it, for the sake of brevity, and also presented by Eco, is the question of “is it possible to say ‘It was a beautiful morning at the end of November’ without feeling like Snoopy?” (Eco 18).⁵¹ The notion is such that, in postmodern times, it is necessary, even essential, to engage ironically with the past, because of the nature of writing “in the face of the knowledge that all the forms of fiction ha[ve] been ‘used up’ by the moderns” (Nicol 15).⁵² One way to engage anew with the past in contemporary memoir is by approaching one’s subject from a

⁵⁰ While the popularity of memoirs is indeed ironic in the literal sense of the word, the kind of irony that is explicitly postmodern is not a literal irony. Instead, postmodern irony is that which “demonstrates a knowingness about how reality is ideologically constructed” (Nicol 13).

⁵¹ In this passage, Eco continues by saying that in order to utter this phrase, if one is not Snoopy, requires a “mask” (Eco 18). The “mask” in question can be, for example, irony.

⁵² John Barth theorizes in his 1967 essay “The Literature of Exhaustion” that there exists “a used-upness of certain forms or the felt exhaustion of certain possibilities” (Barth 64). But, “it might be conceivable to rediscover validly the artifices of language and literature—such far out notions as grammar, punctuation...even characterization! Even *plot!*—if one goes about it the right way, aware of what one’s predecessors have been up to” (Barth 68).

highly subjective and emotional lens, one that is seemingly unreplicable, all the while referring to the fact of the approach (the fact of ideologically creating a reality) in an ironic fashion.

One way to conceive of contemporary memoirs is that they paradoxically embody and also enact postmodern anxieties. Namely, contemporary memoirs can be read as a symptom, an embodiment, of a post-industrial society, such as Baudrillard proposed, that is anxiously attempting to reacquaint itself with the real/authentic. At the same time, contemporary memoirs can be read as mechanisms that shield readers from the “real” in the Baudrillardian sense.

Furthermore, contemporary memoirs enact the ironic engagement with the past in the postmodern manner proposed by Barth and Eco. All the while, contemporary memoirs are still expected to function on behalf of the truth. Therefore, by mapping a postmodern understanding of contemporary memoir, the genre in its current form can be understood as a paradox: altogether, contemporary memoirs are expected to function on behalf of the truth, while at the same time, they embody and enact a postmodern irony. But literary critic Linda Hutcheon asserts that paradox is the essence of the postmodern. Indeed, memoirs can be read through a postmodern lens in that they are “comfortable with doing two opposing things at the same time or representing both sides of an argument at once” (Nicol 16).

Memoirs can be read as an embodiment of what Jean-François Lyotard calls “*petit récits*” or “little narratives”, which is the preferred mode of writing for postmodernity (12). Memoirs stand in contrast to the “metanarratives” that fed Enlightenment with “grand stories which structure the discourses of modern religion, politics, philosophy, and science” (11). “Postmodern subjects simply don’t believe in metanarratives anymore” because said narratives were vehemently ideological and oppressive to the individual and suffused a fraudulent notion of “universality” and “totality” (11-12). The “death of the author” debates, beginning in the early

1960s, can be read as a cultural manifestation of the preference for little narratives. Marjorie Worthington attributes the proliferation of Autofiction to the notion of the death of the author, a catalyst that can also be applied to the memoir in this regard (Worthington 5). The proliferation of memoirs at the end of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first can be seen, in part, as a manifestation of the “authorial anxieties” that arose from the increasing prevalence of writers outside of Audre Lorde’s mythical norm.⁵³ Namely, the rise of self-referential, autobiographically centered writing (writing that focuses on the nature of the individual, also in the process of writing) boomed in the second half of the last century alongside the cultural challenging of the yet uncontested “creatively powerful white male” (Worthington 5). Worthington argues that “contemporary memoirs are often chronicles of their own production; this self-referential yoking of the author to the work signals a rejection of modernist impersonality” (Worthington 149). In the present day, memoirs further embody the notion of little narratives due to “hav[ing] adopted a highly self-conscious or even metafictional style” which enables them to “focus not just on the memories being depicted but also on the process of their depiction” (Worthington 149). Further evidence of the “death of the author” anxiety and the proliferation of little narratives in the present day is the increasing popularity of nobody memoirs.⁵⁴ The making of space for multiple truth claims (Lyotard’s little narratives) is an inherently postmodern practice. It is an essential component of postmodernism that stems from the rejection of the realist assumption of one localized truth, or, metanarrative. The democratic nature of memoirs, especially contemporarily, the infinite content available to write about, the increasing frequency with which memoirs use life-writing tactics alongside fiction storytelling tactics, and the contemporary preference to deal

⁵³ In “Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference” a chapter of *Sister Outsider* (1984), Audre Lorde’s notion of the “mythical norm” can be used to define the creative standard at the time as “white, thin, male, young, heterosexual, Christian and financially secure” (Lorde 116).

⁵⁴ In our contemporary moment, the primacy of this image is further challenged by the proliferation and increasing popularity of confessional memoirs written not by accomplished writers but by “everyday people” (Worthington 5).

in an emotional currency enable an understanding of contemporary memoir as an embodiment of postmodern little narratives. The various modes of engaging with memoirs prevent the genre from ever enacting metanarratives on a large scale. Indeed, the self-conscious “I”, by nature of the author’s awareness and presentation of themselves as individuals, combined with the highly subjective content and emotional theme of contemporary memoirs cannot, “present an overarching ‘Truth’” but instead can “offer a qualified, limited ‘truth’, one relative to a particular situation” (Nicol 12). Hence, memoirs, especially the highly emotional contemporary examples, can be understood in their ultra-subjectivity, as postmodern embodiments of Lyotard’s little narratives.

