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Essay and Memoir

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In Defense of the Author

In *The Art of Memoir*, Mary Karr defends the necessity of truth in memoir. She opens her second chapter, “The Truth Contract Twixt Writer and Reader,” with a quote from Edward St. Aubyn: “*The whole journey is towards the truth, or toward authenticity, agency, and freedom. How could it possibly help to plant a lie in the middle of it?*” Karr, a memoirist herself, examines the nuances associated with truth and being truthful in one’s writing. She describes truth as a “foggy, fuzzy nether area,” where time, biases, and emotions, among other factors, can influence our understanding of reality- *what really happened*. However, despite *and* because of its complex nature, she considers truth to be an indispensable criterion of memoir. She shapes the idea of Aubyn’s quote into a metaphor of her own. “To my mind, a small bit of catshit in your sandwich equals a catshit sandwich, unless I know where the catshit is and can eat around it” (11). Even a tiny crumb of untruth undermines a memoir’s whole truth. An author’s commitment to truth drives their memoir and upholds their project. To neglect truth, Karr holds, is a fatal flaw.

After having read and studied several works of memoir, as well as works *on* memoir, like Karr’s, I am still unsure of what exactly a memoir is. One goal of my essay- my first goal- is to explore the memoir form and its distinguishing qualities, looking at the importance of the memoir form and examining its significance in the context of other literary forms. Ultimately, I hope to get to the heart of what memoir is and why this is important to the form itself, literature, and the world.

As Karr observes, memoirs share a purpose, as well as a responsibility, which is truth. Truth pushes beyond Fact. Fact provides an indisputable account of what happened. Truth, however, has a more subjective connotation. When quoting a text, for example, one must be factually correct. But if one were to recount a conversation from years ago, it would be unfair to hold them to the same standards. In remaining truthful, they must produce something that honors the reality of that event, or that conversation, without adhering to, or altogether omitting the foggy details.

One purpose of the memoir is to convey one's life, one's past, and one's reality in a way that is indisputable. Truth, in memoir, is the factualization of opinion, belief, emotion, and subjectivity by virtue of one's possession of it. Karr writes on the specific breed of truth that memoirs uniquely give rise to: "While formerly sacred sources of truth like history and statistics have lost ground, the subjective tale has garnered new territory. That's partly why memoir is in its ascendancy- not because it's corrupt, but because the best ones openly confess the nature of their corruption" (16). The irony of the memoir is that it is ultimately a memoir's self-awareness, or rather the author's self-awareness of their inability to remember the past exactly as it was that allows the memoir to remain truthful.

Memoir is nonfiction, convincing, and unquestionable, and these qualities are made manifest by an author's adherence to truth. Choice, I believe, is the most effective mechanism for doing so. Memoir writing is selective. An author of memoir must choose the lens through which they view the world; an author must choose their subject; an author must choose what about their life that is so important that it must be made public. I will now look at how choice conveys truth in different memoirs.

Harriet Jacobs wrote *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* to share with the audience her lived experience as an enslaved black woman in the United States. Before writing anything else, the first choice Jacobs makes is to establish her credibility. In her “Preface to the Author,” she writes: “Reader, be assured this narrative is no fiction. I am aware that some of my adventures may seem incredible; but they are, nevertheless, strictly true. I have not exaggerated the wrongs inflicted by Slavery; on the contrary, my descriptions fall far short of the facts” (Jacobs, 2).

That she chooses to begin this way speaks volumes about Jacobs, her work, and the context in which she writes. In any form of writing, nothing is accidental. Any choice an author makes, they make to maximize a desired quality of their writing. In Jacob’s case, this quality is credibility. Jacobs acknowledges that her projected audience, mainly white Northerners and white Northern women, are predisposed to doubt her. She makes the reader aware that not only is everything she says true, but her portrayal of enslavement falls short of the facts of reality. This is a powerful piece of information. It is safe to assume that most- in fact, *all* her white readers- were ignorant to the severity of slavery. *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* functions partly as Jacob’s way of informing the reader, the “well-intentioned,” white reader, how evil the institution of slavery is while still withholding the worst of it. This, ideally, instills within the reader a radical transformation in their understanding of the evils of slavery, which is part of Jacob’s purpose in writing. With credibility established and the severity of her experiences *understated*, Jacobs stages her memoir in such a way that the reader is forced to confront depths of her writing and the truth of her written account.

