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AMERICAN LITERATURE
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CHAPTER 7

Our Stories, Our Selves
Memoir and Self-Help in the "Me Decade"

Nicole Staman

Many Americans disregard the 1970s as forgettable, writes Bruce J. Schulman, introducing his book devoted to the decade, considering it an era full of "bad clothes, bad hair, and bad music impossible to take seriously."¹ Beth Bailey and David Farber admit that "[t]he 1970s may be our strangest decade," inspiring few "impassioned champions" either then or now because the 1960s have "tended to overshadow" them.² These authors – like many of the contributors to this volume – find fault with such conventional wisdom, dedicating their work to thoughtful analyses and investigations of this misunderstood decade and the texts produced therein. For the genre of memoir in particular, the 1970s mark a period of real innovation, providing some of the groundwork for the "memoir boom" of the last few decades. Memoir in the 1970s celebrates the possibilities inherent in the vernacular, the quotidian, and the popular; valorizing and exposing process over product, and making visible lives that may not have found themselves at the center of conventional autobiographical texts. During the 1970s the major social efforts of civil and equal rights, championed during the 1950s and 1960s, began to have direct and material influence on Americans' lived realities and within their communities. And if, as many suggest, the communality, activism, and commitment to cultural integration of the 1960s gave way to cultural nationalism, diversity, and the individual in the 1970s, then memoir is the genre that most explicitly demonstrates these dramatic shifts in how Americans understood subjectivity and identity.³

The dominance of self-help literature during the decade likewise reflects both the cultural desire to remake identities and a belief that such an endeavor is possible. Importantly, it is during the 1970s that the possibilities for self-representation expand as "fundamental social arrangements changed" within the United States and "Americans enjoyed the freedom to reinvent themselves" (Schulman xvii, xvi). Such freedom is reflected in the commercial success of self-help texts during the 1970s, comprising almost

15 percent of bestsellers during the decade (Bailey and Farber 6).⁴ The convergence of literature about self-improvement and self-representation is remarkable in the decade, but its origins far precede it. In fact, Mirdi McGee, author of *Self-Help, Inc.* (2005), begins her investigation into the world of self-help literature not with such 1970s advice gurus as Wayne W. Dyer, whose *Your Erroneous Zones* spent more than fifteen months on the *New York Times* bestseller list in 1976–1977, but with Benjamin Franklin. Because of *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*, McGee argues that Franklin can be considered as “one of the grandfathers of the advice literature genre” (6). Long accepted as foundational to American life writing, Franklin’s book – first published in English in 1793 but not read in its standard four-part form until 1868 – bridges the gap between self-help and self-representation.

In many ways, Franklin’s *Autobiography* connects self-knowledge with self-mastery; an ideal that Franklin – and Western thinkers more largely – inherited from classical Greek culture, where, McGee explains, “the citizen’s capacity to master himself was premised on the fact that the labor of women and enslaved persons supported his leisure” (7). Importantly, then, self-mastery, “a value to be cultivated in a citizen,” was considered impossible “for those who were subject to orders imposed by others” (7). Important for both memoir and self-help, the concept of self-mastery – or its mere possibility – requires the subject to be understood as having a unique subjectivity, one worthy of both documentation and reading. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson explain some of the larger cultural impulses behind our fascination with life writing, arguing that this investment “derives in part from the tenacious hold that the ideology of individualism has on Westerners: Americans in particular,” they note, “continue to be attracted to Horatio Alger-esque fantasies of the self-made individual overcoming adversity. In the contemporary culture of self-help, some people are also drawn to personal narratives of debasement and recovery as models for conversion, survival, and self-transformation.”⁵ In looking for models of self-mastery and self-transformation, readers search out autobiographical texts and literatures of self-improvement: two different genres which both illuminate elements of contemporary American life that suggest we can shape, unshape, and reshape our lives, our selves, as needed.

Following the social movements of the 1950s and 1960s, the possibilities for textual self-representation in the 1970s expand. Genre, too, transitions. A form that has, traditionally, privileged a full retrospective of the writer’s life, autobiography often presents the autobiographer’s achievements in

such a way that, as Roy Pascal describes it, is “more the revelation of the present situation than the uncovering of the past.”⁶ Such cohesiveness in form is, in part, thanks to scholars of autobiography who, during the 1960s and 1970s, as Julie Rak observes, were themselves invested in making autobiography “a genre that could be as literary as the novel itself where the protagonist, like the hero of a novel, was thought to be successful because the writing showed the imprint of his (and rarely, her) personality.”⁷ It is in this context that Franklin’s *Autobiography* is championed, even as it is, actually, more subversive than such genre prescriptions allow. What is more, such a vision of autobiography generally excludes texts written by women, people of color, members of queer communities, and others whose self-understanding or lived realities do not follow what is understood as a conventional path.