The (often) non-linear and non-chronological structure of memoir can also be read with a postmodern lens. Dealing with non-linear and non-chronological structures is a cornerstone for modernist and postmodernist literature.⁵⁵ The non-linear and non-chronological structure of a memoir that is also a record of trauma gets even more to the point. Past trauma is often brought to the fore and thus relived in the present.⁵⁶ As a result, trauma narratives are often disjointed and non-linear as a reflection of the trauma that the text deals with, sometimes oscillating between a depiction of the event itself and the author’s subsequent navigation through the effects of the trauma.⁵⁷ This format is frequently reflected structurally in literature that aims to portray a traumatized subject or content.⁵⁸ Even if they are not explicitly stories of trauma, in comparison to autobiography, memoirs are often non-linear and non-chronological by nature. Namely,

⁵⁵ Namely, modernist and postmodernist literary output utilizes non-linear and non-chronological structures in order to problematize and question the way realism engages linear structure as a function of its metanarratives.

⁵⁶ “[T]he constant presence of past events is typical of a traumatized state of mind” (Nicol 89).

⁵⁷ Jeannie Vanasco’s *Things We Didn’t Talk about When I Was a Girl: A Memoir* (2019) is one example of a memoir structured around the traumatic event of rape. Vanasco’s memoir employs a disjointed structure. Namely, in addition to flashing back to the rape, it also enacts a metanarrative by investigating her rapist’s present-day memories of the event as well as his motives at the time of the trauma. It jumps from the past to the present, simulating the nature of trauma itself.

⁵⁸ A narrative that “is not linear but a collection of events means that the events are all simultaneously present” (Nicol 89).

memoirs are structured thematically, and not necessarily tied to a linear or chronological structure. Much like trauma narratives, memoirs sometimes have the tendency to disrupt time and narrate disjointedly, through flashbacks and other methods of non-chronology.⁵⁹ Memoirs do not necessarily need to, and often do not begin with the birth of the subject (the author) such as in biography proper. Instead, memoirs are commonly organized thematically. Therefore, what binds the text is not the linear quality or chronology, but the theme. Thus, past/historical events and the subsequent examination/analysis for meaning conducted by the author creates a collage of past and present. In their non-linear and non-chronological structure that prioritizes a subjective emotional lens, memoirs showcase a kind of pastiche, whereby they replicate the past by reenacting it in a new way: through emotional subjectivity and moral lessons. A pastiche is typical of postmodern literature and is presented together with irony as a tool for postmodern subjects to negotiate with the past. The memoir pastiche is highly subjective and emotional. Old becomes new by adding subjective and emotional layers and reading the events chosen by the author through a particularly personal thematic lens.

4.2 Contemporary Memoir and the Self-Help/How-To Genre

The utility of the American memoir, implicit in its very foundation, must not be forgotten. Therefore, this section will demonstrate that the memoir has benefitted from and perhaps blurred with another nonfiction genre, namely, the self-help/how-to genre that targets a similar audience. In the following section, I analyze Jess McHugh's *Americanon* (2021), which surveys the

⁵⁹ Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books* (2003) is structured thematically, stemming from the content of banned books by Western authors that Professor Nafisi discusses in her women-only book club in Tehran. Additionally, although it is acknowledged as unconventional, Abigail Thomas' *Safekeeping: Some True Stories from a Life* (2000) is non-linear, as well as written from multiple points of view. *Safekeeping* also occasionally jumps from first to third person.

contents and effects of thirteen American best-seller nonfiction books throughout the 20th century. I use her chosen texts, and the analysis she conducts, and later establish that memoirs also accomplish much of what she contends self-help/how-to texts achieve. To do so I compare McHugh's text's contentions with those of one of her reviewers, Louis Menand.

McHugh's chapters are organized by her thirteen chosen texts (McHugh). She begins each chapter by expressing the value of the books she selected at the time in which they were published, and highlights some of the indicators that these texts, including Emily's Post's *Etiquette in Society, in Business, in Politics, and at Home*, were widely circulated across every American home. For example, Post's etiquette book was, at one point, the most stolen library book second only to the Bible (Post 192). Moreover, Dale Carnegie's 1936 book *How to Win Friends and Influence People* has sold 30 million copies and counting since it is still in print (Post 230). McHugh makes the point, for better or for worse, that the country specializes in this kind of non-fiction literature, to the extent that she reaches the conclusion that the books in question amount to a country and culture-specific canon, what McHugh deems the "Americanon." Louis Menand writes in his review of *Americanon*, "these sales figures are way beyond the range of even the most acclaimed fiction" (Menand par. 3). The texts in question are indisputably circulated on a massive scale, and this "mean[s] that they can be understood to be promoting a national ideology, or what she calls a national myth" (Menand par. 5).⁶⁰

The texts on McHugh's list are all united by a single factor, namely, their shared genre. All of the texts McHugh lists as the most widely circulated in the country at one point in time are self-help or how-to books. These texts, including Catharine Beecher's *A Treatise on Domestic Economy* (1841), Noah Webster's *Speller* (1783), and *You Can Heal Your Life* by Louise Hay

⁶⁰ McHugh asserts that "[b]eyond their practical purposes, these books served as a refuge from ambiguity, offering both reassurances of who 'we' were and the promise of control in times of turmoil" (McHugh 4).