Harriet Jacobs opens with this rhetorical strategy and maintains a similar position as she moves through the rest of her work. She frequently anticipates the reaction of the audience, which is often one of disbelief or doubt, and addresses this reaction. When telling us of the time

Dr. Flint planned to build a house for her, and recounting other evil things he has done, Jacobs writes, “I have promised to tell the truth and I will do it honestly, let it cost me what it may” (69). She reminds us of her commitment to honesty, acknowledging the fact that it may cause harm to her. Furthermore, she addresses lies that her audience may believe and provides an account of the truth. For example, she writes that “slaveholders pride themselves upon being honorable men; but if you were to hear the enormous lies they tell their slaves, you would have small respect for their veracity” (39). She tells the story of a slaveholder who claimed that an enslaved woman did not want to be freed and would have rather remained enslaved. On this, Jacobs asserts the truth: “This whole story was false. I afterwards staid with that friend in New York, and found her in comfortable circumstances. She had never thought of such a thing as wishing to go back to slavery. Many of the slaves believe such stories, and think it is not worth while to exchange slavery for such a hard kind of freedom” (39). Jacobs posits truth as one of if not the most important qualities of her writing.

As well as adhering to a factual record, Jacobs makes the choice to assert her personal truth. She reminds the reader how difficult it is for her to tell her story, further establishing the necessity for her to do so. This is how she concludes her book, telling us that “it has been painful to me, in many ways, to recall the dreary years I passed in bondage, I would gladly forget them if I could. Yet the retrospection is not without solace; for with those gloomy recollections come tender memories of my good old grandmother, like light, fleecy clouds floating over a dark and troubled sea” (164). Her pain, as well as her joy, belong to her.

Jacob’s decision to end *Incidents* with this line reminds me of something Karr writes in *The Art of Memoir*: “Let’s say you had an awful childhood...You could write a repetitive, duller-than-a-rubber-knife misery memoir. But would that be ‘true’? And true to how you keep it

boxed up now, or to the lived experience back then?...It's the disparities in your writing, your life between ass-whippings, that throws past pain into stark relief for a reader. Without those places of hope, the beatings become too repetitive" (13). This is not to say that any of the suffering Jacobs endured at the hands of Dr. Flint and White Supremacy is to be diminished or in any way qualified; it was horrible, and we should call it evil as an objective fact. But ultimately, it is not our story to tell or even interpret. The critical distance between Jacobs and her reader is staggering, perhaps the greatest of any of the works that we have read. Jacobs is fully in charge of her writing. The conclusions that she comes to, the moments of joy that she chooses to share, are hers. That she chooses to make public what must be made public, even if it hurts her, is a powerful testament to her possession of her own life. This autonomy is something that Jacobs had previously been denied. Thus, her memoir exists as a form of reclamation of her truth.

As I write this paper, I find that it is not easy to distinguish between what is of Jacobs and what is of Jacob's writing. In one sentence, I may say, "Jacobs does this" or "Jacobs possesses this quality," and in the next say "Jacob's writing does this" or "her writing possesses this quality." I cannot claim that the two are interchangeable, at least not yet, but I think that this ambiguity surrounding author vs text speaks to an essential quality of the memoir, which is that in memoir, an author almost becomes their writing. A memoir is inherently linked to its author. I would like to expand upon this idea, but for the sake of structure and cohesion, I will now move on and look at other texts and return to this point later.