Unlike autobiography, memoir combines the public and the private, emphasizes the relational subject, and foregrounds the processes inherent to self-representation.⁸ During the 1970s, life writers shift away from traditional autobiography to memoir as authors like Maya Angelou, Justin Green, Maxine Hong Kingston, Aline Kominsky-Crumb, N. Scott Momaday, and Art Spiegelman challenge conventional definitions of subjectivity and present innovative forms of self-representation. Infusing their memoirs with the inward turn that characterizes the self-help literature of the decade and the cultural specificity and formal innovation that alters memoir for subsequent generations, they subvert expectations established by more conventional autobiographical texts. Rather than coin neologisms or invent new genres, readers who engage with these texts as memoir can see how these texts privilege relational subjectivity and situate the self in the larger historical, political, and cultural contexts of the 1970s. It is especially interesting, then, to consider the elements of memoir – relationality, emphasis on process, contextualized subjectivity, seriality – with the rise of self-improvement literature and the larger cultural trends toward individual identity construction associated with postmodernity in this era.

Francis Russell Hart, a theorist of memoir writing at the close of the 1970s, explicitly points to the significance of the memoir genre: “ours is a time of survival,” he explains, “and memoir is the autobiography of survival.”⁹ He continues:

There is no need to wander further into thicket of generic definition: recent writing about autobiography is clogged with them. We know roughly what memoir is. We know that genres change and that generic mutation can be

historically revealing. Here we will be searching out the mutation in recent memoir and in that mutation for evidence of what has been called the “intimate” or “narcissistic” society, a society characterized by the confusion of public and private realms. (195)

“Searching out the mutation,” looking to the works themselves for evidence of narcissism or solipsism, is one way to challenge the negative response to the decade’s emphasis on identity. The trends in self-improvement literature, too, seem to present a response to what is happening in self-representational literature, in memoir. Hart sees memoir as the “autobiography of survival,” and self-help literature of the 1970s is likewise preoccupied with the task of survival. In these two forms, writers try to elude survival—to determine its modes, illuminate its possibilities, demonstrate its features: in the literatures of self-improvement, authors “plac[e] a premium on isolated individual action on one’s own behalf” (McGee 54), while in memoir, writers negotiate the individual in various contexts and through relationships. Both trends, though, present the subject as “embattled and beleaguered: the world [the self] inhabits is a hostile one” (McGee 54).

The charge against the 1970s is that, during this decade, American society became self-absorbed in new, decadent, and ultimately ruinous ways. In his influential essay “The ‘Me’ Decade and the Third Great Awakening,” first published in *New York Magazine* in August 1976, Tom Wolfe writes that the 1970s indulgently celebrate an “unprecedented post-World War II American development: the luxury, enjoyed by so many millions of middling folk, of dwelling upon the self.”¹⁰ Wolfe explains that such focused attention on oneself was once the purview of the “well-born”; providing a brief history of how he understands this luxury, he suggests that a great deal of the “satisfaction” that elites enjoyed was in “dwelling upon *Me* and every delicious nuance of my conduct and personality” (144; emphasis original). During the 1970s, he concludes, “ordinary folks” now engage in such introspection, fashioning identity construction or introspection as a kind of recreation. Wolfe’s observations, that the “middling folk” considered self-examination and self-representation their purview, are borne out by the continuous rise of the genre’s popularity. Writing about the 1990s, Nancy K. Miller extends Wolfe’s claim about the rise of “me,” as she suggests that “so many people write and read memoirs today” because of “the well-worn culture of ‘me,’ given an expansive new currency by the infamous baby boomers who can think of nothing else.”¹¹