(1984) are frequently presented from the point of view of a single author. However, most of the authors of these texts were not single authors at all but were instead multiple authors hidden under one name. In the case of Betty Crocker, for instance, the single person didn't exist but was invented by a company to be the face of sales for General Mills (Menand par. 8). This point is interesting. It suggests the value of a single author sharing their personal truths, as opposed to multiple authors in one text. Indeed, the knowledge of a single author being shared in book form with a reader enacts a different kind of bond and experience for the reader than if the text was presented as it was actually written, by a composite of multiple authors. It seems as though the publishers of these self-help/how-to texts understood that readers react more favorably to the shared knowledge of a single person, indeed, the single author-to-reader format suggests a form of intimacy that is not available in the multiple author-to-single-reader format.⁶¹ There is an intimacy in the shared knowledge of, seemingly, one person to another, and this is something the nonfiction genres of self-help and how-to share with memoir.

In *Americanon*, McHugh also highlights the fact that her chosen texts revolve around a message that single individuals, or readers of these texts, are tasked with the need to change their ways of being in order to fit the mold, instead of, say, charging this change to larger institutions that manage American life.⁶² To contextualize McHugh's concern and proposal, namely, the idea

⁶¹ At the beginning of her analysis of *Betty Crocker's Picture Cookbook* (1950), McHugh writes that "During the war years, Betty received more letters than the average Hollywood starlet" (McHugh 251). Many of these letters were of a personal nature, usually from women, asking for Betty Crocker's advice on domestic/marital/household related situations.

⁶² McHugh begins her text with the postwar period of 1792 in which the first edition of the *Old Farmer's Almanac* appeared. Her assertion is that at this very chaotic and uncertain time, "Americans were left to cope with both the practical work of nation building and the psychological task of national unity" (McHugh 15). Indeed, the remainder of the text follows this logic, citing the popularity and circulation of her texts as well as the individualized tasks that the contents of her analyzed texts promoted. She gives several examples of how and when Americans were put to task with the care of the soul of the nation. For example, McHugh asserts that the popularity of the Beecher sisters' *The American Woman's Home* (1869) is evidence of "[t]he popularity of domestic advice literature" that reached a new level in the 19th century by "filling the void created by growing literacy coupled with a lack of girls' schools" (148). Domestic manuals had to adapt to industrial progress and social literacy when American institutions of learning were slow to do so. Suddenly, cookbooks were not enough, and home organization was also an important domestic task that necessitated its own set of texts. It was women who bore the brunt of these changes, and were

that the impetus to change is put on people versus institutions, Menand makes the point that self-help is intrinsically American, and thus, likely to stay. In fact, Menand asserts that “Benjamin Franklin, whose autobiography is in the canon, pulled himself up out of nowhere, and you can, too, even if you do not happen to be a genius of business, science, and diplomacy” (Menand par. 15). In his snide reassurance to McHugh that self-help and how-to books do not merely reflect some grassroots response to iniquity in American communities but instead can be read as part of the fabric of American society, Menand also echoes the democratization inherent in the notion of self-help and how-to.⁶³ Indeed, later on, the cultural need to claim independence is noted once again when Menand reminds his readers that sometimes it is forgotten how much American citizens actually do rely on government assistance, in such things as highways and pensions, which are at times taken for granted, or subsumed in an effort to sustain the independence identity.⁶⁴ Menand and McHugh agree, in the end, that “both the American pioneer narrative and the American immigrant narrative have themes of self-reliance and individual entrepreneurship woven into them” and also that “[t]he relevance of how-to books is a product of American culture itself” considering that one of the “highest compliments we pay one another is the moniker of ‘self-made’” (Menand par. 16) (McHugh 3).

tasked with the grueling work of keeping up domestic appearances (149). While this can be true, McHugh’s singular focus on the popularity of the texts being a reflection of a loss of agency of women in American society perhaps eclipses a greater point that can be made about the connection between self-help/how-to texts and the molding period of American culture. It could also be argued, like Menand will do, and like McHugh eventually, begrudgingly does, that the texts’ popularity reflects an intrinsic part of American culture that has been for the benefit of all. Indeed, the independent, do-it-yourself attitude is one that McHugh asserts was a key factor in the foundation of the *Old Farmer’s Almanac*, the first mentioned book in McHugh’s text.

⁶³ Menand asserts that self-help/how-to texts are intrinsically American, and have existed on too large a scale, and have been read and cherished by too many American readers since the dawn of American colonization for McHugh to suggest that they are an effect, or response, to large-scale institutional failure. Rather, they are a reflection of American ways of life, and have grown up alongside the very institutions McHugh suggests that they respond to.

⁶⁴“Even though all Americans enjoy benefits paid for by the state, from federal highways and product-safety rules to veterans’ pensions and food stamps, few Americans like to admit it” indeed, because culturally, there exists the notion that to be American is to be a pioneer in your field, an inventor, self-reliant, self-made, and entrepreneurial. To admit reliance or dependence on a force beyond oneself, such as the government, in the United States is no simple task (Menand par. 16).