Between the World and Me, Ta-Nehesi Coates's 2015 memoir, depicts growing up and coming-of-age into adulthood and parenthood as a black person, specifically a black man. Coates portrays systematic racism in the US as something massive and expansive, something that permeates all areas of American life, and, consequently, something that is inherently linked to his

existence. Among other things, *Between the World and Me* is a letter to Coates's son about being a black man in the United States. It functions almost as a manual. Towards the beginning of his memoir, he addresses his son:

I write to you in your fifteenth year. I am writing you because this was the year you saw Eric Garner choked to death for selling cigarettes; because you know now that Renisha McBride was shot for seeking help, that John Crawford was shot down for browsing in a department store... And you know now, if you did not know before, that the police departments of your country have been endowed with the authority to destroy your body. It does not matter if it originates in a misunderstanding. It does not matter if the destruction spring from a foolish policy. Sell cigarettes without the proper authority and your body can be destroyed. Resent the people trying to entrap your body and it can be destroyed. Turn into a dark stairwell and your body can be destroyed. The destroyers will rarely be held accountable. Mostly they will receive pensions. And destruction is merely the superlative of a dominion whose prerogatives include friskings, detainings, beatings, and humiliations. All of this is common to black people. And all of this is old for black people. No one is held responsible. (9)

Coates's motif of the Body, which he establishes in the above quote, is one of his most powerful literary devices. In doing so, he informs his reader of the existential threat to the physical, Black body. Throughout his memoir, he transforms the meanings and implications of the Body, the Black Body, to adapt it to the themes he raises. While in the above paragraph he describes the lack of bodily autonomy among black people at the hands of White Supremacy, he later writes that "it was comforting to believe that the fate of my body and the bodies of my family were under my powers," and tells his son "I knew then that I must survive for something more than

survival's sake. I must survive for you" (67). Although he suspects that his sense of protection may be false, his faith in it functions as a survival method, which he extends to the survival of his son. This dialectic that Coates creates is both powerless against the destruction of his body while also capable of self-preservation runs through his memoir, as does the tension that arises between the seemingly impossible coexistence of these two states. Through his discussion of the Black Body, Coates makes this both clear and profound.

Coates uses metaphor and motif in other places, producing a similar effect. One metaphor, which is the basis of the memoir's title, is that of the division between two worlds- his world, and the world of Whiteness:

Somewhere out there beyond the firmament, past the asteroid belt, there were other worlds where children did not regularly fear for their bodies. I knew this because there was a large television resting in my living room. In the evenings I would sit before this television bearing witness to the dispatches from this other world. There were little white boys with complete collections of football cards, and their only want was a popular girlfriend and their only worry was a poison oak... I obsessed over the distance between that other sector of space and my own. I knew that my portion of the American galaxy, where bodies were enslaved by a tenacious gravity, was black and that the other, liberated portion was not. I knew that some inscrutable energy preserved the breach. I felt, but did not yet understand, the relation between that other world and me. And I felt in this a cosmic injustice, a profound cruelty, which infused in abiding irrepressible desire to unshackle my body and achieve the velocity of escape. (20-21)

Through this metaphor and his figurative descriptions of each World, he both describes each World to the reader what each entails and establishes critical distance. He draws the reader as close as possible to understanding his experiences, while also asserting that they cannot

understand an experience that is not their own. The way that Coates describes the World of Whiteness, for example, allows him to craft the World that is Non-White, the “other” world, the World that he belongs to. He shows through his depiction of the White World what is *lacking* in his World. While he does so with clarity, he also succeeds in creating critical distance by including within this metaphor the motif of distance. The line “I obsessed over the distance between that other sector of space and my own” reminds the reader not only how far Coates feels from the other world but how far *we* are from Coates. The deliberateness and intricacy with which Coates writes allow for his choices to accrue throughout the memoir, producing a profound effect on the reader. *Between the World and Me*, unlike other works, does not demand a highly perceptive reader in order to be effective. Coates’s choices are *felt*, even if they go unnoticed or unacknowledged by the reader.

He expands upon this metaphor by describing his World. “My understanding of the world was physical, and its moral arc bent towards chaos and concluded in a box,” Coates writes. “Fear ruled everything around me, and I knew, as all black people do, that this fear was connected to the Dream out there, to the unworried boys, to pie and pot roast, to white fences and green lawns nightly beamed into our television sets” (28-29). In portraying the manifestations of systemic racism against black Americans this way, Coates articulates the nuances associated with it. While the use of metaphor runs the risk of being reductive, Coates avoids this by synthesizing the figurative elements of his memoir with anecdotal accounts of his lived experience.