Compellingly, among the other reasons Miller provides to explain the contemporary popularity of memoir—including “the desire for story killed

by postmodern fiction” and that “it’s the only literary form that appears to give access to the truth”—is that the genre embraces “a democratic form, giving voice to minority experience” and, further, that “it’s a desire to assert agency and subjectivity after several decades of insisting loudly on the fragmentation of identity and the death of the author” (12). I suggest that this expansion of forms and proliferation of voices participating in self-representational projects stems from the work of the 1970s. For example, although the previous decades had enjoyed economic growth and prosperity, the beginning of the 1970s required a revision of the postwar era’s “expansive, universalist vision” (Schulman 77). “Instead of widening the ‘we,’” Schulman explains, “the nation reconstructed itself as a congeries of many narrower units. Not only racial minorities but large sections of the white majority turned toward a politics of identity” (77). Americans were challenged by central questions connected to identity, especially as they were related to race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality. “It was during the 1970s,” explain Bailey and Farber, “in the backlash of political and economic crisis, that Americans dealt with a productive uncertainty about the meanings of happiness, success, patriotism, and national identity” (2). It stands to reason that, as the political, cultural, and civic institutions on which so many of those identities are also transformed, how we understand our identities would necessarily shift.

Wolfe compares the emphasis on self-invention and attendant self-representation to alchemy. He writes: “The old alchemical dream was changing base metals into gold. The new alchemical dream is: changing one’s personality—remaking, remodeling, elevating, and polishing one’s very *self*... and observing, studying, and doing on it. (*Me!*)” (143; emphasis original). American interest in self-exploration and revelation, in this assessment, is possible only because of the increased affluence of American citizens. Borrowing this metaphor, Schulman suggests that, during this decade, Wolfe and others “detected a change in the nation’s basic chemistry,” observing that, while generations of people had championed assimilation and integration into American culture, “in the seventies, this melting pot gave way, in one astute observer’s words, ‘to a centrifuge’ that spun the nation’s communities around ‘and distributed them across the landscape according to new principles’” (80). One new such principle during the 1970s is the focus on individual groups, on cultural nationalism rather than integration, as Americans, in Eric Porter’s words, “embraced, rejected, or otherwise negotiated racial identities and mobilized themselves around them in important new ways” (52). Such mobilization is true for the extant structures of gender, sexuality, and ethnicity as well.

As Schulman notes, “Wolfe’s essay identified this process of fragmentation and separation – people discovering and cultivating distinct identities, going off by themselves, literally or figuratively.” As one of the enduring nonfiction touchstones of the 1970s, “The ‘Me’ Decade and the Third Great Awakening” demonstrates a real anxiety about this new social construction.

In part, the identities on which Americans had come to rely were also less stable than they had seemed in previous decades. During the 1970s, Americans faced a new sense of anxiety as the postwar prosperity to which many had grown accustomed declined. “Double-digit inflation, growing unemployment rates, and the first of the oil shocks,” McGee explains, allowed for “a new social Darwinism [to] gain credibility” (52). The relative affluence of the previous decades had encouraged communality in ways that seemed, to many, unsustainable in times of scarcity. In self-improvement literature, the new emphasis on the individual, on “me,” is evident in the titles of many of the texts, manifesting in “metaphors of life as a game and the world as a jungle” (McGee 52). These books, including Robert J. Ringer’s *Winning Through Intimidation* (1973) and *Looking Out for Number One* (1977), Thomas Anthony Harris’s *I’m OK, You’re OK* (1969), Michael Korda’s *Power! How to Get It, How to Use It* (1975), and Wayne W. Dyer’s *Pulling Your Own Strings* (1978), all made it onto the *New York Times* best-seller list. As McGee argues, “[S]urvivalism, in the form of social Darwinism, had long justified an American belief in the merits of entrepreneurial competition, [and] bald proposals that one should ‘look out for #1’ or ‘win through intimidation’ marked a new ruthlessness in the self-help landscape, a terrain that had previously been marked by its scriptural homilies or appeals to winning friends” (50).¹² The focus of much self-help literature in subsequent decades centers on ways to “resolve the tensions between the stark individual self-interest advocated in the survivalist self-help literature of the 1970s and the values of community and equality that had dominated the social landscape in the 1960s” (McGee 56). These tensions – between the role of the individual and the position of the community – are especially borne out in memoir. What it means to be an individual who is both part of a community and separate from it, to be someone who negotiates public and private subjectivities, are some of the genre’s central concerns. As the narrator of Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior* (1976) famously queries, “when you try to understand what things in you are Chinese, how do you separate what is peculiar to childhood, to poverty, insanities, one family, your mother who marked your growing with stories, with what is Chinese? What is Chinese and what is the movies?”¹³ Memoir allows

Kingston to explore these questions in their intricacies, expanding readers’ understandings of what the form can do, of what memoir can make legible.