A more nebulous concept that is addressed by self-help and how-to books, says Menand, is an intrinsically existential one: no single human knows what it means to be a person, not, at least, in the way bees know to be bees, and dogs, dogs (Menand par. 18). Books such as the ones McHugh writes about are part of an American canon and network of literature that, by nature of their content, help give agency to millions of readers in an effort to understand the existential questions that have stuck with humanity throughout eternity. Menand goes on to clarify that self-help books are popular around the globe, and indeed proliferate in more societies than just the United States. One reason for the correlation between developed societies and self-help/how-to books could be that “people consider them useful when they think that their fate is not determined by the accident of birth” and thus have the agency to change their situation to be better than that which they were born into (par. 21). As for the relevance in American society, however, self-help and how-to books may have a particularly special position, considering the idea that the States were founded partially on the notion of anti-aristocracy, that, indeed, this was one of the major distinctions between “the New World from the Old” and thus, “it makes sense that how-to and self-help should be central to American life—and that a book about those books should be called ‘Americanon’” (par. 21).

Perhaps the most American urge of all is McHugh’s own lobbying against the intrinsically American self-help and how-to books. In *Americanon*, one of McHugh’s main takeaways is that the top-selling self-help and how-to books are a facade.⁶⁵ It is their intrinsically American nature that actually causes harm by being what Menand categorizes as “fake-inclusive” (Menand par. 22). While masquerading as all-encompassing and able to reach

⁶⁵ McHugh asserts that *Americanon* is “more a reevaluation than a revisionist takedown”, but nonetheless, the notion that the top-sellers represent a culture that has “failed to live up to our own ideals” exists throughout the text (McHugh 9).

every facet of society, these self-help and how-to books are ironically deceptive.⁶⁶ Indeed, McHugh argues that they promote the “white, Protestant, and physically and mentally fit” standard, and are thus, what Menand remarks as, “mechanisms of assimilation” (Menand par. 22). And yet, their wide readership remains an overwhelming fact. McHugh theorizes that her chosen self-help and how-to books, and, indeed, the genres in general may have become extremely popular in the States because of the absence of civic religion (McHugh 124, 159). Certainly, without a national subscription to a code of ethics and morals, citizens may feel isolated or disjointed from their neighbors, community, state, and country. The gap made in the absence of a national shared belief opens up the possibility to create new codes and ways of being, and McHugh and Menand both argue that, for better or for worse, self-help and how-to books attempt to fill the void.

The particularly American qualities of self-help and how-to books echo those that make contemporary memoir stand out as a particularly American genre. In many ways, they overlap, and where self-help/how-to books may fall short, memoirs seem to have a fitting antidote. Similarly to self-help and how-to books, the genre of contemporary memoir is intrinsically American on account of its utilitarian rationale.⁶⁷ Moreover, memoirs rely on the intimate knowledge that singular authors have learned and decided to share with readers. Both memoirs and how-to/self-help books are structured by an author having to share things/ideas/lessons they have learned with a reading audience. However, self-help/how-to texts remain at a distance from their readers in the sense that it is the genre that readers go to in order to learn ways of being (speaking, cooking, decorating, etc.) that they perform physically and outside of themselves. In a

⁶⁶ “They are written as though anyone could profit from their advice, even though Americans are differently situated according to race, class, religion, immigration status, sexuality, and gender, and, for most of American history, those have been barriers that no amount of bootstrap pulling could overcome” (Menand par. 22).

⁶⁷ As a reminder, by “utilitarian rationale” I mean to suggest that, because of the history of memoir in the United States being intrinsically tied to non-literary writings such as journals, diaries, catalogs, etc., it seems as though readers of American memoirs continue to expect that the genre be utilitarian, or functional.

sense, self-help/how-to texts of the same vein as McHugh's selected texts belong to a genre that readers go to in order to get advice. Therefore, what intimacy they share comes from the complicity a reader may feel at having successfully taken and acted on the advice they were given from the self-help/how-to text of their choosing, a text which is always read with the self's performance in mind. Memoirs, while certainly also belonging to a genre that readers expect to suggest ways of being that alter the self's performance, are also expected to reach deeper into the reader's psyche, being that memoirs are typically more personal and emotional than self-help/how-to proper. Readers of memoirs share intimacy with their chosen texts on the basis of having projected themselves onto the first-person journey of the author. In this way, more intimacy between author and reader is available using additional intimate narration and tense in memoir, but both genres nonetheless have a similar target audience, namely, an audience seeking texts to alter or adapt their self's psyche or performance (par. 4).

Memoirs and self-help/how-to books likewise both uniquely attempt to promote unity. Memoirs have a historical record of being central to major mechanisms of unifying change in the United States, and self-help and how-to books, by nature, assist readers in subscribing to a way of being and acting, and, like memoirs, many of the self-help/how-to texts were "clustered around [...] societal upheaval" and "their [self-help/how-to authors'] books served as a salve for national tumult" (McHugh 4). Both genres invite change on an individual level, but for the benefit of the collective, all the while promoting self-reflection.⁶⁸ Furthermore, memoirs and