One of the most profound anecdotes Coates includes is when he took his son, five years old at the time, to see *Howl’s Moving Castle*. As they were leaving the theatre, a white woman pushed Coates’s son and shouted, “Come on!” at him (94). Coates describes his feelings in the moment in detail, stretching out the scene. Coates initially retaliates, because he understands

what her affront meant. “She was acting in accordance to a tradition that held black bodies as lesser,” Coates asserts (97). But he knew that if he were to inform her of this, she would likely protest that she is not racist; “*the people who believe themselves to be white are obsessed with the politics of personal exoneration*” (97). He weighs the situation, realizing that any act of retaliation on part of the black man to the white woman, however justified, could be a death sentence. He is ashamed of himself and his actions, not because he believes himself to be a bad father or a bad person, but because “in seeking to defend you I was, in fact endangering you” (95). The use of anecdote here bears his truth in such a way that makes it obvious. This event truly did happen, but it is Coates’s method of telling it that makes it unquestionable.

The third text I will discuss is Mark Slouka’s memoir *Nobody’s Son*. Much of Slouka’s memoir revolves around memory. What is interesting about this memoir is that Slouka often writes on the unreliability of our memories. He opens his second chapter by asking “who knows where we come from, really? We tell stories to explain us, but like all origin myths, ours is retrospective, a fiction cobbled together to validate who we are – to justify what is, or excuse it. So very logical. After a while you believe it yourself. And then the divining rod dips and you sense another source” (6). This resembles something Karr says on memoir writing, which is “be generous and fair when you can; when you cannot, admit your disaffinity” (26). An essential tenet of the memoir form is that it is true. However, by acknowledging the complexity of truth, Slouka establishes his personal truth, which is also complex. His decision to include this acknowledgment allows him to write about memory freely throughout the rest of his book.

“Well, as Frank Conroy said of his mother’s response to *Stop-Time*, ‘She felt it was my version of events,’” Karr writes (14). This is certainly true of *Nobody’s Son*. It is Slouka’s

version of what happened. This does not make it untrue. If anything, it makes it more truthful because Slouka confidently takes ownership of his life and his past.

As he moves the rest of his memoir, he attempts to make sense of his and his family's experiences. We witness Slouka as he works through the past, trying to reconcile it with the present. Given that his memoir follows his family's immigration story, he often focuses on his family members. On his father, he asks: "What can I say about my father that isn't bent out of truth by hindsight, misshapen by love?" (113). He describes a "fictional father," asking "what was my fictional father...all about? Was I creating a portrait of the man I wished my father to be, flattering myself by imagining someone whose faults didn't remind me of my own?" (114). His observations on the past and its ability to color and reshape our experiences are powerful.

Another quote that speaks to this idea reads "there are times I think the past is nothing more than a room attached to ours. We enter it a hundred times a day, argue with whoever's there; we flatten a cowlick, move the vase, true the picture on the wall" (116). Slouka suggests that our relationship to the past is reflexive; our memories shape us while we shape our memories. By deciding to be honest about his relationship to his past and his memories, Slouka successfully conveys his truth.

The most painful memories Slouka shares are of the night he and his mother shared in a hotel in Germany in which his mother's village of Vydrí gets destroyed by occupying forces. He recalls sharing a bed with his mother, who was in a state of psychological distress, and waking up to the bed shaking, realizing what was happening. He never told anyone of this memory for thirty-five years because it was too painful. "I tried to convince myself it didn't happen. Because I didn't want this memory of my poor mother who, at that moment, in her insanity, probably didn't even know I was there. Because I didn't want this picture of myself, helpless, terrified, at

the age of twenty-two" (229-230). He wanted this memory removed from his mind. Knowing this was impossible, he performed the painful but necessary act of acknowledgement.

"Acknowledging," Slouka writes, "is as close as I'll come. It'll have to do" (230). His memoir stands as an act of acknowledgement. This is Slouka's purpose, or one of his purposes.