One distinctive form that has continued to be significant and challenging, beginning in the 1970s, is graphic memoir. Deborah Nelson notes that “probably the most ubiquitous content matter in the American arts scene of the last sixty years” is autobiographical and that, specifically, graphic memoir “has been one of the most innovative, compelling, tortured, hilarious, psychologically astute, historically insightful, sublime, obscene, scatological, and idiotic forms we have encountered.”¹⁴ The late 1960s and early 1970s, according to Charles Hatfield, were a “climax of sorts” in the history of graphic narrative, “a watershed moment,” adds Jared Gardner, “for autobiographical comics,” and a moment of “particular urgency” for graphic memoir.¹⁵ Like many scholars of graphic narrative, these critics both point to the publication of Justin Green’s *Binky Brown Meets the Holy Virgin Mary* (1972) as one of the first of its kind.¹⁶ While other autobiographical forays into graphic narrative blended real life and fantasy, they tended to be more about “shock value” than introspection or self-representation (Gardner 8). Green’s work, however, was different, and “it was recognized as such by his contemporaries who encountered it for the first time while he was working on it in 1971. Art Spiegelman credits his encounters with *Binky Brown* for his own ambitions to do work in autobiographical comic: ‘without Binky Brown there would be no MAUS’” (Gardner 8). During the 1970s, Spiegelman, along with R. Crumb, Aline Kominsky-Crumb, and Harvey Pekar, among others, turn to autobiography, self-representation, and, ultimately, to graphic memoir as their mode of choice in works as diverse as R. Crumb’s *Hypono Comics* (1971) and *Best Buy Comics* (1979), with Kominsky-Crumb), Kominsky-Crumb’s contributions to *Twisted Sisters* (1976) and *Arcade* (1975–1976), and Pekar’s *American Splendor* (which debuted in 1976).

Some of Spiegelman’s early autobiographical strips closely follow the creation and publication of *Binky Brown*. Spiegelman published “Maus,” the brief strip which precedes the Pulitzer Prize-winning long-form works of the same name about the Holocaust (serialized from 1980 to 1991), in *Funny Animals #1* (1972), which was followed by the intensely personal “Prisoner on the Hell Planet” in *Short Order Comics #1* (1973), a strip crafted in a German Expressionist style that details his mother’s suicide and his own experiences with mental illness.¹⁷ Gardner describes Spiegelman’s work in the early 1970s, explaining that, after Spiegelman saw *Binky Brown* in its early stages,

his own work began to take a more autobiographical turn, writing about dreams and his personal life, often using an autobiographical persona, "Skeeter Grant." In *Short Order Comics* #1 (1973), for example, "Skeeter Grant" tells of a dream he had in 1973 in which he found himself a comic character, "just like Happy Hooligan," complete with speech balloons and gutters between which he disappears as he moves from panel to panel. In the dream, he begins to panic, until another character walks into his panel and says, "Relax buddy boy . . . It's just the style you're drawn in!" (16)¹⁸

Later in the decade, Spiegelman published *Breakdowns* (1977), an anthology of comic strips published between 1972 and 1977, many of which were autobiographical (including "Prisoner" and "Maus"), and from 1975–1977, he coedited *Arcade: The Comics Revue* with Bill Griffith, a publication that Joseph Witek describes as one that "sustained and extended the artistic breakthrough of the underground comic movement."¹⁹

One such contributor to *Arcade*, Aline Kominsky-Crumb, remembers that, in the early part of the 1970s, "there was an opening up to anybody because of the success of R. Crumb's *Zap Comics*. Anybody could get published . . . But that was a period of blossoming because of that openness" (qtd. in Nelson 98). Kominsky-Crumb, who herself contributed to a variety of texts during the 1970s,²⁰ presented her first autobiographical avatar, "Goldie," in the first issue of *Wimmen's Comics*, and she, too, credits Green's work with providing her a new way to consider what she could do: "When I saw Justin's work it gave me permission to or a way to find my voice to talk about my own life" (qtd. in Nelson 89). Her work followed much in the mold of the confessional poets of mid-century (Sylvia Plath, Robert Lowell), detailing "daily experiences of neuroses, body-issues, and sexuality" and engaging "aspects of daily life that had been understood to be off-limits for both polite conversation and public literature" (Gardner 14). As such, Kominsky-Crumb is one of the first graphic memoirists to center her work on the "mundane, messy neuroses of an ordinary life" (Gardner 14). Her emphasis on the ordinary and mundane is central to the connections between memoir and self-improvement literature in the 1970s: for those for whom self-mastery seemed out of reach, identities rooted in the messy and quotidian opened possibilities. The openness of the form allowed for exciting innovation in self-representation.