⁶⁸ By "for the benefit of the collective" I mean that, there rarely exists, to my knowledge, a self-help/how-to text or memoir that isn't completely earnest in its attempt to depict (and therefore be read, sought out, and ultimately suggested as promoting) a positive moral trajectory. They show readers the growth of the people they depict. This is implicit in the notion that one has chosen to write a memoir. Most memoirs that I have analyzed and seen during this study are books that depict people who have gone through something or done something bad and are now dealing with the consequences and trying to be *better*. It doesn't matter if the rationale is selfish, because an attempt to be *better*: a better citizen, family member, friend, co-worker, etc, is for the benefit of everyone else around that person. The idea of the benefit of the collective is easier to grasp for self-help/how-to texts that deal explicitly with promoting seamlessness in society. In memoir, that aim, or byproduct, may be more elusive. However, think of, for example, the James Frey case mentioned earlier. Even through a dishonest depiction of his own life, Frey wrote a

self-help/how-to texts attempt to tackle the existential questions of who we are, why we are here, etc. In more covert ways, self-help and how-to texts, by offering instruction manuals, are indeed offering ways of being. Contrastingly, and more literally, memoirs ask questions in no uncertain terms. For instance, Irvin D. Yalom's *Becoming Myself: A Psychiatrist's Memoir* (2017) questions the origins of human subjectivity and ponders on the meaning of our lives. Hazel E. Barnes, the very writer "who introduced French existentialism to English-speaking readers through her translation of Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* [(1943)]" engages in the queries of our time, and questions the way in which we define ourselves in her memoir *The Story I Tell Myself: A Venture in Existentialist Autobiography* (1997) (University of Chicago Press). These and others like them are not isolated in their existential focus. Indeed, all memoirs, by default, attempt to make sense of the individual in relation to his/her surroundings. In doing so, then, memoirs, like self-help/how-to texts, provide a certain kind of agency for authors, (a concept I introduced earlier) and for readers, too, who might hope to simulate the authors' experiences in search of their own agency.

Where self-help and how-to texts have the potential to fall short, memoirs typically do not. For instance, David Reuben's manual *Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Sex* (*But Were Afraid to Ask)* (1969) inherently communicates that all non-heterosexual methods of intimacy are othered: not normal, weird, etc. Contemporary memoirs do not, as much, run into the problem of dominating cultural narratives. Their democratic, self-conscious "I", and highly self-referential and subjective style typically prevent them from endorsing metanarratives. While memoirs do have the potential to represent or speak for an entire group of people, such as they

story that highlights the redemptive arc of his character (himself), and his hard times *not* fitting in with society to his journey to attempt to reenter society.

did in their American past, they are not inherently binding in the way self-help/how-to texts can be.

A subsequent argument exists whereby self-help and how-to texts are becoming obsolete, and indeed, their natural successor seems to be the contemporary memoir.⁶⁹ Both genres have quite similar intended objectives and thus a similar audience base, but memoirs are more democratic. Furthermore, much of the content available via self-help and how-to books can be accessed via the web, where one can google recipes, table manners, interview etiquette, and more. And even though all of this content is available via the web, the nature of our current global society blurs the lines between class distinctions, meaning that, while one *can* access all the content associated with self-help and how-to, it might not be as necessary due to an accelerating cultural homogenization, where particular customs and rituals are perhaps less strictly observed and thus the impetus to learn them in total is not felt as strongly, or, more importantly, people are more self-referential, and less inclined to observe rituals and customs for the sake of adjusting the self's performance to be assimilative. The gap that is arguably created by the obsolete nature of some self-help and how-to texts can be filled with contemporary memoirs.⁷⁰ The contemporary version of memoirs, in comparison to memoirs past, seems to take on a new set of values and characteristics. Indeed, contemporary popular literature in general

⁶⁹ Approaching this concept from a different perspective, Rebecca Tuhus-Dubrow writes in her essay "I Change, You Change" that the fusion of self-help and memoir are beneficial for readers who, now more than ever, want to read about laypersonal experiences and how conventional people overcame said experiences, rather than a certified or liscenced professional listing bullet points in dry writing (Tuhus-Dubrow). Additionally, much like Harlequin romance novels, some readers feel that the self-help genre is stigmatized, and would much rather read, publicly, a book whose title does not "broadcast your vulnerabilities" such as "'Why Marriages Succeed or Fail: And How You Can Make Yours Last [(1994)]' by John Gottman, Ph.D.'" Readers would much rather be holding *No Cheating, No Dying* [(2012)] by Elizabeth Weil (Tuhus-Dubrow par. 9).

⁷⁰ I want to iterate the "some" here because it is true that many self-help and how-to texts have had great success and continue to do so, but it is also true that they are not as much on the bestselling lists as they once used to be, nor are they referenced in pubic thought and conversation with the same vigor and frequency as they used to be.

seems to prioritize a personal sentimental journey, something that is not offered by self-help and how-to books.

The readerly impetus to prefer and writerly impetus to construct *emotional* journeys could be read as the contemporary manifestation of a long American authorial tradition of writing what you know from experience. In a meta way, then, *reading* literature of experience is a voyeurism of an intrinsically American sort. The popularity of the contemporary emotional journey focused literature would suggest the presence of an American voyeurism concerned with the emotional experiences of others. Insofar as the writerly impetus is concerned, some self-help memoirists “have actually acquired their experience in order to write about [it]” (Tuhus-Dubrow par. 5). The texts that are written after the author seeks out an experience “cater at once to our mania for self-improvement and our gluttonous appetite for first-person narrative” (par. 5). There is a connection to be drawn between the longstanding American impulse to write what one knows from having experienced it, which thus permits authority on a subject, and the popularity of memoirs that deal in highly particular subject matter and are published, increasingly, by younger writers, whose limited life experience can give them authorization only from that which they have experienced firsthand, and not by nature of a long and observant life.