Acknowledging what happened as it happened to him not only allows Slouka to express his truth but make sense of it by confronting the things that cause him pain.

Each work of memoir possesses distinct qualities in their style and purpose. I find it risky to compare works of memoir, at least in the context of comparing the degree to which they possess certain characteristics, because a memoir is so much the product of the author that comparisons like these often provide little importance. It is enough to say that two memoirs are different, then proceed to study them individually; what is important is *that* they are different, and not necessarily *why* they are different.

Ultimately, the fact that these works are so distinct speaks to the main quality they share. Among all the works I have discussed, it is the author and their choices that ultimately drive the narrative. Jacobs, Coates, and Slouka convey personal truths unique to their lives and their experiences. In examining their work individually, it becomes clear that the construction of memoir depends primarily on the notion that there is someone, the author, to tell their story and to act as the medium between the personal and the public. Thus, the defining quality of the memoir is the necessity of the author. Authorship is inseparable from memoir, and memoir is one of the few genres for which authorship is necessary.

Authorship and the role of the author has long been a subject of interest for philosophers and scholars. In his 1969 essay "What is an Author?", Michel Foucault develops the idea of "author function." Author function suggests that the author of a text is not the person who

created it but the discourse surrounding the text. Foucault begins by articulating the common understanding of what an author is: “The coming into being of the notion of ‘author’ constitutes the privileged moment of individualization in the history of ideas, knowledge, literature, and the sciences. Even today, when we reconstruct the history of a concept, literary genre, or school of philosophy, such categories seem relatively weak, secondary and superimposed scissions in comparison with the solid and fundamental unit of the author and the work” (205). He criticizes the individualization of authorship, writing that “even when the individual has been accepted as an author, we must still ask whether everything he wrote, said, or left behind is part of his work” (207). He argues that the author cannot be the sole creator of a work, as a work’s creation depends on external experiences, discourses, and histories, and its consumption requires the presence of an audience. He asks: “how, then, can one attribute several discourses to one and the same author?” (214). The author function, then, is not to create text nor even act as a mediator between author and audience; instead, the author and the author-reader relationship dissolve and are replaced by discourse. He reviews the contributions of several authors that, he believes, produced not a text or a work but rather “the possibilities and the rules for the formation of other texts” (217). He concludes by saying that should the traditional function of the author be replaced with the idea of author function that he proposes, an essential question will arise: “What difference does it make who is speaking?” (222).

Roland Barthes expressed similar ideas on authorship, calling for the “death of the author” in his 1967 essay “The Death of the Author.” Barthes writes, “the *explanation* of a work is always sought in the man or woman who produced it, as if it were always in the end, through the more or less transparent allegory of the fiction, the voice of a single person, the *author* ‘confiding’ in us” (143). Barthes, like Foucault, criticizes the singularity we attach to the author.

He argues that the “death,” or removal, of the author is not something that must happen but something that is already true of literature. He concludes his essay by stating that “it is necessary to overthrow the myth: the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author” (148). Thus, authorship becomes dispensable for the sake of the reader.

Foucault and Barthes’ philosophies on authorship are certainly worth considering and may pose valid claims for most literary forms. However, they do not stand against the memoir form. Memoir *is* authorship. This, I believe, distinguishes the memoir from other forms, including the essay. Essays, even when personal, are subject to the Death of the Author. The essay facilitates the type of discourse that can “kill” the author. Perhaps some pieces can be read as both essay *and* memoir, but to this I would argue that because of the distinction between essay and memoir, anything considered both essay and memoir can only be *read* as either an essay or a memoir, and thus its status is dependent on the lens in which it is read. When read as an essay, it is not a memoir, and when read as a memoir, it is not an essay; it is only both in that it can be read as either. And what qualifies it as a work of memoir is that it requires the *birth* of the author. The discourse that surrounds a work of memoir cannot take credit for the text.

It would be impossible for each of the works discussed to have been written by Jacobs, Coates, or Slouka. The mere thought of it is absurd. So, when Foucault asks, “what difference does it make who is speaking?”, I reply that in memoir, it makes all the difference.

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