Self-representation in comics found a willing audience, and, perhaps as a surprise to the first graphic memoirists, "the most personal stories became the ones that forged the most meaningful connections with others" (Gardner 13). While, apropos of Wolfe's scathing essay, many may consider the 1970s a decade of narcissism or selfishness, the success of graphic

memoir – and the significant ways in which graphic narrative allowed people to experiment autobiographically in new forms and with new freedoms – demonstrates that Americans challenged and interrogated extant strategies for self-representation. As the political awareness of the preceding decades made way for personal awareness, personal awareness did not make the political disappear. Rather, to borrow one of the feminist movement's slogans, the personal became political. And, while Norman Mailer lamented at the end of the decade that, during the seventies, "people put emphasis on the skin, on the surface, rather than on the root of things," and that image "became preeminent because nothing deeper was going on," the depth of confession, of exploring postmemory and collective memory, of writing about the Holocaust or the traumas of sexual violence, or of presenting a vivid, lived reality in a form that had not ordinarily received the attention of readers, complicates such a naive rendering of the decade's literary value.²¹ As Hatfield describes it, graphic memoir "reveals the art form's potential for both frightful intimacy and provocative cultural argument" (151). Emphatically and explicitly placing things "on the surface," in its images, graphic narrative does not sacrifice "the root of things" to achieve its end, especially in memoir.

Other life writers, too, found that memoir allowed for levels of experimentation and play that were previously unavailable. In particular, ethnic American writers published texts that continue to be fundamentally important and resonant in American literature and autobiography studies. Groundbreaking memoirs like Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969), *Gather Together in My Name* (1974), *Singin' and Swingin' and Gettin' Merry Like Christmas* (1976), and *The Heart of a Woman* (1981), Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts* (1976) and *China Men* (1980), and N. Scott Momaday's *The Way to Rainy Mountain* (1969) and *The Names: A Memoir* (1976) challenge expectations for the form and content of memoirs. Many of these works were critically misunderstood in the 1970s but became canonical by the end of the following decade. In 1982, Kingston herself had responded to the reviews of *The Woman Warrior* with her essay "Cultural Mis-readings by American Reviewers."²² Here, Kingston writes that, while *Woman Warrior* garnered the National Book Critics Circle Award and was often reviewed, while it received few unfavorable reviews, and while she "expected [it] to be read from the women's lib angle and the Third World Angle, the *Roots* angle," she "did not foresee . . . the critics measuring the book and [her] against the stereotype of the exotic, inscrutable, mysterious oriental" (55). In fact, she writes, speaking of the turn from the 1970s into the 1980s: "a year ago I

had really believed that the days of gross stereotyping were over; that the 1960s, the Civil Rights movement, and the end of the war in Vietnam had enlightened America, if not in deeds at least in manners" (55). By 1989 though, Bobby Fong described *Woman Warrior* as "an ethnic classic" that "distend[s] the traditional form of autobiography" and "expands our perception of what materials and techniques can be used to construct a useable past."²² Similarly, Chadwick Allen has argued that Momaday's use of "blood memory" which "tropes the conflating of storytelling, imagination, memory, and genealogy into the representation of a single, multifaceted moment in a particular landscape" finally "renders himself coincident with indigenous ancestors and indigenous history."²⁴ Sidonie Smith, in one of the first critical examinations of Maya Angelou's work, argues that the "primal scene of childhood" that opens *Caged Bird* "brings into focus the nature of the imprisoning environment from which the self will seek to escape," which is central to African American life writing more largely.²⁵ Smith observes that the initial moment in African American life writing "almost invariably recreates the environment of enslavement from which the black self seeks to escape," as evidenced historically in slave narratives; in subsequent life writing, "the literal enslavement is replaced by more subtle forms of economic, historical, psychological, and spiritual imprisonment from which the black self still seeks an escape route" (5).