In a thorough investigation of the contemporary literary output of the Americas, Jeffrey Lawrence asserts that it has long been accepted by scholars that US literary production respects and endorses experience as a mode of literary reference material (Lawrence 538). While Americans did not necessarily invent the concept of “the rhetoric of experience” it is intrinsic to the country’s earliest writing among the settlers, a concept I have expanded on in Chapter Two.⁷¹ The prioritization of experience is a “foundational American paradigm”, indeed, the dominance

⁷¹ “[T]he thirst for experience was a natural and even necessary development in a nation emerging into the international scene from the strictures of Puritan morality” and can be distinguished in this way from French, German, Russian, and other national literary traditions” (Lawrence 541-42).

of immersion and the search for experience is the “quintessential theme” of American literature (541). The incentive to transcend “stale literary conventions” is a symptom of a contemporary feeling that implies the need to “go literally beyond those places that have been described ad nauseam by other writers” (543). Indeed, “the slogan ‘write what you know’” is still the overarching paradigm in MFA programs across the country, which is a contemporary indication that a cultural impetus to write from experience exists in the United States (541). Perhaps the dominance of the “cult of experience” in American literary production extends to the realm of reading (555). It could be that the method of authorship which prefers and authorizes experience, has, over time, produced a culture of reading that seeks secondhand the adventure and experience carried out by the author. This would help clarify the fervor with which memoirs are advertised and circulated. Namely, memoirs are advertised and circulated on the expectation that they satisfy the need for an emotional journey.

4.3 Contemporary Literature and TikTok: The Preference for an Emotional Journey

An article published in July of 2022 revealed what many have increasingly encountered at bookstores across the United States, namely, the mention of TikTok in the same breath with popular literature. TikTok has become a monumental driving force in the publishing industry for contemporary popular literature.⁷² The social media platform uses miniature videos to offer viewers insight into “the emotional journey a book will offer” (Harris par. 8). Instead of providing potential readers “information about the book’s author, the writing or even the plot, the way a traditional review does”, these short clips focus on a much more subjective vision: the way a book made the creator of the video feel (par. 8). By offering future readers insight into the

⁷² “Some of TikTok’s success in selling books can be traced to bookstores, which started paying attention to which books were gaining traction on the platform, Ms. McLean said. Barnes & Noble in particular caught on early; many of its stores put out tables with a selection of trending titles. Those displays spread the word about BookTok to new readers, and the cycle continued” (Harris par. 22).

potential emotional journey inherent in a particular text, “Booktok” clips have influenced sales of contemporary literature in a way that no other social media platform ever has before.⁷³ The reason for the success of these videos, suggests Milena Brown, marketing director of Doubleday, is the urgency placed on the emotional element of a text, and the implication that what one person feels, you can feel, too.⁷⁴ “Booktok supercharges something that’s always been essential to selling a book: word of mouth” (par. 11).

The impetus to feel what others are feeling in this context sprang from a particular moment in contemporary history, the Covid-19 Pandemic. Indeed, one year prior to the July 2022 article, another investigation by the same author reports on the bizarre phenomenon of certain TikTok pages centered on the emotional journey of books. The article, titled “How Crying on Tiktok Sells Books” focuses on a few accounts, one of which is run by two sisters who began their journey during the 2020 Covid-19 Pandemic, a period of life ripe with isolation and loneliness. Another account, run by Selene Velez in Los Angeles, posted a video captioned “books that will make you sob” that reached over 100,000 views in a matter of hours (Velez). She was prompted to create the video after months of schooling via Zoom and an online comment that asked for recommendations on books that will elicit tears. The creators of Booktok accounts, including the ones above, have been approached by authors and publishers in order to sign contracts and subsume the Booktok influence into the wider world of publishing. Even, as was mentioned above, major bookstore outlets such as Barnes and Noble have set up book stands dedicated to texts that have become popular or resurfaced via Tiktok. According to some

⁷³ “Now one of the commanding forces in adult fiction, BookTok has helped authors sell 20 million printed books in 2021, according to BookScan. So far this year, those sales are up another 50 percent. NPD Books said that no other form of social media has ever had this kind of impact on sales” (Harris par. 6).

⁷⁴ ““This is how it makes me feel, and this is how it’s going to make you feel,”” Ms. Brown said, describing the content of many of the videos. “And people are like, ‘I want to feel that. Give it to me!’” (Harris, par. 9).

BookTok users, “the app has provided more than just a pastime during the pandemic, it’s brought them a community” (Harris 2021 par. 27).

The acceleration of book sales and engagement via BookTok is particular evidence of what Felski prioritizes in *Hooked: Art and Attachment*, namely, that “stories help make things bearable” (Felski 84). Indeed, in Chapter Three I applied Felski’s theory to support the notion that memoirs play an important role in times of decreased social exchanges to fill a gap normally reserved for human interaction. It seems that the genres of fiction and memoir overlap in this regard. The emotional precedent prioritized in COVID-19 fiction is also prioritized in Covid-19, 9/11, and Kindle memoirs. The impetus of a memoir to focus on the emotional journey perhaps signals a readerly expectation to be emotionally stirred in some specific way. The more eviscerating a text’s premise, the more circulated, in this case, on accounts that prefer intense emotional journeys, and this is no small thing.

Following the precedent set by BookTok, many TikTok accounts and Bookstores are now active participants in the viral hashtag “#BookTok”. One account, run by Schuler Books, an independent bookseller with locations in Michigan, posted a video captioned “We heard you guys were interested in memoirs! Here are some of our bookseller’s favorites, covering a wide variety of topics!” (@schulerbooks). The video, which went viral in May of 2022, shows five booksellers holding up their favorite memoir and listing reasons why the memoir was emotionally moving for them, and in turn, why viewers should read it too. The video follows the same logic as the original BookTok videos, which prioritize the emotional effect of a text, and suggests how the book will make you feel. One bookseller, Sadie, who chose *Hunger* (2017) by Roxane Gay as her favorite memoir, exclaimed that the book was her reinitiation into the world of reading and that she was moved by Gay’s words to the extent that she was unable to set the

book down and therefore finished it in one sitting (@schulerbooks). Considering that Sadie is now a bookseller, there is an implied urgency in the notion that *Hunger* reinitiated her into the world of reading. Namely, Sadie is now someone who is constantly surrounded by and, presumably, reading books constantly. Therefore, even without directly indicating that *Hunger* by Roxane Gay took her on an intense emotional journey, Sadie's recommendation is a purely emotional one.

As it is suggested by the specific nature of emotional journeys preferred by BookTok fiction readers and memoirs through the crises of 9/11 and COVID-19 as well through the release of the Amazon Kindle, it isn't simply an emotional journey that matters, but one in service of something greater. Indeed, it is not enough that memoirs simply be emotional reads.

Paradoxically, memoirs that aim to, like in the case of Frey's *A Million Little Pieces*, "vy[e] for maximum woe" run the risk of tiring the reader and even becoming parodies of themselves, to the extent that emotionally charged memoirs, that seem to offer no consequence other than the emotional journey itself, are categorized as "misery memoirs" by some scholars (Tuhus-Dubrow par. 2) (Yagoda 233).⁷⁵ Rebecca Tuhus-Dubrow's essay "I Change, You Change" posits that readers grow "weary of the exhibitionism and occasional fraudulence" of memoirs whose calling on the emotional eclipses other fundamental memoir qualities, such as the claim to truth, and, as I suggest throughout, the intrinsically American utility function of memoirs, whereby emotional journeys are meant to help the reader arrive at something measurable, such as belonging in a book community or feeling united with the author, or perhaps other readers as well

(Tuhus-Dubrow par. 12).

⁷⁵ In *Memoir: A History* (2009) Yagoda defines "misery memoirs" as "tales of extreme woe". The subset of the memoir genre was, evidently, quite popular if one considers their sales. Misery memoirs "had established themselves as a major player in publishing" and "reached their peak in 2006" having sold "1.9 million" copies, "accounting for eleven of the one hundred top-selling paperback titles" (Yagoda 233). The craze hit the United States first, and then Great Britain. But it was in the United States that the felt impact of misery memoirs was "more wide-ranging" by nature, and, appropriately, "has provoked more harrumphing" (233).

4.5 Conclusion of Chapter Four

Memoirs, while still adhering to their foundational principles of utility and authenticity and continuing to borrow thematically and structurally from fiction and other genres, are expected to fulfill a different, more emotionally charged role than in their past. Their emotionally charged role can be read through a postmodern little narratives lens. In this chapter, I explored the ways in which memoir has adapted to the particular conditions of our cultural context while also remaining true to its genre, thus further demonstrating memoirs' remarkable ability to adapt to the expectations of the time in which they were written. I analyze four tenets of postmodernism and how they can be of service to illuminate the trajectory of contemporary memoirs' trending preference for the highly emotional. I also illustrate the genre-blurring of self-help/how-to and memoirs and investigate the presence of one online book community and its success in circulating books based on the emotional journey they provide readers with. In this chapter, my attempt was to continue to demonstrate that memoirs are highly functional and adaptable, by borrowing from other genres and elevating aspects of its own genre that are aligned with what is popular to read in the current moment, which has had the effect of securing the genre a top position in the contemporary literary landscape.

Conclusion

In this thesis, I sought to partially remedy the gap that exists in contemporary literary studies in regards to the memoir. By analyzing memoirs at the intersection of culture, literature, and life writing, I aimed to demonstrate that the genre's malleability and truth-centered lens enable writers and sellers of memoirs to foster the readerly expectations that memoirs *function* socially and culturally: motivate and unite in wartime, encourage political action, challenge a limited definition of whose lives we ought to recognize, adapt structurally to be more readable in increasingly digital formats, and lastly, adopt more emotionally stimulating lenses that enact social bonding when human interaction is unachievable, perhaps suggesting a readerly demand for stories at the intersection of authenticity and vulnerability. I traced the "functional" quality of the memoir presented above from the earliest American manifestations of the genre to the present.

In Chapter One I demonstrate that readers prefer memoirs to be something *in addition to* truth-centered and that writers and sellers of memoirs are attuned to these expectations. In Chapter Two I demonstrate that precisely due to the utility of their earliest non-literary ancestors, memoirs are expected to *function* socially and culturally: motivate and unite in wartime, encourage political action, and challenge a limited definition of whose lives we ought to recognize. In Chapter Three, I demonstrate the contemporary manifestation of the memoir's functional nature, namely: contemporary memoirs are expected to motivate and unite readers in wartime, adapt structurally to be more readable in increasingly digital formats, and adopt more emotionally stimulating lenses that enact social bonding when human interaction is unachievable, perhaps suggesting a readerly demand for stories at the intersection of authenticity and vulnerability. In Chapter Four, I demonstrate that contemporary readers of literature seem to

prefer books that offer an emotional journey, which I define as a text whose content and theme are of an extremely emotional nature, and when readers encounter a genre that is truth-centered, such as other non-fiction like self-help and how-to texts, the preference for the combination of an emotionally centered and truth-centered lens becomes extremely evident.