In African American literature more largely, the 1970s are full of significant, compelling, and illuminating memoirs that, in particular, present readers with African American writers' memories and engagements with the political and social ramifications of the Civil Rights Movement. Nikki Giovanni's *Gemini: An Extended Autobiographical Statement on My First Twenty-five Years of Being a Black Poet* (1974), Angela Davis's *With My Mind on Freedom: An Autobiography* (1974), James Baldwin's *No Name in the Street* (1972) and *The Devil Finds Work* (1976), Lucille Clifton's *Generations: A Memoir* (1976), and Ossie Guffy's *Ossie: The Autobiography of a Black Woman* (1971) demonstrate how the authors' personal narratives are intimately connected with social and political contexts, thereby refuting the navel-gazing implicit in the "Me Decade" label. Importantly, ethnic American life writing has its foundations in slave narratives, in oral forms, and in collective memory: in many ways, the attention these authors pay to life writing is not a surprise because, in these varied iterations, life writing has historically held value. And yet, these texts demonstrate the visibility of diverse minority groups during the 1970s and the challenges various groups pose to assimilationist ideals as their authors present avatars and modes of self-representation that work to thwart expectation and confound convention.

The social and political movements of the 1960s demonstrated to the larger American reading public some of the various ways in which distinct minority groups in the United States had been excluded from full participation in American life. While the autobiographical ideal as exemplified by Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography* mirrors the conventional ideal of the self-made man, both relied on the privileged position of white heteronormative masculinity. "A crucial component of white privilege," Claudia Rankine reminds us, "is the idea that your accomplishments can be, have been achieved on your own."²⁶ By the 1970s, a number of historically marginalized groups achieved a new visibility and political presence, and these forms of identity took on new meanings. Eric Porter explains that the 1970s were "a critical moment in the world historical development of race as a social, political, and cultural category"; having "transformed the ways their society was structured along racial lines during the 1970s," Americans "embraced, rejected, or otherwise negotiated racial identities and mobilized themselves around them in important new ways" (52). Such transformation was central for racial and ethnic minorities as well as for gender and sexual minorities, as demonstrated by the memoirs published during this decade: although the decade saw the ultimate failure of the Equal Rights Amendment, thanks to the "legal and political groundwork for change" established in the 1960s, during the 1970s "Americans confronted what was arguably a revolution in gender roles."²⁷

And it is this "revolution in gender roles," along with the increase in numbers of workers overall, following the advancements of the Civil Rights Movement, that Micki McGee posits as central to the overall increase in interest in self-help literature. While the entry of women into the paid workforce was impressive throughout the period from 1970–2001, increasing by nearly 16 percent, the "trend was most accelerated during the period of 1973 through 1983, when . . . the percentage of women employed in the civilian labor force increased from 44.7 percent in 1973 to 52.9 percent in 1983, nearly an 8 percent increase. During the same decade male labor force participation declined by nearly 2.5 percent (from 78.8 percent to 76.4 percent) even as "real wages remained stagnant" (81, 49).²⁸ McGee illustrates the significance of this new visibility:

In the wake of the civil rights and women's movements, the ideal of self-invention was extended more broadly. Resources that had been devored almost entirely to cultivating the success of (usually white) men now had to be shared. Those who had been making it possible for men to "make themselves" were being encouraged to pursue their own self-fulfillment . . . Of course no one has ever single-handedly invented or created a self, but now the individuals who had contributed to the making and shaping of others were demanding their own opportunities for self-invention. (14)

One totemic example of this demand is *Our Bodies, Ourselves* (1973), produced by twelve feminist activists who called themselves the Boston Women's Health Book Collective. Objecting to the stigmatization of women's health and sexuality pervasive throughout the medical profession, the authors provided their disempowered audience women-to-women guidance on such taboo subjects as birth control, sexual pleasure, abortion, childbirth, and menopause. What began as a stapled booklet called *Women and Their Bodies* in 1970 morphed into an underground small-press sensation, selling some 250,000 copies before 1973, when Simon and Schuster released a mass-market edition that became a perennial bestseller. By the end of the 1970s, *Our Bodies, Ourselves* had become a certified step in countless young women's maturation process as mothers gifted the book to daughters entering adolescence to inform and empower their journey of self-definition.

Self-invention, self-representation, self-life-writing: memoir of the 1970s, like self-help literature, demonstrates ways in which others' stories, specifically those of members of historically marginalized groups, in historically marginalized forms, become available to a wider readership. People whose lives had previously gone unrecognized by the general public as worthy of narration, those "who had contributed to the making and shaping of others," were, at last, able to see how their own stories might be told, and how their own narratives fit into – and revise – the larger tapestry of American lives.