In conducting my analysis, I tried to establish a definition of memoirs that anchors the role of their utility. My thinking was that if I was able to demonstrate the uniquely *functional* role that the genre has occupied throughout American history, then perhaps I would be doing my part in contributing to the idea that memoirs are deserving of more critical attention in that they illuminate a great deal about history and culture.

Now, I hope to suggest grounds for further examination of the genre. Namely, something that I found through my research, but was not able to dedicate the appropriate amount of space to study, is the relationship between gender and memoir. Specifically, one thing that stood out to me in my analysis of early American memoirs in Chapter Two is the notion that women writers of memoirs were part of the early manifestations of the American women's liberation movement. I am fascinated by the idea that memoirs were a genre that provided space and agency for women at a time when women did not yet have the right to vote in my country. Particularly in light of the #MeToo movement, I would be eager to read a study that focuses on contemporary memoirs written by women, and if/how the malleability of the genre has provided a particular space for women to enact their own agency. There are plenty more studies that can be done on memoirs and the various facets of culture that they interact with. Indeed, memoirs matter precisely because they are valued: sought-after, circulated, written, and read at culturally transformative moments throughout American history.

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Figures

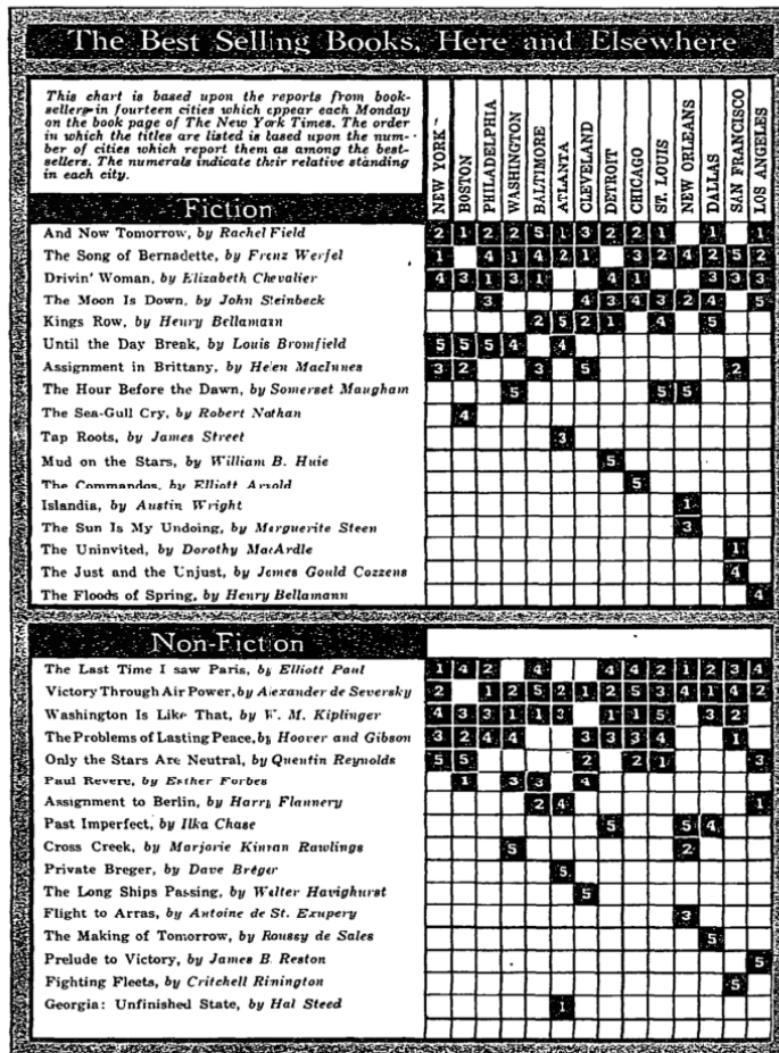


Fig. 1. The New York Times. "Notes on Books and Authors: The Best Selling Books, Here and Elsewhere." *New York Times*, 9 Aug. 1942.


Me	
<i>The Quickie Version</i>	
	
Name:	<i>Valerie Anne Bertinelli</i>
Age:	<i>Forty-seven</i>
Height:	<i>5'4½"</i>
Status:	<i>Formerly married, currently involved, always hungry</i>
Weight:	<i>Dropping</i>
Occupation:	<i>Mother, actress, Jenny Craig spokesperson</i>
Strengths:	<i>Honesty and integrity. I also see the good in other people and let most things roll off my back.</i>
Faults:	<i>Insecurity, tendency to procrastinate, overly judgmental, emotional eater</i>
If you were in my house, you'd hear Wolfie say:	<i>"Ma, don't go all Gandhi on me!"</i>
You will never see me:	<i>. . . without my clothes on</i>
Favorite meal:	<i>Anything Italian . . . or French . . . or Mexican . . . or . . .</i>
Happy or sad?	<i>Grateful</i>
Everything I know in ten words or less:	<i>Love, you always have a choice, exercise, portion control</i>

Fig. 2. Bertinelli, Valerie. "Me: The Quickie Version." *Losing It: And Gaining My Life Back One Pound at a Time*. Simon and Schuster, 2008.