Importantly, though, as a challenge to Wolfe's argument that such focus on individuals perpetuates "me"-ness, or as a way to refute the famous term Christopher Lasch coined by titling his 1979 study *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations*, rather than focus exclusively on the subject itself in these texts, memoirists write about the development of relational subjectivities: about how the relationship with a community, a significant other, or a movement influences how they understand themselves. Francis Russell Hart notes that memoirs "are of a person, but they are 'really' of an event, an era, an institution, a class identity" (195, emphasis original). Memoirs are about "personal history; the personalizing of history; the historicizing of the personal," and they present "the personal act of repossessing a public world, historical, institutional, collective" (195). These are the literatures of survival.

The popularity of self-improvement literature and of memoir – specifically in the rise of graphic memoir and memoirs written by members of historically marginalized communities – demonstrates how Wolfe's assessment that the 1970s is the "Me Decade" was both prescient and potentially

misleading. Certainly, the rise in popularity of these genres matters: they allowed readers to see and understand themselves as in-process, as serial, and as members of communities both worth reading about and worth seeing presented textually. Porter proposes that certain "cultural products were popular because people could see themselves in ways that spoke not of assimilation but of identities that stood out against narratives of nation and of larger racial communities" (63). Memoirs by Kingston, Angelou, Green, Momaday, Davis, Spiegelman, Baldwin, Koinisly-Crumb, and Giovanni, among many others, would support his assertion. These memoirs, texts that are still taught regularly in classrooms and that continue to provide foundations for conversations about memoir and history, present their subjects as relationally constituted and both part of and apart from specific communities. As Hart suggests, even though "we are newly defensive about charges that ours is an age of narcissism, newly committed to self-transcendence," we are also tasked with selecting "a collective identity to which one can 'belong,' and then trying to cope with the sense of self-alienation which that 'belonging' engenders" (209). More generally, though, as Albert E. Stone posits, interest in life writing has continued to be popular with readers and critics since the 1960s, and really beginning in the 1970s, when "the national literature of nonfictional prose was enriched as perhaps in no previous period of history."²⁹ This decade of intense political upheaval, social transformation, investment in diversity, and real creativity galvanizes American literature into the 1980s and beyond, into the twenty-first century. Looking back on the 1970s, on the position of the self in self-improvement literature and in memoir, it is clear that the decade's preoccupation with the connections between the personal – the subject – and the political or the social continues to resonate with readers and scholars.

NOTES

- 1 B. J. Schulman, *The Seventies: The Great Shift in American Culture, Society, and Politics* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2001), xi. Subsequent references are included in the text.
- 2 B. Bailey and D. Farber, "Introduction," in B. Bailey and D. Farber (eds.), *America in the 70s* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004), 1. Subsequent references are included in the text.
- 3 Schulman and Bailey and Farber make this argument, as does E. Porter, "Affirming and Disaffirming Actions: Remaking Race in the 1970s," in Bailey and Farber (eds.), *America in the 70s*, 50–74. Subsequent references are included in the text.

- 4 M. McGee notes that "between 1972 and 2000, the number of self-help books more than doubled, increasing from 1.1 percent to 2.4 percent of the total number of books in print." See *Self-Help, Inc.: Makeover Culture in American Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 11–12. Subsequent references are included in the text.
- 5 S. Smith and J. Watson, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*, 2nd edition (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 124. Subsequent references are included in the text.
- 6 R. Pascal, *Design and Truth in Autobiography*, 1960 (New York: Routledge, 2016), 11.
- 7 J. Rak, *Boom! Manufacturing Memoir for the Popular Market* (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2013), 22. Subsequent references are included in the text.
- 8 For a more comprehensive discussion of these distinctions, see H. Buss, *Repossessing the World: Reading Memoirs by Contemporary Women* (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2002) and J. Rak's thoughtful consideration of genre in "Are Memoirs Autobiography?" *Genre* 36 (Fall/Winter 2004): 305–326.
- 9 F. R. Hart, "History Talking to Itself: Public Personality in Recent Memoir," *New Literary History* 11.1 (Autumn 1979): 195. Subsequent references are included in the text. Hart looks specifically at what he describes as "the prevalence of ambiguous dialogue" in the memoirs of Studs Terkel, Michael Harrington, Saul Bellow, Michael Harr, Maxine Hong Kingston, and Lillian Hellman with what he calls "backward glances" to the memoirs of Vincent Sheean and T. E. Lawrence (196).
- 10 T. Wolfe, "The 'Me' Decade and the Third Great Awakening," in *Manne Glazes & Madmen, Clutter & Vine, and Other Stories, Sketches, and Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1976), 165. Subsequent references are included in the text.
- 11 N. K. Miller, *But Enough About Me: Why We Read Other People's Lives* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 12. Subsequent references are included in the text.
- 12 This survivalism, McGee notes, does not disappear as the decade comes to a close, although it does shift to the "serving your customer" rhetoric that came to dominate success literature" of the 1980s and 1990s. See *Self-Help, Inc.*, 73.
- 13 M. H. Kingston, *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts* (New York: Vintage, 1976), 6. Subsequent references are included in the text.
- 14 D. Nelson, "Panel: Comics and Autobiography: Phoebe Gloeckner, Justin Green, Aline Kominsky-Crumb, Carol Tyler." Moderator; Deborah Nelson. May 19, 2012. *Critical Inquiry* 40.3 (Spring 2014): 86.
- 15 C. Hatfield, *Alternative Comics: An Emerging Literature* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2005), 7; J. Gardner, "Autobiography's Biography, 1972–2007," *Biography: An Interdisciplinary Quarterly* 31.1 (Winter 2008): 1. Hatfield and Gardner both look to R. Crumb's *Zap Comic* (1968) as a point of origin in the development of underground comic. Gardner writes that *Zap Comic* was a

- "pioneering work" that used the form of the comic book "to speak unspeakable (and often deeply disturbing) new fantasies" (7), while Hatfield reminds readers that the "birth of the underground comic book" is a "distinction [that] belongs to R. Crumb's *Zap Comic* No. 1" (8).
- 16 Hatfield describes *Binky Brown* as "perhaps the ur-example of confessional literature in comics" and "often cited as the wellspring of autobiographical comics" (131).
- 17 This strip is also incorporated into the long-form *Maus* texts published in 1986 and 1991 and collected together as *The Complete Maus* in 1997.
- 18 In *In the Shadow of No Towers* (2004), his depiction of New York City's reaction to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, Spiegelman again presents himself in the style of Happy Hooligan.
- 19 J. Wreck, "Chronology," in J. Wreck (ed.), *Art Spiegelman: Conversations* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007), xix, x.
- 20 Kominsky-Crumb's published work in the 1970s appeared in such venues as *Wimmen's Comic*, *El Perfeca*, *Arcade*, *Twisted Sisters*, and *Best Biry Comics*.
- 21 N. Maller, "Maller on the '70s – Decade of 'Image, Skin Flicks and Porn,'" *US News and World Report* 87.27 (December 10, 1979): 57.
- 22 M. H. Kingston, "Cultural Mis-readings by American Reviewers," in G. Amirthanayagam (ed.), *Asian and Western Writers in Dialogue: New Cultural Identities* (London: Macmillan, 1982), 55–65. Subsequent references are included in the text.
- 23 B. Fong, "Maxine Hong Kingston's Autobiographical Strategy in *The Woman Warrior*," *Biography: An Interdisciplinary Quarterly* 12.2 (Spring 1989): 116.
- 24 C. Allen, "Blood (and) Memory," *American Literature* 71.1 (March 1999): 93.
- 25 S. A. Smith, "The Song of a Caged Bird: Maya Angelou's Quest after Self-Acceptance," in H. Bloom (ed.), *Maya Angelou's I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (Philadelphia: Chelsea House, 1998), 6. The essay was originally published in *Southern Humanities Review* 7.4 (1973). Subsequent references are included in the text.
- 26 C. Rankine, "Her Excellence: What Serena Williams Means to Us," *New York Times Magazine*, August 30, 2015; 43; www.nytimes.com/2015/08/30/magazine/the-meaning-of-serena-williams.html
- 27 B. Bailey, "She Can Bring Home the Bacon: Negotiating Gender in the 1970s," in Bailey and Ferber (eds.), *America in the 70s*, 108.
- 28 McGee also explains that, "In the twenty-year period between 1950 and 1970, labor force participation for women increased by 10 percent, while in the ten-year period between 1973 and 1983 it increased by 8 percent; the rate at which women were entering the labor force was almost doubled." See *Self-Help, Inc.*, 81–82.
- 29 A. E. Stone, "Modern American Autobiography: Texts and Transactions," in P. J. Eakin (ed.), *American Autobiography: Retrospect and Prospect* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), 102.